From Coolies to Panamanian Citizens

The Chinese and other “silver roll” immigrants working on the tracks in Panama during the construction of the railroad, while the “gold roll” supervisor seats nicely dress making sure that the workers didn’t slack off.

Photo courtesy of The First Transcontinental Railroad

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Chinese Adapting to the Panamanian Culture

Early in the morning the Sea Witch arrived at the dock. The Irish came to see the majestic ship that had broken the speed records twice. When they laid eyes upon it, they were filled with disappointment. It was nothing like they heard. But the ship gave them another surprise. Over 1,000 Chinese men disembarked the Sea Witch and the two other ships docked at the port. Because they were in a ship for so long and they were stored in every nook and cranny that it was no wonder that the ship was in such bad condition, but worse was yet to come for these Chinese workers.

Over 1,000 Chinese coolies came to Panama. A coolie is a derogatory name given to the unskilled Chinese workers by the Irish. The Chinese came to Panama to work on the Panama Railroad because, the Irish weren’t working at the speed that they were expected to so the Panama Railroad Company hired more workers. The first group of Chinese coolies arrived to Panama on March 30th 1854. They came on Sea Witch from China to Panama. They came to Panama to work in Matachin. They were promised: money, food, shelter, clothes and opium (a drug). They came because no more people from Ireland would come to build the railroad so the Panama Railroad Company brought in Chinese and other groups to make up for the lack of workers. People from Ireland stopped coming because of malaria and yellow fever.

After a long day of work Chinese coolies sit down to rest. Photo Courtesy of United States: Shaped by Immigration
From Sea to Land
The Chinese came on a ship, but this was not like other ships this was the Sea Witch know as the record breaking ship and known also for its good looks. This ship went from China to Panama, it was launched on December 8, 1846 and the length of the Sea Which was 170’. The designer was John W. Griffiths and the main builders were Smith and Dimon. They were all cramped in every available space, every body was sweaty, some people on the boat got seasick/sick and they didn’t have enough water. The Chinese stepped onto land wearing clothes and their bamboo hats that looked like cones.

In China there were many unskilled people without jobs or just had bad jobs. Many of them wished for a better life. When the railroad company offered them a job to work on the Panama railroad they accepted it thinking that this was the first step into getting a better life. No more would they live in poverty and no more would they work horrible jobs.

But when they arrived in Panama they found out they were only going to get paid 8$ a month, live in wooden houses and get little food. But they did get one thing that they really wanted opium.

Life Overseas
When the Chinese first arrived the Irish weren’t very happy about their presence. They would swear under their breath when the Chinese workers would walk by. The Irish used to get drunk all the time so early in the morning when it was time to work they had a hangover. Instead the Chinese would go home and have a good night’s sleep so the next morning they would be well rested, but they would also have opium. The Irish started to call them coolies to make them feel bad but the Chinese wouldn’t understand so it would be like an inside joke for them to make
fun of the Chinese workers. They were also mistreated for the difference in language and culture. They were the victims of subhuman treatment and they would only get eight dollars a month even though the company payed 25 dollars per man sent.

Their living conditions weren’t very good. On their way to Panama it wasn't the best, many of them didn’t make it to Panama or arrived very sick. They estimated that out of the people on the Sea Witch 15.3 percent of the voyagers didn’t make it to their destination. In Panama they were living in small houses that they would have to make for themselves in the land of their bosses. In their houses they wouldn’t get water or toilets. The only good part about their living in Panama was that a Chinese chef would come twice or three times per day to deliver tea for the workers in the area. The owner of the land would take a percent of their money and that’s why they would only get eight dollars out of their assigned amount.

The Tragedy
The tragedy of 1,000 Chinese men started when the Panama Railroad Company stopped when New York found out that the company was illegally trafficking drugs to the Chinese. The company had to stop sending opium so they wouldn’t get in trouble with New York. The Chinese who were already depressed went through withdrawal which gave them even more depression.

One morning Colonel Totten was altered that the Chinese started to commit mass suicide. The Chinese hanged themselves on trees, stabbed themselves with their own machetes or made their own weapon by making a sharp edge on a stick, drowned themselves by tying rocks to their clothes to keep them from surfacing,
choked themselves with their long braids and some of them even asked Malays to shoot them with their blunderbuss or cut their head off with their razor-sharp bolo knives. Sean Donlan, (the construction foreman) made a report to Totten. According to him there were 125 of the Chinese hanging in the trees and over 300 more dead on the ground.

**Adaptation to Panama**

At the start the Chinese were not welcome because the Irish hated the Chinese. The Irish were jealous of how much the Chinese worked. The Chinese were not allowed to speak their language when working on the railroad and they started to lose their language because they had to only speak Spanish to communicate with other people that were non-Chinese workers.

The Chinese contributed by building the railroad and later on contributed to Panama’s economy by building small business and becoming merchants. Chinese also made their own societies due the large population of Chinese at the time and they also bring their cultures, foods, places like Lung Fung, Don Lee and The Golden Unicorn. In Chinatown, you can visit last standing original Chinese restaurant called Kwang Chow. In the local stores in Chinatown you can purchase traditional Chinese vegetables, fruits and sauces for cooking.
In this map we can find Corte Culebra, Matachin and Gamboa. This are the places where the Chinese Coolies worked and lived. Map Photo Courtesy of: Bites and pieces

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The Chinese lived in Matachin which was near Gamboa and when they were working in the railroad because it was easy to get to their jobs from there. Later they moved to Chinatown which is located in front of the Fish Market in Casco Viejo. They started to live together because it was better to live near people that understand your culture, beliefs and language. After a while they moved to El Dorado which is where they have all of their stores.

Last traditional Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. They serve one of the best traditional Chinese foods, you can find one of the best Dim Sum and other plates. Photo Courtesy of: Paisanito
The Chinese had many religions some of them were Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk. Some of the Chinese that arrived in the 19th and 20th century changed to Catholicism but some stayed with their own religion. For many years converting to Catholicism not only meant religiously but have access to many resources. Many Chinese arrived to Panama being bilingual speaking Mandarin and Cantonese and now they would learn Spanish here. Some of them spoke English because before they came to Panama many people that were from Hong Kong lived in the US.

**This is Who We Are**

Some Chinese people didn’t come with the railroad they came to Panama as merchants and they started to set down roots. As well as many other ethnicities the Chinese made sure that their culture was remembered by the new generations. Arnulfo Arias which was the Panamanian president at the time declared that residents who were not nationalized were not allowed to open business in Panama and would be taken away their stores. In order to keep their stores Chinese men would marry black Panamanians from Colon and this is why you might find black Panamanians with Chinese last names like Wu, Wang, Li, Zhang, Liu, Chen, Yang and many more. They called it “marriage of convenience” which meant that their wives and children would be the owners and they would work for them until they got their nationality.
After awhile they realized that they were losing their culture so they started to bring their families from China, if you were able to bring your family from China you automatically were looked at with more respect because that meant you had more money that other people. When they had kids in Panama they would send them back to China to learn the Chinese culture, language and behaviors. When the kids reached a certain age they would be send back to Panama with the rest of the family. The Chinese group in Panama is now having trouble because they Chinese girls don't want to marry Chinese men instead they want to marry Panamanians. They don’t see the point of moving to China if they have their family here. The Chinese people that were living here before don’t want their daughters to marry Panamanians because they didn't want to mix their pure Chinese race.

Panamanian Citizens
Since the 1800’s the Chinese have dominated the small retail market. They became merchants, farmers, laundrymen; small grocery store, corner store, and other small business employees or owners because they couldn’t get a job in the Panamanian government. The term “Chinito” was a derogatory term for these merchants, who occupied these jobs.

In 1940 the Panamanian government took away the citizenship of Chinese people and other ethnicities who were recognized as Panamanians. This was because Panama was accepting too many people and they couldn't keep up. In 2000 when they gave back their citizenship they only gave it back to people born before 1926 in Panama, people born after 1926 had trouble getting their citizenship back.
In the 1990’s The new wave of Chinese immigrants from PRC (People’s Republic of China) were discriminated by Panamanians and Chinese-Panamanians. They are seen as illegal immigrants and they are regarded as rude, ignorant, dirty, disrespectful, dishonest and sometimes are thought to be criminals by the Chinese-Panamanians and values” Those values are: family closeness, respect for elders, and working hard. They don’t do many Chinese traditions but they still some practice Chinese traditions, like eating Chinese food, giving and receiving lai see (red envelopes of money), and worshipping ancestors. These things are the things that make them feel Chinese.

In Panama there still is some discrimination on the Chinese-Panamanians but the Chinese think that they are treated as second-class citizens by both Chinese and non-Chinese Panamanians. Being non-Panamanian makes it hard to own a business because of laws. These laws were made so the Chinese didn’t have such dominance over the small retail market.

Now there are School, such as Centro Cultural Chino Panameno Instituto Sun Yat Sen started off has a Chinese Cultural Center. Don Fermin was the founder of the Chinese Association of Panama, the Cultural Center de came a school called Cultural Center Chino Panameno Instituto Sun Yat Sen. The School began work in 1986 with 115 students and 10 teachers, Now Chino Panameno has 100 teachers and 1750 students. Showed that the discrimination from 1990’s was beginning to fade away. Panamanians began to accept ‘Chineseness’ into their country.
Bibliography


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