Vietnamese and Chinese American Cultures: Destination Houston

By Jessica Chew

For many Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, an international refuge meant hope for survival. Other Asian ethnicities, including the Chinese, looked to the United States with optimism for a better future. Several Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants found their new home in Houston, raising first-generation, American-born children while trying to preserve a piece of their old society. Vietnam War refugees faced many taxing struggles, such as cultural assimilation, which included the difficult tasks of learning the English language and American customs and adapting to a new and developing Asian culture in the United States.

Over twenty years after the fall of Saigon, Houston became only the second place in the United States, after Sacramento, California, to erect a memorial commemorating the Vietnam War.[1] For Vietnamese Houstonians, this memorial served as a cultural community core where they could gather and remember home. From the original, small Asiantown in the downtown area, the Chinese and Vietnamese communities today have expanded into the Bellaire area, which is generally bounded by Fondren, Beechnut, Westpark, and Highway 6. It acts as the main Vietnamese-Chinese center for Asian Americans, where grocery stores, restaurants, and cultural events offer up a bittersweet taste of home.

Coming to the United States

My mother Suzanne Chew is an immigrant of the Vietnam War. Chew was only a child at the time of the war, but she still remembers the "bombing[s] every night … so [her family] always [had] to … go down to the basement … to sleep there. And sometime[s] the siren on the street [went off,] and kid[s had] to get out [of] school to go home because the school was shut down." She says that the Việt Cộng raided the villages, causing many people to go to the beaches to escape by boat. When South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu left for London with his daughter, Chew's family decided to flee since her uncle worked with the government. Chew and her family were given a military helicopter escort from Vietnam to Paris, where they lived for about six months.[2]

Relatives in New York persuaded the Chews to come to the United States, promising them better opportunities and support than they would receive in France. The Chew family entered the United States as immigrants through California, settling first in Needles and then Los Angeles. Fortunately, Chew knew some English and French, since Vietnam had been a French colony, and she had studied at the International School there. Chew says that initially in Needles, her family had little difficulty "in the Asian community, because we [were] speaking the language." But in Arcadia Middle School, she said, "I have a difficulty to fit in because I was Asian. … [M]ost [of] the people there [were] half white and half Hispanic, and they either [spoke] Spanish or English, and we [knew] just a little bit in English, so we really have a hard time." Furthermore, the school placed her in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class that focused on Spanish-speaking individuals because an "English and Chinese or English and Vietnamese" course did not exist.[3] The Vietnamese-Chinese community was nearly absent in Needles, but in Los Angeles, Chew found a larger Chinese community with the majority of refugees coming from Hong Kong or Taiwan rather than Vietnam.

Suzanne Chew with siblings and cousin on the docks in Vietnam, 1970.

All photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

Suzanne Chew (center) with her younger brother Steve (left) and neighbor Christine (right) at the Transco Tower, now Williams Tower, near Loop 610 and Richmond in Houston, 1981.

In 1981 Chew, then in her early twenties, and her brother moved to Houston, Texas, after hearing about its economic opportunities. Her brother opened a body shop, focusing on mechanical work to service the numerous Vietnamese shrimping boats. When Chew first arrived, the Leland area downtown had a small Asiantown that combined Vietnamese-Chinese cultures. She remembers the area having a couple of Chinese restaurants and that most Vietnamese people living there were fishermen. Over thirty years later, Chew continues to live in the Houston area, where she raises her American-born children with an integrated Vietnamese-Chinese cultural background.

The Vietnam War and the Incoming Refugees

Others, like Chew, fled to the United States with hopes of fulfilling the American dream. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War lasted from 1954, supporting Ngo Dinh Diem, to the fall of Saigon in April 1975, resulting in about 130,000 refugees coming to the United States in three waves. The fall of Saigon marked the first wave of refugees who had American political connections, were well educated, or already had family in America. The next wave included less educated refugees, sometimes called "boat people." The last and most recent wave consisted of political detainees and "Amerasians," which were the "children of U.S. soldiers born to Vietnamese mothers during the war." In the 1990 Census, Texas was second only to California in the number of Vietnamese residents, making up 11.3 percent of the total U.S. Vietnamese population.[4]

In Houston, the shrimping business acted as a central part of the Vietnamese community, which was familiar with the trade. Many American fishermen feared the competition from local Vietnamese shrimpers, inciting conflict on several occasions during the early 1980s. In 1981 American residents, including members of the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, set fire to Vietnamese boats and hung a Vietnamese fisherman in effigy from a deck. The Vietnamese responded by filing a lawsuit against the KKK, saying it had violated the fishermen's civil rights. The case resulted in decreased hostilities but tensions remained.[5]

Erected in 2012, this statue depicts a Vietnamese refugee family in honor and remembrance of the experiences of those who fled from their native land. The statue is located in the parking lot of the Universal Shopping Center plaza on Bellaire Boulevard.

In 1987 Hermann Park hosted a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Tour with a replica of the Vietnam War Memorial wall in Washington, DC. Many people placed flowers and small American flags along the wall to pay their respects. More recently, in 2005, Vietnamese Americans in Houston funded a Vietnam War memorial for the Universal Shopping Center, located on Bellaire Boulevard.[6]

Today, most of Houston's Vietnamese community has moved to the Milam area in Midtown, between McGowen and Holman, nicknamed "Little Saigon," where they have opened up Vietnamese restaurants and grocery stores. Radio Saigon, founded by Vietnam War refugees Duong Phuc and Vu Thanh Thuy in the 1980s, broadcasts in Vietnamese to help others like themselves cope with assimilating into a new environment. Bilingual street signs, which arose in 1998 in the Vietnamese communities, further ease the acculturation process. With the gentrification of Midtown, Little Saigon expanded into areas in southwest Houston, including along Bellaire Boulevard and Boone Road.[7]

Members of the Ku Klux Klan and others set fire to a boat representing Vietnamese shrimping boats, 1980. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1980-14-015.

Chinese Beginnings

Over a century before the waves of Vietnamese immigration, Chinese immigrants had come to the United States working in mining, agriculture, and construction of the railroads. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, a small number of Chinese came to Texas looking for work. The *Galveston News* supported them by advertising the Chinese as "the best, cheapest and most reliable laborers ever known." The first Chinese, numbering almost three hundred, came to work for the Houston and Texas Central Railway, but they were mysteriously discharged and had to find work elsewhere. The second wave of a few thousand Chinese immigrants arrived in 1881 with the Southern Pacific Railroad, but after the completion of its railroad lines in the region, only about 710 Chinese immigrants remained in Texas by 1890.[8]

The 1880 U.S. Census was the first to include Chinese residents. At that time, most Chinese could only get jobs at cafes and hand laundries because people labeled those as women's work. In the 1890s the introduction of the steam laundry to Texas displaced the hand-washing Chinese, with the last hand laundry closing in 1943. Displaced workers moved into American-cuisine restaurants because Houstonians had not yet accepted the exotic flavors of Chinese foods. Coming to Houston in larger numbers during the Depression in the 1930s, the Chinese opened restaurants and grocery stores on the east side of downtown Houston. A wave of skilled Chinese workers arrived in the post-World War II era as Houston offered job opportunities with its "oil companies, universities, medical centers, and NASA."[9]

In the 1930s the University of Houston saw its first Chinese student graduate, Edward K. T. Chen, who went on to become the first Chinese-American professor in Houston. The University of Houston also hosted an exhibition in 1980 celebrating the "Centennial of the History of Chinese in Houston since 1880," compiled by Chen's son, Edward C. M. Chen.[10]

Two main groups of Chinese exist in Houston: the Cantonese-speaking Chinese, who assimilated into the American lifestyle, and the Mandarin-speaking populace, who represent a more elitist culture. Because of this division, Chinatown started off as a small section located along Chartres Street and Highway 59 North. Chinatown included a Lucky Inn Restaurant, Sun-Deluxe Café, and an Asiatic Import Company, specializing in general Asian merchandise.[11]

The Chinese in Houston became more readily receptive to American assimilation after the repeal of exclusion laws in 1943 and the shift to communism in their homeland in 1949. Recently, the Houston Chinatown Council redeveloped old Chinatown with "a farmer's market, community center, [and] theater," near the George R. Brown Convention Center, but since the 1980s, the Bellaire area has dominated as the "new suburban Chinatown."[12]

Vietnamese-Chinese Traditions

Other than language, a major cultural aspect that sets the Vietnamese-Chinese apart from Americans is cuisine. Chew believes that the Vietnamese-Chinese foods of the Bellaire area and downtown Houston create a "Chinese mix," much like the Tex-Mex foods combining Mexican foods with a Texas flair, "because they cannot be too authentic … but [they are] pretty close." For example, Chew thinks that anchovy sauce, a dip created using the "little fish and shrimp paste mix," found in Vietnam is slightly different from the less potent *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) in Houston. Vietnamese food also shows a strong French influence, since Vietnam was a French colony. One of the most popular sandwiches is the *banh mi*, which has grilled meats served in a mini, toasted French baguette.[13]

Rather than the Vietnamese *thịt nướng* (grilled bbq pork) in *banh mi, xa xiu* (grilled bbq pork) with a honey-like sauce and *siu yuk* (roasted pork) fill the butchers' racks in Chinese grocery stores and are normally served with rice. These foods, along with roast duck, are often found at traditional cemetery ceremonies.

Suzanne Chew's family gathers to pay respects to ancestors at the cemetery in Vietnam, Easter 1965.

Chinese and Vietnamese cultures share a belief in spiritual continuity between life and death. The living "transfer food, money, and goods" to the dead in exchange for gifts of "luck, wealth, and progeny." During a funeral ceremony, several steps are followed in the Chinese customs: mourners must "wear all white" rather than the American all black, the corpse must be bathed, material possessions are transferred by burning models of them, and other rituals are observed to help move the spirit. During the ceremony, Chew says mourners "cannot sit [in chairs]; we have to sit on the floor and bow and kneel" to pay respects to the deceased. Furthermore, members of the deceased's family place altars inside their homes and burn incense to call their ancestors for meals. During Chinese Easter many families visit their ancestors in cemeteries bringing feasts of chicken, duck, fish, and pork. They also serve wine and tea and burn incense and paper. During the visit, Chew must "share the food with the family and burn the paper[s]" that contain the names of her ancestors to tell them that she is giving them her respects.[14]

Another big celebration that both the Vietnamese and Chinese observe is the Lunar New Year, which follows the lunar calendar. In 1988 KUHT aired a Vietnamese New

Year Special featuring the Year of the Dragon. Several locations in Houston host Chinese New Year celebrations, where they put together lion dances, food tastings, and a Miss Chinatown competition. At the celebrations, vendors hand out slips of paper that tell people their fortunes for the year and sell lucky money trees. Sets of two or more people in a red and gold lion costume attempt to get a ball of green cabbage and *lai see* (red envelope, usually filled with money) found on doors of businesses; after "consuming" the greens, the lion then "spits" them out at the door (but keeps the envelope), symbolizing good fortune. The people inside the costume bat the lion's eyelashes, move its mouth, and do tricks to make the lion seem alive. In both Vietnamese and Chinese cultures, family members have a feast, including "noodles [for] long life to live," lotus, and sweet rice. Families like Chew's also clean out the house to sweep away the bad luck and "wear the new clothes" to welcome in the New Year.[15]

Suzanne Chew has noticed that growing up in America has influenced some of her native customs. For instance, rather than eating rice every day, her family eats a wide variety of foods such as pasta or pizza. Moreover, her parents were traditional Buddhists who went to temple in Vietnam, but when the family moved here, "they live and they look and they see … change is good … and they thought Christian wasn't bad at all." They embraced freedom of religion and allowed Chew and her siblings to become Christians.[16]

Chew returned to Vietnam in 2008 and realized that a lot had changed since she left in 1974. Saigon exhibits American and European influences, with fast food chains and high-end hotels. However, the residents in Vietnam still speak in the same way and exhibit the same clothing habits, wearing pajamas as both day and sleep attire. Chew believes that for some Vietnamese-Chinese she has seen in Houston at places like Hong Kong City Mall, "their culture [was] not changing at all [in] the way they dress, they eat the food, they sleep, the way they talk, and their education" because they did not feel the need to learn English.[17]

This outdoor altar at the Vietnamese Buddhist Center is located in Southwest Houston. The VBC allows Asian Americans to explore their heritage by offering language classes, holding Buddhist festivals, and providing traditional vegetarian food to hungry guests.

Most people have moved out of the original Asiantown. Some traveled to New Orleans to follow their fishing careers, and others opened up restaurants and grocery stores in new locations while their children strived for higher education. Chew explains that life in Houston is "completely different from when … I go back to Vietnam and see how [much] difficulty" they have there. Life here is good because people can better their lives.[18]

A group performs a traditional Lion Dance at an outdoor celebration near the intersection of Chartres and Capitol to celebrate the Chinese New Year in February of 1965. This Lion Dance features the lion, a representation of Buddha, and percussion instruments.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1965-0425-006.

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