

Business and politics in Little Saigon, California

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INTRODUCTION

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When I was a child, Little Saigon was synonymous with long, hot car rides to crowded, pungent markets bursting with a feast of smells, colors, and sounds. Every weekend, my family and I would jump into our Buick Skylark and make the pilgrimage from our predominantly white neighborhood through the ethnic heart of Orange County, California. Tracing a line from east to west, we followed 1st Street lined by store signs in Spanish until it became Bolsa Avenue lined

by store signs in Vietnamese. There, my mother could do her weekend food shopping at the half dozen supermarkets and stores we visited in the course of one morning. After fighting for a parking space and then making our way through minefields of gum-layered sidewalks, we usually encountered a chaotic scene of shoving people, renegade shopping carts, and souring bananas. Eagerly, my mother joined the fray deftly maneuvering her cart through the crowds to find choice produce and meats at bargain prices. In the process, my parents would stop to talk to friends, co-workers, and relatives who we happened to meet, catch up on the latest news, find out about sales at other stores, and pick up a half-dozen free Vietnamese-language newspapers. We would then lunch on Vietnamese sandwiches, or—if we felt like splurging—go to a restaurant to have steaming bowls of *pho* at \$3 a piece. By mid-afternoon, we would leave Little Saigon with full bellies and a car loaded with Vietnamese ham, spring rolls, BBQ pork, baguettes, fresh tofu, fish sauce, red and yellow sticky rice, Vietnamese puddings, ten different kinds of fresh herbs, a fifty-pound bag of dry rice, and a deep-fried fish. And this was just a small sampling of the bounty Little Saigon had to offer.

p. 2 For me, every trip to Little Saigon was a visceral experience. And although my exposure to the area has been limited to a consumer's perspective, I believe that there were many Vietnamese-Americans who shared this view.¹ We comprised the thousands of weekend shoppers who came to Little Saigon because it was a place that provided tangible material needs such as food, clothing, and medical care. Interacting with each other and with the merchants providing these services, we collectively formed what I refer to as the “Little Saigon community.” At present, this broad definition includes the 135,548 Vietnamese-Americans living in Orange County.² It also includes those who live in neighboring counties (i.e. Los Angeles, or San Diego counties), but who work in, or regularly visit the Bolsa area. Coming from diverse socio-economic, political, and religious backgrounds, all of these individuals comprise the people of Little Saigon. And famous, infamous, and otherwise, it is important to remember that Vietnamese merchants and shoppers constitute the economic basis for the survival of the Little Saigon business area which in turn is the most visible manifestation of the Vietnamese community's existence.

As a symbol of community, Little Saigon also fulfills certain intangible needs. It serves as an information center, place of memory, and cultural focal point for the largest community of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam. According to Elisabeth Orr, Little Saigon meets Alejandro Portes and Ruben Bach's definition of an ethnic enclave as a “distinctive economic formation, characterized by the spatial concentration of immigrants who organize a

¹ There is also the perspective of the people who live in and around the residential neighborhoods surrounding the business district known as Little Saigon. For a more in depth study of resident's perspectives, see Elisabeth Orr, “Living Along the Fault Line: Community, Suburbia and Multi-Ethnicity in Garden Grove and Westminster, CA 1900-1995” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, December 1999).

² Estimates of the Vietnamese population in Orange County vary and are highly disputed by members of the community. For a brief overview of this dispute, see Eunice Cluck, “The Vietnamese Community in Orange County” (report prepared for United Way of Orange County, August 1994), Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine Library, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, 28. The number used here, however, comes from the 2000 Census as reported in “Ethnic Kaleidoscope,” *Orange County Register*, 8 August 2001, sec. News, p. 22.

variety of enterprises to serve their own ethnic market and the general population.”³ Indeed, with its 42 Vietnamese-language newspapers, yearly *Tết* celebrations, five radio stations, two television studios, numerous community organizations, and 3,000 businesses including dozens of medical offices, markets, and restaurants Little Saigon is a self-sufficient community.⁴ Other enclaves also exist in San Jose, California; Houston, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Boston, Massachusetts.⁵ But it is the community in Orange County, California, that carries the distinction of being recognized as the Vietnamese capital of the United States. In fact, Little Saigon is famous even in its namesake. As Andrew X. Pham wrote of his return to Vietnam, “They rush questions at me. Do you live in Country of Oranges [Orange County] in the sate [sic] of Cali [California]? I hear all Viet-kieu live there.”⁶

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With all of tis fame, however, Little Saigon is not without its share of problems. Some of these include tensions with non-Vietnamese residents, youth gangs, political violence, and community in-fighting. Of these, the most common critique of Little Saigon from both internal and external sources is that the community is very fragmented. While acknowledging that fragmentation is not unique to Vietnamese community groups, James Banerian writes, “The Vietnamese are well aware of this [fragmentation]. And they are aware of the reasons they do not work together, which they often discuss privately among

themselves. The sources of fragmentation can be divided into four categories: leadership, traditional behavior, historical factors, and lack of democratic spirit.”⁷ Basing his argument on intervies with Vietnamese informants, Banerian continues, “The Vietnamese people are competitive people, not cooperative. From the time they are young, they are pushed to achieve individual success, but not to share that success with anyone outside the family.”⁸ Although there is a measure of truth in this statement, the history of Little Saigon complicates this portrayal because both competition and cooperation have been instrumental in its development. In many cases, they are two sides of the same coin and have contributed both negatively and positively to the building of Little Saigon. It is the competitive spirit, for example, that has led to entrepreneurial desire and the growth of new businesses while at the same time feeding public denunciations and political turmoil.

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To explore this issue further, I will investigate the historical development of Little Saigon starting from its white suburban roots its flowering as a Vietnamese enclave to its most recent political controversy. Relying upon newspaper articles and oral histories as primary sources, I will also contribute material I gleaned as a participant-observer during a nine-month stay in Orange

³ Elisabeth Orr, “Living Along the Fault Line: Community, Suburbia and Multi-Ethnicity in Garden Grove and Westminster, CA 1900-1995” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, December 1999), 215-216, quoting Alejandro Portes and Robert L. Bach, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴ Cluck, “Vietnamese Community in Orange County,” 15.

⁵ For a study of the community in New Orleans, see Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998). For a study of the community in Boston, see Karin Aguilar-San Juan, “Creating Ethnic Places: Vietnamese-American Community Building in Orange County and Boston” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, May 2000).

⁶ Andrew X. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala* (New York: Picador USA; Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 101. “Viet-kieu” means foreign, or overseas Vietnamese and has slightly negative connotation.

County from May 2001 to January 2002. I spent much of this time doing research at the Southeast Asian Archive located in the University of California, Irvine Library, conducting interviews with Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese informants, translating Vietnamese-language based documents (i.e. newspaper articles, organizational ⁷⁸

p. 5 brochures, community pamphlets, etc.), attending political functions, and immersing myself in the local scene by “re-visiting” Little Saigon numerous times as one of its shoppers.

During this exploration process, what has become clear is that are several perspectives from which to tell the story of Little Saigon. I have chosen to focus on the history of the business area itself, however, because of its importance as a marketplace of political, economic, and cultural bartering. Dynamic, vibrant, and highly contentious, Little Saigon is a public place where Vietnamese-Americans have cooperated for economic survival, struggled with mainstream society's prejudices, and negotiated with each other over intra-ethnic differences. At the heart of this negotiation was Vietnam's long history of foreign domination, colonialism, civil war, and political turmoil (i.e. anti-communism). A component of Vietnamese nationalism and a greater Vietnamese cultural identity, the import of this shared historical legacy was so powerful that it not only fostered a sense of community, but also created passionate and sometimes violent discord. The history of Little Saigon, then, is an on-going story of how Vietnamese immigrants have shaped a community to meet common economic and cultural needs amidst a simultaneously unifying, yet deeply conflicted historical context.

p. 6 **SETTING AND BACKGROUND**

Orange County

Bounded by the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Santa Ana mountains to the east, and Camp Pendleton to the south, Orange County is a coastal valley -- an augmentation of the Los Angeles Basin twenty miles south of the City of Angels (Fig. 1.). Originally a part of Los Angeles County immediately to the north, the region's residents successfully lobbied the California legislature and split off to form a separate county incorporated in 1889.⁹ Following the Mexican-American War, Anglo farmers from the Midwest colonized Orange County and displaced the few Mexican and Native American inhabitants living in the region. The Anglos set up farms to grow a variety of crops but eventually phased them all out due to disease, failure, and soil exhaustion in favor of the citrus that would come to dominate the landscape and give the county its name.

Additionally, Elisabeth Orr has argued that the Anglos instituted a culture founded on the ethic of farm labor, tightly-knit democratic communities, devout Protestantism, and racial exclusion of the Japanese and Mexican minorities who lived amidst the whites as seasonal laborers and

⁷ James Banerian, “Fragmentation in the Vietnamese Community; Some Observations and Recommendations for Change” (report prepared for the ninth annual conference of national Association for Vietnamese American Education, April 1988), Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine Library, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, 4. All subsequent references to “Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine Library, University of California, Irvine, Irvine” will be abbreviated “SE Asian Archive, UC Irvine Library, UCI, Irvine.”

⁸ Banerian, “Fragmentation in the Vietnamese Community,” 5.

⁹ Orr, 24.

fellow farmers.¹⁰ The typical Orange County town was a white, Protestant, and sparsely populated farming community where “everybody knew everybody.” Successfully, the Anglo settlers recreated the familiar and steady pace of Midwestern small towns that characterized Orange County's agrarian age.

In the 1950s, however, a dramatic change swept over the northern cities closest to Los Angeles County. The county's ubiquitous orange groves rapidly gave way to new acres of tract homes -- symbols and signs of white flight and post-World War II suburbanization. By 1960, tract homes radiated outward from Los Angeles to the cities of Garden Grove and Westminster located near the center of Orange County. As these cities were transformed into white lower middle-class bedroom communities, a new culture replaced the old agrarian social scheme. Informal social relations and increased privacy from one's neighbors became the norm. A new sense of community developed based upon the cult of “suburban domesticity and affluence” epitomized by immaculate lawns, PTA mothers, and Fourth of July barbecues.¹¹ Feelings of security, material comfort, immunity from crime, rosy optimism, and family wholesomeness characterized this middle-class suburban ethos. Thomas Fuentes, who moved to Garden Grove with his family as a boy in 1962, relates that Orange County was a “refuge from LA (Los Angeles) urbanization for blue collar transitional people. It was a wholesome clean place with no graffiti... It was homogenous and there seemed to be a horizon of opportunity.”¹² Indeed, like other blossoming suburban areas across the country, Orange County had become an ideal place to settle down and raise a family. Yet, the rapid pace of development in some cities would undermine the wholesomeness and threaten the racial and economic homogeneity its new residents had fled to suburbia for.

By 1970, the central Orange County cities of Westminster and Garden Grove began to show signs of decay. Hastily constructed, the stucco tract homes had “aged quickly and

now looked old and tired.”¹³ Along with the homes, many of the cities' residents had become elderly empty nesters. As a result, the cities' tax base decreased along with the stagnating population. To make matters worse, both Garden Grove and Westminster had been developed as bedroom communities without viable business or industrial centers that could have provided other sources of tax revenue and economic sustainability. The 1965 construction of the Garden Grove Freeway (California State Highway 22) devastated the few business areas that had existed by rerouting traffic away from them. A pall of economic attrition descended over Garden Grove and Westminster even as their respective governments struggled to revitalize the cities. In the 1970s, Garden Grove embarked on a downtown re-building program while Westminster constructed the Westminster Mall. Both efforts enjoyed moderate success,

¹⁰ Orr, 20-36. Separately, it should be noted that very few blacks lived in Orange County then (or now). Like blacks, however, both Japanese and Hispanics experienced systematic discrimination because they were nonwhites although the Japanese were considered “proto-white.” In the socio-economic hierarchy of the time, Hispanics were considered to be closest to the underclass blacks. For a more thorough discussion and speculation as to why, see Orr, 56-73.

¹¹ Orr, 4-5.

¹² Thomas Fuentes, interview by author, tape recording, Santa Ana, California, 21 August 2001.

¹³ Fuentes interview.

but it was a new infusion of people that would play a pivotal role in the economic revitalization of the cities while dramatically altering their ethnic makeup and cultural flavor.¹⁴

Black April and the Waves of Refugees

In April of 1975, Saigon fell. As the government and army of South Vietnam crumbled, millions of panic-stricken people swarmed towards the capital away from the advancing North Vietnamese army. Those lucky unfortunates who had been involved with the Americans now faced the threat of Communist retaliation and so were airlifted out of the country along with their families courtesy of Operation Frequent Wind. More than one hundred and twenty thousand strong, these people constituted the first wave of Vietnamese refugees who found themselves on the shores of America in one of four processing centers: Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Indiantown Gap in

p. 9 Pennsylvania, and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. The vast majority of these evacuees came from the middle-class and elite socioeconomic strata of Vietnam. As Linda Vo recounted, “half of the heads of households had completed high school, and one fourth had been to college (in contrast to the fact that 16 percent of the population in Vietnam attended secondary school and 1 percent attended college).”¹⁵ Additionally, the 1975 evacuees' transition into U.S. society was aided by the fact that half were Catholic, most came from urban areas and had previous exposure to Americans, and two-thirds spoke English with some fluency. The federal government resettled these refugees through voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) such as religious charities. It pursued a dispersion policy because of widespread fear that the Vietnamese would not assimilate if they stayed together and would overburden local welfare systems if they massed in one area. By the end of 1975, refugee families had been resettled in all fifty states and it appeared that the final problem of the Vietnam War had been resolved.¹⁶

Ongoing instability in Vietnam, however, brought a second wave of refugees to the United States. Known as the “boat people,” these refugees fled Vietnam because of the intolerable conditions created by the new Communist regime. This group consisted mainly of young men who had endured the torture of re-education camps and of ethnic Chinese who had been persecuted by the Communists. Instead of direct immigration, these refugees made perilous sea and land crossings to nearby countries of first asylum such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong where they waited for admittance to a host country such as France, Australia, or the United States. In general, however, this group

p. 10 was less educated, contained more rural people, and had less English fluency than the evacuees of 1975. Hence, they had less marketable job skills and experienced more difficulty in adjusting to life in the U.S.. The United States government admitted 44,500 Vietnamese refugees in 1979; 95,000 in 1980; 86,000 in 1981; 44,000 in 1982 and 20,000 each subsequent

¹⁴ Orr, 181-182.

¹⁵ Linda Trinh Vo, “The Vietnamese American Experience: From Dispersion to the Development of Post-Refugee Communities” in *Asian-American Studies: A Reader*, ed. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 291.

¹⁶ Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese-Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 39.

year until 1986.¹⁷ In the late 1980s, a third wave of refugees was admitted into the United States following the passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1988 and the approval of the Humanitarian Operation Program between Vietnam and the U.S. in 1989. These measures facilitated the immigration of Amerasian children and political prisoners with their families, respectively.¹⁸ Many of these second and third-wave refugees eventually settled in areas where their friends and family from the 1975 wave had already established themselves. Among the top destinations were Houston, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; San Jose, California; and most significantly, Orange County, California.

In 1978, just three years after the first major wave of Vietnamese refugees had arrived in America, the inaugural issue of *Nguoi Viet* newspaper proclaimed, "Respected readers, Are you in California? If so, you are at the center of the Vietnamese community in exile. There is no other place where we are as numerous as in California."¹⁹ In fact, by 1980, 85,238 Vietnamese lived in California, the most of any state. (In second place was Texas with a Vietnamese population of 27,791.)²⁰ More specifically, the 1980 Census data indicated that the Vietnamese population was concentrated in four Californian Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas depicted in Table 1.

Even though the largest absolute number of Vietnamese lived in the Los Angeles SMSA, the Vietnamese were more greatly concentrated in Orange County where their percentage of the total population was the highest. Additionally, the *Orange County Register* reported in 1984 that there were sixty thousand Vietnamese comprising nearly twelve percent of the nation's estimated five hundred thousand Vietnamese living in the county.²¹ Within a few short years, a large number of Vietnamese had concentrated in Orange County despite the initial efforts of the U.S. government to disperse them.

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How and why did this happen? First, it must be pointed out that many Vietnamese were second-time migrants who had repeatedly left their homes and moved as necessity dictated. The experience of at least two generations had been colored by half a century of war, sudden death, and capricious destruction. In these conditions, migration in search of safe havens, adaptation to ever-changing circumstances, and overcoming omnipresent dangers became familiar tools of survival. Specifically, historians point to the internal migration of 900,000 refugees who fled the Communists and moved from North to South Vietnam in 1954.²² Equally important but less quantifiable was the displacement of villagers who fled from province to province all across the country as the theaters of war shifted.

¹⁷ Vo, 292.

¹⁸ Zhou and Bankston, 33-34.

¹⁹ Yen Ngoc Do, editorial, *Nguoi Viet Cali*, 15 December 1978, p. 1. Founded by Yen Ngoc Do, *Nguoi Viet* was and is the major Vietnamese language newspaper in Orange County. Translated, "Nguoi Viet" means "Vietnamese people."

²⁰ Hien Duc Do, 46.

²¹ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa: Vietnamese Create Their Own Saigon," sec. I, p. 1.

²² James W. Tollefson, *Alien Winds: The Reeducation of America's Indochinese Refugees* (New York: Praeger, 1989), cited in Linda Trinh Vo, "The Vietnamese American Experience: From Dispersion to the Development of Post-Refugee Communities" in *Asian-American Studies: A Reader*, ed. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 295.

Along with the final dislocation of 1975, these repeated events of fearful flight are ingrained in the Vietnamese collective conscious best epitomized by the song 1954 *Cha Bô Quê*, 1975 *Con Bô Nước* (1954 *Father Leaves Home*, 1975 *Son Leaves Country*) by Pham Duy.²³xs

- 1 One day in '54, Father left old lands Of buried placentas and countless cut cords! One day in '54 Father left heaven, A dark North weeping rain
- 2 One day in '54 Father left Mount Son-Tây! Leading infants to Biên-Hòa Though far `twas still our home, A free and sunny region for our family!
- 3 One day in '75 Son left his country! Twenty years, twice uprooted Father exiled to new homeland, Now Son exiled to foreign lands!
- 4 One day in '54 Father left his home North to South he ran, Father fled evil One day in '75 the road ends! Into the sea the demons push Son!
- 5 Our lives of Twice Leaving must nurse Tomorrow's return Home!
- 6 Một ngày n\$am, b\$on, Cha bô quê xa Ch\$on đã chôn rau, c\$at r\$on bao nhiêu dói! M\$ot ngày năm b\$on, cha bô phurong trời, M\$ot mi\$e\$ B\$a\$c t\$oi tâm mura phùn roi
- 7 M\$ot ngày n\$am b\$on, Cha b\$on Son-Tây! D\$a\$t dít con tho, vô s\$ng noi Biên-Hòa D\$uG là xa dó c\$uTng là quê nhà, Và mi\$e\$ n\$a\$ng soi vui gia d\$Gnh ta!
- 8 M\$ot ngày b\$a\$y l\$am, Con b\$on nưóc ra đi! Hai muroi năm là hai l\$a\$ ta bi\$e\$t xú Giò Cha luu d\$a\$y \$o\$ ngay trên d\$a\$t ta, Và giò Con luu d\$a\$y \$o\$ dây trên xú la!
- 9 M\$ot ngày b\$ay l\$a\$Km, dúng \$o\$ cu\$oi duòng! Loài q\$u\$y dũ xua Con ra dai durong!
- 10 Dòi, hai l\$a\$ ta b\$on quê, b\$on nuóc Ph\$a\$ nuôi ngày v\$e\$ om T\$on Qu\$oc!

Viewed from this perspective, the internal migration that followed the U.S. governments' directed settling of the refugees is congruent with a previous and familiar survival strategy. The past experience of the Vietnamese provided them with a proactive response to the challenges that they encountered in the United States.

To the Vietnamese, the most pressing of these challenges was that of economic survival. Although many of the refugees who came to the U.S. in 1975 held college degrees and could speak English, they still needed to adjust to a new and unfamiliar economic environment. Also, some highly specialized Vietnamese degrees were not functional in the

United States. One commonly cited example is the situation of lawyers trained in Vietnamese law. To continue to be lawyers in the U.S., these people would have to reinvest the time and resources needed to gain a nuanced command of English and to learn U.S. legal procedures. Unfortunately, the concerns of immediate survival predicated the ability to gain more marketable and lucrative skills. As a result, many Vietnamese who entered the U.S. labor force immediately after leaving the refugee camps took on low-skilled jobs (such as janitorial work) that paid less, but were more readily available. Nevertheless, many sought to improve their economic condition by finding more financially rewarding employment. And during the late 1970s and early 1980s, one of the best places to find low-skilled, higher wage labor was on the assembly lines of the Southern Californian electronics industry.²⁴

²³ Pham Duy, 1954 *Cha B\$on Quê 1975 Con B\$on, N uóc*, trans. by author, 1978, sheet music.

²⁴ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa", sec. I, p. 1.

Aside from economics, Southern California had an especially strong drawing power on Vietnamese refugees. The establishment of Camp Pendleton (immediately to the south of Orange County) as one of the four refugee centers facilitated the development of a sizable Vietnamese population in the area because it was easiest to find sponsor families who lived close to the military base. After the refugees had been settled, they began to re-establish communication with family and friends in other cities and states. Through phone calls, letters, and word-of-mouth, it became clear to many Vietnamese that Southern California was the place to be because the climate was warm, there were good job opportunities, a generous continuing education program, and more Vietnamese in the area. Again and again, the oral histories of the refugees repeat these motivations for relocation to Southern California. According to Thuan Vu, a 1975 refugee who was initially settled in the Midwest, for instance:

[In Ohio] it was the snow season during December and I was attending parties and walked from place to place and slipped and fell several times. And I got so scared of it. In the meantime Aunt Xuyen over here [California] had gotten in contact with me and told me to come over because you could study and earn money here. So I applied to go to school here and a month later I moved into her house in California...[and] took the Community Education Training Act classes for six months.²⁵ p. 14

But why did the Vietnamese choose to settle in Orange County instead of San Diego or Los Angeles? When I asked one of my interviewees this question, he replied that Los Angeles was “unsafe, tumultuous and lacked opportunity for growth.”²⁶ By contrast, Orange County felt relatively new, wholesome, and ripe with opportunity for development. The life histories of the Vietnamese I interviewed and of many of the community leaders in this paper indicate that they were a mobile group of people who made a conscious and deliberate choice to settle in California and more specifically in Orange County because of economic considerations.²⁷ Though Vietnamese who had already settled in the area might have encouraged them, many refugees came to Orange County because of better opportunities for jobs and schooling. And as discerning agents, they chose to stay because life in Orange County proved to be better than wherever they were before. Orange County was the place that offered greater material comforts in the form of increased economic opportunity as well as a general sense of emotional and psychological security. Aside from jobs in the electronics industry, many Vietnamese soon discovered that Orange County provided entrepreneurship opportunities as well.

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²⁵ Thuan Ai Vu Ha, interview by author, tape recording, Irvine, California, 9 March 2001.

²⁶ Thomas Nguyen [pseud.], interview by author, tape recording, Irvine, California, 8 January 2002.

²⁷ This is somewhat contrary to Elisabeth Orr's suggestion that the location of Little Saigon in suburban Orange County was serendipitous. In her dissertation, *Living Along the Fault Line*, Orr writes, “For the Vietnamese, the fact that Garden Grove and Westminster were suburbs was somewhat incidental to their attractiveness. Their large pre-existing populations of other Vietnamese proved to be their draw. It was only later that many realized their good fortune compared to that of other S.E. Asians like the Cambodians and the Hmong who had ended up in urban ghettos or depressed rural areas in California.” (Orr, 203)

FROM BUSINESSES ON BOLSA TO LITTLE SAIGON

Two years after the fall of Saigon, the first Vietnamese-owned stores appeared on Bolsa Avenue, the main thoroughfare through Westminster in Orange County. By this time, a state of suburban blight had settled on the street. There was no business life along Bolsa aside from “second-hand car dealerships, auto repair and salvage shops, along with the odd store here and there.”²⁸ Scattered along the thoroughfare between car dealerships and empty fields, a handful of Vietnamese-owned mom-and-pop stores and private medical practices formed the humble beginnings of what would later be known as Little Saigon.

From the start, there was no real center to the future business district. Individual stores and offices were located in small strip malls separated by large tracts of agricultural fields spread out over a mile-and-a-half section of Bolsa Avenue from Magnolia in the West to Ward Street in the east.²⁹ Arriving from Nebraska in 1978 and opening Danh's Pharmacy, Danh Nhut Quach was one of the earliest entrepreneurs to start a business on Bolsa Avenue. According to him, there were very few Vietnamese businesses around when he opened his store. Among them, he remembers Hoa Binh market, another small grocery store, Dr. Pham Van Hoang's medical office, and Tony Lam's office across the street.³⁰ In 1979, more

p. 16 Vietnamese-owned businesses (as well as Italian, Japanese, and Liechtensteinian ones) opened in Bolsa Mini Mall located just a few blocks away from Danh's Pharmacy.³¹

During the first few years, Quach recalled a considerable amount of anxiety over the viability of doing business in the area. As mentioned earlier, the nascent commercial district was partitioned by vast agricultural fields and it was uncertain whether or not more Vietnamese would move into the surrounding neighborhoods. For the first three years, business was slow since a Vietnamese customer base did not yet exist. Also, the existing Anglo population was unfriendly or hesitantly cordial at best. Quach related that when the mayor and police chief of Westminster visited in 1978 “they did not feel comfortable with our Vietnamese presence in the community; everything seemed new to them. Yet they tried to make friends with us.”³² By May 1981, however, the trickle of Vietnamese businesses soon grew noticeable enough that more than a hundred Westminster residents signed a petition urging the city to “deny granting any license to any Indochinese refugee attempting to set up any business in this Viet town area.”³³ These residents were really ticked off that the Vietnamese were taking over. Finally, there was potential competition from other growing Vietnamese districts in Southern California. In Los

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ It should be noted that this area is largely within Westminster, but also includes portions of Garden Grove.

³⁰ Danh Nhut Quach, interview by Minh Duc Hoai Trinh, in *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, ed. Mary Kay Tirrell, trans. Vo Thi, Minh Van and Vo Ta Chuoc, vol. 1 Business Development, (Santa Ana: The Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County and Newhope Library, 1991), 65.

³¹ Steve Padilla, “Vietnamese Business Thriving in Southland Despite Some Opposition,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1981, sec. IV, p. 1. John Horn, “American and Vietnamese Cultures Blend in Orange County's Little Saigon,” *Orange County Register*, 13 March 1988, sec. Show, p. 3.

³² Quach interview, 67.

³³ Padilla, “Vietnamese Business Thriving in Southland,” sec. IV, p. 1.

Angeles, a group of "Vietnamese and American" businessmen was trying to build a "Vietnam Town" complete with apartments and cultural centers in addition to stores and business offices and boasted that it would be more than Bolsa Mini Mall.³⁴ In retrospect, we know that this was empty

bravado for despite disadvantages and early difficulties, Bolsa Avenue was destined to become the main boulevard of the new Saigon. p. 17

After the first stores opened on Bolsa Avenue, the increasing population of Vietnamese in the Southern California area provided the necessary rise in ability and demand that led to a rapid proliferation of more businesses. It was a cycle that fed upon itself as more shops and services attracted more co-ethnic patrons and entrepreneurs who wanted to share in the financial benefits of business ownership. Although exact numbers are hard to find, the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce estimated that there were thirty Vietnamese-owned businesses in Orange County in 1979. By 1981, there were three-hundred and fifty. Just three years later, the number would nearly double to six hundred and fifty. Most but not all of these businesses stood within four blocks of Bolsa Avenue.³⁵ As mentioned earlier, climate and economic concerns motivated many Vietnamese to move to Orange County initially. But the rise of Bolsa Avenue as a commercial center catering to Vietnamese tastes and needs soon became another reason to come to Orange County. The early ascendancy of the Bolsa area is most apparent in the following statement by a Vietnamese-American visitor from Washington, D.C. in 1984:

It's a must for people like myself to make a pilgrimage to Orange County, to meet people, to eat good food and have a sense of the old Vietnam. We jokingly say among ourselves that Orange County is the Vietnamese capital of the United States, and there's a certain jealousy.³⁶

By 1987, the Westminster police department estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 people came to shop along Bolsa Avenue every weekend. Additionally, a survey in the same

year indicated that the number of Vietnamese-owned businesses in Orange County had ballooned to 3,074.³⁷ p. 18

What led to the success of Bolsa Avenue as a Vietnamese commercial center? External reasons included the central location of the street in Orange County (near the 22 and 405 freeways) and the encouragement of Westminster government officials who recognized that the boom of Vietnamese businesses was rejuvenating the area adding to the city's coffers. According to Quach:

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵ Padilla, "Vietnamese Business Thriving in Southland," sec. IV, p. 1. Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa," sec. I, p. 1.

³⁶ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa," sec. I, p. 1.

³⁷ Jeffrey Brody, "Little Saigon: County's Vietnamese Enclave Succeeds the American Way," *Orange County Register*, 11 January 1987, sec. C, p. 1. Dean Takahashi, "Parallel Paths," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1993, sec. D, p. 1.

Business was slow here so that rent was low.... The contribution of the City of Westminster was their encouragement... the City of Westminster had been a poor one at that time. They did not have anything but income from businesses. Therefore, the growing Vietnamese businesses in the community were likely to bring in lots of taxes to the City of Westminster.³⁸

From the beginning, the relationship between the Vietnamese immigrants and previous residents of Westminster was problematic. As mentioned earlier, Westminster city officials and residents felt uncomfortable with the Vietnamese because the immigrants threatened the city's supposed cultural homogeneity. At the same time, however, Vietnamese-owned businesses brought economic value to the city. The Vietnamese were foreigners whose entrepreneurial success was read as a sign of assimilation that initially pleased Americans, but whose very presence was also seen as a mark of America's guilt and shame. To some Americans, these people were human baggage from the Vietnam War. As we shall see, this uneasy relationship between the Vietnamese newcomers and the existing Anglo-dominated community in Westminster would always be present in the area's history. Nevertheless, the

p. 19 initial encouragement of the city of Westminster was important to the growth of Vietnamese businesses in the Bolsa area.

The true success of the Bolsa area, however, was heavily dependent on competitive merchants and the weekly Vietnamese shopper. For each, the area met certain needs. For the Vietnamese consumer, the shops along Bolsa allowed people to regain the sights and smells of Vietnam. Visiting the area then and now is an experience where one can feel the rhythm of a lost and recreated place. Though not exactly the same as the lost Saigon, the reflection itself was empowering because it was a sign of the creator's agency. As Tony Lam, former president of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County stated, "We can find the atmosphere of home here on Bolsa. It's not only a shopping center, but a center of the past... I can taste the food I thought I lost and could never taste again."³⁹ For the weekend visitor, language and food were the salient and most obvious indicators of a shared culture. It was here that the Vietnamese could reaffirm to themselves and to others that they had not forgotten their country, their family, and their people. Every weekend, thousands of Vietnamese shoppers came to the Bolsa area to eat, shop, run errands, and converse. To many, it was a ritual - a pilgrimage that had both emotional meaning and utilitarian purpose. Additionally, in its early years, the Bolsa area served as the center of a community in exile. It became a nexus of information about Vietnam and a conduit for sending clothing and medicines to relatives in need. Indeed, supermarkets, restaurants, pharmacies, and newspaper offices were the first successful businesses in the area because they met the earliest and most immediate demands of the Vietnamese.

For Vietnamese merchants, the Bolsa area represented community, but more importantly, opportunity. After struggling to eke out a living by working low-wage jobs,

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³⁸ Quach interview, 65-68.

³⁹ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa," sec. I, p. 1.

many Vietnamese discovered business as a way to get ahead in the United States. As Du Tran, founder of Little Saigon Supermarket, recounted,

After three years of study, I graduated as a technician and worked as a T.V. technician. I made \$6 to \$7 an hour. My salary was not enough to support my family. I was thinking of others such as my cousin. They went to farms to buy vegetables for resale to markets. I decided to try that idea. I went to wholesale centers in Los Angeles to buy merchandise and to distribute it to the Vietnamese markets in Orange County where they speak Vietnamese ... I was dedicated to this new employment and worked 20 hours a day, continuously for several months. Realizing that my business was progressing well, I decided to move to Orange County because North San Diego was quite distant from Los Angeles.⁴⁰

Once again, we see evidence of Orange County's drawing power on Vietnamese immigrants. Additionally, Tran's story is typical of most Vietnamese businesses which began as family operations. Early on, he related that his "capital consisted of loans of money from [his] relatives saved from their wages."⁴¹ Later, his wife and brother-in-law joined as partners in the business culminating in the formation of VANCO company in 1984. Starting out as a food and cooking oil distributor, the company eventually expanded into supermarket chain ownership. Emotionally, Du Tran related the secret of his success:

Thanks to the participation of my wife and my children, all have contributed to the success.... After school, my children helped me in the storage facility. They have done shipping and receiving and inventory as well as putting oil into small cans. Currently, at this market, my children have been working as extra staff. Looking around, I can see my wife and my children which contributes to my working spirit. I am proud of my family and they have been good to me.⁴²

Du Tran's pride in his family and the vital role they play in the success of his business are evident.

In *Family Tighrope*, Nazli Kibria has argued that patchworking, or the sharing of disparate but complementary kinship resources, is a major characteristic and economic survival strategy of Vietnamese-American households.⁴³ I believe that this idea can be extended into the domain of entrepreneurship as well. In Du Tran's case, for example, economic benefits motivated him to begin his business, but the initial capital was provided by several relatives' contributions. His children, who did not have financial capital, contributed free labor to the family enterprise. Du Tran, himself, provided the entrepreneurial skill behind the whole operation. Kibria's examples are much more complex and varied than this one, but the general idea of patchworking can be

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⁴⁰ Du Tran, interview by Minh Duc Hoai Trinh, in *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, ed. Mary Kay Tirrell, trans. Vo Thi, Minh Van and Vo Ta Chuoc, vol. 1 Business Development, (Santa Ana: The Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County and Newhope Library, 1991), 100-101.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Du Tran interview, 105-106.

⁴³ Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese-Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

found in many Vietnamese business success stories including that of Song Long bakery and *Nguoi Viet* newspaper (two cultural icons of Little Saigon) just to name a few. The story of the Bolsa area is inseparable from and is actually the amalgamation of hundreds of family business histories much like Tran's. Behind each business is the story of a family's pride, solidarity, and successful survival. Indeed, as Kibria has suggested, the Confucian ethic of family collectivism and the centrality of kinship as identity among Vietnamese immigrants provided the reinforcing ideology behind patchworking. Here again we have an example of older cultural institutions being adapted to meet the survival needs of an unfamiliar social setting.

Admittedly, however, business was not always the route to every family's economic stability. In fact, many businesses failed and the community attempted to ameliorate the high rate of business turnover by holding educational business seminars later on. Nevertheless, the desire to share in economic profit and community building was a powerful motivator both then and now. As Du Tran said, "I wanted everyone to be proud of having a typical market

p. 22 on Bolsa. This thinking inspired me to establish the market. I have not seen any force superior to the spirit of the Vietnamese. To be successful or to fail depends on one's destiny."⁴⁴ In this statement, we find a profound link between pride and opportunity. Du Tran is obviously a skilled businessman who has successfully met the needs of a niche market. Like many businessmen, however, his ambitions are not limited to profit making. Secure with his economic situation, his vision is now focused on the ultimate project of contributing to the legacy and prestige of the Vietnamese emigr\$eA community. His businesses, along with the rest of the businesses in the Bolsa area, had become symbols of memory, rebirth, and resiliency. Their presence embodied material success as physical testaments to capitalism's triumph over Communism, but also a validation of American values and a new Vietnamese-American identity.

Both shoppers and merchants were aware of the significance of each to the other and their mutual dependence in the creation of community. The shoppers brought their money and, more importantly, their children to the Bolsa area every week. The merchants invested their labor, capital, and ambition in delineating the physical space necessary for creating cultural space. Basic economic motives might have been the first cause of settlement, but culture soon became the justification. And although a few shops do not constitute a community, a few hundred might. After all, what were the roots of the *agora*, the forum, and the town center? A market provides a meaningful and convenient gathering place for the growth of socio-cultural institutions and happenings. Indeed, as the Bolsa area developed from disjointed strip malls to ethnic enclave, it gained and developed newspaper publishers, churches, temples, radio and television stations, festivals, service organizations, community centers, and its own host of political personalities. Admittedly, the roots of many of these

p. 23 institutions were contemporary with the development of businesses. Nevertheless, the full expression of many of these institutions was heavily dependent upon the critical mass created by the concentration of Vietnamese businesses on Bolsa Avenue and their role in meeting people's material needs. By the late 1980s, Vietnamese businesses leaders began thinking that

⁴⁴ Tran interview, 104-105.

they could draw even more consumers to the Bolsa area if they promoted it as a unique cultural-commercial district. To do so, they needed a name that represented the Vietnamese flavor Bolsa Avenue had assumed. The naming process, however, was not simple and the events leading up to it shed light on some important and lingering issues between the Vietnamese and the city of Westminster.

Before 1988, Vietnamese merchants and shoppers used many different names for the Bolsa area. Some might have referred to it as *Sài Gòn Nhỏ* (Little Saigon), but most called the area simply *khu Bolsa* (Bolsa area/center), or *cho Bolsa* (Bolsa market). In the mainstream media, the use of the name "Little Saigon" became common as early as 1984 when the *Los Angeles Times* published an article entitled "Boom on Bolsa: Vietnamese Create Their Own Saigon," but it was four years later that a group of Vietnamese leaders would choose Little Saigon to be the area's official name.⁴⁵ In fact, as late as 1987 Tony Lam, former president of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County (VNCOC) and destined to become the first Vietnamese-American elected to the Westminster City Council, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We want to call our community Asiantown -- not 'Little Saigon' which is too negative and reminds people of the bad experiences from the

[Vietnam] war."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the name Little Saigon would stick. A synopsis of that history was given by Dr. Co Pham, president of the VNCOC in 1991. p. 24

We named the area Little Saigon because the Vietnamese who lost their nation, those overseas, always hope someday to return to Saigon. Therefore we created the name Little Saigon so that we can remember a day when we can reconquer Saigon. At that time, we lobbied the Mayor of the City of Westminster as well as the City Council who supported the Vietnamese.... But when we applied for the name, it was difficult because we had to lobby Assemblymen, Senators and Congressmen to sign a petition which recognized the Saigon area as a cultural center and not only as an economic and commercial area.⁴⁷

In the end, the petition was signed and passed and Dr. Pham expressed his gratitude to the "American government and the local elected officials of the City of Westminster" for their assistance. This rosy interpretation, however, effaces the political jousting that occurred. Before Little Saigon could be named, the Bolsa area had to be defined as a tourist area. Early in 1988, however, Westminster city officials expressed their concern that the Vietnamese businesses were not collecting enough sales tax. Using the analogy of "a carrot rather than the stick," the mayor of Westminster told the Vietnamese community that the city would declare the area a tourist zone if the businesses would do a better job of collecting sales tax. Some community leaders were outraged by the accusation that Vietnamese businesses were

⁴⁵ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa," sec. I, p. 1

⁴⁶ David Reyes, "Asiantown: Commercial-Cultural Complex Expected to Anchor Southland's Next Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 1987, ed. Orange County, 1.

⁴⁷ Co Long Dang Pham, interview by Son Kim Vo, in *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, ed. Mary Kay Tirrell, trans. Vo Thi, Minh Van and Vo Ta Chuoc, vol. 1 Business Development, (Santa Ana: The Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County and Newhope Library, 1991), 40.

defrauding the city of tax money.⁴⁸ In response three days later, Dr. Co Pham and other Southeast Asian business leaders “complained to council members, that even though they were U.S. allies during the Vietnam War, little attention is paid to them now that they have

p. 25 settled in this country.”⁴⁹ The council relented and on February 10, 1988, the Westminster Redevelopment Agency unanimously approved a resolution designating a 1.5 mile section of Bolsa Avenue stretching from Brookhurst to Magnolia streets as the “Little Saigon Tourist Commercial District.”⁵⁰

The next step was the erection of freeway signs directing traffic towards Little Saigon. As Dr. Pham related, this was a bit time-consuming. In fact, the plan encountered some resistance from Caltrans (California's department of transportation) which thought that the signs were a form of “free advertising.” Nevertheless, they were eventually approved and George Deukmejian, then Governor of California, unveiled the freeway markers and became the first governor to visit Little Saigon amidst great jubilation. Van Tran, who attended the unveiling ceremony, remarked “This is important for us not only because of the governor's visit, but also because, in a way, the name of Saigon is being resurrected. We are proud of our achievement.”⁵¹ The naming of the Bolsa area as Little Saigon was the culmination and de facto acknowledgement of the commercial district's transformation into a Vietnamese ethnic enclave.

In less than ten years, the Vietnamese had succeeded in building a thriving business area on Westminster's main thoroughfare where only beanfields and junkyards had existed before. The squabble over sales tax revenue when business leaders wanted to name the area Little Saigon, however, indicated that there continued to be tension between the city of

p. 26 Westminster and the Vietnamese. Awed and threatened by the speed of Bolsa Avenue's metamorphosis, some Westminster residents reasoned that the Vietnamese must have received large government subsidies in order to start their businesses. This was a common and egregious misconception held by many non-Vietnamese residents. For example, a Japanese-American interviewee informed me that “a lot of the [Vietnamese] family businesses received money from the government.”⁵² When I asked how much, she estimated that each family member received \$10,000 to \$15,000. There is no evidence to support such an astronomical

⁴⁸ I know from personal experience that some vendors occasionally do not charge customers sales tax in order to “lam quen” or “make friends” with their patrons. I believe this stems from a tradition through which loyal customers would get inside deals from merchants. Obviously, however, it is not possible to quantify how much money is not collected because of this practice.

⁴⁹ David Reyes, “Little Saigon Aiming to Be Tourist Magnet,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1988, sec. II, p. 1. Jeffrey Brody, “Westminster Links Tax Collection to Improvements in Little Saigon,” *Orange County Register*, 2 February 1988, sec. B, p. 3.

⁵⁰ David Reyes, “Little Saigon Aiming to Be Tourist Magnet,” sec. II, p. 1. David Reyes, “Westminster Approves Boost for Little Saigon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 1988, sec. II, p. 5.

⁵¹ Mark Platte, “Caltrans Frowns on Freeway Signs for Little Saigon,” *Orange County Register*, 25 March 1988, sec. B, p. 6. Pat Brennan, “Deukmejian Signs up Little Saigon: Governor Unveils Freeway Marker for Vietnamese Businesses,” *Orange County Register*, 18 June 1988, sec. B, p. 1. David Reyes, “Deukmejian to Enlarge Little Saigon's Stature,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1988, sec. II, p. 4.

⁵² Michelle Marumoto-Wright, interview by author, tape recording, Irvine, California, 19 January 2002.

sum. In fact, it was difficult for the Vietnamese even to get loans because many had neither credit history nor sufficient income. Repeatedly, Vietnamese businesspeople articulated the fact that most of the capital came from personal intracommunity loans.⁵³ But the perception that the Vietnamese must be somehow cheating lingered. In the debate over the sales tax revenue, it is evident that this idea persisted in the minds of elected officials. What is even more interesting, however, is the tactic employed by Vietnamese leaders to get the resolution passed. Matching political admonishment with historical shame, they evoked American guilt about the Vietnam War as a weapon with apparent efficacy. Whatever the true motives were behind these political machinations, local politicians gained the appreciation of the Vietnamese and a promise for increased collaboration regarding Little Saigon's development while Vietnamese business leaders gained the official recognition they had desired.

Even in the midst of this political success, however, the position of Vietnamese business leaders within the Little Saigon community, itself, was tenuous. Due to the influence of Confucian ideology, merchants in Vietnam were stigmatized as pariahs because

they did not produce, but reaped benefits as middle-men in transactions. Scholars (mandarins, p. 27 teachers, and national examination candidates), however, were attributed high status. In America's capitalist-oriented socio-political schema, this might seem counterintuitive, but nearly all Vietnamese, including the most successful businessmen, have been instilled with this value system.⁵⁴ In his interview, for example, Du Tran's language implied that he privileged degreed professionals over his own occupation. "Though I **could not earn a master or a doctorate degree** [emphasis mine]," he confessed. "I am gifted in doing business."⁵⁵ Later, he attributed the success of the Little Saigon naming to "the (Vietnamese) scholars, the nationalists submitted a petition for the name of Little Saigon for this center."⁵⁶ This is interesting because it was actually the Little Saigon Development Committee, a group of business leaders, who submitted the petition. Apparently, Tran was not on this committee, or was unaware of its existence. Nevertheless, he assumes that scholars and Vietnamese nationalists must have done it because they are the only ones invested with sufficient power and prestige. But weren't Vietnamese entrepreneurs the people who built Little Saigon? Perhaps, but without consumers (in this case, loyal weekend shoppers), the area's businesses could not have survived. This important principle, however, was recently forgotten by one of Little Saigon's most influential developers, Frank Jao.

Like other Vietnamese, Frank Jao arrived in the United States from South Vietnam in 1975. Like them, he toiled on assembly lines before he acquired enough capital to start his own business. But unlike them, Frank Jao is not always accepted as a vietnamese by the Vietnamese. Why? Because Jao is a Vietnamese of Chinese descent and as such, he carries the stigma of being an oppressor and a quasi-infiltrator who is not completely accepted by

⁵³ Day and Holley, "Boom on Bolsa," sec. I, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Hien Duc Do, 11.

⁵⁵ Tran interview, 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 116.

either Chinese or Vietnamese immigrant groups.⁵⁷ For the Vietnamese, one thousand years of Chinese domination left them harboring deep resentments against all things Chinese. Having said that, however, I must qualify that the Vietnamese have absorbed and even emulated many aspects of Chinese culture. Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism, the Heavenly Mandate, Vietnamese styles of literature and writing, and even *Tết* (the Lunar New Year) are just some examples of China's enduring influence. In America, the first Vietnamese immigrants gravitated towards pre-existing Chinatowns because that was where they could find familiar foods and associate with people who shared a similar culture. Indeed, the symbiosis between the Chinese and Vietnamese in America is very real and deep. One can not visit Chinatown without meeting a Vietnamese. Likewise, one can not visit Little Saigon without hearing Cantonese. Nevertheless, as we shall see with Jao, this coexistence has its limits.

In 1978, Frank Jao opened Bridgecreek Development Company, a firm that would eventually develop over one-third of Little Saigon. Without peer, Frank Jao and his company have made the most influential impact on the Bolsa area. As Yen Do, publisher of the *Nguoi Viet* newspaper said, "If we take away all the buildings and office spaces he built, we wouldn't have what we call Little Saigon. Little Saigon is basically a big master plan of real estate. He was the executor of that plan."⁵⁸ Starting with the Far East Plaza in 1979, Jao has steadily built a commercial empire one development at a time. By 1987, he was part owner of at least five of the twelve largest shopping centers in Little Saigon.⁵⁹ His largest project, however, was centered on the 9200 block of Bolsa Avenue: the Asian Garden Mall known by

Vietnamese as *Phước, Lộc, Thọ* (Luck, Prosperity, and Longevity after the three statues adorning the mall entrance).

Asian Garden Mall was actually the second phase of a master plan Jao had designed for a large tract of land along Bolsa. The first phase had been completed in 1985 with the construction of the Asian Village, a two-story strip mall anchored by a 99 Ranch Market, right across the street from the future Asian Garden Mall. As the second phase neared completion in late 1987, Jao began a campaign to call the Bolsa area "Asiantown" instead of "Little Saigon." Jao argued that he was attempting to expand the area's potential customer base by appealing to all Asians and not just to Vietnamese. Needless to say, this proposal did not go over well with some Vietnamese community leaders who felt that to do so would rob the area of its Vietnamese identity. Newspapers, however, did not report this because attention was focused on the overwhelming momentum for naming the area Little Saigon and the intrigue surrounding that issue. Asiantown was forgotten, but Frank Jao's faux pas would be remembered. In the meantime, Asian Garden Mall became an enormous success and gained a reputation as the centerpiece of Little Saigon.

Nine years later, Jao embarked on the third stage of his development. His dream was to build a cultural center that would draw in tourists and become Little Saigon's hotspot. Jao was trying to

⁵⁷ Vo, 292. Do, 5-6.

⁵⁸ Quyen Do, "O.C. Developer Jao looking to Asia," *Orange County Register*, 26 December 1996, sec. A, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Brody, "Little Saigon: County's Vietnamese Enclave Succeeds the American Way," *CL*.

capitalize upon the tourism focus that had become the predominant concern of Little Saigon leaders since its naming. Originally, the city of Westminster and Vietnamese business leaders had idealized a situation where each would be able to help the other mold Little Saigon into a cohesive and bustling business district attractive to both Vietnamese shoppers and non-Vietnamese tourists. Towards furthering of this goal, the Westminster City Council established the Bolsa Avenue Steering Committee and handpicked the seventeen

members on it. Along with previous talks about designing a uniform architectural code, there were propositions for building a monorail, pedestrian bridge, and underground tunnel, but none of these came into fruition because of lack of consensus.⁶⁰ Additionally, it was clear at the beginning that the city of Westminster and the majority of Vietnamese community leaders had different goals since the city was primarily concerned with attracting non-Asian tourists to the area. As for the Vietnamese, they were becoming increasingly preoccupied with preserving Little Saigon as an ethnic enclave. By the mid-1990s, the first generation of American-born Vietnamese children had become teenagers who were more interested in going to South Coast Plaza (a chic mainstream mall) than to Little Saigon. There was a growing sense of urgency amongst the older people of Little Saigon to make or remake it attractive to the young. As a shrewd businessman, Frank Jao considered these trends as he planned future developments.

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First, he proposed building a pedestrian bridge that would span Bolsa Avenue and connect Asian Village to Asian Garden Mall. Named the Harmony Bridge, it was to be the setpiece of an elaborate outdoor plaza filled with kiosks, sculptures, and fountains lining either side of the street. The Harmony Bridge, however, turned out to be anything but. When the plans for the bridge were put up for public display, some Vietnamese criticized them on the grounds that they were too Chinese. One of the most vocal critics was Mai Cong, president of the non-profit service-oriented Vietnamese Community of Orange County.⁶¹ She vehemently insisted:

We don't want for our beloved Little Saigon to be turned into a Chinatown. The architecture of the proposed bridge is in the style and characteristic of Chinese. The Vietnamese have our own culture, our own architecture. We want this to stay as Little Saigon for the benefit of all who come here.⁶²

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Specifically, Mai Cong and her Ad Hoc Committee to Safeguard Little Saigon criticized the roof of the bridge which should have been red instead of green and the ornamental curvatures which should have been less bulky. Jao did not help his case by challenging Mai Cong's accusations with, "Prove it. Is it so wrong...to have a primary goal [of doing] business in a multicultural society?"⁶³ In the end, Bridgecreek chose to scrap the \$3 million bridge proposal because a compromise could not be reached despite the mediation efforts of the Westminster

⁶⁰ Anh Do, "Plan to Reshape Little Saigon Moving Too Slowly, Some on Advisory Panel Say," *Orange County Register*, 5 June 1992, sec. B, p. 9.

⁶¹ The Vietnamese Community of Orange County is located in Santa Ana and provides a variety of services to help Vietnamese immigrants adjust to life in the United States. These services include health education, counseling, socio-cultural events, etc.

⁶² Lily Dizon, "Acrimony Over Project Called 'Harmony'," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1996, sec. A, p. 1.

⁶³ Ibid.

officialdom.⁶⁴ The city of Westminster expressed its disappointment. Additionally, a survey conducted by University of California, Irvine students in the fall of 1996 found that many Westminster residents (both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese) wanted some kind of bridge to be built. In a sampling of one hundred people, thirty-seven stated that the bridge should be changed to a Vietnamese style and then built, nineteen answered that a bridge should be built because it would be an asset to the community, and two felt that the bridge should be built with the original design. Only twelve respondent felt that no bridge should be built at all.⁶⁵ The conflict was obviously not about a bridge. It was about the different historical meanings which individuals in the same community gave to architectural symbols. Unfortunately, in this case such heightened awareness combined with a lack of sincere dialogue served only to defeat an idea that most Little Saigon community members actually wanted.

p. 32 Disappointed, frustrated, but undaunted, Jao proceeded with the construction of a different phase of his master plan: the New Saigon Mall. Located behind the Asian Village, the new development featured a courtyard adorned with a twelve-foot marble statue of Confucius and his disciples, tree-lined walkways with statuary depicting mythical figures from both Chinese and Vietnamese traditions, concrete representations of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, and a 1,000-foot-long stone-wall mural narrating the history of Vietnamese kings, heroes, legends, harvest traditions, and folklore. Additionally, there were plans to build a Buddhist temple. Apparently, Jao had learned from and was attempting to make up for his past miscalculations. Of course, one can not help but feel a sense of disjuncture standing in front of a mural illustrating the Trung sisters mounted on their elephants leading a heroic charge against an army of Chinese invaders and then turning around and facing the monolithic Confucius surrounded by his coterie of followers. Indeed, it was apparent from the beginning that Jao's attempt at diversity had profitable and perhaps even honorable intentions, but was ill-conceived. At the opening ceremony of the New Saigon Mall in 1997, the *Orange County Business Journal* reported,

Anyone who doubted Frank Jao's desire to broaden the appeal of Little Saigon in Westminster only had to listen to the eclectic mix of music ... The Nicholson Pipe and Drum crops marched to "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and a strolling mariachi band strummed "Spanish Eyes." Meanwhile, a group of traditional Vietnamese musicians mixed bass drums and heavy rhythm sticks as dancers gyrated underneath dragon costumes. And anyone who doubted that Jao faces serious challenges only had to listen to a group of teengagers ...

"This is only for old people who live around here," said Quan Vu, a 15 year-old Bolsa High School student.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ John Pope, "Developer Scraps Plans for Bridge in Little Saigon," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1996, sec. B, p. 1.

⁶⁵ John Nguyen, Kim Khanh Nguyen, Phuong Nguyen, and Son Vu, "The Harmony Bridge" (paper written for Social Sciences 178D: The Vietnamese-American Experience, University of California Irvine, 26 November 1996), SE Asian Archive, UC Irvine Library, UCI, Irvine, 7-8.

⁶⁶ J L Sullivan, "How Now Frank Jao?," *Orange County Business Journal*, 20 February 1997, 1-3.

If Jao's goal was to attract young Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese tourists to Little Saigon, the merchandise options at the New Saigon Mall were not indicative of this effort. Arranged as a bazaar, the mall's kiosks only offered “off-brand apparel, discount leather goods,

Vietnamese CDs, cosmetics and toys.”⁶⁷ These were the kind of cheap wares bargain shoppers live for. Unfortunately, cheap goods were already ubiquitous in numerous other Little Saigon stores. The New Saigon Mall was built to lure young, fashion-conscious shoppers back from South Coast Plaza, and yet it did not offer trendy merchandise. Worse still, it was set far back from Bolsa Avenue behind the 99 Ranch Market. Eclipsed and hard to access, the New Saigon Mall rapidly became an economic failure. The festivals and celebrations Jao had envisioned taking place in the courtyard were limited by surrounding neighborhoods' complaints of noise. As for the Buddhist temple, it was cancelled because a compromise could not be reached with a nearby property owner. In August of 1999, Jao was forced to admit defeat and announced the closing and demolition of the New Saigon Mall. In its place, he proposed the construction of an affordable housing development for senior citizens.⁶⁸ When I visited the area in January of 2002, I found that the New Saigon Mall had disappeared. In the cultural court, only Confucius and his disciples remained as companions to the Vietnamese heroes depicted on the western wall. Many of the other statues had been junked. Surprisingly, there were no senior apartments. Where the New Saigon Mall once stood, tract homes and a new sign proclaimed, “Magnolia Court: A New Home Community Priced from High \$300,000s.” p. 33

In retrospect, Jao admits that he took an economic risk that did not pay off. Do Ngoc Yen, publisher of the *Nguoi Viet* newspaper, however, offered another perspective.

He and others say Jao's new development also may be feeling the pinch from community residents upset with the Chinese artwork in the mall's court. “It is a kind of silent protest,” Do says, adding that for all of Jao's hard work and success, he has not taken the time to sell his vision or develop consensus for projects like the

pedestrian bridge. “Maybe because he was so successful, he just forgot one of the ingredients - the cooperation of people here.”⁶⁹ p. 34

Practical and emotional conflicts ultimately resulted in the failure of Frank Jao's master plan for Little Saigon. In the wake of this failure, Jao lost not only a great deal of money, but also his reputation as the Donald Trump of Little Saigon. For the Vietnamese community, Frank Jao's failures meant that they had preserved their cultural integrity at perhaps the cost of economic growth. Had Jao's plan succeeded, it would undoubtedly have enriched the physical and cultural space of Little Saigon. Of course, the question would always be whether or not that cultural space was one of choice or imposition. Most important is the explicit concern over the future of Little Saigon's economic viability through its appeal to both young Vietnamese-Americans and non-Vietnamese tourists. Could Little Saigon serve the material and social

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Vik Jolly and Mai Tran, “An Idea Reborn,” *Orange County Register*, 6 August 1999, sec. Local News, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Don Lee, “Power Broker Has New Plan for Little Saigon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 August 1997, sec. A, p. 1.

needs of older generations if its focus changed to catering to non-Vietnamese tourists? What is the future of Little Saigon and will it be just to all who are involved? Apparently, these are questions which neither Frank Jao nor the Vietnamese community has found a solution to. But it is a concern that must be answered in the near future.

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ANTI-COMMUNISM AND THE HI-TEK INCIDENT

Of the political forces that have shaped Little Saigon, none has been as omnipresent, virulent, contested, and empowering as anti-communism. In fact, anti-communism has dominated the politics of the community. Its origins can be traced to the most recent Vietnamese civil war ending with the 1975 fall of Saigon. Burning with grief over the loss of their country, many first-wave refugees believed that the Communists would soon be overthrown and that they would return to Vietnam within a few months. As those months became years, and those years turned into decades, the pain of the initial loss decreased but did not disappear. In the meantime, the refugees participated in the collective building of Little Saigon which had come to represent safe haven and the symbolic resurrection of their beloved capital. Underlying the naming of Little Saigon was the assumption that everyone in the community was a Vietnamese-in-exile. More importantly, they were exiles because they feared, hated, and had been persecuted by the Communists. Second to a Vietnamese cultural identity, anti-communism was the next lowest common denominator of unity. It was a force that could be galvanized to create cohesion. Drawn together by their universal opposition to the Communists, for example, the first generation of Vietnamese-Americans voted, for the most part, as Republicans and contributed thousands of dollars to organizations planning for an "armed liberation" of Vietnam.

At the same time, however, anti-communism could be a destructive force. The new Saigon, like the old Saigon, was not without its political intrigues and anyone who even appeared to be sympathetic to the current government of Vietnam was branded a traitor and a

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Communist. Like "Fascist" in mainstream U.S. politics, "Communist" is part of the rhetoric of Vietnamese-American political denunciations. Moreover, akin to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, political witch hunts have taken place in Little Saigon. In the 1980s, a vigilante group calling themselves the Vietnamese Organization to Exterminate the Communists and Restore the Nation (VOEARN) claimed responsibility for a string of arsonists and summary executions of purported Communist propagandists. The most publicized occurrence was the death of the journalist Tap Van Pham who was killed when arsonists set fire to his newspaper office located in Little Saigon on August 9, 1987.⁷⁰ Pham was the editor of the entertainment newspaper, *Mai*, and had been running ads for Montreal-based Vinamedic, a company that specialized in money transfers to Vietnam. Located in Canada because of the U.S. economic embargo in effect at the time, the company was strongly suspected of having ties with the communist government of Vietnam. Apparently, Pham had received anonymous letters warning him not to print the ads, but ignored them. Three days after his death, the VOEARN distributed a communiqué to the Vietnamese language press claiming responsibility for several murders including Pham's and

⁷⁰ Patrick J. Kiger, "Viet Publisher Found Dead in Apparent Arson," *Orange County Register*, 10 August 1987, sec. B, p. 1.

warning of more to come. As listed in the *Orange County Register*, past assassinations included the 1982 slaying of Nguyen Dam Phong, a Houston newspaper editor, for printing editorials critical of a group purporting to raise money for resistance fighters in Vietnam; the 1994 shooting of Nguyen Van Luy, honorary president of a pro-Hanoi group, in San Francisco; and the 1986 shooting of Van Khan Tran outside a Westminster shopping center for speaking in favor of establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam.⁷¹ These incidents showed that voicing any kind of deviant opinion,

or one vaguely critical of the émigré community could be construed as pro-Communist and was dangerous to one's personal safety.

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Additionally, the VOERCN held newspaper editors responsible for any and all material printed in their papers. By all accounts personal and professional, Pham was not a Communist and *Mai* was an entertainment magazine full of Hollywood scandals, not political polemics. In Vietnam, however, pervasive government propaganda made journalism and many entertainment forms suspect.⁷² The idea of a politically neutral news media was foreign to Vietnamese who had only been exposed to the controversial, partisan-oriented press inherited from the French.⁷³ To be fair, many Vietnamese-language newspapers continued this tradition in the United States. The only ones that survived in this refugee community were the ones that expounded anti-Communist viewpoints exclusively. Fear of potential violence, however, created a climate where newspaper editors were forced to police themselves: sooner, or later, every editor was threatened. Both A Tu Nguyen, editor of *Viet Press* and Yen Ngoc Do, editor of *Nguoi Viet*, for example, received death threats in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After Pham's death, Nguyen kept an "M-16 semiautomatic rifle, a .45 caliber automatic pistol, and a .38 caliber revolver close by when he edits the *Viet Press*."⁷⁴ Do, threatened in 1990, explained his survival strategy in a 1992 interview: "Should there be difficulties in politics where we do not meet that standard [of non-controversiality], we would rather use our indirect way, which means we may choose not to report the news. So to

speak, 'not to report the news' is one of our choices."⁷⁵ Later in the interview, he goes on to say that his newspaper also makes a concerted effort to avoid any Communist terminology and to keep the Vietnamese language in their newspapers "clear and precise."⁷⁶

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⁷¹ Jeffrey Brody, "Editor's Slaying Heightens Fears in Viet Community," *Orange County Register*, 23 August 1987, sec. B, p. 1.

⁷² For anecdotal accounts of propaganda and how it was used by both Vietnamese Communists and Nationalists, see Andrew X. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala* (New York: Picador USA, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999). Past experience with propaganda helps to explain the paranoia and violent emotions engendered when Vietnamese government-sponsored art programs arrive in Orange County. During my time in the field, I was invited to protest against a Hanoi dancing troupe's performance and heard about the controversy surrounding the display of Vietnamese artwork (on loan from Vietnam) at Bowers Museum.

⁷³ Jeffrey Brody, "OC's Viet Community has 17 Newspapers," *Orange County Register*, 11 August 1987, sec. A, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Jeffrey Brody, "Editor's Slaying Heightens Fears in Viet Community," sec. B, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Yen Ngoc Do, interview by Son Kim Vo, 27 April 1992, in *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, eds. Donna Minick and Vo Kim Son, trans. Vo Thi, Minh Van, vol. 4 Preservation of Cultural Heritage and the Vietnamese Media, (Santa Ana: The Intercultural Development Center, Office

Eventually, the wave of political violence peaked in the late 1980s and then subsided. In 1992, the Orange County Register reported, “as the prospects increase for a peaceful transition from communism to democracy in Vietnam, the level of political violence in the U.S. refugee community has decreased.”⁷⁷ Indeed after 1990, the VOECRN disappeared and showed no further signs of activity. The next instance of political controversy occurred in 1993 when protests were held against Dr. Co Pham, president of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce of Orange County, because he had hosted two ranking members of the Vietnamese Communist Party at his home.⁷⁸ At the time, the United States opened diplomatic channels with Vietnam and planned to lift its twenty-year-old trade embargo. Envisioning Little Saigon as the gateway for all trade between the United States and Vietnam, Dr. Pham and other businessmen believed that lifting the embargo would result in a financial boon for the area. However, the community had not reached consensus on this issue and many Vietnamese viewed Dr. Pham's action as political grandstanding at best and as a traitorous fraternization with the enemy at worst.

In fact, the community was torn on the U.S. government's plans to normalize trade relations with Vietnam. Politically liberal individuals welcomed the development as an

p. 39 opportunity for economic growth, easier travel to Vietnam, facilitated communication with relatives, and perhaps increased political freedom for those in Vietnam through better access to education and material resources. Others, however, took a more hard-line conservative stance. Tran Son Ha, formerly an attorney in Vietnam, believed that the United States should not restore relations with Vietnam and that Vietnamese-American visits to Vietnam could be used as propaganda by the Communists, but his statements revealed a deeper emotional conflict, “I love my country,” he said. “I have a father, mother, five sisters, and a brother in Vietnam. But I will not go back. No refugee should.”⁷⁹ Yen Do explained the feelings of many Vietnamese who felt that restoring relations would “destroy the dream of returning to a free Vietnam. The Cubans and the Vietnamese are in a similar position. Sometimes they look irrational to the average American who has put the events of the past behind. But for Cubans and Vietnamese, it's the meaning of their lives. A lot of them were political prisoners. Revenge lies with them forever.”⁸⁰ Unwilling to let go of the past, some Vietnamese-Americans continued to believe that attrition was the best weapon to wield against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam even at the cost of increased impoverishment suffered by relatives left behind in Vietnam.

of International Education and Exchange, Division of Student Affairs, California State University, Fullerton and Newhope Branch of Santa Ana Public Library, 1992), 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 62.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Brody, “Political Violence in Refugee Areas on the Decline,” *Orange County Register*, 12 January 1992, sec. A, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Kim Christensen, “Little Saigon Newspaper's Office Torched by Arsonist,” *Orange County Register*, 28 September 1993, sec. B, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Brody, “Editor's Slaying Heightens Fears in Viet Community,” sec. B, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Although Vietnamese-Americans might have been conflicted, the U.S. government was ready to be friends with Vietnam again. On February 3, 1994, President Clinton announced the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam. In July of the following year, the U.S. and Vietnam restored full diplomatic ties with each other. During the intervening months, the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce of Orange County led by Dr. Co Pham and Cathay Bank sent a trade delegation to Vietnam and returned to angry picket lines in Orange

County. In support of Dr. Co Pham, a virtual un-known named Truong Van Tran organized a forum at Pham's medical offices on October 17, 1994 in the hopes of creating a dialogue between those that did and did not support normalized relations with Vietnam. Nobody, however, attended, or paid attention.⁸¹

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Five years later, though, Truong Van Tran became infamous for inciting the largest anti-communist demonstrations in Little Saigon's history when he displayed a Socialist Republic of Vietnam's flag along with a portrait of Ho Chi Minh in his HiTek TV and Video store. Over the course of two-and-a-half months of political rallying, tens of thousands of protestors demonstrated in front of his business to denounce both Truong Tran and the communist government of Vietnam. Eventually, Truong Tran was evicted from the minimall and jailed for video piracy. But who was this man and what drove him to spark the controversy that he did?

Like other Vietnamese immigrants, Truong Tran's personal history is rife with tragedy and hardship endured during and after the Vietnam War. His cousins died fighting the Communists and his brother suffered in a re-education camp for five years. As a "boat person," he arrived in the United States with the second wave of refugees in 1980. Twenty years old and without a high school education, Truong Tran soon joined a meditation group known as Vo Vi led by Ong Tam, an elderly spiritual personae. Within a few years, he had risen among the ranks and by his account was acknowledged by Ong Tam as being "enlightened and the chosen one." Taking this as sign of his calling, Tran proclaimed himself "God," requested that people address him as "Father," and traveled from

Washington, D.C. to Texas to Oregon, preaching his meditation techniques. On one occasion, he tested a group's devotion to him by making them crawl between his legs.

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Eventually, Truong Tran's megalomania proved to be self-defeating. At a Vo Vi conference in 1989, members of the cult relate that he tried to usurp control from Ong Tam by demanding to sit in a higher chair than his former master. As Mai Nguyen, vice president of the Northern California branch of Vo Vi recounts, "He [Tran] proclaimed that he is god. He proclaims he wants to sit in a chair higher than Ong Tam's chair. Basically his attitude is very haughty — and we always show gratitude and respect to our spiritual leader and master."⁸² Truong Tran was defeated and withdrew from the group after that. He married his only ally and supporter, a woman named Kim-Khanh Thi Nguyen in 1989. They had two children and moved to Stanton, California where Nguyen supported the family on her earnings as a computer programmer while

⁸¹ Nancy Luna, "Forum on Trade with Vietnam Nearly Ignored in Little Saigon," *Orange County Register*, 17 October 1994, sec. B, p. 2.

⁸² Tini Tran, "A Lightning Rod with a Stormy History," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1999, sec. A, p. 1.

Truong Tran contributed what he could salvaging TVs and VCRs from dumpsters. Ultimately, he took electronics classes and opened the HiTek TV and VCR store in 1996. According to Truong Tran, it was during these years when he also made numerous trips back to Vietnam and began to see improvement in the living conditions of its people that he became an advocate of increased economic and political relations. This ultimately led him to organize the failed forum in support of Dr. Co Pham in 1994.⁸³

For the next five years, Truong Tran continued his crusade for a dialogue on increased trade with Vietnam by publishing and distributing twelve editions of a newsletter addressed to the community at large. They were ignored. Frustrated by this lack of attention, in 1999, Truong Tran conceived the idea of displaying the Communist flag and

p. 42 portrait of Ho Chi Minh in his store to incite a response from Little Saigon's merchants and shoppers. Ostensibly asking for a debate on trade with Vietnam, he declared his intentions to put up the flag and portrait in two faxes sent a week in advance. In one of them, he stated, "I defy you all ... if you dare to come to take them off."⁸⁴ They, of course, did.

On Sunday, January 17, 1999, several hundred protestors descended on Hitek TV and VCR, a video rental store located at 9550 Bolsa Avenue in the Bolsa Marketplace. For the next fifty-three days and nights, they held a vigil outside the store with their numbers swelling to a peak of fifteen thousand on the weekends. On January 18, someone struck Tran on the back of the head as he was closing his store. Three days later, on January 21, Orange County Superior Court Judge Tam Nomoto Schumann granted a temporary restraining order to the owners of the Bolsa Marketplace and ordered Truong Tran to remove the items for fear that "great or irreparable injury will result to the strip mall."⁸⁵ One of the owners, Danh Quach, announced that he was planning to evict Tran because the protests were interfering with surrounding businesses. "I don't like any politics on my property," he said. "And I have to have action against him for sure, give him 30 days' notice." As Quach summed up his situation, "Protestors have a right to protest, but who pays the bills?"⁸⁶ In February, however, Judge Nomoto Schumann reversed the ban and upheld Tran's First Amendment right to display the items. This came as no surprise and the vigil continued.

Although relatively peaceful, the emotional charge behind the demonstrations was very real. People denounced the Communist government of Vietnam on megaphones, plastered the store and surrounding strip mall with thousands of South Vietnamese flags,

p. 43 burned and spat on macabre effigies of Ho Chi Minh, held impromptu parades, and taught their children to wave South Vietnam's yellow flag with the three red stripes. A crosssection of the Vietnamese community attended the protests: men and women of all ages from different social classes and regions of Vietnam were represented. The protest expanded to a demonstration

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Vik Jolly, "Little Saigon Display Rips Old Wounds," *Orange County Register*, 20 January 1999, sec. A, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Mai Tran, Bill Rams, Stuart Pfeifer, and Kirsten Searer, "Ho Chi Minh Poster Yields to Judge," *Orange County Register*, 22 January 1999, sec. A, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Vik Jolly, "Little Saigon Display Rips Old Wounds," sec. A, p. 1.

and became a movement. Almost overnight, American and South Vietnamese flags appeared on the rooftops of every shopping center in Little Saigon. Side by side, these fluttering banners proclaimed the ostensible solidarity of Vietnamese-Americans, their dual loyalties to two countries, and their commitment to *ch\$o\$ng C\$o\$ng* (anti-Communism). The flags became the required badges of membership and allegiance. Inspired by Vietnamese language radio and mainstream national television coverage, sympathetic protests were organized by Vietnamese-American communities in San Jose, CA and Houston, TX. Although separated by thousands of miles, these Vietnamese-American demonstrators were united by grief, hate, passion, and idealism -- memory and reality become one voice articulated in the old language and the new: Vietnamese and English, anti-Communist denunciations and First Amendment rights. Or so it seemed. In the end, the immediate cause of the protests, the flag and portrait, was removed by the American justice system not on the basis of ideological righteousness, but on the technicalities of mercantile law.

On February 20, 1999, Tran returned to his store and re-hung the items under police protection. Upon entering his store, officers noticed the tell-tale signs of video piracy, began an investigation, and raided the store two weeks later on March 5, 1999.⁸⁷ Now facing piracy charges on top of his eviction battle, Tran announced through his lawyers that he would not contest possession of the property on March 10, 1999. The following day, crews removed the

HiTek logo from the storefront amidst great jubilee. The protestors cheered, dismantled their displays, unrolled American and South Vietnamese flags, declared a victory, and ended their demonstrations. The HiTek incident was over.⁸⁸ The only casualties of this demonstration were a handful of arrests, \$200,000 in police costs incurred by the city of Westminster, and the disgrace of one Vietnamese-American political figure.⁸⁹ For the protestors, the important thing was that the community had appeared united, had used a collective voice and had succeeded in ejecting a perceived threat to its freedom and integrity.

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Nevertheless, as a case study, the HiTek incident reveals the conflicts, misunderstandings, and beliefs that constituted peoples' unspoken anxieties and assumptions. To "mainstream society," the Hi-Tek incident was always about freedom of speech and First Amendment rights. This was reflected in the editorials and comments made by non-Vietnamese-American participants. In particular, R.L. Nelson, a Redondo Beach resident wrote to the *Los Angeles Times*,

I am completely disgusted with the protesting going on in Westminster's Little Saigon district (Feb. 22). I feel these protestors should be immediately deported.... This is the United States of America. As repugnant as the Communist display is, it is still the individual's right to display it.

⁸⁷ Harrison Sheppard and Phil Willon, "Police Raid Store at Center of Protest," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 March 1999, sec. A, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Mai Tran and Vik Jolly, "The Hi Tek Saga Comes to an End," *Orange County Register*, 12 March 1999, sec. B, p. 1. Harrison Sheppard and Phil Willon, "Jubilant Protestors Declare Victory," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 1999, ed. Orange County, sec. Metro, p. 1. Vik Jolly, Mai Tran and Hieu Tran Pham, "Hi Tek Owner to Leave Little Saigon Strip Mall," *Orange County Register*, 11 March 1999, sec. B, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Megan Garvey and Harrison Sheppard, "Crowd Again Thwarts Little Saigon Merchant," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1999, sec. Metro, p. 1.

These people came from a country where the words "freedom" and "rights" have no meaning and obviously they have not learned since they have been here. And yes, I am a Vietnam War veteran.⁹⁰

Implicitly, Nelson's remarks delineated the Vietnamese protestors from "real Americans" who knew what "freedom really means". Moreover, his tone echoed the historical desire of nativist Americans to exclude non-desirables. Like the nativists, Nelson feared that "those immigrants" do not and will never understand what America is supposed to be about. On a

p. 45 different level, the HiTek incident also reflected American dissension over the Vietnam War. Unlike Nelson, for example, some American veterans actually showed up to the demonstrations to support the protests. Douglas Waggoner, from Anaheim, wrote to the *Orange County Register*, "As a Vietnam veteran, I support those protesting the displaying of the picture of Ho Chi Minh.... Since the gentlemen so favors the communist government of his homeland, let him return there to live under that government."⁹¹ Although Waggoner was sympathetic to the protestors, it is interesting to note that his suggestion for Tran was the same as Nelson's solution for the protestors. If you don't appreciate your American "rights," they say, go back to Vietnam.⁹²

To the Vietnamese protestors, however, the HiTek issue had nothing to do with First Amendment rights. While some acknowledged Truong Tran's constitutional right to freedom of speech, his actions constituted an unconscionable and reprehensible challenge to other Vietnamese. To many people in Little Saigon, it was not only a slap in the face, but also the ultimate betrayal. As Ngo Ky said, "We know this is a free country and you have the right of freedom of speech, but he has basically challenged the community. We want to raise our voices. People understand the Vietnamese community here hates the Communists."⁹³ Speaking on behalf of all Vietnamese-Americans, Ky gives utterance to the assumption that has been taken for granted: this is a community founded by political exiles who all suffered under and hate the Communists. How could Tran dare to violate this compact so brazenly?

During the protests, people told and retold horrific tales of the violence, abuse, and loss they endured at the hands of the Communists. As Dung Huynh, a protestor, narrated, "I

p. 46 saw my friends killed by the Communists. Every time I see the flag, I get so mad. I still see it; I still hear the gunshots. I cannot forget."⁹⁴ One among many, this story and others like it provided the emotional fuel that kept the demonstrators coming back. As the vigil continued, it took on the ambience of impassioned group therapy and adopted the signs and symbols of a public mourning. At one demonstration, some wore bandanas around their heads and filled a

⁹⁰ R.L. Nelson, "Flag Protests" (letter to the editor), *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1999, sec. B, p. 8.

⁹¹ Douglas Waggoner, "Return to Vietnam" (letter to the editor), *Orange County Register*, 17 February 1999, sec. Metro, p. 9.

⁹² Of course, the protestors, themselves, also suggested that Tran return to Vietnam.

⁹³ Peter W. Warren and Tini Tran, "Store's Display of Communist Items Protested," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 1999, sec. B, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Tini Tran, "200 Stand Ground Against Flag," sec. B, p. 1.

coffin with photos of deceased South Vietnamese soldiers draped with South Vietnam's flag.⁹⁵ Openly grieving again for past losses, the protestors also were conscious that they were being watched by Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese.

In an editorial published in the *Viet Economic Daily News (Vi\$e\$t Báo Kinh T\$e\$)* on February 1, 1999, Khai Tran, a Journalist, articulated the deep and multi-faceted concerns of the protestors regarding those that were not on their side. He first mentioned the effort of ACLU lawyers to change the subject of the protests from an intra-ethnic conflict to a civil rights battle. As he wrote, "Now the battle has taken a **new direction** after ACLU lawyers submitted an appeal to the Orange County Courthouse asking for the repeal of the current ban on Truong Van Tran's display of the flag and portrait ... Will the civil rights group be effective on this **new front** [emphasis mine]?"⁹⁶ To Khai Tran, the ACLU created a *new* defense for Truong Tran by asserting his First Amendment rights. Previously, "on the political front, this was a conflict between Truong Van Tran and the Vietnamese refugees."⁹⁷ According to this perspective, the ACLU was interfering with an intra-ethnic squabble. To the protestors, Truong Tran was a recalcitrant deviant who had wrongly and maliciously

provoked his brethren by insulting the memory of their pain and loss. To them, this was the story of one man being sanctioned for disrespecting his community, not a civil rights struggle.

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Nevertheless, Khai Tran issued the following advice to his readers:

We Vietnamese must be prudent in our demonstraions and endeavor to not only gain the approval of the americans, but also to gain the support of our youth. If we are too severe, we may lose grasp of our own children. We must remain lawabiding and calm because the Ha Noi regime is always trying to infiltrate America, one way or another.⁹⁸

Khai Tran raised two important issues in the above passage. Clearly, he was conscious the of mainstream public's judgment. Additionally his tone suggested that the protestors should seek mainstream approval as if the Vietnamese were America's guests. As such, the presence of the protestors in the shopping mall was analogous to the presence of the Vietnamese in America. Both were dependent upon their host's complicity. Also, Khai Tran articulated the protestors' looming paranoia about another Communist takeover. "What if," Khai Tran later asks, "the Vietnamese government decided to buy several stores along Bolsa Avenue and hung red flags there?" Having lost the original Saigon, many vietnamese feared that Communist Vietnam was monitoring them closely and would try to take over, or at least infiltrate their new Saigon. Their fears were not completely unfounded. During the protests, Truong Tran received telephone calls from the Vietnamese Consulate in San Francisco offering him assistance. A spokesperson from the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C. also told reporters, "The embassy of

⁹⁵ Ibid. Traditionally, Vietnamese only wear bandanas (usually white) around their heads at the funerals of close kin. It is considered inauspicious to wear bandanas for any reason other than mourning.

⁹⁶ Khai Tr\$a\$N, "Tr\$a\$N Chi\$e\$N Treo Cò CSVN," *Vi\$e\$t Báo Kinh T\$e\$ (Viet Economic Daily News)*, trans. by author, 1 February 1999, no. 1398, no. 1398, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Vietnam is deeply concerned and strongly opposes those violent acts against Mr. Truong Tran and demands that Mr. Truong Tran's rights to belief as

p. 48 well as his well-being be respected and protected.”⁹⁹ The government of Vietnam was indeed paying attention to events in Orange County. As troubling as they were though, these external concerns paled in comparison to the protestors' anxiety about the future of their youth.

In his article, Khai Tran mentions another editorial published a day earlier in the *Los Angeles Times*. Written by Daniel C. Tsang from the University of California, Irvine, it focused on the HiTek incident as another example of Vietnamese red-baiting (branding people as Communists) and intolerance towards nonconformists. Tsang argued, “newer generations of Little Saigon seem less and less interested in the old politics of division and the history that sustains it. Increasingly, these Vietnamese-Americans are U.S.-born.... They may speak some Vietnamese, but they do not read or write the language.”¹⁰⁰ It is this statement that elicits the strongest response from Khai Tran who brings two main issues to the forefront: the future of the Vietnamese youth and the divisive politics of Little Saigon. Like other immigrant groups before them, the Vietnamese refugees retained feelings of loyalty to their country of birth, but realized that a gulf of twenty years now separated them from Vietnam. In that time, they had become Vietnamese-Americans and now faced the challenge of negotiating what this meant for them and (more importantly) for their children. Undoubtedly, some things would get lost during this transition. Tsang, for his part, celebrated this as an opportunity for the community to rid itself of the virulent anticommunism that he perceived to be a divisive force. Khai Tran, on the other hand, acknowledged the inevitability of change and advised his generation to “respect the struggles

p. 49 and efforts of the young" who might “fight for democracy and freedom in a different way [visiting Vietnam to do humanitarian work].” He went on to say, however, that the purpose of this understanding was to “keep them in our loving arms" and to “avoid forcing them into a position [public disapprobation] where they would have to defend Hanoi.”¹⁰¹ Khai Tran made it clear that the community had an interest in and would continue to inculcate its young with the Vietnamese definition of democracy and that such a definition vehemently excluded communism. How the community would do this while being tolerant of the younger generation's “different ways”, however, was another matter.

To a certain extent though, Tsang was right about the destructive potential of anticommunism. The political violence that terrorized Little Saigon in the 1980s has already been mentioned. Additionally, the circumstances surrounding the HiTek incident led to the decline in popularity of Tony Lam, the first Vietnamese-American elected to public office. As a member of the Westminster City Council, Lam was advised by his peers not to attend the HiTek demonstrations because they feared his presence would constitute official approval of the

⁹⁹ Vik Jolly and Mai Tran, “Little Saigon Poster Protest had Larger Goal,” *Orange County Register*, 23 January 1999, sec. B, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel C. Tsang, “Little Saigon Slowly Kicking the Redbaiting Habit,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 January 1999, sec. M, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ Khai Tran, “Tr\$a\$N, Chi\$e\$N Treo Cò CSVN,” no. 1398, p. 1.

event. If a riot broke out afterwards, business owners could then sue the city for “sponsoring” the protests. However, this placed Lam in a predicament. As one of the most visible Vietnamese-Americans, his absence from the demonstrations was noticed. Some interpreted this as a failure to support his community, and indicated that he was a communist sympathizer. After the HiTek incident was over, picketers demonstrated in front of his restaurant, Vi\$e\$n Đông, and began a recall campaign. Unfair as it was, the damage was done.

Although he did not lose office, Lam became a controversial figure overnight and lost the credibility and popularity he once had in Little Saigon.¹⁰²

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However, there was a positive side to the HiTek incident. Anti-communist sentiment was so pervasive in Little Saigon that Truong Tran's actions actually served to galvanize the community and to create an unprecedented degree of unity. As mentioned earlier, the protests were attended and supported by Vietnamese from diverse social groupings. One of the defining moments of the protests occurred when competing leaders of the Vietnamese Community of Southern California shook hands. Interfaith prayers were held. And in response to Tsang's article, Vietnamese youth groups organized the largest rally at the HiTek store. On March 2, 1999, the *Los Angeles Times* reported:

Friday's rally drew about 15,000 people -- the largest yet during the controversy -- in a show of unity organized by more than 25 Vietnamese student and religious groups. The mobilization of youths came after an opinion column by a local writer declared that ardent anti-communist feelings were retained only by the older generation of Vietnamese-Americans, [Diem] Do said.

“He said that the younger generation doesn't care. That's dead wrong. We do care,” Do said. “We do have our eyes set on the bigger picture.”¹⁰³

In an impressive display of solidarity with their elders, Vietnamese-American youth claimed both membership and leadership in their community. Additionally, they elevated the purpose of the protests from local outrage to international humanitarianism, especially in the realm of increased human rights for the people of Vietnam. To many Vietnamese-Americans, the protests came to represent the potential power they wielded as a political unit. While acknowledging the undesirability of the Lam protests, Do emphasized that the majority of Vietnamese were actually focusing their efforts on higher goals. As he stated, “The mood is

unity. The mood is about human rights. That's the general direction where the community is headed. That hasn't changed. But I am concerned that the general public will see [the Lam protests] as a reflection of the mood of the entire community. People may think the Vietnamese American community is so divided, and that's not true. This is just one small group.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the HiTek incident had been successful in fostering a spirit of cohesion and political activism.

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¹⁰² Vik Jolly and Mai Tran, “Dispute Catches Up to Westminster Councilman,” *Orange County Register*, 13 March 1999, sec. A, p. 1. Tini Tran, “Divided on Unity,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March 1999, sec. B, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Tini Tran, “Vietnamese Crusade: `This Has Become Bigger than Mr. Tran',” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1999, sec. B, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ Tini Tran, “Divided on Unity,” sec. B, p. 1.

Later in the year, Vietnamese-American leaders capitalized upon the momentum created by the protests and organized a Rock the Vote concert on October 17, 1999 in an effort to increase Vietnamese-American voter registration. At the time, only thirty-five thousand out of one hundred thousand Vietnamese-American citizens living in Orange County were registered to vote. Realizing this, the organizing group of thirty leaders led by Van Thai Tran (later elected to the Garden Grove City Council) coordinated an event featuring Vietnamese-American entertainers and radio personalities at the University of California Irvine. Highly successful, the concert attracted five thousand attendees and garnered over a thousand voter registrations.¹⁰⁵ The HiTek incident showed that anticommunism was a force that could be harnessed for constructive purposes if there were leaders willing and skilled enough to organize its volatile energy. In the short-term, the controversy served to unite disparate interests and to move the community towards a greater sense of political empowerment. Whether or not this spirit of compromise and unity will last, however, is still unknown.

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CONCLUSION

The dynamic forces and tensions underlying the successes and failures of the Little Saigon community continue to be volatile. On the political front, anti-communist passion will persist as long as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam exists, but it will undoubtedly lose its historical fervor. As the Hi-Tek incident demonstrated, younger Vietnamese-Americans could be successful at channeling their community's anti-communist zeal towards the advocacy of humanitarian, political, and economic progress for the people of Vietnam. Ultimately, however, the community's political clout will be heavily dependent upon its involvement in mainstream politics. The Rock the Vote concert was a step in the right direction, but more events like it will be necessary to give Vietnamese-Americans a strong political voice.

As for the future of the business community, it will depend on several factors. For at least another ten years, Little Saigon's survival appears secure because the most recent wave of refugees arrived in the United States in the early 1990s and will continue to rely on the services and resources that the area provides. However, the fate of Little Saigon in the distant future is more difficult to foresee. Important changes (such as inter-generational and gender-role struggles) that have been occurring within Vietnamese families will have far-reaching implications for Little Saigon. After all, families founded and ran the businesses of Little Saigon and it is as family units that the customers came to shop. Will younger generations continue to run these businesses and patronize these stores? On a larger scale, since membership in the community ultimately originates with membership in a Vietnamese

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family, the question becomes, how strong is the ethos of family collectivism and is it sufficient to sustaining the community?

If younger Vietnamese-Americans do not contribute to Little Saigon's economy as either merchants, or consumers, however, the commercial district's survival is much more tenuous.

¹⁰⁵ Tini Tran, "Voter Campaign Targets Vietnamese," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1999, sec. B, p. 1. Anh Do, "Rock-N-Vote Drums Up Vietnamese Voters," *Orange County Register*, 18 October 1999, sec. News, p. 1.

Although immigration from Vietnam continues at a steady rate, it is unlikely that there will be more refugee waves to support the niche-oriented businesses.¹⁰⁶ One possible solution for economic viability is for some Little Saigon businesses to specialize in providing services to and meeting the material needs (i.e. diet, healthcare, housing, etc.) of the rapidly aging immigrant generation of 1975 and the early 1980s. Little Saigon's other alternative would be to transform itself into a tourist area catering to non-Vietnamese visitors. Frank Jao's failed attempt to do exactly this, however, indicated that such a demand did not yet exist and, more importantly, that any transformation must respect the perceived cultural integrity of the Little Saigon community at large. Even so, there are potential difficulties with this proposition. Los Angeles' Chinatown and Little Tokyo, for example, are older ethnic enclaves that have attempted to attract tourism with modest success. Unlike them, however, Little Saigon does not possess the inherent advantages of location in a downtown area, nor pedestrian accessibility. Located far from the business-industrial complexes of suburban Orange County and organized as strip malls, Little Saigon must work harder to attract non-Vietnamese visitors and to make shopping at its numerous stores a pedestrianfriendly experience.

Presently, however, Little Saigon is thriving and continues to expand and grow. From its humble beginnings on Bolsa Avenue, the area now spans over half the width of the

city of Westminster and has spilled over into Garden Grove and Santa Ana. With Bolsa Avenue still at the core, Vietnamese-owned businesses can be found in great numbers from Westminster Avenue in the north to McFadden Avenue in the south and from Magnolia Street in the west to Euclid Street in the east. All told, these businesses stretch along a sevenmile perimeter. The economic success of the Little Saigon business area is a testament to the fact that Vietnamese refugees have created a new home for themselves in the United States. Like the millions of immigrants who came before them, however, Vietnamese-Americans have found that the formation of a new identity has been problematic.

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On the one hand, Vietnamese-Americans do share a common history, language, and cultural that have allowed them to identify with their co-ethnics. At times, this collective remembrance has been useful as a source of pride and resilience when confronting economic hardship and racial discrimination in the United States. As Andrew X. Pham writes, "Vietnamese have a saying: a thousand years of Chinese rule, a hundred years of French subjugation...but we survived, unified. Survive. That's the word. Survive at any cost."¹⁰⁷ From Vietnam to America, this has been the mantra of the Vietnamese people. It is a message that has already been preached by young Vietnamese to those even younger. In a speech to eleven Vietnamese-American high school graduates in 1999, Quang X. Pham, a 34-year-old former U.S. Marine described how he endured racial abuse:

I wanted to shout back at the GIs, "You lost 58,000 Americans in Vietnam. We lost over two million people. You served one tour of duty in combat. My father and his colleagues fought the Commies for nearly 20 years! And you think we(I) cannot make your military?" [*sic*]

¹⁰⁶ Zhou and Bankston, 25. Figure 1.1 from this source indicates that after 1993, only about thirty thousand Vietnam-born persons were admitted into the United States per year.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew X. Pham, 282.

The Vietnamese people and my parents, inspired me without even being there, to march that extra mile in the woods, to swim that extra 15 feet, to grin my teeth and

p. 55 bear the harassment, to prove Vietnamese can belong in America and in the U.S. Marines.¹⁰⁸

Of course, not all battles can or should be fought with the sword and remembrance is not always an empowering institution.

The history of Little Saigon has shown that intra-ethnic differences stemming from historical conflicts are still being negotiated and cannot easily be subsumed for the sake of political, economic, or social expediency. While these differences have been frustrating and divisive at times, they have been useful in galvanizing the energy needed for such constructive events as the Rock the Vote concert. Additionally, the existence of the Little Saigon business area indicates that economic success is being achieved in the midst of political and social plurality. Moreover, the fact that there is a Little Saigon implies a certain degree of mutual need and cohesion among the people who compose it. With or without political consensus, the shoppers and merchants of Little Saigon will continue getting together to go on with the business of living.

p. 56 APPENDIX

Fig. 1. Orange County (outlined in green) and its environs *Source:* <http://www.census.gov>

p. 57 Fig.2. Little Saigon *Source:* <http://www.yahoo.com>

Fig.3. Little Saigon marker on California Highway 22

p. 58 Fig.4. Bolsa Mini Mall

Fig.5. Sidewalk scene

Fig.6. Supermarket shoppers

p. 59 Fig.7. Asian Garden Mall

Fig.8. Asian Village

Fig.9. Fabric store on Bolsa Avenue

p. 60 Fig.10. Confucius in the Cultural Courtyard

Fig.11. The former New Saigon Mall (2002)

Fig.12. Trung sisters on the western wall of the Cultural Courtyard

¹⁰⁸ Quang X. Pham, "Vietnamese-Americans 2000: Getting Beyond the War and its Aftermath" (keynote address at the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association Annual Youth Recognition luncheon, Houston, Texas, 1 August 1999), SE Asian Archive, UC Irvine Library, Irvine.

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