

MAKING “LITTLE SAIGON”: A GEOGRAPHIC HISTORY, 1970-2020

BY ANH ADAMS

REVIEWED BY DR. CHRISTI TOWNSEND

EDITED BY ASHLEY ETHRIDGE

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, United States immigration policy enabled thousands of Vietnamese refugees to seek asylum, resulting in a growth of Vietnamese populations in the United States, particularly in California. When these refugees immigrated to America, they created closely knit communities known as ethnic enclaves. The creation of these places, along with the subsequent movement and transformation of the population itself, demonstrates a unique instance of the intersections of ethnicity, migration, culture, and community. In studying the distinct geographic history of this group, we gain a larger understanding of the development of ethnic places and their function for ethnic populations. Employing a mixed method approach, using both US. Census data and historical primary sources, this work tracks the movement of Vietnamese Americans and their communities in California from 1970 to 2020, allowing for a more thorough examination and explanation of “Little Saigons” in the state. Furthermore, I predict that improvements in transportation and communication systems at the turn of the century would enable Vietnamese populations to expand beyond urbanization. Through this research, I discovered that after the Vietnam war, Vietnamese people in California mainly resided in highly urban counties such as San Francisco County and Orange County. However, after 2010, and even more so in 2019, we see that suburban and rural counties surrounding these previous Vietnamese hubs experienced a rise in Vietnamese populations, suggesting suburbanization of these groups and their community.

Introduction

In the decades after the Vietnam War, significant immigration of Vietnamese populations to the United States fostered the formation of distinctly Vietnamese ethnic enclaves, spaces colloquially known as “Little Saigon” (Mazumdar et al. 2000). These spaces created a unique situation which can help us examine not only the creation of ethnic spaces, but their function, movement, and transformation over time.

Historically, ethnic enclaves have enabled the assimilation of immigrant groups, shaped labor forces, and cultivated cultural shifts in urban areas. Thus, the cultural landscape of the United States is significantly shaped by these places and their functions. Although many geographers have studied ethnic enclaves, none have attempted to spatially analyze these shifts in the Vietnamese population in America. Much of the existing research has taken a historical or anthropological approach. My research seeks to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the movement of Vietnamese ethnic groups in America from 1970 to 2010, paying attention to the creation of “Little Saigon” enclaves in California. By combining spatial analysis with historical research, I endeavor to answer the question of where Vietnamese Americans in the post-Vietnam War era migrated and how they constructed ethnic spaces that

transformed the American cultural and political landscape. I expect to see high concentrations of Vietnamese populations in the Southern and Bay Area regions of California after 1975, followed by the spread of these populations and their ethnic communities to more suburban spaces.

Background and Literature Review

Studying Vietnamese populations in California is important because of the influence these populations have had on the evolution of the United States cultural landscape. Although many people know about Vietnamese ethnic enclaves and take part in aspects of Vietnamese culture, for instance by attending Lunar New Year celebrations and eating *Phở*, few are aware of how Vietnamese immigrants built their own unique ethnic spaces over the past half century and the unique historical circumstances that led to their creation. Given this lack of knowledge about the historical geography of Vietnamese ethnic enclaves, I found it important to research how these people and places became a landmark in the American landscape.

The study of ethnic geography in the United States has largely relied on a small but contrasting set of theoretical frameworks. The theories of assimilation and pluralism discussed in Milton Gordon’s landmark book, *Assimilation in American Life*, characterized ethnic places

as static spaces that functioned to integrate immigrants into American society and culture. By providing new immigrants with spaces to live, work, and speak their native language, ethnic enclaves offered immigrants a relatively safe introduction to American life. However, a more useful perspective for my study is the use of spatial distribution techniques to study ethnic geography. Particularly, Terrence Haverluk’s mapping of Hispanic populations suggests that cultural communities are not permanent features of a locale but change and move with the populations that inhabit them (Haverluk 1997). This approach to ethnic geography and spatial analysis has greatly influenced my methodology for researching Vietnamese populations. The last and most recent theoretical framework is that of heterolocalism, which asserts that in an increasingly globalized and connected world, ethnic communities are fluid, dynamic, and not necessarily restricted by space or time (Zelinsky and Lee 1998). Thus, the theory of heterolocalism proved to be the most timely and accurate lens through which I could analyze the movement of Vietnamese spaces and populations in the past half century.

Study Area

My research focuses on the growth of Vietnamese communities in California,

United States, from 1970 to 2020. Being the most populated state in the U.S. for over half a century, California is known for its large cities and significant ethno-racial diversity. As a result, the state has a number of vibrant and popular ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatown in San Francisco and Little Saigon in Westminster, Orange County. This project studies the state of California by county, focusing on counties with historically high percentages of Vietnamese populations, particularly in the counties of Orange, Santa Clara, Alameda, Sacramento, and San Francisco. In addition, this project examines the city of Westminster in Orange County for its “Little Saigon,” which is home to the highest concentration of Vietnamese people outside of the country of Vietnam.

Figure 1: Study Area of Californian Counties





Figure 2: Little Saigon shopping center, Westminster California. Courtesy of Anne Frank, Southeast Asian Archive, UC Irvine.

Methods

My research utilized a mixed methods approach, using numerical data alongside historical and anecdotal information. First, I gathered data on the number of Vietnamese in California by county. For this part of my research, I utilized Social Explorer, an online mapping tool that allows for collection and organization of census data. This program enabled me to observe the number of Vietnamese in California from 1980 to 2010 from the decennial United States Census surveys. Since ethnic and racial population data from the 2020 Census is not available, I utilized the 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates population data. Lastly, I collected primary historical sources in the form of photographs and oral histories from the Southeast Asian Archive and Viet Stories at UC Irvine.

My methods of analysis varied based on

the nature of my sources. For Census data, I calculated the percentage of Vietnamese out of the total population by county in Excel, then used Simply Analytics, an online mapping program, to map these percentages. In Simply Analytics, I created five choropleth maps, or graduated color maps, to display the concentration of Vietnamese populations in California counties.

Since the distribution of these populations was highly skewed, I used the natural breaks classification system to organize the data into representative classes. Next, I built upon Haverluk's methodology that used the thresholds set by the 1975 amendment to the Voting Rights Act. This threshold serves as an indicator in my research because it signifies the level at which the government recognizes the political power of a minority group (Hunter 1976; Haverluk 1997). Notably, when a minority population in a county meets these thresholds, many of them gain access to the vote as election materials are printed in their native language. On the other hand, analysis of historical events provided context for migration patterns and population changes. Finally, due to the historical nature of this research, I found it most practical to discuss my results by decade.

Results and Discussion

In 1970, there were very few Vietnamese in the United States, and the race categories in

the census did not include Vietnamese until the 1980 Census (US Census Bureau 2015). However, the context of the 1970s is important because it explains the unique introduction of Vietnamese populations into the US. During this decade, thousands of Vietnamese refugees migrated to America, partially due to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which enacted policies that encouraged family reunification (Golash-Boza 2015). For Vietnamese refugees, migration to the United States represented a reprieve from abuses in the refugee evacuation system. In one instance, a Vietnamese boat refugee pleaded in his diary “to be resettled as soon as possible in the USA” to escape extortion from police and boat companies (Schill 1979). Thus, shifts in American immigration policy enabled a mass influx of Vietnamese immigrants in the early 1970s. At the same time, it is important to note that the amendments to the Voting Rights Act in 1975 stipulated that if 5% of the population in a county was a single language minority, the county had to provide election materials in that language. This legislation would provide the groundwork for Vietnamese Americans and other immigrants to access political power in the future, particularly in counties where thriving ethnic enclaves meant that the population could quickly reach single language minority thresholds. Making note of the

ability of Vietnamese Americans to access political activity provides a benchmark at which we can observe not only Vietnamese population growth in California, but also the growth of this ethnic group’s cultural and political influence.

Mapping Vietnamese populations using census data from 1980 to 2010 reveals some changes in the locations of where Vietnamese people lived. First, there is significant Vietnamese population growth over the 30-year period with an increase from 89,601 to 581,946. From 1980 to 2000, there was a gradual consolidation of Vietnamese populations into Orange County and Santa Clara County, whose percent Vietnamese population grew by 3.76% and 5.04% respectively (Social Explorer, US Census 1980, 1990, 2000). However, by 2010, there is evidence that nearby rural and suburban counties saw growth in their Vietnamese populations. This is corroborated by primary historical evidence that suggests a decline in urban areas as essential parts of the Vietnamese American experience.

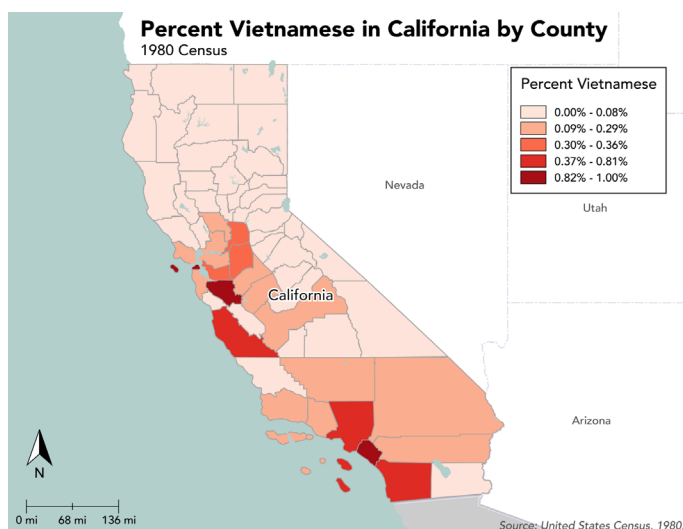


Figure 3

In 1980, Vietnamese ethnic activity was very new, and restrictions set by the federal government in the late 1970s on Vietnamese immigration slowed population growth. By 1977, Vietnamese were only allowed to immigrate to the US for purposes of family reunification (Kelly 1986). At this time, the population was concentrated in the counties of Orange, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Alameda, and Monterey (Figure 3). It is in this decade that “Little Saigon” in Westminster began to form as a center of Vietnamese economic activity. From 1981 to 1984, the number of Vietnamese businesses in what would soon become Little Saigon rose from 350 to 650. By 1987, there were 3,074 Vietnamese businesses in Orange County (Ha 2002). Finally, in 1988, the Westminster City Council officially designated the 1.5 square mile area around Bolsa Avenue as Little Saigon (Trinh

Võ 2009). While the economic growth of Little Saigon at this time was significant, the political status of the Vietnamese American community did not reflect the economic impact that their labor had on the local economy. Because no Californian county met the 5% threshold for bilingual elections in Vietnamese, much of the community did not feasibly have access to the vote.

By 1990, voting conditions remained the same, and Vietnamese were further concentrated in Santa Clara and Orange County (Figure 4). A few notable legislative changes took place at this time that enabled more Vietnamese-Americans to access the vote. First, the Voting Rights Language Assistance Act of 1992 stipulated that if a county had over 10,000 people of a single language minority it had to provide bilingual election materials (GovTrack 2021). Then, the California Election code set a 3% threshold for bilingual elections (California Legislature 1994). Throughout the following decade, these pieces of legislation would give thousands of Vietnamese Americans access to the vote, evident by a Vietnamese poster that encouraged people to “Build Up Our Community, Register and Vote” (National Congress of Vietnamese in America 1992.) Evidence of increasing political activity in Vietnamese urban ethnic places illustrates the growth and cultural advancement in these

communities during this era. As Vietnamese populations and spaces grew, their mark on the politics and culture of American life increased.

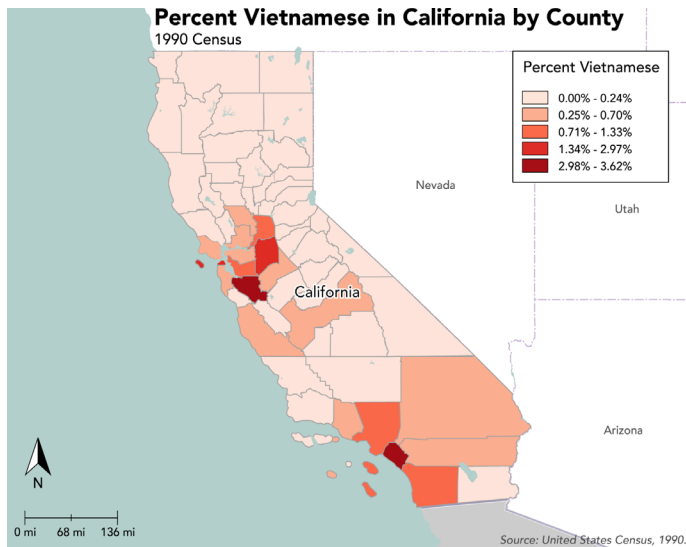


Figure 4

At the turn of the century, 2000 Census data revealed that Vietnamese populations were more concentrated than ever, especially in Orange and Santa Clara County. There were several factors that contributed to this growth, but economic opportunity remained a significant factor in the expansion of urban ethnic places within these few counties. For instance, in an oral history interview, Alex Hieu Tran recalled his reasons for moving into Orange County from Riverside County, claiming that “my English was so bad, and as a Vietnamese who just came with dark skin and not so handsome so to speak, who were [sic] going to hire?!” (Tran 2012). Clearly, the presence of the Vietnamese community in places like Orange County created significant

employment opportunities for Vietnamese populations, especially for those who could not speak English. Moreover, this linguistic reality reinforces the significance of the ethnic enclave, as the consolidation of Vietnamese populations directly resulted in further access to the vote as eight counties were required to provide bilingual election materials as indicated in Figure 5.

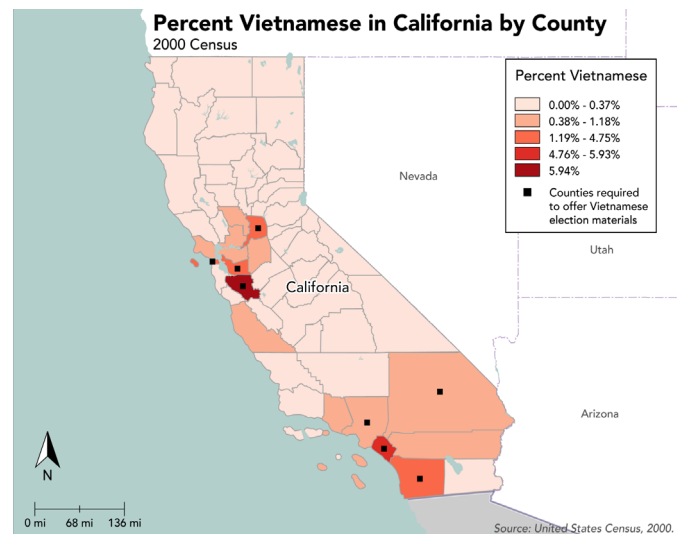


Figure 5

Conversely, by 2010, there is a spreading of Vietnamese across counties, particularly ones that are suburban and rural. Figure 6 illustrates that Riverside County, a largely suburban area, is added to the list of counties that must offer Vietnamese election materials. Additionally, Sonoma and Marin County (located north of San Francisco) also see an increase in Vietnamese population. Now, not only is there less emphasis on Vietnamese ethnic enclaves as places of cultural and economic refuge, but the urban nature of

ethnic spaces like Little Saigon seems to be less central to the notion of the ethnic community. Instead, Little Saigon is a place that can be occasionally visited for shopping and cultural celebrations. For instance, Hiep Cao Nguyen does not live in Little Saigon but says that he visits for a few months at a time before he travels for work because “it feels like there [is] a home outside of Vietnam” (Nguyen 2012). His account reveals that there is less emphasis on the ethnic enclave as a strictly defined place of work, living, and cultural activity. Now, with improvements in transportation, Vietnamese Americans like Nguyen can use the ethnic enclave in ways that are more dynamic and fluid. Here, we see evidence that Vietnamese ethnic enclaves in California align more closely with the theory of heterolocalism, which suggests that the modern ethnic community is not bound by strict physical borders, but instead is dynamic, fluid, and held together by advancements in transportation and communication. This shift in the function of Vietnamese ethnic spaces is important because it reveals the ways in which the modern, globalized, and technologically advanced world has shaped the ways that ethnic groups live, work, and connect.

Finally, the 2019 American Community Survey data suggests that Vietnamese populations

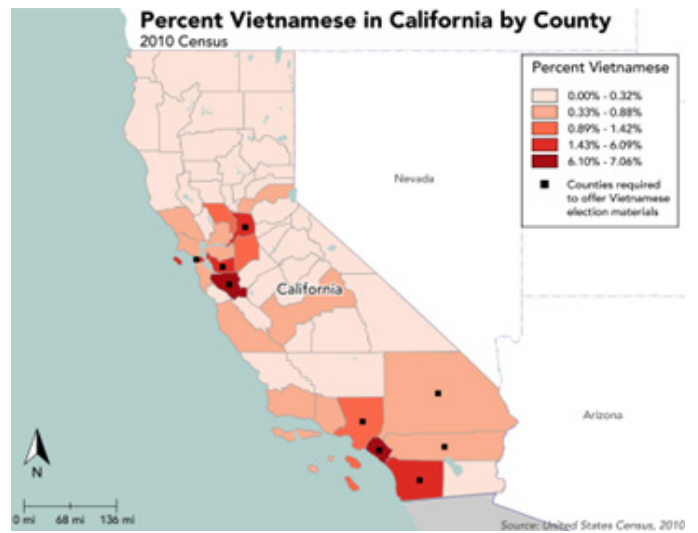


Figure 6

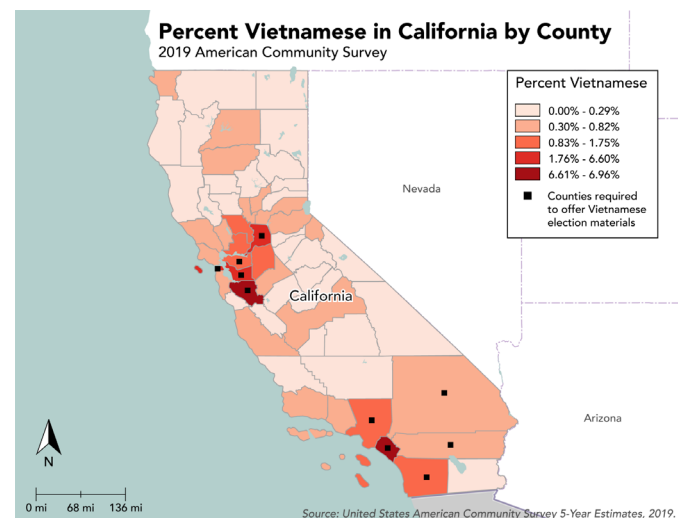


Figure 7

are more spread out across counties than ever and are not solely concentrated in Santa Clara or Orange County (Figure 7). This is most clearly exemplified by negative population growth in Orange County in the years between the 2010 Census and the 2019 ACS. From 2010 to 2019, the number of Vietnamese decreased by over 25,000— from 209,485 to 183,766. This large out-migration of Vietnamese from Orange County, a historically significant ethnic enclave,

suggests that the urban nature of ethnic spaces is much less significant than it used to be. However, this is not to imply that the Vietnamese ethnic community is declining. Rather, the theory of heterolocalism allows us to infer that the ethnic community is using other forms of connection, such as online communities, to keep cultural ties alive while the members of the community move beyond the urban setting. In addition, this suburbanization of Vietnamese is reinforced as the population increase of over 3,000 Vietnamese in Contra Costa County (located east of San Francisco) by 2019 leads the county to meet the threshold for bilingual elections with a projected Vietnamese population of 10,628. These gains in population and resulting election procedural changes illustrate the apparent suburbanization of the Vietnamese populations and their communities. This suggests that the modern world has shaped the ethnic community by loosening its rules, boundaries, and functions, so that the urban notion of the ethnic enclave is less central than it used to be.

Conclusion

The humanitarian devastation of the Vietnam War introduced thousands of Vietnamese refugees to the United States, a country in which very few Vietnamese had lived prior to 1970. Because of this unique context

surrounding the introduction of Vietnamese populations to the US, I sought to analyze how Vietnamese immigrants cultivated the vibrant ethnic communities that are so well known today. I found that, in the few decades after the Vietnam War, Vietnamese populations in California moved to a few key centers of Vietnamese ethnic activity. Concentrating in Santa Clara County and Orange County, these populations used ethnic spaces to build community, economic stability, and political power. However, after the turn of the century, Vietnamese populations moved beyond the urban and into the suburban, redefining the boundaries of the ethnic community.

While still acknowledging the cultural importance of the ethnic enclave, Vietnamese Americans today have begun to move out of the urban center with improvements in transportation and communication. Studying the state of California serves as an introduction to the importance that the Vietnamese population have had on American culture and politics, but there is still much to learn about the rich geographic history of Vietnamese populations in the US. A number of other states, including Texas, received an influx of Vietnamese immigrants after the Vietnam War that resulted in the creation of ethnic enclaves. However, across the nation, there is little information on Vietnamese populations

and the communities they constructed in the past half century. As a result, this subject lends itself to further investigation as this research reveals the unique ways that ethnic groups have transformed the American physical and cultural landscape.

Bibliography

- California Legislature. 1994. Elections Code Section 14201. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC§ionNum=14201 (last accessed 22 November 2021).
- Golash-Boza, T. 2015. *Immigration Nation: Raids, Detentions, and Deportations in Post-9/11 America*. New York: Routledge.
- Gordon, M. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- GovTrack.us. 2021. 102nd Congress: Voting Rights Language Assistance Act of 1992. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/102/hr4312#overview> (last accessed 25 November 2021).
- Ha, N. Q. 2002. *Business and Politics in Little Saigon, California*. PhD diss. Rice University.
- Haverluk, T. 1997. The Changing Geography of U.S. Hispanics, 1850-1990. *Journal of Geography* 96 (3): 134-145.
- Hunter, D. H. 1976. The 1975 Voting Rights Act and Language Minorities. *Catholic University Law Review* 25 (2): 250-270.
- Kelly, G. P. 1986. Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (1): 139-149.
- Mazumdar, S., S. Mazumdar, F. Docuyan, and C. M. McLaughlin. 2000. Creating a Sense of Place: The Vietnamese-Americans and Little Saigon. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 20 (4): 319-333.
- National Congress of Vietnamese in America. 1992. Vote 1992: Build Up Our Community, Register and Vote. Poster. Southeast Asian Archive Vertical File Collection, UC Irvine.
- Nguyen, H. C. "Oral History of Hiep Cao Nguyen." By Shaun Gutierrez. Viet Stories, UCI Libraries (7 March 2012). <http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/1645>.
- Schill, J. 1979. *Pocket Diary of a Vietnamese Boat Person Refugee*. Diary. Southeast Asian Archive, UC Irvine.
- Tran, A. H. "Oral History of Alex Hieu Tran." By Thuy Vo Dang. Viet Stories, UCI Libraries (31 August 2012). <http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/8396>.
- Trinh Vö, L. 2009. *Transforming an Ethnic Community: Little Saigon, Orange County*. In *Asian America: Forming New Communities, Expanding Boundaries*, ed. Huping Ling, 87-103. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- United States Census Bureau. 2015. *Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790-2010*. https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/race/MREAD_1790_2010.html (last accessed 25 November 2021).
- United States Census Bureau. 2020. *American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2009-2019)*. <https://www.census.gov/data/developers/data-sets/acs-5year.html> (last accessed 25 November 2021).
- Vietnamese, 1980. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed 22 November 2021).
- Vietnamese, 1990. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed 22 November 2021).
- Vietnamese, 2000. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed 22 November 2021).
- Vietnamese, 2010. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed 23 November 2021).
- Vietnamese, 2019. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed 23 November 2021).
- Zelinsky, W., and B. A. Lee. 1998. Heterolocalism: An Alternative Model of the Sociospatial Behaviour of Immigrant Ethnic Communities. *International Journal of Population Geography* 4: 281-298.