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Asian Americans in U.S. history

Heralding from a diverse array of nations, Asian Americans are those who claim ancestry in the wide geographic region known as Asia, which includes the many islands located throughout the Pacific Rim. Beginning in the early 19th century, several different Asian ethnic groups immigrated to the United States, where they contributed vast amounts of labor to help build transportation systems, mostly the backbreaking work of laying track for the railroads. Many Asian Americans have struggled against recurrent stereotypes that cast them as permanent outsiders despite their long history in the United States.



Large numbers of Chinese first arrived during the California gold rush in the late 1840s and early 1850s, determined to reap their fortunes from California's gold fields. Most of the immigrants were men who were later chased out of the mining districts by taxes levied against foreign miners and the prevalence of violence against a perceived inferior ethnic group. A few were women, most of whom were forced into prostitution.

While many Chinese men came only to make their fortunes and return home, others sought more lucrative long-term prospects in the United States. Turning to retail and the railroads for work, the Chinese created a vibrant culture on the West Coast centered in San Francisco's Chinatown district.

The Chinese were significant contributors in laying track for the vast transcontinental railroad between 1860 and 1880, but because they often worked for lower wages than their white counterparts, the Chinese increasingly became the subjects of violence from an underemployed white working class in California. Rampant racism against the Chinese in the 1870s culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which halted Chinese immigration to the United States until well into the 20th century.

Some Chinese challenged these efforts to discriminate against them. The most noted instance was a legislative battle that reached the U.S. Supreme Court as the case of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886). At issue was a San Francisco ordinance designed for the regulation of laundries that had been strictly enforced against Chinese launderers but not white launderers. The landmark Supreme Court ruling noted that the Fourteenth Amendment protected all persons in the United States and not simply citizens.

Although the ruling decreed that the rights of Chinese Americans must be protected, the Court could do little to protect Asian Americans from widespread prejudice and discrimination, nor were the restrictive immigration laws concerning the Chinese successfully challenged in the courts until the 1960s.

Although Chinese were the largest Asian group to immigrate to the United States in the 19th century, Japanese also came to America in large numbers during this period. Japanese men worked primarily as agricultural laborers in California, while thousands of Japanese women came over as "picture brides"—the spouses of men they had never met but who had seen pictures of them.

By 1907, racism against the Japanese led to calls to restrict "the yellow peril," as some Americans called the wave of Japanese immigration. In that year, President Theodore Roosevelt and the Japanese government concurred on the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement to restrict Japanese immigration to the United States. Japan's interest in doing so was to keep its young, ambitious men from leaving the country as it grew into an increasingly militaristic state with highly skilled armed forces.

In the United States, Japanese immigrants were further restricted with the passage of the Alien Land Law in 1913, which prevented many Asian Americans from owning land since they were "aliens ineligible for citizenship," a special citizenship status applied only to Chinese and Japanese people.

During World War II, Japanese Americans, many of whom had been living in the United States since the late 19th century, were forcibly detained in internment camps as Americans questioned their loyalty in the face of the massive conflict with Japan. Following President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, 120,000 Japanese Americans were moved from their homes all along the West Coast to arid regions of the central United States.

An American-born Japanese man named Fred Korematsu challenged the legality of the internment camps in another landmark Supreme Court case, *Korematsu v. United States* (1944). Although the Court firmly stated that any restrictive laws based on race deserved "rigid scrutiny," it never questioned the government's position in classifying all Japanese as serious risks to national security and then taking steps to limit their freedom accordingly. Thus, the Court upheld the constitutionality of the internment camps. Decades later, in 1988, Congress voted to award \$20,000 in compensation to each Japanese American still alive who had been interned during World War II. Many Americans of all races now consider Japanese internment as one of the darkest blots on American history.

Members of two other Asian ethnic groups came to the United States in large numbers in the early 20th century: Koreans and Filipinos. Most of the Koreans went to Hawaii and the West Coast to work as agricultural laborers, where they were met with distrust and suspicion but not the open hostility that the Chinese and Japanese had encountered just a few decades earlier. Nevertheless, their poor treatment prompted the Korean government to discourage further immigration.

The majority of Koreans came after the 1960s when liberal immigration laws finally allowed many to escape their war-ravaged country after the Korean War. The Korean-American population grew from 69,130 in 1970 to 798,849 in 1990. They became the most heavily employed Asian ethnicity in the retail business, a position they still hold today as shopkeepers throughout the country. They are also, like Filipinos, one of the most heavily Christianized Asian ethnicities in the United States.

Filipino immigration increased markedly in the early 20th century following the U.S. invasion of the Philippines, a Spanish colony, during the Spanish-American War. More than 110,000 Filipinos immigrated to America or American territories between 1906 and the 1930s, primarily to Hawaii, where they were contracted to work in the sugar cane fields owned by large American corporations. During the Great Depression, Filipinos comprised 75% of sugar cane workers. Most of these soon immigrated to the United States. During World War II, Filipino men fought as part of American forces across Southeast Asia.

People from Southeast Asia came relatively late to the United States as compared to other Asian ethnic groups. Southeast Asians arrived mainly as war refugees in the 1970s. The Vietnam War had displaced several million people from this region, forcing them into refugee camps before some were allowed to legally enter the United States. Others became "boat people" by risking their lives in makeshift vessels to reach neutral shores. Between 1971 and 1980, more than 150,000 Vietnamese came to America. Between 1981 and 1990, more than 320,000 more immigrated to the United States, as well as 114,000 Cambodians following the rise of a brutal dictatorship there.

Similar to the experiences of Koreans, immigrants from India were late arrivers. Although many of them are foreign-born, the majority of Asian Indians are well-educated, highly skilled professionals, with an excellent command of English, due primarily to Great Britain's colonial rule in India during the past several centuries. With such advantages, they have assimilated quickly into the American population.

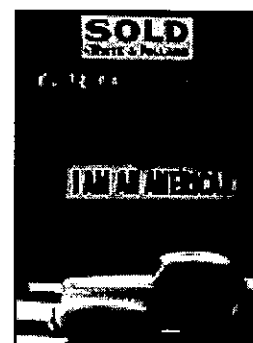
Current population figures reveal that Asian ethnic groups comprise a large and growing segment of the American population. Liberal immigration laws after 1965 have enabled the Asian American population in the United States to grow by 687% between 1965 and 1995. They currently comprise 3% of the overall American population. In 1990, the breakdown of the American Asian population revealed their varied ethnicity, with more than 1.5 million Chinese, 1.4 million Filipinos, nearly 850,000 Japanese, more than 800,000 Asian Indians, close to 800,000 Koreans, just over 600,000 Vietnamese, close to 150,000 Laotians, slightly fewer than 150,000 Cambodians, roughly 90,000 Thais, more than another 90,000 Hmong, and more than 300,000 people from other various Asian nations.

A more recent group of Asian immigrants are Pacific Islanders, who counted 365,024 people in 1990, primarily in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas of California. These people come from Samoa, Tonga, Guam, and Melanesia and include native Hawaiians. Because they are indigenous to countries presently under U.S. control, their status often hovers between that of Asian immigrant and indigenous American.

Modern Asian Americans face continuing racism and a general political and social apathy that pushes them away from mainstream American politics and culture. Yet the incredibly diverse background of this eclectic group of people belies any easy modern comparison across ethnic lines. Many, like fourth- and fifth-generation Japanese Americans, are thoroughly Americanized and know little of their Asian ancestry. Yet some embrace Buddhist philosophy as a way of getting in touch with their ethnic roots, and Asian communities still thrive in many major cities throughout the United States. In contrast, most recently arrived Chinese immigrants, who overcame enormous hurdles to escape communist China, can only find employment in sweat shops, making the struggle to learn English and improve their socioeconomic conditions even more difficult.



Political participation of Asian Americans is growing, though Asian Americans only comprise 2% of Senate seats and 1.15% of congressional seats. They are also the most heavily intermarried ethnic group in the United States. Asian Americans are often stigmatized by vicious stereotypes and pilloried for

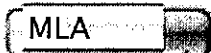


their perceived unobtrusive personality. For example, the 1999-2000 espionage case of Wen Ho Lee, a high-level scientist at a U.S. military installation, revealed the extent to which Asian Americans still make acceptable scapegoats due to the perception that they are permanent foreigners and outsiders to American culture. Other ethnic stereotypes, like the idea that Asian children are better students than the children of other ethnic groups, are more complimentary, although they remain stereotypes.

Further Reading

Daniels, Roger, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*, 1988; Knoll, Tricia, *Becoming Americans: Asian Sojourners, Immigrants, and Refugees in the Western United States*, 1982; Okihiro, Gary Y., *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, 1994; Takaki, Ronald, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1979; Takaki, Ronald, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 1990.

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