

The Chinese Texans



THE TEXIANS AND
THE TEXANS

THE INSTITUTE OF
TEXAN CULTURES
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS AT SAN
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The **C**hinese Texans
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THE TEXIANS AND THE TEXANS

A pamphlet series dealing with the many kinds of people who have contributed to the history and heritage of Texas. Now in print: The Indian Texans, The German Texans, The Norwegian Texans, The Mexican Texans (in English), Los Texanos Mexicanos (in Spanish), The Spanish Texans, The Polish Texans, The Greek Texans, The Jewish Texans, The Syrian and Lebanese Texans, The Afro-American Texans, The Anglo-American Texans, The Belgian Texans, The Swiss Texans, The Czech Texans, The French Texans and The Italian Texans.

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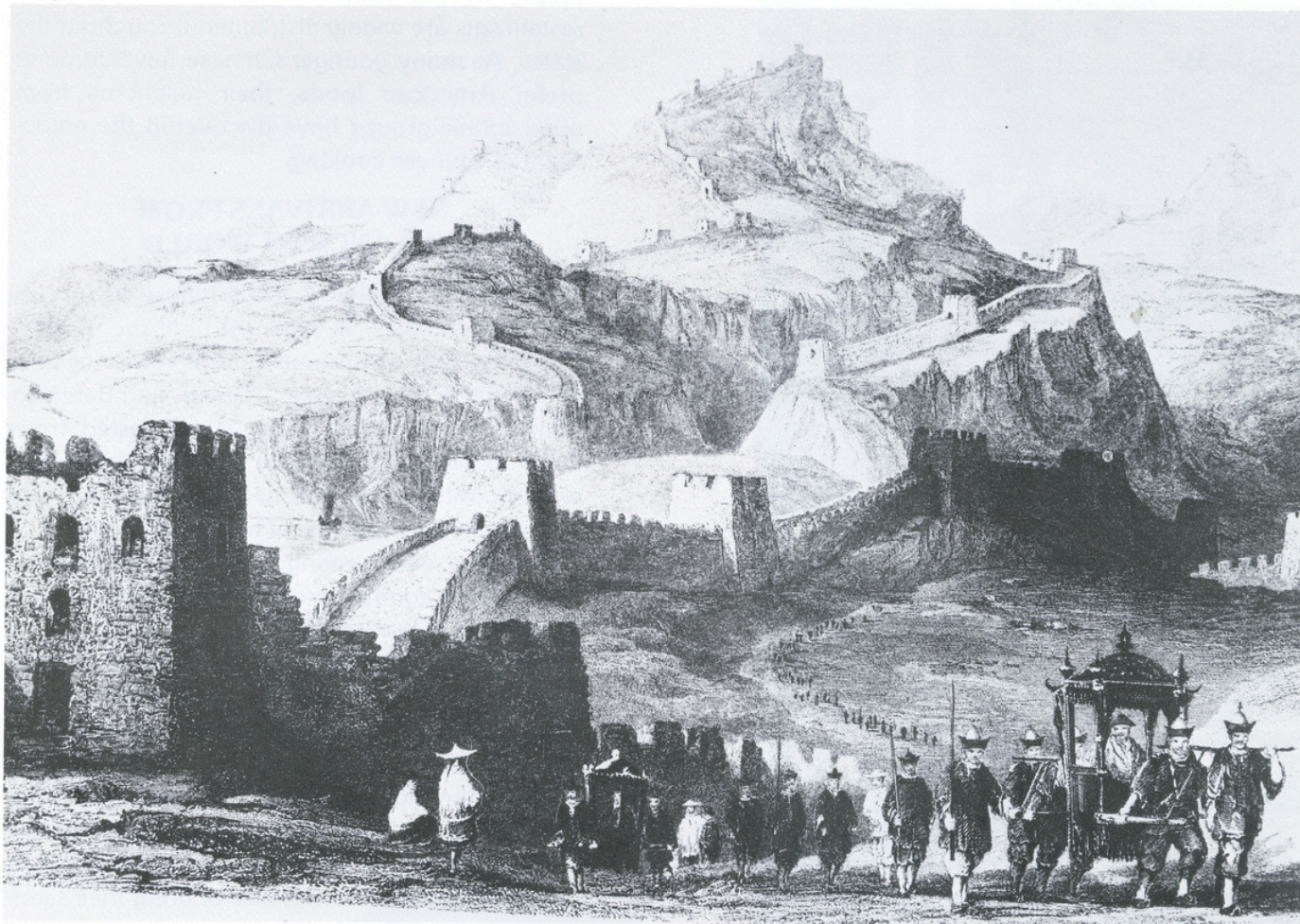
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Great Wall of China.

THE CHINESE TEXANS

To the average nineteenth-century American, Chinese immigrants presented an interesting but paradoxical portrait. They were heirs of one of the world's great civilizations, but everything they did seemed to be backward. They read sentences from right to left and their books from back to front. They introduced themselves using their surnames first instead of last. They mounted horses from the right side instead of from the left. Even the needles on the compasses they carried pointed south instead of north.

Their physical appearance—even the color of their skin—was different from that of their neighbors. They wore pigtails hanging down their backs, a practice imposed by the Manchu Dynasty during the seventeenth century. Their clothes were cotton, pajamalike garments, and their belongings were carried in wicker baskets on their shoulders. Their language, their customs and their religion bore no resemblance

to “traditional American life.”

At the same time they were obviously descendants of an old and highly cultured civilization, but it was a civilization that was isolated and remote from the rest of the world. The Great Wall of China, a tremendous construction achievement, was but one obstacle making the country a closed society. Governmental attitude and policy closed the country to foreigners for many years. Great geographic distances as well as cultural differences within the provinces also contributed to the development of an isolated society.

Recently, however, Chinese immigrants have been welcomed into American life. Following an extended period of discrimination, exclusion laws and antipathy toward all things foreign, Americans recognized that, in addition to their industry, honesty and thrift, the Chinese people possessed a fascinating and unique cultural heritage. Some of their customs have now become a part of American tradition. One example, the custom of exploding firecrackers in celebration of



Chinese Immigrants on board the steamship Alaska.

the Fourth of July, did not originate among Anglo-American colonists in 1776. Firecrackers were introduced by Chinese in San Francisco when celebrating the admission of California to the Union in 1850. Chinese cuisine has been appreciated by Texans for a long time. One Chinese dish, chop suey, is actually a Chinese-American creation and almost unknown to the Chinese mainland. And the great old German dish, sauerkraut, had its origins in China and is a favored Oriental food of long-standing.

Traditional ingredients of Chinese cooking are easily obtained in many Texas cities, as Oriental import shops stock a diversified array of cooking ingredients from China. The Chinese wok, or frying pan, originally used over a charcoal stove, has now been replaced with a built-in wok

placed over a modern gas burner. Chinese restaurants are widely distributed throughout the state. As many younger Chinese have come to prefer American foods, their neighbors from other ethnic groups have discovered the enjoyment of Chinese cooking.

NEW ARRIVALS FROM AN ANCIENT WORLD

Early Spanish explorers met Chinese traders on the Pacific coast. It was not until the 1840's, however, that a substantial immigration of new settlers from China began. Britain had defeated China in the Opium War, which lasted from 1839 to 1842. The Manchu Dynasty, although it would continue into the twentieth century, was perceptibly weakening. The social structure of China was deteriorating; a series of rebellions plunged the country into intermittent civil war for more than 20 years.

Then from California came news of a great gold strike. Adventurous Chinese began preparations to make their fortunes by heading east to the "west's" gold fields. In 1850, 25,000 Chinese immigrants sailed on forty ships from Hong Kong to California. Few women came; most of the arrivals were men who hoped to gain wealth and then return home or bring their families to America.

Few, if any, Chinese made their way to Texas in this early period. By the 1870 United States Census, only 25 Chinese were listed as living in Texas. In 1880 the number climbed to 136. For the next several decades, the number of Chinese in Texas remained small but relatively stable.

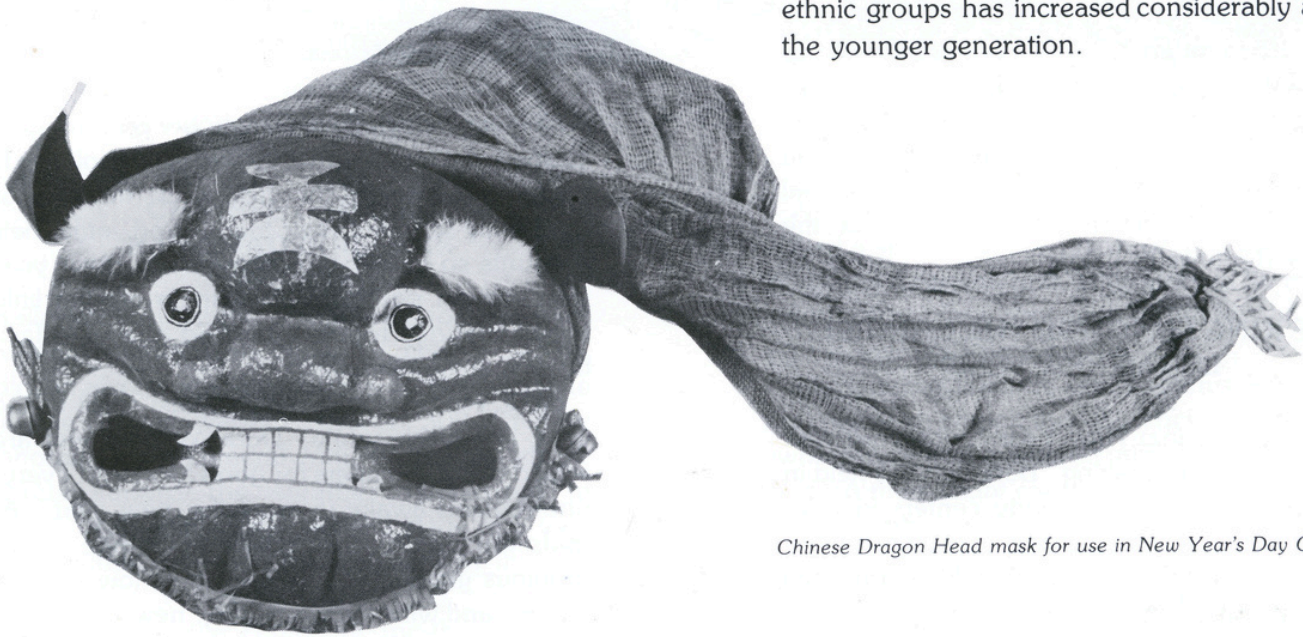
1890 - 710
1900 - 836
1910 - 595
1920 - 773
1930 - 703
1940 - 1,031
1950 - 2,435

In 1960, 4,172 Chinese were recorded officially, and the figure reached 7,635 in 1970 including both native and foreign born. In the middle 1970's estimates by Chinese themselves suggested a population of some 15,000 Chinese in Houston alone and some 3,000 in San Antonio. In addition, there were several thousand more in El Paso, Dallas, Fort Worth and in smaller towns throughout the state. The total number of Chinese in Texas was estimated at 22,000.

AN ANCIENT CULTURE BLENDS IN A MODERN SETTING

Today one of the distinguishing traits of Chinese Texans is an enthusiastic participation in all aspects of modern culture. But they have become Americanized in thought, speech and dress without sacrificing their own cultural identity. They still surround themselves with symbols of their heritage. Prompted by a genuine interest in their cultural traditions, they are among the few people who can read a calligraphy scroll over a thousand years old and a modern newspaper with the same ease.

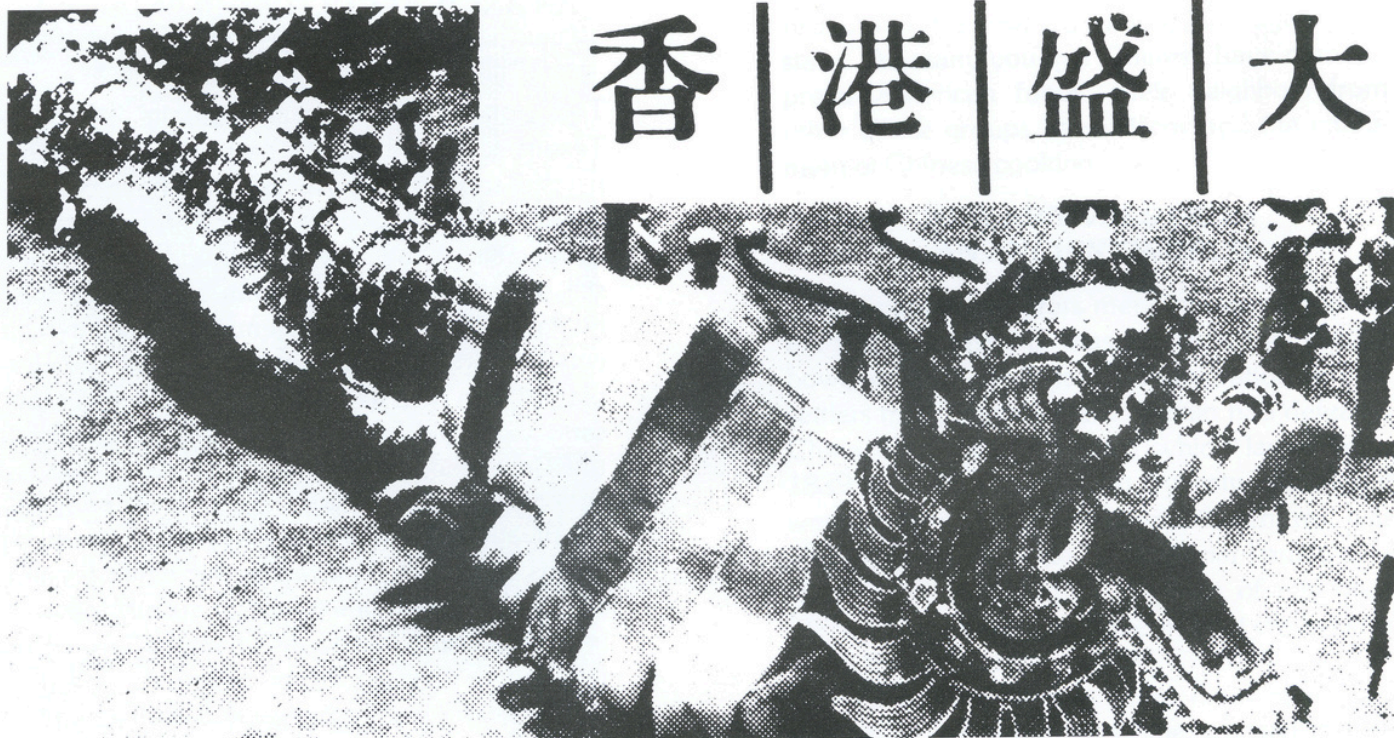
Wedding customs are still observed, although the beautifully embroidered Chinese wedding gowns are often replaced by the white western style. Traditional practices that are still followed include sending invitations engraved in gold on red paper, dressing the bride in jade and gold family heirlooms, formal acknowledgement by the couple of their obeisance to the parents of the groom, and the exchange by the two families of moon cakes and Chinese pastries. In the past Chinese were expected to marry Chinese, but intermarriage between the Chinese and other ethnic groups has increased considerably among the younger generation.



Chinese Dragon Head mask for use in New Year's Day Celebration.

The "red egg" party is also celebrated on occasion. Friends and relatives are invited to the event, which commemorates the first cutting of a month-old baby's hair. After the infant's head has been shaved, a red egg is rubbed over it for good luck. Red is the color symbolizing happiness and good fortune, and red eggs are given to the guests as favors. An important birthday celebration is the parents' seventieth. The traditional gift is money in a red envelope.

大 | 盛 | 港 | 香



Gilded King Lung in Hong Kong.

The dress of Chinese Texans has changed over the years as American articles of clothing have been gradually combined with the traditional costume. The *chipao*, still worn at times by Chinese women, has been adopted by many westerners. It is attractive and comfortable and cut in classic lines that never go out of style.

The Ten-Ten Celebration (tenth day of the tenth month) is held on October tenth, a national holiday commemorating the founding of the Chinese Republic.

THE KING LUNG AND THE CHINESE LUNAR NEW YEAR

The Chinese Lunar New Year is observed with feasting and merrymaking. Banquets are held in fraternal halls and community centers in celebration of the event. Banners, firecrackers, and small papier-mache dragons and lions are often part of the occasion.

In recent years interest has been revived in the parade of the large dragon featured in celebrations in San Francisco and New York City. The dragon, or "king lung," represents both joy and sorrow. It has been a traditional part of Chinese parades, funerals, holidays and other commemorative events. In El Paso king lungs have been a part of Chinese activities in the past, notably in connection with the funeral procession of a Chinese resident of the city. On

another occasion in El Paso, in 1909, a hundred-foot-long dragon highlighted the Presidential Parade honoring President William Howard Taft and Mexican President Porfirio Diaz.

Individual Chinese families often hold Lunar New Year Celebrations. The home is thoroughly cleaned and an elaborate festive dinner planned. Early on the eve of the new year, the men of the family seek out their friends and settle their accounts so that they can greet the new year with a clean slate. Shops remain open a little longer that day to make sure no one loses face by not paying his debts.

New Year's Eve dinner, the last meal of the year, is eaten leisurely. Doors of the house are sealed with red papers for good luck, and everyone remains awake to await the new year. At midnight family members exchange ceremonious greetings. Children bow low to their parents and wish them a happy new year. The parents present gifts of small amounts of money in bright red envelopes decorated with gold emblems that wish the recipients new happiness for a new year.

Then the family retires. Early the next morning the seals on the doors are broken, and the remainder of the day is often devoted by some to the worship of ancestors. It is considered bad luck on New Year's Day to raise one's voice, tell a lie or use indecent language.



Work on the Pacific Railroad.

CHINESE CAME AS RAILROAD BUILDERS

Railroads brought the first Chinese to Texas, but as laborers, not as passengers. They were employed as construction workers on a railway line in the Brazos valley. Some 300 Chinese laborers led by General John G. Walker left St. Louis aboard the steamer *Mississippi* in 1869. This marked the second stage of a long and arduous journey that had begun in California.

Walker was the contractor for the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. Calvert, Texas, was the railhead at the time. The line was to be completed to the city of Dallas. Walker arranged for a three-year contract, providing fare for all construction workers, including the return trip to San Francisco. The workers were guaranteed \$20 a month plus food. According to the contract, a store stocked with Chinese goods was to follow the laborers as the work on the railroad progressed.

At the company's expense, workers were furnished a specified daily ration of food as well as lodging in tents and huts. They worked 26 days a month, most often, probably, as graders preparing the railroad's right of way.

The Chinese laborers kept to themselves both while working and off the job. They lived in their own camps and prepared and ate their own food. A meal might consist of rice, pork or dried fish, vegetables and tea. They wore light cotton blouses and loose pants and plaited their hair in a queue. Their straw hats were the shape of inverted washbowls.

They observed their own holidays, including a Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve celebrated at Bremond, Texas, on January 30, 1870. "In full Chinese costume, including large umbrellas, they promenaded the streets 'to the delight of the juveniles without distinction of race or color.'"

Their aim, originally, had been to return to China with the money they earned. But the rich Brazos valley farmland proved quite an attraction. After working about six months, and



Gate to the Temple of Confucius in Ching-Hai.

encountering labor problems, their contract was terminated. A number of them returned and settled near the starting point of their labors. Others immigrated from China to join their countrymen as farm workers. Although figures for the total number of Chinese in the Brazos valley at that time are not available, it is known that 150 Chinese registered to vote in Hearne in 1874.

A typical labor contract was drawn up by James S. Hanna, a plantation owner in Robertson County, on December 13, 1872:

"Sin Yong and John See have this day agreed with James S. Hanna as follows. The said Sin Yong and John See agree to cultivate thirty acres of land on said Hanna's Plantation State & County aforesaid in a farmerlike manner for the year 1873. Twenty acres in cotton ten acres in corn under the superintendence of James S. Hanna or his authorized agent and they further agree to crib the corn, pick, gin and pack the cotton upon the following terms viz: The corn to be divided by the wagon load—one load for said Hanna, one load for said Chinamen. The cotton to be divided at the screw or sold on joint account—and proceeds divided at Calvert—one half for said Chinamen ... James S. Hanna on his part agrees to furnish said Chinamen sufficient team and tools to cultivate the land and also corn to feed the team until corn crop of 1873 can be used and he further agrees to make them reasonable enough advances throughout the year for such things as they require ..."

The Houston and Texas Central was not the only railroad in Texas to employ Chinese labor. Residents of Toyah, in Reeves County, recall stories of Chinese railroad workers who came

there when the town was a part of the Texas frontier. During the 1880's there was even a "Chinatown" in Toyah, along the route of the Texas and Pacific Railway.

The Texas and Pacific was chartered by the United States Congress in 1871. Work began at Texarkana in 1873, and by 1881 the line extended deep into west Texas. Chinese laborers were employed all along the route. As many as 3,000 Chinese were at work on the tracks at one time—and they were not listed in the census.

A settler recalled coming upon a Chinese section crew along the railroad tracks. "They were working like bees along the dump. The men looked immaculate. Their full white sleeves were gathered to loose fitting cuffs. Their shirts, resembling the American sport shirt of the 1960's, hung loose over the top of their trousers. Some of them had their queues wound around the top of their heads under their stiff hats, but most of them hung down their backs. The most impressive sight of all was presented by a Chinaman on one of the black flat handcars going down the track so fast that he seemed to be flying. As he rapidly worked the handbar the wind puffed out his sleeves like two huge white balloons and blew his black queue almost straight out behind."

As time progressed members of the Chinese community of Toyah drifted away to other areas. But they left behind many recollections of neighborliness and good will. During New Year Celebrations, it was recalled, the strains of Chinese music could be heard throughout the town. When their neighbors visited them at this time, the Chinese would give them priceless porcelain dishes that were kept as remembrances for many years.

A third railway, the Southern Pacific Railroad, used Chinese construction workers. The line was completed with the driving of the last spike near the first Pecos River high bridge in Val Verde County on January 12, 1883. Two groups had performed the difficult pick and shovel construction work, the Irish, working their way west, and the Chinese, who worked their way east from El Paso.

In addition to the difficulties encountered from the rugged trans-Pecos environment, the Chinese workers were often faced with hostility from their fellow laborers. One Chinese worker was murdered near the Pecos River, and when the incident came to trial Judge Roy Bean delivered the opinion that there was no law in Texas against "killing a Chinaman." There were



Chinese immigrants at San Francisco custom house.

other dangers. On December 31, 1881, a roving band of Apache Indians encountered a surveying crew of 11 Chinese at Eagle Pass and killed them all.

The tunnel construction necessary to lay the track in the Pecos River canyon was done by the Chinese laborers. Today little evidence of their efforts remains—a few broken rice bowls and other scattered fragments of their material culture. Even the tunnels, engineering marvels for their time, are now closed and abandoned for a shorter route. As in other similar construction jobs, when their work was completed many of the laborers retraced their steps and settled for awhile in towns along the route, later moving to other areas that seemed to promise greater opportunities.

SAM MARDOCK COMES TO EAST TEXAS

Many of the Chinese railroad construction workers found success in their later years in other vocations. Typical of these was Sam Mardock, one of the first Texans of Chinese descent to settle in east Texas. Sam was born with the name of Mar Dock near Canton, China, in 1863. He came to the United States at the age of 14 and studied English while he was working on a ranch in California.



Sam Mardock family.

Sam came to Texas as a railroad worker in 1880. He found employment as an interpreter in El Paso and in Galveston, and then in 1890 he moved to Tyler, where he opened the first of six restaurants. He began other restaurants later in Longview, Kilgore and Gladewater. The restaurant business, like the laundry business at that time, was one of the few occupations open to