Asian Americans: Expanding Our Horizons

By Edward C. M. Chen and Debbie Z. Harwell

Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians arriving at Houston Intercontinental Airport in 1978 are assisted by Travelers Aid workers.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1978-2294-0150.

The year 2015 marks a half century since the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, a comprehensive immigration reform that abolished the racial quota system based on national origin established in 1924. The new law admitted people based on criteria such as family reunification, skills needed in the U.S. workplace, and political persecution. The law limited annual immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere to 170,000 and from the Western Hemisphere to 120,000. Non-quota immigrants and immediate relatives (for example, spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens over the age of twenty-one) were not counted toward the ceilings. Later policy changes created special quotas given to about 200,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees at the end of the Vietnam War. About 3 million illegal immigrants who had entered the country before 1982 were given legal status in 1986. Since 1993 a limit of 675,000 total immigrant visas per year worldwide has been in effect.[1]

The change in law had tremendous implications for the nation and the Houston region. The Asian population in the United States grew to more than 20 million with over 1.2 million Asians in Texas at the last census. In 1910 the Houston area had fewer than 100 Asians, but a century later the number has risen to over 417,000 in the Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, Texas Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).[2] This special issue of *Houston History* and its companion exhibit at The Heritage Society, *Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures*, examine the stories of Asian Americans in Houston and the many ways in which they have enriched the community.

In the Beginning

The Western Hemisphere was first populated over 10,000 years ago, and recent DNA evidence indicates that these early immigrants came from Asia. The Chinese record outlines the 459 to 499 A.D. stay of four Buddhist monks in *Fusang* (Mexico or the Southwest United States). The writings of one monk, Hui Shen, described efforts to bring their religion to the residents of what perhaps later became *Tejas* (a Caddo word meaning friends) as described by Coronado in 1540.[3]

In 1587 and 1595 Filipino sailors arrived in what is now California to establish Spanish claims in the northern frontier of New Spain, known as "Nuevas Filipinas" because they were the first Asians known to cross the Pacific Ocean in the Age of Discovery. In 1763 Filipinos, who had deserted Spanish ships, established Saint Malo, the first North American Asian settlement in what is now Louisiana. Since no women accompanied them, they married Cajun and Native American women, and some of their descendants

The background image, Map of Asia with countries–Single Color, is by FreeVectorMaps.com.

eventually fought with Jean Lafitte at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814.[4]

The first Asian Indians came to North America as a part of the Jamestown colony in 1624. Captain George Menefie appointed "Tony, an East Indian," as an overseer of his land.[5] In 1788-1789 Captain John Meares, a British fur trader, established another Asian settlement in North America with 120 Chinese men in Nootka Sound. Although the Spanish destroyed the village, some Chinese escaped and went to live with the Native Americans.[6] In the centuries that followed, millions more crossed the Pacific to put down roots in the new land.

Coming to Texas and the United States

Francisco Flores, a Filipino, was the first known Texas Asian immigrant. He arrived in the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas about 1822 at the age of thirteen and died in 1917 in Rockport, Texas, where he owned a fishing business. This meant he witnessed life in Texas under five of its six flags: Spain, Mexico, Republic of Texas, United States, and Confederate States of America.

Early references to Chinese residents in the Houston region appeared during the Republic of Texas years. On April 8, 1840, D. W. Babcock, the recorder for Harrisburg, Texas, fined Henry Tucker ten dollars for the assault and battery of Mr. Price, a barber of Chinese and Maltese descent, which demonstrated the equality of Chinese under Texas law at the time. In 1862, a Chinese juggler was contracted to perform a benefit for a Houston hospital, which was recorded by Confederate Army officer Gustev Forsgard who wrote, "March 17, 1862, attended To-Gon-Won's exhibition at Perkin Auditorium with Miss Belle."

Between 1850 and 1889, approximately 300,000 Chinese came to the United States to work in mines, agriculture, fishing, and railroad construction, although as many as half eventually returned to their homeland.[7] After the Civil War, the expansion of Texas railroads brought Chinese workers to the state in earnest. The January 22, 1870, edition of *Harper's Weekly* showed 250 Chinese men and one woman crossing the Missouri River en route to build the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. The contractor, Chew-Ah-Heung, advertised in 1870 that he had 240 Chinese laborers in need of employment in Calvert, Texas, in Robertson County. Several in Calvert eventually opened laundries, grocery stores, and restaurants that catered to white customers.[8] Some of the railroad workers turned to sharecropping as indicated by a contract between James Hannah and Ah Gow, Ah Yong, and Ah Bao dated December 29, 1873. Hannah later brought in fifty-nine other Chinese laborers through Galveston.[9]

Lee Ting (also known as Sam Lee), Lee Hing, and Lee Yung were listed as laundrymen in the 1877 Houston City Directory. The 1880 Census listed seven Chinese in Houston, including Wah Yuen, age thirty-five, born in China, and proprietor of the Wah Yuen laundry at 86 Fannin Street. His nineteen-year-old Hispanic wife Annette Savilita Yuen was born in Texas.[10] Their son Lincoln Yuen, just four months old, was perhaps the first Chinese born in Texas. The 1900 Census listed forty-three Chinese in Houston, including twenty-two naturalized citizens; Charlie G. Hong was the only native-born U.S. citizen. He and his wife Savannah, a Caucasian woman, had two children who were the second and third native Chinese Houstonians. All were listed in the 1903 city directory, but by the next year, the Hongs and all but seven Chinese had left Houston following passage of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in perpetuity.

Between 1886 and 1911 more than 400,000 men and women left Japan for Hawaii and the Pacific Coast, and 300 of them came to Texas. Unlike the Chinese, many were younger sons who would not inherit their family land in Japan, but they had money and were "prepared to stay." Tsunekichi "Tom Brown" Okasaki came to Houston in the 1890s and opened a restaurant at 1111 Congress Avenue and, in 1911, started the Japan Art and Tea Company. At the invitation of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the Southern Pacific Railroad, Japanese farmers were brought to Webster, southeast of Houston, to improve rice production by growing high-yield Shinriki rice. A member of the samurai class, a lawyer, and former member of the Japanese House of Representatives, Seito Saibara, his family, and thirty Japanese farmers established the Gulf Coast rice industry.[11]

Shinpei Mykawa, 1903. Photo courtesy of Edward C. M. Chen.

Shinpei Mykawa, born in Aichi, Japan, on December 1, 1874, came to Harris County with four young Japanese to grow rice. On April 24, 1906, Mykawa died after he fell underneath a piece of agricultural equipment. In his honor, Garrat A. Dobin, the railroad agent, renamed the nearby station "Mykawa." The station no longer exists, but Mykawa Road next to the railroad track remains as a tribute to this early Japanese resident.[12]

In 1921 the Texas Legislature passed a bill that prevented Japanese from owning rural land. Saburo Arai, a nurseryman who came to Houston in 1902 and ran a successful business for over forty years, lobbied successfully to allow current Japanese Texans classified as aliens to keep their land and to purchase more. Through the 1920s most Japanese Texans remained in agricultural jobs; one-third of them were located in Harris County, and half of those were women.[13]

Emigrants from other Asian countries found their way to Houston as well, but tracking them is extremely difficult. Inconsistent in how it collected data, the U.S. Census only listed two Asian groups, Chinese and Japanese, until 1930 when it added Filipinos, along with Koreans and Hindus, both of which were removed in 1950. Not until the 1980 Census, when the Asian population grew significantly, did the government track Asian groups by ethnicity with any degree of accuracy.

From Exclusion to Inclusion

As the turn of the twentieth century approached, Congress began passing laws that negatively impacted Asian immigration to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers from coming into the country for ten years. Exceptions were made for teachers, students,

Saibara rice farm near Webster, Texas, 1904. Seito Saibara's son Kiyoaki is fourth from the left. Photo courtesy of Edward C. M. Chen.

merchants, diplomats, and tourists. It refused citizenship to resident aliens and made it difficult for people who went home to China to reenter the United States. Congress renewed the law in 1892 and made it permanent in 1902.

In 1916, General John Pershing, who was dispatched to Mexico to capture Pancho Villa, was cut off due to the long supply lines required in the rugged terrain. After Mexican Chinese came to his rescue with food and supplies, Pershing brought 527 Chinese refugees with him when he returned to Texas as the U.S. entered World War I. Some thirty "Pershing Chinese" helped build Ellington Field in record time on 1,280 acres of prairie located eighteen miles southeast of Houston.[14] Pershing obtained legal residency for these Chinese in a rare instance of the exclusion laws being set aside.[15]

Another set of laws ensured that the country's racial mix continued to be dominated by northern and western Europeans. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 over President Woodrow Wilson's veto. The law required literacy tests and denied access to anyone born in an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which included India, Afghanistan, Persia (Iran), Arabia, parts of the Ottoman Empire and Russia, Southeast Asia, and the Asian-Pacific islands.[16] The Immigration Act of 1924 set limits according to country of origin, establishing a quota of two percent of the number of immigrants already in the United States from a given country based on the 1890 Census and excluding immigrants from Asia, thereby extending the Chinese Exclusion Acts to all Asians except Filipinos.[17]

Chinese held a reception at Ellington Field for General John J. Pershing on February 6, 1920. Pershing had helped several Chinese obtain residency status after they assisted him in pursuit of Pancho Villa in Mexico in 1917 and in the construction of Ellington Field.
Photo courtesy of the University of Texas-San Antonio Libraries, Digital Collections, 068-2942.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had held in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) that a child born in the United States to parents of foreign descent is a citizen based on the Fourteenth Amendment, they did not receive equal treatment. In 1927 in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, the Court upheld an 1890 Mississippi Supreme Court decision that ruled Chinese were "colored" and could not insist on attending a "white" school. In Texas, however, Asians were considered white, making the state an attractive destination for those seeking a better education.[18] Mu Xiang-yue (H. Y. Moh) came to Texas A&M University in 1913 for a master's degree; Rudolfo Hulen Fernandez, a Filipino, was in the 1917 graduating class at Rice; and P. Watanabe was in the 1919 class. In 1923, Taro Kishi, a Japanese student at Texas A&M,

became the first Asian to play football in the Southwest Conference.[19]

Asian Americans experienced racial injustices in everyday life, but wartime policies exacerbated existing stereotypes. Perhaps the most disgraceful incident of discrimination against Asian American citizens in U.S. history was the wartime evacuation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans that began in 1942. A year later, President Franklin Roosevelt changed his position in part by creating a regimental team of Japanese Americans. Despite being interned, thousands of young Japanese volunteered to serve in the 100th Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which were eventually combined, fighting in Europe and with the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. The heroic efforts of this "Go for Broke" unit demonstrated that civil liberties should never be denied because of race or ancestry. Among their many feats, the soldiers broke through enemy lines to rescue over 200 members of the First Battalion of the 141st Regiment, Thirty-sixth Texas Division, in northern France in October 1944.[20] Houstonian Saburo Tanamachi, one of the many local Japanese who served admirably, lost his life in the rescue effort.[21]

Approximately 250,000 Filipino men joined the U.S. Armed Forces in the months before and the days after Pearl Harbor. Despite their service, in 1946 Congress passed and President Truman signed Public Law 70-301, stating Filipinos "shall not be deemed to be or to have been service in the military or national forces of the United States," thereby eliminating their benefits.[22]

Although the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943, after China became a U.S. ally against Japan, it took another twenty years before significant changes occurred in the law impacting Asian immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made it possible for Asians to become an integral part of the United States. Passed in the wake of the civil rights movement, it recognized the racial bias of the earlier quota system, even though it set limits on the number of immigrants by hemisphere. Today, the effects of these changes can be seen in the greater Houston area, which has become one of the most ethnically diverse in the nation. The 2010 Census showed Harris County was approximately 42% Hispanic, 32% non-Hispanic white, 19% black, 7% Asian, and 1% Native American.[23]

Changing Houston's Landscape

The change in Houston's demographics began slowly and then mushroomed in the last half of the twentieth century. By 1965 the 2,500 Chinese living in Houston made it the hub of the state's Chinese population. Some came from other southern states and established businesses in black neighborhoods.[24] Approximately 5,000 Filipinos lived in Texas by 1970. Both Filipino and Korean immigrants included many wives of U.S. servicemen. Historian Bruce Glasrud notes that Koreans came to the state as early as 1905 but were sometimes counted as Japanese in the census; as a result the 2,090 Koreans tallied in 1970 may not be accurate.[25] The 2010 Census showed 11,813 Korean Americans living in Harris County, although community leaders believe that number to be much higher.[26]

While Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos initially led the way in Houston's growing Asian community, other groups have expanded as well. In 1960 Houston's South Asian population was less than 400. However, passage of the 1965 immigration law enabled more Indians and Pakistanis to come to the United States as university students or professional and skilled laborers. Houston's growing job market and low cost of living attracted many of these new residents. By the 1980s, South Asians had begun to establish their own communities. The 2010 Census indicated 27,856 Pakistanis and 82,575 people with Indian ancestry resided in the Houston MSA.[27]

Early Korean immigrants to Houston gather after a ceremony on August 15, 1964, honoring Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 and the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948.
Photo courtesy of the Korean Community Center of Houston.

The Vietnam War brought an influx of emigrants from across Southeast Asia. Historian Roy Vu explains that in early 1975 at the end of the war, approximately 30,000 Vietnamese lived in the United States, with less than one hundred in Houston, most of them wives of former servicemen, students, and educators. The war's end brought the first wave of refugees, which included many professionals and a small number of blue-collar workers. The second wave of "boat people" arrived from 1978 to 1982, and a third wave of mostly political detainees and Amerasians followed from the late 1980s to mid 1990s. By 2010 the nation had 1.7 million Vietnamese, and Harris County ranked fourth among U.S. counties in Vietnamese residents.[28]

In 1989 Beverley Clark became both the first African American woman and the first Asian American woman elected to Houston City Council, representing a multi-ethnic ancestry tracing back to a nineteenth-century Chinese sharecropper and his African American wife. The first predominantly Asian American elected to council was second-generation Chinese American Martha Wong, who won with sixty-two percent of the vote in 1993. The former school principal received her Ed.D. at the University of Houston and went on to become an assistant superintendent with the Houston Independent School District. She later became director of Staff and Instructional Development and director of Community Resource and Development for the Houston Community College System. One of the founders of the Asian American Coalition dedicated to electing an Asian American to city council, she was reelected twice, serving three terms total. In 2002 Wong defeated the incumbent

Transitioning to American society proved difficult for many Asian Americans. Even everyday activities like grocery shopping were new and exciting challenges for some, such as these Vietnamese immigrants receiving instructions in 1979.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD00066-N1979-2727-020A.

for Texas District 134 to become the first Asian American woman elected to the state House of Representatives.[29]

Other firsts include Hannah Chow, the first Asian American elected to a county-wide office, the Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 5 in 1987; Council Member Gordon Quan, the first Asian American elected to city council in an at-large position in 1999; and M. J. Khan, the first Muslim and first Pakistani council member, elected in 2003 to serve District F.[30]

In 1999 members of the Asian community formed the non-partisan Houston 80-20 Asian American Political Action Committee, following the national model created a year earlier. Its purpose was to endorse and support those candidates who best represent the interests of their community. Although Asian Americans do not comprise a large voting bloc, their constituency is certainly big enough to swing an election. This is perhaps best illustrated by the 2001 campaign strategy for Mayor Lee Brown against GOP conservative Orlando Sanchez and moderate Democrat Chris Bell. Brown's staff drafted campaign literature and recorded phone messages in a dozen languages that were "directed at households of Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, and other Asian nationalities." Brown's campaign manager Craig Varoga believed this helped seal Brown's victory.[31]

Lighthouse for the Blind offered children the opportunity to broaden their horizons by learning about other cultures when they met with an Indian woman in traditional dress, 1971.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1971-2537-021A.

Martha Wong was active in the city throughout her term on the Houston City Council, attending events such as the Kroger grocery store ribbon cutting in Chinatown.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS1139-016.

Today, Asian Americans remain an integral part of the fabric of Houston – socially, culturally, politically, and economically. Asian communities can be found in areas across the Houston region with their own districts that feature shop and street signs in multiple languages. As with immigrant populations that came before them, Asian Americans have established houses of worship, community centers, media outlets, restaurants, grocery stores, and other businesses that cater to their individual ethnic needs. In the process they have motivated others to appreciate the kaleidoscope of their cultures.

Edward C. M. Chen, Ph.D., is a retired chemist and professor in the University of Houston System. He has served as an officer and board member for numerous community organizations, including the Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Association. A visiting scholor for the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University, he serves on the Harris County Historical Commission and is the unofficial Chinese historian for Houston.

Debbie Z. Harwell, Ph.D., is the managing editor of *Houston History* and teaches Houston History in the Honors College at the University of Houston.