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## Asian Americans: An Overview

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## Asian Americans: An Overview

### **Abstract**

Asian Americans are those groups and individuals in North America (some prefer to expand the scope of the term to include all countries of the two Americas) who trace their ancestry back to Asia. Asian Americans by this definition include all Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, ethnic Lao, Hmong, Thai, and all other Americans with ethnic backgrounds in Asia. Many include Pacific Islanders under the rubric of "Asian Pacific Americans," so that Samoan Americans and Tongan Americans, for example, are included in the mix.

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### **Comments**

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DAVID M. LUBIN

## ASIAN AMERICANS

[The place of Asian Americans in the culture and history of the United States is here treated in several separate but related articles. The first entry, AN OVERVIEW, points to the rich diversity inherent in the term Asian American and discusses the groups and histories it is meant to designate. Following this introduction are three more specialized pieces concerning the contributions of Asian Americans to various fields of activity. These are as follows:

ASIAN AMERICANS IN FILM AND THEATER

ASIAN AMERICAN ART AND LITERATURE

ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS

For related articles in the encyclopedia, see also ANGEL ISLAND; AMERICANIZATION; VIETNAMESE AMERICANS; SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS; KOREAN AMERICANS; ORIENTALISM.]

### An Overview

Asian Americans are those groups and individuals in North America (some prefer to expand the scope of the term to include all countries of the two Americas) who trace their ancestry back to Asia. Asian Americans by this definition include all Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, ethnic Lao, Hmong, Thai, and all other Americans with ethnic backgrounds in Asia. Many include Pacific Islanders under the rubric of "Asian Pacific Americans," so that Samoan Americans and Tongan Americans, for example, are included in the mix.

Ever since Chinese sought out the "Gold Mountain" in the California gold rush, Asians have been coming to America in significant numbers. Once America opened its doors—although at times half-

heartedly or reluctantly—to Asian immigration, Americans of Asian descent experienced lives as diverse as their backgrounds. Many live in communities with such names as Chinatown, Koreatown, Little Tokyo, and Little Saigon. From western railroads to New York City's Chinatown, from Alaskan canneries to hospitals in New York and New Jersey, from California's Silicon Valley assembly lines to high-technology laboratories of Route 128 in Massachusetts—people of Asian descent have contributed much to the building of society and the development of culture in America.

Chinese and Filipino mariners of the Spanish galleons jumped ship at Acapulco during the 1600s, and this may have initiated the first immigration toward what would become the United States. Filipinos made their way to present-day Louisiana and established settlements in the Barataria Bay area. The first wave of migration began in the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of 195 Chinese contract laborers in Hawaii and more than 20 thousand Chinese in California. Gold is what drew Chinese to California in 1848, and work in the sugar plantations attracted Chinese contract laborers to Hawaii beginning in 1851, thanks largely to the efforts of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association. The Chinese were followed by 149 Japanese laborers shipped to Hawaii in 1868 and dozens of Japanese seeking their fortunes in California to work in the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony. Large numbers of Japanese laborers, contracted under the Irwin Convention, came to Hawaii in 1885 and continued to do so until 1894. The newcomers were welcomed coldly in other parts. The 1878 ruling in the case of Ah Yup determined the ineligibility of Chinese for citizenship. In 1894 the circuit court in Massachusetts confirmed the ineligibility of the Japanese for U.S. citizenship; this finding did not, however, prevent Shinsei Kaneko from becoming the first to be naturalized in California in 1896.

A second wave of Asian immigration began in the first decade of the twentieth century. The initial group of Korean laborers joined the Hawaiian plantation workforce in 1903. That same year sponsored Filipino students called *pensionados* came to study in American colleges and universities. Dur-

ing this period hundreds of East Indian Sikhs, mainly from the Punjab region, made their way to the Pacific Northwest. They met with hostility and exclusion in both Canada and in the United States, where legislation in 1917 finally closed off the influx of the so-called turban tide.

The reception of Asians arriving in American lands was not usually congenial. Quite the opposite. In 1850 California imposed a Foreign Miners' Tax, with discriminatory impact on the Chinese miners who had come to join the gold rush in that state. Discriminatory legislation was often directed against Asian Americans. The justices in the 1854 case of *People v. Hall* ruled that a Chinese person could not give valid testimony in court cases. Some 12 thousand Chinese were contracted to work for the Central Pacific Railroad Company. When 2 thousand of the Chinese workers went on a week-long strike for equal pay and better work conditions, the company broke the strike by cutting off the strikers' food supply. Discriminatory legislation included the California law of 1858 prohibiting the entry of Chinese and those classified as "Mongolians."

#### **Immigration and "Becoming American."**

America opened its doors, but not so widely to some immigrant groups. Whereas Chinese and Mongolians were shut out by the 1858 California law, the commercial Burlingame-Seward Treaty of 1868 allowed Chinese to immigrate. Chinese sweat and blood built the first transcontinental railroad beginning in 1865, when the Central Pacific Railroad Company employed Chinese laborers to grade, dig, and lay tracks.

Everywhere they moved, Chinese and Japanese immigrants met with discrimination and exclusionary practices. In 1870 the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to charge a fee to laundries using no horses, thus setting up a discriminatory ordinance targeting the Chinese laundries. Anti-Chinese mob violence broke out in Los Angeles in 1871; in Chico, California, in 1877; and in Washington Territory in 1885. The Page Law of 1875 prohibited the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian laborers, especially targeting felons and women perceived to be destined for prostitution. The Chi-

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nese Exclusion Law blocked the entry of Chinese immigrant labor from 1882 to 1892. In 1892 the Geary Law required registration of all Chinese immigrants. A 1902 police raid in Boston's Chinatown resulted in the arrest of nearly 250 Chinese immigrants without certificates. With the Organic Act of 1900 extending U.S. law to Hawaii, the flow of contract labor ended and many Japanese sought work on the U.S. mainland. But there they met with hostility and distrust. In 1913 California passed a series of alien-land laws designed to prevent "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from buying agricultural property.

A landmark event in Asian American history was the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Executive Order 9066 authorizing the army to carry out the relocations was signed March 18, 1942, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. All told, some 120 thousand Japanese Americans were interned in ten relocation camps throughout the interior western United States.

Amy Ling calls Asian America a "borderland," one that is "rich in its variety of permutations of ethnicity, race, and culture, and in the paradoxes of multiculturalism, multivocality, and multinationalism." But in order to reach this borderland, Asian Americans had to struggle against tremendous odds. Institutionalized racism took form early on. In 1854 the Supreme Court ruled in *People v. Hall* that the killer of a Chinese man could not be convicted on the testimony of a Chinese, whose testimony could not be admitted in court. The road to becoming American was beset with other kinds of obstacles as well. In 1880 Section 6 of California's Civil Code was enacted to ban marriages between whites and nonwhites, the latter category including those of Mongolian descent.

### **Self-Definition and Cultural Assertion.**

Asian American history tells more than stories of exploitation, and Asian American culture offers more than reactions to victimization. Asian Americans, from their beginnings as newcomers to their acceptance as integral members of American society, proved time and time again their creativity and resourcefulness as the agents of their own history

and makers of their own identity. Self-definition took multiple forms of resistance to oppressive conditions collectively and individually. Many Asian immigrants formed mutual benefit associations such as San Francisco's Sam Yup and Sze Yup Associations in 1851 and the Chinese Six Companies, a loose federation of six Chinese district associations in San Francisco in 1862. In 1884 the parents of Chinese American student Mamie Tape sued the San Francisco board of education to allow their child to attend public school.

The first trade association among the Japanese, the Japanese Shoemakers' League, was established in 1893 in San Francisco. Also in San Francisco, the Japanese founded in 1898 the Young Men's Buddhist Association, and in the following year Nishi Hongwanji priests in California established the North American Buddhist Mission. In 1909 the Korean Nationalist Association was formed, and in 1911, Pablo Manlapit began and organized the Filipino Higher Wages Association in Hawaii.

In Oxnard, California, in 1903 15 hundred Japanese and Mexican sugar-beet workers joined in a strike, and the following year Japanese sugar laborers in Hawaii carried out their first organized strike. The Caballeros de Dimas Alang, a fraternal and nationalist organization founded in Manila in 1906, established a San Francisco branch in 1921.

Asian Americans continued to fight for admission and citizenship. They encountered a setback in 1923, when in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* the Supreme Court ruled that Asian Indians could not be naturalized as citizens. Despite such obstacles, Asian Americans persisted in seeking acceptance into American society. The Japanese American Citizens League, founded by young professionals and businesspersons, advocated "that Nisei [second-generation Japanese] should become 200 percent American" and thus promoted the American model of individualism and entrepreneurship.

Significant events in later years have affected Asian American communities. In 1965 the Hart-Cellar Act removed national-origins quotas for immigration to allow entry to preferred groups: refu-

gees, needed professionals, and family members related to citizens. A nine-month student strike at San Francisco State University and the University of California at Berkeley, in 1968–1969, led to the creation of ethnic-studies programs on those two campuses. The 1974 Supreme Court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* determined the right to bilingual education, which reaches many Asian American children. The triumph of Communist governments in Southeast Asia drove more than 130 thousand from that region to migrate to the United States in 1975. The 1976 Health Professionals Education Assistance Act reduced the flow of foreign health professionals into the country. In 1979 the resumption of Sino-American diplomatic relations allowed Chinese families to be reunited. In 1980 a Congressional Refugee Act was passed to order and regulate the influx of refugees. In 1988 the U.S. Congress approved the Amerasian Homecoming Act, permitting entry to children conceived by American fathers in Vietnam. In 1992 President Bill Clinton signed a bill for reparation of 25 thousand dollars to each survivor of the Japanese American internment.

Many are the stereotypes that continue to limit the possibilities and opportunities of Asian Americans. Such widely diffused stereotypes involve labels such as “yellow peril,” which sees Asians in general as aggressive and diabolical enemies in war and aggressive and unscrupulous rivals in business; the “model minority,” which assumes Asian Americans to be inherently oriented toward achieving success in school and work while working within the existing sociopolitical system, thanks to a traditional work ethic, family discipline, and adaptation to the social order; the “household eunuch,” which regards Asian men as apt to perform as asexual domestic servants; and the “lotus blossom” and the “dragon lady,” which relegate Asian-descended women either to the category of submissive plaything for men or to that of the seductive, yet emasculating and manipulative, dominatrix.

Asian American studies began as an academic discipline on San Francisco and Berkeley campuses in 1968. Its field of inquiry includes representations

of Asians in literature and media, citizenship and assimilation, trans-Pacific relations, and the global economy.

Out of 600 thousand immigrants arriving each year in the United States, about half are Asian, contributing to the fact that Asian Americans make up the fastest growing minority group in the United States, at a rate of 95 percent in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In 1960, only 877,934 Americans were of Asian ancestry. By 1990, according to the U.S. Census, there were 7,273,662 Asian Americans in the United States, or nearly 3 percent of the total population, including 1.6 million Chinese, 1.4 million Filipinos, 847 thousand Japanese, 815 thousand East Indians, 800 thousand Koreans, 593 thousand Vietnamese, 147 thousand Laotians, and 149 thousand Cambodian Americans. By the year 2000 the Asian American population reached 10 million. It is expected that by the year 2050, Asian Americans will constitute 10.7 percent of the U.S. population. In 1989, 35 percent of Asian American households earned an annual income of 50 thousand dollars or more.

“Close to 50 percent of Asian Americans under 35 are marrying non-Asians,” wrote Eric Liu in 1998, “which promises rather quickly to change the meaning of the race.” This fact emphasized the hybrid significance of the term *Asian American*. In the aftermath of the Japanese American internments, the Japanese American Citizens League encouraged intermarriage as a means of gaining acceptance and assimilation. United States military involvements and interventions in Asia also promoted intermarriage between soldiers and women from Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam—the so-called war brides. California lifted the remaining barrier to intermarriage with Asian Americans in 1948 when it repealed its antimiscegenation laws.

The scope of Asian American experience should not be limited solely to that of Asian immigrants and their spouses and descendants, however. Rather, it is a collective history that connects both sides of the Pacific Ocean, one that involves Asians of diverse national origins and Americans of other than Asian descent, which inevitably entails the so-

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cial processes of transnationalization and cultural transformation.

Amy Ling asserts the value of an Asian American perspective because "it calls to account those in positions of power and shines a light on the discrepancy between word and deed, between democratic ideals and discriminatory practices." Along the same lines, Gary Okihiro argues that "the deeper significance of Asians, and indeed of all minorities in America, rests in their opposition to the dominant paradigm, their fight against 'the power,' their efforts to transform, and not simply reform, American society and its structures." Indeed, their struggle for admission, recognition, livelihood, and equality has meaning for the entirety of American society, inasmuch as "Asians resisted their exclusion and marginalization and thereby enlarged the range and deepened the meaning of American democracy."

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EUGENIO MATIBAG

### Asian Americans in Film and Theater

While distinctly different disciplines with separate histories, Asian American film and theater are

linked by their similar development and existence as a response to, if not in opposition to, mainstream American film and theater. The image of the Asian has long been a subject of fascination in American film and theater; from the dawn of the era of the silent movie and the minstrel show, Asians have been depicted on the American screen and stage. The stage convention of Caucasian actors portraying Asian characters later became accepted in film; a cavalcade of noted actors including Katharine Hepburn, Fred Astaire, Louise Bremer, Marlon Brando, Sidney Toler, Greta Garbo, Peter Sellers, David Carradine, Jonathan Pryce, Ricardo Montalban, and Bette Davis are among those who donned "yellow face" to create enduring and stereotypical images, such as the submissive geisha, the humble peasant, the emasculated servant, the exotic prostitute, the inscrutable sage, the comic sidekick, the evil dragon lady, and the diabolical villain—images that continue to inform the popular imagination and media.

The emergence of Asian American film and theater is intrinsically tied to the Asian American movement, which was catalyzed by the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. The monolithic, mythologized "Oriental" was appropriated and subverted in the term *Asian American* as a source of political power for diverse communities of Asian descent. According to William Wei:

The concept of Asian American implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent Pan-Asian movement for social change.

Films made by Asian Americans began in this spirit of community activism in the 1970s. Film-making emerged that both redressed damaging media images and addressed pressing issues in the Asian American community, such as urban renewal and the plight of Asian communities. Documentary films, far more economical to produce than fea-