

Asian immigrants outpacing Hispanics in California

By Stephen Magagnini and Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

The face of new Californians – once predominantly Latino – is increasingly Asian American, census data show.

A seismic shift in immigration has occurred in California over the last decade, with Asia replacing Latin America as the primary source of the state's immigrants.

"This is a pretty astounding change over a short period of time," said Hans Johnson, co-director of the Public Policy Institute of California, citing census data.

"For the first time in decades, the number of Asians coming to California exceeded the flow from Latin America, and it exceeds that flow by a lot – 2 1/2 times greater."

To have Latino immigrants eclipsed by those from Asia over the past five to 10 years "could represent the end of an era," Johnson said.

In 2001, 42 percent of immigrants coming to California were from Latin America, primarily Mexico, while 37 percent were from Asia. In 2011, 57 percent of new immigrants were from Asia, and just 22 percent were from Latin America, census data show.

California's new faces were on display at a swearing-in ceremony at the Sacramento Convention Center on Wednesday. Of the 774 area residents who took the oath of citizenship, about 450 were born in Asia, compared with roughly 160 who were born in Latin America, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

They included 119 people from Mexico, 100 from India, 94 from

the Philippines, 63 from Vietnam, 35 from Ukraine, 33 from the People's Republic of China and 29 from Laos.

Among those celebrating their newly minted citizenship was Melody Malliet, who dressed in a crisp white suit to take the pledge of allegiance. She came here from the Philippines four years ago to marry an American citizen and is now a nursing assistant in Calaveras County. "It feels so good to be a U.S. citizen," Malliet said with a huge smile. "I'm part of the greatest country in the world."

Filipinos – the largest Asian ethnic group in Sacramento – often come here to fill jobs in health care.

The changing needs of California's economy since the start of the recession explain much of the shift from Latin America to Asia. "Part of what we're seeing is the changing face of California's labor market, which has been increasingly demanding more highly educated workers," Johnson said.

Unemployment has gone up at all levels, "but it's gone up the most for people with high school degrees or less," Johnson said. "Immigrants from Asia, particularly India, tend to be much more highly educated, much more likely to have earned a bachelor's degree."

While 74 percent of recent arrivals from India have at least bachelor's degrees, 59 percent of Mexican immigrants have less than a high school degree, and there are now fewer jobs for less-educated immigrants, Johnson said.

The census doesn't ask for a person's immigration status, but the declining Latino numbers reflect a drop in undocumented immigrants, Johnson said. A substantial number of newcomers are sponsored by California businesses that help skilled immigrants obtain H-1B visas and other types of work authorization, he said.

"High-tech firms are arguing in Washington, D.C., that the

number of work visas needs to be increased because they're having a hard time finding people trained in computer sciences, and those jobs have often gone to Asian immigrants," he said.

The number of foreign students coming to California also has risen. For example, there are now more than 1,500 students and scholars from China and Taiwan at UC Davis.

Asian Resources, which helps immigrants find jobs, has seen a large influx of immigrants from Mongolia, China, Laos and India, said executive director Stephanie Nguyen.

They include doctors, architects and professors seeking a better life, added placement counselor Sheng Lo. "Over the last three years, I've seen a lot of refugees from Iraq and Iran who came here as asylees or refugees seeking political or religious freedom," Lo said. "And we had a couple from India – a teacher and pharmacist – who came looking for a better life for their kids. They learned they'd have to be retrained here."

Overall, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the number of new immigrants coming to California went up slightly between 2010 and 2011, from 257,359 to 277,304. The Sacramento area also saw a slight boost in legal immigrants, from 8,047 to 9,469, federal immigration officials said.

But the number of new immigrants coming to California from Latin America annually has plummeted 65 percent since 2001, going from roughly 147,000 to 60,000 in 2011, Johnson said.

The drop began in earnest around 2007, when California's economy began to falter ahead of the lengthy recession. Since 2006, the number of Latin American immigrants arriving each year in California has dropped by about 70,000.

Meanwhile, the number of Asian immigrants coming to California has grown, particularly from China and Taiwan. In 2001, about

129,000 immigrants came to California from Asia; by 2011, that number had risen to 160,000.

Immigrants coming each year from China and Taiwan grew 45 percent over the last decade, going from 25,000 to about 38,000. The biggest jump occurred from 2010 to 2011, when 10,000 more Chinese came to California than during the previous year.

The number of Koreans coming here each year has also grown sharply, going from about 13,000 in 2001 to 17,000 in 2011.

At Wednesday's citizenship ceremony, hundreds of new immigrants waited in line for Social Security numbers.

Huy Tran, an 18-year-old senior at Florin High who arrived from Hue, Vietnam, in 2006, said he wants to help people with asthma, something he's struggled with.

Ye Her, a Hmong refugee from Sacramento accompanied by her daughter May Saechao, 24, proudly displayed her citizenship certificate. "I've never felt this happy in my life before," she said.