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Ethnic changes in store for Chino Hills

Some residents protest, in vain, an Asian market in the upscale community. Others say it will serve their needs.

By Sara Lin
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An hour before Sunday services at a Lutheran church in Chino Hills, the Rev. Andy Wu joined his congregants in front of plates piled high with boiled Napa cabbage, shiitake mushrooms, stir fried tofu and rice.

Since Wu became an associate pastor in 2002, attendance at lunch and his worship services in Mandarin Chinese have doubled. So has Chino Hills' Asian population, which now makes up about 40% of city residents.

"Five years ago, if I walked into a Vons market and saw an Asian face, I would get very excited," Wu said. "Now, every day we see Asian faces."

But the demographic shift has proved unsettling for some in this upscale San Bernardino County town, and that tension surfaced when a major Asian grocery chain, 99 Ranch Market, announced plans for a Chino Hills store.

The Chino Hills City Council heard an outcry from a small group of residents, including one who wrote that he didn't want to see "little Chinatowns all over the Hills" filled with Asian signs he can't read.

The skirmish mirrors clashes in the San Gabriel Valley in the 1980s when Asian immigrants moved into the traditionally white and Latino suburbs. When a wave of Asian businesses followed, city officials in Monterey Park tried unsuccessfully to pass English-only ordinances, arguing that Chinese-language business signs would confuse firefighters and emergency workers.

Larry Blugrind of Chino Hills told the City Council in a letter that the store would "result in a run-down center that is the equivalent of a Chinese Pic 'N' Save less than a mile from the kind of high-quality shops our city has been trying to attract to this area."

Reached by telephone, Blugrind explained that he enjoyed having a diverse community — his daughter-in-law is Japanese.

"My worry is that 99 Ranch could be a steppingstone for it to become all Asian," he said. "I don't want another Hacienda Heights."

In Chino Hills, the City Council has no say in whether Tawa Supermarkets Inc. can open a 99 Ranch Market. The store is moving into a space formerly occupied by a Ralphs supermarket. It's a simple case of one grocery store taking over for another, said Mayor Gwenn Norton-Perry.

"It's an approved use, and we as a city have no purview over this. That's the bottom line," Norton-Perry said.

But that hasn't stopped angry residents from sounding off to the City Council.

The market's owners downplayed the controversy.

"We don't want to focus on that part," said Jennifer Tsao, a spokeswoman for Tawa, which operates 22 stores throughout California. Inside the store, Tsao said customers could expect clean aisles, signs in English and Chinese, as well as bilingual employees.

The 99 Ranch Market in Chino Hills may have struck a chord with residents because it "makes the Asian American community very visible and displaces businesses that people were comfortable with, in this case a Ralphs," said Linda Vo, an Asian American studies professor at UC Irvine.

From 2000 to 2005, the city of 81,000 saw its Asian population jump from 22% to 39%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent survey. Of those, 10,316 were Filipino and 7,752 were Chinese. Asian Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese and Japanese constitute most of the remaining Asian Americans.

The Asian influx has already had an effect on some public services: The Chino Hills library stocks books written in Chinese, Korean and Japanese.

Similarly, in Orange County, nearly one-third of Irvine residents are Asian Americans. But Irvine's transition was a slower one, with many immigrants moving into newly built neighborhoods, Vo said. There was some mild resentment from the community about the changing

demographics but nothing overt, she said.

At the Mediterranean-style plaza in Chino Hills where workers are readying the 99 Ranch Market for a summer opening, a handful of the plaza's 20 shops already seem to reflect the city's changing face.

There's a karate studio, a Chinese buffet and Thai restaurants.

Every Tuesday, restaurant owner Chad Chantaracharat invites Thai monks wearing saffron robes to lunch at his Thai Original BBQ Restaurant. The monks live at a Buddhist temple a few miles away.

Chantaracharat said he had mixed feelings about the new market. The store could attract more business to his restaurant, but he wasn't sure if the market planned to have a small cafe inside serving cheaper meals.

He sympathized with some residents' concerns, saying he has noticed that 99 Ranch Markets in some areas are not that well kept, but said that once people saw the spread of Asian vegetables and fresh seafood — often still swimming in tanks until a customer orders it killed — they'd like the market.

"I think people are going to dig it," he said. "It's something new, and everyone here likes to be trendy."

At Loving Savior of the Hills Lutheran Church, Chinese congregants mostly welcomed the market, saying its unconventional wares would be a boon to the community. The market could also become a much-needed hub for older Asians to meet friends, chat and sip tea.

"I think the market is absolutely a good thing. We've been waiting a long time for this," said Cindy Fu, 40, who recently moved from Chino Hills to Chino. "Every culture has businesses; some are super clean, and some are not. But you can't use just one to judge an entire culture. I think this could be a good opportunity for us to earn a good reputation."

Still, others were afraid that the market could give well-heeled residents of this semirural community at the westernmost edge of San Bernardino County the wrong impression about Asians.

"We've tried very hard to build up ourselves and build up our image to Caucasian people here. I hope 99 Ranch will hold up to that high standard," said Wu.

The new grocery store wasn't the first controversy to arise from the changing faces in Chino Hills neighborhoods.

Three years ago, Hindu leaders proposed a grand temple on former farmland, in part to serve the 500 Indian families there.

But the plans drew protests from some residents who contended the project would turn Chino Hills into a "Third World city" and a haven for terrorists.

After a heated public hearing, the temple's supporters won approval to build, but it ultimately did not win permission to construct the temple's spires that exceeded the city's 43-foot height limit.

City leaders say the community isn't in danger of losing its rural feel: The Sheriff's Department station is surrounded by white post fencing and horse pastures. Forty percent of Chino Hills' 46 square miles is dedicated to open space, Norton-Perry said.

The 99 Ranch Market, as any other grocer, will undergo regular inspections by the county Health Department.

As for the sign, "We can tell them we prefer signs to be in English only, but we can't require it," Norton-Perry said.

Still, some say the spat is much ado about nothing.

"Last I remember, the words '99 Ranch' were in English," said Don Nakanishi, director of UCLA's Asian American Studies Center. "You have El Pollo Loco," he said, referring to the popular Mexican restaurant chain. "Nobody's telling them to translate that."

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