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ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Asian immigration to the US

The goal of this paper is to analyze current data of the Asian ethnicity residing in the US at the beginning of the 21st century and to expatiate on key facts and salient features pertaining to Asian Americans, whereas the main objective of the introductory part of the present work is to recount succinctly the history of the Asian immigration to the United States.

The Asian immigration to the US commenced in significant numbers one year after the discovery of gold in northern California, on January 24th 1848. Thus, three hundred twenty-five Chinese immigrants migrated to California in 1849. Within one year their numbers rose exponentially: 2,716 Chinese arrived in California in 1851 and 20,026 in 1852 (Lee 2015: 59). Emigration from China to America was, for nearly a century, not overwhelmingly Chinese, as Canton emigration. Hence, over 90 % of the immigrants of that period were not exclusively from Canton in South China but from a very few counties centered on the Pearl River Delta there. The Chinese were prevalently centered in the Western part of the US, specifically in California. They usually ensconced in big cities, particularly in San Francisco, although the percentage in the rest of the US increased progressively after 1870 (Daniels 2002: 241). In such large cities, the Chinese lived almost exclusively in ethnic enclaves, denominated *Chinatowns*, often being overcrowded slum areas. San Francisco's Chinatown was the first and the most significant one. It was subsequently replicated in big cities across the US as far away as Boston and, even if today there are a larger number of Chinese people in New York City than in San Francisco, the latter preserves its cultural preponderance. The most noteworthy feature regarding San Francisco's Chinatown has been its geographic stability (Daniels 2002: 242).

The Chinese, however, had a migratory tradition long before any came to the United States, involving migration to Southeast Asia. Thus, in the first half of the 19th century Western entrepreneurs, with the support of Chinese middlemen, imported unfree Chinese labour to various parts of the plantation world, as surrogates for African slaves. This "collie trade", as it was named, brought Chinese to Trinidad in the Caribbean in 1808. The major New World destinations were Cuba and Peru. It was a violent and iniquitous system that can be considered even more nefarious than slavery, particularly in the guano islands, in propinquity with the coast of Peru (Tinker 1974).

Beginning in the 1850s, when young single men were recruited as contract laborers from Southern China, Asian immigrants played a vital role in the development of the

United States. Working as miners, railroad builders, farmers, factory workers, and fishermen, the Chinese represented 20% of California's labour force by 1870, albeit they constituted only .002% of the entire United States population. With the depression of 1876, amidst cries of "They're taking away our jobs!," anti-Chinese legislation and violence raged throughout the West Coast (www.asiasociety.org).

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act—the sole United States Iaw to subvert immigration laws and naturalization on the basis of race—which restricted Chinese immigration for the successive sixty years. The "Chinese Must Go" movement was so strong that Chinese immigration to the United States declined from 39,500 in 1882 to only 10 in 1887.

By 1885, following Chinese Exclusion Act, considerable numbers of young Japanese laborers, together with smaller numbers of Koreans and Indians, began arriving on the West Coast where they replaced the Chinese as cheap labour in constructing railroads, farming, and fishing. Growing anti-Japanese legislation and violence followed immediately. In 1907, Japanese immigration was restricted by a "Gentleman's Agreement" between the United States and Japan.

Rather modest numbers of Korean immigrants came to Hawaii and to the mainland United States following the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and Japan's occupation of Korea. Serving as strike-breakers, railroad builders, and agricultural workers, Korean immigrants faced not only racist exclusion in the United States but Japanese colonization at home. Some Korean patriots also settled in the United States as political exiles and organized for Korean independence.

South Asian Indian immigrants also entered the United States as labourers, following Chinese exclusion. Recruited initially by Canadian-Pacific railroad companies, a few thousand Sikh immigrants from the Punjabi region immigrated to Canada which, like India, was part of the British Empire. Subsequently, many moved into the Pacific Northwest and California, and became farm labourers. Ironically decried as a "Hindu invasion" by exclusionists and white labour, the "tide of the Turbans" was outlawed in 1917 when Congress declared that India was part of the Pacific-Barred Zone of excluded Asian countries (www.asiasociety.org).

By 1924, with the exception of Filipino "nationals," all Asian immigrants, including Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Indians were fully excluded by law, denied citizenship and naturalization, and prevented from marrying Caucasians or owning land.

With all other Asians excluded, thousands of young, single Filipinos began migrating in large numbers to the West Coast during the 1920s in order to work in farms and canneries, filling the continuing exigence for cheap labour. Filipinos were not legally excluded by the immigration laws because the Philippines had already been annexed by the United States as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Racism and economic competition, intensified by the depression of 1929, however, caused a recrudescence, as far as severe anti-Filipino violence and discrimination were concerned.

The passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1935 placed an annual quota of fifty on Filipino migration—effectively excluding their entry, as well. During the half century from 1882 to 1935, three waves of early Asian immigrants contributed their labour to the building of the US, but were eventually denied entry and not granted naturalization rights until 1952. Though coming from different countries and cultures, the pioneering Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Indians, and Filipinos each faced similar conditions of exclusion and were victims of diverse iniquities which forged the beginnings of a common, shared Asian experience in America.

There are important parallels between European and Asian immigration history, especially in terms of how individuals responded to the "pushes" and "pulls" in their homelands and then faced contradictory experiences of discrimination and opportunity in the U.S. However, the "push-pull" model commonly used to explain European immigration, like the melting pot paradigm of immigrant assimilation, does not explain the fundamental differences in patterns of Asian immigration and exclusion.

These differences can only be understood by recognizing critical features of the historical period, including:

- the reality of western colonialism and unequal power relations in Asia;
- the insatiable need for cheap labour that accompanied manifest destiny westward expansion and economic development in the United States; and
- the influence on social policy and public attitudes that resulted from lack of knowledge about Asian peoples, and racist notions of white superiority (www.asiasocietyorg).

Although people are familiar with Ellis Island as a symbol of America's immigration history, not many realize that Angel Island—a comparable immigration detention centre for the West Coast—was the site where immigration policy was enforced during the Asian exclusion years. Angel Island represents an important counterpoint to Ellis Island and the saga of American immigration history.

Between 1910 and 1940, hopeful Chinese immigrants were detained at Angel Island where they were required to undergo humiliating medical examinations and detailed interrogations. In 1970, a park ranger discovered sets of Chinese characters carved into the wooden walls of the barracks. Now recognized as an historic landmark, the Angel Island detention centre bears witness to the bitterness and frustration of excluded Chinese immigrants who carved more than one hundred poems into the walls.

Although minor reforms in immigration law, due to changing international rapports, allowed for limited numbers of Asians to enter the United States following the World War II era, United States immigration laws remained discriminatory toward Asians until 1965. But subsequently, in response to the civil rights movement, non-restrictive annual quotas of 20,000 immigrants per country were established. For the first time in United States history, large numbers of Asians were able to come to the United States as families. In addition, due to the United States' eagerness for technology during the Cold War, foreign engineers and scientists were also encouraged to emigrate to the United States. Thus, the dramatic changes in the Asian Pacific American landscape during the past twenty years, particularly with the explosive growth of new Filipino, Korean, South Asian Indian, and Chinese populations, have resulted from the liberalization of immigration laws in 1965 (www.asiasociety.org). Since the passage of the aforementioned Immigration Act in 1965, no aggregate group has benefited more from the modification in American immigration law than have Asian Americans. They were above all beneficiaries of a general trend toward a more egalitarian society, specifically in terms of race and ethnicity in the 1960s (Daniels 2002: 350). Two other events, however, were decisive in this regard: the retarded admission of Hawaii to statehood in 1959 implicated the presence of Asian American senators providing political clout in Washington D. C. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the so-called model minorities with the perceived nonachievement of black internal migrants and most of the Hispanic population, accelerated the diffuse acceptance of Asians, particularly vis – a – vis other contemporary newcomers; and consequently the augmentation of Asian American population was noteworthy: in 1940 Asian Americans were less than four-tenths of 1 % of the American people, by 1980 they constituted 1,5 %, and in 2000 they were 4 % of the American population (Daniels 2002: 350).

The exodus of Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos commenced in 1975. They entered the United States after escaping from war, insupportable social chaos, discrimination, and economic hardship. Roughly one million Southeast Asians, including about 30,000 Amerasian children of American servicemen and their families, have entered the United States since then through a variety of refugee resettlement and immigration programmes.

Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos each have distinct cultures, languages, and contexts of historical development. Although each country shares certain influences from their common history as a French colonial territory for nearly a century until 1954, Vietnam is much more culturally influenced by China, whereas Cambodia and Laos have been more influenced by India. Within each country, there are Chinese and other ethnic minority populations such as the Hmong, Mien, and Khmer from Laos.

Numerous cases also link the present to the past. The experiences of personal struggle, economic contribution, racial harassment, and discriminatory legislation targeting Vietnamese fishermen in California's Monterey Bay during the 1980s, for example, are almost identical to those of earlier generations of Japanese and Chinese fishermen who successively fished in Monterey Bay during the late 1800s and early 1900s (www.asiasociety.org).

Throughout the 20th century a large number of Chinese immigrants moved to the US and came from diverse places: Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and China itself. A considerable part of the more than half-million increase in the Chinese American population between 1960 and 1980 represents immigrants, and they and their children represented an absolute majority of that population. Furthermore, Chinese Americans distinguish themselves, above all in comparison with Japanese Americans because they are often younger, less concentrated in the Western part of the US, and they have a slightly lower median income per full time worker and more than twice as high a percentage of families living in poverty (Daniels 2002: 354). As to education, a relatively high number (68,1 %) of Chinese Americans were high school graduates, ands more than a quarter were college graduates in the 1970s (Daniels 2002: 354). The Chinese community, however, was characterized by a somewhat bifurcated nature, a community that despite significant achievements frequently contained considerable indigence and deprivation, as will be illustrated in the subsequent parts of this work.

Thus, it seems to be particularly appropriate to me to lay emphasis on the fact that throughout their history, Asian Americans have confronted a long legacy of exclusion and inequity in the US; they were oppressed; and moreover, they were frequently discriminated, above all in relation to school policies and practices, particularly during periods of changing demographics, economic recession, or war. In spite of historic and linguistic differences, distinct Asian nationalities have been grouped together and treated similarly in schools and in the larger society. The grouping of Asian Americans together, then, makes sense in light of historic links from the past to the present.