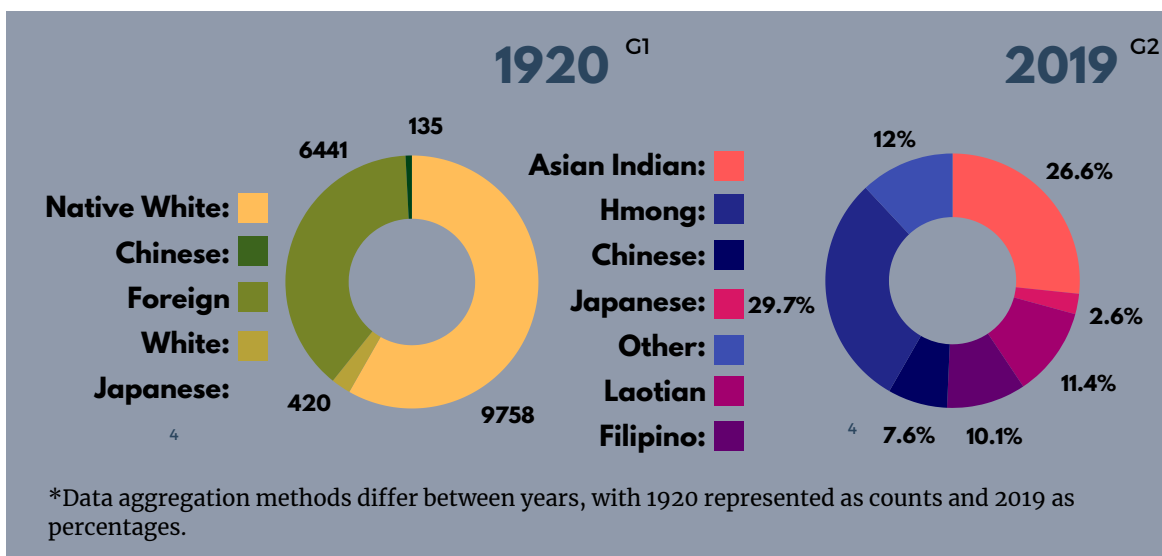


## EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICANS IN MERCED

### The Important Role of East and Southeast Asian Americans in Merced

During the late 1800s, Chinese railroad workers played a pivotal role in building the town of Merced.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, in the early 1900s, Japanese farmers established vital agricultural settlements in Merced.<sup>2</sup> In the latter parts of the twentieth century, during the 1970s and 1980s, Southeast Asians resettled in the United States from Cambodia, Lao, and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> East and Southeast Asian Americans played a vital role in founding, growing and shaping Merced.

### Merced County: Asian American Population Demographic Data



### History of Japanese Farming in Merced: Yamato, Cressey and Cortez Colonies

Japanese farmers have contributed significantly to settlement and agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley (SJV), and their experiences are an important part of Merced history. In the early 1900s, three Japanese agricultural settlements were established in the northern part of Merced County. In 1906, Kyutaro Abiko, an immigrant businessman and newspaper publisher, founded the Yamato Colony just east of Livingston. The colony was settled predominantly by Japanese farmers who overcame obstacles such as racial prejudice to establish themselves as successful

farmers and respected residents.<sup>4</sup> The Cressey Colony was settled in 1918. In 1919, during a time of increasing anti-Japanese sentiment, Japanese immigrants settled 13 miles northwest of Merced, establishing the Cortez Colony. The small group of farming families faced many challenges and survived racial hostility and economic hardship. Over time, the residents of the Japanese settlements suffered through the distressing experiences of being interned and dispossessed.

### Snapshot in Time: 1940

There were 715 native and foreign-born Japanese among the 46,900 residents in

Merced County. Approximately 600 Japanese lived in the Yamato, Cressy and Cortez Colonies; the Japanese settlers were only one of a number of ethnic minority groups in the Livingston area of Merced County.

- Anglo Saxon (White, non-Hispanic): 45%
- Mexican: 8% of the population
- Japanese: 6% of the population<sup>5</sup>

### Historical Anti-Asian Racism and Exclusions Anti-Asian Sentiment and the Barring of Chinese Immigration

In the 1850s, the Chinese were the first non-White settlers to arrive to the SJV. Merced and other SJV cities developed land use policies to segregate immigrants to “undesirable” sides of town.<sup>6</sup> As Chinese workers built the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, they were segregated to a residential district west of the Union Pacific tracks. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers. Chinese communities in the SJV were often targets of racial violence and city demolition, and public health policy and local law enforcement kept residents within a segregated enclave.<sup>7</sup> The city demolished the Chinese neighborhood for the purpose of urban development in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

### Renewed Nativism and the Anti-Japanese Movement of the Early 1920s

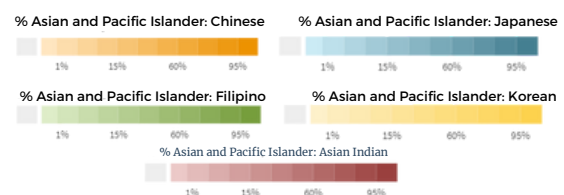
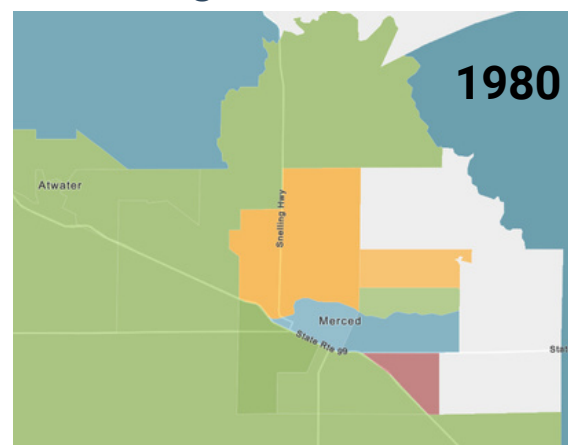
At the turn of the 20th century, residents of the Yamato Colony faced racial prejudice on a constant basis, including anti-Japanese leagues.<sup>9</sup> In 1920, Merced County Farm Bureau directors formed the Merced County Anti-Japanese Association to oppose further Japanese colonization. Representatives from

local groups and farm centers agreed to launch a two-fold campaign of “moral persuasion against persons who attempt to sell or lease property to Japanese” and “pitiless publicity” against those undeterred by the former method.

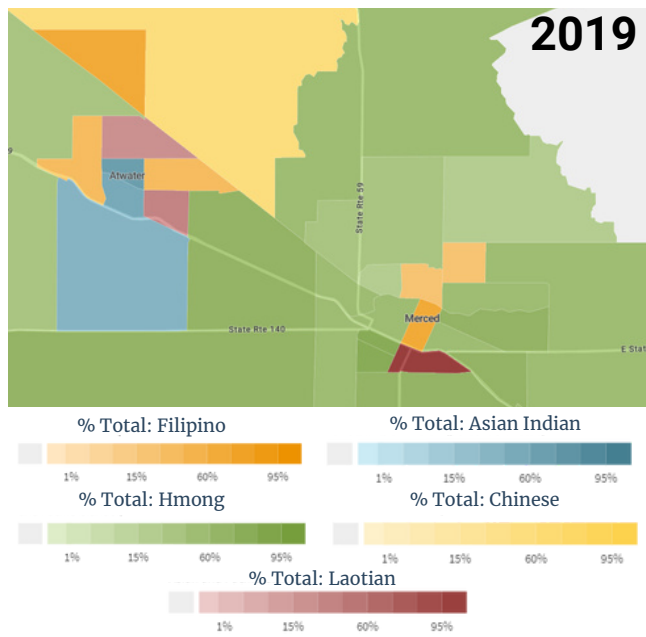


“No More Japanese Wanted Here” sign in Livingston, California, ca. 1920. | Photo: Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum, gift of the Yamamoto family. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/no-more-japanese-wanted-here-when-japanese-americans-were-forced-into-internment-camps>

### Points in Time: Asian American Population Demographic Changes 1980 & 2019



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## Forced Relocation of Japanese Families

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the "evacuation" of 110,000 Japanese and their American-born children from the western half of the Pacific Coastal states and the southern third of Arizona. On May 7, 1942, Civilization Exclusion Order Number 51, ordered the May 13th evacuation of Merced County. Japanese Americans arrived at the Merced Assembly Center in May and then were relocated to the Amache Camp in Colorado in September.<sup>10</sup> Many Japanese families suffered the trauma of internment and dispossession of their lands.<sup>11</sup>

## 1970s-1990s: The Hmong Community Settle in Merced

In the aftermath of the U.S occupation of Southeast Asia, the "secret war" and bombings in Laos, the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, and Vietnam War,

forced refugees to flee, leading to the largest mass resettlement of refugees in American History. Hmong refugees first settled in Merced and other areas in the SJV during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12,13</sup>

- By 1997, over 12,000 Merced residents were Hmong, making the Hmong about 1/5 of the population. According to the 2010 Census, Merced had the third-largest Hmong population in California behind Sacramento<sup>5</sup> and Fresno.<sup>14</sup>

## Hmong Farms

The SJV is a vast agricultural area, and the Hmong who settled here turned to farming, as they faced language barriers and limited job opportunities.<sup>16</sup> In 2015, there were nearly 2,000 Asian farms in the San Joaquin Valley and approximately 70% of these were run by Hmong growers. Small, Hmong farms feature a variety of Southeast Asian vegetables, and farmers usually grow crops cultivated in Laos, including Thai peppers, bok choy, snow peas and lemongrass. Farmers of Asian specialty crops contribute to the county's \$7.7 billion agricultural industry.<sup>17, 18</sup>

## SEAA Challenges

Southeast Asian refugees faced racism, inadequate support, and extreme blight and many lived in neighborhoods with poverty, racial tension, gang violence, and failing schools. Even decades after initial resettlement, institutional inequities still impact SEAA communities, and tremendous socio-economic challenges

remain unaddressed. Instead of the U.S. upholding its responsibility, the SEAA community has been ignored, misunderstood, and overlooked as a result of the Asian American “model minority” myth.<sup>19</sup>

### Health Disparities System Challenges

Hmong in Merced County faced language and cultural barriers accessing healthcare, including providers' lack of Hmong language proficiency and understanding of Hmong health beliefs. Some providers were unaware of Hmong history and the trauma they had experienced.

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Residents gathered at Tenaya Middle School in south Merced for the Health4All meeting. Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bhcmerced>

Historically, all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been grouped into a racial classification system for data collection purposes in the US; however, doing so, often masks health issues, disparities, and needs that are specific to the Hmong community.<sup>21</sup>

### Addressing Current Challenges in Merced

Over the last thirty years, the SEAA population has led efforts to address Merced's structural and system challenges by:

- expanding language access,
- improving healthcare access/quality,
- advocating for investment in underinvested neighborhoods, investing in youth programs/opportunities, shaping education budget/plan, and improving infrastructure. In 2016, for the first time, a mayoral forum was held in South Merced and moderated in the languages spoken in these communities, which included Hmong and Spanish. Youth held their own Mayoral forum in south Merced to ask candidates how they planned to address long-standing disinvestment and neglect in youth who live in neighborhoods that face racial and income segregation. Efforts in community organizing to address disparities and increase opportunities and access in Merced are ongoing.

### Conclusion

Merced County offers a rich example of the best this country has to offer; immigrant communities rising to create a home, agricultural richness that helps feed the world, and a world-class university that opens the door to higher education for local students. However, conditions that

have shaped the infrastructure have created inequality, and a situation where segregation denies communities access to resources they need for social mobility, yielding a broken pipeline that diminishes one's chance of accessing higher education. It is inequality because there are neighborhoods and places in Merced where people can readily access all of these assets. The existing disparity, over time, feeds generational gaps in wealth and educational achievement. The research here shows that there are people in Merced with rich histories, and that local institutions and structures must be shaped with equity in mind to improve access to better outcomes for residents of places like South Merced, Beachwood Franklin, and Planada. Looking forward, inequality in infrastructure, if left unaddressed, will continue to leave some communities more vulnerable to the effects of pressing environmental issues such as climate change. Overall, the effects of unequal access to resources, education, and infrastructure affect the chances of further prosperity for all of Merced, and arguably, the region. Many efforts of emerging leaders tackling these challenges demonstrate that Merced has the capacity to improve the outcomes for all of its residents if collaboration and equitable policies can be put into practice in all systems and places.

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### **Acknowledgements:**

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the following individuals who have played an integral role in the completion of this project. Anthony Jansky and Miguel Garcia for their contribution to the layout of this project. Lupe Corona and Karina Corona for their extensive research on the background of this project. Guadalupe Corona, Karina Corona, and Amanda Conley for their collaborative effort in writing and editing this project. Armando Ramirez, who was an editor on the report. Lastly, Dr. Tania Pacheco-Werner's contribution to this project as a writer of the conclusion.

**Contact Information:**

Tania Pacheco-Werner, PHD  
Central Valley Health Policy  
tpacheco@csufresno.edu  
cvhpi.org

**Suggested Citation:**

Corona, G., Corona, K., Conley, A., Jansky, A., Pacheco-Werner, T. L., Ramirez, A., & Garcia, M. (2024). Unequal Neighborhoods Merced: East and Southeast Asians in Merced. Central Valley Health Policy Institute. California State University, Fresno.

This report series was made possible by a grant from The California Endowment

