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Asian American Immigrants:
A Comparison of the
Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos

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An historical overview of the immigration of the three most populous Asian American groups in the United States is presented. The immigrant experiences of the Chinese, Filipinos, and Japanese are compared, and the implications of their experiences for current and future immigration/resettlement programs and policies are discussed.

According to the 1980 census, the Chinese, Filipinos, and Japanese represent, respectively, the three most populous Asian-Pacific ethnic groups in the United States. This paper examines the immigration of these groups, provides a historical perspective of their resettlement, and discusses implications for current and future immigration programs and policies. The presentation follows the historical order of passage with the Chinese being the first to come to America, followed by the Japanese and then the Filipinos.

Chinese Americans

The majority of the Chinese immigrants came from the southeastern coastal provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien. The Tai-Ping Revolution of 1850–1964, the discovery of gold in California, and a natural catastrophe simultaneously created conditions which motivated some 300,000 Chinese to emigrate from their villages in this heavily overpopulated region (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982; Lyman, 1974). These immigrants were predominantly young men who intended to stay in the United States

only long enough to accumulate wealth and then return to China.

Generally, the Chinese were regarded as a curious but welcome addition to the population of laborers and fortune seekers arriving on the West Coast. Working as field hands and domestics they performed many needed services, and they contributed significantly to the completion of the transcontinental railroad. But, in the trades and gold fields where they competed with whites, they were often brutally attacked.

The national depression which started in the 1870s led to an intensification of atrocities against the Chinese. The bullying and beating of Chinese were common occurrences. The excesses of the 1870s and 1880s included shootings and lynchings, the burning of homes and businesses, and the expulsion of all Chinese from numerous areas (Lyman, 1974). Increasing racial agitation led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The Act effectively halted emigration from China to the United States.

Because many of the Chinese immigrants viewed their stay in the United States as temporary, they did not actively attempt to change the social and political structure of America. Furthermore, because of their self-perceived transient status, many left their wives and children in China. Unfortunately, the families that were separated by emigration were often never reunited. Lyman (1974) contends that the separation of families acted as a powerful deterrent to the creation of any sizable body of Chinese American citizenry. This left them with little numerical strength to fight discrimination or stem the tide of anti-Chinese legislation.

This latter situation was exacerbated by the shortage of eligible women. During the period of unrestricted immigration (1850-1882) 100,000 Chinese men, but only 8,848 women came to the United States (Lyman, 1974). Due to this imbalanced sex ratio it was not until 1950 that American-born Chinese came to comprise over one-half of the Chinese in the American population. Even then, discriminatory immigration practices had severely limited the number of Chinese (and Asians) in the United States. The 1980 census lists only 812,178 Chinese Americans, and they represent the most populous Asian group in the U.S.

The Chinese immigrants adapted to their situation by living in tightly knit enclaves insulated from the larger society. The enclaves were organized around prior territorial associations and often-times had one or more families that dominated the political, economic, and social life of the community (Light, 1972). Many traditional social and economic practices were directly transplanted into the enclaves, and transactions with members of the larger society were minimized.

Within the enclaves community associations served to assist new immigrants in a variety of ways. Such associations provided employment assistance, acted to mitigate disputes within the Chinese community, and served as representatives to the majority society. They also helped to underwrite the development of an entrepreneurial class by providing venture capital. Since discriminatory practices limited the immigrants access to external financial institutions, the associations developed rotating credit systems to substitute for banks (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982). Thus, community associations facilitated Chinese resettlement by fostering a degree of social and economic independence and insularity.

Japanese Americans

The majority of Japanese immigrants came from the southern prefectures of Japan during the Meiji restoration period of the late 1800s (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982). The government was attempting to industrialize Japan in order to compete with Western nations, and the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy spawned social unrest and unemployment. Faced with a tenuous economic future, many individuals sought a better life abroad.

Needing cheap, dependable labor, developers initially welcomed the first Japanese immigrants (Issei) to the sparsely populated frontier West. Ample employment opportunities existed in agriculture, and the Issei used familiar farming skills to obtain work in the fields. Those not employed in agriculture worked in a variety of other industries, with some 10,000 Japanese being employed at one time by the mining, lumbering, canning, and railroad industries (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982). However, as increasing numbers of Japanese arrived, the reception changed.

The American populace began to perceive them as competitors in the job market and considered them to be low in "assimilative potential" (McLemore, 1980).

The peak years of Japanese immigration (1885–1924) were characterized by the development and popularization of racist ideas by native whites and by the growth of legal efforts to restrict immigrant opportunities. Anti-Asian sentiments were manifested through laws which limited immigration, restricted land-ownership, prohibited naturalized citizenship, prohibited interracial marriages, and permitted the forced expulsion of Japanese from numerous communities (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982).

Given such laws, adaptations based on necessity evolved. For example, since Japanese were denied naturalized citizenship, and since laws prohibited non-citizens from owning land, Issei bought farmland in names of their children who were citizens by virtue of their birthright. When racist policies attempted to block economic development, the Japanese developed their own lending institutions or "tanomoshi." Within the tanomoshi members pooled their money and loaned it to each other on a rotating basis. This system operated entirely on mutual trust and obligation (Light, 1974). The tanomoshi provided capital for many Issei business ventures, which formed the foundation for the development of the Japanese American community.

Another type of organization was the "kenjinkai," or prefectural organization. The kenjinkai were comprised of families and individuals who had similar geographic origins and had settled near one another in the United States. The organization acted to maintain traditional cultural values and served as mechanisms for community solidarity. The kenjinkai also provided legal advice, gave money to needy members, served as an employment bureau, and paid medical and burial expenses (Light, 1974).

In a slightly different vein, anti-miscegenation laws prohibited Japanese men from marrying white women. Since labor contractors in the United States recruited men exclusively, there existed a radically imbalanced sex ratio. In order to find mates, Japanese men enlisted traditional "go-betweens" to arrange marriages with women who desired to come to America. Literally thousands of young Japanese women were betrothed

in this way and sent to join unknown bridegrooms in the United States (Kitano, 1969).

These adaptations coupled with hard work allowed some Issei to make remarkable gains against formidable odds. But, these gains were shortlived. With the onset of World War II came the mass evacuation of all Japanese from the West Coast. Many people sold their homes, businesses, and possessions at cut-rate prices. Others stored their goods or simply left everything in locked houses hoping that they would be safe until their return. Many farmers were forced to leave fields in which their life's savings were invested. The economic losses were monumental.

The incarceration of 110,00 Japanese Americans marks the most significant social and psychological event in their immigrant history. It was a critical period, a time when they had to carefully consider their nationality and ethnic identity. Fischer (1965) notes that only 2,300 of the 110,000 evacuees asked to be sent back to Japan. This is a surprisingly low number considering the bleak circumstances faced by these people. Those who chose to stay became committed to the American cause and believed they must vindicate themselves and their people by becoming ideal citizens. Thousands of Japanese American men enlisted in the Armed Forces to prove their loyalty. The 442nd and the 100th battalions, composed of second generation (Nisei) men from the Mainland and Hawaii, suffered more than 9,000 casualties and became the most decorated unit in American military history (Kitano, 1969).

Filipino Americans

The lure of economic opportunities was the primary motive for young Filipino men to emigrate to America. Like other Asian immigrants before them, they held dreams of accumulating great wealth and returning to their homeland. A common practice was for a family to mortgage part of its land in order to send one son to the United States. In turn, he would send money home to pay off the mortgage or to help a brother obtain a higher education (Melendy, 1976).

As was the case with previous Asian groups, the dreams and expectations of these men rarely materialized. Instead, they

found that they had to remain in America much longer than they expected. Many refused to return home as acknowledged failures. They continued to maintain family ties and send money home, but this practice became more difficult as retirement age approached (Melendy, 1976).

The immigration of Filipinos came largely in two waves. The first influx occurred during the 1920s, especially after 1924 when the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan halted the flow of Japanese laborers entering this country. Restricting the immigration of Japanese created a vacuum in the expanding labor markets on the West Coast. Farmers in California and Hawaii had to find other workers to perform the seasonal tasks in the fields and orchards. Workers were also sought by the salmon canneries of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska (Melendy, 1976). The demand for Filipino labor was shortlived, however, as the number of available white workers increased during the depression years. Racism escalated as competition for jobs increased, and the number of Filipinos arriving in America declined sharply.

Because the Philippines was a colony of the United States, the nationals were granted some rights and privileges, but were denied the right of franchise, property ownership or the freedom to marry whom they chose. The prejudicial attitudes held towards Filipinos paralleled those held about previous Asian minorities. These attitudes kept Filipinos in low level service positions, and those who sought housing were forced to live in non-white slum areas.

The second major influx of Filipinos followed the revision of immigration laws in 1965. This groups included a large proportion of well-educated and highly skilled professional men and women. Upon arrival, many of these people found themselves underemployed. They were not allowed to utilize their skills and training because professional bodies refused to recognize their credentials (Ishisaka & Takagi, 1982).

The Filipino community is extremely diverse with complex regional, generational, and dialect differences. Melendy (1976) notes that the immigrants arriving in the wake of the 1965 legislation, as well as those arriving earlier, represented at least three different island cultures. Most immigrants, therefore, had

to adapt to their own differing cultures as well as to their new homeland. This cultural pluralism, along with the seasonal, transient work of the earlier immigrants, made it more difficult to develop strong pan-Filipino community organizations. Lott (1976) considers this lack of organizational development to be the primary reason behind the Filipinos' inability to establish a foothold in American society. However, with time and the emergence of new indigenous generations, this situation may change.

Comparison and Implications

Common and unique strategies of adaptation are evident among the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos in America. In this section we provide a cautious and limited comparison of some of these strategies and interpret their relevance for current and future Asian American immigrants.

Early Chinese immigrants met with a harsh reception in America. They faced blatant and often violent forms of racism and were to encounter legislation which not only denied them the rights of citizenship, but the right to become naturalized citizens. Denied naturalization and franchise for nearly a century, they adapted by moving into ethnic enclaves and organizing their own benevolent, protective, and governmental bodies.

Clan associations emerged as the principal organizations within these enclaves, promoting group solidarity, mutual aid, economic support and, at times, organized vice activities. These traditional associations competed with one another for membership and community influence. Yet, during periods of anti-Chinese sentiment they tried to put aside their differences and form a united front. The associations thus helped Chinese immigrants to adapt to the New World and deal with the powerful forces of racism. However, the enclaves also served to partially insulate the Chinese from the outside community.

Like the Chinese, early Japanese immigrants faced the problems of job discrimination and racist legislation. And, they too adapted by banding together and forming benevolent and protective organizations and associations. Japanese regularly established rotating credit associations (*tanomoshi*) to obtain capital

outside of the white economic community (Light, 1974). They formed *kenjinkai* to help with cultural, economic, legal and employment matters (Light, 1974). And, Japanese farmers in California even united to form the Southern California Retail Produce Workers Union (SCRPU) to protect their interests (Modell, 1976).

Despite the similarity of ethnic solidarity, the experiences of Japanese Americans took a dramatic and uniquely different turn from that of the Chinese. World War II and the relocation camps served to disperse Japanese away from the West Coast and disrupt the ethnic enclaves and organizations which remained intact for the Chinese. The camp experience also engendered a need among Japanese to vindicate themselves and accelerated their assimilation into the American culture.

Like the Chinese and Japanese, early Filipino immigrants worked in menial jobs. They were first recruited by the agricultural industries in Hawaii and California and by the salmon canneries of the Pacific Northwest. Although Filipinos readily found work in these two industries, when they sought employment in the cities, they encountered the same discrimination faced by their Asian predecessors.

In contrast to the Chinese and Japanese, however, community organizations did not emerge as readily among Filipino immigrants. The cultural diversity of their homeland and the transient, seasonal nature of the early immigrants' work made the formation of strong pan-Filipino organizations more difficult (Lott, 1976). A number of district and fraternal groups were organized from time to time, but none of them emerged as powerful centers of Filipino community life (Cordova, 1973). One exception to this pattern was the early emergence of farm labor organizations. Poor working conditions and negative stereotypes of Filipinos produced early demands for labor unions. These unions were instrumental in securing wage increases and improving working conditions.

The experiences of early Asian groups can be used as a reference, but not a model, for understanding current and future Asian immigrants. Possibly the most important lesson concerns the vital role of ethnic enclaves and organizations in the adaptation process. They provide immigrants with an important link

to the customs and values of their homeland; they give their members a sense of community and familiarity; they provide services and support systems which help the immigrants to economically, socially and psychologically adapt to their new environment; they provide unified protection against racism; and they help to represent the immigrants to the outside world. Thus, current and future resettlement efforts need to support and work with these ethnic communities and organizations and "outsiders" should consult with, and include community members in any planning process.

Noncommunity personnel might even go so far as to offer technical assistance, but allow community members to design their own services. In the past, programs designed for Asians by outsiders have often failed because the planners made certain assumptions about the consumers or lacked critical knowledge about them. This was evident in recent government programs to disperse Indochinese refugees throughout various regions of the United States. Despite the threat of financial penalties, many refugees migrated from their original placements to be near others from their homeland (Montero, 1980).

A second factor prominent in the history of early Asian immigrants is racial discrimination. Racism was the most severe when the immigrants were perceived as economic or political threat to the white majority. Current immigrants have experienced similar fate as they are often seen as threats to working-class Americans who feel crowded by the Asians' growing economic success (*Newsweek*, May 12, 1986).

The lesson here is not that racism is an inevitable aspect of Asian American life, but that we must acknowledge its presence and formulate policies and programs to deal with it. The sociopsychological research on prejudice indicates that racism can be reduced through equal status, cooperative contact (Aronson, 1988). Such contact is rare when immigrants are relegated the most menial jobs in our society and are insulated in ethnic enclaves. Resettlement and social service programs will have to be creative in making equal status, cooperative contacts possible. Ironically, this implies that immigrants will have to be coaxed out from the ethnic communities which have helped facilitate their adaptation to this country.

Finally, the history of Asian American immigration illustrates the uniqueness of each immigrant group. While this seems too obvious to mention, it would be dangerous to ignore its implications. It is this uniqueness which makes any historical overview (including this one) an uncertain and limited reference for the present/future. For example, most of the early Asian immigrants were young men seeking their fortunes in this new land. Aside from obvious cultural differences, current Indochinese refugees consist of men, women and children; there are families and there are people of all ages. To use historical comparisons in this case may not be appropriate. The historical perspective is helpful, but it must be coupled with group-specific knowledge and sensitivity. Thus, the uniqueness of each immigrant group means that we still need to forego our preconceptions and listen to, and learn from, the immigrants themselves.

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