



Friday, August 24, 2001

Asians seek a place in 60% Hispanic city

By Lisa Chow

Eagle-Tribune Writer

Sarin L. Ay is Cambodian-American. Her best friend is Dominican-American. Both are members of minority groups within the larger, white world of the Merrimack Valley and beyond.

But like other Asian-Americans in Lawrence, Sarin, 15, faces an additional challenge: To fit in, she has to adapt to the predominant Latino culture in the city as well as the larger Anglo culture around it.

Lawrence's Asians -- an amalgam of Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indian and several other ethnicities -- are unique in that they represent a nonwhite culture within a larger nonwhite culture, one where Spanish is the preferred language, where businesses cater to Latino clients and where other recent Latino immigrants make up the majority of the city's population.

This situation poses a question: How are these two non-Anglo populations coming together?

So far, they aren't coming together, at least not the older generations.

Children have been more successful because they are put together in schools and forced to interact. Asian students have emerged from bilingual education classes speaking fluent English and Spanish, Sarin said.

But some older Asian immigrants are still struggling with the English language despite having lived in the city for decades.

Asians, who make up 2.7 percent of the city's population according to the 2000 Census, are at the same spot Latinos were 30 years ago, when Latinos made up 3 percent of the city's population. After fleeing countries in turmoil to find a better life in the United States, Asians have almost no political

power and struggle with language barriers and stereotyping. And their population is growing even faster than that of Hispanics, who now represent 60 percent of the city's population.

Even though Asian-Americans make up only a small percentage of the city's population, their numbers have ballooned in the past decade, from 1,160 to 1,910, an increase of 65 percent. In that same time, the Hispanic population grew by 47 percent, while the city's population as a whole grew by 2.6 percent.

As immigrants, Lawrence's Asians and Latinos have some issues in common, but they also have their differences. Asians do not share a common language, unlike most Latinos. They struggle with different stereotypes. In fact, Asians say they experience some stereotyping by Latinos.

"New immigrant groups are interacting, adjusting to other immigrant groups, rather than older, principally European groups adjusting to nonwhite groups," said Paul Watanabe, co-director of the Institute for Asian-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. "It's a bit of an experiment."

These types of interactions may grow more commonplace if the population of Asians continues to grow as it has been.

'The Third Country'

Wearing flat sandals, a cotton shirt and sarong, Sinath Vann traveled at age 13 from a tropical country to a city of skyscrapers, grit and attitude, whose sidewalks were covered with snow. It was Jan. 23, 1983 -- the middle of the winter in New York City.

Vann had lost her father in war, fled Cambodia with her mother and two sisters, lived in refugee camps in Thailand for four years and was now in "heaven" or "The Third Country," a phrase many Cambodian-Americans use to describe the United States since it was third on their journey to freedom.

From New York, Vann moved to Portland, Maine. Now she lives on Jamaica Street in Lawrence, on the first floor of a triple-decker. Her brothers-in-law and their families live on the second and third floors. Vann, who works as a machine operator in Newburyport, says she came to Lawrence to follow her husband's family.

Her story is not unlike those of many Asian immigrants,

whose arrival has brought into the city new cultures, languages, faces and flavors.

Some believe that the proximity of Lowell -- home to nine times as many Asian-Americans as Lawrence -- is why Lawrence has started to see more Asian faces.

As the city with the highest percentage of Asian-Americans in the state, Lowell has become a hub, particularly for Cambodians, who two years ago helped elect Lowell's first Cambodian-American city councilor.

Because of a boom in the housing market and economy in Lowell, Ratha Paul Yem, executive director of the Cambodian-American League of Lowell, believes, many Asians moved to Lawrence to find more affordable housing and explore business opportunities.

Five years ago, Lon Phan opened a Vietnamese restaurant on South Broadway. He had worked as a restaurant employee in Lowell but decided to pursue his own business venture in Lawrence, where there were fewer Asian restaurants and where he could target a growing population.

His was the first Vietnamese restaurant in Lawrence. Now, at lunchtime, older Vietnamese men sip their coffee, sweetened by thick, syrupy, condensed milk, and an Anglo couple dig into bowls of noodles. Latinos frequent the place in fewer numbers, according to the family owners.

Two Asian grocery stores have also opened in the city.

Even though Vann says she would like to see more stores selling Asian foods, jewelry and movies, as in Lowell, she still prefers living in Lawrence. "In Lowell, there are too many Asians. Kids are into gangs," she said. With a denser population of Asians, children are more likely to cluster and put pressure and challenge each other, she said.

Younger generations

Sarin Ay, 15, who will be a sophomore at Lawrence High School this fall, has friends of several races. Last year she was elected vice president of her sophomore class, over a Dominican-American classmate. Sarin still doesn't exactly know why she won in a school whose student body is more than 80 percent Hispanic.

"My speech was better," she gives as a possible reason.

But even though she often socializes with other Latinos, she still experiences their ignorance at times.

"You know what I hate?" Sarin says. "I'm Cambodian, and if a Vietnamese or Chinese person is by me, my friend is like, 'Do you know what that person is saying?' I'm like, 'I'm not Vietnamese.' They're like, 'I thought you guys were the same thing.' I'm like, 'The same thing?'"

This kind of exchange can be a common experience among Asian-American adolescents -- not only in Lawrence but in small towns across America.

"At times, they shock me, but not by their beliefs. Some of them are really ignorant," Sarin says of her schoolmates. Some people have asked whether she eats cat.

"I'm kind of like, 'OK. Why do you think that? No we don't.'"

Some stories are more distressing than others.

Sarin's older brother, Sam Duch, 18, said the police once stopped him and his friends when they were driving in Lowell. The officer asked them which gang they belonged to and refused to believe them when they denied belonging to any, Duch said.

"It was just because we were wearing the same colors that the gang wears," he said. Eventually the officer let them go. Duch is not particularly bitter about the experience, but he does believe he was treated differently because of his race.

Some Asian-American students spoke nonchalantly about the times their racial difference incited comments.

"Personally, I don't care at all. Whenever something happens, I go my own way. If little kids start coming up to me and teasing me, it's not like I'm going to do something," said Trung K. Chau, 18, who graduated from Central Catholic this year. Being hassled because of his race has only happened a few times, Chau said.

His friends are Latino, Anglo and Asian, and he says they really don't talk about race, culture, their families' stories or their differences. And they don't seem to care to either.

Common experience

As their numbers grow in the city, Asians hope to find a

stronger support network. But with more people come more strength and a greater potential for culture clashes. Some recognize this challenge, but believe the common immigrant experience of Latinos and Asians can bring them together instead of break them apart.

"A large non-English-speaking population that is Spanish, with newer non-English speakers of Asian languages -- it can create some tension between the two, but it can also create a common set of issues," Watanabe said.

For example, a shared agenda might include finding the best way to educate people whose principal language is not English, he said.

Lack of political representation and the prevalence of racism are also issues both groups deal with, he added. "There is going to be a need for Asian-Americans and Latinos to reach out to each other."

Sitting in her living room, Sinath Vann describes her journey from the "holocaust" in Cambodia during the 1970s and 1980s to a country where she, at first, had nothing -- "No dishes ... no jacket ... no English, no nothing" -- but now has a home, friends and family nearby, and a job.

Cambodian music filters into her apartment. A band made up of guitarists, vocalists, a drummer and keyboard player -- all Cambodian immigrants -- practices in the basement.

Like many Latinos, Vann says she wants a better life for her daughter Burina, who was born in the States. Vann hasn't yet told Burina, who is in kindergarten, about the family's struggles in Cambodia, or the war, or why they even came to America.

"She's too young," Vann said. But in the future, the 31-year-old mother plans to explain to her daughter her own hard life as a child. Vann will tell Burina that "she has an easy life, with more freedom."

[Next Story: Two cultures connect over lunch and letters](#) 

[Online editor](#)