18. For additional excerpts and analysis of this veteran’s interview, see: Peter N. Kiang, “Pedagogies of PTSD: Circles of Healing with Refugees and Veterans in Asian American Studies,” in Lin Zhan (ed), Asian Americans: Vulnerable Populations, Model Interventions, Clarifying Agendas (Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett, 2003), 197-222.

19. As noted in several of the interview excerpts, the term “local” is a common self-referential term used in productions of varied and cultural backgrounds who come from Hawai’i.


23. Comparable research, for example, might address thousands of children from Asian immigrant families who experience racial stigmatization in school classrooms and cafeterias each day when foods they bring from home are targeted for ridicule. Though not parallel to combat settings in which one looks like and identifies with a racially dehumanized enemy, such situations for Asian American children in U.S. schools are, nonetheless, traumatic, often violent, and require intervention. For specific case studies of school-based racist violence targeting Vietnamese American elementary school and high school children and youth, see: Peter N. Kiang, Nguyen Ngoc Lan, & Richard Lee Sheehan, “Don’t Ignore It! Documenting Racial Harassment in a Fourth-Grade Vietnamese Bilingual Classroom,” Equity and Excellence in Education 28:1 (1995), 31-35 and Peter N. Kiang and Jennifer Kaplan, “Where Do We Stand: Views of Racial Conflict by Vietnamese American High School Students in a Black-and-White Context,” The Urban Review 26:2 (1994), 95-119.

In August of 2003, The Hollywood Reporter featured a collage of celebrity pictures from a live, “open mic” event at Crustacean Restaurant, which the serial labeled the “it” place for “A lister” entertainers to congregate. Among the glitterati, musicians such as Brandy, Missy Elliot, Faith Hill, Chaka Khan, Joe Jackson, Wyuto Jean and Stevie Wonder attended and participated in the performances—an ostensibly common Hollywood-style celebrity gathering. Beyond these entertainers, the pictures featured several Asian American sisters mingling with the stars. The sisters belonged to the An family, owners and operators of this restaurant. Mainstream media that have covered the Crustacean restaurants, beyond reporting about the Euro-Asian fusion cuisine, almost always focus on the multi-generational family of three generations of Vietnamese women who developed this culinary chain. Indeed, all of these represent important aspects of Crustacean.

This essay provides a re-framed and in-depth view of the An family and Crustacean Restaurant as a space in which the elements of entrepreneurialism, ethnicity, family and food intersect on multiple levels. The essay poses the following question: how do Asian Americans negotiate these four dimensions, both in the public eye and the private familial space? In current ethnic marketing and advertising literature, the emphasis is on how mainstream practitioners can target and attract multi-ethnic consumers, including African Americans, Asian Americans and Chicano/Latinos. These works highlight the importance of introducing and promoting mainstream products to emerging ethnic groups.

In contrast, this essay gives insight into the markedly differ-

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ent process of how ethnic entrepreneurs market “ethnicity” to the mainstream. The An family has contracted a public relations professional, which would ostensibly indicate a highly manufactured public image of the family’s business. The public relations process, in actuality, entailed many intricacies about presenting the family’s identity to the mainstream. Accordingly, I contend that the process of image creation and representation in the An family reflects an intricate negotiation of elements including lived experiences, Orientalist nostalgia and public relations entrepreneurialism. On the one hand, the An family business has formulated strategically planned narratives for their culinary audiences, on the other hand, their process involves organic interpersonal exchanges.

These interpersonal interactions include gendered and generational issues that underlie the flamboyant Hollywood images and the more sensationalized media depictions of the An family’s restaurant business. The An family business furnished a space that both mirrored and facilitated these gendered and cross-generational relationships, within an overall entrepreneurial family structure. These culinary entrepreneurial spaces, both figuratively and literally, encouraged fluid intergenerational and gendered discussions among the An family.

The essay utilizes print and electronic media representations and public relations literature about the An family conglomerate, as well as interviews with those involved in the business.

From Royalty to Refugees to Restauranteurs: Formations of the An Family Business

The creation of the An family enterprise both reflects and diverges from the major refugee migrations of Vietnamese Americans since 1975. Helene and Danny An, along with their children, fled to the U.S. in 1975. This “first wave” of refugee migration from Vietnam often have elite backgrounds. The An family’s social and financial status was consistent with this pattern. Differing from the majority of post-1975 Vietnamese American refugee experiences, the An family orientation and business originated in transnational histories and ongoing practices from the early 20th century onwards.

The Vietnamese kitchen, through the lived experiences of Helene An, currently the “matriarch” of the An family conglomerate and its restaurant’s Executive Chef, symbolizes one transnational space. An, the great-granddaughter of the Grand Advi-
Asian fusion cuisine. It offered foods from Helene’s childhood to contemporary creations that merged European and Asian gastronomic influences. Unlike most Vietnamese American restaurants, Crustacean catered to a higher-end and mainstream clientele. 1997 proved a major turning point for the An family business when they launched their flagship establishment, Crustacean Beverly Hills. They hired a public relations firm, Elaine Sense Public Relations, to conduct coordinated efforts toward bringing attention to their multi-million dollar investment.

How did they develop this public image and develop these entrepreneurial practices? What are the complexities of interactions between fame, family, fortune and fusion food?

Ethnicity and Entrepreneurialism: Marketing Culinary Delights

The An family managed to negotiate lived experiences, Orientalist nostalgia and public relations expertise toward creating and representing a highly marketable public image. These various dimensions of the marketing campaign signify both its organic and planned nature, which in turn demonstrate the intricacies of representing personal histories and culinary practices toward generating a profitable business.

The initial formation involved intertwining the culinary arts with personal and family narratives. At first, the process of converting Diana An’s deli into Thanh Long restaurant stemmed from Helene’s personal history and passion for cooking, which would actually provide the foundation to catapult the An family business toward higher visibility. For instance, Helene would share her childhood experiences with her patrons of working with the Euro-Asian mix of chefs. Such stories and memories contributed to the atmosphere of eating innovative dishes and the nostalgia of her life in colonial Vietnam.

The An family’s refugee exodus (from riches to rags) also added appeal to their budding culinary enterprise. This lack of material possessions as poor refugees further underscored the value of the recipes stored in Helene’s memories, as they made her restaurant successful. Moreover, being run by three generations of women, the restaurant’s story grew increasingly interesting, since Vietnamese families typically consider the man to be the household head. Thus, the gendered aspects of this story cultivated additional interest in the pair of restaurants. The An family managed to eventually weave all of these parts, which included colonial nostalgia, the refugee exodus and the gendered entrepreneurialism, into a virtual brand.

In 1996, as the An family began to discuss plans for opening a Crustacean in Beverly Hills, they approached Elaine Sense for public relations consultation. The importance of this move lay in that the An family narrative was partially woven by a non-Vietnamese for public consumption. Elaine seized upon the thought of branding the forthcoming Crustacean Beverly Hills with the genre of French colonial Vietnam, which was one that represented a “glamorous highpoint” of Vietnamese cultural beauty and allure, while featuring the country’s elite who sported their most “decadent” behavior under colonial rule. This led to the formation of a Vietnamese-French colonial culture. This nostalgic notion added a more multi-generational and historical branding to the An family’s existing motif of conveying their refugee experiences as human-interest marketing. To add American flair, the An family and Elaine crafted a family “fairy-tale” of refugees who supported one another in order to rebuild their lives in America.

Since colonial legacies were deeply embedded in the foundational premise of the restaurant, this raises tensions between two forces: those that reinvigorate, or even glamorize, the oppressive colonial French period in Vietnam and the personal aspects of representing a portion of one’s own life history. Given Helene’s background that stemmed from her family’s elite status during and after the colonial period, Crustacean exhibited the latter, without referencing the former. Entrepreneurial objectives eventually guided the momentum of this inherent tension, while the family privileged a respect for personal life histories over a critique of colonialism. After all, it is a business.

The story of Crustacean also weaves the influences of Vietnamese-American experiences because Elizabeth grew up in both Vietnam and America. The restaurant integrated Elizabeth’s imaginations of how Helene lived during that colonial period. Thus, history, memory and imagination formed the backbone of Crustacean’s theme. For instance, the restaurant contains both antiques and creations that reflect the colonial period, such as the prevalence of warm wood architecture and ceiling fans. The American-style service and hospitality, as well as attractive menu descriptions and different cultural components to the restaurant. Instead of attempting to extricate the purportedly quintessential “French,” “Vietnamese,” or “American” facets from one another,
An initial observation of the restaurant's physical presence and its association with historical figures and events led to the development of a marketing strategy that included the creation of themed dining experiences, such as "Cultural Traditions Night," which showcased various aspects of Chinese-American culture through food, music, and dance. The marketing team also utilized social media platforms to engage with customers and promote the restaurant's unique offerings. This approach not only attracted new patrons but also helped in retaining existing customers by providing them with a memorable dining experience.

The restaurant's success in attracting a diverse clientele was further enhanced by its commitment to quality and authenticity. The chef and his team were dedicated to preserving traditional Chinese-American recipes while also incorporating modern culinary techniques. This balance between tradition and innovation was well-received by diners, who appreciated the opportunity to enjoy a blend of familiar and新颖 offerings.

In conclusion, the restaurant's strategic approach to marketing, including the creation of themed dining experiences and a focus on quality and authenticity, played a significant role in its success. By effectively leveraging these strategies, the restaurant was able to attract a broad range of customers and establish itself as a leader in the culinary scene.
with her family's chefs. As a result, she erected a small metal kitchen, accessible only to family members, which concealed the methods of the restaurant's food preparation. Slots from within the metallic kitchen opened for waiters to pick up the finished dishes. Helene thus exercised (and exercised) her fears through this kitchen-within-a-kitchen.

To lay official claim to these recipes, the An family immediately obtained a trademark for them, as well as an implementation strategy to educate the public about this issue and maximizing its revenue-generating potential. In that same year, Elaine managed to draw the attention of the Wall Street Journal by convincing them to take seriously the stakes in "culinary espionage." This gave the An family business a level of legitimacy in their efforts to guard their recipes, while serving as a useful marketing tool for uniquely branding their conglomerate via the "Secret Kitchen."" The idea of the "Secret Kitchen" included the inextricable intersection of family, capitalism and knowledge as intertwined issues. This secrecy mirrored the need to protect family history from external co-optation, as well as the concerns over intellectual property and the prospects of marketing such a unique existing practice. This intricate intertwining process, I argue, relied on the organic and manufactured processes of image generation and representation, lived family experiences, Orientalist nostalgia and skilled marketing entrepreneurship. To dismiss the "Secret Kitchen" as a mere "marketing schtick" masks the complex realities of: (1) personal and colonial historical narratives, (2) questions of knowledge production and protectionism, and (3) capitalist practices that encompass much more than revenue generation.

More than the "The Mother of Fusion Cuisine": Gender and Generations amidst Culinary Entrepreneurialism

Dimensions of gender and generational issues played major roles in shaping the business' development. For example, the eldest of the three generations, Diana, endured her husband's "womanizing" ways as she spent much of her life entertaining her husband's guests at their exquisite home in Vietnam. Amidst her self-described "rebellion" of traveling the world, she created opportunities to engage in transnational movements by obtaining a visa to visit America (via ownership of the San Francisco deli) and also convinced her husband to fund the food establish-

ment's purchase. I contend that Diana went beyond a "rebellion" against the accepted male promiscuity in Vietnam. Rather than passively succumbing to this patriarchal social structure, she carved a transnational entrepreneurial space. Moreover, her class advantages and extensive entertaining experiences provided her with a background in the food services and hospitality industries.

Not everyone performs as well. After resettling in the United States, Danny had difficulty adapting with few possessions and downward social mobility, while Helene made the adjustment more easily. Nazli Kibria suggests that male Vietnamese American refugees underwent a loss of social status in their migration to the U.S. Where many of these men had more wealth and social standing in Vietnam, they felt a sense of alienation and powerlessness after migration. In turn, they often suffered from malaise and depression that inhibited their ability to function efficaciously as traditional male breadwinners. Women suffered relatively less because they had come to America with lower socioeconomic hierarchical positions. Like Danny, Diana's husband could not overcome the adversities associated with the family's new life, so he also became depressed. Thus, two generations of An family men lost much of their socioeconomic privilege.

In contrast, Diana and Helene strengthened their resolve and parlayed their skills and experiences in cooking, as well as hospitality, to support the rest of the family. Although Helene initially worked in accounting and education after arriving in the U.S., she eventually shifted toward working with Diana to turn their San Francisco deli into Thanh Long restaurant. According to Helene:

They [Diana and Helene's husbands] were very arrogant and thought to be in the service business was not prestigious enough. My father went into depression and it was the women who held the family together. When everything changed, they had the strength to accept things the way they were and build them from there. The men could never get over the loss of power and status.

Diana and Helene collaborated in their efforts toward laying the economic and social foundations of the family since arriving in the U.S. More so, they contributed in these ways as their husbands lent only minor support or even criticism.

In the case of the youngest generation of Ans in the U.S.,
Elizabeth married and divorced twice. In fact, she stated:

No one [in my family] had ever divorced and now I'd done it twice. I didn't want to move back to San Francisco and have to hear 'I told you so,' so I thought, where can I go that I won't have to deal with all the aunts and uncles and questions from Grandfather? I decided to move to LA.

The concluded marriage led her to begin plans to construct Crustacean Beverly Hills, which in part functioned as a means of avoiding intrusive questions and quick judgments about her situation. As a Vietnamese American divorced female, questions would likely have arisen about the viability of her finding an appropriate husband who could help to care for her children after becoming a divorcée. These inquiries usually presuppose the traditional idea of the male breadwinner and female dependence on him. Instead, she forged additional independence as a young refugee woman through this business venture. In fact, although she did not want to endure gendered marital commentaries from her relatives, she did attribute acquiring a strong business sense from her grandfather, who was quite affluent in Vietnam.

Beyond their financial success, the three generations of An women created change in some of the gender relationships of their lives. Through their financial success, Diana, Helene and Elizabeth actually managed to alter the dynamics of their family structure toward a much more matriarchal one. Although the case for the two aforementioned husbands conforms to Kibria's notions, the An family example challenges Kibria's other major gender-related findings. She states that, even though the financial income disparity between Vietnamese American men and women shrunk, the latter remained intent on preserving traditional family systems and structure. Even in the cases where the women earned more than the men, they still relinquished their opportunities to subvert this male-dominant family system. In contrast, however, the An women grew to occupy the dominant breadwinning, public and private family positions. For example, these women handle matters from cooking to public relations and accounting. They took charge of the traditionally "male" role in the case of their family, even as the males did not always support these women's endeavors. Although probably more the exception than the norm for Vietnamese American gender relationships, the An family provides an intriguing example of how these male-female relationships changed on a cross-generational basis.

As the experiences of the An women eventually interwove into their enterprise, their condition as penniless refugees greatly facilitated this entrepreneurial development. They could only afford a one-bedroom dwelling when they first arrived. Individual privacy was less the norm and a rare luxury, given the cramped living space. The lack of space prompted them to share and compromise, even though making ends meet through work and school consumed much time. Even though each family member held busy schedules, the dining table provided them a consistent opportunity to exchange ideas and passions. Thus, the spatial and gastronomic aspects of their lives actually fostered these cross-generational family interactions.

The An women intertwined these gendered and generational relationships into an entrepreneurial family structure that helped the family to cohere. Through sharing and lively discussions, they eventually realized that each family member possessed specific skills that they could coordinate and parlay into a joint project. More than an informal patchwork of skills, the family understood the need to systematically organize these specialties and passions into a profitable collaboration. For instance, with Diana's culinary skills, Elizabeth's artistic and public relations savvy and Hannah's financial meticulousness, the family developed this systematic family enterprise. The tying together of specialties identified roles based on strengths and passions, which in turn encouraged collaboration. The entrepreneurial structuring of the family actually helped to bridge generations, and in the case of the An's, reflects a very gendered process. Even the family inheritance has some relationship to this financial framework, as Helene would pass on her recipes and culinary practices rather than money to her children. Stated another way, she would endow her children with the keys to her specialty, not just money. Specialization, as well as cross-generational and gendered interactions, served as the catalyst for these family business practices and structures.

Conclusion

The An family represents a culinary entrepreneurial family structure that challenges an overemphasis on generational gaps among Vietnamese American refugees, while highlighting the marketing of family interactions. On the contrary, the An family demonstrates that their organically generated business bureaucracy assisted with building bridges across generations. By no means
does the structure enforce rigid relationships, but instead features quite dynamic and changing facets that can happen informally (such as at the family meal table) or formally (such as with the formal corporate positions held by the An family members).

With the more structured dimensions of their conglomerate, the An family successfully market their family stories and systematized this with a public relations specialist. Their business began with private, individual passions for cooking and hospitality, as well as cross-border travels and refugee expediencies, while it eventually developed into designed public images and strategic marketing, both organic and manufactured. The An family presents a unique model for strengthening and clarifying family bonds, while transforming family relationships and cultural capital into entrepreneurial endeavors. Capitalist and bureaucratized practices both stemmed from, as well as harnessed, generational bridge-building and gendered positionings for the An family.

Notes

1. I wish to thank the An family and Elaine Sense for sharing their stories with me toward writing this piece.


3. The An family has trademarked the “Secret Kitchen” as a central part of their business.


9. I define transnationalism as actions and experiences that occur among migrants politically, economically and socially linked to one or more nations. These ties need not always exist with multiple physical movements by those migrants across national boundaries, but can take place through actions such as political lobbying or economic remittances. Moreover, transnationalism need not privilege one nation as a center, since it challenges the concepts of “home” and “host” countries as statically-defined notions.


12. “Beyond and Before Boat People.”

14. Rather than engaging in an in-depth and critical inquiry into these larger issues of French colonialism and colonial representations of Vietnam, the essay instead grapples directly with how this Asian American family and conglomeration engage these issues and apply them toward their entrepreneurial goals. Interview with Elaine Sense, Friday, April 23, 2004, Crustacean Restaurant, Beverly Hills, California.

15. Ibid.

16. Interview with Elizabeth An.


17. Through her examinations of two generations of Japanese Americans, Yanagisako concluded that her subjects employed different terms to describe common past events and periods. In other words, their histories were not static, but "transformed" based on the different conceptions of a common past. Sylvia Janine Yanagisako, Transforming the Past: Tradition and Kinship Among Japanese Americans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1985.


20. Interview with Elaine Sense.


25. Kibria, Family Tightrope, ch. 5.


27. Kibria, Family Tightrope, ch. 5.

28. Interview with Elizabeth An.

29. Kibria discusses the idea of "patchworking," in chapter four of her book. She characterizes this process as the bringing together of disparate and uneven resources.

30. Interview with Elizabeth An. Also, see An Family Press Kit.