

# Racial and Ethnic Groups in the Gulf of Mexico Region

## Asians\*



\*This report does not discuss the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese are discussed in detail in LSU AgCenter Report #116.

### Introduction

As part of a larger project that examines demographic and community-level changes in the Gulf of Mexico Region, we reviewed racial and ethnicity literature for eight key groups with significant influence in part or all of the region. The Gulf of Mexico Region is incredibly diverse, with more than 13.5 million residents who trace their origins to scores of places in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Of these various groups, we have focused our reviews on eight specific racial, ethnic and ancestry groups: African-Americans, Cajuns, Creoles, Croatians, Latinos, Native Americans, Vietnamese and Other Asians (not Vietnamese). Although some of these groups may be small in number, their effects on the region have been substantial. For instance, although only about 7.8 percent of the residents in the region identify as Cajun/French, this group has had significant effects on shaping the cultural and economic climate of the region through the tradition of Mardi Gras, ethnic food ways, commitment to Catholicism and culture of revelry.

These eight groups emerged as significant through the existing literature that gives details of their unique contributions in building the culture, economic stability and political climate in the region, as well as their ties to the oil and gas industry operating in the Gulf of Mexico. For each group, we have focused our review on common elements such as the culture, history, immigration, ties to the oil and gas industry and economic standing. In addition to these common elements, we examined other prominent themes that emerged for particular groups. For instance, the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Vietnamese fishermen living in southern Louisiana was widely discussed by scholars and thus became a prominent discussion in our review of the literature on Vietnamese living in the region.

Table 2. Groups of Interest in the Gulf of Mexico Region

Racial/Ancestry Group	Percentage of Total Population	Number
African-American	19.14	2,568,703
Cajun	7.81	1,092,377
Croatian	.05	6,422
Latino	29.72	3,988,491
Native American	.64	85,455
Asians	2.95	396,007
Vietnamese	1.15	154,669
White	63.72	8,912,239

Table 2. Data from ACS 5-Year Estimates and 2010 Decennial Census. Numbers do not add to 100 percent because individuals can indicate more than one race, ethnicity or ancestry group. Other Asian refers to Asian groups other than Vietnamese.

ern United States, a vast body of literature in the social sciences has described, explored and explained the presence of Vietnamese immigrants living along the Gulf of Mexico. Less has been written about “other” smaller Asian ethnic groups that reside along the Gulf Coast, however. These groups consist of, but are not limited to, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and Laotian people<sup>1</sup>. Although individually each of these groups may not have a strong presence in the Gulf of Mexico region, these groups of Asian immigrants, when considered together, have a meaningful cultural and economic influence on the communities in which they reside.

Table 1. Diversity in the Gulf of Mexico Region

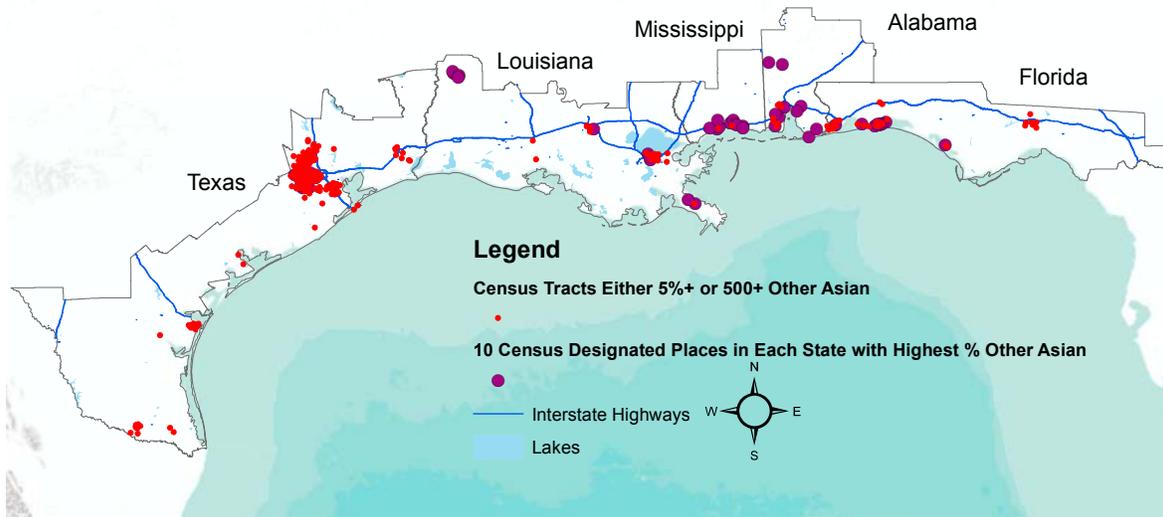
Ancestry Category	Percentage of Total Population	Number
British	15.36	2,147,789
French	7.81	1,092,377
German	8.71	1,218,236
Middle Eastern	.49	68,544
Northern/Eastern European	5.24	733,424
Southern European	3.09	432,724
Subsaharan African/West Indian	1.22	170,670
Total Population:		13,985,914

Table 1. Data from ACS 5-Year Estimates.

This is the third in a series of reviews. This review discusses the experiences of other Asians (not Vietnamese) in the region. Given the significant number of Vietnamese immigrants living in the southeast-

<sup>1</sup> The term Filipino refers to people from the Philippine Islands. Beginning in the 1970s, however, some scholars have come to prefer the label “Philippino,” given that the national language of the Philippines does not contain the letter “f.” Because of this, “Filippino” can be understood as symbolic of colonialism. Nevertheless, the term “Filipino” is used in this paper because of its wide recognition (Boyd 1971).

# Asians in the Gulf of Mexico Region



Data from 2010 Decennial Census. Counties selected from Fannin et al. 2011.

## Origins, History and Migration

Asian immigrants arrived in the southeastern United States through a variety of means. As a result of anti-Asian sentiments along the western coast, the active recruitment of Asian workers to farms in the south and Asians taking refuge along the Gulf of Mexico from war and slavery in their native countries, Asian immigrants eventually settled in and started forming their own businesses and communities along the southeastern United States.

In 1971, Monica Boyd released an article titled “Oriental Immigra-

tion: The Experience of the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino Populations in the United States” that outlines historical Asian immigration to the United States. According to Boyd, large-scale Asian immigration to the United States began with the active recruitment of Chinese laborers to work in the trans-Mississippi frontier between 1850 and 1860. Not long after the active Chinese recruitment, Japanese immigrants also sought employment in the western United States as agricultural laborers (Boyd 1971). Filipinos were the last Asiatic group to migrate to the United States in large numbers and

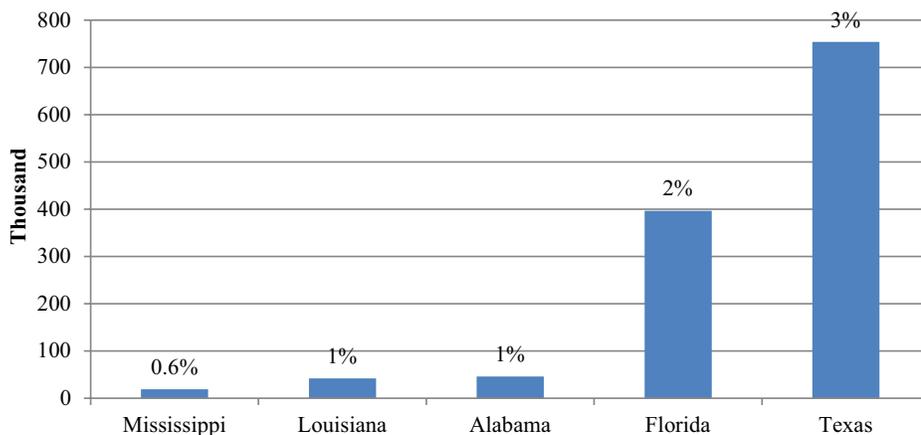
initially began arriving in Hawaii in response to recruitment efforts by sugar and pineapple plantations.

Initially, these immigrants settled in far western states – primarily California, Oregon and Washington – but with time, they were met with extreme opposition due to their competition with white workers for jobs during the Depression Era (Boyd 1971).

As a result of growing anti-Asian attitudes, two notable pieces of legislation were passed to prevent or limit the employment opportunities of Asian immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, made permanent in 1902 and later repealed in 1943, refused entrance to any unskilled Chinese laborers in an effort to prevent Chinese immigrants from obtaining low-skill work. The Gentleman’s Agreement of 1908 between the United States and Japan was similar in that the goal was to prevent immigrants from obtaining work upon arrival in the United States by only granting visas to nonlaborers.

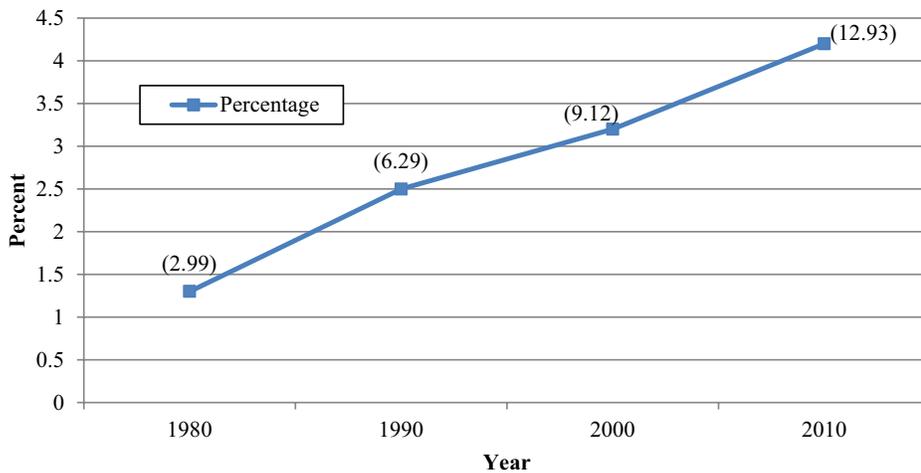
The result of this legislation was not that Asian immigrants stopped coming to the United States but that they were no longer as likely

## Asians in Gulf of Mexico Region by State: 2010



Data from United States Decennial Census. (Other Asians population in millions in parentheses).

## Asians in the United States: 1980 - 2010



Data from 2010 United States Decennial Census. Percent of total state population as data label. (Asian population in millions in parentheses).

to settle along the western coast. Rather than seeking employment in traditional locations, Asian immigrants began to settle across the continental United States.

Another way Asian immigrants arrived in the southeastern United States was the result of active recruitment by plantation owners who hoped to address labor problems on the cotton and sugar farms during the Reconstruction Era. Although the farmer/contract laborer relationships ended quickly and most Asian workers left the agricultural industry, many of these immigrants remained in the southeastern United States.

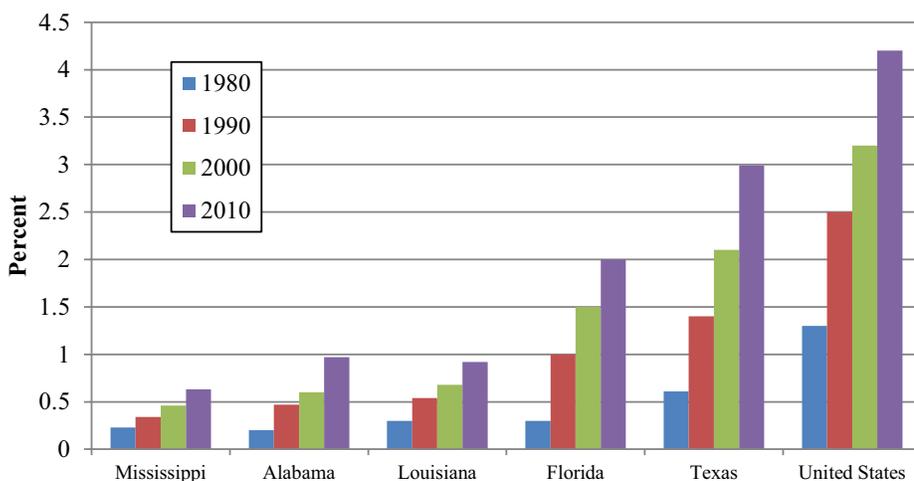
During Reconstruction, between one-fourth and one-third of southern African-American workers migrated to urban areas across the continental United States to seek employment – leaving southern planters to find new laborers to work their farms (Lim de Sanchez 2003). Many of these southern plantation owners decided to recruit Asian immigrant labor, particularly Chinese workers, hoping they would replace the lost African-American slave labor and also create a sense of “ethnic competition” between the two groups, encouraging the African-American slaves to return to their work on plantations (Lim

de Sanchez 2003, Jung 2006). In all actuality, African-American workers continued to pursue their independence, and the recruited Chinese immigrant laborers turned out to be more expensive and less reliable than the plantation owners expected.

Moon-Ho Jung recently released a book titled “Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation” that outlines the troubled relationship that developed during the Reconstruction Era between the Asian immigrant labor force and Southern plantation owners (2006). Plantation owners actively imported Asian immigrants from China, Cuba, Martinique and the western United States during Reconstruction, and many Americans, including the federal government, viewed this form of labor as the “new slavery” since these workers arrived under strict labor contracts and were offered little compensation. Because of this strained plantation owner/laborer relationship, the Asian labor force on sugar plantations came to be known as “coolies,” a term that embodies the contradictory imperatives of enslavement and emancipation (Cohen 1984, Jung 2006).

Southern farmers argued that, in fact, these Asian immigrants were coming willingly and voluntarily entering such constraining labor contracts. By 1874, however, struggles between plantation owners and Asian workers were breaking out across the southeastern United States due to low wages and an unsteady sugar market (Jung 2006). Asian workers began to organize and instituted work stops, protests and riots to express their frustration with the terms of their labor contracts. Due to the exploitation by plantation owners, Asian immigrant workers quickly lost interest in agricultural work and fewer Asian immigrants agreed to be

## Asian Population of the United States and Gulf of Mexico Region: 1980-2010



Data from 2010 United States Decennial Census.

transported to the South. Eventually, most Asian “coolies” left these agricultural jobs to start their own merchant businesses in the southeastern United States and to gain independence (Cohen 1984, Lim de Sanchez 2003, Jung 2006).

Some Asian immigrants, particularly Filipinos, sought refuge along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Marina Espina has written extensively about the historical presence of Filipinos along the southeastern coast of the United States. Many of these articles were bound together in a book, “Filipinos in Louisiana (1988).” In this series of scholarly articles, Espina outlines the arrival of Filipino immigrants in Louisiana and the establishment of Filipino communities along the Gulf of Mexico.

As early as 1765, Filipinos began living along the southeastern coast of the United States. During the Manila Galleon trade, a Spanish trade route running between the Philippines and Mexico, both under Spanish rule at the time, many Filipinos were used and traded as slave labor as woodcutters, shipbuilders, crewmen and munition workers. In particular, Filipinos were very effective seamen and often were used as such in the Gulf of Mexico (Allen 1977, Espina 1988).

Louisiana became a refuge for Filipino seamen who jumped ship during the galleon trade. Landmarks of their early settlements are still visible in Louisiana at Manila Village in Jefferson Parish. For more than a century, approximately 300 Filipinos lived in Manila Village along with some Mexicans and Spaniards (Espina 1988). This settlement was established by a Filipino named Quintin de la Cruz who noticed that the nearby waters were full of shrimp to be caught and sold in the Asian markets in New Orleans.

Early on, women were not allowed in the settlement in Louisiana, which stifled the development of Filipino communities. While other immigrant groups were producing second and third generations, Filipinos were not. In an effort to expand their fishing grounds, new Filipino settlements were established across Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes. It was in these communities that interracial marriages were formed and the second-generation Filipinos were finally born. Due to this growth and the success of Filipino fishermen, even during the Depression, Louisiana became a common destination for Filipino immigrants, and New Orleans remains the most significant city for Filipino immigrants in the South (Espina 1988).

Another scholar who has studied Filipino immigration to the United States is James Allen. In his 1977 article, “Recent Immigration from the Philippines and Filipino Communities in the United States,” Allen demonstrates how Filipino immigration has fluctuated throughout the 20th century as a result of legislative changes. In 1898, the United States acquired the Philippine Islands as part of the Spanish-American War, which resulted in a significant influx of Filipinos to the United States. In the years leading up to 1934, when the Philippines regained independence, Filipino immigrants typically were young, single, unskilled men who were recruited for jobs in California or Hawaii. As a result of the Depression, however, the establishment of the Philippines as an independent nation and the implementation of a per-country quota system for immigration to the United States, Filipino immigration slowed from 1934 until the mid-1960s (Allen 1977). Most of the immigrants who did arrive during that time were considered “nonquota” immigrants because they were World War II veterans and their

families, students or families of men who had previously immigrated.

Although the American economy rapidly expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, job opportunities for Filipino immigrants improved only slightly, especially for those in the western United States because of persistent anti-Asian attitudes. With the passing of the 1965 immigration reform that replaced the existing quota system, however, Filipino immigration rapidly increased once again (Allen 1977). One of the stipulations of the 1965 immigration reform was that families of individuals who had previously immigrated would be allowed to enter the United States without regard for the 20,000 per-country quota, which granted many Filipinos access to the United States that they previously lacked. Under the 1965 reform, people also were able to obtain visas for particular occupational skills that were in demand in the United States. Roughly 20-30 percent of all Filipino immigrants qualify for occupational visas because they are doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants and school teachers. According to Allen, by the late 1970s, Filipinos were one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States.

For Filipinos, one of the most common means of immigration to the United States in the late-1970s was by obtaining a visitor’s visa that often could be easily converted to immigrant status. From 1970 until 1977, when Allen published his article, an average of 54,000 Filipinos came to the United States each year as visitors. While a significant number of Filipinos obtained visitor visas, many more were sought than actually granted. This is because Filipinos seeking this sort of visa were required to convince the Manila government they would not remain in the United States. In particular, applicants were required to show large bank holdings or prop-

erty ownership that would entice them to return to the Philippines (Allen 1977). Overall, the motives for Filipino immigration to the United States have undergone massive changes throughout the years as Filipinos have sought refuge, become citizens and sought visas. The changing motives of Filipino immigration have not stifled the growth among this group, however, as they found economic success and established communities in the southeastern United States.

Although many Asian immigrants arrived in the United States as a result of labor recruitment, after migrating or immigrating to the southeastern United States to seek work or take refuge from war, slavery or racism, many of these immigrants decided to seek independence and build communities along the Gulf of Mexico. As is outlined in the remainder of this paper, these communities have had meaningful economic and cultural effects on the southeastern states as Asian immigrants forged an identity as both Asian and Southern.

## Culture

According to Lim de Sanchez, without access to the communal, educational, medical and religious institutions that urban Asian immigrants had, Asians living in the southeastern United States created communities that differed significantly from the “Chinatowns” seen in urban areas across the United States (2003, Quan and Roebuck 2007). These southern Asian communities are characterized by a sense of collective independence, retention of cultural traditions and family-centered social organizations. Structured around networks of extended family and locally owned businesses that sustain the economic and social autonomy of interconnected neighborhoods, southern Asian communities are unique when compared to other Asian communi-

ties across the United States (Lim de Sanchez 2003, Quan and Roebuck 2007).

## Occupations

Asian immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century typically were recruited to California or Hawaii for jobs as harvesters, domestic laborers, bellboys and busboys or dishwashers in restaurants (Allen 1977, Boyd 1971). Others found jobs in fruit, vegetable and fish canneries, and many took advantage of summer work in Alaska canning salmon (Allen 1977). Given the economic downturn during the Depression Era, however, anti-Asian sentiments rose among U.S. citizens, who feared these immigrants were filling jobs the Americans needed. These anti-Asian sentiments resulted in Asian immigrants having difficulty finding housing or work (Allen 1977, Boyd 1971). As noted earlier in this paper, the anti-Asian sentiments manifested in The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and The Gentleman’s Agreement of 1908. The effect of these agreements was that Asian immigrants no longer settled primarily along the West Coast but began to spread across the continental United States looking for work (Boyd 1971).

During the late 1960s, many Filipino immigrants obtained occupational visas to enter the United States as doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants and school teachers. Since that time, however, the Philippine government has made employment in America less appealing to their citizens by requiring professionals to serve an internship in their country before being allowed to immigrate, imposing high income taxes on those citizens employed in the United States and offering large discounts to Filipinos from the United States who return to their home country for 30 days or more under the Balikbayan program (Allen 1977). Overall, throughout

the 20th century, Asian immigrants have filled a variety of occupations and continue to work in a broad range of industries.

## Oil and Gas

Although, to our knowledge, there exists no literature discussing any direct role Asian immigrants fill in the oil and gas industries, there have been a few authors who explored the roles Asian immigrants fill in related industries, such as seafood processing, that can be directly affected by the decisions oil and gas companies make in the Gulf of Mexico. Moberg and Thomas have written extensively about the seafood processing industry, particularly in Alabama, and the ways in which Asian immigrants have both influenced this industry and been effected by it (1993).

Since the mid-1970s, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian immigrants have been incorporated into the seafood processing industry in Alabama. Most of these workers find jobs in Bayou La Batre, Ala., which is the seventh largest port in the United States in terms of the value of seafood landings. By far, shrimping is the largest segment of the local seafood industry in Bayou La Batre, employing approximately 1,200 people in the 17 shrimp processing plants. There also are 23 crab processing houses, fishing fleets, ship-building firms and supporting service industries, however, which also employ Asian immigrants (Moberg and Thomas 1993).

Historically, the demand for labor in Bayou La Batre was met by black women from outside the community and white women whose husbands were shrimpers, crabbers or oyster harvesters. Beginning in 1970, however, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees began settling in the area. Of these three ethnic groups, Vietnamese are the largest, followed by Cambodians and then

Laotians (Thomas 1991). Asian workers broke into the seafood processing industry in Bayou La Batre when one crab processing plant began actively recruiting Asian workers in 1979. Other processors followed suit, and by 1983, several hundred Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian immigrants had moved into the area (Moberg and Thomas 1993). Their involvement in the seafood processing industry allowed Asian immigrants to find steady work and settle along the Gulf of Mexico.

## Economy

Asian immigrants have played an important role in the economy of southern states that traditionally were characterized as a caste system of two colors: black and white (Schneider and Schneider 1987). During Reconstruction (1866-1876), Asian immigrants filled a significant need for labor to maintain agricultural production in the southern states.

With African-American workers seeking independence and being viewed with suspicion by plantation owners, planters sought labor from Europe and the northern states. This effort became relatively unsuccessful, however, leaving plantation owners to turn to Asian immigrants to maintain production. These immigrants initially were viewed favorably as hard and dedicated workers, although this relationship soon soured over disputes about labor contracts. With rebellions, work stoppages and court suits occurring across the south, many Asian workers left the agricultural industry to become merchants and establish independent communities (Schneider and Schneider 1987).

One of the most common merchant businesses created by Asian immigrants is the Asian grocery store (Schneider and Schneider 1987). In a period where few banks

existed, plantation owners often would turn to Chinese grocers to obtain supplies on credit. Once a harvest was sold at the end of each year, southern farmers would pay their bills to the Chinese grocers. Without this resource for supplies, many southern plantations and farmers would have been unable to obtain the supplies they needed to conduct business and sustain their families. One reason Asian immigrants leaving agricultural work were inclined to start groceries was their direct competition with blacks in other industries such as laundries or domestic work (Schneider and Schneider 1987). Whether filling a labor need or creating businesses, Asian immigrants have contributed greatly to the economic success of the southeastern United States, particularly the agricultural industry.

## Identity

Since their arrival in the South more than 300 years ago, Asians have encountered an invisible racial barrier, being viewed as neither white nor black. Asians and their descendants are somewhere between these two racial categories, with no fixed “place in society” (O’Brien 1941, Schneider and Schneider 1987, Wu Wong 1996, Lim de Sanchez 2003, Bronstein 2008). Early on, Chinese immigrants were considered “colored” by the white inhabitants of the southeastern United States, but through a process of negotiation and accommodation, they formed a unique identity that blended both Chinese and southern culture (Lim de Sanchez 2003).

The transition from “outsider” to “honorary white” status began when prosperous Chinese men started bringing wives to join them in the United States in the 1910s, thus ushering in a new pattern of long-term settlement in the states (Bronstein 2008). Families successfully challenged the older perceptions of racial inferiority

by joining white churches, enrolling their children in white schools and building social ties with white community leaders (O’Brien 1941, Schneider and Schneider 1987, Lim de Sanchez 2003). The religious transitions from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism to Christianity played a large role in gaining the trust and acceptance of the larger southern white society. A Chinese Christian identity, implemented by means of a separate church, helped to distinguish Asian immigrants from African-Americans in terms of the racial and social hierarchies of the southeastern United States (Lim de Sanchez 2003). Second-generation Chinese-Americans reaped the benefits of this strategy in the 1950s and 1960s by gaining access to housing in white neighborhoods, employment opportunities in white-collar occupations and acceptance as partners in marriages with European-Americans (Bronstein 2008).

## Conclusion

Although the presence of smaller Asian immigrant groups along the Gulf of Mexico often goes unnoticed in scholarly work, these immigrants together have historically contributed to the economic stability and racial transformation of the southeastern United States in a meaningful way. While many of these immigrants arrived in the United States to fill jobs along the western coast, because of legislation that limited their employment opportunities, anti-immigrant sentiments and a need for labor in the Reconstruction Era South, these immigrants began to spread across the continental United States, often finding work and community along the Gulf of Mexico. As time progressed, many of these immigrants settled here permanently and continued to contribute to the economic stability and cultural diversity of the region.

## Appendix

### Overview of Other Asians in the Gulf of Mexico Region

Section	Broad Conclusions
Origins and History	Asian immigration to the United States among Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and Laotian people has been the result of a variety of motives. Active recruitment of Asian workers began in the 1850s and 1860s. In addition, some Asian immigrants sought refuge in the United States as a result of war or slavery in their homelands.
Migration	Due to legislative shifts, anti-Asian sentiments along the west coast and economic changes, many Asian immigrants came to the Gulf states to seek work and remained here to seek independence.
Culture	Asian communities in the southern United States are characterized by a sense of collective independence, retention of cultural traditions and family-centered social organizations.
Occupations	Asians residing along the Gulf of Mexico hold a variety of occupations in a range of industries such as service, agriculture and white-collar professions.
Oil and Gas Industry	Although few Asians work directly for the oil and gas companies that are in the Gulf Coast Region, many Asians work in related industries such as seafood processing that can be affected by the actions of oil and gas companies.
Economy	Historically, Asians supplied low-wage work during the Reconstruction Era that created economic stability in the region, and most eventually settled permanently in areas along the Gulf Coast. Asians also have started a variety of businesses that contribute to the continued economic stability of the region.
Identity	Identity was a prominent theme throughout the literature, because since their arrival in the South more than 300 years ago Asians have encountered an invisible racial barrier – being viewed as neither white nor black. Asians and their descendants are somewhere between these two racial categories, with no fixed “place in society.” This racial barrier undoubtedly has shaped the social and cultural decisions Asians in the region have made to find their places in the racial divide.

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