

The Chinese Texans



Column of Chinese and Mexicans following the Pershing expedition out of Mexico, January 28, 1917



Wedding portrait of Mrs. Mow Wah Chin

The Chinese, initially arriving in Texas as laborers and facing decades of exclusion laws, were often seen by others as stereotypical Orientals: railroad laborers in unusual dress who ate strange food with strange sticks, set up instant laundries, and associated with peculiar gods. From the “other” viewpoint, some of the image was accurate.

The first Chinese, seeking jobs that would allow them to return to China with money, were single men. Most in Texas worked on railroad construction crews. Some 250 Chinese were on the Houston and Texas Central construction in 1870. A few stayed in Robertson County at the end of the railroad work as cotton sharecroppers. Other than a few individuals, these were the only rural Texas Chinese, then or now.

A second group, nearly 3,000 from the west coast, worked on the Southern Pacific construction as the line moved east from El Paso. Blasting powder

and desert heat were not the only perilous aspects of this job. Judge Roy Bean, the “Law West of the Pecos,” ruled at least once that there was “no law against killing a Chinaman.”

And members of a surveying crew, including 11 Chinese, were killed near Eagle Pass on the last day of 1881 by Apaches. Or so the raiders were identified. After 1883 some workers settled in El Paso County, but by that year further Chinese emigration to the United States was virtually halted. Anti-Chinese sentiment, much originating on the west coast, created exclusion laws that allowed very few individuals to enter the country.

In 1917, an exception was made. U.S. General John J. Pershing had been ordered into Mexico to destroy the forces of Francisco “Pancho” Villa, who had raided into the United States. Pershing's unsuccessful pursuit was supported by hundreds of Chinese in northern Mexico. Perhaps hoping to be allowed into the United States, they provided the expeditionary army with food and supplies in an otherwise hostile countryside. More than 500 individuals followed Pershing out of Mexico and were given special permission by the U.S. government to stay, on provisional terms. Some 400 of these were allowed to settle in San Antonio, although they could not become citizens.

The first Chinese, unable (in any case, not allowed) to bring families, intended to make money and leave (with the exception of "Pershing's Chinese"). Most did. They were laborers who took work where few others would, such as on railroad crews, or where their presence would offer no economic threat, such as sharecropping or running a laundry. They were mainly single men, mostly southern Chinese who spoke Cantonese.



Lion Dancers, San Antonio, 1983

When China became a World War II ally, the feeling in the United States changed to some degree, and the exclusion act was repealed in 1943. After World War II northern Chinese, Mandarin speakers and often from well-educated upper-economic classes, came to Texas. Many specialized in medicine, sciences, or engineering. These later arrivals could and did establish the traditional extended families—very patriarchal—and lived together in enough numbers to celebrate common holidays and traditions.

Of more importance, later generations maintained the traditional family and merchant associations. A few organizations based on province of origin were established. All of these supported Chinese families in economic terms. This generation claims very few individuals ever listed on welfare rolls.

Emphasizing education, the Chinese made several efforts at establishing Chinese schools, where the language and history were taught. San Antonio's school was operated from about 1922 to 1947. Ending for a time, it was revived in 1971. Another school has operated in Houston most years since 1970.

Many present-day Chinese Texans are Christian, and many customs have yielded to Western tradition. Still, their Lunar New Year is commonly celebrated, and most people remember that firecrackers (even on the 4th of July) are a popular Chinese contribution to life in the United States.

Legends of the Far East

Chinese culture is one of the oldest in the modern world. Individuals who read Chinese can understand a language that has remained remarkably stable in written form for thousands of years. And the earliest Chinese history includes legends and metaphoric language that bother few Eastern scholars but do puzzle Western historians.

For centuries the Chinese—in a wonderful irony—have regarded North America as the “Far East,” just as earlier Europeans called China the “Far East.”

And the Chinese “Far East” has been known to them for over two thousand years. Whether this knowledge is based on travel across the Pacific or is just a good guess remains speculation. But in the past several decades Western historians have realized that early China was not the somewhat isolated country it became in the 19th century.

Government documents from China in the sixth century, in part rejected as fiction by many Western historians, record the journey of a Buddhist priest to the Far East. Hwui Shan returned from somewhere—traveling the proper distance from North America to China—and the bow and arrow appeared among American Indians just about the time of his journey.

Even more strange, the oldest geography produced in China over two thousand years ago includes land traverses in their Far East. The book does contain much that is fantastic, like many travel journals of Europe, but some of the land traverses match geography in North America. One route passes across trans-Pecos Texas.

Who surveyed the land is unknown, even if true. No hard evidence exists for the priest or the surveyors. Only written records were created, preserved in China to the present day.

Intriguing stories, with few believers. Perhaps just a good guess.



The Chinese Texans

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

The “push-pull” theory says that people migrate because things in their lives *push* them to leave, and things in a new place *pull* them. *Instructions: Decide what economic factors push and pull people. Complete the graphic organizer below using the word bank.*

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|--|---|--|----------|--------------|----------------|---------|
|  Economic Push Factors | Economic Pull Factors  | <p style="text-align: center;">WORD BANK</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Lost Job</td> <td>Higher Wages</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Available Work</td> <td>Low Pay</td> </tr> </table> | Lost Job | Higher Wages | Available Work | Low Pay |
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Chinese Settlers in Texas

Groups of Chinese men came to Texas more than 120 years ago. They came to help build the railroads across the state. Hearne, Toyah and El Paso were some of the towns where they settled.

Between 1882 and 1943, the U.S. Government did not allow many Chinese people to enter the United States. However, in 1917, about 500 Chinese people were allowed to settle in San Antonio. These people had been living in Mexico. When an expedition of American soldiers went to Mexico, the Chinese gave them food and supplies. When the Americans left Mexico, the Chinese followed them. They were permitted to enter the U.S. because they had helped the soldiers.

Since 1943, many more Chinese people have come to Texas. They live mostly in cities. Houston has more Chinese Texans than any other city in the state. There are shopping centers with signs in Chinese. A Chinese-language newspaper is printed there. Chinese is spoken in theaters and churches. Cities throughout the state celebrate Chinese cultural traditions such as the Lunar New Year.

Why did Chinese men first come to Texas in the 1800s?

Why were some Chinese people allowed to settle in San Antonio after coming from Mexico?

How is Chinese culture represented in our state today?



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