

Chinese Americans in King County and Washington State

Chinese people first began coming to the West Coast to work in the 1850s, so there is a long history of Chinese Americans and families that have lived in the U.S. for generations. On the other hand, there are many Chinese Americans who have immigrated to the U.S. just within the past 10-15 years. Chinese Americans have come from mainland China (People’s Republic of China, or PRC), Taiwan (Republic of China, or ROC), Hong Kong, Macau, as well as ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

The information from the U.S. Census below includes some figures for Taiwanese-Americans as well as Chinese Americans. Most people in Taiwan originally moved there from mainland China, whether between the 17th-19th centuries to work, or in the 20th century to escape war and hardships in mainland China. Actually, only about 2% of the population of Taiwan are indigenous people of Taiwan, known as Taiwan aborigines. ‘Taiwanese American’ does not refer to Taiwanese ethnicity, but to Chinese Americans who choose to identify themselves with Taiwan (ROC).

Census information and more numbers

The figures below show growth in the Chinese American population from 1990 to 2000, to 2005. Remember that not all those who immigrated from Taiwan choose to identify themselves as ‘Taiwanese American;’ and these figures show just one of many identity differences within the Chinese American population.

		US Census 1990	US Census 2000	U.S. Community Survey 2005
Chinese Americans in U.S.	Chinese, except Taiwanese	1,574,918	2,314,537	
	Taiwanese	73,778	118,048	
	Total	1,648,696	2,432,585	2,882,257
Chinese Americans in Washington State	Chinese, except Taiwanese	32,659	55,895	
	Taiwanese	1303	4019	
	Total	33,962	59,914	72,135
Chinese Americans in King County	Chinese, except Taiwanese		41,930	

	Taiwanese		3088	
	Total		45,018	55,771

Data from U.S. Census Fact Finder, http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en ; “Washington State Social Indicators,” Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum, <http://www.apiahf.org/resources/pdf/WA.pdf>; and Chinese American Data Center, <http://members.aol.com/chineseusa/index.htm>.

According to the 2000 Census, Chinese Americans made up 1.0% of the population of Washington state, and 3.11% of the population of King County. It also records 47% of the Chinese American population nationally as immigrants, or ‘native born’ Chinese. Chinese Americans were the largest of the Asian American groups in all three of the years shown above, 1990, 2000, and 2005.

History of Chinese Americans in King County and Washington State

In the broadest terms, waves of Chinese American immigration represent different groups of people that were able to come to the U.S. under different historical circumstances. Beginning in the 1850s, many Chinese laborers left difficult circumstances at home to work on plantations in Hawaii, and on the west coast, worked to build railroads and mine gold. Many of these men came from Guangdong province in southeastern China where they suffered from famine and lived near the huge international port city of Guangzhou (earlier known as Canton). In Washington state, Chinese laborers were recruited for mining in the 1860s, and then in the 1870s for canneries and railroad construction. They made up about two-thirds of the miners and two-thirds of the railroad crews, and built almost every 19th century railway in Washington.ⁱ In Seattle, Chinese men dug the first canal connecting Lake Union with Lake Washington. Chinese Americans also grew vegetables and sold them in the Seattle Center neighborhood, and on the Duwamish River.ⁱⁱ

When the availability of mining and railroad work diminished, Chinese men formed neighborhoods where they could live as a community. Small businesses that Chinese Americans could open and operate included restaurants and laundries. They also formed organizations to support one another, such as family associations and district organizations that offered loans, ways to learn English, and activities.

From the beginning, Chinese Americans faced extraordinary discrimination, especially when changes in the economy made other workers feel nervous about their jobs. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1881 was the first law that prohibited immigration on the basis of nationality, and prevented further immigration from China. The law was also written to prevent Chinese women from coming to the U.S., in an attempt to limit the population and keep Chinese men more able to move around for work. Anti-Chinese feeling in Washington grew, and many Chinese were forced out of the labor camps where they worked, and out of the Chinese neighborhoods.ⁱⁱⁱ The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until the time of World War II.

After the Immigration Act of 1965, many more Chinese people immigrated to the U.S., as did people from other Asian nations. Initially these immigrants were primarily from Taiwan and Hong Kong, educated, and chose to settle in middle-class or suburban areas, rather than in older Chinese American neighborhoods such as urban ‘Chinatowns.’ In King County as elsewhere, since the late 1960s, the Chinese American population has spread out into many areas beyond the earlier districts they were restricted to, Beacon Hill and the International District in Seattle. While earlier Chinese immigrants usually spoke Cantonese, many in this wave spoke Mandarin Chinese, or *putonghua*.

After the People’s Republic of China was recognized in the 1970s, its own immigration quota was established for coming to the U.S., and Chinese American immigrants since 1980 have been more mixed than in the past. Many are highly educated, while others come under desperate and dangerous conditions, and some struggle to learn English and find suitable employment. Community organizations, such as the Chinese Information and Service Center, work to meet these needs. Now Chinese Americans are the third largest ethnic group of Americans, after Mexican Americans and Filipino Americans.

Sources

Asian American History Timeline <http://www.cetel.org/timeline.html>

Chinese Information and Service Center, <http://www.cisc-seattle.org>

Klinge, Matthew W. “A History Bursting With Telling: Asian Americans in Washington State-- A Curriculum Project for the History of the Pacific Northwest in Washington State Schools” Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, University of Washington Department of History <http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Resources/Curriculum/Asian/Asian%20Main.htm>

Minato, Ryan. “Chinese Americans,” *Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs Newsletter*, vol 1, issue 2.

Seattle Neighborhoods: Chinatown-International District -- Thumbnail History, HistoryLink.org Essay 1058, http://historyink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=1058

Takami, David. “Chinese Americans” http://historyink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=2060

Further Resources

Links to many original sources for Chinese American history and communities in the Pacific Northwest: <http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Resources/Curriculum/Asian/Section%205.html>

Chew, Ron, ed. *Reflections of Seattle’s Chinese Americans: the First 100 Years*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.

Takami, David A. *Shared Dreams: A History of Asians and Pacific Americans in Washington State*. Seattle: International Examiner, 1989.

ⁱ Ryan Minato, “Chinese Americans,” Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs newsletter.

ⁱⁱ David Takami, “Chinese Americans” http://historyink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=2060.

ⁱⁱⁱ For accounts of riots and Chinese expulsion in Washington state and King County, see “Seattle mob rounds up Chinese residents and immigrant workers on February 7, 1886,” HistoryLink.org Essay 2745, and “Tacoma expels the entire Chinese community on November 3, 1885,” HistoryLink.org Essay 5063, on <http://www.historyink.org>

The following Chinese American traditional artists in King County can be found on the searchable database, *Folk & Traditional Artists in Washington State*:

- 1) Warren Chang
- 2) Lucy Liu
- 3) Henry Lip Louie
- 4) Bin-Liang Wang
- 5) Wu Ziying