Asian American History

AN INTRODUCTION

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Early Contexts: Asian Immigration to the United States

Long before scholars and journalists spoke in terms of "the Atlantic world," "the Pacific Rim," "transnationalism," or "globalization," people, goods, and ideas had circulated across national borders in the form of labor, capital, and ideologies that have shaped the contours of Asian American history. The documents and graphics selected for this collection of primary sources for the study of Asians in the Americas touch on themes that run throughout Asian American studies: immigration, migration, and citizenship; war and imperialism; race and civil rights; and representations and the construction of historical narratives, most of which are related to global rather than just national trends of the time periods in which they were created.

Much of Asian American history has been the record of immigration and exclusion. Even before Asians entered the young republic in recognizable numbers, they were denied the possibility of fully engaging in the U.S. political landscape because of the Naturalization Act of 1790, which granted the right of citizenship to only "free White persons." This situation would not fully change until 1952, with the McCarran-Walter Act, which did away with all racial restrictions to citizenship. In between these two landmark legal acts, Asian immigrants and their descendants were subjected to a series of immigration policies intended to deny Asians entrance into the country, based on their class, gender, or "race," as defined by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the U.S. government. Although Chinese began immigrating to the Americas in the largest numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, Filipinos were the first Asians to arrive in small numbers. They came to Mexico and areas that would become the American South (Louisiana) in the 1700s because of the Span-

ish conquest of the Philippines and the subsequent Manila-Acapulco galleon trade. It is likely that both Filipino and Chinese crew members were among these early Asian pioneers in the "New World."[1] While the Spanish presence in the Pacific and the Caribbean certainly contributed to the European colonization of these areas, British and American imperialism and business concerns in Asia and the islands of the Pacific would have the greatest influence on the development of Asian American history.

Chinese immigrants first came to the United States in appreciable numbers in the mid-nineteenth century because of the California Gold Rush of the 1850s, but the British occupation of India substantially put the trans-Pacific diaspora in motion. From the beginning of British trade with China in the 1830s, the trade balance heavily favored the Chinese. The British went to China wanting a variety of goods (tea, spices, silks, and porcelain), but there was very little the British had to offer that the Chinese desired. Eventually, the British introduced opium grown in their Indian colony to China as a good for trade. The Chinese developed a taste for the drug that would lead to a shift in the trade balance to favor the British as well as the social decay that opium addiction brought to Chinese people of all social classes.

In response, the Chinese tried to halt the opium trade by seizing a shipment of opium and setting it afire. The British took this as an act of war and sent their fleet to attack the Chinese navy, which proved no match for the British. The ensuing Treaty of Nanjing (1842) allowed for, among other concessions, more Chinese ports to be open to Western trade. This set the stage for both a greater Western presence in China and the means by which more Chinese could venture to the West. The ships that had increased access to Chinese ports for trade would soon become transport vessels that took Chinese laborers to the Americas in search of gold and the various occupational opportunities found in the American West. These same ships would facilitate the infamous "coolie trade" that took Chinese workers to the Caribbean (Cuba) and Latin America (specifically Peru). In addition, American sugar cane interests and Christian missionaries would soon establish a foothold in Hawai'i, leading to a permanent U.S. colony in the once independent island kingdom (and later, statehood).

Soon after Chinese labor migration to Hawai'i and the American mainland increased and U.S. trade with China became more profitable, Americans broke through Japan's isolationist policy via Commodore Matthew

Perry's 1852–1854 missions to the country. Then as Japan began a program of modernization in the late nineteenth century, Japanese laborers began going to Hawai'i and the United States to seek their fortunes. In addition, Koreans were recruited to work in Hawai'i by American sugar cane plantation owners. Once Japan took full control of Korea (1905,) however, Korean emigration came to a halt because the Japanese did not want Korean workers to compete with Japanese laborers abroad; they wanted Koreans to stay in Korea to work for their Japanese overlords. While the British were engaged in the China trade, they continued their rule of the Indian subcontinent. By the early twentieth century, the British had transformed the cotton-growing area of the Punjab into a commercial agricultural enterprise in which the vast majority of the cotton grown in that area was sent to the mills in England to be processed and manufactured into cloth, thus removing the Indians from that aspect of cotton cloth production and thereby producing a surplus of labor. In response, a large number of men from the Punjab, mainly Sikhs, immigrated to Canada as moving from one part of the British empire to another was easier than trying to enter another country, such as the United States.

Following on the heels of British, American, and Japanese imperialism and their profound effect on Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian emigration to the Americas were the Filipinos—the final group of Asian immigrants to come to the Americas in large numbers before the Second World War. Their emigration history was rooted in the overlapping effects of Spanish and American imperialism. The Spanish began to colonize the archipelago in 1521 with the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan and called this island chain "the Philippine Islands" in honor of King Philip II in 1543. By the late nineteenth century, the people of both the Philippines and Cuba began to resist Spanish colonial rule, and open rebellion broke out. The United States supported the rebels' cause in Cuba and entered the Spanish-American War in 1898. Determined to break Spanish rule in both the Caribbean and the Pacific, the United States opened a two-front war against the Spanish that led to Cuban independence and the U.S. annexation of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. However, the Filipino insurgency against the Spanish did not accept U.S. rule, and from 1899 to 1902, the Philippine-American War raged until the Americans finally subdued the resistance. At that point, Filipinos, now American "nationals," were recruited to work in Hawai'i and the U.S. mainland mainly as agricultural workers.