

Locating Local History: Chinese Agriculturalists in Kern County's History, 1865-1900.

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Kern County, nestled in the southernmost portion of California's Central Valley, is a region driven by its dominant oil and agricultural industries. These industries, especially the latter, have not only shaped Kern County's identity and history, but also highlight the region's importance. As demonstrated in 2022 when Kern outproduced every county in the nation in terms of agriculture production, thus crowning it the nation's strongest agricultural force.¹ A feat which represents a continuation of Kern's longer agricultural history, which famously includes the Dust Bowl Migration (1930s) and the Delano Grape Strike (1965-1970). While many are familiar with these histories, few realize that this region was not always a fertile agricultural landscape. Prior to its settlement and the resulting displacement of indigenous peoples, this region primarily consisted of wetlands that frequently flooded, but over time, said lands were made farmable.² A feat generally credited to a handful of individuals like Thomas Baker, the namesake of the county's seat, Bakersfield, but focusing exclusively on such figures ignores the contributions of diverse communities, one of the most notable being the Chinese.³

Despite being among the region's earliest settler groups and representing over 11% of the population in the county's formative years, Kern's Chinese community has received little attention across over a century of local historiography.⁴ Especially in regard to the county's prized agricultural history, which archival records indicate they had a notable role in building. A notion which numerous institutions, both local and abroad, prove with the records they possess. The goal of this research has been to locate and compile such records to address the historical void that is Kern County's Chinese agriculturalists. A task which has led to a plethora of discoveries, some even predating Kern County's founding.

While it is difficult to assess the size and impact of this region's Chinese community prior to Kern County's establishment in 1866, there are historical records prior to this that acknowledge Chinese individuals living and working on the region's lands. One such record comes from an 1865 report from Solomon Jewett, who stated that, in his experience, "Chinese labor [was] good, reliable, and the cheapest" when it came to cultivating his cotton crop.⁵ An assessment reiterated in an October 1865 article from *The Friend*, wherein it states that over one hundred acres of cotton had been cultivated along the Kern by a company of three persons whose lands were "all cleared of weeds and willows by Mexicans, Indians, and Chinamen [*sic*]," with the latter being "the most reliable help."⁶ Through these records it is apparent that even prior to 1866, the local Chinese

¹ Ava Kershner, "New Kern County Oil and Gas Economic Impact Report Released," 23 ABC News Bakersfield, August 19, 2022; Kellie Helton, "Kern County Is the Top Agricultural Producer in Nation," KGET 17 News Bakersfield, October 25, 2022.

² Douglass R. Littlefield, *Ruling the Waters: California's Kern River, the Environment, and the Making of Western Water Law* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 5-7.

³ *Ibid.*, 29-51.

⁴ United States Census Office, "Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890," (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), 9; 516. According to the Federal Census, Kern County's Chinese community represented roughly 12.5% of the local population in 1880, and 11.5% in 1890.

⁵ Solomon Jewett, "Agricultural Prospects of Southern California," in *Transactions of the California State Agricultural Society, During the Years 1864 and 1865* (Sacramento, CA: O.M. Clayes, 1866), 259-261.

⁶ "Agriculture in California," *The Friend* (Philadelphia, PA), October 14, 1865, Internet Archive, 53.

community was making an impact on the region's nascent agriculture industry, and the county's earliest records indicate that such impact only grew.

By the 1870 federal census Kern's Chinese community represented over 6 percent of the total population, with 142 individuals, and while many of these individuals were listed as miners, roughly half held occupations associated with foodways, such as farmers and cooks.⁷ For many, these occupations were considerably safer than competing against white prospectors in the gold fields and simultaneously could "provide a more steady income than mining" because Chinese individuals could both avoid California's Foreign Miners' Tax and sell their crops to miners and others in the community.⁸ One Chinese individual in Kern County, Sam Sing, did just that, according to the 1870 Federal Census Agriculture Schedule, which indicates that despite Sing owning a modest three-acre property, the smallest listed in the records, his garden's produce was valued at a thousand dollars, which was four times more than his closest competitor.⁹ Sam Sing, therefore, represents perhaps the first concrete example of a Chinese individual establishing their own agricultural success in Kern County, but as time went on, the success of Chinese agriculturalists generally benefited those employing them.

By the early 1870s, the lands of Kern County were quickly transforming as a result of widespread land reclamation efforts. As individuals looked to capitalize off of Kern County's swamp and desert lands by turning them into arable farms, numerous canal and irrigation companies were established in the region. Many of these companies, such as the Buena Vista Canal Company and the Stine Canal Company, utilized Chinese laborers, with the latter spending over \$3,200 on "China labor" in 1875 alone.¹⁰ Although this sum spent by the Stine Canal Company was substantial, this enterprise, and those like it, were dwarfed when compared to the operations of James B. Haggin, Lloyd Tevis, and William Carr, the founding partners of the Kern County Land Company.¹¹

Though the Kern County Land Company (KCLC) wasn't officially established until 1890, its founders profited of Chinese labor for years prior to this. As exemplified by an 1881 labor contract between James Ben Ali Haggin and Ah Chong, wherein the former obtained fifty Chinese laborers "capable of doing efficient farm work, ditch building, and irrigating" for two years, at just

⁷1870 United States Census, Kern County, California, digital image, *Ancestry.com*. While this census technically lists 143 Chinese residents, one individual, Juan Alvirez, was presumably mislabeled as Chinese.

⁸ Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 79.

⁹ 1870 United States Census Non-Population Schedules, Havilah, Kern County, California, digital image, s.v. "Sing Sam," *Ancestry.com*. This census indicates that, in addition to owning three acres of land, Sam Sing also owned one horse and twenty pigs.

¹⁰ Ledger Containing Information on Stine, James, Buena Vista, Pioneer, James & Dixon, Joyce Gates, Anderson, Plunkett, & Goose Lake Canals, ca 1878, BOX 116, Kern County Museum. Within this ledger there are five canal companies that include "China labor" as an expense from 1872 to 1878. These companies, combined, spent at least \$5,398.06 on Chinese labor, with the Stine Canal Company representing \$4,251.87 of this cost.

¹¹ Lawrence James Jelinek, "'Property of Every Kind': Ranching and Farming during the Gold-Rush Era," *California History* 77, no. 4 (1998): 233-49; Jeff R. Bremer, "The Trial of the Century: 'Lux v. Haggin' and the Conflict Over Water Rights in Late Nineteenth-Century California," *Southern California Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1999): 197-220.

twenty-five dollars per month.¹² Though Haggin, Tevis, and Carr attempted (and failed) to replace these Chinese laborers with African Americans from the Southern U.S. in 1884 for half the pay, over the coming decades Chinese laborers remained central to their operations.¹³ A notion proven by numerous sources, such as photographs commissioned by the company in the late 1880s and early 1890s wherein Chinese agriculturalists are prominently featured, and in the 1900 census where somewhere between roughly a third to a half of the Chinese population (906) held agriculture adjacent occupations, many of which on KCLC ranches and farms.¹⁴

Though these examples represent just a fraction of the sources compiled in this research, it is my hope that they are sufficient to underscore the apparent issues surrounding local history's continued oversight of Kern's early Chinese agriculturalists. Oversights which can arguably be attributed to local historians of Kern's past being unable to perceive this community beyond conventional approaches to Chinese American history which generally confine histories of Chinese Americans to narratives surrounding the Gold Rush, railroad construction, and community formation (in Chinatowns or otherwise), while ignoring their vital contributions to industries such as agriculture. This research, by returning to the historical record, rejects such ahistorical approaches, and in doing so has revealed a broader, more inclusive, history of Kern's agricultural past.

¹² Ah Chong and J.B. Haggin Labor Contract, November 1881, Castle and Cooke Archives: BOX 140, Unique Contracts & Agreements, Kern County Museum. Notably, this contract was signed in San Francisco, thus revealing Haggin imported Chinese labor to Kern County.

¹³ "Importation of Black Laborers to Replace Chinese," *The Washington Standard* (Olympia, WA), December 5, 1884, Newspapers, 2.

¹⁴ Carleton Watkins, *Panama Ranch. The lake, and Alfalfa Field on Kern River; Rio Bravo Ranch, and Kern Island Dairy-The Milking Chute, and McClung Ranch, and Bellevue Ranch. Stacking Alfalfa Hay, and Stockdale Ranch-Stacking Alfalfa Hay*, Kern County, California, ca 1888-1890, Photographs, From Library of Congress: *Photographic views of Kern County, California / photographed by Watkins, 427 Montgomery Street, San Francisco*; 1900 United States Census, Kern County, California, digital image, *Ancestry.com*.