

The Journey from Gold Mountain: The Asian American Experience

Asian immigration to central North America predates the existence of the United States. The first settlers from Asia on the American continent were Filipino deserters from Spanish ships known as “Manilamen” in English, and “Tagalas” in Spanish. Escaping the oppressive rule of the Spaniards, the colonial masters of the Philippines, these settlers organized obscure fishing villages near what became New Orleans and Acapulco, Mexico starting around 1763.¹ The village of St. Malo near New Orleans consisted of a number of wooden houses with high “Manila style roofs” supported by wooden piles above a mosquito infested swamp. Though many had families in New Orleans, only men lived in St. Malo. Set well apart from any thoroughfare to the city, these new immigrants were free to live and work without the intrusion of the police or the tax man.² It is speculated that some these Filipino immigrants participated in the battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, but for the most part, they had a purposely quiet and localized impact on American society.

The first Asian immigrants to come to the United States in significant numbers were the Chinese in the middle of the 19th Century. The Chinese, primarily from Guangdong province, were motivated by problems at home as well as opportunities abroad. At that time, China was rocked by a number of violent conflicts including the Red Turban uprisings (1854-64) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) responsible for the death of at least twenty million Chinese. The Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 against Great Britain also inflicted economic devastation.³ The Qing government of China, having lost to Britain in both conflicts, was forced to pay reparations. As a result, the Qing imposed high taxes on farmers, many of whom lost their lands because they could not sustain these payments. When the news of the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill reached China, the dream of economic opportunity in California, popularly called *Gam Saan* or “Gold Mountain,” lured these disenfranchised farmers as well as middle class merchants and entrepreneurs.

Nearly all of the Chinese who traveled to *Gam Saan* were sojourners, travelers to a foreign land with the intention of returning home when they had made enough money. As a result, the first immigrants were almost entirely men, the majority with wives in China, hoping to get rich within a few years and then return to their families. Contrary to popular belief at the time, the Chinese in America were not “coolies,” kidnapped men forced into slavery. They came of their own free will, mostly by the credit ticket system in which a Chinese broker lent the emigrant money for the voyage with the promise that the worker would repay the loan with interest from his earnings in America.

Unfortunately, the tales of gold and good fortune in California were largely overblown, and *Gam Saan* for many immigrants did not hold the promise that its name suggested. Though some were wildly successful like Wong Kee, who at one time employed as many as 900 workers in his mining company, and more returned home as successful sojourners, most Chinese found themselves simply as outcasts in the rugged frontier West.⁴ White settlers from the eastern United States were as new to California as the Chinese, but labeled the Chinese as “aliens” because of their different appearance and customs. Chinese competed with whites for the limited gold and jobs, often willing to work for less than white workers. Competition with the Chinese brought to the surface the economic pressures whites were trying to escape in the industrializing Northeast, and the Chinese quickly became scapegoats as a result.⁵

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White settlers took a number of steps to discourage Chinese immigration. As early as 1852, the California legislature passed the Foreign Miner's License Tax, stipulating a monthly tax of three dollars on every foreign miner not desiring to become a citizen. Because the Chinese were sojourners, this tax almost exclusively affected them. Furthermore, even if the Chinese did want to become American citizens they were prohibited under the Naturalization Act of 1790 that allowed only "free white persons"⁶ to become citizens. The tax was not uniformly collected and Chinese miners were frequently forced to pay more than they owed. In 1855, the legislature passed another law titled "An Act to Discourage the Immigration to this State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens Thereof" levying a \$50 tax on the owner of a ship "for each passenger ineligible for naturalized citizenship."⁷ As with the miner's tax, the law, though not explicit, was drafted to curb Chinese immigration.

In 1870, Congress amended the Nationality Act of 1790 that originally stated, "any alien, being a free white person who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for a term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof" to conform with the 14th Amendment of 1868 and allowed "aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent to become naturalized citizens." Congress rejected attempts to make Chinese immigrants eligible for citizenship and retained the racial prohibition on naturalization for nonwhite immigrants who would be classified as "aliens ineligible for citizenship." This term would reappear in a number of pieces of legislation, especially in California, targeting Asian immigrants. It would have a detrimental impact until the passage of the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952.

The reaction from the legislature and white working class contrasted with the messages sent from business owners and corporate moguls who needed cheap foreign labor. In 1865, white workers for the Central Pacific Railroad, then engaged in laying the tracks that would connect the eastern half of the country with the West, threatened to strike, demanding higher wages. Management countered by threatening to hire Chinese worker to prevent the strike, yet hired Chinese workers anyway. Despite initial misgivings over the Chinese being too delicate for the work, the initial crews of Chinese workers proved to be as hard working as whites and accepted less pay. From that point on, the Central Pacific actively recruited Chinese workers, even printing handbills in Chinese and sending recruiters to China.⁸ Within two years, 12,000 Chinese worked for the Central Pacific Railroad, a number accounting for 90 percent of its workforce.⁹

Racial prejudice played a role in the types of jobs the Chinese could enter. To avoid conflict, many Chinese chose to be self-employed, filling Chinatowns with restaurants, shops, and particularly laundries.

Notwithstanding the demand for Chinese labor, they were mistreated. The Chinese could not attain the higher positions offered to whites. In addition, they were the only workers who were willing to assume the danger of handling explosives. On Cape Horn, a particularly notorious rock outcrop in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Colfax, California, workers were lowered down the cliff face in a wicker basket to drill holes in a solid granite wall and then stuff them with dynamite. Those unlucky enough not to be pulled up before the dynamite exploded, perished. Many Chinese also died from harsh weather conditions. For their work, including those handling explosives, they received a flat salary below that of all white workers. In 1869, when tracks from east and west were joined at Promontory Point, Utah, no Chinese were allowed to attend the ceremony.

The mistreatment of Asians was also common in Hawaii, a site of major immigration from China, Japan, Korea and the Philippines. Although Hawaii was not an official territory of the United States until the passage of the Hawaii Organic Act in 1900, American sugar companies established large plantations over much of the country around the middle of the 19th Century, turning Hawaii into something of an economic colony of the United States. Between 1850 and 1920, over 300,000 Asians immigrated to Hawaii, eventually accounting for 65 percent of the population.¹⁰ Like the Central Pacific Railroad, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) actively recruited workers from China and other Asian countries. Before 1900, most came under the contract labor system. Laborers would sign contracts to work on island plantations for a number of years in return for free passage and some pay, essentially a system of indentured servitude.

For Chinese and other Asian workers, conditions on the plantations were crude. Single men were put in bunkhouses and whole families were crammed into single rooms. The water supply was frequently unsanitary, and in the early years there were no cooking or recreational facilities. Work life was heavily regimented. Whistles sounded at 5am for wakeup, and work started one-half hour later. Laborers worked six days a week until dusk supervised by "lunas," or white foremen, who would verbally abuse workers and sometimes strike them to maintain discipline. Talking during work was generally forbidden. Workers were not even allowed to stand and stretch while hoeing weeds.¹¹

This controlled lifestyle was difficult for many traditional Chinese men who were used to making decisions for their household. Still, plantation life in some ways was preferable to that of the mainland. Because of the contract system, workers stayed in one place instead of roaming from place to place to compete for jobs. It was also more common for Chinese workers to bring their wives with them to the plantation (in 1900, women accounted for 13.5 percent of the Chinese population of Hawaii versus 5 percent on the mainland¹²). Additionally, because Asians accounted for such a large percentage of Hawaii's population, incidences of racial discrimination and violence were less pronounced.

In the absence of communal plantations, Chinese on the mainland formed their own communities called Chinatowns. In the 1870s, after the completion of the railroad and long after the Gold Rush, many Chinese moved into urban economies, multiplying the Chinese populations in West Coast cities, particularly in San Francisco. In response to housing segregation, Chinese established their own communities to consolidate power and maintain some sense of Chinese culture. Within Chinatowns, immigrants associated with others of the same surname or in *huiguan*, community organizations representing different regions of China. In 1862, the six largest *huiguan* in San Francisco formed an umbrella organization called the Chinese Six Companies, later the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. The Six Companies responded to the many needs of Chinatown. Lawmakers ignored the interests of the Chinese, so a governing body was needed in the Chinese community to help maintain order. The Six Companies filled this role and also served the community by providing loans, funeral services, a Chinese school, a Chinese census, settling disputes, and even acting as unofficial ambassadors to the Qing Government in China.¹³

Racial prejudice played a role in the types of jobs the Chinese could enter. To avoid conflict, many Chinese chose to be self-employed, filling Chinatowns with restaurants, shops, and particularly laundries. By 1890, there were 6,400 Chinese laundry workers in California, accounting for one out of twelve Chinese workers in the state.¹⁴ Many Chinese men agreed to do what they viewed as “woman’s work” because the cost to operate laundries was relatively low, and it offered independence, unlike the work in the mines and factories.

Nonetheless, many Chinese did enter into the factories and mines of the West Coast, putting them in direct competition with white workers, in particular with recent immigrants from Italy and Ireland. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese, partially because of the limited needs of the strictly male Chinese society in America, worked for less than whites, sparking numerous incidents of racial violence. “The Chinese Massacre” of 1871 occurred in Los Angeles when a mob of approximately one hundred white men burned and pillaged the Chinatown, killing as many as twenty-eight Chinese. The Snake River Massacre claimed the lives of thirty-one Chinese miners who were “robbed, killed, and mutilated by a group of white ranchers and schoolboys.”¹⁵

In the mid-1880s, a string of anti-Chinese outbreaks occurred in the Northwest. Following a forced eviction of the Chinese in Rock Springs, Wyoming, the “Anti-Chinese Congress” met in Seattle to discuss the fate of the Chinese in that region. The decision of the “Congress” was to expel all Chinese from the Northwest by November 1, 1885. Similarly, a series of forced evictions occurred in Tacoma and Seattle, but less violent than the one in Rock Springs. In Seattle, the social unrest became so severe that Governor Watson Squire declared martial law and called in federal troops to protect the Chinese leaving for California on the steamer *Queen*.¹⁶

Though incidents like these were most pronounced in the West, anti-Chinese sentiment was not solely a West Coast phenomenon. The movement to exclude the Chinese from the United States started in California in the 1870s with strong assistance from the Workingmen’s Party, but expanded to the national stage within a decade. The Workingmen’s Party was a political party in California composed heavily of Irish immigrants. Many Irish moved west to avoid discrimination in the east, so in addition to opposing the Chinese for economic reasons, Irish immigrants could also foster a sense of their own American identity by attacking the Chinese and other non-whites as the true foreign elements in America. The anti-Chinese movement was fueled in part by the poor economy of the 1870s. The anti-Chinese sentiment became a partisan issue in California where Democrats and Republicans competed to adopt anti-Chinese platforms. The Chinese had no political voice because they were not eligible for citizenship and they could not vote.

The Chinese were victimized in the same manner during the national elections in 1876. The Democrats, with their strong base of Southern support, sympathized with the Western outcry against the Chinese because of their own animosity toward recently freed slaves. The Republicans were more hesitant on the issue of Chinese exclusion than the Democrats, but acquiesced in order to receive crucial votes from white immigrant workers. Both sides found it easier to placate workers with anti-Chinese platforms rather than tackling the root causes of workers’ problems, the business practices of large industrial monopolies.

In 1882, the southern Democrats sponsored the Chinese Exclusion Act, initially vetoed by President Chester Arthur for violations of treaties with China, but passed later that year upon revision.¹⁷

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The Chinese Exclusion Act stated that “the coming of Chinese laborers” to America “endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof.”¹⁸ As such, only Chinese laborers were excluded from immigrating, a compromise that did not completely satisfy the Workingmen's Party. Students and merchants could still enter the United States, inspiring some Chinese laborers to immigrate under false pretenses. The Act also specifically reaffirmed the fact that foreign-born Chinese still could not become naturalized citizens, an issue in contention after the Civil Rights Act of 1870 extended citizenship to African Americans. To maintain diplomatic relations with China, the Act was to be temporary, lasting for only ten years, but it was later renewed for another ten years by the Geary Act, and then indefinitely. Under the original Act, Chinese laborers residing in the United States by November 17, 1880 were allowed to return to the United States if they went overseas, provided they obtained a government issued pass before leaving. The Scott Act of 1888, however, severely reduced eligibility for this special pass system, stranding 20,000 Chinese who had left the country, many of whom had businesses and families in America, until its repeal in 1894.¹⁹

The Japanese Arrive

Though the Page Law of 1875 restricted immigration of Chinese contract laborers and women imported for “immoral purposes,” the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first and only immigration law in American history to exclusively target a particular nationality.²⁰ Some Chinese laborers managed to circumvent the law by claiming to be merchants, others by claiming to be the sons of Chinese American citizens (American-born Chinese were guaranteed citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment). This “paper son” method was especially popular after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 that destroyed most of the immigration records. It allowed many Chinese to claim relatives and attempt to bring them into the United States by providing family details to those who were willing to pay a fee to obtain the information, thus bringing about the term, “paper son.” Still, after 1882, Chinese immigration was reduced to a trickle. While this satisfied some working class exclusionists, large companies and farmers still needed an abundant source of cheap labor, opening the door for the second “wave” of Asian immigrants—the Japanese.

When Commodore Perry arrived in Edo (modern day Tokyo) in 1853 with a fleet of battleships to “open” the island chain, Japan had been completely closed to the Western world. Though Perry succeeded in his mission, emigration from Japan was still prohibited by the Japanese government until 1885, and then under strict regulation until 1894. When Japan did “open” its labor market, Hawaiian sugar planters took

advantage. Between 1885 and 1894, 29,000 Japanese came to Hawaii on three-year work contracts; and from 1894 to 1908, 125,000 came.²¹ Planters liked importing Japanese workers because they believed they offset the Chinese workers by preventing strikes and the formation of unions. Similarly, plantation owners imported Portuguese, Italians, Southern blacks, and Koreans, though not to the same degree. Japanese laborers became even more attractive in 1900 when Hawaii was annexed by the United States, extending the Chinese Exclusion Act to the islands.

The Japanese emigrated for reasons similar to the Chinese where economic conditions at home caused many to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Intimidated by Perry's military display, Japan reluctantly entered into a treaty with the United States. In the transition to internationalism and modernization, the Tokugawas fell in 1868 after centuries of rule, making way for the imperial Meiji government. The Meiji government was avidly pro-modernization, and promoted a program of industrialization. To finance this program, the new government devised a new land-tax system. Farmers formerly taxed on the size of their crop were now taxed on the value of their land, a system that did not account for factors such as crop failures. In the 1880s, some 367,000 farmers lost their land under the new system.²² Rather than be tenant farmers in their own country, many decided to seek their fortune abroad.

The Japanese began arriving on the United States mainland in the early 1890s. The flow of immigrants increased when the Organic Law of 1900 rendered the contracts of all Japanese in Hawaii null and void, freeing them to pursue opportunity in the American West. Many *Issei* (first generation Japanese immigrants) sought work in farming in California's growing agricultural economy. The Immigration Commission in 1909 calculated that of the 79,000 Japanese immigrants on the mainland, approximately one-half were involved in farming.²³ White farmers also valued Japanese for their expertise in agriculture and for the comparatively low cost of their labor. In addition, Japanese also sought jobs as industrial fishermen, miners, loggers and service workers. The growing population together with restrictive housing barriers gave rise to the establishment of Japantowns in many urban centers of the West. These enclaves provided opportunities to many independent Japanese business owners.

Because of their physical similarities the *Issei*, or immigrant generation, they were mistaken for Chinese during the early years of their immigration. Though most Japanese who came before 1908 were "*dekaseginin*" or sojourners, they were adaptable to western ways. Japanese men adopted western clothes and haircuts. It was also more common for Japanese women to immigrate than Chinese women who had been constrained from coming to the United States by federal law. The Japanese government sought to reduce the problems of gambling, drunkenness and prostitution found in bachelor societies by encouraging the emigration of women to Hawaii and the mainland.²⁴ A picture bride system soon developed where Japanese men married women from Japan through an exchange of photographs.

Before the turn of the 20th Century, Asians were viewed as an inferior race, little better than "beasts of burden." This all changed with the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Japan prevailed in both wars and established Korea as a Japanese protectorate. In less than forty years, Japan had transformed itself from a pre-modern agrarian society to a formidable industrial and military power. Unfortunately, these victories earned the Japanese more fear than respect in America. The rapid influx of out-of-work Japanese soldiers and Korean refugees after the Russo-Japanese War together with the increasing labor and social organization of the *Issei*, contributed to the view of the Japanese and other Asians as the "Yellow Peril."

The "Yellow Peril" stereotyped all Asians, not just the Japanese, as a threat both at home and abroad. At the time, America was becoming a small colonial power. By the end of the Spanish-American War, the United States had dominion over Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, Cuba, Hawaii and the Philippines. With interests now in the Pacific, Japan's colonial expansion was seen as threatening. At home, many white Americans looked at Asian immigrants as foreign agents intent on securing world control for their home countries. These fears were embodied in the form of the fictitious Dr. Fu Manchu, first appearing in the popular novel, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913), and further popularized in subsequent novels and movies. Fu Manchu "lived" in London's Chinatown and secretly schemed to bring the world under the control of an "Asiatic Empress."²⁵

The “Yellow Peril” fears compounded the pre-existing animosity toward Asian immigrant laborers. Like the Chinese before them, Japanese workers were frequently used as strike breakers across the West. Cries for Japanese exclusion arose almost from the moment the Japanese arrived in America. The first national push occurred in 1902 to include Japan in the renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. When the movement failed, western residents acted locally. The San Francisco Labor Council organized a boycott of Japanese businesses on March 10, 1905. Two months later, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League was formed to lobby against Asian immigration and to promote anti-Asian laws.²⁶

On October 11, 1906, the San Francisco school board mandated that all “Oriental” students attend segregated schools in Chinatown, ignoring the fact that it was nearly impossible for most Japanese and Korean students to commute that far.²⁷ Japanese community organizations, unable to sway the school board, alerted the Japanese press and the Japanese government. With the school board’s decision now a national matter, President Theodore Roosevelt stepped in to mediate. The President, careful to quiet the rage of Californians rallying around the decision, and to pacify the powerful Japanese government, invited a delegation of state representatives and the mayor of San Francisco to the White House on January 3, 1907. After a week of discussions, the school board agreed to relent in return for a promise from the President that Japanese immigration would be curbed. On March 14, Roosevelt barred immigration of Japanese from Hawaii, Canada and Mexico by executive order. Then, in late 1907 and 1908, a series of secret notes were passed between the governments of the United States and Japan. This series of exchanges became known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement, where Japan agreed not to issue any passports to Japanese laborers trying to enter the United States.²⁸ As the Panama Canal had not been completed, which would ease the movement of naval fleets from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, Roosevelt felt he needed to avoid any potential aggression from Japan.

The Gentlemen’s Agreement, while significantly restricting Japanese immigration, did not eliminate it. Non-laborers were still allowed to enter the United States, and many laborers obtained visas for Canada or Mexico, crossing the border more easily from those countries. The nature of Japanese immigration also changed. The Gentlemen’s Agreement allowed laborers already in the United States to bring their wives, parents and children from Japan. As a result, thousands of Japanese women came to the mainland, even outnumbering male Japanese immigrating in the years immediately following the agreement. The Japanese no longer came as sojourners, but with the intention of settling in America.

Anti-Japanese elements in the United States were not pleased by this development. In 1913, California passed the Alien Land Law declaring that aliens who could not become naturalized could not own land in the state. The Law was directed at the Japanese, who more than any other group of Asian immigrants pursued land ownership. Some *Issei* began registering property under the names of their *Nisei* (second generation) children who were born in the United States and were American citizens. To prevent this, the California legislature passed a stricter Alien Land Law in 1920 that outlawed this practice and barred Japanese from even leasing land. As a result, Japanese-owned lands shrunk from 74,769 acres in 1920 to 41,898 acres in 1925, a decline of 44 percent and leased lands from 192,150 to 76,397 acres, a decline of 60 percent.²⁹

The two California land laws and similar ones in other western states proscribing land ownership clearly defined the benefits to be derived from becoming a naturalized citizen. Although this privilege had been specifically denied to Chinese immigrants through the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was still some question as to whether Japanese immigrants could be naturalized. The issue garnered national attention in 1922 with the Supreme Court case *Ozawa v. United States*. In the case, lawyers for Takao Ozawa claimed that when Congress drafted the Naturalization Act of 1790, they intended “free white persons” to mean all those who weren’t black. Ozawa, a highly assimilated Japanese immigrant appealing his rejected application for citizenship, was lighter skinned than many naturalized Italians and Greeks and therefore appeared clearly eligible. Though the Court agreed that Ozawa was assimilated and light skinned, it held that “the words ‘white person’ were meant to indicate a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race.”³⁰

Both *Ozawa* and *Thind* exemplified the popular belief of nativism, which promoted the idea that Western European Americans with older immigrant lineages and Native Americans were the true “natives” of America.

One year later, the Naturalization Act was again challenged by an Asian Indian applying for citizenship in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Asian Indians, numbering only a few thousand in the United States at the time, were considered technically Caucasian, and some were granted citizenship. Thind, a United States veteran of World War I, was naturalized in 1920, but the Board of Immigration challenged his citizenship for his outspoken beliefs on India’s independence.³¹ In *Thind*, the Court backtracked from *Ozawa*, stating that the 1790 Act “does not employ the word ‘Caucasian,’ but the words ‘white persons.’” According to the Court, whiteness should be defined by “common speech” and not “scientific origin.”³² As a result, Thind along with many other Asian Indians became “denaturalized.”

Both *Ozawa* and *Thind* exemplified the popular belief of nativism, which promoted the idea that Western European Americans with older immigrant lineages and Native Americans were the true “natives” of America. Fueled by increasing United States involvement in international politics and the growing immigration from Asia and Eastern Europe, nativism contributed to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917. The 1917 Act was the most comprehensive immigration doctrine the United States had enacted. It declared a “barred zone” over most of Asia with the exception of Japan, forbidding immigration from those countries. As isolationist sentiment increased after World War I, Congress passed the even stricter Immigration Act of 1924. To inhibit postwar immigration from Eastern Europe, the number of immigrants admitted from each nation would be equal to two percent of the population of United States residents from that nation according to the census of 1890, a year before most Eastern Europeans came to the United States. The Act also added Japan to the list of barred countries, nullifying the Gentlemen’s Agreement and ending Japanese immigration to America.

This era also witnessed the immigration of Koreans to the United States motivated primarily by political chaos and poverty, and limited at first to Hawaii where approximately 7,000 emigrated between 1903 and 1905 seeking better working and living conditions.³³ Some Koreans then migrated to California; by 1905 approximately 1,000 Koreans lived in that State.³⁴ In that year, after learning of the deplorable working conditions and the low wages in other countries, and under pressure from Japan, which then occupied Korea, the Korean Government banned all emigration. This, in effect, stopped the entry of Koreans into the United States until years later.³⁵

“Little Brown Brothers” and the All-American Loophole

The desires of exclusionists conflicted with the needs of American businessmen. Despite worker outcry, there was no shortage of jobs, especially during the “roaring twenties.” This continuing demand for labor prompted the immigration of Filipinos, sometimes dubbed the “third wave” of Asian American immigrants.

Officially, America acquired the Philippines from Spain in 1898 for \$20 million following the American victory in the Spanish-American War, though fighting did not end on the islands until 1902. A segment of the Filipino population led by Emilio Aguinaldo declared independence from the United States, precipitating a bloody war. American victory in the Philippine American War, known in the United States as the Filipino “insurrection,” claimed the lives of 4,243 American soldiers and countless Filipinos.³⁶ What followed was over forty years of American rule.

After the war, the United States tried to cultivate a regime of “benevolent despotism” or at least the appearance of it. William Howard Taft, first civilian governor of the Philippines, declared Filipinos to be America’s “little brown brothers.”³⁷ From 1903 to 1910, the United States funded a program to educate Filipino students in American schools on the mainland. These “pensionados” numbered only about five hundred when the program ended and they returned home to the Philippines, but they inspired thousands of unsponsored students to come to the United States. The United States also actively recruited Filipinos to work for the navy. By 1930, there were about 25,000 Filipinos working for the United States Navy, mostly as stewards and mess hall attendants.³⁸

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hardship of the 1870s
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the Great Depression
roused sentiment against
Filipinos.

Though they were not citizens of the United States, Filipinos were considered American nationals. Consequently, Filipinos could freely move from the Philippines to Hawaii or to the mainland once they acquired an easily obtainable certificate of residence. This loophole to Asian exclusion first caught the attention of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters’ Association (HSPA) after immigration of Japanese laborers to Hawaii was banned by the Gentlemen’s Agreement. In 1909, the HSPA began full-scale recruitment to bring Filipinos to Hawaii. Filipino laborers, called *Sakadas*, came mostly under three-year contracts negotiated in advance. After the expiration of their contracts, many stayed in Hawaii while others returned home or moved to the mainland.

Filipinos began migrating in large numbers to California after the Immigration Act of 1924. Many were displaced tenant farmers, so they were able to blend into the agricultural economy of the state. A number of Filipinos also went to Alaska to work in salmon canneries. Like the Asian immigrants before them, the vast majority of Filipinos were male laborers and worked for less than competing workers, including whites and Japanese. Unlike the Chinese and Japanese, however, Filipinos did not tend to live in dense, segregated communities. “Little Manilas” were rare and fleeting, possibly because centuries of Spanish rule or their identity as American nationals had diminished their “cultural cohesiveness.”³⁹ Filipinos also differed from earlier Asian immigrants in that they were the first to actively court white women and even inter-marry.

This last difference became the source of much agitation. In the Philippines, Filipinos were taught that they were a part of a friendly father country. When they arrived in America, however, they found that Americans did not treat them as the so-called “little brown brothers.” Americans looked upon Filipinos as “jungle folk,” only recently civilized by American influence, and feared mixing between races.⁴⁰ A

number of violent outbursts occurred over the popularity of Filipino dance halls, where Filipino men would dance with white women. The most notable incident was the race riots in Watsonville, California on January 19, 1930. The riots began with a nonviolent anti-Filipino demonstration against a Filipino dance hall, but over the course of a few days, groups of demonstrators turned into mobs that targeted Filipinos, beating them, and destroying their property. The riots ended on January 22, when a Filipino man, Fermin Tobera, was shot through the heart.⁴¹

Fears of intermarriage and miscegenation were not only reflected in the violent actions of mobs, but also in state and federal laws. As early as 1884, interracial marriage was banned under Section 69 of the California Civil Code forbidding the marriage of a white person to a “Negro” or a “Mongolian.” In the 20th Century, prohibitions against miscegenation were linked to the notion of the “Yellow Peril.” For some, the threat of the “Yellow Peril” was twofold: the threat of Asiatic domination by conventional warfare coupled with a “fifth column” revolution, and the threat of the dissolution of the white race through race mixing. This second facet of the “Yellow Peril” was argued in Lothrop Stoddard’s book, *The Rising Tide of Color*, in 1920. Stoddard, a eugenicist, held that white blood, particularly from the “Nordic” races of Western Europe, was the most advanced or “highly specialized.” He also argued that because Nordic blood was so highly specialized, it was most at risk of contamination. Stoddard feared a “racial suicide” and the washing away of Nordic blood by the “rising tide” of the colored races.⁴² This type of popular sentiment may have led to the passage of federal laws such as the Cable Act of 1922, which stipulated that any female American citizen would lose her citizenship by marrying an “alien ineligible for citizenship.”

The popularity of books like *The Rising Tide of Color* reveals the trend of the time to justify racism with science. Although the classification and judgment of races was arbitrary and based on visible rather than actual genetic differences, it was held by many to be an indisputable, scientific fact. This pseudoscientific racism sometimes undermined the aim of exclusionist laws. The 1884 California code only prohibited marriage to “Mongolians,” thus exempting Filipinos because they were considered to be of the “Malay” race. Since Filipinos were considered as American nationals, the Cable Act did not apply to them. Until April 21, 1933, many Filipinos married white women until the California Civil Code was amended on that date to include a prohibition against “Malays.”⁴³

Filipino immigration was resisted in the 1920s, but strong support to exclude Filipinos did not materialize until the 1930s. Just as the economic hardship of the 1870s had fueled the Chinese Exclusion Movement, the Great Depression roused sentiment against Filipinos. Philippine independence was the avenue advocated by most exclusionists. If the Philippines were no longer under the ownership of the United States, then they could be included in the Asiatic Barred Zone. In 1934, Congress passed the Philippine Independence Act, known as the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which promised independence for the Philippines in ten years. Under this Act, Filipinos were reclassified as aliens and an immigration quota of fifty Filipinos a year was established. For twelve years (Philippine independence was delayed by World War II), Filipinos were in the odd position of owing allegiance to a country in which they were considered aliens. This alien status was especially damaging during the Depression because it rendered them ineligible for government relief programs. The passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act was the final step in Asian exclusion, effectively shutting down all immigration from Asia until World War II.

World War II and the Japanese American Internment

December 7, 1941 profoundly affected America’s views about Asians. The attack at Pearl Harbor reinforced the “Yellow Peril” fears, but it also caused the United States to forge alliances with Asian nations, China among them. America’s entry into World War II presented opportunities for some Asian Americans and for others, it caused loss and disillusionment.

Following Japan’s attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, agents of the FBI swept through Japanese American communities in California, Oregon and Washington, arresting leaders who were identified as “potential threats” to the security of the West Coast. Those arrested were leaders of Japanese American community organizations, ministers of churches, teachers at language and martial arts schools, and editors of Japanese American vernacular newspapers. Despite never having been accused of any crime or acts of treason, and without trial or representation, they were taken away to

United States Department of Justice detention centers, many for the duration of the war. Their families did not know where they were taken or if they would ever see them again.



On February 19, 1942, two months after the attack at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which set into motion a series of events that led to one of our country's most tragic constitutional failures. Executive Order 9066 gave broad authority to the military to secure the borders of the United States and to create military zones from which individuals—citizens and aliens alike—could be forced from their homes. Although the executive order was carefully crafted so that no specific groups of people were singled out, its implementation resulted in the wholesale removal and imprisonment of the entire Japanese American population residing on the West Coast of the United States.

Under the authority of Executive Order 9066, the western portions of California, Washington and Oregon were declared as military zones, and in April 1942, the military imposed a curfew and travel restrictions on Japanese Americans. Singled out by race alone, Japanese Americans became the target of racial policies that deprived them of their rights as American citizens. Soon after the curfew, the military posted notices in all Japanese American communities, ordering all citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry to abruptly leave their homes, schools and businesses and report to assembly areas, bringing with them only what they could carry. The government euphemistically referred to this program as an "evacuation" to "relocation centers," when in fact it was the forced removal and incarceration of American citizens into concentration camps.

Under direction of armed police and the military, Japanese immigrants and Americans of Japanese ancestry were herded onto buses and trains for the forced journey to government detention camps. Without regard for due process or basic constitutional guarantees, over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, (the *Issei* — or first generation — were ineligible for citizenship due to discriminatory naturalization laws) were imprisoned in ten concentration camps located in remote, desolate areas in California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming and Arkansas. Approximately 10,000 people were imprisoned in each camp surrounded by barbed wire and armed military guards.

In January 1943, the United States Department of War announced that Japanese American volunteers would be accepted for military combat duty in Europe. Most of the volunteers came from Hawaii, but there were also those who volunteered from within the concentration camps on the mainland. The volunteers were assigned to a segregated Japanese American unit—the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. For its size and length of service, the 442nd eventually became the most decorated American unit in United States military history.

The treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II remains as one of the most serious violations of constitutional rights in the history of the United States. The President signed the executive order with an intent to single out those of Japanese ancestry; the Congress supported the President's actions and gave statutory authority to the order; and the Supreme Court upheld the government's actions in three test cases that sanctioned the forced exclusion and imprisonment of a group of citizens based solely on race. This all transpired, despite the fact that eight articles and amendments of the Bill of Rights had been denied them.

The long struggle for regaining citizenship rights is a good example of the difficult and slow struggle that Japanese Americans faced when returning to normal life. Anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast still thrived in their absence and many people were opposed to the return of the Japanese Americans. In addition, much of the personal property that had been left behind had been stolen, vandalized or ruined by neglect. Unlike their forced removal, there was no large government effort to reintroduce Japanese Americans back into society after the war. They were forced to pick up the pieces of their lives after their incarceration.

A Changing Nation: The Aftermath of World War II

After World War II, the United States found itself in a new position with regard to Asia. Japan had been defeated and all other Asian nations were not equipped to pose a military threat to the United States. Though the "Yellow Peril" had always been more racist myth than fact, its influence waned with the diminished level of a perceived threat. Furthermore, knowledge of the horrors of Nazi brutality toward Jews and others caused many to abhor parallel racism in American society.⁴⁴ Slowly, the American attitude towards those of Asian descent within its borders began to change.

One factor contributing to the changing opinion of Asian Americans was their heroic participation in the war effort. The heroic exploits of the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team became widely known and heralded. Tens of thousands of Asian Americans of all ancestries enlisted to serve their country, enough to support military units for Chinese, Filipino and Korean Americans as well as the Filipinos who were recruited to fight against the Japanese in the Philippines with the promise of United States citizenship. The goodwill generated by this contribution was reflected in the legislation of the time. In 1946, three years after Chinese could become naturalized as citizens, the Luce-Cellar Bill extended the same right to Filipinos and Asian Indians. In a similar display of postwar goodwill, the War Brides Act of 1945 (later amended in 1947 to include veterans of Asian descent) along with the GI Fiancées Act of 1946, allowed thousands of Asian fiancées and wives of servicemen to enter the United States. No longer concerned with an "Asian invasion," these women were allowed to enter as non-quota immigrants.⁴⁵ Anti-miscegenation laws, while still supported by a segment of the population, also fell from favor. In 1948, the California Supreme Court declared in *Perez v. Sharp* that California's anti-miscegenation law constituted a violation of civil rights, releasing a wave of marriage applications that had been stymied for years.

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The Cold War with Russia and the “hot” war with North Korea and China further influenced America’s opinion towards Asians. After the war, the Soviet Union, a former ally during the war, was now America’s greatest foe. The United States became increasingly fearful of the “domino effect,” the idea that as one country turned to communism, other surrounding countries would follow suit like “dominoes.” This theory seemed an all too present reality when China and most of Eastern Europe “fell” to communism after World War II. On the Korean Peninsula, the country was divided at the 38th parallel. On the north was Soviet-liberated Korea with guerilla leader Kim Il Sung as chairman, and on the south was American liberated Korea that became its own country in 1948 with the election of Korean exile Syngman Rhee. The Korean War started in June of 1950 when North Korea invaded southern Korea. At the time, most American forces had left Korea, but they soon returned to help the South Korean government. Communist China countered by backing North Korea in November of that year. The war stalemated after three years with the 38th parallel once again designated as the border dividing north and south.⁴⁶

The Korean War again showed that the United States was no longer an isolationist country. Now it was involved in the reconstruction of a war-torn world, including Japan and Germany. America was deeply involved in world politics and interested in modeling itself as the leading nation to promote democratic values. In the landmark anti-segregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the amicus brief by Justice Department stated, “The existence of discrimination against minority groups in the U.S. has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries.”⁴⁷ At the same time, the United States was gripped by fear of communism, and believed tighter and more organized control of its borders to be the solution against communist infiltration. These somewhat conflicting desires worked to reshape racially-biased American immigration policy.

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The Korean War initiated the largest wave of Korean immigration to the United States since the Russo-Japanese War. Most of this immigration consisted of Korean women and orphans covered under the War Brides Act. In 1952, Congress passed the Walter-McCarran Act, over a veto by President Harry Truman, a compromise between the desire for equality and a hesitation to open national borders. On the one hand, the act nullified both the Naturalization Act of 1790 and all federal anti-Asian exclusion laws, allowing for the first time all legal immigrants in America to become naturalized citizens. On the other hand, the Act did not abolish the biased quota system, allowing only a total of 2,000 visas annually for all nineteen of the countries in the Eastern hemisphere. One other important difference in the Act was the establishment of a preference system. The United States no longer looked at race as the only factor for immigration but gave preference to those with professional and technical skills.⁴⁸

Anti-Asian laws also were repealed in state and local governments during the 1950s, including the infamous alien land laws of California in 1956. The development of the Civil Rights Movement continued to change things for Asian Americans, most notably with the Immigration Act of 1965. Since the mid-1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders had been advocating equal rights and opportunity for all Americans. In 1964, the government acknowledged this movement on a federal level with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. With discrimination within United States borders, the discriminatory policies used to control those borders came into sharp relief, and Congress soon turned their attention to immigration reform. The Immigration Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Reform Act, abolished the national origins quota system established in 1924 and adopted a hemisphere quota system. Quotas for Asian nations jumped from approximately 100 to 20,000 immigrants per year, making the quotas representative of world population distribution rather than by racial preference.⁴⁹

The era of the Civil Rights Movement also produced a new stereotype for Asian Americans—the “model minority.” Sociologist William Peterson first coined the term in his 1966 article, “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” to contrast Japanese Americans with other so-called “problem minorities,” implicitly African Americans and Latinos. At the time, these minorities were drawing attention to the discrimination and racism that existed in the United States with boycotts, protests and civil disobedience. The riots in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles occurred six months before publication of the article. By comparison, Asian Americans were cast in the stereotype of being quiet, successful, and self-reliant. They were portrayed as the embodiment of the Horatio Alger “rags to riches” dream, persevering despite prejudice and hardships, and without government assistance. Nevertheless, this seemingly positive stereotype still did not remove the stigma of Asian Americans as being “foreigners.” Moreover, the “model minority” myth was sometimes used to deflect responsibility for the affects of racism on other minorities.

After 1965: Increasing Unity and Complexity in the Asian American Community

Legislators of the time could not have predicted the effect that the Immigration Act of 1965 would have on immigration from Asia. When it passed, the bill was not expected to have that great an impact. Since the bill favored spouses and children of American citizens, allowing them to enter as non-quota immigrants, it was reasoned that not many Asians would enter the United States. In defense of the bill he proposed, Emmanuel Celler declared, "Since the people of... Asia have very few relatives here, comparatively few could emigrate from those countries." Celler could not have been more wrong. Since 1965, Asians have been coming to America in numbers that far exceed pre-1965 statistics. Between 1971 and 1980 alone, about 1.6 million Asian immigrants arrived on American soil, and between 1981 and 1990, a surprising 2.8 million.⁵⁰ Aided by the increased ease of travel and motivated by new economic and political opportunities in the United States, Asian Americans grew to be more numerous, diverse and vocal than ever before in American society.

One immediate diversifying effect that the act produced was the surge in immigration of Koreans and Asian Indians. For Koreans, post-1965 immigration became known as a renewed "third wave." For Asian Indians, it was the first time they had come to the United States in significant numbers. Because the 1965 Immigration Act maintained the "preference system," like that of the Walter-McCarran Act, most immigrants from these countries were educated professionals. This phenomenon of importing the "best and brightest" was particularly pronounced with Asian Indians, and the process became known as a "brain drain."

In the 1970s, other new groups of Asians, those affected by the Vietnam War, would be motivated to come to the United States. The United States became involved in Vietnam in the 1950s after France released colonial control of the country following an eight-year war. At the time, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel between the communist north and anti-Communist south. The United States provided financial and military aid to South Vietnam to repress internal communist insurgencies, dramatically increasing the number of American "advisors" in the country when the National Liberation Front, known popularly as the Viet Cong, was created in 1960. Motivated by the attack on the USS *Maddox* and the USS *C. Turner Joy*, in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese gunboats, the United States began an all out war against North Vietnam in early 1965. After years of unsuccessful warfare against North Vietnam, the United States began seeking a way to end its involvement in this unpopular war. As a result, the United States signed a ceasefire with North Vietnam in January of 1973, evacuating the last American troops from Saigon on April 30, 1975.⁵¹

When Vietnam "fell" to the North Vietnamese, it did so faster than expected. South Vietnamese soldiers, trained to defend their country, were expected to hold off North Vietnamese forces until at least 1976, but suffered a quick defeat as soon as American troops were gone. In the final hours of the Saigon evacuation, American troops along with South Vietnamese desperate to leave their country were airlifted from the tops of buildings. This hurried departure led to the first wave of 132,000 Vietnamese refugees, most of whom had strong ties to the United States government and would certainly be singled out for severe retribution by the North Vietnamese had they stayed in Vietnam. Subsequent waves lasting into the 1980s would also include ethnic Vietnamese minorities like the Cham, Montagnards, Khmer and ethnic Chinese, as well as refugees from Laos and Cambodia fleeing communist regimes in those countries. Refugees from Southeast Asia numbered in the hundreds of thousands, many seeking refuge in surrounding Asian countries, but the majority looking for asylum in the United States.⁵²

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Because refugees fled Southeast Asia in such numbers, it often took years for them to find homes in other countries. Large numbers of refugees who left on boats were consistently denied entry as they traveled from one country's port to another, and became known as "boat people." Feeling responsible for this human crisis, the United States began accepting "boat people" in 1977 under a third preference visa, good for two years. Three years later, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980. The Refugee Act superseded the Immigration Act in the area of refugees and helped more than one-half million Southeast Asians gain permanent resident status in the United States within the first decade of its passage. In 1987, the Amerasian Homecoming Act became law permitting foreign-born children of American soldiers, many of whom were orphans, and their families to immigrate to the United States. Overall, well over a million Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants have come to America since the Vietnam War, turning that previously non-existent Asian community into a booming one.⁵³

The war in Vietnam shaped certain negative images about this new group of immigrants. During the war, American soldiers used the term "gook," a racial slur that originated during the Korean War, to describe all Asians they encountered. Because the Vietnam War experience seemed, for many soldiers, a series of guerilla battles in which it was difficult to distinguish North Vietnamese soldiers from South Vietnamese allies and dangerous southern Viet Cong from peaceful civilians, many soldiers started labeling all Asians as "gooks." The trauma of war abroad turned into tensions at home for some soldiers who returned to find Vietnamese as their neighbors.

During the 1980s, American automobile manufacturers operating outdated plants began losing their competitive edge to newer, more efficient Asian manufacturers, particularly Japan. People accused Japan of trying to do economically what they failed to do militarily in World War II. Lee Iacocca, chairman of the Chrysler Corporation, even made a joke about dropping more nuclear weapons on Japan.⁵⁴ "Buy American" campaigns were started, and anything that was Japanese became a target for "Japan bashing." The perceived Japanese threat was embodied in Hollywood films such as *Rising Sun*, where the protagonist battles a faceless horde of Japanese businessmen and gangsters bent on American economic takeover.⁵⁵

These tensions were expressed in hate incidents and hate crimes directed at Asian Americans. The most notable incident occurred in Detroit where two disgruntled autoworkers beat Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American to death. The tragedy was compounded when the judge in the case sentenced the killers to only three years probation and \$3,750 in fines.⁵⁶ Other examples include an incident in 1989 when Patrick Purdy, wearing combat fatigues and using an AK-47 rifle, sprayed a playground filled primarily with Asian American children at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California. One Vietnamese and four Cambodian children were killed and 29 others were wounded. In another incident in

2000, Benjamin Smith, a member of a supremacist group calling itself the World Church of the Creator, went on a shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana, killing a Korean student, Won- Joon Yoon at the University of Indiana and wounding a Chinese American student at the University of Illinois.

Interethnic tension led to a tragic incident affecting the Korean American community—the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The riots began when the beating of African American motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles Police officers provoked anger in the African American community when the beating was caught on tape and played continuously by media outlets. Community outrage erupted into violence when a jury acquitted the policemen of using excessive force in subduing King. The riots took place as a result of the years of discrimination and neglect toward the residents in Watts. For the Korean store-owners, their presence in Watts presented one of the few ways for these immigrants to make a living, in part, because of language barriers and because many had difficulty finding entry level opportunities elsewhere. Rioters ransacked stores owned by people of all nationalities, but Korean immigrant store owners suffered fully one-half of the \$850 million of damage, with 2,300 Korean stores destroyed.⁵⁷

A Growing Population and Political Empowerment

Since 1970 when the Census Bureau counted approximately 1.5 million Asian Americans, or less than one percent of the total United States population, the growth in the Asian American population has been dramatic. By 2000, there were nearly 12 million Asian Americans, comprising 4.2 percent of the population. In contrast to an earlier time, this growth was not limited to certain geographic areas such as the West Coast. The states with the largest Asian American populations in order were California, New York, Hawaii, Texas and Illinois. The cities with the largest Asian American populations in order were New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Philadelphia.

The growth in the Asian American community brought with it recognition for the importance of political empowerment. For Asian Americans, this movement grew out of the civil rights challenges of the 1960s, which began with efforts to establish Asian American studies programs on university campuses. Following statehood for Hawaii in 1959, Asian Americans quickly became a political force because of their sizable population in the state. Hiram Fong was elected as Hawaii's first United States senator and Daniel Inouye was elected as its first United States representative. On the United States mainland, Norman Mineta was the first Asian American elected as a congressman from California in 1974, after having served as the mayor of San Jose. Mineta later became the first Asian American to be appointed to the Cabinet, serving as the Secretary of Commerce under President Bill Clinton and as Secretary of Transportation under President George W. Bush. In 1996, Gary Locke became the first Asian American to serve as the governor of a mainland state when he was elected as Washington's governor. Mee Moua became the first Hmong elected to the Minnesota Senate in 2002. Despite these electoral successes, the Asian American community continues to struggle to see representatives from their community elected to offices within all levels of government. These efforts to increase their political representation are similar to the efforts by the Hispanic and African American communities, and by the Irish, Italians, Polish and other ethnic groups dating to their initial arrival in the United States.

Coupled with attempts to elect individuals to public office have been the efforts by Asian American communities to influence public opinion and shape public policy. The killing of Vincent Chin in a Detroit suburb in 1982 by two autoworkers during a climate of "Japan-bashing," became a focus of national attention when the judge gave a light sentence to the killers following their guilty pleas for manslaughter. The case became a rallying point for Asian Americans eager to seek justice and to begin addressing the history of marginal and discriminatory treatment by the government. One of Chin's killers was convicted of civil rights violations and sentenced to 25 years in prison, though he was later acquitted in a re-trial in 1987. Vincent Chin's mother later awarded damages in a civil court.

Beginning in 1979, the Japanese American community, led by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), a national civil rights organization, began a decade-long campaign to seek reparations from the federal government for unjustly incarcerating Japanese Americans during World War II. This "Redress" campaign resulted in the establishment of a federal commission, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC), to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the

internment and to make recommendations to Congress. In 1983, the CWRIC concluded that the internment was unjustified and recommended an apology by Congress and a payment of \$20,000 to those affected by Executive Order 9066. Many in the Japanese American community regarded the amount of the payment as purely symbolic because the monetary sum could not replace the loss of liberty or the personal and community trauma caused by the incarceration. It would take five more years before the House of Representatives finally approved legislation on September 17, 1987, adopting the primary provisions of the CWRIC recommendations. Following approval of the legislation by the Senate, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act into law on August 11, 1988.

The Impact of September 11, 2001

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans were singled out and associated with the terrorists. However, because of ignorance and the proximity of certain Asian countries to the Middle East, South Asian and Muslim Americans were also targeted for acts of intolerance. Just as Muslim women wearing *hijab* (headscarves) were singled out and forced to wear stickers stating they had passed airport security, so too, were Sikh men wearing turbans subjected to the same treatment. Four days after September 11th, a Sikh man was shot and killed while planting flowers outside his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. The man arrested said he did it because the victim was “was dark-skinned, bearded and wore a turban.” The pattern of hate crimes and hate incidents directed at South Asians and Muslims has continued since September 11, 2001. This story has repeated itself through the decades beginning with the initial immigration of the Chinese who were demonized as foreigners and targeted as the cause for economic downturns during the 1800s. Japanese Americans suffered the same fate at the outbreak of World War II when they were deemed a security risk to our nation and confined unjustly in concentration camps during the 1940s.

Asian Americans: An Integral Part of the American Landscape

Though there is much in the Asian American historical experience that recounts mistreatment and discrimination, there has also been a steadfast endeavor by Asian Americans to find opportunity and to contribute and become an integral part of American society. Asian American contributions are reflected in the building of the Transcontinental Railroad and in the influence Japanese Americans had in developing the agricultural industry in California and the heroic exploits of the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe during World War II. Asian Americans continue to make significant contributions to American society and to our popular culture. This is seen through the contributions of individuals such as the renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Olympian Apollo Anton Ono, Pittsburgh Steelers Pro-Bowler Hines Ward, the architect of New York’s World Trade Center, Minoru Yamasaki, Yahoo! founder Jerry Yang, astronauts Ellison Onizuka and Kalpana Chawla who died in separate NASA missions, the Pulitzer prize author Jhumpa Lahiri, comedian Margaret Cho, Hip-Hop artist Mike Shinoda, television chef Ming Tsai and fashion designer Vera Wang. Moreover, Asian Americans have brought their customs and traditions which have been absorbed into our culture, helping shape our ever-changing society.

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The Angel Island Immigration Station

From 1910 to 1940, the Angel Island Immigration Station located in San Francisco Bay, processed over 175,000 immigrants, the vast majority from China and Japan. Angel Island has been referred to as the "Ellis Island of the West," but this is misleading. While immigrants on Ellis Island were usually processed in a matter of hours, immigrants on Angel Island could spend two weeks to two years before they were either allowed entry or deported. Because of exclusionary laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen's Agreement, Angel Island operated as a blockade rather than as a gateway for Asian immigration.

Prior to 1910, Asian immigrants were housed on the mainland in the squalid Pacific Mail Steamship

Company shed near San Francisco's Chinatown. To avoid a lengthy and uncertain immigration process, immigrants would cut through barbed wire or file down iron bars to escape, disappearing into the city streets. Angel Island's isolation, like that of neighboring Alcatraz Island, prevented escape, making it an ideal location to detain immigrants.

Upon arrival at Angel Island, men and women were separated, including husbands and wives, and housed in crowded conditions surrounded by barbed wire. In the weeks, and sometimes months that followed, detainees received substandard food and medical care while being subjected to exhaustive interrogations. One of the few ways that Chinese and Japanese could legally enter the



Angel Island interrogation.

country was by proving they had a relative already living in the United States. To expose false relatives or “paper sons” interrogators probed immigrants for the most miniscule details of their lives such as “How many streets does your village have?” or “How many stairs lead up to your family house?”¹ One wrong or inconsistent answer could lead to immediate deportation. The demoralizing treatment

and living conditions on Angel Island compelled many detainees to carve poems in the dormitory walls that reflected their despair. One poem reads:

*Leaving behind my writing brush and
removing my sword, I came to America.
Who was to know two streams of tears would
flow upon arriving here?²*

In 1940, a fire destroyed the main administration building, and the immigration station was closed. The rest of the station was slated for demolition in the 1970s, but was saved through the efforts of concerned citizens. Today the Angel Island Immigration Station is a national historic landmark.

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- 1 Brimner, *Cornerstones of Freedom: Angel Island* p. 22
 - 2 Cao, Novas, and Silva, *Everything you need to know about Asian American History*, p. 38