

THE CHINESE ROLE IN THE MAKING OF THE  
EARLY CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE  
SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN DELTA

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The decline of gold mining in California in the 1860's left a great number of Chinese laborers in search of alternate futures. Between 1863 and 1867, the Central Pacific Railroad absorbed a large portion of this labor force.<sup>1</sup> After 1867, reclamation and irrigation projects were undertaken primarily with Chinese labor. In addition, the Chinese began to provide California farmers with manual labor for a variety of agricultural crops. These activities, particularly land reclamation and agricultural labor, brought the Chinese into various areas of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.<sup>2</sup> They became firmly established in river Chinatowns in the Delta during the twentieth century, and relics of this early occupation are found in the Delta country today.

*THE CHINESE IN THE DELTA*

The Chinese movement to and occupation of the Delta is in many ways reflective of the greater history of the Chinese in California. The hearth area in Southeast China from which most Chinese emigrated was principally a rural landscape. In most cases, however, Chinese immigrants arriving in the host environment settled in the urban centers of the Pacific west coast.<sup>3</sup> For many, the urban center acted as a home base from which they departed to participate in rural labor projects, returning to the city at the close of a job.<sup>4</sup> Between 1850 and 1882, the Chinese were seen throughout California, working in the countryside in

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small migrant camps.<sup>5</sup> Many of the Chinese bonded into local concentrations and eventually occupied distinct quarters in various California rural communities.<sup>6</sup>

The immigration of Chinese to California was closely associated with district ties in heart areas of Southeast China. Lyman has characterized this process as "group immigration," that is, Chinese immigrants arriving in California were representative of particular village districts in Kwangtung, China.<sup>7</sup> The two districts in Kwangtung from which most of the Chinese in the Delta emigrated were Sze Yup and Chungshan.<sup>8</sup> Sze Yup refers to the people of the "Four Districts" of Sunwui, Sunning (Toishan), Hoiping and Yanping who are bound by a link of common dialect.<sup>9</sup> Chungshan refers to the people of Chungshan district who speak a dialect which closely resembles standard Cantonese, but which is practically unintelligible to the Sze Yup. In California, the majority of Chinese immigrants have always been Sze Yup.<sup>10</sup> With the decision to reclaim the swamplands of the Delta during the 1850's and 1860's, Chinese, both Sze Yup and Chungshan, were attracted to the area as laborers.

#### RECLAMATION

The first recorded efforts at reclamation of the Delta were in 1851 when individual settlers attempted small-scale projects in selected areas.<sup>11</sup> In 1852, California Governor McDougal requested that settlers be given the opportunity to secure land on the condition that they reclaim it within a certain period.<sup>12</sup> A new policy of reclamation was embarked upon in 1861, and for the first time, the state became responsible for reclamation which had previously been conducted by individual landowners. During the period of state control, reclaimed areas were designated reclamation districts and an acreage limit (first 320 acres, later 640 acres) was imposed on individual ownership of reclaimed lands. In 1868, however, the responsibility of handling reclamation matters was transferred to county governments and the acreage limits set down earlier by the state were then dropped.<sup>13</sup>

The removal of acreage limits in 1868 prompted a new period in the reclamation process. Large tracts of swampland rapidly came under the control of land agents and corporations. The Tide Land Reclamation Company, under the direction of George D. Roberts, for example, acquired 250,000 acres between 1868 and 1871.<sup>14</sup> Reclamation became the primary concern of the corporations whose existence depended on the availability of laborers willing to work in the swamps for small wages. The Chinese met these requirements.

### *Chinese laborers*

While some East Indian and Hawaiian labor was used in Delta reclamation, the majority of the labor used in early work was Chinese.<sup>15</sup> Driven from the gold mines of the Mother Lode and attracted by the prospect of work, Chinese began to move into the Delta as laborers in reclamation projects. During the 1870's, Ratzel noted that Chinese were widely employed in the reclamation of the "tule lands" of the Delta.<sup>16</sup> In 1876, Brooks commented on the role of the Chinese in such projects.

Chinamen reclaim these lands; they build levees; they patiently work in the mud and water where whitemen will not; and as a rule it may be said they "create" wealth for they do that work which but for them would not be done at all.<sup>17</sup>

Besides being numerous, the Chinese worked under a contract system for Chinese bosses.<sup>18</sup> Recruiting of individuals by the reclamation corporations was unnecessary since the employer negotiated directly with the bosses who did all of the hiring, paying and firing.<sup>19</sup> Labor gangs of up to a thousand men were distributed throughout the Delta, using shovels and wheelbarrows provided by employers to dam sloughs, cut drainage ditches, build floodgates and pile levees. Rates paid to the Chinese bosses ranged from \$.09 to \$.25 per cubic yard of material emplaced in levee construction.<sup>20</sup> This amounted to a daily wage of approximately \$1, or \$25-30 per month for the Chinese laborers.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the Chinese gathered in their own makeshift camps to eat and sleep, further reducing the contractors' expenses.<sup>22</sup>

*Levee construction and land preparation*

Artificial levees were superimposed on the outer edges of the natural levees.<sup>23</sup> Early construction relied on island tule sod which was highly organic and shrank when dried and set into blocks for fill.

The sod was removed from the ditch with a great spade, locally a "tule cutter" or "tule knife," and used to face one or both sides of the proposed levee. The material underlying the ditch was tramped into place between the sod block rows or on the inside of the single sod wall. Sometimes the sod blocks were placed in the levees as soon as cut and at other times the blocks were permitted to dry on the ground first. In either case, they were forked into wheelbarrows and taken along planked paths to the levee, <sup>24</sup> where they were fitted or tramped into a firm embankment.

Cracks and surface irregularities developed on the early levees, and wave erosion eventually discouraged the use of this material. Later, mixtures of mineral and organic soils were used. A typical finished levee measured thirteen feet at the base, five feet at the crown and three feet in height.<sup>25</sup>

By the late 1879's, manual and horse power were nearing the limit of practicable employment and alternate means of construction were sought. One continual problem had been the small structure of the early levees. Owing to the methods of construction, early levees were little more than fragile retaining walls which often gave way during the season's first flood. Dredges were introduced in 1870, but were not put to general use until 1876. The clamshell dredger, devised in the early twentieth century, proved the ultimate in levee construction and was capable of moving fill at a cost of \$.03 per cubic yard, or one-third to one-eighth the cost of earlier methods.<sup>26</sup> With the use of dredges, river bottom clay became popular as a surface material on levees. Sand was also obtained with clay to give a more protective surface which did not crack or leak like clay or peat, and it retarded rodent penetration. Dredging also allowed for the construction of massive levees which measured as much as 200 feet at the base and 30 feet high, and which functioned more effectively than earlier works.

Once the land had been reclaimed, the costly and troublesome clearing of tules (*Scirpus lacustrus*) and breaking of virgin organic or mineral-organic soils was necessary. Here again, Chinese labor gained widespread use. Fire was considered the cheapest method of removing tule and was often utilized in the fall after the tules had dried through the summer. Chinese laborers were also used to set fire to peat soil by digging holes in the turf and dropping straw in the holes which was then ignited.<sup>27</sup> Usually a soil depth of three to five inches at a time was fired. This not only helped clear tule and kill pests, but it also liberated potash, adding to the fertility of the soil.<sup>28</sup> Burning of the peat, like burning tule, was a common practice and was justified as a necessary step in bringing the land to cultivation.

Between 1860 and 1920, fully ninety percent of the Delta had been reclaimed.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese had been instrumental in the early reclamation and construction efforts, but by the 1880's they had been replaced by mechanical operations which were cheaper and more efficient. However, reclamation had been undertaken with the intention of leasing reclaimed land. From the earliest days of reclamation, tenant farming developed, and later this was accompanied by crop specialization. The Chinese became very active in the farming process. In addition, the Chinese contract labor system shifted into agriculture and thus ensured the continued presence of the Chinese in the Delta.

#### AGRICULTURE

The role of the Chinese in early California agriculture is a story of migrant labor and farm tenancy. Brace, in travelling California in 1867, frequently saw Chinese laborers working fruit orchards, and Loomis similarly observed Chinese harvesting hops, strawberries and small fruit.<sup>30</sup> Bowen has noted that during the feverish growth of the Vacaville district in the 1880's and 1890's, gangs of Chinese laborers excavated extensive orchard terraces throughout the English Hills.<sup>31</sup> Coolidge has also remarked that

... many immigrants who came directly from farms in China and were not skilled in handicrafts, went directly to the country to engage in vegetable raising, orchard work and general farm work.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese workers began to drift into agricultural districts throughout California at a time when growers were beginning to demand a large supply of cheap labor to work in fields and harvest crops. By 1886, the Chinese comprised over seventy-five percent of the state's agricultural laborers.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Chinese agriculturalists in the Delta*

Of those Chinese who lingered in the Delta after reclamation, some were farmers who came with the intention of buying and tilling small tracts of land such as they had known at home.<sup>45</sup> However, there had never been any widespread interest on the part of Delta landowners in subdividing and selling. Rather, owners chose to rent, lease on shares, or assign the land to managers. This proved more convenient and profitable for the landowners, who had no desire to live in the Delta.<sup>35</sup>

Land tenancy on a sharecropping basis became an institution in the Delta. At the turn of the century, seventy-five percent of the farmed land in the Delta was tenant farmed and seventy-five percent of the tenant farmers were Orientals.<sup>36</sup> Most of the Chinese who leased land were sharecroppers. Aside from attending the gardens or orchards, the Delta Chinese cut and stored hay, drained water, made boxes or baskets for fruit and performed numerous other services and duties on the farm. The Chinese tenants usually received one-half of the proceeds of the vegetables and two-fifths of the return on the fruit harvested on the leased land.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Small-scale farming and vegetable gardening*

Delta agriculture prior to 1900 was considered primarily small-scale farming and vegetable gardening, and not until the twentieth century did it become large-scale, specialized field agriculture.<sup>38</sup> The Chinese were an important part of the farming and gardening process as it evolved in the Delta (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1  
Chinese Farmers in Sacramento County,  
1860-1880

Year	Number
1860	3
1870	37
1880*	558

\* The figure for 1880 includes farm laborers who worked on farms operated by the Chinese.

Table 2  
Chinese Vegetable Gardeners in Sacramento  
County, 1860-1880

Year	Number
1860	120
1870	72
1880	184

Source: Chiu (1963), p. 76.

George D. Roberts commented, in 1881, on Chinese farming in the Delta.

There is a disposition among them [Chinese] to turn their attention to farming. They think it is a more quiet life; they get out of the excitement of the city. Many of them have rented patches and are paying \$25 and \$30 a year per acre for lands.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1880's, there were sixty-four Chinese-operated farms in Sacramento County, forty-eight of which were owned and operated on a partnership basis, with two to thirteen partners each.<sup>40</sup> Many other Chinese were involved in vegetable gardening. Smaller in size than Chinese-operated farms, Chinese vegetable gardens, between 1850 and 1860, lined the east bank of the Sacramento River from the city of Sacramento to opposite Rio Vista.<sup>41</sup> Crops grown

included sweet potatoes, maize, melons, squash, peanuts and celery. In addition, Chinese vegetables such as tubers, greens, beans, bean sprouts and water chestnuts were cultivated.<sup>42</sup> Vegetable gardens were considerably smaller than farms with only one to five persons working each garden. Gardeners maintained outlets for their produce in San Francisco and Sacramento, which were reached by rivercraft that moved along the Sacramento River daily. Annual incomes from these plots were small and most were valued at \$500 or less.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Orchard work*

In the 1870's, the 9,000-acre Pierson district between Walnut Grove and Courtland was one of the only tracts in the Delta which was completely reclaimed and farmed.<sup>44</sup> Tree crops were the principal land use along the river, with stone fruit such as peaches, apricots, cherries, figs, nectarines, grapes and apples covering the landscape near the levees.

The Chinese operated some of these fruit orchards along the Sacramento River, the land being rented from Caucasian landowners. Most of the Chinese orchards were valued at less than \$800, but four, owned in partnership, were assessed at over \$1,000. Usually from fifteen to twenty workers labored in each orchard, with each laborer receiving \$10-\$16 per month plus board.<sup>45</sup> Also, in the 1870's, Cone found Chinese employed extensively on Caucasian-owned fruit ranches along the Sacramento River. Ranches employed six to ten Chinese year-around, and twice that labor force during the harvest. In winter, the Chinese plowed, pruned, grafted and transplanted. The workers were organized under a Chinese foreman and each worker received \$28-\$30 a month without board.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1880's, stone fruit orchards along the Sacramento River declined as a result of water seepage through the levees. Pears (Bartlett variety) quickly assumed importance since they were better adapted to existing edaphic conditions than other deciduous fruits. Also, a prime market for pears began to develop on the East Coast. Returns on pear orchards in the vicinity of Courtland

and Walnut Grove were \$200 per acre in the 1890's, \$350 in 1906, \$500-\$1,000 in the 1920's.<sup>47</sup> The Chinese also worked these fruit orchards, and again under the contract labor system, provided orchard operators with the majority of the labor necessary to prune and harvest.<sup>48</sup>

*Ethnic specialization and population concentration*

Delta agriculture was characterized from its beginnings by ethnic groups who were identified with particular types of husbandry. Thus, Chinese, Italians and Portuguese were vegetable gardeners, whereas American-born settlers were involved in grain and livestock activities. The Chinese took this specialization one step further: Chungshan Chinese specialized in orchard work, whereas Sze Yup concentrated on potato and onion farming.<sup>49</sup> This ethnic crop association had its antecedents in Southeastern China where Sze Yup had previously been engaged in potato farming and Chungshan had been occupied predominantly with mulberry and other orchard work.<sup>50</sup>

This tendency toward crop specialization was, in turn, reflected in the local concentrations of Chinese in the Delta. By the 1880's, the Chungshan Chinese were localized up the Sacramento River in the fruit district with Courtland at its center. Further downstream, near Rio Vista, the Sze Yup maintained potato patches.<sup>51</sup>

In the 1870's, waterside Chinatowns were scattered along the levees of the Sacramento River (Figure 1). Courtland, founded in 1870, contained a Chinese quarter which burned in 1879 just before its inhabitants had intended to open a clothing factory in the area.<sup>52</sup> After the fire, a new quarter was rebuilt. Also, in 1885, Elliott Village, a Chinatown which had been located on the Sacramento River just north of Courtland, was completely burned. Many of the Chinese from Elliott Village reestablished themselves in villages on the Deming Ranch near Courtland and at Paintersville between Courtland and Walnut Grove.<sup>53</sup> Rio Vista, settled in 1857, had Chinese as early as the 1880's, and Isleton, founded in 1874, contained concentrations of Chinese during the 1890's.<sup>54</sup>

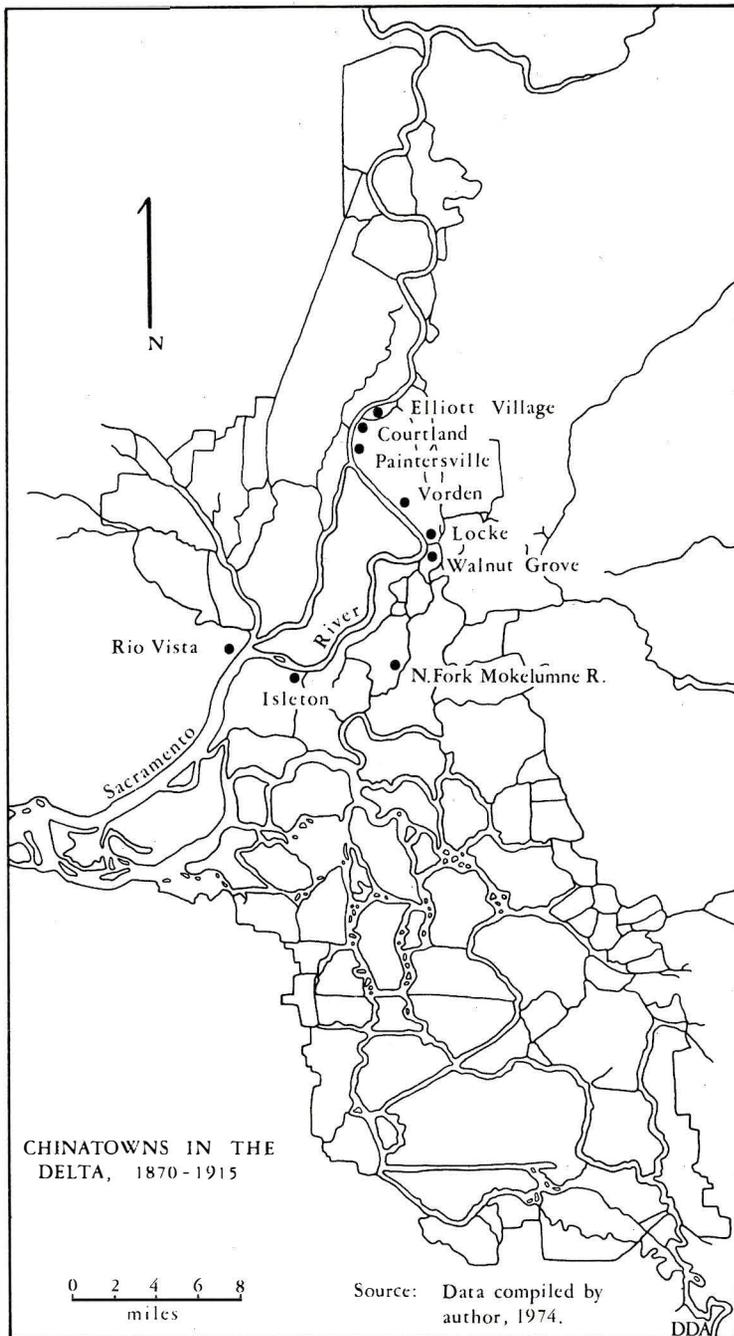


Figure 1. Chinatowns in the Delta.

One of the first Chinatowns in the Delta had been established on the North Fork of the Mokelumne River at a point about six miles south of Walnut Grove. This village was also destroyed by fire in 1885, and the Chinese from this area then located in Walnut Grove.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after the turn of the century, Locke, a new and independent Chinese town, was founded and built just north of Walnut Grove along the Sacramento River.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Chinese exclusion*

Between 1850 and 1880, the Chinese were scattered up and down the Sacramento River, laboring in reclamation crews, working vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, and residing in Chinese quarters in various small river communities. However, an economic depression which hit California during the 1870's fostered a sense of discontent with Chinese agricultural labor.<sup>57</sup> Unemployment among the general population and the Chinese presence as cheap laborers aggravated the problem and soon resentment against the Chinese turned to terrorism and violence.

Growing fear among the Chinese was reflected in a drop in the Chinese population in the state between 1890 (71,066) and 1900 (40,262).<sup>58</sup> Those who could afford to, returned to China, many others departed for the East Coast, while still others sought refuge in the crowded settlements of the large cities of Central California. In Sacramento County, the Chinese population of the time mirrored this statewide decline and gave evidence of the situation in the Delta region in general. In 1890, the Chinese population of Sacramento County numbered 4,371 and by 1900, this total had fallen to 3,254.<sup>59</sup> With the increase in anti-Chinese attitudes and the passage of the Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese farm laborers in Sacramento County fell from 668 in 1870 to 218 by 1880.<sup>60</sup>

Although the number of Chinese immigrants allowed into California had dropped and many of those who had lived and worked in the Delta began to move away from the area, a small number of Delta Chinese persisted. They began to concentrate in the small

river communities about halfway between Sacramento and Antioch. At the turn of the century, a new phase of agricultural activity focused on asparagus production became widespread throughout the Sacramento River area of the Delta. This new period marked the passing of the early Chinese occupation of the Delta and ushered in a period of bustling activity based on the river Chinatowns of the region.

#### SUMMARY

During the mid-nineteenth century, many Chinese immigrants found work as laborers in the reclamation of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Between 1850 and 1880, the Chinese as laborers and tenant farmers, were primary agents in the molding of the early cultural landscape of the Delta. Although Chinese exclusion in the 1880's forced many Delta Chinese from the region, some persisted and collected in a number of small Sacramento River communities. These communities became the basis of the Chinatowns which flourished during the twentieth century as the Chinese influence in the Delta passed into a new phase of activity.

#### NOTES

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<sup>3</sup>Sen-Dou Chang, "The Distribution and Occupations of Overseas Chinese," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 58 (1968), p. 102.

<sup>4</sup>Victor G. Nee and Brett de Bary Nee, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 22; A.W. Loomis, "How Our Chinamen Are Employed," *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 2 (1869), p. 231.

<sup>5</sup>Theodor Kirchhoff, *Californische Kulturbilder* (Cassel: T. Fischer, 1886), pp. 336-376.

- <sup>6</sup>Book Club of California, *Cathay in Eldorado: The Chinese in California* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1972).
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- <sup>8</sup>Chu (1970), p. 27.
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- <sup>18</sup>Nordhoff (1974), pp. 130, 143-144.
- <sup>19</sup>George F. Seward, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1881), p. 132. Chu (1970), p. 24.
- <sup>20</sup>Thompson (1957), pp. 212, 260-261, 490.
- <sup>21</sup>Chiu (1963), p. 72.
- <sup>22</sup>Nee and Nee (1972), p. 20.
- <sup>23</sup>George A. Atherton, "Reclamation and Development in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta," *Agricultural Engineering*, Vol. 12 (1931), pp. 129-130.

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- <sup>47</sup>Thompson (1957), pp. 359-362.
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- <sup>52</sup>Thompson and West (1880), p. 220.
- <sup>53</sup>*Stories of the Sacramento River Delta*, n.p., n.d., Bancroft Library, p. 14.
- <sup>54</sup>Chinn (1969), p. 59. Chu (1970), pp. 27-31.
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