



What is HAAA? A Nine-Year Retrospective

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This article discusses the Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA) in the context of recent scholarly writing on immigration. What does this literature tell us about the global patterns and processes of immigration, past and present, and how does it relate to the specific historical conditions under which Asian people have immigrated to the United States over time and across space? In particular, what have been the experiences of Asian immigrants who found their way to Houston during the past century or so, and how do the lives of these individuals (and often those of their families) fit into the larger picture of Asian migration? The HAAA project has had, and will continue to have, an important role to play in documenting and interpreting this complex process: first, by acquiring historical materials of all sorts—including personal correspondence, official and unofficial documents, family records, newspaper accounts and photographs—and making it available online to both scholars and the general public; and second, by conducting in-depth personal interviews, which are then made available as videotapes and audiotapes and/or carefully edited transcripts. As many as a dozen student interns are working on these materials at any given time, giving their labor to the project, but taking away a wealth of knowledge and experience into the bargain. In short, the HAAA project promotes cutting-edge academic research, encourages creative learning of all sorts, and helps in the development of productive relationships between Rice University and the Asian American community of greater Houston.

Introductory Remarks

Unless one is of American Indian ancestry, everyone in the United States is an immigrant or a descendant from one, regardless of whether that person came by land or sea, by choice or via conscription, seeking political asylum or the possibility of improved life prospects. While

Europeans and African Americans dominated the flow of migrants into the United States from 1500 until the early twentieth century, a radical shift in migration patterns occurred in the 1960s. Instead of people moving from “densely settled countries at the earliest stages of industrialization to sparsely settled and rapidly industrializing countries,” people began to travel from “densely-settled countries at the earliest stages of industrialization to densely-settled and mature post-industrialized countries.”¹ With respect to the “sending” countries, there was a shift from Europe to Africa, Asia and Latin America, while the “receiving” countries now include Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden and the Netherlands.² As part of this global phenomenon, by the 1980s, more than eighty percent of the 7.3 million immigrants in the United States originated from Latin America and Asia.³ By the end of the twentieth century, the proportion of people born outside of the U.S. approximated ten percent of the general population, and one in five persons in the U.S. is now either a first or second-generation immigrant.⁴

Today, greater Houston, with a population of nearly 6.5 million residents, has become the most ethnically and racially diverse metropolitan area in the country. Its eight adjacent counties—Harris, Galveston, Fort Bend, Liberty, Brazoria, Montgomery, Chambers, and Waller—contain the eighth largest Asian American population in the U.S.⁵ Asians account for 6.7 percent and nineteen percent respectively of the total populations of Harris and Fort Bend counties, and the latter recently earned the distinction of “coming closer than any other county in the United States to having an equal division among the nation’s four major ethnic communities [Anglo, African-American, Hispanic and Asian].”⁶ A recent article in the Huffington Post titled “A Snapshot Of How Asian-Americans Are Changing The South” quoted statistics from an Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders ([AAPI](#)) survey showing that from 2000 to 2016, the Asian population in Texas

¹ Douglas S. Massey, “Why Does Immigration Occur? A Theoretical Synthesis,” in Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind, eds., *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, vol. 1 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 34.

² Massey, in Hirschman, Kasinitz and De Wind, eds., 35.

³ Hirschman, Kasinitz and De Wind, eds., 1: 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Steven Klineberg and Jie Wu, *Houston Area Asian Survey: Diversity and Transformation among Asians in Houston* (Houston: Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2013), 9.

⁶ Klineberg and Wu, 9.

rose 132 percent.⁷ Yet despite this demographic diversity, documentation of Asian American settlement in Texas is comparatively scarce.⁸

Unlike other cities with sizeable Asian American populations, until recently, Houston lacked a repository of Asian American life stories and archival materials that was both systematic, scholarly and representative of diverse Asian ethnicities.⁹ Rice's Houston Asian American Archive ([HAAA](#)) was specifically designed to fill this gap. HAAA is an oral history project that seeks to document the lives of Asian Americans in greater Houston. The project currently involves a year-round student internship program, and we have so far accumulated over two hundred interviews, averaging ninety minutes in length. The interviews are fully transcribed, checked twice for accuracy, and then processed through the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer ([OHMS](#)) that was developed by the University of Kentucky's Nunn Center for Oral History. These materials are all available online at www.haaa.rice.edu.

The HAAA project reflects the scholarly orientation of the Chao Center for Asian Studies ([CCAS](#)), which emphasizes—in its research programs, its courses and its community outreach—the transnational circulation of people, products, culture and ideas, erasing the distinction imposed by the geographical demarcation of Asia and Asian-America. Our stories capture specific moments in time, but they also illustrate broad themes in the complex history of international migration, offering a glimpse into the global phenomenon of human resettlement as well as the particular circumstances of immigrants to Houston.

In the early history of Asian immigration to the United States, migrants were often pushed out of their home environments by economic and/or political distress and pulled by the

⁷ Angel Chen, "A Snapshot Of How Asian-Americans Are Changing The South," *Huffington Post*, March 28, 2018 URL: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asian-american-growth-south_us_5a948133e4b0699553cb5834, accessed 10/4/18.

⁸ For some sources on the early history of Chinese migration into Texas, see Edward Rhoads, "The Chinese in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 81 (July 1977) and Edward C.M. Chen "Into the Future Together: Two Lunar Centuries of Progress 1877–1997: Houstonians of Asian Heritage," (ITTF) booklet prepared for Houston's Texas Commerce Bank, 1997. Other valuable sources include Nestor Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston" in Janet Salzman Chafetz and Helen Rose Ebaugh, eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (AltaMira Press, 2000); Marilyn D. Brady, *The Asian Texans* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); and Irwin A. Tang, ed., *Asian Texans: Our Histories and Our Lives* (Austin: The it [?] Works Press, 2008).

⁹ For some years, the University of Houston has had an Asian American Studies Center (<https://www.uh.edu/aasc/>), but its research orientation has been confined to "Chinatown Development History," "Chinese Cultural and Transnational Understanding," and "Getting Americans to Know Chinese Culture."

promise of a better life in the new society.¹⁰ Often, they had to make perilous journeys by sea and were forced to make agonizing cultural choices upon arrival. How they acculturated and navigated the treacherous legal and political landscape of their new homeland is testimonial to humanity's deep resourcefulness, ingenuity, grit, and luck. Their lives were shaped by the convoluted legal restrictions that came into existence since 1882 and offered up a mirror to America's love-hate relationship with immigration. More recent immigrants have also experienced hardships—in particular, Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s. But before discussing this process as it relates to Texas, and Houston in particular, we may benefit from a quick review of the literature on migration, which should help to contextualize the material in our archive.

Approaches to Immigration, A Brief Overview

Referring to ancient civilizations that conscripted massive number of laborers to build spectacular monuments, A.K.M. Ahsan Ullah observed that “population movement...has occurred since the daybreak of human history.”¹¹ Given its timeless significance, how do we conceive of today's patterns and processes of migration? Theories and models for conceptualizing migration abound, based on disparate historical sociological, economic, global, political, cultural and gender perspectives.¹² Although scholars of migration all agree that there is no single unifying theory that can explain all aspects of migration, a synthesis drawn from various disciplines may help us to conceptualize this movement of people across space and time.¹³

Douglas Massey and Ullah both agree that any theoretical consideration of migration must take into account four factors: (1) the structural forces that led to emigration from one country or culture to another; (2) the structural elements of the receiving country or culture; (3) the personal motivations of the migrants; and (4) the “social and economic structures that arise to

¹⁰ See Eurostat, “Push and Pull Factors of International Migration: A Comparative Report,” *Eurostat* (2000), 1–161. For a summary of other theories of international migration, see 3–6. For early efforts to develop an empirical approach to migration, see Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” *Demography* 3.1 (1966): 47–57 and Guido Dorigo and Waldo Tobler, “Push-Pull Migration Laws,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73.1 (March 1983): 1–17.

¹¹ A.K.M. Ahsan Ullah, *Population Migration and Asia: Theories and Practice* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2010), 7.

¹² Ullah, 8.

¹³ Graziano Battistella ed. *Global and Asian Perspectives on International Migration* (New York: Springer, 2014), 2.

connect areas of out- and in-migration.”¹⁴ Implicit in this calculus is the notion that all four variables operate under specific historical conditions, which naturally influence structures and motivations.

Massey’s syncretic approach to migration draws upon a version of world systems theory. World systems theory eschews the traditional emphasis on nation states, and focuses instead on the idea of interregional, transnational and global economic systems or networks. It offers a historical-structural view of a world in which global markets dictate the flow of capital, labor and raw materials in relation to “core” and “peripheral” regions. Core areas enjoy skilled labor and focus on capital-intensive production, while peripheral areas rely primarily on low-skill, labor-intensive production and provide raw materials to core areas. To this foundational explanation, Massey adds a “segmented labor market theory,” based on the idea that immigrants from peripheral areas will supply a constant built-in demand for inexpensive and flexible labor by the advanced industrial “core” societies. Complementing these two economic theories of immigration is a neoclassical macroeconomics explanation of how workers, if they are able, will move from low-wage and labor-surplus areas to high-wage and labor-poor areas, based on the migrants’ personal cost-benefit calculations. At the same time, there is often an accompanying flow of capital from a surplus country to one that is capital-poor.¹⁵

In examining the structural links between sending and receiving countries, Massey invokes a “social capital” theory, describing ways in which migrants deploy their network ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin as resources that mitigate the costs associated with migration. This social capital approach emphasizes the idea of collective decision-making; that is, decisions about migration are not made by an individual alone, but by an entire household or a “larger unit of interrelated people,” as a way to maximize income and minimize risk. Finally, Massey factors into his approach to immigration what may be called “cumulative causation theory,” in which each act of migration encourages subsequent migrations by expanding and enriching the social structure in the host country or culture, eventually turning migration into a self-perpetuating act.¹⁶

The one element least studied in the field of immigration, Massey avers, is the role of the state. This omission is especially critical when we try to understand the experiences of political

¹⁴ Massey, in Hirschman, Kasinitz and De Wind, eds., 50.

¹⁵ Massey, in Hirschman, Kasinitz and De Wind, eds., 35–50.

¹⁶ Massey, in Hirschman, Kasinitz and De Wind, eds., 45.

refugees. The circumstances of their escape and resettlement are inextricably linked not only to the policies of both the sending and receiving states, but also to those of world organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Whether or not these issues rise to the level of a theory, political factors and their impact on refugees and immigrants need to be included in any discussion of international migration, as we shall see.

At a more granular level, the classic assimilationist model of cultural adaptation advanced by Milton Gordon has been giving way to a pluralistic and integrative approach to the study of migration. In the past, immigrants to America and other “Western” countries were seen as embracing the mainstream culture (Anglo-Saxon White Protestant) by eliding their own culture and language as a way to achieve rapid social integration and acceptance. Today immigrants find a more welcoming environment, in which they can retain their heritage and claim a share of the cultural capital of their host societies.¹⁷ But they may still face hard choices. Although immigrants may be incorporated into certain areas of Western society, the “differential exclusion model” suggests that they may be denied access to others, such as welfare benefits, citizenship, and political participation.¹⁸

An Overview of Asian Migration to the United States

With this general background, we can now look briefly at the way some of these patterns and problems have manifested themselves in the history of Asian migration to America. As mentioned above, the role of the state, both in the sending and receiving countries, is one of the most important factors in immigration. In the U.S. as a receiving country, a plethora of federal immigration laws, pieces of state legislation, city ordinances, and neighborhood association by-laws all come to bear on immigrants’ quality of life. A brief overview of the history of U.S. immigration law reveals the complexity and arbitrariness of these legal decisions and their real-life consequences. The first major immigration law in the U.S., the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act,

¹⁷ Ullah, 10.

¹⁸ Ullah, 15. The “differential exclusion model” describes a situation whereby immigrants are granted access to selective services and institutions in their host society, either legally or informally. The assumption on the part of the receiving country is that the migrants are there only temporarily, as in the cases of transient laborers or refugees accorded temporary protection, for example.

was drafted to target the Chinese. It suspended the entry of Chinese labor for ten years, thereby legitimating the exclusion of a particular group from the United States based on race and ethnicity.¹⁹ Although the Civil Rights Act of 1875 proclaimed “equal and exact justice for all, of whatever nativity, race, color or persuasion, religious or political,” stipulating that “all persons within the jurisdiction of the U.S. shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns,”²⁰ the U.S. Supreme Court yielded to a congressional ruling based on the concept of the “plenary power doctrine,” which maintained that decisions by the federal government in the realm of immigration were beyond judicial review.²¹

After Chinese laborers were barred entry, the Japanese, once regarded as the “Frenchmen of the East,”²² were restricted from entering in 1908. By 1917, the Immigration Act of 1917 had created a triangular “Asiatic barred zone,” forbidding immigration from a swath of the world that stretched from South East Asia to Arabia, including India, Burma, Siam, the Malay states, the East Indian islands, Asiatic Russia, the Polynesian islands, and parts of Arabia and Afghanistan.²³ Anti-immigrant sentiment after WW I resulted in the Immigration Act of 1924, the national origin quotas of which favored the influx of northern and western Europeans, and excluded any “alien ineligible to citizenship,” meaning all Asians—in particular the Japanese, as well as southern and eastern Europeans.²⁴ In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act created an Asian-Pacific triangle, from which only two thousand immigrants could enter the country each year.

It was only with the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1965 that such race-based exclusions were fully removed, annual quotas of 170,000 and 120,000 being set for the numbers of immigrants from the Eastern and Western Hemispheres respectively, with professionals, scientists, and artists of “exceptional ability” being encouraged to apply. This opened the door to a large influx of Asians, both the highly educated and the families of laborers who were long-

¹⁹ Paul Finkelman ed., *Milestone Documents in American History: Exploring the Primary Sources that Shaped American* (Dallas: Schlager Group Inc., 2008), 991.

²⁰ Deenesh Sohoni, “Unsuitable Suitors: Anti-Miscegenation Laws, Naturalization Laws and the construction of Asian Identities,” *Law & Society Review*, 41:3 (September 2007), 601.

²¹ Paul Finkelman, *Controversies in Constitutional Law: Collections of Documents and Articles on Major Questions of American Law* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001), xi.

²² John S. Harding, *Mahayana Phoenix: Japan’s Buddhists at the 1893 Worlds Parliament of Religions* (New York: P. Lang Publishing Group, 2008), 37.

²³ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race Rights and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1998), 26.

²⁴ Ancheta, 26. See also Monique Avakian, *Atlas of Asian American History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2002), 115.

term residents of the U. S.²⁵ Heralded by Gabriel Chin²⁶ as a juncture where “civil rights revolution comes to immigration law,” the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was soon amended to protect certain categories of profession from foreigner access. The 1976 Health Profession Education Assistance Act and the 1977 Eilberg Act reduced the influx of foreign physicians, making it more difficult for foreign physicians to practice in this country.

The sudden and large influx of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s led the U.S. government to create the Refugee Act of 1980, detailing the handling of political refugees and exempting them from the usual bureaucratic hurdles of immigration policy. Amnesty programs were created in the Immigration Reform Act of 1986, which also criminalized the employment of undocumented workers. In 1990, an overhaul of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act took place, according to which the quota of legal immigrants to the U.S. was increased to 700,000 per year, and several previously banned types of migrants were allowed to enter the country. Perhaps the most notorious debate on immigration during recent years involved the Dream Act, a provision for granting residency to certain qualified minors who were brought to this country by their parents illegally as children. Controversy swirled around this debate (most prominently in 2001, 2009, and 2010), with President Obama finally implementing DACA (Deferred Actions for Childhood Arrivals) in 2012.

Today the political pendulum has swung back to a closed-door and nativist mentality. Travel bans and refugee suspension, stepped-up deportation, tougher border controls, zero tolerance and family separation, as well as cancelation of DACA and of Temporary Protective Status are the hallmarks of the Trump administration. These isolationist measures and the President’s recent tweet calling for suspension of the due process of law in dealing with undocumented immigrants portend a dangerous time for international migration, and an unsettling climate for immigrants. Trump and his supporters have turned their backs on the compassionate spirit behind the Statue of Liberty, as expressed in Emma Lazarus’ poem, “[The New Colossus](#).”

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

²⁵ Ancheta, 27, Avakian, 183–4.

²⁶ Gabriel Chin, “Segregations’s Last Stronghold: Race Discrimination and the Constitutional law of Immigration,” *UCLA Law Review* 46:1 (1998), 1–54.

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost [sic] to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The lessons derived from the stories of HAAA's interviewees are more relevant than ever, as they represent beacons of hope, resilience and moral courage in these dark times.

Regional and Local Perspectives on Asian Immigration: The Jim Crow South

In the 1850s, the earliest Asians to be sighted in the Southern states of Louisiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, were Chinese who were either traveling with missionaries and presented as examples of heathen converts, entertainers such as jugglers, acrobats and magicians, or, occasionally, cooks and store clerks. Their small number allowed them to be tolerated as exotic Orientals in the region.²⁷ With the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the subsequent freeing of slaves, there was a serious shortage of laborers in the Southern cotton, sugar cane and tobacco plantations. Envious of the lucrative but morally questionably practice of importing Chinese coolies to the plantations in Cuba and the Caribbean, merchants at the Memphis Convention of 1869 resolved to import thousands of Chinese laborers to the South.²⁸ Soon after, three projects that brought in a large number of Chinese laborers were launched.

The first shipment of two hundred Chinese laborers, who were classified as legal "volunteer emigrants" and not banned "coolies," arrived in New Orleans, and were dispersed to cotton fields in Arkansas and Mississippi.²⁹ In January 1870, another two hundred or so Chinese laborers arrived in the boom town of Calvert City, Texas, to work on the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. In August 1870, more than nine hundred Chinese were brought in to work on the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad. The railroad went bankrupt and many Chinese dispersed throughout the region, fending for themselves. Some sold fruit or started their own grocery businesses; others went to work on nearby plantations; and still others found work as houseboys

²⁷ Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1984), 1–21.

²⁸ Cohen, 71.

²⁹ Cohen, 78.

and yard servants.³⁰ In the same year, 147 Chinese were imported to work on a large sugar plantation in Millaudon, outside New Orleans.³¹ Harsh working conditions and labor disputes led a majority of Chinese laborers to abandon the plantation within a year. Thereafter, plans for the large-scale importation of Chinese laborers came to a halt, mainly because Chinese laborers refused to work when employers withheld their wages or threatened to change the terms of their contracts.³²

As non-whites, Asian Americans in the South were subject to [Jim Crow Laws](#), which were designed to keep the newly-emancipated African Americans in inferior positions. However, because they were neither classified as “white” nor as “black,” and as they were also unable to obtain citizenship (barred by the 1906 Naturalization Act from being naturalized in the States), they existed in a legal limbo. What made life in the South for Asian Americans especially treacherous was the fact that segregation was embedded in a system of “ritualized social conduct...enforced not only by the law and by vigilantism but [also] by social convention.” Asian Americans were relegated to an inferior status by having to navigate the etiquette of daily social conduct, as constructed by the dominant white race: “Hat on or off? Front door or back? What mode of address? Which railway coach, elevator, doctor’s office, or diner?”³³ As humiliating as these daily encounters must have been, Asian Americans nevertheless attempted to use their liminal status as perpetual aliens to fight back in court, sometimes taking their cases all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In the 1905 case of *United States v. Ju Toy*, the Supreme Court gave up its right to judicial review over immigration matters altogether. As a result of this and other rulings, Congress gained more plenary powers than the Constitution had intended.³⁴ In some of the Southern states, Asian children were often barred from attending white schools. In 1927 in Rosedale, Mississippi, the father of Martha Lum fought for his daughter’s right to attend a white school, and the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court in *Gong vs. Rice*. Ultimately, the court sided with the Supreme Court of Mississippi and declared that race

³⁰ Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and the Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 35. Cf. Cohen, 85.

³¹ Cohen, 96.

³² Cohen, 82–101.

³³ Bow, 27.

³⁴ Sucheng Chan, “Asian American Struggles for Civil, Political, Economic and Social Rights,” in Wu, Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, eds., *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 219.

segregation in public schools was constitutional.³⁵ It was not until 1954 with the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision that the Supreme Court struck down the notion of “separate but equal” in the field of education.³⁶

In the early twentieth century, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas were some of the most important rice-producing states in the country. With high regard for Japanese farming and engineering expertise, the Houston Chamber of Commerce and Southern Pacific Railroads invited Japanese farmers to advise Texans on rice production. The Japanese introduced a hybrid rice strain, called the Kyushu, which was hardier and produced a larger quantity of rice than other strains. Soon, a colony of Japanese farmers was settled in Webster, Texas, led by the [Saibara](#) family.³⁷ For six years during the first decade of the twentieth century, thirty rice farming ventures were attempted in Texas by the Japanese.³⁸ Texans initially welcomed the Japanese, who were “preferred to the Italians” and looked upon as “model citizens.”³⁹ However, by 1913, amidst a wave of anti-Japanese sentiment across the nation, Texas, which had an 1892 law prohibiting aliens from holding property for more than ten years, reduced the time limit on holding land to five years, and added a ban on alien-owned companies from holding property.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, as historian Stephanie Hinnershitz has observed, for Asian Americans, “the fluidity of their racial identity in the South as well questions surrounding their rights as noncitizens created a more legally convoluted approach to civil rights in the southern U.S. [than in the case of Afro-Americans]”⁴¹ Small victories were won by Asian Americans in this interstitial space. In response to the restriction on Japanese farmers from owning property in Texas, the colony of Japanese rice farmers in southeast Texas and the Japanese businessmen in cotton firms in Dallas together formed the Japanese Association of Texas in 1921, lobbying to oppose the time limit on holding land and the ban on alien-owned companies from holding property. Saguro Arai, owner of a large nursery in Harris County, spoke before the Senate

³⁵ “Gum vs. Rice,” in Adrienne Berard, ed., *Water Tossing Boulders: How a Family of Chinese Immigrants Led the First Fight to Desegregate Schools in the Jim Crow South* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 138.

³⁶ “Gum vs. Rice,” Berard, 145.

³⁷ Henry C. Dethloff, “Rice Culture,” Texas State Historical Association. URL: <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/afr01>, accessed 2/27/2018.

³⁸ Thomas K. Walls, “The Early Japanese Texans,” in Irwin A. Tang ed. *Asian Texans: Our Histories and Our Lives* (Austin: The it Works, 2008), 96.

³⁹ Stephanie Hinnershitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press), 33–34.

⁴⁰ Hinnershitz, 43, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alien_land_laws#Texas, accessed 2/28/18.

⁴¹ Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 8–10, See also Hinnershitz, 6.

committee. In the end, the Texas senate passed the Alien Land bill, but included a grandfather clause that allowed Japanese immigrants currently living in Texas to keep their land and to purchase additional property.⁴²

In 1937, white grocers in San Antonio attempted to pass an amendment to the Alien Land Bill that would have barred non-citizens from owning urban land, as a way to thwart competition by Chinese American grocers in the city. A united coalition of Chinese grocers led by Mrs. Rose Wu, the Republic of China's Assistant Consul Edward K.T. Chen, the League of United Latin-American Citizens of San Antonio, and the American-Chinese Citizen League of San Antonio, succeeded in defeating the bill. Mrs. Wu testified in Austin and was quoted in the *San Antonio Light*: "Everyone can tell I am Chinese by my color. You pass this law and I have to go through much embarrassment if I want to rent a piece of property. Everyone doesn't know I am a citizen."⁴³



Mrs. Rose Wu

Houston and the HAAA Project

Naturally, with only a limited amount of space, I cannot recount all the ways that the HAAA project sheds light on the issues discussed above. Nor, since only a few articles based on

⁴² Thomas K. Walls. *The Japanese Texans* (Austin: The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, 1987), 121.

⁴³ *San Antonio Light*, March 10, 1937. <https://newspaperarchive.com/san-antonio-light-mar-10-1937-p-6/> accessed 3/2/2018.

the archive have been published in this special edition of *Transnational Asia*, can I do justice to the extraordinary diversity of political, social, economic, religious and other cultural experiences that these archival materials reveal. Nonetheless, several prominent and sometimes related themes emerge with a certain clarity. One is the persistent problem of coping with prejudice. Another is the question of how to navigate an alien and sometime hostile political, social, economic and cultural environment with incomplete maps of the difficult terrain. A third concerns education: what strategies make the most sense under different historical and socio-economic circumstances? Fourth, what sort of organizational mechanisms maximize advantage? And above all, what does it mean to be an Asian American? These themes are not always addressed directly in the essays that follow, but they can easily be inferred.

The five articles in this special edition of *Transnational Asia* reflect the above-mentioned themes in different ways. “The Gees of Houston: Networking for Strength and Survival” explores the rise and development of the largest and most prominent network of Chinese Americans in the city. The Gee clan is remarkable, not only for its size and strength, but also for the active effort on the part of its members to keep its family ties strong in the face of countervailing cultural influences—for instance, the American emphasis on individual freedom and unbridled self-expression. This article examines how the Gees parlayed the traditional Chinese affinity for associations based on the same surname or place of origin into a hybrid model adapted for maximum efficacy in the new world. Led by a small group of generous and resourceful elders who put down roots in the Bayou city, the Gees rose from humble beginnings, endured the Jim Crow restrictions on non-whites, and attained great social, financial, and political success. A discussion of the migration and assimilation patterns of this particular family offers a case study that can be used to test theories about migration in general.

“Compassion Without Borders” follows the formation, growth and maturation of Daya, Houston’s premier organization for South Asian victims of domestic violence. Proud of its image as the “model minority,” and unwilling to have its darker elements exposed to the public, most members of the South Asian community would prefer to ignore the significant occurrence of domestic abuse perpetrated against its female population. But a cohort of determined South Asian women, led by a trained domestic violence counselor, decided to create a culturally specific center to help the victims. Without a ready model to emulate, they learned as they went, starting by passing out home phone numbers to interested parties. Today Daya ranks as one of

the top centers for South Asian victims of domestic abuse in the country. Theirs is a tale of how immigrants adapted an institution from the host society, engaged with similar institutions across cultural and geographic divides, and succeeded in saving hundreds of lives in their community.

“Japanese Texan: Life on the Border of Belonging” tells yet another tale of immigration, assimilation and cultural conflicts. Texans of Japanese descent represent a significantly smaller population in the state than those of other Asian ethnic categories, and yet they have left their mark on Texas’s history, economy, politics, culture, and natural environment. Their stories thus deserve more attention than they have so far received. Drawing on news reports, editorials, and propaganda from the first two decades of the twentieth-century, this essay presents the settlement of Japanese in Texas as a singular, mission-oriented project that began with a large-scale dream to revolutionize the state’s rice cash-crop industry. US officials originally encouraged this venture, but Anglo-Texan prejudice short-circuited its potential. The second part of this essay examines selected interviews with Texans of Japanese descent that are housed in HAAA. The personal narratives that emerge in this archive link, in direct, revealing and often compelling ways, the origin story of Japanese Texans to narratives of service to a state and a nation that for decades withheld from them the protections and privileges of full citizenship.

“Life After the Tragic Exodus: Vietnamese Resettlement in Houston (1975–Present)” documents in multi-media form the resettlement experience of Vietnamese refugees in Houston and its environs. After a preliminary discussion of the historical context in which large numbers of Vietnamese found their way to Texas (by 2005, the Houston area contained the third-largest Vietnamese-American community in the United States), textual narratives, visual images, maps, and audio/video clips showcase six HAAA interviewees, who tell individual tales of extraordinary challenges, conflicts and compromises, accounts of a sort that are rarely available in English.

“Presenting and Preserving Houston Asian American Archive Oral Histories for the Long Term” provides a technical discussion of what it takes to create and maintain a digital archive like the ongoing HAAA project. Its digital oral histories include full transcripts, consent forms, photographs and associated analog ephemera, as well as files that provide time-syncing and indexing data to enhance the interaction of these materials with the interviews. The workflow and tracking of the interviews employs cloud-based online tools and storage mechanisms that provide access to anyone via Rice University’s institutional repository. This article explores in

detail the complex system used to provide robust online preservation and access to complex oral histories using undergraduate student work, part-time faculty, library support, and cloud-based tools and storage. Challenges in maintaining this system are also discussed.

Concluding Remarks

The genre of oral history is particularly well-suited for capturing the memories and experiences of community members. Sound is a powerful vehicle for conveying emotional nuances. The tone of the interviewee's voice, its inflection, the presence or lack of an accent, and even a chuckle or a sigh, convey unspoken information, and deepen the significance of the story being told. Hints of humility, wistfulness, pride, joy, sadness, frustration and disdain are conveyed through their distinct tones, enriching our comprehension. The subject's interaction with the interviewer, a student, also provides clues for how we should understand and interpret the words that are being said. The voice supplies a critical layer of cultural context and allows us to better situate the overall narrative.

The work done post-interview by HAAA interns is as important as the interview itself. We apply a rigorous and in-depth curation process to the transcript. Each of our two-member interview team takes on half the transcription, each then checking the other's work. The draft is then "cleaned" by a third intern. From there, the text is put through an open source study aid software program, the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer ([OHMS](#)), created by Doug Boyd of the University of Kentucky's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. OHMS adds time-stamps, keywords, and indices to the transcript, enabling us to connect words in the text to the exact moments when they are spoken in the audio/visual recording. The last step in our curatorial continuum is checking the OHMS-processed transcript. This careful and labor-intensive treatment of each interview ensures minimum errors and maximum fidelity. Presently, HAAA has collected over two hundred oral history interviews, and we intend to keep growing. When the project first began, there was a great sense of urgency due to our strong desire to capture the stories of elderly members of the Asian American community, but having reached a critical mass of such material at this point, we aim to adopt a more thematic and strategic approach going forward.

Unlike archives devoted to a specific ethnicity or a specific demographic group, (such as

“Chinese American Women in New England,” “Oral Histories of Japanese American Students in WWII,” “Korean American Digital Archive,” “Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project,” or “South Asian American Digital Archive”), HAAA embraces as diverse a range of Asian ethnicities as possible. At present, we have interviews from members of the Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, Bengali, Cambodian, Iranian, Pakistani, Palestinian, and Nepalese communities of Houston. Our selection criteria are simple: those who self-identify as Asian or Asian American, and who live in the city and its environs. Occasionally, we will also include a visiting family member of an interviewee.

Over time, our archive has created, and will continue to create, a collection of primary materials for the writing of a new kind of Texas history, as well as a more inclusive version of the history of the South and of U.S. labor and migration—one in which Asian American contributions to this region since their first arrival will be fully acknowledged. The articles in this journal suggest some directions where further research might take place. Plans are already being made to write a monograph on the Gee Family of Houston. The rise of voluntary associations in various Asian communities also provides a rich topic for comparative, transnational research. In addition, we are gathering recipes for a cookbook that links the narrative of immigration to cuisine.⁴⁴ Finally, we are exploring themes such as the political, social, economic and cultural roles of Asian scientists and physicians, Asian fashion-industry personnel, and Asian religious institutions. In short, as a pan-Asian archive, HAAA provides a roadmap to a deeper knowledge of the richness and complexity of the Asian American experience.

⁴⁴ For a revealing case study of the link between food and identity, see Sonia Ryang, *Eating Korean in America: Gastronomic Ethnography of Authenticity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).