

on the STREET

INTERVIEW WITH DETECTIVE TRANG TO

Sacramento Sheriff's Department Gang Unit

by Deputy Nancy Henrickson

I was born in Viet Nam and came to the United States in 1970. I speak Vietnamese fluently and read and write the language also. Before becoming a Sheriff's Deputy I attended high school in San Francisco and graduated from Sacramento State University. Because of my bilingual skills I've had the opportunity to work with many divisions within the Sheriff's Department, from Auto Theft to Robbery and Special Investigations.

Roots of the Asian gangs here in Sacramento go back to the early 1980's. Vietnamese Chinese who were actually ethnic Chinese living in the Hanoi area and farther north emigrated, many very poor and most fleeing the Communists who had taken over the country in 1975. Some of these ethnic Chinese were already in gangs in Viet Nam — opportunists seeking fertile ground for their criminal activities. Because of our climate and judicial system, California was one of their main targets. In addition, they

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Sacramento Nip Boys posing with some of their weapons.



wanted to be with their own people, and Los Angeles had the largest population of Vietnamese Chinese in this country.

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Presently in Sacramento we have no “organized” Asian crime. Most of the Asian street gangs are informal groups of youth, both male and female, between the ages of about fourteen to nineteen. But we are unsure about the future of these street gangs. We don’t know if the older gang members will form more cohesive and sophisticated gangs or whether they will migrate south to become affiliated with the established gangs already in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas.

The biggest targets of these youth gangs are money and jewelry. They want to spend the money on themselves, buying flashy clothes and new cars. The gangs usually strike within the Vietnamese community. They know our judicial system and know that their people will not report crimes because of fear of retaliation. Let me emphasize

this: these gangs are ruthless and cruel and they will do anything to get money from their victims. They don’t care if their victims are elderly, pregnant or very young children.

Typically, the gangs commit residential burglaries and extortions. Gang members watch their victims for up to two weeks to find out their habits and where their valuables are hidden. They get in the victim’s house by use of a decoy, often a young female gang member who knocks on the front door. When the victim opens the door the rest of the gang bursts in and, at gunpoint, demands everyone in the house to get on the floor. The victims are tied with duct tape, telephone cords, electrical wire — whatever is handy. Gang members then begin their threatening tactics, often choosing the most vulnerable women or young children. They have put automatic weapons up to the heads of small children, sometimes holding them upside down by a leg, and threatened to kill them in front of the parents. They have held young children under hot water and have burned them with cigarettes. There have been no deaths here in Sacramento, but one victim was shot. Another had boiling water poured on her stomach and back, and there have been many cases of pistol-whipping and shots fired. Faced with these brutal tactics, most victims give up all their valuables.

We are not talking about small sums of money. These residential burglaries often involve amounts of cash between \$5,000 and \$35,000. Vietnamese have a traditional distrust of banking systems and usually keep all their money at home. Most are businessmen and often carry large sums around with them. Many Asians are avid gamblers. But those on welfare can’t keep their winnings in the bank, or welfare will find out about it. There are quite a few gambling houses here in Sacramento that are very popular with Asians, and some make a great deal of money. These situations account for many Vietnamese having a great deal of cash at home.

Asian gang members often wear black, especially leather jackets. They don’t wear colors like other ethnic gangs, but they do like trendy clothes. They also like tattoos, generally of aggressive animals such as tigers, dragons and snakes. Gang members think these tattoos are intimidating because most Vietnamese people will not tattoo themselves. There are at least two rival gangs in Sacramento — the Nip Boys and the Oriental Boys — and they have been involved in drive-by shootings. None of the Asian street gangs here claim territories like the black and Hispanic gangs.

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Previously, members would readily admit their gang affiliations. Now they are trying to be more covert and draw less attention to themselves. They are not involved in drug-running as a major activity, at least here in Sacramento. They have not affiliated with any other of the ethnic gangs so far. They are mostly high school kids between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, some born in southeast Asia, some born here. Most of their families are decent, hard-working people trying to adjust to a new lifestyle. Some of their parents work too hard and

spend too much time in their businesses and don't provide proper supervision for their kids.

Currently we are trying to establish rapport and increase awareness within the Asian community by sponsoring information meetings. Many of these people are insulated from the white

community by a variety of cultural factors and they are not willing to become involved in testifying against the gangs and the accompanying violence. It is not that these people distrust the police or anyone who wears a uniform. It is only that they are truly afraid of retaliation and of getting killed.

I think we are all in for a rude awakening. The Asian gangs are more dangerous than other gangs because of their potential for violence. Many of the members grew up in a society torn by violence. It is usual behavior for them. The gangs know how to prey on their own people very effectively and when Hong Kong is taken over by China in 1997 I think we will see an enormous influx of Triads here in California. ★

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