



© S. Leo Chiang

Their homes destroyed. Their voice discovered.

A Documentary Film by:
S. Leo Chiang

Duration: 68 minutes

AUDIENCE AWARD, New Orleans Film Festival
HENRY HAMPTON AWARD, Council on Foundations Film & Video Festival
AUDIENCE AWARD, San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival
BEST DOCUMENTARY, Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

For more info, or to download a press kit/publicity stills, visit
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CENTER FOR
ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA



SYNOPSIS

SHORTER (105 words):

A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES is a feature documentary about Versailles, an isolated community in eastern New Orleans that has been settled by Vietnamese refugees since the late 1970s. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Versailles residents impressively rise to the challenges by returning and rebuilding before any other flooded neighborhood in New Orleans, only to have their homes threatened by a new government-imposed toxic landfill just two miles away. A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES recounts the empowering story of how this group of people, who has already suffered so much in their lifetime, turns a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and a chance for a better future.



photo by Lucas Foglia

LONGER (872 words):

A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES is a feature documentary about Versailles, an isolated community in eastern New Orleans originally settled by Vietnamese “boat people”. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Versailles residents impressively rise to the challenge by returning and rebuilding before any other neighborhood in New Orleans, only to have their homes threatened by a new government-imposed toxic landfill just two miles away. A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES recounts the empowering story of how this group of people, who has already suffered so much in their lifetime, turns a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and a chance for a better future.

Thirty years after their arrival, Versailles is at a crossroads. Now a thriving working-class enclave of 8,000, the community has accomplished material success, but is unsure about its identity. The elders look at their American-born, hip-hop-loving grandkids with suspicion, questioning the cultural allegiance of the youth and fearful of them moving away and leaving the community behind. The youth, on the other hand, dismisses the elders as out-of-touch and yet is frustrated by the lack of trust from the Viet-speaking older generations. Legally citizens of the US, but uncomfortable being American, Versailles residents are perpetual outsiders in the city of New Orleans, largely ignored by the government. All of this, of course, is about to change.

The flood following Hurricane Katrina devastates New Orleans in August 2005. Most residents evacuate Versailles, but 400 stay behind. Trapped after the levees break, the residents are transported to the living nightmare that is the New Orleans Convention Center, and then dispersed across the country after evacuation. Some are taken in by

relatives, and others are placed in Katrina shelters where they rely on inadequate translation help to navigate through the massive FEMA red tape. Forced out of Vietnam by the war thirty years prior, many of them wonder why their homes are being taken away from them once again.

Six weeks after the flood. Residents are allowed to return to “look and leave,” but they do not leave. By day, the group fixes their homes, then drives 30 miles to the west side of city where flood damage is minimal to sleep on the floor of the church there. Help from the outside arrives, too, mostly from idealistic young Vietnamese-Americans. Shortly after the initial group’s return, Father Vien calls the community to come back for mass. People come back, and they stay. 300 attend the first mass; 800 the next Sunday. On the third week, the church extends an invitation to the rest of New Orleans East and packs in 2200. “People are back,” the word of mouth spreads. “The priests are back. We’d better get back.” Friends and family finance much of the rebuilding, without help from FEMA. By January ‘06, while the rest of New Orleans is just recovering from the shock of the flood, over half of the Versailles neighborhood has returned.

The community leaders take the initiative to put together an ambitious redevelopment plan for Versailles, including its own senior housing, a cultural center, and a community farm and market. At its Lunar New Year Festival in February ‘06, the community proudly unveils the development plan, but a challenge arrives to spoil the celebration. Mayor Ray Nagin exercises his emergency power to open Chef Menteur Landfill less than two miles from Versailles for toxic Katrina debris disposal, without an environmental impact study, without protective lining on the bottom of the dump, and literally next to the body of water that flooded the community in the first place.

Outraged, Versailles fights back. Residents crowd the public hearings by the hundreds, making the Vietnamese presence felt in the city for the first time. Legal battles are waged at the state and federal level. A demonstration at City Hall prompts Mayor Nagin to promise that dumping will be suspended until tests are done to ensure the safety of the dumpsite, but he does not keep that promise. Tired of being passed around, the community decides to go for broke, staging a protest at the landfill to shut it down.

At the protest, old and young fight side by side, chanting in English and Vietnamese. They turn away dump trucks; they speak passionately for all the world to hear. Mayor Nagin backs down and shuts down the landfill. The community is finally heard.

The Vietnamese-Americans in Versailles now have a new sense of identity and pride. Their determined drive to return and rebuild has inspired and empowered other New Orleanians to do the same, and their impressive victory against the Chef Menteur Landfill has won them a political voice that can no longer be ignored. As the community celebrates the Lunar New Year once again,, Father Vien speaks with pride. “Now, no one would dare speak about rebuilding New Orleans without mentioning our community, because they know we are back. They know we are here.” Once upon a time, the Versailles clan was known as the quiet Vietnamese refugees way out east of the City. Now, they are Vietnamese-American New Orleanians. Now they are Americans.

CHARACTERS



Charismatic **FATHER VIEN NGUYEN** is an animated and eloquent speaker. He is an unexpected mix of a traditional steady and proper Catholic priest and a progressive social activist. Sometimes he speaks with an air of arrogance, sometimes with a sense of mischief, but we always know that Father Vien loves the Versailles community with all his heart and leads it with a sense of duty and incredible passion. Father Vien is our main storyteller.

Although 30-year-old **MIMI NUYEN** is not from Versailles, she has more in common with the elders in the community than other people her age. Mimi's family paid for her escape from Vietnam by boat when she was already a teenager in the early 90's, much later than most Vietnamese refugees. Like the elders 20 years prior, she spent time at a refugee camp. She relates to the Versailles elders and holds them dear in her heart, so much so that she uprooted herself from Northern California and took a job as an aide to City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis so she can fight for the community. Mimi is the emotional center of the film

NGO MINH KHANG is one of the most respected elders in the community. He is over 70 years old, but we can see the dogged fighter within his frail frame. Ong Khang treasures what he and his family and friends at Versailles have built, and will do anything to defend it. Ong Khang provides us with the community elders' perspective.

Born and raised in Versailles, **MINH NGUYEN** and **MARY TRAN** were two 20-somethings starting their careers and considering leaving the community. After Katrina,

the charming and likeable Minh rallied the youth of Versailles to step up, working hand-in-hand with the elders to fight for the community. The bubbly Mary, at times young and giggly like a teenager, has answered the call and taken the helm at the community development corporation in charge of the future of Versailles. They speak for the youth of Versailles.

Attorney **JOEL WALTZER**, the only non-Vietnamese lawyer with an office in Versailles, has represented community members for over 15 years. Versailles is a part of City Councilwoman **CYNTHIA WILLARD-LEWIS'** district, and she has been an advocate of the community for as long as anyone remembers. Her New Orleans East district happens to also include the majority of the Ninth Ward, the area in New Orleans most devastated by the flood. These two outside supporters, both of who have suffered every bit as much from the storm and the flood as the Versailles community members, are instrumental allies in the fight against the Chef Menteur Landfill. They also provide the outsiders' perspective on the Versailles story.

BACKGROUND STORIES

"In New Orleans, Versailles Resurfaces"

—All Things Considered, [NPR](#)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9163113>

"A New Landfill in New Orleans Sets Off a Battle"

—[New York Times](#)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/08/us/08landfill.html>

"Sustained by Close Ties, Vietnamese Toil to Rebuild"

—[New York Times](#)

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/20/national/nationalspecial/20viet.html?_r=1

"After tragedy, a community finds its political voice"

—Frontline World (video), [Abroad at Home Series](#)

http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/rough/2008/08/a_village_calle.html

SCREENINGS & AWARDS

PAST SCREENINGS:

San Francisco Int'l Asian American Film Fest – **AUDIENCE AWARD, Documentary**
New Orleans Film Festival – **AUDIENCE AWARD, Feature Documentary**
Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival – **BEST DOCUMENTARY**
Sheffield Doc/Fest - Videotheque
Vietnamese Int'l Film Festival
Hawaii International Film Festival
Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival
San Diego Asian American Film Festival
DC Asian Pacific American Film Festival
Austin Asian Am Film Fest
Cinema on the Bayou Film Festival
RealFilms Houston
Society for Visual Anthropology Film, Video, and Multimedia Festival
American Sociological Association Film & Video Screening
Advancing Justice Conference
California Association for Bilingual Education Conference
Katrina@5 Conference
Yale Asian American Film Festival
Vail Film Festival
Chicago Asian American Film Festival

UPCOMING SCREENINGS:

Council on Foundations Film & Video Festival – **HENRY HAMPTON AWARD**
Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival (VC FilmFest)
DisOrient Film Festival, Eugene, OR
Diversity in Place Film Festival, Honolulu, HI
Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, WI
Crossroads Film Festival, Jackson, MS

RIGHTS & DISTRIBUTION

- US Television—ITVS/Independent Lens. US PBS Broadcast in May, 2010
- US Educational—New Day Films
- Online/New Media—ITVS/PBS

Rights in all other territories are available.

PRESS

“Chiang skillfully shows how revolutionary this [protesting] was for a community whose elders had been scarred by war and dislocation.”

—Michael Shapiro, *The North Bay Bohemian*

<http://www.metrosantacruz.com/bohemian/02.24.10/arts-1008.html>

“A story that bridges oceans and generations alike. The film is not designed to preach, but to inspire: to share a unique slice of the American story with a wide audience... This is a film you cannot afford to miss.”

—*Racebending.com*

<http://www.racebending.com/v3/featured/a-village-called-versailles/>

"Reminds us that ethnic minorities in this country have a common struggle and tells its story succinctly and persuasively."

—Kevin Langson, *Edge SF*

<http://www.edgesanfrancisco.com/index.php?ch=entertainment&sc=movies&sc2=feature&sc3=&id=103224>

“There was no mainstream media coverage of the isolated Vietnamese enclave that had existed in eastern New Orleans since the late 1970s. That regrettable omission is rectified in Chiang’s moving documentary.”

—Judy Stone, *SF360*

<http://www.sf360.org/features/village-offers-new-look-at-new-orleans>

"Chiang blends archival footage with emotional first-hand accounts to tell their inspirational American story—one of immigration and of triumph over adversity."

—*Hokubei.com*

"This moving documentary is proof that our community can stand together and triumph over tragedy."

—Uyen Nguyen, *One Vietnam*

<http://talk.onevietnam.org/a-village-called-versailles/>

“Inspiring that the community united and stepped up. They found their voice.”

—Momo Chang, *Hyphen Magazine*

<http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2008/09/village-called-versailles>

“Tells the story of the political awakening of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East.”

—John Rudolph, *Feet in 2 Worlds*

<http://feetin2worlds.wordpress.com/2009/12/02/immigrant-filmmaker-documents-the-rise-of-vietnamese-american-political-power-in-new-orleans/>

“Offers a potent commentary on our nation’s identity, and challenges historically misguided views of what it means to be American.”

—Kim Leung, *Campus Progress*

<http://www.campusprogress.org/filmtv/5028/second-homeland>

"A positive tale told with economy, in broad strokes, but with nuance and context...well worth an activist presenting, a scholar teaching, or an individual watching."

—Dan Duffy, Editor, Viet Nam Literature Project; Chair, Books & Authors: Viet Nam, Inc.

***NOTE: Full reviews at the end of document**

KEY PERSONNEL



S. Leo Chiang – Producer/Director

Born and raised in Taiwan, Leo immigrated to the US as a teenager and received a MFA in film production from University of Southern California before beginning his filmmaking career. As a film student, Leo was commissioned by the Directors Guild of America to direct and edit *Directing: How to Get There*, for which he documented early careers of several well-known directors including Robert Wise, Norman Jewison, and Steven Spielberg. His other films include *To You Sweetheart, Aloha*, about the 94-year-old 'ukulele master Bill Tapia (PBS broadcast '06; Audience Award at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival '05), *One + One*, a documentary about mixed HIV-status couples (CINE Golden Eagle Award '02; Cable Positive Award '01), *Safe Journey*, a short fiction film (PlanetOut.com Short Movie Award 02 - Audience Award, Drama), and his most recent film, *A Village Called Versailles*, about the transformation of the Vietnamese-American community in post-Katrina New Orleans East (Independent Lens '10). Leo also collaborates with other documentarians as an editor (*True-Hearted Vixen*, POV '01; *Recalling Orange County*, PBS/VOCES '06) and as a cameraman (*It's STILL Elementary*, '09; *Ask Not*, Independent Lens '09). Leo is an active member of New Day Films, the social-issue documentary distribution co-operative.

Brittney Shepherd – Associate Producer

BRITTNEY SHEPHERD loves the idea of media as a means of connection. With a B.A. in Ethnic Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, Brittney was a founding member of the student run production team MothaBase Productions whose short film entitled *Hurricane Katrina: Ya'll Know Where the Vietnamese Were?* is used as a discussion tool for community groups, policy makers, and educators around the country concerning the issues of language access and disaster preparedness for immigrant communities. She has gone on help produce many independent documentaries including *Ask Not*, *A Village Called Versailles*, and *Straightlaced*.

Eva Moss – Associate Producer

EVA MOSS has been involved in documentary filmmaking since graduating from Smith College in 2003. She has worked as both an editor and producer on many films whose topics range from alleviating water shortages in Kenya and Mali, Aboriginal artists and the intersection of storytelling and painting, the transition of a transsexual woman as seen through the eyes of her 3 young nieces (*No Dumb Questions*, Melissa Regan), a family working to understand their child's learning disabilities, a sequel to *The Celluloid Closet* (*Here's Looking At You Boy*, Michael Ehrenzweig), a gay couple's experience trying to conceive a child through insemination, *Don't Ask Don't Tell* and those working to overturn it (*Ask Not*, Johnny Symons), a 90 year old successful actress who started her career at 70, and the first documentary made by gay filmmakers depicting gay people (*Word Is Out*, Veronica Selver, Janet Cole). She uses filmmaking as a means to promote

social change and introspection and works to facilitate the telling of others' stories, giving voice to those without a voice and sharing with the world that which is rarely seen.

Loan Dao – Associate Producer

LOAN DAO is a Ph.D. candidate of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her interest and focus on the historical impact of a new generation of Southeast Asian American leaders stems from her experiences as the Director of Huong Viet Community Center and as a national leader in the fight against Cambodian deportations. She produced and wrote *We Will Not Be Moved*, and served as an outreach and promotional events coordinator for *Sentenced Home*, two films that document the Cambodian deportation process. She is the co-editor of an anthology on the impact of Hurricane Katrina on Vietnamese Americans throughout the Gulf Coast (forthcoming), and currently teaches at Stanford University, New College of California, and Laney College.

Rebecca Snedeker – Archival Researcher

REBECCA SNEDEKER is an award-winning independent filmmaker based in New Orleans. *By Invitation Only*, her first feature-length documentary, premiered at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS stations nationwide. The film recently won Best Documentary at the New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival and has been presented at numerous festivals, conferences, and campuses. Snedeker also Associate Producer Julie Gustafson's *Desire* and Dawn Logsdon and Lolis Elie's *Faubourg Tremé*. At home in post-Katrina New Orleans, she is producing a new film in which she asks diverse people about their dreams for the future of the city. Snedeker received a B.A. from Wesleyan University and is a Visiting Scholar at Tulane University's Newcomb College Center for Research on Women.

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan – Editor

KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN picked up her first camera in middle school and hasn't put it down since. Her short films include, *El Corrido de Cecelia Rose*, chronicling the violent death of a Richmond teen. The film won the Golden Spire at the San Francisco International Film Festival, was an official selection of the Sundance Film Festival, and was subsequently broadcast on the Sundance Channel. Kristy holds an MFA in Cinema and, in addition to directing films, is an editor and film instructor.

Joel Goodman – Composer

JOEL GOODMAN, a native New Yorker, began his musical career at the famed High School of Music and Art. Having spent many years as a studio musician/performer, and working with legendary musicians (including Cab Calloway and Ralph Towner), Joel transitioned into focusing his musical acumen on scoring. He recently scored *Canvas*, starring Oscar winning actress Marcia Gay Harden & Joe Pantoliano, *Constantine's Sword, Hear & Now* (HBO), *Walt Whitman* (PBS - American Experience), the multi award winning film *The Cats of Mirikitani*, *Sister Rose's Passion* ('05 Academy Award Nomination), *The Collector of Bedford Street* ('04 Academy Award Nomination), and *Children Underground* ('02 Academy Award Nomination).

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

Before Katrina, I had no idea that Vietnamese American communities existed along the Gulf Coast. Having lived in California most of my life, the very concept of Asian Americans in the South seemed totally incongruent with my perceptions (stereotypes?) of what the American South was like. When Hurricane Katrina hit and the catastrophic flood followed, we hardly saw any Asian faces on mainstream news. It wasn't until a geographer friend, Dr. Wei Li from Arizona State University, began describing a community she encountered on her post-Katrina research work in New Orleans that I learned about Versailles, the New Orleans East neighborhood portrayed in *A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES*. Wei told me how the Vietnamese American residents from Versailles were among the first people to return, how they were rebuilding way faster than anyone had anticipated, and how, just when life in Versailles was returning to normal, the city government decided to open a landfill less than 2 miles away to accept 1/3 of all Katrina debris. The landfill was to open without any environmental impact studies, any input from residents nearby, and without even a basic lining at its bottom to prevent it from polluting the ground water. The city was going to dig a huge hole in the ground, next to the body of water that flooded, and dump a mountain of potentially toxic trash in it.

In the same conversation, Wei also told me that the Versailles Vietnamese Americans were passionately organizing, mostly around the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church under the leadership of its charismatic Pastor Vien The Nguyen, to fight against this landfill. The residents, especially the refugee elders who escaped to the US after 1975, were not about to lose their home again. As an immigrant myself who experienced displacement (but nowhere nearly as traumatic as the Vietnamese refugee experience), I was incredibly moved by the Versailles people rising up to defend against what they perceived as a threat to their American homeland. I asked Wei if I could meet her in New Orleans on her next trip. She introduced me to Father Vien, and I began to make the film.

It took 2 ½ years to capture this story. I am grateful that the members of the Versailles community trusted me to tell their story. Before I made this film, the word “community” would come up in conversations from time to time, but making this film has taught me what “community” really means: a group of people, family or not, who always have each other's back. I hope audiences walk away from the film as moved by this story as I have been and continue to be. I also want them to feel empowered, especially viewers who are part of any underserved and/or underrepresented group. I want them to believe that, united with their friends and family, they, too, can make a difference. Idealistic? You bet.

While *A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES* specifically portrays the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans East, in many ways it is a re-telling of that classic American story: of David defeating Goliath, of the just triumphing over the unjust, of a determined immigrant group overcoming the odds to claim their own unique piece of American identity. It's a story that we can all relate to... and cheer for.

CREDITS

S. Leo Chiang	Director/Producer
Brittney Shepherd, Eva Moss, Loan Dao	Associate Producers
Rebecca Snedeker	Archival Researcher
Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, Amy Young & S. Leo Chiang	Editors
S. Leo Chiang & Francis James	Camera/Sound
Joel Goodman	Composer
Idle Hands	Graphic Design
Philip Perkins	Sound Editor & Mix

FUNDING AND SUPPORT

A Village Called Versailles is a co-production of S. Leo Chiang/Walking Iris Films and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) in association with the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

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Fleishhacker Foundation
BAVC Mediamaker Award

A Village Called Versailles is produced by S. Leo Chiang/Walking Iris Films who is solely responsible for its content. © 2009 S. Leo Chiang



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ARTS & IDEAS

DON'T DUMP
Protesters from a New Orleans suburb are the subject of 'A Village Called Versailles'.



Global Filmage

The Sebastopol Documentary Film Fest brings the whole world home

By MICHAEL SHAPIRO

Amid the devastation that was New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, one community managed to right itself: a Vietnamese neighborhood in New Orleans East. Six months after Katrina, when much of New Orleans remained a ghost town, Versailles was almost fully occupied. But just when Versailles' inhabitants were getting back on their feet and laying out a plan to transform their community by integrating small farms and a charter school, this enclave literally got dumped on.

S. Leo Chiang's film, *A Village Called Versailles*, screening March 6 at the Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival, traces Versailles' evolution from a sleepy, under-the-radar hamlet to a feisty, politically charged community.

What catalyzed this transformation? The mayor of New Orleans and his emergency decree to put a garbage dump on the edge of town. The Vietnamese leaders of Versailles asked the waste company to install a liner to prevent chemicals from leaching into their water and fields. They refused.

So when the dumping began, Versailles' people, led by a charismatic priest and youthful protesters,

took to the streets to block the garbage trucks. Chiang skillfully shows how revolutionary this was for a community whose elders had been scarred by war and dislocation, a people who prior to this desecration had just wanted to avoid confrontation and be left alone.

An immigrant from Taiwan who now lives in San Francisco, Chiang, 39, sought to capture the evolution of the immigrant experience in the United States. "At first you feel like a guest," he says. "You must be polite; you can't ask too much." But after a disaster like Katrina, when you're on the verge of being pushed aside, "you need to claim your place."

Having their homes threatened, first by a natural calamity and then by Mayor Ray Nagin's decision to put a toxic dump on the edge of town, "gave the community purpose beyond doing well financially," Chiang says. "It was politically empowering."

A Village Called Versailles screens with Sebastopol resident Robert Hillmann's 1982 film *Fire on the Water*. Both directors will appear at their screenings during the Sebastopol festival, running March 5-7 and now in its third year.

Hillmann, a loquacious former New Yorker whose parents emigrated from Europe in the early 20th century, traveled to the Gulf Coast of Texas

in the early 1980s. He captured a moment when Southern fishermen who'd spent generations trawling for shrimp clashed with Vietnamese immigrants seeking to make a living in the waters off east Texas. Hillmann scouted the Gulf Coast until he found the characters to tell the story and used cinéma vérité techniques to keep the film fast-paced.

His goal was to get beyond the "hot-button issues" of that time and make a "timeless" film about what humans do when confronted with the fear of "there not being enough to go around anymore."

Most of the white fisherman harass or condemn the newcomers, but one man, Jim Craig, provides them with docks where they can harbor their boats. Craig's description of the impending explosion between the white and Vietnamese fishermen gives the film its title: "It's like a fire burning to the water," Craig says. "There's no way to stop it."

Hillmann's goal was to make a film without judgment. "There are no good guys and no bad guys," he says, though some characters come off better than others. We meet a young Vietnamese fisherman who's trying to earn enough money to send his younger siblings to college; today, Hillmann says, one is a professor at Rhode Island School of Design.

Then there's James Stansfield, a boat mechanic and the leader of the local chapter of the →24

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Ku Klux Klan. In one scene, Stansfield exhorts his minions to burn crosses, though he can be surrealistically pragmatic: "The price of diesel went up here—it's slowed down the cross-burning a bit. You only use 'em when you're serious," he says. "You gotta make all of 'em count."

The next scene shows Stansfield repairing the motor of a fisherman's boat—a Vietnamese fisherman. His pride in his work is so great, Hillmann says, that he always does his best work, even on an engine he views as belonging to the enemy.

One of the film's most poignant exchanges is between Stansfield and a fisherman who was a colonel in Vietnam and tries to convince Stansfield that they're similar. You can almost see Stansfield's dogmatic facade begin to crack.

And then we learn an astonishing secret about Stansfield, proof that the filmmaker has hung around long enough to gain his trust. The local leader of the KKK faces the camera and says he's not white, he's actually Native American.

Hillmann, who scored an Oscar nomination in 1991 for producing the documentary *Waldo Salt: A Screenwriter's Journey*, is on the Motion Picture Academy committee that nominates contenders for best documentary. A few years ago, the Academy considered removing these awards from the telecast, but Hillmann and others fought for recognition of documentaries to stay on TV. "It's an opportunity to find good work and give it the attention it deserves," he says.

A couple of years later, Michael Moore was using his award to stump for social justice before an audience of almost 1 billion people.

Hillmann says he's pleased to see a documentary film festival come to his little West County burg. It's especially valuable today because there are so many major media outlets "that co-opt everyone's attention," he says. "There's not as much time for quality stuff from the independent world."

And he likes that this festival is for North Bay residents, unlike Sundance and others that cater to the out-of-town crowd.

Jason Perdue, program director of the film festival, knows his audience is local, but he seeks a diverse and broad range of films that may not share the progressive political perspective of most Sonoma County filmgoers.

The festival has expanded its roster of events, with a workshop of documentary filmmaking and parties at the Hopmonk and Sebastopol Center for the Arts. A popular event from last year, pre-film dinners at Viva Culinary Institute, is making a return engagement. And unlike other festivals, where you have to buy an expensive pass, you can attend the Sebastopol festival à la carte. Most films are \$8. "We'd rather sell out than make an extra dollar," Perdue says.

Films screen Friday–Sunday, March 5–7, at the Sebastopol Cinema, Hopmonk Tavern, Viva Culinary Institute, Sebastopol Center for the Arts and the Youth Annex. All venues are within walking distance of downtown Sebastopol. Tickets are sold at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts (6780 Depot St.; 707.829.4797) and online. For more info, see www.sebastopolfilmfestival.org.

Brightest Lights

Highlights of the Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival

Parties Meet filmmakers and local artists at opening- and closing-night parties at Sebastopol Center for the Arts. The opening-night program, including the films and party, costs \$20; closing night is \$4 for the party. On Saturday night, the band Pellejo Seco plays in the Hopmonk's Abbey, \$7.

Filmmakers at Screenings Many directors will be present for Q&As at their films. The one who's probably traveling the farthest to attend is Anna Rodgers, the Irish filmmaker of *Today Is Better than Two Tomorrows*. Set in Laos, the film traces the paths of two boys; one goes to school, the other becomes a monk. Oakville filmmaker Lucy Massie Phenix presents *Don't Know, We'll See*, a 2008 film about the life of master ceramicist Karen Karnes. Phenix will also appear at the showing of *Word Is Out*, a 1978 film in which gays and lesbians share their hopes and dreams.

Workshop "The Art of Shooting Docs" led by filmmaker Emiko Omori, who will show excerpts of her work and discuss techniques for creating films on Saturday at 2pm.

Latino Program Cuban films are featured followed by a lunch and discussion with the filmmakers of *Salud!* on Saturday at 11:30am.

Don't Miss Films *Still Bill*, a doc about Grammy-winning soul singer Bill Withers, explores the reclusive artist's decision to give up fame and fortune and seek a quiet life with his family. Withers wrote and sang "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Lean on Me." *My Vietnam, Your Iraq*, a film from a director who served 20 months in the Gulf of Tonkin, observes nine Vietnam vets as they watch their children deploy to Iraq. The film is paired with *Republican Dad*, made by an Obama supporter who films his conservative father's run for Congress. The film starts with politics but ends up being about the relationship between father and son.

—M.S.

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February 25th, 2010 | Published in [Featured \(http://www.racebending.com/v3/category/featured/\)](http://www.racebending.com/v3/category/featured/), [Film & Television \(http://www.racebending.com/v3/category/film-and-television/\)](http://www.racebending.com/v3/category/film-and-television/)

Last week, Racebending.com had the opportunity to watch [A Village Called Versailles \(http://avillagecalledversailles.com/\)](http://avillagecalledversailles.com/), a documentary about the struggle of the Vietnamese American community of New Orleans.





<http://avillagecalledversailles.com/dvd>

From their [official website \(http://avillagecalledversailles.com/\)](http://avillagecalledversailles.com/):

In a New Orleans neighborhood called Versailles, a tight-knit group of Vietnamese Americans overcame obstacles to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, only to have their homes threatened by a new government-imposed toxic landfill.

A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES is the empowering story of how the Versailles people, who have already suffered so much in their lifetime, turn a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and a chance for a better future.

The documentary takes us into the heart of this six-thousand strong community of Vietnamese American families. We learn about the pain and hardship experienced by the older Vietnamese on their journey to come to America and build livelihoods for their children and grandchildren. At the same time, we see a growing movement of American-born youth come to support – and lead – their parents and grandparents in a struggle for recognition and acceptance.

This is a story that bridges oceans and generations alike. The film is not designed to preach, but to inspire: to share a unique slice of the American story with a wide audience. As we watched, we came to feel, appreciate, and empathize with Versailles' heartbreak – and triumph.

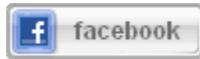




<http://avillagecalledversailles.com/dvd>

This film is not a recollection of events past, but a celebration of a living, breathing community. It is a celebration of togetherness and action, of people reaching out and supporting each other. To anyone who has ever experienced hardship in their lives, to anyone who has ever taken up a cause deemed hopeless, to all those who rally for justice in the face of indifference: this is a film you cannot afford to miss.

Check out the [official site \(http://avillagecalledversailles.com\)](http://avillagecalledversailles.com) for information on [film screenings \(http://avillagecalledversailles.com/screenings\)](http://avillagecalledversailles.com/screenings) and the details on [how you can purchase the DVD \(http://avillagecalledversailles.com/dvd\)](http://avillagecalledversailles.com/dvd).



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Village people: S. Leo Chiang documents Vietnamese residents of post-Katrina New Orleans standing up for their rights in "A Village Called Versailles." (Photo courtesy SFIAAFF)

[Critic's Notebook](#)

'Village' Offers New Look at New Orleans

By **Judy Stone**

S. Leo Chiang, born and raised in Taiwan, knew what it was like to be an outsider in the United States, so the seemingly inexplicable rebellion of previously docile Vietnamese residents in New Orleans was an ideal subject for this documentary director.

It took him more than a year to track down bits and pieces of film from unclassified archives at the University of New Orleans that could reconstruct the untold story of what happened to the 5,000 residents of the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam after the 2005 Katrina hurricane wreaked havoc on that Louisiana city. For outsiders, the main victims of that storm appeared to be black and white; there was no mainstream media coverage of the isolated Vietnamese enclave that had existed in eastern New Orleans since the late 1970s. That regrettable omission is rectified in Chiang's moving documentary **A Village Called Versailles**. It will be shown at the [San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival](#) (Sat/13, 2:15 p.m., Sundance Kabuki, Tues/16, 9

p.m., Viz Cinema, Sat/20, 5:30 p.m., San Jose's Camera 12). It is Chiang's second feature documentary since he made **To You Sweetheart, Aloha**, about a 94-year-old ukulele master from Hawaii.

New Orleans had been just a uniquely glamorous city to Chiang who only learned about the Vietnamese residents from a geographer friend who visited there. He began to wonder then about what the sense of "home" is for an immigrant. For Chiang, home had been a small town in southern Taiwan where his Buddhist father was a doctor and shared a clinic with his wife, a nurse. Although his father wanted him to be a physician, Leo had no intention of following in their footsteps. For him, the jewel in the one-main-street area was the lone cinema. Nevertheless, the parents never discouraged him from his steady attendance there, watching melodramas from Taiwan and Hong Kong. For some obscure reason, he was mostly fascinated by the outtakes that ran when the credits were rolling. His movie attendance expanded when his parents sent him to live with an uncle in San Jose when he was about 15 or 16.

"I remember seeing some movies and wondering why I was there," Chiang, a slight, soft-spoken 39, recalled. "I was frightened by **Amadeus**, loved **Indiana Jones**, was puzzled by Godard's **Hail Mary** and mesmerized by Schlöndorff's **The Tin Drum**. For some strange reason, I was obsessed by Ken Russell. I was fascinated that someone was making films out of this bizarre, campy fantastical stuff."

He certainly never thought of becoming a filmmaker. The practical thing was to get a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering from UC Santa Barbara and begin his 10-year long struggle to become a citizen. "It was a long hard journey to get that passport, that citizenship. The test was the least of it. It's all the bureaucracy that you go through. They lost my paperwork, I re-applied—but then it's another six months or a year and you have to start over. But you're an immigrant and you can't complain. I started pursuing my citizenship since I was 16 and finally got my green card when I was 23 or 24."

For two years, he worked at Apple Computer and then a young filmmaker friend convinced him to apply to film school at USC. "I had never considered it a viable career choice, he said. "I didn't think I was qualified, but he finally was admitted to USC and he began to think, "Someone wants me to go down this road."

Later when he learned about the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, his interest was piqued. "I don't pretend to understand the trauma of refugee experience, but I think I can relate to the experience of moving somewhere so foreign, having to adjust to a new language, a new culture, without all your friends and to at some point be able to overcome all that strong sense of feeling that 'I'm just here temporarily. I need to act like a guest'—and then to finally to be able to transition to the feeling that I'm an American too. I may not be an American like someone who grew up in Kansas, but I'm every bit an American as anyone else and I need to claim that. So to me that was really colorful, claiming your American identity and finally settling roots and claiming this piece of land being figuratively part of oneself."

He was very impressed when he saw that happening to the Vietnamese community in New Orleans when they strongly objected to the city's plan to impose a toxic landfill two miles away from their Versailles neighborhood without any safeguards or consultation. "To the extent that they went to fight, to speak up, to go out of their comfort zone and to challenge something that was previously intimidating to them was very moving to me. It made me very happy and that made me decide to make this film."

The "really weird thing," he said, "was I probably shouldn't feel this way anymore because I've been living with the film for so long. Sometimes I'd be watching my own film and I would tear up which was really silly for me, but it would happen when I'm watching it with an audience and I could feel their energy in relating to that whole experience."

topics: [activism](#), [asian american cinema](#), [bay area](#), [directors](#), [diy](#), [documentary](#)

03.10.2010

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A Village Called Versailles

By *Momo*

Created *Tue, Sep 2nd- 11:03am*

"Village" continues the story after returning to Versailles. Soon after resettling, the Vietnamese American community realized that the city planned on dumping toxic waste into a landfill right next to their homes. What ensued is an ongoing battle with the city. The rough cut shows some inspiring images of hundreds of Vietnamese Americans, young and old, storming city hall meetings. They succeeded in closing down the landfill, though it seems like the city still has not cleaned what was already dumped (background: after Katrina, there were some 22 million tons of trash, according to the film). Basically, it seems like the large community of Vietnamese Americans was largely invisible to the local government. They thought they could just dump waste right next where they lived and no one would say anything -- but that's not what happened.

What is inspiring is that the community united and stepped up. They found their voice. Though largely told as a story of a model minority community, hopefully "Versailles" will paint a fuller picture.

On a sidenote, I interviewed Father Vien Nguyen on the phone soon after Katrina hit, as he was gathering Vietnamese American families to resettle in Versailles. He is (as you can see in the film), a charismatic leader. In the [same article \(http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20051112/ai_n15854765\)](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20051112/ai_n15854765) [1], I interviewed Mimi Nguyen, who is also featured in the film. She lived in Oakland, CA at the time, but after volunteering as a translator and advocate during and right after Katrina, she moved there and now is an aide to a city councilmember in New Orleans.

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[Immigrant Filmmaker Documents the Rise of Vietnamese-American Political Power in New Orleans](#)

By John Rudolph, FI2W Executive Producer

Less than a month ago Anh Joseph Cao was hardly a household name. Then the freshman congressman from Louisiana [broke with his party](#) to become the only Republican in the House to vote in favor of the health care reform bill.



Young Versailles
community member
participates in protest to
shut down the Chef
Mentour Highway
Landfill, 2006. Photo
Credit: James Dien Bui

In addition to his party-defying vote, Cao's personal story also helped propel him into the national spotlight. He is the [first Vietnamese-American elected to Congress](#). He's also a Republican who represents an overwhelmingly Democratic district with a majority African-American population. "How did he do it?" a lot of people wondered.

A new documentary film helps provide some answers. Cao appears only briefly at the very end of "[A Village Called Versailles](#)," which tells the story of the political awakening of the Vietnamese community

in New Orleans East following Hurricane Katrina. Virtually the entire film was shot well before the 2008 election in which Cao won an upset victory over veteran Democratic Representative William J. Jefferson, who was indicted, and subsequently convicted, on corruption charges.

The documentary is a kind of prequel to Cao's story. It shows how in the year following Hurricane Katrina, Vietnamese residents of the Versailles neighborhood rebuilt their homes, businesses and churches only to have their safety threatened by a landfill created nearby to receive tons of hurricane debris, much of it toxic. The community, which had mostly avoided politics up to that point, successfully organized and forced the city to close the landfill.

The Vietnamese refugees who settled in Versailles had already been displaced from their homes twice. During the Vietnam War they were forced to flee their villages in North Vietnam and move to South Vietnam. When the South fell, they were forced to leave the country entirely. "A Village Called Versailles" tells the story of how they refused to be displaced a third time, from their new home in the U.S.

"A Village Called Versailles" was made by S. Leo Chiang, 39, a Taiwanese-American filmmaker who lives in California. Feet in Two Worlds spoke to Chiang about his new film which is [being shown around the country](#), and will [be broadcast on public television next May](#).

FI2W: How did this project begin?

Chiang: It was actually kind of an accident that I came across this story. I was out of the country for most of the period around Hurricane Katrina. After I got back I was having a conversation with a friend who was doing a study that tracked the recovery among different communities of color, and she started telling me about the Vietnamese-American community down there and how they were fighting this landfill. I had no idea there was a Vietnamese-American community down there. I was fascinated, mostly because I feel like as an immigrant I really understand what they were doing to fight for their new home and, sort of, claim their American identity.

FI2W: So it was the immigrant aspect of the story that was particularly compelling to you?

Chiang: It was a couple of things. The parallel between the two exiles, the fact that they were refugees, that they were forced to travel through water to leave their homeland, and then Katrina once again was a similar situation where they were forced to leave their homes, but this time they had the option to come back. And just the parallel between the two was really fascinating. It was an angle on Katrina that no other community had experienced. The other thing that really interested me was this whole idea of second homeland and connection to the land, and how as an immigrant for a long time you feel like a guest in the new country that you moved to. In order to claim that identity (as part of the new country) there are a couple of fundamental attitudes that need to be adjusted. To me, the Vietnamese community didn't decide to do that until Hurricane Katrina happened, and it made them realize they don't really have another home to go back to. Now they can see where they are, and New Orleans is actually their home, and in order to not lose their home again they have to step up and fight.

FI2W: At the very end of the film we see Joseph Cao being sworn in as a U.S. congressman. Obviously this happened after you shot the film. But the film seems like the backstory of how Cao won the election.

Chiang: I feel like it's definitely related. I wouldn't say that it's the only backstory, but I think it was hugely influential in the result of the election. The district that Joseph Cao represents is 60 per cent African-American Democrat (*Editor's note: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated this figure*

as 70 to 80 per cent), and he is a Vietnamese-American Republican. For him to have been elected there was a combination of events. Because the Vietnamese-American community was so energized they really got behind this man, and came out to vote and held voter registration drives. And I think it was also an indication of the good will non-Vietnamese New Orleansians felt toward the Vietnamese-American community. Folks in other parts of New Orleans did really admire what the community had achieved. I'm not saying there was no backlash. There was and there still is. There is this, 'why did those guys come back, and how did they get so far ahead, and why didn't we get so far ahead?' But I felt there was enough good will towards this community that this guy became a representative of the community.

FI2W: What do you hope people who see the film will come away with?

Chiang: I feel that there are not enough images and stories about Asian-Americans, and especially Asian-American immigrants, engaging in civic activities and the democratic process and speaking out politically. I really want this to motivate the immigrant community to see that this is a choice. You don't have to stay quiet and not rock the boat and, sort of, be the model minority. There are ways to self-determine. I really wish that the film can be a motivating force for people to take action, that's what I hope the most for it. From a more passive perspective I would just like to share the story of this community which is very little known, even now.

FI2W: There appears to be an ascendancy of Asian-American politicians around the country. John Liu recently became the first Asian elected to city-wide office in New York City. The governor of Louisiana is Indian-American. So how much of that passivity that you talk about is still a reality?

Chiang: Well the fact is in a lot of these Asian-American communities, and Versailles is one of them, the people that hold the power are still the first-generation immigrants that do have these attitudes of not rocking the boat. They also are not training the next generation to speak up because of the cultural tradition of the kids should be seen but not heard. There's not that encouragement for the youth to engage and take charge and to take leadership roles. Yes, there is definitely a tradition of improvement of Asian-Americans being more politically prominent. But I feel that because of what is traditionally taught and how things are traditionally structured in Asian-American households the next generation will probably have to overcome that in order to speak out and step up. I feel like the second-generation of folks just need to be encouraged. If you're not going to get the encouragement from the traditional community structure ...

FI2W: ... they'll get it from you instead.

Chiang: Maybe. I don't know. At least that's the hope.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, December 2nd, 2009 at 8:17 am and is filed under [Arts and culture](#), [immigration news](#), [interviews](#), [media](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. Both comments and pings are currently closed.

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Film + TV:

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Second Homeland

A new PBS documentary will examine New Orleans' Vietnamese immigrant community, a group that faced a battle over a toxic landfill after Hurricane Katrina.

By Kim Leung

January 27, 2010



Hai Au Huynh (left) and US Congressman-to-be Anh "Joseph" Cao (right) protesting outside of City Hall in New Orleans, 2006. (James Dien Bui)

When people think of New Orleans, they typically don't think of Versailles—the small but resilient Vietnamese neighborhood in East New Orleans. After years of silence and ostracization, it was the category five Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and its aftermath that moved the Vietnamese community in the city to take action. The vibrant immigrant population is now the subject of a new documentary, *A Village Called Versailles*. The film, which is set to air on PBS in May, tells the story of how one community turned the tragedy and political fallout from the hurricane into a catalyst for social change.

Versailles refers to the Versailles Arms Apartment, a public housing project built in 1975 which is home to Vietnamese immigrants. Movie viewers are treated to different perspectives out of Versailles, from elders, youth, religious leadership and the local government. Collectively, they tell a story of how their community was able to rebuild after Katrina, and then successfully defend their home from the threat of a toxic landfill.

"When we hear stories about Asian Americans, they tend to be about class struggles, struggles against poverty, and immigration issues," says S. Leo Chiang, the film's director in an interview. "There have been few stories about an entire Asian American community, stepping up, and coming out from their shell to get engaged—to get their political voices heard."

The fact that New Orleans is home to the densest population of ethnic Vietnamese outside of Vietnam is no fluke in American history. It is American history. In the film, the audience is transported back to Versailles during the 1970s,

near the end of the Vietnam War, as the community was first established by political refugees from South Vietnam. Prior to resettlement in the United States, they had fled their homes once before in 1957 from North to South Vietnam to escape persecution from the communist party. The U.S. government granted the Vietnamese Catholics amnesty and relocated them to New Orleans.

“We are a nation of immigrants,” Chiang says, “This documentary, in many ways, tells a quintessential American story.” But the American immigrant experience has never been a cakewalk due to systemic inequality and poverty.

Phillip Hannan, then the archbishop of New Orleans, spearheaded efforts to help the refugees find jobs and affordable homes when they arrived in New Orleans in the 1970s. But as the Versailles community grew, it became more fractured, with no clear identity or sense of future direction. Many found financial stability in working as farmers, fisherman, and market sellers. But rather than assimilating, the community remained estranged from the rest of New Orleans.

Fissures also emerged within the community itself. The youth and elders struggled to understand one another. “There was mutual disrespect,” said Chiang, who noted that elders were suspicious of their American-born, hip-hop-loving, grandchildren who did not speak Vietnamese. The youth, in turn, felt that their grandparents were out of touch with the rest of American society.

Then Hurricane Katrina—in what the Versailles community commonly describes as a turning point in village relations—devastated New Orleans. At first, residents found tenuous sanctuary in lying low. “We were always quiet, never protested, never raised our voices. We basically stayed below the radar,” said Father Vien Nguyen, who was among the first Vietnamese settlers in Versailles and serves as the community’s Catholic priest.

For the elders in Versailles, this was the third time that they were forced to leave their homes, but this time they had the hope of returning. Six weeks after the flood, the city allowed residents to return to “look and leave.” Many in the Versailles community decided to stay and rebuild. By January 2006, more than half of the Versailles population had returned, while much of New Orleans was still recovering from the shock of the flood.

But after community members took it upon themselves to rebuild their homes and resettle, they were dealt another disaster. This time it was a political one. On February 2006, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin used his emergency power to order Chef Menteur Landfill to open in April, less than two miles away from Versailles. Without a routine environmental impact study and without protective lining on the bottom of the dump, Versailles residents neighboring the trash heap feared they would be poisoned by toxic debris from the hurricane. The community realized if they were not going to fight for themselves, no one else would.

“Why put it in the Vietnamese-American community, where people don’t speak the language?” says Mimi Nguyen, noting that the dump wasn’t constructed next to more affluent areas like Uptown or the French Quarter. “So, you don’t think the people can protest; you don’t think they know the law, or their rights?” Nguyen, initially a FEMA volunteer, emerged as a community organizer for Versailles during their political battle against the landfill.

Versailles residents requested that the city test the landfill for toxic contaminants, and that a synthetic liner be placed on the ground to prevent chemical leaking. After their requests were denied, they moved to fight the landfill every step of the way. The community formed partnerships with environmental groups, religious charities, and leaders from neighboring communities. They waged legal battles through state and federal courts, while publicizing their cause through the media. They demonstrated en masse outside of City Hall. But after trying all the available legal avenues, the city continued to dump in the landfill.

On August 15, 2006, about 200 members from the Versailles community staged a protest at the site of the landfill, blocking waste trucks from entering and exiting. Following the protest, Nagin agreed to close the landfill. The film shows footage from the demonstration, including images of both young and old standing together and chanting in a mix of English and Vietnamese. Viewers are shown a portrait of Versailles post-Katrina—a united community with purpose, and a political voice.

“We have a sense of who we are, and who we could be,” said Father Nguyen, “We feel that we can now control our destiny, and it has not always been that way.”

The film offers a potent commentary on our nation’s identity, and challenges historically misguided views of what it means to be American. This nation not only lends its making and ingenuity to its ordinary Joes and Janes, but also to

its Nguyens, Trans and Vos.

“After so many decades of living here, we are all emotionally connected—fathers, sons, mothers daughters, neighbors, “ said Ngo Minh Khang, a respected community elder. “I consider it my second homeland. I tell my kids that I will live and die here. I am here to stay.”

Kim Leung is a staff writer for Campus Progress. She graduated from the University of Michigan in May.

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Sự thức tỉnh chính trị của người gốc Việt ở New Orleans

Versailles là nơi cộng đồng người Mỹ gốc Việt sống quần tụ từ hàng chục năm nay tại thành phố New Orleans, bang Louisiana của Hoa Kỳ. Sau cơn bão dữ Katrina, cộng đồng này đã vượt qua những thách thức lớn để xây dựng lại cuộc sống, nhưng lại vấp phải một trở ngại từ chính quyền. Nhưng chính khó khăn đó lại trở thành chất xúc tác để người dân gốc Việt ở đây thể hiện tiếng nói chính trị của cộng đồng. Những chuỗi sự kiện đó được đã được thể hiện trong bộ phim tài liệu 'A Village Called Versailles' (Một ngôi làng mang tên Versailles). Trong chuyên mục 'Câu chuyện Việt Nam' kỳ này, mời quý vị theo dõi cuộc trao đổi của Nguyễn Trung với đạo diễn Leo Chiang về ý tưởng cũng như thông điệp của bộ phim.

Nguyễn Trung | Washington DC Thứ Ba, 22 tháng 12 2009



Đạo diễn Leo Chiang nói ông muốn làm phim về Versailles vì 'những giá trị mang tính lịch sử' của nơi này

Bằng những hình ảnh chân thực, '[A Village Called Versailles](#)' thuật lại những câu chuyện về một cộng đồng từng trải qua những ngày khốn khó trong cuộc sống, nhưng đã cùng nhau nỗ lực biến thảm họa thành cơ hội lên tiếng bày tỏ quan điểm trong xã hội. Đạo diễn Hoa Kỳ gốc Đài Loan Leo Chiang cho biết ông cùng đoàn làm phim đã mất hơn hai năm để thực hiện bộ phim tài liệu này. Ông cho hay trước đó ông chưa từng nghe nói đến Versailles cũng như những cư dân gốc Việt tại đó.

Nhưng ngay sau khi trao đổi với một người bạn nghiên cứu về quá trình phục hồi của các nhóm sắc dân khác nhau sau khi cơn bão Katrina tàn phá New Orleans, ông Chiang đã muốn quay một cuốn phim về nơi này.

Ông Chiang nói: 'Sau khi cơn bão Katrina xảy ra, phần lớn các phương tiện truyền thông chính thống chỉ quan tâm đưa tin tới người da trắng và da đen bị ảnh hưởng ra sao ở New Orleans mà không để tâm tới thực tế rằng có khoảng 2 – 3 chục nghìn người Mỹ gốc Việt sống dọc vùng bờ biển Vịnh Mexico. Họ là người tị nạn sau cuộc chiến và giờ lại phải rời bỏ nhà cửa lần thứ hai. Tôi quyết định làm phim vì những giá trị mang tính lịch sử của nó'.

Theo đạo diễn Leo Chiang, 'A Village Called Versailles' đã làm sáng tỏ cách cộng đồng vượt qua những cách biệt giữa các thế hệ để cùng nhau thay đổi, bởi lẽ cho dù đã sống ở Versailles hàng chục năm, thế hệ trước vẫn nhìn lớp con cháu sinh ra ở Hoa Kỳ, ưa chuộng nhạc hip-hop, với vẻ nghi kị xen lẫn lo lắng, là

liệu chúng có nhớ tới nguồn gốc văn hóa Việt hay không.

Trong khi đó, giới trẻ lại cho rằng những người có tuổi nói tiếng Việt chỉ sống trong một thế giới riêng và không còn bắt nhịp được với cuộc sống ở Hoa Kỳ.

Nhưng mọi chuyện đã thay đổi kể từ khi cơn bão Katrina tàn phá New Orleans hồi tháng Tám năm 2005, gây ra tình trạng ngập lụt trên diện rộng, buộc người dân Versailles phải di tản khắp nơi.

Nhiều tuần sau đó họ trở về New Orleans với các kế hoạch tái phát triển đầy tham vọng cho cộng đồng, gồm việc xây dựng một nơi ở cho người lớn tuổi, thiết lập một trung tâm văn hóa và một khu chợ nông sản địa phương. Nhưng đúng lúc họ công bố những đề xuất đó thì lại vấp phải một thách thức khác.

Thị trưởng thành phố New Orleans, ông Ray Nagin, đã ra lệnh thiết lập một khu chứa rác thải độc hại do cơn bão Katrina gây ra nằm cách Versailles khoảng 3 km.

Cộng đồng vốn không quan tâm tới chuyện chính trị [đã đứng lên tổ chức các chiến dịch chống lại quyết định này](#). Đó cũng là lúc, khoảng cách biệt giữa những thế hệ không còn nữa, khi cả người già và các thanh niên trẻ tuổi cùng đứng lên vì một mục tiêu chung.

Hàng trăm người đã tới dự các buổi điếu trần công khai về vấn đề này. Lần đầu tiên, người ta có thể cảm nhận được sự hiện diện của người gốc Việt ở New Orleans. Một cuộc diễu hành ở Tòa Thị Chính đã buộc thị trưởng Nagin phải cam kết sẽ ngưng đổ chất thải cho tới khi nào các cuộc kiểm nghiệm được tiến hành nhằm bảo đảm sự an toàn của bãi rác, nhưng ông đã không giữ lời hứa.



Người dân Versailles mạnh mẽ phản đối kế hoạch của chính quyền

Quá bất mãn, người dân Versailles đã biểu tình đòi đóng cửa bãi rác. Người diễu hành, già lẫn trẻ, cùng đứng bên nhau, hô vang các khẩu hiệu phản đối cả tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh. Họ đã chặn các xe tải chở rác, buộc thị trưởng Nagin phải xuống nước, đóng cửa bãi thải đó.

Đạo diễn Leo Chiang nói rằng bộ phim đã cho thấy người dân Versailles vốn ít lên tiếng đã thực sự được thức tỉnh về mặt chính trị khi bị đẩy vào những tình huống khó khăn. Ông cũng cho rằng việc xuất hiện của dân biểu Joseph Cao ở cuối phim mang một ý nghĩa nhất định.

Ông Chiang cho hay: ‘Có thể chỉ là một phần lý do, nhưng sức mạnh của tiếng nói cộng đồng đã lan tỏa, dẫn tới việc họ bầu lên một dân biểu gốc Việt đầu tiên vào Hạ viện Hoa Kỳ. Thực tế đó là một điều gây bất ngờ đối với cộng đồng người Việt khắp Hoa Kỳ, vì họ luôn nghĩ rằng một dân biểu đầu tiên như vậy có lẽ phải tới từ những nơi như San Jose, California hay Houston ở Texas nơi có nhiều người Việt sinh sống, chứ không phải từ một cộng đồng người Việt nhỏ bé ở New Orleans nơi ít người biết tới’.

Ông Chiang cũng cho rằng giờ người Mỹ gốc Việt ở Versailles đã cảm nhận được bản sắc và niềm tự hào mới của mình sau khi dám đương đầu với thách thức.

Ông nói: ‘Cộng đồng dường như đã chứng minh được rằng họ đã chấp nhận rủi ro khi nói lên tiếng nói của mình, khác xa so với thái độ của họ trước đây. Và chính bởi họ tham gia vào các hoạt động dân sự mang tính dân chủ, mà họ nhận được các kết quả tích cực. Tiếng nói và sự tồn tại của cư dân Versailles được nhiều người biết đến không chỉ ở khu vực, mà còn cả ở toàn bang, và thậm chí là cả quốc gia’.

Đạo diễn gốc Đài Loan nói rằng từng có thời cộng đồng Versailles bị coi là những người Việt thâm lặng, không bày tỏ chính kiến.

Nhưng giờ, họ không còn bị bỏ quên nữa.

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