

# Why Asian American Studies?

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*Editors' Note: In anticipation of the roundtable discussions of the relationship between Asian Studies and Asian-American Studies that is scheduled for the 2008 ASIANetwork Conference (see Conference Schedule, p. 6), we are happy to publish this article to help provide background for the sessions.*

The purpose of this short essay is to encourage undergraduate institutions in North America to take seriously Asian American Studies, either as part of Asian Studies or American Studies. In so doing, I offer but a few issues that are part of the tortured history of Asians in America and Asian Americans in my modest attempt to exhort the students and teachers alike to learn of, if only vicariously, what Asian Americans experienced long before they came to be known as the "Model Minority" in America.

The dreams and despair of Asians in America, and the accomplishments and challenges confronting Asian Americans, stem from the crucible of their experience in North America since the mid nineteenth century. In the century in which the United States was on its way to becoming the "super power" of the world, the nation relied heavily on slave labor in the South, while new Eastern European immigrants were subjected to de facto slave labor in the mill towns of New England. In the West, Asians from impoverished regions were eagerly sought for their labor by industrialists, and they crossed the Pacific just as eagerly to the "Golden Mountain."

## A. Why are Asian Americans "foreign," and not American?

Common sense may inform us that Asian Americans are "foreign," because they are among the newest comers to the United States. History tells us otherwise.

There are some data that Asians were already in North America before the Mayflower. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Spain and Portugal ruled the world as colonial powers, they no doubt brought some Asians as part of their expansion across the Pacific, to California and Mexico. Filipinos, who jumped ship in Louisiana, were known as "Manila men." The Dutch and the British soon followed as the next major colonial powers with colonies all around the world. In the nineteenth century, the sun was said never to set in

the British Empire. There is ample evidence that they brought Indians to Africa and to the Caribbean.

But the first wave of Asians crossing the Pacific on their own accord began in the mid nineteenth century. Their migration across the Pacific began, roughly, at the same time as did Irish and Italian immigration across the Atlantic. Impoverished peasants and menial workers came from China, Japan, Korea and the Philippines to the islands of Hawaii to work as indentured laborers on the plantations, owned by the descendants of New England missionaries. They say in Hawaii that the missionaries came to do good, but their

continental railroad, arguably the most significant engineering feat of the nineteenth century. Only seven years after California passed an 1865 law, barring the Chinese and "Mongolians," Leland Stanford and other railroad tycoons employed the Chinese for their ambitious projects. Stanford extolled their hard work during the entire period when the California Pacific Railroad was constructed. He described the Chinese as "quiet, peaceable, industrious, economical."<sup>1</sup> Quickly they learned to use dynamite to break through the Sierra Nevada Mountains as the railroads inched forward toward the East Coast. Casualties were, of course, great.



*Chinese railroad workers transported dirt by the cartload to fill in this Secrettown Trestle in the Sierra Nevada Mountain.*

children ended up doing well. The Asians' dream of returning home as wealthy men remained unfulfilled, prompting them to seek better opportunities on the mainland. They worked as miners, gardeners and restaurant workers. Most notable during the Gold Rush in the West was the role of the Chinese in the construction of the trans-

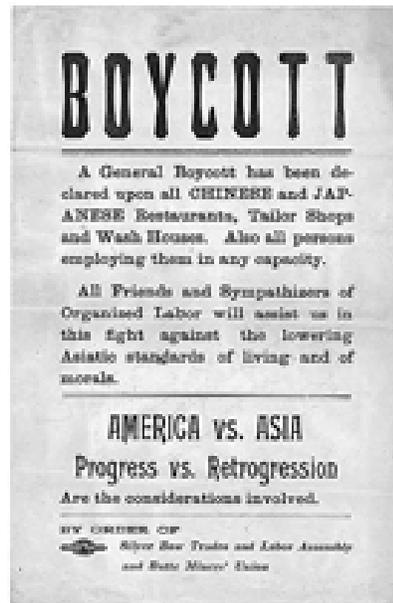
It was said that for every mile of the railroad, there was a Johnny Chinaman's grave. Stanford never bothered to remember his Chinese workers' names, and called all of them "Johnny Chinaman." When construction was finally completed, Stanford got himself elected Senator from the new State of California. In Washing-

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ton, working closely with James Blaine, senator from Maine with presidential ambition, Stanford worked hard to persuade his colleagues that no more Chinese should be allowed to come to the United States; in fact, those who were already there, including those who had worked tirelessly for him, were to be deported back to China. Suddenly, the Chinese became “rat eaters.” Stanford’s effort led in 1882 to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Act was justified in order to maintain the “white racial purity” of the United States, and to keep it “Christian,” although the Chinese comprised no more than .002 percent of the population in the country at that time. The Chinese Exclusion Act also barred the right of naturalization to other Asians. The federal law was complemented by state laws, especially in the Western states. They passed laws to prohibit Asian workers to own arable land, to marry non-Asian women, and yet made it impossible for Asian women to come to the United States. More than such 600 pieces of anti-Asian legislation were passed. The Asia Barred Zone Law of 1917 denied entry to people from South Asia and Southeast Asia, and from the islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, but it excluded people from the Philippines and Guam where the US had military bases.<sup>2</sup> It was complemented by the Immigration Act of 1924, which aimed specifically at barring the Japanese from the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was but one example of a history of legislative acts that reaffirmed the “Nationality Act” of 1790, that had limited naturalization only to “free white persons.”

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was not revoked until 1952, when Congress passed the McCarran-Walter Act<sup>3</sup>, which was intended primarily to keep the “Communists” out of the country as “subversive.” It granted Asians the right of naturalization with an annual quota of 2,000 individuals which was quickly filled, while reserving 70% of the quota, though never filled, for citizens of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany. The new US immigration policy, in the wake of the collapse of fascism at the end of the World War II and the rise of Communism, represented the adoption of a deliberately paradoxical policy. Retaining the 1924 decision for the National Origin Quota System for immigrants from Europe, the McCarran-Walter Act opened doors, if only

slightly, to allow Asians to come to the country as potential immigrants, and not just as migrant laborers. However



Poster from the Chinese Exclusion Act.

“racialized”<sup>4</sup> the McCarran-Walter Act may have been, it was the first time that foreign born Asians, working in the United States, gained the right of naturalization.

Federal and state immigration policies may be seen as responses to a climate of fear and prejudice. This is the reason why Asian Americans are still misunderstood as “foreigners.” The removal of racial quotas was introduced in the early 1960s. Envisioned originally by John F. Kennedy, the first Roman Catholic and Irish American to be elected President, it was signed in 1965 by Lyndon B. Johnson who, in spite of his many prejudices, wanted to take credit for a new United States, whose enemy came not from a certain nation or race but from an ideology, Communism. To strengthen the United States against Communism, the country needed people of professional skills, from wherever they came. The 1965 immigration policy opened doors to people with special skills, especially in science and medicine, resulting in a disproportionately large number of medical professionals from Asia, including Korea, the Philippines and India coming to the US. Subsequent immigration laws only confirmed the profession driven immigration philosophy of the 1965 Law. The Law also had a special provision for refugees, especially from Communist countries.

According to the last two US censuses, Asian Americans represent the second fastest growing segment of the US population, next only to the Hispanics. They are no longer confined to Hawaii and the West Coast. They live throughout the United States. And yet, Asian Americans continued to be misperceived as “foreign,” and not American, as they often have to answer the questions that assume that they are “foreign” and not American, such as “Where do you *really* come from?”

## B. Why Asian Americans are “all alike”?

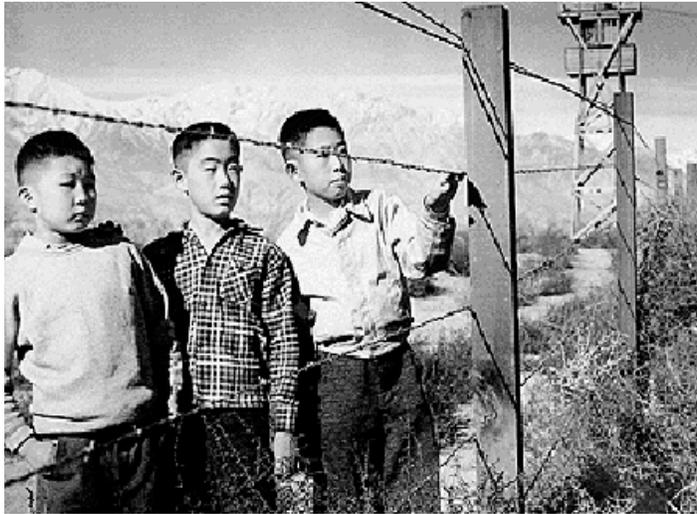
Japan’s “sneak attack” of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 served as a catalyst not only for legitimizing anti-Asian legislation that was already in place, but also for more, and harsher, measures to be taken against them. Although no other Asian country besides Japan had emerged as a major military power, the US government continued to treat all Asians as if they had shared a common “racial” trait that was viewed as hostile to the United States. Never mind that Asians shared nothing in common in terms of language, culture or religion. In the last two millennia and more, Buddhism has been a common religious and spiritual heritage to much of Asia. Confucianism, similarly, has shaped much of East Asia into a society with a common respect for learning and for ancestors. Since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, parts of Asia were subjugated by Western colonial expansion, first by the Spanish and the Portuguese and later by Holland and Britain. The beginnings of the US interest in Asia in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century proved no less hegemonic.

Their shared historic, cultural and intellectual heritage, however, is not the reason why Asian Americans have been lumped together. This is due to prejudice, rooted in ignorance and fear, where all Asians are viewed as if they were “all alike.” Asians have comprised more than one half of the human race, not to mention the fact that Asia was the repository of civilizations millennia older than that in Europe and North America. How could Asians be “all alike”? How could “Asian American” be considered as a parallel category to “Irish American”? When the federal government coined for the 1970 census the artificial category, “Asian American,” this mentality remained intact. They referred to a very small segment, less than 3% then, of the US population, who

represented more than 50% of the global population, and yet who are, presumably, “all like.” When they are grouped together as Pacific Islanders, as in “Asian and Pacific Islander Americans,” the program of stereotyping became compounded.

### C. Why “Model Minority” is not a compliment?

The lumping together of Asian Americans continued after the end of the Pacific War. “Model Minority,” a term originally used in 1960 by sociologist William Peterson in his *New York Times Magazine* article on Japanese



*The Manzanar camp in California.*

Let it not be forgotten that, before the West began its Asian conquest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the use of the Bible and the gun, the East and the West had fascinations for each other. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Marco Polo saw China as the most civilized and the most prosperous nation on earth. Christopher Columbus’ yearning to see China, though never realized unbeknownst to him, was directly inspired by what he had read about the fellow Italian.

Not only were all Asian Americans lumped together, so were Asians and Asian Americans. The Executive Order 9066, issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the wake of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, indeed lumped together Japanese Americans and Japanese natives. Some 120,000 “Japanese,” defined as having at least 1/16 Japanese blood, were arrested without charge, without due course, and were incarcerated for four years in “wartime relocation centers.” 70% were US citizens,<sup>5</sup> who were reclassified with the stroke of a pen as “enemy aliens.” Lt Gen. John L. DeWitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command and the Fourth Army located in the Presidio, San Francisco, remarked: “A Jap’s a Jap. ... It makes no difference whether he is an American [citizen].”<sup>6</sup>

*Americans*, bespeaks the continued use of racial stereotyping, this time with an emphasis on the presumably positive characteristics of Asian Americans. His reference was to Japanese Americans, whom he regarded as family oriented

and hard working, and therefore least likely to become another “problem minority” in America.<sup>7</sup> The turning of a hostile stereotype into a flattering one has a number of important catalysts.

At the heart of the background is war. Since World War II, most of the wars that the United States has fought have been in Asia and against Asians, including the Korean War and the Vietnam War, as well as the “trade war” against Japan during the 1980s. Now a sense alarm is apparent as the US is faced with the economic rise of China and India. While North Korea remains Communist in Asia, and Indonesia and the Mindanao Island of the Philippines are areas where suspected “terrorists” reside today, much of Asia has been cleared of its United States “enemies.” Even after the ultimate triumph of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, the new Vietnam has become a trade partner of the United States. Japan has emerged from the ashes of the Pacific War, including its devastations from the only two atomic bombs ever used so far in human history, and has become one of the closest allies of the United States with the United Kingdom and Israel. Asia, in short, is no longer viewed as dangerous to the US.

Particularly noteworthy was the valor exhibited by Japanese American soldiers in the European theater of World War II.

The 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, consisting entirely of *Nisei* or second generation Japanese American soldiers, who as “enemy aliens,” volunteered for military service to prove themselves loyal to the US and not to Japan, remains today the most highly decorated of all soldiers in US history.<sup>8</sup> They liberated the Nazi Concentration Camp in Dachau. After the war, President Truman welcomed the *Nisei* soldiers back on the White House lawn, and said, “You fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won.”<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the wars fought in Asia came a new wave of new immigrants from war-torn counties of Asia. After the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 and the new Immigrant Act of 1965, Asians no longer came as laborers willing to work for any price, under any condition, but as potential immigrants, in the way Europeans had come in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Burdened still by anti-Asian ordinances, older Asian Americans chose to main a low profile in public and taught their children not to make waves. But younger generations, especially the new immigrants and refugees, sought more publicly to create their own niche in a country that they now viewed as their own. They excelled in school work, especially in math and science where a language handicap was not as onerous as in other fields. Comprising little more than 3 % of the US population today, Asian Americans are heavily represented in many of the most selective institutions of higher learning. At Stanford and Cal Tech, they exceed 20 % of the student body. At UCLA, UC Berkeley, Wellesley and MIT, the figure is significantly higher.<sup>10</sup>

The “model minority” image belies the fact that many Asian Americans are far from what they are supposed to be. First, while the wealthiest ethnic group in the US is Asian American, namely Indian Americans who are heavily represented in the medical and high tech professions, the poorest group is also Asian American, namely Cambodian and Hmong Americans, who continue to languish at the bottom of American society. They are also victims of the highest rate of domestic violence among all ethnic groups.

Second, Asian Americans are seen as a “model minority,” when they excel in areas where they compete with Euro Americans. Michael Chang after his victory in 1989 at French Open Tennis, and Kristi Yamaguchi after winning the ice skating

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World Championship in 1991 and the Olympic gold medal a year later, are indisputable “model minorities.” Would a world champion in judo or tae-kwon-do be hailed as a “model minority”? The implication here is that Asian Americans are praised by becoming more Western and less Asian. Asian Americans who embrace their Asian heritage, especially through political activism, are not “model minorities” but something else. “Making waves” in ways that are contrary to the Euro-centric American way is a blemish, but not making waves in that way is a mark of distinction.

Third, flattering some Asian Americans as “model minority” can easily be used against other minorities, as if to say to them, “Why can’t you study hard and not complain like these Asian Americans?” To conspire with those who have monopolized power in the past is not to deal with the historic problem of power imbalance, which is at the heart of racial discrimination. The time is always ripe for Asian Americans to be in solidarity with other minorities. Who would be content being on the side of the comfortable, while plenty remain who are still afflicted.

Yet another problem with the “model minorities” syndrome is that, however exemplary, however well behaved, Asian Americans may be, a “model minority” is still a “minority.” Even if Asians comprise significantly more than one half the human race on the global scale, within the United States, Asian Americans still comprise a rather small segment of the population. “Minority” is not just a numeric consideration. Ultimately, the key issue is power. “Minority” refers to people, irrespective of their number, who remain disempowered by others and sometimes by their own choice.

This is where we come to the final point of this paper.

#### D. Learn to make waves, for others

There are many studies that compare the success of Asian Americans in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with that of Jewish Americans a century earlier. They share in common trials and tribulations before they sought a haven in the new world; their tireless work, especially on the part of parents who toiled for their children; their exceptional achievements in institutions of higher learning and in certain choice professions, such as medicine. They

are among the wealthiest of Americans today.

The remarkable parallels break down, when we notice that Asian Americans, after their great success, seem to shy away from getting involved in social change, except for themselves and their kin. Early Asians in American learned not to make waves for their safety, so as to insure their survival. But so did Jewish immigrants. And, Jewish Americans remain prominent in American institutions and movements that seek combat discrimination, such as B’nai B’rith. As American Jewish wealth grew, their philanthropic involvement increased. Brandeis University’s Institute for Community and Religion estimates that there are 7,000 Jewish foundations with assets totaling \$10 to \$15 billion.<sup>11</sup>

There are notable exceptions,<sup>12</sup> but on the whole, Asian Americans seem content to join the ranks of the comfortable. The first Asian American US Senator, outside of Hawaii, was a conservative Republican, S.I. Hayakawa of California. He sought to declare English as the “official language” of the United States in order to eliminate social and educational programs in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and other languages which the first generation Americans relied upon. The first Korean American US Congressman, Jay Kim, elected for the first time in 1992, represented one of the most conservative districts of California. He also represented big business both in Southern California, South Korea and in other Asian countries, from which he received what proved in 1997 to be “illegal campaign contributions.” While in office, he received 100% approval ratings from the Christian Coalition, the American Conservative Union, and the National Rifle Association.<sup>13</sup> While the first Indian American US Congressman, Dalip Singh Saund, elected in 1957, was a progressive Democrat, the most recent, Piyush (Bobby) Jindal of Louisiana, elected in 2005, is a “darling” of the current Republican Party. The first Vietnamese American elected to the California State Assembly, Van Tran, is a Republican.

Among the countless challenges that Asian Americans face, none is as important as cultivating the political will to stand up against injustice and to go beyond self-preservation to transform the society and make it more tolerant and respectful. First, Asian Americans need to remember the

injustices perpetrated against their forbearers when they were the indentured workers on the pineapple and sugar cane plantations in Hawaii; they need to remember the coolies, miners, railroad workers and gardeners in California, Washington, Idaho and beyond, who worked for pittance at the whim of their employers. Then, they need to expose and rectify the injustices, in which they may have been complicitous. Finally, they must summon the courage to speak and act on behalf of all those who continue to languish at the bottom of the American society.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, NY: Penguin, 1989, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>In 1898, the Philippines became “US Territory.”

<sup>3</sup>The Act was authored jointly by Senator Pat McCarran (D-Nevada) and Congressman Francis Walter (D-PA). Congressman Walter later served as chair of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

<sup>4</sup>Lisa Lowe, “Work, Immigration, Gender: Asia ‘American’ Women,” *Making More Waves*, edited by Elaine H. Kim, Lilia Villanueva & Asian Women United of California. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997. The Naturalization Act of 1870 granted the right of naturalization to “aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent.” Chinese and Filipinos were grant the right during the WW II in 1943, for they were perceived as victims of Japanese military and colonial rule, perhaps to turn them against Japan and toward the US.

<sup>5</sup>They were US citizens by virtue of their birth on the US soil. Most of them were children born of Japanese laborers already in the US and their “picture brides,” sent from the same province as the men. The first band of “picture brides” arrived in California in 1910 from Japan and Korea.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Conrat, Maisie & Richard. *Executive Order 9066*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press for the California Historical Society, 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Peterson, William. “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” *NY Times Magazine*, January 6, 1960.

<sup>8</sup>They were awarded one Congressional Medal of Honor, 47 Distinguished Service Crosses, 350 Silver Stars, and more than thirty six hundred Purple Hearts.

<sup>9</sup>Tanaka, Chester. *Go Broke: A Pictorial History of the Japanese American 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team*. (Richmond, CA: Go For Broke, Inc. 1982), p. 171.

<sup>10</sup>*US News & World Report*, for the 2003-04 entering class. The largest was at UC Berkeley, where 41% of the entering class was Asian American.

<sup>11</sup>Tobin, Gary A. *The Transition of Communal Values & Behavior in Jewish Philanthropy*. San Francisco: Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Especially those from the State of Hawaii, including Senator Daniel Inoué, Congresswoman Patsy Mink and Governor George Ariyoshi.

<sup>13</sup>*Asian Week*, 1998.