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AUTHOR Woodell, Thomas M.  
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ABSTRACT

There are between seven and eight thousand Chinese Americans living in Houston, but there has never been a predominantly Chinese neighborhood in the city. This lack of geographical focus has prevented the development of easily identifiable aspects of ethnic concentration, such as a Chinese school or a Chinese business district. Apart from the obvious racial component, Chinese ethnicity in Houston involves an individual's largely voluntary association with organizations classified as business or fraternal, religious, and educational. The Chinese language is spoken in all three categories of organizations. Both Cantonese and Mandarin are found, as well as a regional dialect of Cantonese, Taisanese. It is unusual, however, to find third-generation Chinese who speak Chinese as a mother tongue or learned language. The Chinese living in Houston do not seem to be interested in maintaining an ethnic mother tongue. There is, however, considerable interest in preserving family traditions and influence, and the future of a conscious, Chinese ethnic identity seems secure. (Author/PMP)

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## The Chinese in Houston<sup>1</sup>

Thomas M. Woodell  
University of Houston

The geo-cultural area known as The South has generally been inhospitable to immigrants, except those who were Northern European or Protestant or both. Texas seems to have been somewhat of an exception and, further, appears to have realized that such is the case by establishing the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio. Displays at the Institute chronicle a diversity of peoples that in variety rivals Chicago. Cultures of many parts of Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, the Far East, and the America's are represented. Numerically, however, the nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrants to Texas were overwhelmingly Northern Europeans.

For Texas immigrant groups both large and small Americanization proceeded in much the fashion described by Fishman (1973), a few relatively isolated pockets of German heritage notwithstanding. Some smaller immigrant groups--the Wends, for example--went through an intermediate step of first assimilating to larger groups of immigrant neighbors such as the Germans, but all assumed outwardly (at least) the cultural trappings of the host nation at the expense of ethnicity. "Outwardly" is a deliberate choice because, of course, the notion of America the melting pot is a fiction that has for the past few decades been relentlessly exposed, first by scholarly suggestion and later, more powerfully, by the Black, Brown, and Red protests which began in the mid-1960's. Such protests sparked a widespread revival of conscious interest in ethnic heritage, although manifestations of the revival for most groups did not assume the often bellicose mood of the Black, Brown, and Red protests. Because, in part, of the lack of brashness, the ethnic revivals of many groups have remained relatively unknown, such peaceful and productive happenings not being considered particularly newsworthy.

In Houston absence of such attention has left largely unrecognized an ethnic community of unusual size and vigor. The purpose of the following remarks, then, is to describe a generally unnoticed ethnic community in Houston and to assess the prospects of this community for the maintenance of its separate cultural heritage.

At first it seems paradoxical to assert that the Chinese community in Houston is largely unidentified as a community. After all, there are between seven and eight thousand Chinese who are active participants in the daily affairs of the city: for example, Chinese own more than two hundred grocery stores and fifty restaurants. Yet there seems little realization except on the part of the Chinese themselves that the Chinese community in Houston is among the significant populations of Chinese in the country. Resolution of this seeming paradox can be achieved by examining both the Chinese in Houston and Houston itself.

Despite a population in the thousands, there does not seem to have been an ethnic neighborhood, strictly speaking, in Houston; there certainly has not been a Chinatown. The lack of such a geographical focus has prevented the development of other easily identifiable aspects of ethnic concentration, for example, a predominantly Chinese school, a Chinese business district, or other such manifestations. Instead many Chinese have initially lived where they

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worked, in the back of small, family-operated businesses which were usually interspersed among the Black, Mexican-American, and less affluent Anglo sections of the city. The frequent financial success of the Chinese merchants afforded many the opportunity of moving to one of the numerous, newer areas of the city. Not a few took advantage of that opportunity, further decreasing the population density of Chinese in any given part of the city. At the same time Houston itself was growing so rapidly that the Chinese community as a percentage of the metropolitan population was actually decreasing. Further, Houston was expanding outward not upward: the geographical area of the city so increased that the total population density remained relatively unchanged despite a mushrooming population. The time frame in which all of this was happening is also important, for both the remarkable growth of Houston and the population increase of the Chinese in Houston have taken place since the late 1940's. That is, in speaking of what today is known as Houston and its Chinese community one is speaking of developments which have taken place within the past twenty-five years. The convergence of various factors--demographic, social, economic, geographic, and temporal--has resulted in both the failure of a Chinese population center to develop and the lack of the greater community to recognize the size of the Chinese population.

In such light reference to the Chinese in Houston as a community is based on the existence of cultural affinities which are maintained and even defined to some extent by organizational means rather than by interactions facilitated by geographical proximity. Apart from the obvious racial component, Chinese ethnicity in Houston revolves around an individual's largely voluntary association with organizations which can be roughly classified as business or fraternal, religious, and educational.

Touching perhaps two-third's of the Chinese in Houston are the various organizations classified as business or fraternal. Such groups include (among others) the Chinese Professional Organization, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the National Chinese Welfare Council, the Chinese Commercial Association (On Leong), and the Association of Chinese Organizations in which are loosely brought together the eight family associations in Houston. Besides simply providing a meeting place for people of Chinese heritage, the organizations support the maintenance of Chinese ethnicity in a variety of ways. Some of these ways include sponsoring major celebrations (Chinese New Year and Chinese Independence Day), providing a place for traditional amusements, institutionalizing the complex of interactions generated by the notion of the extended family, and most important, perhaps, bringing together different generations in a milieu which enhances the informal transmission of an ethnic heritage to successive generations.

The Chinese Baptist Church (CBC) offers means of supporting Chinese ethnicity which are not markedly different from those provided by the business or fraternal organizations. The reason for this lack of unique contribution is readily apparent: Christianity is not an expression of Chinese ethnicity. Nonetheless the CBC is considered an important source of support for a sense of Chinese community if for no other reason than that ten percent of Houston's Chinese population are members of this one church. However, the role of the CBC as a base for ethnic maintenance is likely to increase since it soon must move from its present building--essentially, the Sanctuary--into a complex of multi-purpose facilities, which will encourage week-long use both religious and non-religious in nature.

The Institute of Chinese Culture enrolls less than one percent of Houston's Chinese, although it is the only organizational source of formal instruction in Chinese language and culture. The Institute was founded three years ago to replace the language school once operated by the CBC. The circumstances of the Institute's founding augured for a successful future: the school received an educational charter from the state accrediting body; it was designed to be self-supporting, and that design has proved out; the organization of the school was based on community control; teachers and students alike could be expected to be highly motivated; the teachers were Chinese-born, native speakers of Chinese and had the equivalent of at least a bachelor's degree; finally, classes were to be held in a hospitable setting, the campus of Rice University. In light of such circumstances, it is somewhat surprising to learn that enrollment in the Institute has been steady, which means that the Institute now registers a smaller percentage of the Chinese community than it did at its inception. Still the Institute is generally viewed as an increasingly valuable base for the maintenance of ethnic identity (though there seems to be here a difference between expression and action).

A Chinese language is spoken in all three of the aforementioned categories of organizations. Both Cantonese and Mandarin are found, as well as a regional dialect of Cantonese, Taisanese. Cantonese is the Chinese language spoken by the majority of the Chinese community, although more parents than speak Mandarin want their children to learn Mandarin (if they learn Chinese) because of the official and prestigious position that Mandarin holds in contemporary China. Because less than half of Houston's Chinese community speaks Chinese, the language spoken in any given situation depends on which generations are present. Generally, the older the generations present, the greater the portion of time in which Chinese rather than English is used, although there are organizational exceptions. For example, in separate services (liturgy and sermon) the CBC employs simultaneous translation in both Cantonese and Mandarin. Simultaneous translation into both languages is also used in the business meetings of the CBC. Formal language classes at the Institute provide an additional, though obvious, exception. Outside of these two instances, the generation guideline holds rather firm, although such a case should not be surprising. After all the bulk of the membership--and, thereby, the control--of the Chinese ethnic organizations is largely second generation Chinese (those who were born in this country of foreign-born parents). It is this second generation which comprises the major part of the speakers of Chinese. The first generation (the foreign-born) speak Chinese a majority of the time and, in fact, count among their number some monolingual Chinese speakers, most of whom are older females. It is the unusual third generation (U.S. born of U.S.-born parents) Chinese who speaks Chinese as a mother tongue or learned language. Considering such a fact and the low enrollment at the Institute, it does not seem unreasonable to expect that in a relatively few years English will be the predominant language of even the Chinese ethnic organizations.

Apart from the organizations, it is not as easy to formulate firm distributions for the use of Chinese, although the generation guideline is somewhat helpful. In restricted family situations English is much more likely to be used a great part of the time--regardless of the presence of first or second generation members--simply because most of the third generation are monolingual English speakers. Such situations seem not to be without a certain degree of tension which the second generation attempts to mediate by providing partial

translations if the first generation member seems interested or piqued by his exclusion from the conversation. Outside of the organizations, movement towards a predominant use of English is already considerably advanced.

Having identified a Chinese community in Houston and described some of its more prominent characteristics, let me try to assess the prospects for maintenance of a Chinese mother tongue and ethnic identity. Apart from the first generation, whose cultural conservatism is predictable, there is a generally pragmatic view toward language. While there is a feeling that those of Chinese heritage should know something of a Chinese language, such a desire is admittedly sentimental and not viewed as a necessary condition for the maintenance of ethnic identity. The president of the Institute of Chinese Culture, when asked whether ethnic subjects were taught in Chinese, answered that not only was instruction via the mother tongue impractical but unnecessary, since the first goal of the school was to teach a great deal of Chinese history, cultural achievements, and ideals in a relatively short time. A second generation parent, whose parents live with him and are monolingual Chinese speakers, stated a view that is not unique: "I am American, though I have a separate heritage; I make my living doing business in English; my children, too, will live and work in an English-speaking country; it is not a worthwhile expenditure of time and effort for my children to learn a language they will not use frequently; they can be Chinese otherwise. A number of the third generation apparently share this view and are quick to offer it as a reason for not attending the Institute.

As the result of conscious choice, then, widespread maintenance of a Chinese language among the Houston community does not appear to have a bright future. Nor does bilingualism--not now widespread among the Houston Chinese--seem to have much appeal if the foregoing opinions are representative. There simply does not seem to be much enthusiasm for maintaining a language that is not viewed as being particularly functional.

Despite the lack of widespread interest in maintaining an ethnic mother tongue, the future for a conscious Chinese ethnic identity seems secure. Nowhere is found any expression other than a quiet pride in having a Chinese heritage. Interestingly such feeling does not seem to have resulted from the general reawakening of interest in ethnicity that arose in the last decade. Nor has Chinese ethnicity in Houston followed that course which Fishman (1973) feels characterizes the recent ethnic revival: positive revaluation, strident politicalization, and brash ideologicalization. There has been no call for revaluation because there has been no real self-denigration. Bold political action has been unnecessary because of a tradition of shrewd accommodation and stoic endurance. Ideological ethnicity has been rejected as sheer folly; since the clear-sighted man viewed different cultures as offering complementary paths rather than mutually exclusive ones.

The Houston Chinese seem to be secure in whatever degree of ethnicity they choose to retain. The cultural means by which ethnicity is most easily identified--formal organizations, the strict observance of many traditions and customs, and mother tongue maintenance--have been previously mentioned, although the Houston Chinese seem to view such manifestations as largely external badges of ethnicity rather than underpinnings. The keystone of Chinese ethnicity--the one aspect all informants agreed was most important for being Chinese--seems to be the idea of family and the complex of relationships, responsibilities, and imperatives which are generated therefrom. Even the third generation, whose

enthusiasm for other ethnic organizations is most uneven, are unhesitating in their expressed intent to actively participate in the interrelationships of their respective families (extended) as soon as it is proper for them to do so. The family, then, seems to be the key for a continued sense of ethnicity among the Houston Chinese. Given the combination of the traditional influence of the family and the expressed enthusiasm with which the younger generation looks forward to participating in them, there is likely to be a Chinese community in Houston for some time to come.

That Chinese ethnicity is thriving in Houston should be a happy prospect not only for Americans proud of their Chinese heritage but for researchers as well. For reasons which have, in part, been touched on, further investigation of the Chinese community in Houston should provide another interesting chapter in the history of an immigrant nation and, perhaps, further insights into the nature and course of language processes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For the information on which this paper is based I am particularly indebted to the Reverend Lok Tin Cheung, Dr. Paul Fan, Mr. Wallace C. D. Gee, Mr. Jimmie Leo, Mr. Bill Woo, and Mr. M. Bing Wu.

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