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Xin Chao

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Houston is a city filled with diversity and murals that reflect it. The Xin Chao Mural is one example of a mural that reflects Houston's diversity. The Xin Chao is an extremely diverse artwork that connects Vietnamese culture, symbols, and their history in America into a congruent style that gives a superb message that shows their resilience and strength as a community.

The Xin Chao Mural is on the outside of a Vietnamese restaurant called Thein An Sandwiches, according to Google Maps. This context is extremely important to the mural, as Xin Chao itself means “Hello” in Vietnamese. This isn’t just a random welcome; this is a literal message to anyone who knows Vietnamese, which is the main audience that is walking by. This mural represents the Vietnamese community as a whole, symbolizing its remarkable growth and resilience in Houston since 1975, when the community consisted of only about 100 people and has since expanded to approximately 152,000. [3]. Houston has one of the largest Vietnamese populations in all of America, and it's mostly focused on Midtown, specifically Bellaire. Xin Chao itself is built in Midtown, the epicenter of the Vietnamese community, where it has thrived as a sightseeing spot as well as a remembrance of their community’s resilience to discrimination. The Vietnamese have a long history of discrimination in the Houston and Coastal area of Texas. From the 1980's till 2010’s the KKK has heavily targeted the Vietnamese, mostly with threats against their children and their businesses; in 2018, they went to court and sued the group [1]. Since then, the local community has become more expressive, including with the painting of the

Xin Chao Mural that is there to welcome all people, not just Vietnamese, into the restaurant and the general surrounding area, contrasting the hateful message the KKK was spreading.

The mural itself is mesmerizing and has so many different hidden meanings inside of it. The Mural's flowers look just like some normal branch flowers, but in Southern Vietnamese culture, these Hoa Mai flowers are significant and have several meanings. These flowers bloom in harsh and dangerous environments which contributes to their cultural association with resilience [5]. They also bloom in spring, particularly during the Lunar New Year. This means, they don't just mean Resilience, but also Rebirth or New beginnings [5]. This resonates with the background context of the Vietnamese community; they had to live through the fear of the KKK, and then they were able to restart their community's life afterwards, symbolizing the main and secondary meanings of the flower [1]. The other way it could connect to the second meaning of the flower could be by the fact that the Vietnamese immigrants were looking for a new start, but since the artist has made no formal statement on what the mural means, it is mostly up to speculation. The tiny detail of the bird is also meaningful, and it doesn't connect to the flower but rather the branch. Mai branches are often depicted alongside birds in Vietnamese art, a traditional motif that can be seen in the mural. The combination of mai blossoms and birds has historical and cultural significance within Vietnamese decorative art. [5]. These are there to resonate with the earlier meaning of rebirth or the changing of the season, resonating with spring and the new year. The boat, on the other hand, is where we have to enter the guessing game on its meaning. There are suggestions and ideas that it could represent Houston, as it has buildings in the back and it's a port city after all, or some say it represents the Vietnamese traveling from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975 by boat to the West Coast of the USA [2]. If it is about

the Vietnamese traveling to America, I could see it in the bigger picture representing them finding their new home in America.

Now, who made this painting and what is their affiliation with the Vietnamese community in Houston? Her name is Caroline Truong; she is a member of the Vietnamese community herself and, in fact, also lives in Houston. This gives her an actual perspective on the community and how they feel about certain events through the past decades. This also isn't her only work; in fact, she has made dozens of different artworks, many also about the Vietnamese community. One such artwork is on the side of Roostar Vietnamese Grill; another is for Poke Burri but differs as it resides inside. She has others that are smaller, but the two listed and Xin Chao are the largest that center the Vietnamese community. In her other work, she is quite colorful and uses a large variety of Blues, Greens, and Yellows. Most of these works are for kids' interactive places as well as general public spaces where she paints about virtues like kindness and being unique. This is interesting because, although Xin Chao contains a variety of distinct colors, the colors themselves are relatively natural and correspond to the objects they represent, such as the flowers, sea, and branches, rather than appearing to be arbitrarily chosen by the artist. Caroline Truong, although not the most popular artist, does have an Instagram where she does have comments that are public. These comments are overwhelmingly positive, with one commenter, kim_whimsy, saying, "Amazing! I can't wait to show my mom!!!" while many of the other commenters expressed similar enthusiasm and appreciation for the mural. That trend follows amongst her other works where she doesn't get much feedback, but the feedback she does get is positive and congratulating her for her work. I would also like to note that many of her avid followers are Vietnamese, making their connection to her artwork more personal. This

gives the Xin Chao mural an even deeper meaning, as members of the Vietnamese community appear to view the artwork as a positive representation and symbol of their culture.

The artwork is also interesting when it comes to typography and when you analyze the way it makes you look and feel about it. When you first look at it, most likely from the side, you immediately spot the branch peaking into Vietnamese culture, then leading to their new home in Houston, Texas. Then there is the banner that just adds to the welcoming message; you can just think of any sweet welcoming movie, and it has that modern family banner style that this mural also portrays. Then, although the colors are natural, they are warm and give off the beauty of spring. The warm atmosphere of the artwork helps with the welcoming feelings and hopeful setting. Then the bird being near the signature gives a sweet resting point for the piece. Although the symbolism behind the artwork is important, the layout of the work is just as crucial, and it gives a nice, calm, and balanced feeling.

I actually personally deeply connect with the Vietnamese community, as my dad's best friend, who I consider an uncle, is Vietnamese and is deep in his roots and loves to talk about them and their historical significance and history. I also have many friends who are a part of the group, as a whole as my Middle School had a large Asian population. My dad even lived in Vietnam and Japan for 4 years each respectively. Because of all these environmental connections I have with the community, this artwork has real value to me because now I can view artwork that plays out the culture my uncle KJ talks about so often. It gives me a sense of warmth to notice his culture be so appreciated and divulged in these beautiful pieces of works that I could only wish to try and create.



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