



HAWAII CHINESE HISTORY CENTER

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Hawaii's Chinese roots run deep through isle history

By Bob Sigall | February 23, 2018

My Chinese friends and readers often encourage me to write about the history of their ethnicity. That's why I was happy to hear from Douglas D.L. Chong, president of the Hawaii Chinese History Center.

The Hawaii Chinese History Center is 48 years old and is the second-oldest Chinese historical center in the U.S. It is located in the heart of Honolulu's Chinatown.

I asked him to share with my readers some of the interesting highlights of Chinese history in the islands.

"Hawaii's Chinese roots go deep through island history," he told me. "Most people think that Chinese only eat and do lion dancing at the Lunar New Year, but there is a lot more."

"Chinese began migrating to Hawaii nearly 230 years ago," Chong says, "due to civil unrest, famine, wars and colonial imperialism occurring in China during that time.

"They arrived first as traders, then sojourners to begin small sugar plantations. Later they were imported to teach the budding sugar industry how to cultivate cane and mill it into sugar, before becoming a source of labor."



While the early bulk of single laborers came to Hawaii for the sugar industry, some came to work the rice fields.

"The Chinese early on had befriended the Hawaiians, not only to lease their lands for rice but they also symbiotically filled the needs of the Hawaiians by refurbishing their fishponds and cultivating taro for them.

"Well over 95 percent of early Chinese immigrants were males. Many bachelor laborers lived with Hawaiians, cooked for them and took their daughters as wives, to produce the beautiful Chinese-Hawaiian blend.

"Eventually, many sugar laborers and rice farmers went into trades and started small businesses, then brought wives from China until the Chinese Exclusion Act banned all immigration of Chinese to America (and its territories)."

"It is from these few Chinese families that our large Chinese population in Hawaii has sprung. Ensuing generations have made Hawaii their home and have become successful businessmen, tradesmen, doctors, lawyers and educators who live the American dream while retaining their Chinese ancestral values and heritage."

Over 70 percent of the Chinese in Hawaii hail from one district, the Chung Shan County (part of Kwangtung Province) in southern China, Chong says.

It was the birthplace of Dr. Sun Yat Sen (1866-1925), the first president and founding father of the Republic of China. Sun was born in China but grew up in Hawaii. Island Chinese played a substantial role in launching his revolution and overthrowing the Manchu dynasty.



"Chung Shan County's original name, Heong Shan, was changed in 1925 upon the death of Dr. Sun. In his memory the county took Sun's own name, Chung Shan, which Dr. Sun used when he was in exile and which he preferred to be called. He is affectionately referred to as Sun Chung Shan by Chinese the world over.

"Dr. Sun's uncle, Young Mun Nap, and brother, Sun Mei, were early Chung Shan immigrant laborers in Hawaii who quickly went into rice planting, then business, sugar and land acquisition, and ranching.

"His brother brought Sun Yat Sen to Hawaii as a child in the 1870s and educated him at Punahou and 'Iolani where he not only obtained a western education, but became a Christian.

"As such, the early ancestors of Hawaii's Chinese were not only fellow villagers of Sun but helped him lay the foundation of the Chinese revolution starting in November 1894 on Emma Street.

"Loyal Chinese classmates and Chinese Hakka Christians banded together with Sun at my wife's great-granduncle Ho Fon's home on Emma Street," Chong says, "across from St. Andrew's Cathedral, to create the Hsing Chung Hui or Revive China Movement.

"This organization grew rapidly with merchants, fellow villagers, and those Chinese disillusioned with the emperor. Plans were hatched for the revolution in China by members in Hawaii and branches in Singapore, Thailand, Japan and San Francisco."

The first revolution in 1895 failed, but more were to come until the final victory in Wuchang (halfway between Hong Kong and Beijing) in 1911.

In the meantime, the Hawaii Chinese sponsored Sun to speak at rallies in Chinatown. "They initiated him in 1904 to the Hoong Moon Secret Society movement to gather support throughout Hawaii and other overseas settlements who also had secret societies.

"Loyal supporters launched campaigns throughout large Chinese communities like Waipahu, Punaluu, Hilo and Wailuku to bring Sun to rally the common folk. Hundreds of Chinese merchants, laborers, farmers and tradesmen throughout these settlements gave generously to help Sun's cause.

"Patriots like Deng Yum Nam from Maui sold his business to support the revolution and Sun Yat Sen's brother. Sun Mei sold his huge ranch in Maui to support the revolution."

Douglas Chong also had some insights into local Chinese culture and customs.

"During World War II, all Chinese language schools in Hawaii were closed, communication and goods from China ceased. The whole lifestyle of the Chinese community changed drastically. For instance, our all-night Chinese wakes and funerals ended because of blackout practices. We couldn't get foodstuffs from China and we ended up raiding the Night Blooming Cereus from the Punahou walls since we could not obtain dried lily flowers.

"The war altered our total lifestyle, customs, diet, practices and, in general, our Chinese heritage in the islands."

When the war ended, Chong says, a few Chinese leaders decided to do something about reviving their rich heritage bring back unity to the Chinese community and draw back the Chinese youths who lost out of their Chinese education.

"Thus the Narcissus Festival was born, and until today, it has remained one of the strongest teaching and reinforcing elements of our Chinese culture in Hawaii

"The festival not only includes a beauty pageant but provides activities at the Chinese Cultural Plaza such as food booths, Chinese arts and crafts, educational performances, lion dancing, physical and martial art demonstrations, and narcissus flower carving exhibitions."

In the past, it also involved cooking shows, fashion shows, trade shows and community shows to involve the 150 Chinese organizations in Honolulu.

"The first Narcissus Pageant was held in 1950," Chong recalls, "and has involved hundreds of Chinese women throughout the years.

"The festival was named Narcissus since this beautiful, sweet-scented blossom, along with the peach blossom and Buddha Hand Citron, are classic symbols of the Lunar New Year celebration in all China.

"Because cultivating the narcissus bulb occurs only in south China, we southern Chinese all propagate and carve the bulbs for display during the new year season. In the old days we had contests and exhibitions in Chinatown and it was quite an exciting event for the older generation."

I thank Douglas Chong for sharing his thoughts about Chinese in Hawaii and I invite my readers to share

theirs.

Bob Sigall's "The Companies We Keep 5" book has arrived, with stories from the last three years of Rearview Mirror. "The Companies We Keep 1 and 2" are also back in print.

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