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COLUMN ONE

New Chinatown grows in far east San Gabriel Valley

Wealthy ethnic Chinese immigrants are fashioning their own enclave in the cities of Rowland Heights, Diamond Bar, Walnut and Hacienda Heights.

By David Pierson
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The celery and squid sizzle in Suipao Tsai's blackened wok as she prepares lunch for up to six dozen employees of the family's multimillion-dollar lingerie business in the city of Industry.

It's a scene repeated every weekday morning at her patial family compound in the hills of Rowland Heights.

Chicken is deep fried on an outdoor cooking island by the pool and waterfall.

A Mercedes-Benz SUV parked next to an 18-foot koi pond is lined in the back with old Chinese newspapers and loaded with a steaming pot of beef brisket and turnip stew.

After the Mercedes arrives, the employees — most of them Asian — pile heaps of food on plates, then sit quietly eating and watching a Mandarin-language talk show on a flat-screen TV.

"It's a cultural thing," said Mike Tsai, 38, Suipao Tsai's second son and chief operating officer of the family's company, Leg Avenue. "My father used to be responsible for providing lunch for 200 employees" in Taiwan. "We brought that tradition here to America."

In fact, much of the eastern San Gabriel Valley has more in common with Taipei, Beijing or Shanghai than it does with neighboring Los Angeles. Here, Asian-immigrant entrepreneurs have transformed once-sleepy suburbia into a Chinatown like no other.

They are far from struggling newcomers trying to achieve the American Dream in other Chinese enclaves such as Monterey Park and San Gabriel farther to the west.

Here, the power of Chinese culture and its economy is on display, said Joel Kotkin, an expert in urban affairs and ethnic economies.

"It's so overwhelming," he said. "It's a suburb anchored to the tribal economy of the Chinese and China. They have an ideal life with a spacious backyard and insitutions and amenities close by. You have a 15-minute commute to work rooted in city of Industry. You don't have to step out."

And many don't.

Since the family moved its offices to the city of Industry two decades ago, Mike Tsai says he's visited China and Taiwan more frequently than he's been to downtown L.A.

Tsai and other Asian entrepreneurs have created office parks where most of the signs are in Chinese. At the trendy shopping arcades one is more likely to hear Mandarin than English.

At Life Plaza off Fullerton Road, Tony Liu works at a high-end sneaker store. The 24-year-old from northern China has been in the U.S. for two years and said it often feels as if he never left home.

"I never get to practice my English," said Liu, who's been west of downtown L.A. only twice. "Sometimes it feels like I'm still in China."

The combined populations of Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Walnut and Diamond Bar have not only doubled in the last two decades but also are now two-thirds Asian.

Close to 40% of the businesses in Industry are ethnic Chinese-owned.

Up the hill from Life Plaza, at Blandford Elementary School, close to 60% of the students are Asian.

Many are the children of wealthy immigrants, dropped off in luxury cars by their mothers. Many fathers are absent, having to work in China.

The school recently had to revamp its lunch policy. The main office was overwhelmed at noon with mothers trying to deliver hot lunches either from home or Chinese restaurants. Now they must leave the meals on a cart outside the school gates at 11 a.m.

Parent volunteer Rosy Chong said she overheard a newly arrived Korean parent's daughter ask her mother, "When are we going to America?"

"She thought Rowland Heights was a stopover" in Asia, Chong said.

For the teachers and administrators at Blandford, the demographic changes have been both a blessing and a challenge.

The cultural premium parents place on education has helped make Blandford the top-performing elementary school in the district. A waiting list was established to handle the high demand for enrollment.

Blandford Principal Jo Ann Lawrence said some parents told her they were reluctant to send their children to another school in the district because there were too many Latino students there.

"I'm not one to feel you have to be a melting pot; I value what each group brings," she said. "But the isolation concerns me."

Teacher Cindy Kim sees it firsthand in her classroom. In an environment so dominated by Chinese and Koreans, it's difficult to teach lessons about other cultures.

"We had Cesar Chavez assemblies, and it was difficult for them to comprehend," Kim said. "I'd ask for background information, and I wouldn't get a lot of input. They'd ask, 'Who is that?' Our big holiday is Chinese New Year."

The school usually holds its book sale after the New Year's celebration, knowing the students have "lucky money" to spend.

That was the case on a recent afternoon when Janelle Book, a Taiwanese native, was helping run the cash register surrounded by dozens of schoolchildren.

When Book immigrated to the U.S. 11 years ago, she and her husband chose to live in Rowland Heights over the western San Gabriel Valley because they considered Monterey Park and its neighboring cities the domain of working-class mainland Chinese immigrants.

Adjusting to the new country was easy at first because of where she lived. She could use Mandarin almost anywhere and could find most of the food she ate in Taiwan.

She got a job working at the cosmetics counter at a nearby Macy's. Half her customers also spoke to her in Mandarin.

The difficulty arose when she wanted to learn English. She had no one to practice with.

So Book signed up for an English-as-a-second-language class and began regularly watching "Friends" and "Everybody Loves Raymond."

She grew confident enough in her English to volunteer at Blandford when her 7-year-old-daughter enrolled in first grade. It made her feel part of a larger community for the first time.

Now she hopes that her daughter will grow up able to traverse both American and Chinese cultures. It's why she's being taught to speak both English and Mandarin.

"I'll take her to see our family in Seattle," Book said. "Show her another side of America."

The Tsai family immigrated to Southern California in 1984, fearing the political instability in Taiwan. They started modestly by selling cheap toys at a flea market in Redondo Beach. They then moved to downtown L.A., where they sold hosiery.

Early success allowed them to buy a 3,000-square-foot home in Rowland Heights in 1989.

Like many middle-class Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants, the Tsais opted for the area over more established enclaves like Monterey Park and Alhambra, partly because the homes were newer and larger.

The Tsais' fortunes increased dramatically in 2000 when Leg Avenue began making and designing sexy Halloween costumes for women.

They used old connections to secure factories outside Taipei and in Guangzhou and Shanghai to manufacture the designs affordably.

The racy nurse and pirate outfits became so popular the company went from \$1 million in sales in 2000 to recording \$87 million last year.

Their original Rowland Heights property has grown to become a 1.5-acre plot featuring three houses shared by more than 20 family members and a fleet of luxury cars.

The family imported ancient wood chairs and stone from Taiwan to form a table under the gazebo in the courtyard. Their annual Chinese New Year's parties have become affairs for 400. This year's party featured Peking duck, rowdy Taiwanese dice games and the doling of \$30,000 in red "lucky money" envelopes to visitors.

"Even though we've gone corporate, the Taiwanese family structure is always there," Mike Tsai said.

It's a lifestyle that requires few jaunts outside their "new Chinatown" enclave, save for shopping runs to South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa or a chance to race Mike Tsai's Lamborghini, Porsche or Ferrari at Crystal Cove.

"We never have to leave," Mike Tsai said. "Everything we need is here."

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