

# An American Chinese in Houston

By Edward C. M. Chen

**M**y grandfather Yuen Yee Chan arrived in the United States in 1880 and worked for a company supplying food to Chinese railroad workers. He returned to China after the death of his first wife and brought his new wife, Yee Shee (Luk Oi), to California in 1908. My father, Edward King Tung Chen, was born in San Francisco on November 30, 1909. He graduated from Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, attended Columbia University, and was the editor of a Chinese language newspaper. He came to Galveston in 1932 as secretary to the first Vice Consul of the Republic of China for the southern United States. He married Janie Ng (1911-1965) in 1934, and they had two children, Margaret Fay Jane Chen Sham (1935-1989) and me.

E. K. T. Chen spent half his life a Texan and died a patriot in Washington, DC, on October 16, 1957, while preventing Chinese internment during the Korean War. This is the story of the extraordinary things accomplished by this ordinary son of Chinese immigrants that benefited all Americans and my efforts to continue his legacy. Born in 1937, I am the oldest native-Houstonian American Chinese male still in Houston. I prefer the term “American Chinese” because I am an American first.



*FBI identification photo for Special Agent Edward King Tung Chen.*

*All photos courtesy of Edward C. M. Chen unless otherwise noted.*

## Edward King Tung Chen in Texas: 1930-1957

The Chinese Exclusion Acts passed from 1880 to 1902 prevented laborers from coming to the United States but allowed scholars, merchants, and diplomats and their families to travel between the two countries. My maternal great-grandfather, Ming King Ng, was a food merchant who settled in San Antonio with his wife and two sons. My grandfather, Lin Don Ng, married Gin Shee in China where they had a son, Richard, and a daughter, Janie, my mother. He brought his family to San Antonio where they had five more children: Tom, Butch, Sam, Jane, and Sally. My father's parents in California had six children: Edward, Charles, John, George, David, and Daisy. They moved to Houston in 1935, which makes me a fourth-generation Texas Chinese and third-generation Houston Chinese.

In 1927 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Gong Lum v. Rice* upheld a Mississippi State Supreme Court decision that established Chinese were “colored” and could not insist on attending a “white” school.<sup>1</sup> In Texas, however, Asians were classified as whites. The 1917 class at Rice Institute included a Filipino and subsequent classes had Chinese and Japanese students. My uncle, Charles Chan, who was instructed to use “white” for his color/race on his application, received a basketball scholarship and in 1942 became the first Chinese man to graduate from Rice. His brother, George, was the second and my aunt, Jane Eng, was the third Chinese woman admitted to Rice.

My father's work to protect the rights of American Chinese began in 1932 when Vice Consul T. L. Ouang and Secretary Edward King Tung Chen established a diplomatic office of the Republic of China in Galveston. After the office moved to Houston a year later, my parents and the Ouangs became the first Chinese accepted by the larger society, receiving numerous invitations to social events.

Three years later, Oklahoma Governor Ernest W. Marland invited E. K. T. Chen to Oklahoma to observe the trial of Lois Thompson, who was charged with attempting to murder a Chinese student, Daniel Shaw. Twelve Tahlequah farmers found Thompson guilty. This verdict overturned an 1883 ruling by Texas's Judge Roy Bean, the “Law West of the Pecos,” which held that no law existed against killing a Chinese. Shaw noted, “The state of Oklahoma has



*Edward K. T. Chen and Janie Ng (center of photo) posing with family members at their wedding.*

This article was written as a tribute to my father, Edward King Tung Chen, for Father's Day, June 21, 2015. I have authored two applications for Texas historical markers that cite his accomplishments, along with those of Rose Don Wu and Albert C. B. Gee who gave rise to the Houston Chinese community that, like the Phoenix, has arisen from the ashes of the Chinese Exclusion Acts.





*First officers of the Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, November 1954. The first four presidents were E. K. T. Chen, at podium; Albert Gee, two left of podium; Charles Chan, far left; and Hobert Joe, seventh from left.*

proven that the intimate friendship between my country and the United States shall be maintained.”<sup>2</sup>

Owners of Texas grocery stores, who felt competition from Chinese merchants during the Depression, sponsored a bill before the Texas Senate in 1937 to escheat urban property owned by Asians. E. K. T. Chen and Rose Wu, a native of the Arizona Territory and resident of San Antonio, testified against the bill in the Texas Senate, and it was killed in committee. Wu noted, “My grandfather was one of twelve hundred Chinese who helped to build the rails through Texas. I am an American citizen but I do not forget my blood. Everyone can tell I am Chinese by my color but not everyone knows I am a citizen.”<sup>3</sup>

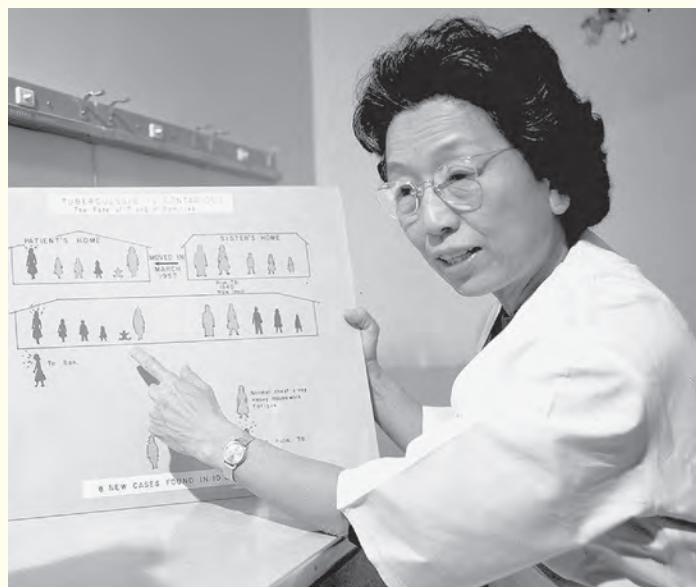
On April 8, 1940, my grandmother, Mrs. Y. Y. Chan, became the first Chinese woman to pass away in Houston. Dr. E. D. Head, pastor of the First Baptist Church, officiated her service. After that, my father helped organize a Chinese Sunday school. Its first meeting, held on May 5, 1940, marked the beginning of Houston’s first Chinese church. My mother taught English and Chinese there, and my Uncle Charles designed the first church building at 1823 Lamar Street.

The first local Chinese college graduate, E. K. T. Chen (AA, 1939; BA, 1940; MA, 1943) was cited as an outstanding scholar and became the first Asian college instructor in Houston. He taught Chinese, Spanish, history, and government part-time at the University of Houston night school and started extension courses in Galveston. In 1949, he became full-time faculty and the city’s first Asian tenured professor. He was joined at UH by professors Joyce and Paul Fan, Henry C. Chen, and C. J. Huang, and at Baylor University College of Medicine by Dr. Katharine Hsu. The professors organized the Chinese University Club in 1950. Today, its successor, the Chinese Professional Club, seeks to improve professional knowledge and business skills, promote the welfare of the community by raising funds for scholarships, and advance mutual understanding through social engagement.<sup>4</sup> My father also became the first Asian to appear weekly on Houston television, serving as a panelist on KUHT, Channel 8.

George Fuermann of the *Houston Post* wrote of my father on February 13, 1952, “E. K. T. Chen is a professor of political science at the University of Houston. Once a deputy Chinese Consul here, he is frank and outspoken. Far

from wealthy, he is in his 40s and is spokesman for a small but influential group of Chinese. Albert Gee, a partner in the Ding How restaurant in his 30s, is Chinatown’s unofficial mayor. Brilliant and energetic, his goal is to organize a Houston chapter of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA).” Albert Gee was born in Michigan and also lived in New Orleans and China. He settled in Houston in 1936, where he married my aunt Jane Eng and became a respected restaurateur and community leader.

Before 1950, the majority of Houston’s five hundred Chinese worked in the grocery or restaurant businesses because no local law, dental, or medical schools accepted Chinese students. The Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), founded in 1954, helped change this.<sup>5</sup> Early presidents included E. K. T. Chen, Albert Gee, Charles Chan, Hobert Joe, Henry Lee,



*Dr. Katharine H. K. Hsu revolutionized tuberculosis treatment by prescribing Isoniazid as a preventive measure, administering it based on positive skin tests prior to active signs of TB appearing, and tracing additional cases by testing those with whom infected children had contact. Hsu became Houston’s first Director of Tuberculosis Control, serving from 1964 to 1968. By the 1970s, when TB no longer posed a public threat, she turned her research to asthma and respiratory disorders in children, formulating new standards and treatment protocols.*

*Photo courtesy of Baylor College of Medicine Archives.*





*E. K. T. Chen taught Chinese to FBI students from 1955 to 1957.*

Wallace Gee, and Sam Eng. My uncle Sam Eng, who attended South Texas College of Law, was the first Asian judge in Houston.

During the Korean War, the FBI contacted E. K. T. Chen about the government's plans to intern the Chinese. He convinced them that most of the Chinese were loyal Americans and that he would help identify those who were not to prevent the internment of innocent citizens. He prepared a white paper, "Potentialities of Chinese Communist Intelligence Activities in the United States," leading to the Communist Control Act of 1954 that outlawed the Communist Party in the United States.<sup>6</sup> He taught FBI agents Cantonese so that they could continue his work.

In 1957, my father developed ulcers and passed away in Washington, DC, at the age of forty-eight.

### **Edward C. M. Chen, Student to Professor: 1957 to 1980**

After the death of my father, Dean George Holmes Richter, my organic chemistry professor at Rice Institute, found me a part-time job at Shell Development until I graduated in 1959. I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Houston, where I met and married Eugenie Han in 1960. After joining the Army and completing basic training at Ft. Hood, Texas, I was deployed to Huntsville, Alabama, and became a rocket scientist under Werner Von Braun. He said that we needed to protect the



*Edward C. M. Chen and Senator Hiram Fong from Hawaii at the national CACA convention in Houston, 1967.*

country, which included development of an anti-ballistic missile (ABM). Hence, I developed an ABM that used a torpedo-like gun to shoot a "bullet" and, therefore, required only enough fuel to intercept an enemy missile.

While in Alabama, my daughter Karen Sue Mae was born in 1962 at the Redstone Arsenal hospital. She became the third generation of Rice graduates in our family by earning a degree with majors in electrical engineering, computer science, and math sciences, and married another Rice graduate, Randy King.

In 1966, I became the first Texas-born Chinese to receive a doctorate in Houston. The Republic of China designated me as one of five outstanding overseas Chinese. After working in industry, I started the chemistry programs at UH-Clear Lake and UH-Victoria. I became a full-time professor and eventually published over 120 technical articles. My son, Edward Sam Don Chen, born in 1968, received a doctorate from UH and is now at Baylor College of Medicine, the third generation Professor Ed Chen in Houston.



*Albert Gee and his wife, Jane Eng, pose with an early winner of the Miss Chinatown pageant, which they helped found in 1970. Albert served as local CACA president from 1955 to 1958 and national president in 1971 and 1972. Jane led the auxiliary and later became the first woman president of the Houston CACA. In 1961, Albert and Jane Gee helped organize the Houston Taipei Sister City Society to promote cultural and commercial ties between the cities.*

*Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N4307-001.*

The Houston CACA came into national prominence in the 1960s after the election of the first American Chinese senator, Hiram Fong of Hawaii, the labeling of existing immigration laws as "nearly intolerable" by President John F. Kennedy, and the 1964 election of President Lyndon Johnson. Albert Gee represented the CACA and helped secure passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.<sup>7</sup> The youngest person elected president of the Houston chapter, I presided over the first national CACA convention held in Houston in 1967, which welcomed Senator Fong as the keynote speaker. Albert Gee became the first president of the National CACA from outside California before he passed away in 1978.





*On Leong Chinese Merchants Association (which translates to Secure Prosperity & Good Conduct) was established in 1893 as a national mutual aid society for early immigrant Chinese men to provide support and social services for businesses and laborers to act as a buffer against discrimination directed toward the Chinese. The Houston chapter filed with the Texas Secretary of State in 1944, although it is known to have existed prior to that time. The building designed by Charles Chan opened in 1951 at 801 Chartres Street, serving as a meeting place for festivals and celebrations. The venue provided meeting rooms, a ballroom, and stores. It was torn down in 2011.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS-1248-0404.

Calvin Bow Tong Lee, an American Chinese educator who served as chancellor of the University of Maryland, Baltimore from 1971 to 1976, described other activities of the Houston CACA. For example, when a Chinese girl applied for an oil company job at the same time as her white classmate, the company hired the white girl. After insisting on an explanation, the Chinese girl was told the company turned her down because she was Chinese. CACA members “quietly stopped buying gas from that company.” Six months later, after a sales manager inquired why Chinese were not using their credit cards, the company “liberalized [its] employment policy.” Similarly, after a statewide

grocers’ association prohibited non-whites from becoming officers, the Chinese resigned. The organization changed its constitution in 1965, and a Chinese, Hobert Joe, joined the board of directors.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1940s my father served as president of the first local umbrella Chinese organization, the Wah Kew of Houston. In 1965 five civic and family organizations formed a successor, the Federation of Chinese Organizations of Houston, which I chaired twice. In 1990 the Association of Chinese Organizations of Houston (ACOH) elected me co-chair, while president of the Chen Family Association. When President Carter recognized Communist China in 1979, my wife and I, along with former consuls, formed the Texas Taiwan Cultural and Trade Association that joined the ACOH. The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Houston, established by Congress in 1979, continues unofficial diplomatic relations with the Republic of China.

### **The Professor Becomes a Historian: 1980-2007**

After my grandmother Gin Shee Ng passed away in 1980, I began to search for my roots. Following my father as a newspaper columnist, I wrote articles for the *Southwest Chinese Journal* and *U.S. Asian News*. My wife translated some of these for *The Chinese Voice*. My aunt Daisy Chen Gee and I also started collecting oral histories of Chinese in Houston. A history of the Chinese in Houston, which I wrote, appeared in Rice professor Fred von der Mehden’s 1984 book, *The Ethnic Groups in Houston*.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, I co-chaired the Sesquicentennial Activities of the Chinese in Houston. I was appointed to the Harris County Historical Commission and became known as the unofficial historian of the local Chinese community.

My father said he was possibly the first Asian Republican



*A monument commemorating the 3,000 Chinese workers who helped build the Southern Pacific Railway on the centennial of its completion was unveiled in Hermann Park on June 29, 1983.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1983-1248-3.





in Texas since he conducted a Republican primary in 1934. Continuing this legacy, I chaired the Houston Young Chinese American Council and served as president of the Chinese American Voter's League. Beverley Clark, the descendant of a nineteenth-century Chinese railroad worker and his African American wife, was elected to the Houston City Council in 1989, the first council member with Asian ancestry. The next year, I was nominated to fill the unexpired term of Judson Robinson Jr. but did not receive enough votes. Subsequently, local voters elected me the first Chinese chair of Republican Precinct 175 in 1991, Harris County Republican Party treasurer in 1992, and vice chair in 1994. With George Strake, I also helped establish the Texas Asian Republican Caucus (TARC). My wife, Eugenie, has been president of the Braes Republican Women, the oldest Republican Club in Houston. In 1998, TARC honored Governor George W. Bush and recognized my father and Rose Wu as the first Asian Republicans.

The City of Houston redrew its council districts to accommodate the newly annexed and predominantly white Kingwood suburb in 1997. Along with eleven other plaintiffs, I participated in a case to demonstrate that the new districts constituted racial gerrymandering, ignoring the one person-one vote principle, by diluting the strength of minority districts by population and voting age. The District Court and Appeals Court granted summary judgment to the City in *Chen et al v. City of Houston*, and the Supreme Court refused to hear the case, although Justice Clarence Thomas dissented.<sup>10</sup>

### **Into the Future: 2007 and Beyond**

The Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University, created with a \$15 million endowment from the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation, established the Houston Asian American Archives (HAAA) in 2008. Recognizing that I had not accomplished as much in the fifty years since my father's death as he did in his twenty-five years as an American Chinese in Houston, I deposited his papers in the HAAA. Two Texas historical markers were dedicated in 2009 and

2014 as permanent public testaments to the contributions of my father, Rose Wu, and Albert Gee.

A 1957 UH Faculty Assembly proclamation quoted in my father's historical marker application states, "Professor Edward K. T. Chen was a man of great ability and tremendous energy...Thousands of students at one time or another received instruction from him in American Government, International Relations, or concerning the cultural and political institutions of the Far East....Professor Chen was always regarded as a loyal and esteemed friend and colleague by members of his department, by the whole faculty, and by the University administration. He had become so much a part of the life of the University and the City that his place could never be filled." James E. Sheriff, one of my father's FBI students, described him, saying, "Undoubtedly here was a man who devoted much of his life and attention to the welfare of his country. In a way I felt that he gave his life for his country in teaching us to read, write, speak, and understand Chinese."<sup>11</sup>

Much of the significance of the life of Edward King Tung Chen can be seen in the vibrant Asian community in Houston. A diplomat with the skills of a newspaperman, he introduced the Chinese to the citizens of Houston. He established the first Chinese Church in Houston, was instrumental in founding many Asian organizations, served as the first president of the Houston Chinese American Citizens Alliance, and helped prevent the internment of the American Chinese during the Korean War. My father worked throughout his life to increase the visibility of Chinese and American Chinese. Through his efforts and those of other American-born Chinese, economic and social injustices began to be righted.

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