

EVENTS

Outstanding Citizen Achievements Are Announced at the 2010 Organization of Chinese Americans National Convention

By Roger S. Dong

This year, 2010, OCA held its National Convention in Houston, TX - oil country. Few people know, but Texas, with Houston playing a major role, is the second largest exporter of American made products in a America - California is still number 1. While a large portion of California's exports are agricultural products, Houston is the center for the manufacture of many Information Technology hardware and software products. And you thought everything was made in China!

The OCA theme was "Diverse Communities United Commitment." This was an excellent theme for the meeting in Houston - a metropolis that epitomizes diversity. No ethnic group holds a majority in Texas, as in the last 50 years, the inflow of many, many different ethnic groups have immigrated to that state drastically changing the state's demographic map. The 2009 ethnic distribution in Texas was Caucasians 45%, Hispanics 36%, Blacks 11% and APA 4%. In the 1950s, Caucasians were 80% and APAs (almost all were Chinese Americans and a few were Japanese Americans) were <1%.

Two former Californians were featured during the meeting, Ms. Laura Spanjian, former San Francisco Supervisor, District 8, is now the Director of Houston Sustainability spoke and gave a very detailed and informative report on her plans to make Houston greener. Astronaut Leroy Chiao, the first Asian American Space Ship Commander from Danville, CA was honored as a 2010 OCA Pioneer.



The 2010 OCA Outstanding Citizen Achievement award winner was Dr. Nguyen D. Thang, for his devoted work in empowering, organizing and training SE Asian American refugees.

Unsung Heroes this year were Grace Wai-Yin Lee, OCA St Louis, MO; Helen Yu, OCA New Jersey; Janis Woo, OCA Long Island, NY; William H. P. Kaung, OCA Westchester and Hudson Valley, NY and Yu Sing Yee, OCA, New York, NY.

Several films were featured including *Vincent Who*, the story of Vincent Chin, who was mistaken for Japanese, and killed by two Caucasian racists. His two murderers were caught, but never punished. Another film was *Wo Ai Ni*, *Mommy*, the touching story of a young Chinese girl who was adopted and grew up facing many challenges in her life transformation into becoming an American.

And then there was the unique film *A Village called Versailles*, the emotional and ongoing story of the Vietnamese Americans who have just started to recover from Katrina, but now faced the bigger threat of an unfriendly local government which heartlessly dumped toxic waste/garbage and drained liquid poison into their front yards and their vegetable gardens.

There was a fourth film, the story of an unknown all American athlete named Wat Misaka, who was a Nisei and a member of the

University of Utah basketball team that won two NIT and one NCAA championship during and after WW II. Wat was an all-star guard, ala Bob Cousy, Boston Celtics, who was a great shooter and playmaker, but was always passing setting up other teammates to score. Wat was so good that he was the first player of color to join the NBA Knicks, but was never given the chance to play. Likely many Americans had not forgiven Pearl Harbor, and Wat, as a Japanese American, could not avoid his racial linkage to Imperial Japan. So the NBA was not ready to have a talented Asian player join their ranks. Wat Misaka was awarded the other 2010 OCA Pioneer award. I spoke to Wat and the gentleman that he is, he did not reveal any resentment. His career in the NBA was not to be, and the world will never know how good a basketball player he could have been.

This year's OCA convention was held at the Western Galleria hotel which adjoins to two mega shopping centers. Spouses who did not wish to listen lectures gave their credit cards a good shake down at the many fancy shops with European names. There was even an ice rink where one OCA informal gathering was organized.

In addition to the Awards dinner, on Friday night all attendees were transported to an APA Community Center where a bountiful buffet featuring all flavors of Asian food and Texas BBQ ribs were deliciously offered. The ambiance and community spirit of Asian Americans in Houston were very evident to all the OCA visitors.

This event was wrapped up with a visit to the NASA Space Center, a source of pride and scientific achievement for all Americans.

2011 OCA National Convention.

In 2011, the National convention is scheduled in the Big Apple where the attendees will be staying in the Grand Hyatt hotel as special bargain rates of \$199.00 night, a real deal in New York City. We are all waiting with anticipation

for the opportunity to take a big bite out of the Big Apple.

Sidebar: The Story about Asian Texans

An important sidebar to this national event was the story about Asians in Texas. Chinese Americans and other Asian American IT entrepreneurs and scientists have, and are, playing a significant role in the development and manufacture of IT products in Houston and its suburbs. The Chinese and a few Japanese have been in Houston since 1870s and were joined by many other Asian American from south-east Asia who immigrated after the 1965 Immigration Act. Many more came after the Vietnam war. A large number of Asian Americans professionals found Houston (and other parts of Texas) to be a nice home and a rewarding place to work.

The authoritative book on the Asian history in Texas, *Asian Texans - Our Histories and Our Lives* (2007, ISBN: 978-0-0679433-7-4) written and edited by Irwin A. Tang was available during the meeting. Tang did a lot of research, but collaborated with over twenty other writers and researchers, to complete his book. Photos in this book showed that Californian Veteran and POW Eddie Fung (See "Curiosity Saved Eddie Fung" in the October 2009 issue of our CAF Quarterly magazine) was not the only Chinese American cowboy in America. A number of other Chinese Texans also enjoyed riding horses in their lives and businesses.

Tang's compendium documents that in 1870 the first Chinese arrived in TX to provide labor for their infrastructure including the Houston - Texas Central Railway. These Chinese pioneers were the toughest and best RR men who had just finished building the Central Pacific transnational RR bridging both our coasts. They survived avalanches, primitive dynamite and nitroglycerine excavations, and subzero winters, but they did not quit until the job of building our cross country RR was completed. These robust men were initially welcomed and praised for their reliability, durability, and hard work, but a few years later, these positive attributes were scorned

as they were a threat to the working force who did not wish to work as hard for low pay. Does this sound familiar?

For the next hundred years or so, Chinese Texans had most of the same difficulties as Chinese all over America. They were not allowed to vote, did not have any rights in our courts, were not allowed to fraternize with local women, were not allowed to bring family to America, were not allowed to own property, and generally we were just not welcomed.

Why? There were the stereotypical reasons, and the media, echoing its citizenry, proclaimed that the Chinese would “lower the standard of labor, demoralize society and vote the Radical (Republican) ticket.” The real reasons were likely that the Chinese worked very hard, setting a very high bar to compete, stayed out of trouble by keeping to ourselves, and they were very frugal. Despite these difficulties, some Chinese men crossed the Mexican border and found Mexican wives and started families.

Prior to entering World War I, “General “Blackjack” Pershing’s military expedition into Mexico to hunt down Pancho Villa included many Chinese Texans who mainly provided logistics (cooking, washing and food services). There were a few Chinese combatants and they were involved in the death of some of Pancho Villa’s rebels. After Pershing was transferred to fight in Europe, Pancho Villa, in revenge, conducted his version of ethnic cleansing by murdering Chinese men with their Mexican wives and families whenever he found them.

Chinese Texans and World War I

During WWI, the US Army needed to develop combat training facilities in Texas. Camp Travis was a new designated location, but it was not developed and was covered with heavy, sage bush. The Army had a plan to convert the covered area into a training base for the 90th and 18th Divisions and estimated that it would require 3-4 months of heavy labor to make the land useable. Several hundred Chinese men were recruited and paid 20 cents an hour and zip for overtime to

complete the task. Since they were paid nothing for overtime, the Chinese finished the task in just 5 weeks. Then the Chinese provided other critical services including water, food, tobacco and laundry. Healthy and tasty Chinese cooking warmed the hearts of the soldiers, and soon the Chinese were called “Pershing Chinese.” A few did join the Army and went into combat. After the war, General Pershing, a grateful war hero, successfully lobbied for two years until Congress granted the loyal Pershing Chinese immigration rights and citizenship.

World War II further changed attitudes.

In WW II, young Chinese men, who volunteered and were not drafted, fought bravely alongside their countrymen against the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese Army. Initially, some people didn’t want the Chinese in their Army, but Army Air Force General “Hap” Arnold declared that there would be no bigotry in his Army and opened the doors for many Chinese to join the military to defend their Country. The stories of many of these Chinese American military heroes can be found at www.chineseamericanheroes.org.

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