

Chapter Six

Effects of Asian American Immigration History and Experience

The unique history of immigration from Asia has had considerable impact on Asian American experience in America, as expressed in the accounts from preceding chapters. Both past history and the current high levels of immigrants from Asia have influenced contemporary families and communities.

Numbers

The most obvious (and intended) result of past immigration restrictions and exclusions was that Asian Americans remained a small proportion of the national population. It is interesting to speculate what the demographic composition of the country might be today if Asian immigration had been treated equally with that from Europe. For example, the arrival of large numbers of Chinese in the 1850s and 1860s followed shortly on the start of large scale immigration from Ireland. Approximately 38.5 million Americans claimed some descent from Ireland in 1990, approximately 15% of the national population. The Chinese American population ten years later in 2000 was about 2.8 million, barely 1% of the national population even after years of heavy immigration following 1965. What might the Chinese American population be today if earlier immigration laws had been different?

Illegal Immigration

The enactment of exclusionary laws against Asians did not end larger social, economic, and historical realities. The United States was still seen as a desirable place to go. Lacking legal means of entry, illegal means were developed, particularly within Chinese American communities, which suffered longest from exclusion. While surreptitious entry, via land from Mexico or Canada, or hiding in ships was one means, the most common method was through the use of false papers.

The preferred method was as a "paper son" or child of a United States citizen. Court decisions had established the principle that any child of an American citizen, wherever they were born, was a United States citizen and eligible for entry. Despite the low numbers of families, there were some American born Chinese who were citizens by birth and a few others had been naturalized prior to explicit prohibitions against them. Another important opportunity to claim citizenship for Chinese

Americans was the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco which destroyed many records. Procedures were set up to reestablish identity and citizenship status; some Chinese Americans took advantage of this opportunity to claim citizenship.

A Chinese American who had established a real or fictive claim to citizenship could return to China, marry and register children as they were born, as described in many of the immigration accounts in this book. Born in China, these children would be American citizens and were eligible for entry, despite exclusions against Chinese immigration. The general chaos and absence of records in China at this time made it possible for a person to register non-existent children or register a daughter as a son, thereby creating a "slot" for future use. This slot could be sold or used for relatives. In either case the person who had created the slot would become the "paper father" of a "paper son" (or more rarely a "paper daughter") who was really someone else's child. A number of factors in the United States served to limit the usage of this method for the entry of women. The immigration service often looked quite critically at women entrants on the assumption that they were prostitutes, unless proven otherwise. Economic opportunities for daughters were limited. Once married their ability to contribute earnings to their parent's family would be restricted. These economic realities were important considerations when a family in China was often dependent on overseas earnings for survival. Finally, the relative absence of families meant that the living circumstances of many men was such that they would have no place for a daughter to live.

Paper sons had to establish their identity on entry, usually through a process of interrogation by the immigration officials during which they would compare the entrant's responses regarding obscure details of family background and circumstances to those of the claimed father. If the answers matched, the identity was established; if not, entry could be refused. The nature of the questions were such that it was virtually a necessity to memorize a "crib sheet" of answers even if one were an actual son. People were held in detention until approved or deported, originally in a warehouse in San Francisco, later at Angel Island, and after World War II in a detention center in the immigration building on Sansome Street in San Francisco.

The importance of illegal entry for Chinese Americans is not to be underestimated. In the 1960's it was estimated that a very large majority of Chinese Americans were illegal entrants or the descendants of illegal entrants. Evidence gathered in classes at San Francisco State in recent years continues to substantiate this estimate. Family immigration histories reveal illegal immigration as the primary basis for entry before the 1960's. Furthermore, even the accounts of many modern, legal entrants suggest illegal entry as the original basis

(through a chain of sponsorship) for entry of the majority recent immigrants to the Bay Area from southern China and Hong Kong.

The scale of illegal immigration had a number of unfortunate consequences. It led many Chinese Americans to avoid dealing with official agencies for fear of exposure, often depriving them of services to which they were entitled. It hampered the development of Chinese American political activity because such activity might entail public scrutiny of personal or familial backgrounds. It discouraged involvement with the larger society for the same reason and created a mentality of silence within Chinese American communities that often obscured important social issues and needs, as well as often leaving younger generations with poor knowledge of family history. Finally, illegal status could be used to blackmail individuals and was used, in particular by conservative groups, to stifle dissent and change, even among the American born.

Delayed Development of Family

Immigration restrictions significantly delayed the formation of family-based communities in the United States for both Chinese and Filipino Americans. As with many European immigrants during the same periods, the first Chinese and Filipinos to arrive in the United States were primarily men. Unlike European immigrants, many never had the opportunity to establish families in the United States due to the subsequent timing and character of immigration restrictions.

Japanese Americans were a partial exception. Like the Chinese and Filipino Americans, the first arrivals from Japan were mostly men. As they became established they, too, became the target of exclusion but with an important variance: Japanese resident in the United State were allowed to bring wives and family from Japan for a period of time. This allowed many men to establish families in the United States, although many others remained single through lack of opportunity or economic means. The consequence of this limited opportunity for family immigration was the formation of family-based Japanese American communities.

For Filipino and Chinese Americans, communities and social structure in the United States became heavily oriented toward the needs of men without families. In the case of some Chinatowns even the physical character of the buildings reflected the absence of families, with many small apartments or residential hotels rather than space for families. Consequently, when families finally did arrive in large numbers after World War II, and especially after 1967, some communities had difficulty meeting the social and housing needs of families and children.

This general pattern should not obscure the fact that there were families in both Chinese and Filipino American communities from an early date and that their numbers grew over time. These families gave some permanency to communities and their children became the early American-born generation who could provide something of a connection between their communities and the larger society. The very existence of these families, however, was also a constant reminder of familial isolation for those men without families of their own.

Split Families

One Chinese American adaptation to these circumstance was the development of split families, in which the husbands/fathers lived in the United States while wives and children were left in China. This living pattern, described earlier in a number of the immigration accounts, became a common form of family for many Chinese American men between the 1880's and the 1950's. In some cases this pattern continued for three and even four generations of the same families. Men would return to China, marry and return to the United States to work and send money back to the family in China. If they were lucky they might see their wives and families every few years but long period of separation were not uncommon. If the man was able to establish a real or paper basis for American citizenship he could send for or bring his children to the United States. He could not bring his wife, unless she were the child of a citizen or he belonged to one of the few exempt classifications of legal entrants.

The social consequences of split families have never been properly examined. Men lived apart from their families, wives raised families without husbands, children rarely saw their fathers. In addition to the emotional stresses of this situation, there would also have to be changes in roles for both men and women. The effects on actual, as opposed to idealized, family structure, roles, and relationships must have been considerable. It is a topic that deserves further investigation.

The repeal of immigration laws that created the split families did not bring an end to their legacy. As families reunited in the United States in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, they had to deal with consequences of separation. Men, with little experience with families, had to suddenly become the day-to-day fathers of teenagers and the husbands of wives who had become used to making many of their own decisions. With expectations of a better life and a complete family in the United States, wives had to deal with cramped living spaces and inattentive husbands used to leading their own social life among their friends. Children had to learn to relate to a stranger whom they might never have seen except as an image in a photograph. Many Chinese Americans, both American born and immigrant, have had such families in their backgrounds.

Bachelors and Out-marriage

Except for split families, men's options were limited. They could marry here in the United States but the relatively low number of Asian American women limited that option. They could marry women from other groups, but social pressures and miscegenation laws in many states, including California, made that option difficult, if perhaps more common than usually perceived. For example, enough early Punjabi immigrants in the Imperial Valley of California married Mexican American women to establish a small but culturally significant Punjabi/Mexican American community of their own.

Many simply remained single, depending on friends and community organizations, both formal and informal, to provide the social base that family would ordinarily provide. Community structures and functions prior to the mid 20th century are significantly modified to accommodate the needs of a large population of men without families. Consequently, when families started to arrive in large numbers following changes in the laws, many communities were ill prepared to provide for their needs. At the same time, the continued presence of aging men without families made their care in their old age a significant social issue in Chinese and Filipino American communities and was one of the factors leading to the development of new community organizations which provide care for seniors.

Slow Development of Political Power

Another legacy of restrictive immigration and naturalization laws was a delay in the development of Asian American political involvement and power. For many decades the immigrant generations, regardless of their time in the United States, could never become citizens. This restricted involvement in American politics and encouraged or even necessitated retaining political ties with Asia. The growth of an American-born generation in many groups was delayed, resulting in few eligible voters. Racial, social, and economic discrimination served to exclude even the American-born from the political process and the number of Asian Americans was kept small by exclusionary legislation, further weakening their political potential. With very rare exceptions, Asian Americans have begun to exercise visible political roles only recently, except in Hawaii, where large numbers of Asian Americans produced political results much earlier.

A Heavily Immigrant Population in the Present

The relatively recent provision of equal entry rights to Asians followed by large scale immigration from Asia makes modern Asian American groups heavily

immigrant in composition. With the exception of Japanese Americans, over 65% of Asian Americans in 2000 were immigrants. While the numbers of American-born have grown, continued immigration has maintained the immigrant majority through the 1990's. The 2010 census, however, is likely to reflect a growth in the proportion of American born in the Asian American population.

Immigrant communities lack knowledge of American society and systems and many members are still not United States citizens, although Asian immigrants have a high rate of naturalization. As immigrants, many are predisposed toward an uncritical view of their new society. After all, if they did not think circumstances are better here than in their places of origins they would not have immigrated. When they encounter difficulties, particularly economic ones, these are often seen as products of their own lack of effort or short-comings rather to larger causes. On a practical level, immigrants, quite reasonably, tend to be concerned with issues of immediate survival and adjustment. Collectively, all these factors serve to further complicate the development of Asian American voices in the political and public policy arena, although this situation is changing.

As will be seen later, immigrants encounter their own particular difficulties and issues in family and community contexts. Families must adapt to new and often somewhat hostile circumstances while also dealing with tensions associated with differential rates of acculturation of the older and younger generations. Existing communities have to adapt to large numbers of newcomers. New communities have formed, both as new Asian groups arrive and as old ones expand, with immigration-fed population growth, into new locales. These new communities must deal with other ethnic groups, unfamiliar with Asian Americans, that may resent or feel threatened by their arrival and growing numbers.

Denial of American Roots and Identity

The nature of restrictive laws both reflected and perpetuated a social climate in which Asian Americans did not feel fully part of the larger society and were not perceived by others as being genuinely "American." A number of factors were involved in this exclusion from the "American Dream."

For many men, the absence of family reinforced a sense of being transient in the United States even after a life time here. Many people have attributed this so called "sojourner" mentality to Asian cultural values which, they claim, discouraged permanent movement from one's village and prohibited the emigration of women to foreign lands. This socially convenient interpretation may have partial legitimacy but circumstances in the United States were almost certainly more significant. Japanese Americans, who were permitted to bring wives and family for a period of

time, established permanent, family-based communities in the United States, even though they shared many of the cultural values which supposedly created the "sojourner" mentality among Chinese Americans. Prior to 1943, a few exempt categories of Chinese American men could, and did, bring wives and family. These families became the foundation for a slow growth of Chinese American families in the United States. When more Chinese American men were legally able to bring wives and family to the United States after World War II they did so in large numbers, as did Filipino American men. The evidence suggests that while Asians, like many Europeans in the same time period, may have initially seen working in America as a temporary situation, the persistence of any "sojourner" mentality was largely the product of circumstances in the United States that prohibited or discouraged true permanency.(1)

Separation and distance from the larger society existed even for those with established families in America. The Issei (first generation) Japanese Americans formed family-based communities but they could not become citizens, could not vote, frequently could not own property, and were in other ways excluded from the "American dream." The early American-born generations of Asian Americans (mainly Chinese American and Japanese American) were usually denied equal access to schooling, jobs, housing, and participation in the larger social and political arenas of the communities in which they lived. All Asian Americans were subject to discriminatory treatment and the threat of violence.

This history has had long term impact on our use of language. To this day, many Asian Americans use the term "American" to mean "White person," reflecting a long history of exclusion and separation in during which they could not be American. It is equally notable that this use of the term "American" as being exclusive of Asian Americans can be found among many other people in the society. These linguistic patterns, while slowly changing, suggest that, despite a long and important history in the United States, Asian Americans have been relegated to the edges of American identity, both in their own minds and in the minds of others.

Conclusion

The period since 1965 has seen tremendous changes in the Asian American population of the United States. Equal immigration rights, in conjunction with wars and other social, political, and economic disruptions in Asia, have produced an enormous growth in population. Equally important, the social and cultural composition of Asian American groups, has also changed dramatically to one of extreme diversity of ethnic origins, degrees of acculturation, and social/economic status. This diversity is present both within groups and among groups, making generalizations about Asian Americans extremely difficult. Despite this diversity,

there remain some compelling commonalities of experience and larger cultural origins. The experience or legacy of a particular range of immigration circumstances is one of those areas of some commonality.

The unique immigration history of Asian Americans remains unknown to most Americans although it affects their perceptions of Asian Americans. Unlike most European immigrant groups, Asian Americans are still perceived as not fully part of American history and society -- alien newcomers, treated alternately with friendly curiosity and suspicious hostility.

Notes

1. This critique of the "sojourner" concept is based on long standing discussions with colleagues in Asian American Studies, student accounts of family immigration histories, and immigration statistics. In recent years, a number of researchers have written on this issue in some depth. For example, see Sucheng Chan, "European and Asian Immigration to the United States in Comparative Perspective, 1820s to 1920s," in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, edited by Virginia Yan-McLaughlin (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp 37-77.

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