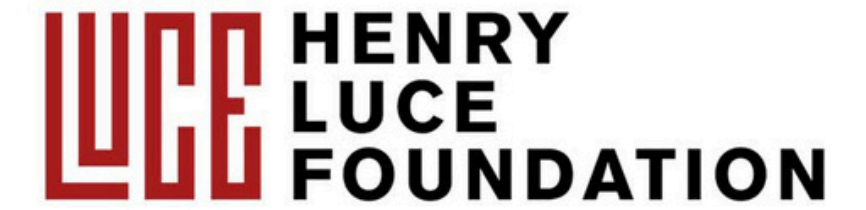




# Merced Speaks: Language Diversity Past and Present



Business Advertisements on Cosmopolitan Cafe Sign, 1890s

Merced's identity has been profoundly shaped by the diversity of languages spoken throughout its history. The voices of Merced's many communities, both past and present, have left an indelible mark on the city's landscape, reflecting a rich cultural and linguistic heritage. "Merced Speaks: Language Diversity Past and Present" explores this legacy through the lens of the Linguistic Landscape, a concept that examines how language is visually represented in public spaces—on street signs, storefronts, billboards, and more.

This exhibition goes beyond mere words; it invites you to reflect on the deeper meanings that these languages carry. Each language visible in Merced's public spaces is a testament to the city's evolving cultural, political, and social dynamics. Whether it's the traces of languages from early settlers, or the vibrant multilingualism seen today, "Merced Speaks" tells the story of how language connects communities and shapes our shared heritage.

Through a collection of historical photographs, maps, and present-day visual documentation, we highlight the unique contributions of Merced's diverse populations. Join us as we celebrate the power of language in creating connections across time and space, offering a profound insight into the multilingual reality that continues to define Merced today.



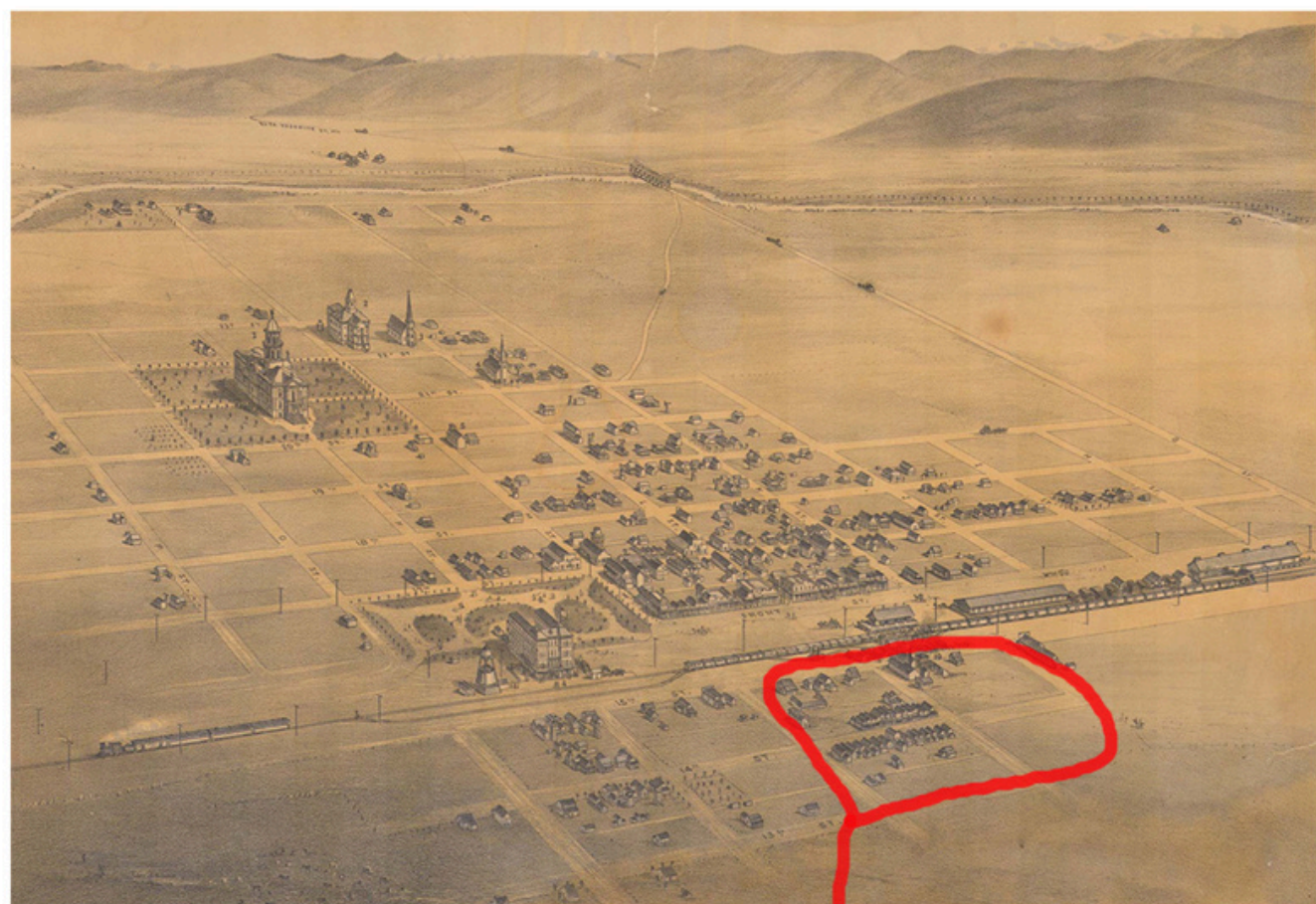
Bilingual Sign on a Laotian Restaurant in Merced, 2024

**Project Leads:** Drs. Yiran Xu and Jiajun Liang,  
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University of California, Merced  
**Funding Source:** Henry Luce Foundation

Check out a collection of photos in  
this interactive Google map







Merced's Chinatown, once located on 14th Street between K and M Streets, emerged as a vibrant community due to the settlement of Chinese railroad workers. By 1880, 108 Chinese residents lived in Chinatown out of Merced's population of 1,523, and the area remained a self-contained community until its demise in the 1950s, largely due to the construction of Highway 99.

The photo lower center shows a building on the 400 block of 14th Street, which housed the Nanking Restaurant on the first floor and the Hua-Sheng Chamber of Commerce on the second. A banner with 開幕慶典, or "Grand Opening Celebration," is displayed, alongside the American and Chinese national flags. The photo on the lower right shows the same building 20 some years later, which housed Tea Garden Restaurant on the first floor and Suey Sing Chamber of Labor and Commerce on the second floor.

## 開幕慶典 Grand Opening Celebration



Merced's Chinatown before 1945



Merced's Chinatown replaced by Highway 99, 1963



Tea Garden Restaurant and Suey Sing Chamber of Labor and Commerce, circa 1950s

Nanking Cafe and Hua-Sheng Chamber of Commerce, circa 1930



# Evidence of Early Chinese Economic Influence in Merced

When the City of Merced was created in 1872, so was Merced's Chinatown. During the construction of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, hundreds of Chinese immigrants were recruited to grade and lay tracks in the vicinity of Merced, leading to their settlement in Merced. Chinatown was a predominantly bachelor society. Most of the Chinese residents were married men who had left their wives back home to care for their parents and children. They sent most of their earnings home to support their families; therefore, the Chinese residents were valuable customers to local banks like the Commercial Bank in Merced (pictured here).

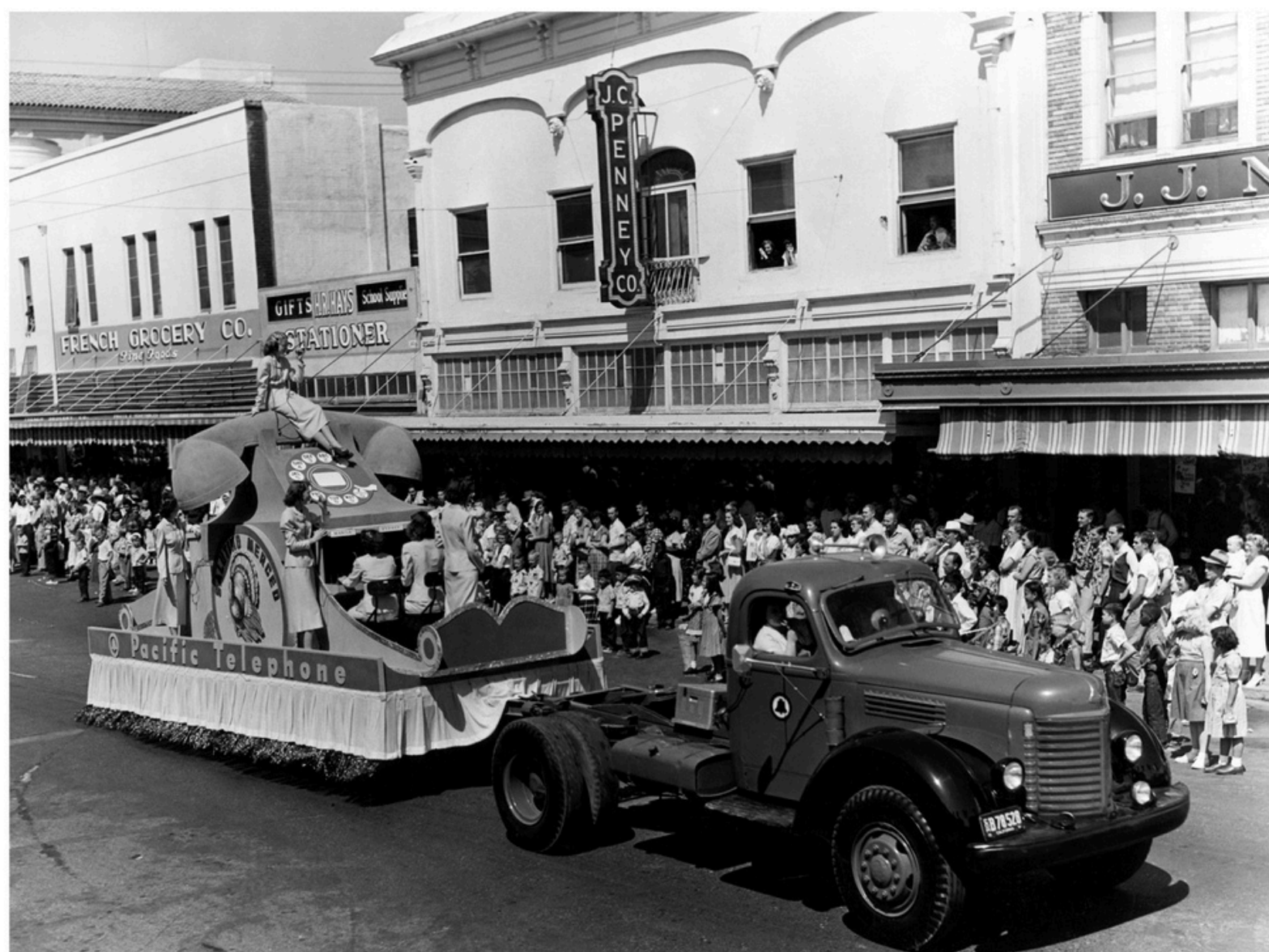


Dated circa 1908, the photograph on the left shows the Commercial Bank on Main and Canal Streets in Merced. A sign in the lower left window (marked by the red arrow) contains partially obscured Chinese characters, including words such as 本行 ("this branch") and 香港 ("Hong Kong") as seen in the closeup above. This likely indicates the bank's involvement in international currency exchange, catering to local Chinese immigrants.



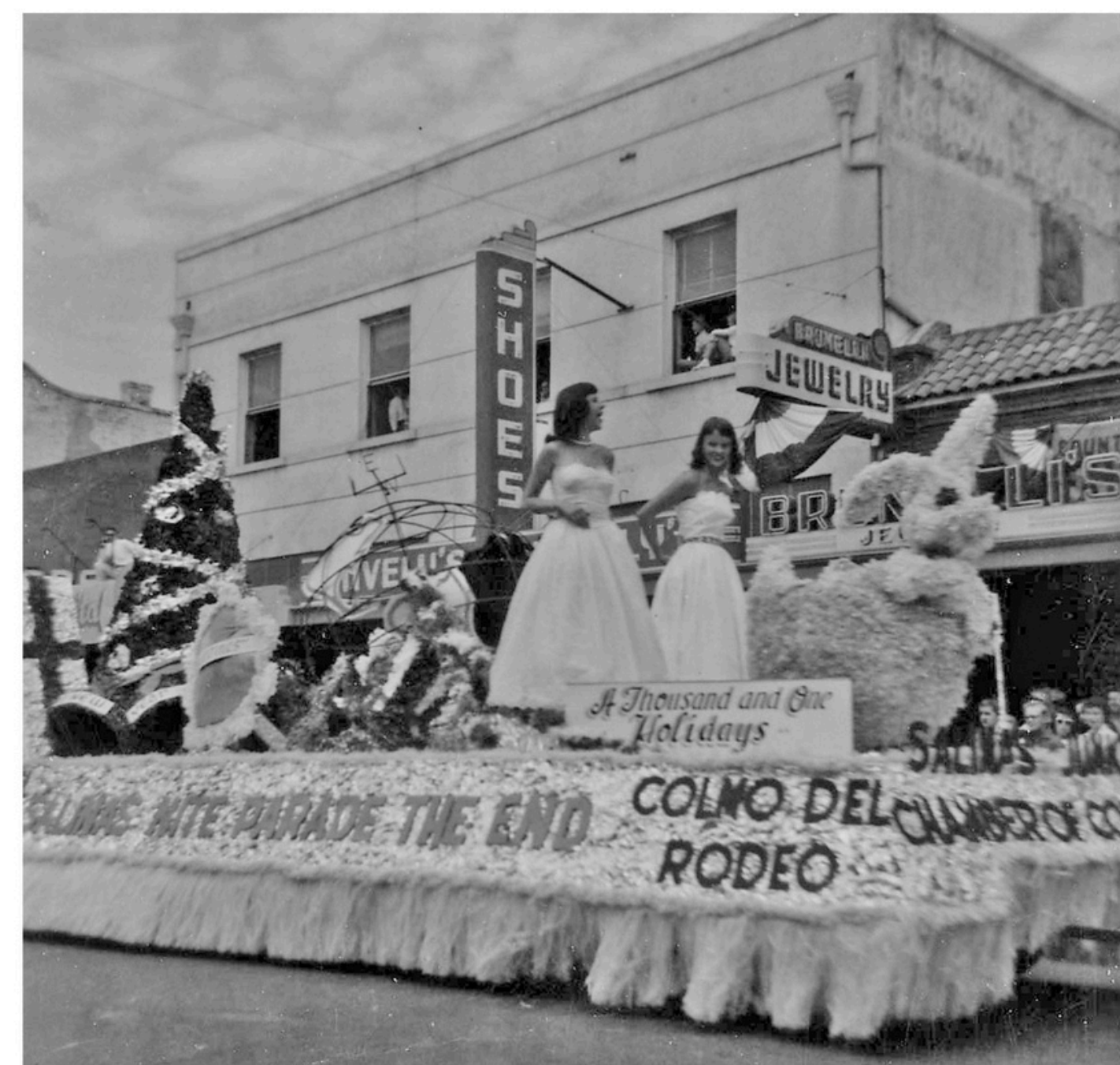


# Parades of Merced: Celebrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity



Pacific Bell operators at switchboard at the Merced County Fair Parade, 1950s

These images highlight Merced's evolving linguistic and cultural landscape through parades. In the 1940s July 4th parade seen in the picture below, a float adorned with holiday symbols and the Spanish phrase "Colmo del Rodeo" reflects early Spanish integration into public celebrations. The Laotian New Year parade in 1988 in the lower left image showcases Lao language on a banner and the gong held by a shaman. Together, these parades underscore the city's rich multicultural heritage and the prominent role of diverse languages in public life.



Tulare Co. Chamber of Commerce float at the Merced County Fair Parade, 1940s



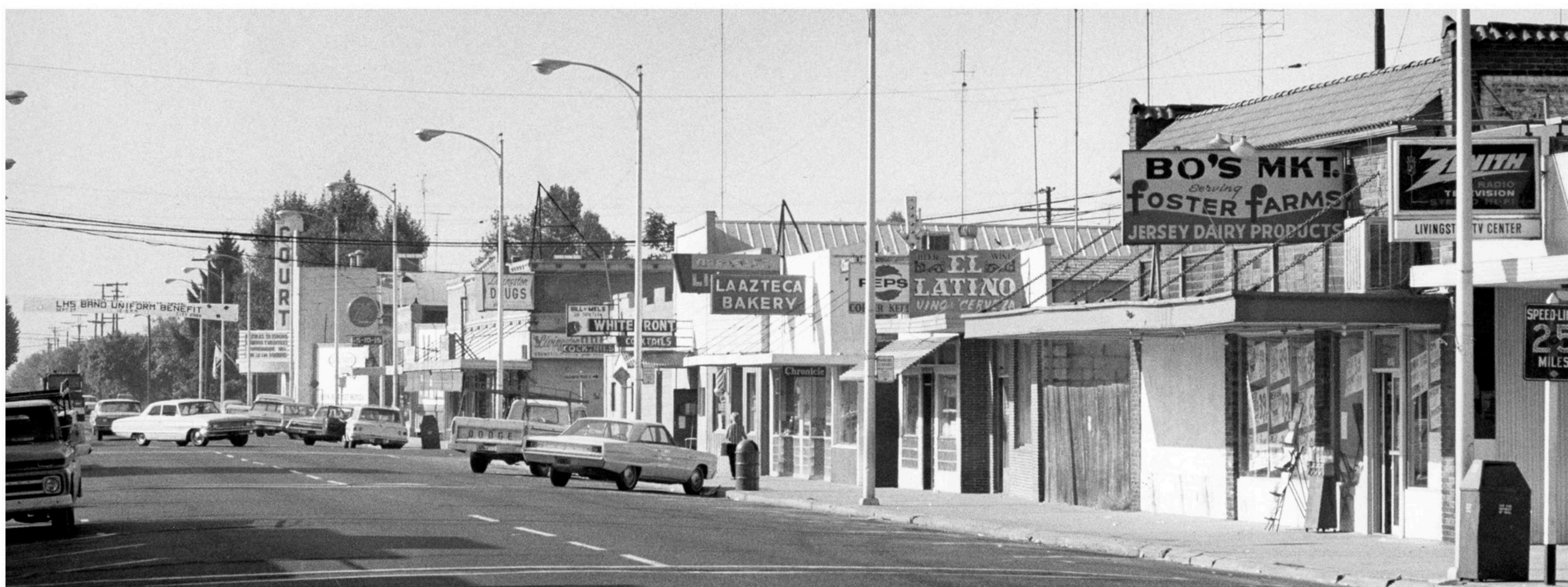
Laotian New Year Festival Parade on Main Street, 1988

ELDER HOLYMAN (SHAMAN) BOUAPHANH PHENGSAVANH Ring  
GONG AS HE LEADS PARADE DOWN MAIN ST. MERCED





These images highlight the cultural diversity in Merced County's street landscape, showcasing businesses that reflect the county's ethnic variety. The photo above, taken on Highway 152 in Los Banos, shows establishments like Taco Charley and La Familia Ristorante, representing Mexican and Italian influences. Below, businesses such as El Latino Vino & Cerveza and La Azteca Bakery in Livingston emphasize a strong Hispanic presence. These signs and storefronts demonstrate the blend of cultures and languages that shape the economic and social fabric of Merced County.





This collection of images showcase the past and present of Merced Theatre in downtown Merced, highlighting the evolution of its linguistic landscape. The two historical photos show signage advertising “Spanish shows,” reflecting the theatre’s role in catering to Merced’s Hispanic community. In the modern image, the Art Kamangar Center at the Merced Theatre continues to embrace its connection to the Hispanic community with an advertisement for Dr. César Lozano’s *Felizmente Imperfectos* tour, entirely in Spanish. The prominent use of Spanish in both the historical and modern signage demonstrates the enduring presence and cultural significance of the Hispanic population in Merced, with the theatre serving as a hub for Spanish-language entertainment.



Merced Theatre, circa 1970s



Merced Theatre, circa 1976



Merced Theatre, 2024





# A Warm Welcome to Merced County's Diverse Communities



Welcome sign at the intersection of Hammatt Ave. and Campbell Blvd.  
in Livingston, Merced County, 2024

The “Welcome to Livingston” sign celebrates the town’s cultural diversity by displaying “Welcome” in various languages, including Tagalog (“Mabuhay”), Punjabi (“ਜੀ ਆਇਆਂ ਨੂੰ”), Spanish (“Bienvenido”), Chinese (“歡迎”), and Portuguese (“Bem Vindos”). It also features emblems from local organizations such as Livingston Youth Football and Cheer, Lions International, and the VFW Post, highlighting the community’s civic pride and cultural richness.

At UC Merced, we celebrate and value diversity! Scan the QR codes to hear a warm welcome in languages like Spanish, Cantonese, Igbo, and more. Don’t see your language? Record a message and help us showcase the richness of our vibrant community. Join us as we embark on a journey of learning and discovery at your new home—UC Merced!

## A MULTILINGUAL WELCOME TO UC MERCED CAMPUS

Scan the QR code and hear what a welcome to UC Merced  
sounds like in 12 different languages!



Azərbaycan dili  
Azerbaijani



粵語  
Cantonese



English



Español  
Spanish



فارسی  
Farsi



Français  
French



Igbo



日本語  
Japanese



普通话  
Mandarin



Tagalog



Tiếng Việt  
Vietnamese



Türkçe  
Turkish



Don’t see a language you speak? Record a message and  
send it to Yiran Xu: [yxu72@ucmerced.edu](mailto:yxu72@ucmerced.edu)

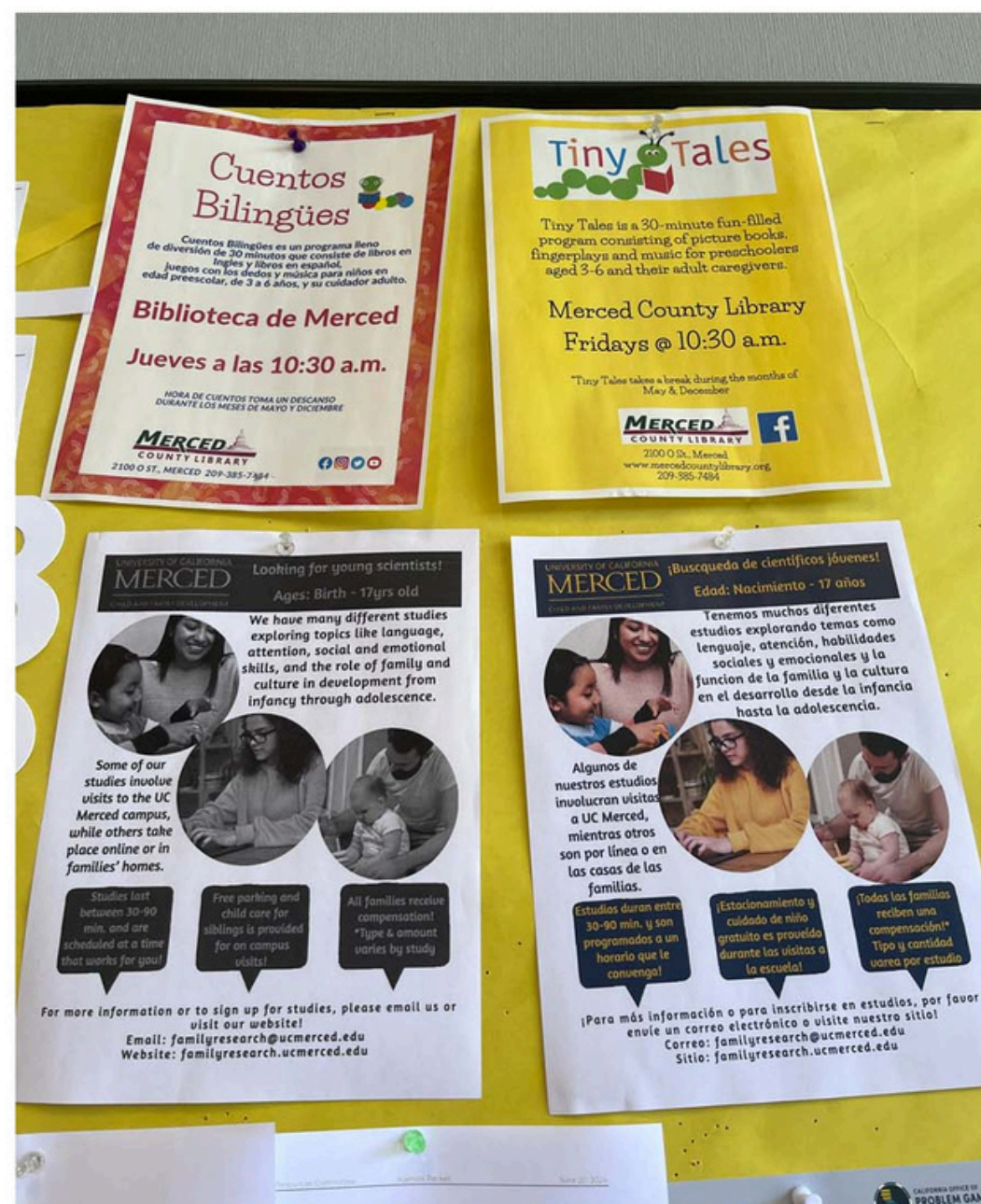




# Language Diversity at the Merced County Library



The flyers and signs at the Merced County Library reflect its commitment to serving a linguistically diverse community. Posters advertise the Summer Reading Challenge in English, Hmong, and Spanish, inviting children and teens to participate. A bookshelf showcases “Young Adult Books in Spanish,” offering a collection of Spanish-language literature for younger readers. Another flyer promotes a monthly Hindi-language book club, encouraging broader linguistic engagement. Additionally, the flyers highlight bilingual storytime sessions such as “Cuentos Bilingües” and “Tiny Tales” aimed at fostering early literacy in both English and Spanish for young children, further emphasizing the library’s dedication to multilingual outreach.

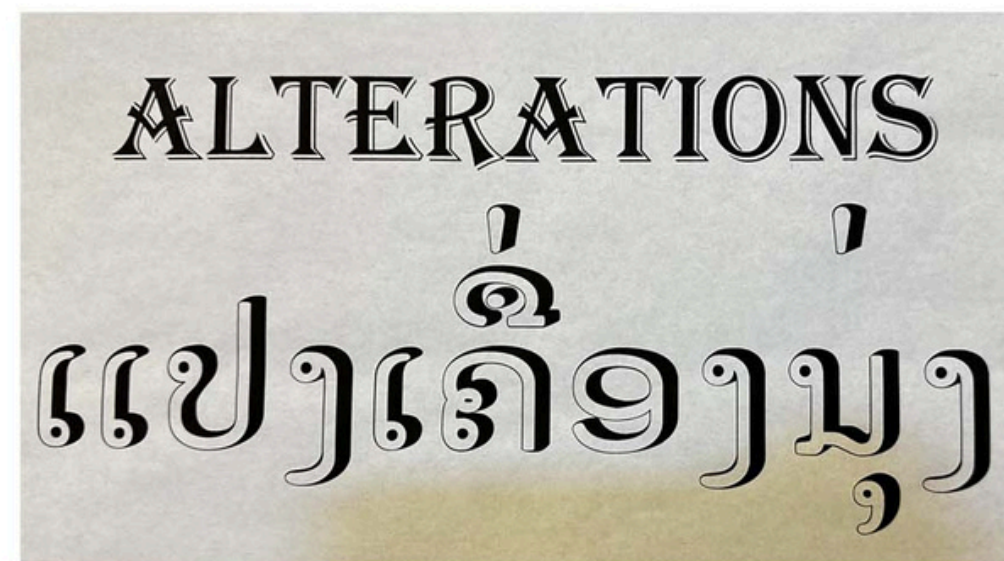




This collection of signs showcases the rich linguistic diversity of Merced, offering a glimpse into the various services available in multiple languages. The posters feature businesses such as clothing alterations services in Lao, a hair salon in Chinese, funeral planning in Spanish, and Toyota sales in Hmong. One sign advertises Hmong caskets, while another addresses funeral plans in Spanish, saying “Esto NO es la manera para poder pagar su funeral!” These multilingual signs reflect the community’s diverse cultural backgrounds and the importance of accessible services in multiple languages.



Funeral Service Stand at the Merced Flea and Farmers Market



An alternation store located at the Merced Mini-Mall Indoor Swap Meet on Main Street, Merced



Hair stylist advertisement targeting the Chinese population outside the Lee's Merced Community Food Market



Hmong caskets advertisement targeting the Hmong community outside the Lee's Merced Community Food Market



Toyota sales advisor advertisement targeting the Hmong community outside the Lee's Merced Community Food Market



A barber shop serving the Spanish speaking population located at the corner of G & Main Street, Merced





The “Grupo Nueva Esperanza” sign at 1744 G St., written entirely in Spanish, offers services for individuals facing addiction, depression, and more. It highlights the importance of language in reaching vulnerable populations, particularly Merced’s Hispanic community, many of whom may not be fluent in English. Additionally, mental health awareness within the Hispanic community may be limited, with individuals often being less inclined to seek professional support for mental health issues. This highlights the importance of culturally and linguistically tailored outreach in facilitating access to care and promoting mental health support.



The People's Fridge is sponsored by the Community Initiatives for Collective Impact, Hlub Hmong Center, and food. ¡Para todos! This “People’s Fridge” sign exemplifies how public spaces use language to foster inclusivity and reflect the linguistic diversity of the surrounding community. The text is written in both English and Spanish, demonstrating an understanding of the local demographic, where a significant portion of the population may be Spanish-speaking. The bilingual message ensures that both English and Spanish speakers feel welcomed and included in this community resource, emphasizing accessibility. The choice to include Spanish reflects the community’s multilingual nature and highlights how public signage can serve practical and symbolic functions, fostering a sense of belonging and participation for different linguistic groups.



This sign is a real estate advertisement on Highway 140 for affordable housing in eastern Merced. It targets the local Spanish-speaking community. Providing services in Spanish helps ensure that a vulnerable population can access affordable housing and navigate the rental process with greater ease. While this effort helps provide essential housing services to the Hispanic community, it also raises concerns about segregation, as advertising housing exclusively among one ethnic group can deepen divisions along racial and linguistic lines, unintentionally reinforcing social and economic divides.



# Linguistic Diversity in Merced's Retail Spaces



Price sign at the Merced Flea & Farmers Market

This photo, taken at the Merced Flea & Farmers Market, shows a bilingual price sign for clothing items, with English used for “new clothes with store tags” and Spanish for the rest. The selective translation suggests that new clothes may be more desirable to English-speaking customers, while used items might be targeted towards Spanish speakers. This example highlights how language is strategically used in public signage to cater to different segments of a multilingual market, reflecting deeper social and economic dynamics in Merced. Another explanation for not translating “Ropa usada” (used cloth) could be the sign maker ran out of room.



Chris Fashion at 6 W. Main Street, Merced

This photo captures how language is strategically used in public retail spaces to cater to a multilingual audience. The signage prominently displays tags in both English (“NEW” and “MEN”) and Spanish (“Nuevos Estilos Para Hombre,” meaning “New Styles for Men”). This reflects an intentional effort to engage both English and Spanish-speaking customers, likely in response to the local demographic. The use of Spanish for specific tags, particularly related to men’s fashion, suggests the vendor is aware of the significant presence of Spanish-speaking shoppers and wants to ensure they feel included. This bilingual approach highlights how language in commercial settings can be both practical and inclusive, offering accessibility while acknowledging the cultural diversity of the market’s clientele.





Food truck menu at the Merced Flea & Farmers Market



Tray/utensil return at the Pavilion Dining Center at UC Merced



Churro stand at the Merced Flea & Farmers Market



Drink menu at Quickly

These photos reflect linguistic diversity in food businesses, featuring signage in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The bubble tea menu includes drinks like "Thai Milk Tea" and "Panda Milk Tea," with both English and Chinese text to cater to bilingual customers. The red menu highlights Mexican cuisine, offering items like "Pozole," "Menudo," and "Tacos de Lengua," using Spanish alongside English phrases like "Hamburger, fries & soda." The "Casa de Churros" truck emphasizes traditional churros, featuring a Spanish name and descriptions in both English and Spanish. Additionally, the utensil sign captured at the UC Merced dining hall includes translations for "spoon" in English, Spanish ("cuchara"), and Chinese (勺子), illustrating accessibility for different linguistic communities.