ASIAN AMERICANS

A Historical Perspective

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Americans All® A National Education Program

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Chinese: The First Major Flow of Asian Immigrants

Him Mark Lai and William M. Mason

The first Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States in the late 1780s as workers on trading ships sailing out of New York and Baltimore. During this same period, crew members from Chinese trading vessels established themselves in Hawaii.

In the early 1800s, a few Chinese youths came to the United States to learn Western culture as a direct result of American missionary activity. The first Chinese immigrant known to relocate permanently to California came in 1815 and served as the cook for the governor in Monterey.

Poverty in China and Gold in California

Until the California gold rush, Chinese immigration was very small and generally limited to a few students, seamen, merchants and domestics. The first major flow of Chinese immigrants to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century was prompted more by the deterioration of southeast China's economy than by the promise of a bright new future in California's gold fields. It was part of a general movement stimulated by the need for labor in Western countries and colonies.

The changing conditions in southeast China made leaving almost a necessity for many emigrants. During the early 1800s, China had enjoyed a favorable balance of trade with the West. Western nations, especially England, were determined to gain an economic advantage by increasing their export trade. The key product became opium, which was being grown in India. Its effects on the Chinese economy and its people were devastating. By the 1830s the favorable balance of trade had been reversed. The Chinese government's efforts to stop the trade led to the Opium War (1839–1842). Defeated, China was forced to allow both American and European traders to engage actively in sales of the drug.

This unfavorable balance of trade began to affect the Chinese economy. People left to find better economic opportunities and to escape the pressures of overpopulation, the effects of the Taiping Rebellion, excessive corruption in local governments and heavy taxation. News of the California gold strike reached southeast China in 1848, and between 1849 and 1860 several tens of thousands of Chinese came to the United States.

Although the gold fields presented economic opportunities, there were also many problems. American miners resented foreigners, especially non-Europeans, digging for the precious metal. Chinese people were not unique. Coincidental with their arrival, a series of racist, organized efforts succeeded in preventing other groups, notably Mexicans and South Americans, from participating in profitable mining areas. Chinese Americans managed to survive, and their patience was rewarded. When most of the productive mines became difficult to work by the late 1850s, it was the Chinese miners who acquired the rights and skillfully removed the remaining gold.

The new immigrants often felt the sting of anti-Chinese sentiments. Some of these were based on a stereotype created, in part, by Chinese business activities. A small number of Chinese merchants dealt in gambling, drugs and enslaved women, and many Americans assumed that these businessmen were typical members of Chinese society. The state governments were of little help. In 1850 California passed a foreign miners' license tax. In 1854 the California Supreme Court denied Chinese people (along with African Americans, *mulattos* and Native

A Chinese mining camp in California

Americans) the right to redress by testifying against European Americans in courts of law. Problems were magnified by a lack of understanding of Chinese culture, a problem that still exists today.

Working on the Railroad

In the 1850s virtually all Chinese people in the United States were in California, and in the 1860 census, which reported approximately 35,000, only California listed Chinese in a separate category. About half lived in counties that were primarily mining areas. Thousands lived in agricultural counties, where they worked not only in farming but also on such tasks as draining swamps and building levees.

As the United States entered the 1860s, the move to develop the natural resources of its western states required a cheap and reliable labor source. Chinese people were available. They were very good workers, very adaptable to changing conditions, quick to learn new tasks and not bothered by physical labor. Of all the western states, California had the greatest need for laborers. Chinese workers represented more than 20 percent of the total manual labor force even though they accounted for only about 10 percent of the state's population.

California also envisioned the creation of a major transpacific trade link with Asia—if it could gain rapid access to the manufactured goods from the industrialized eastern United States. The key component was a transcontinental railroad.

Construction of the western section of that railroad began in 1863. After having little success in recruiting (due in part to enlistment in the Civil War) and in gaining production from European American laborers, in 1865 railroad developers turned to Chinese immigrants who by that time were looking for alternatives to the mining camps. Although Chinese Americans demonstrated a talent and proficiency for railroad work, they were paid less than their European American counterparts.

Building the railroad proved a larger task than initially expected, so developers needed an increased labor supply. With economic conditions worsening in China, that area once again became a fertile source of new workers. Most of the recruits could not afford the cost of passage, so employers used the "credit ticket" system to bring them to the United States. Passage money was advanced to the emigrant, who repaid his employers, usually by deductions from his wages.

Labor and the Chinese Exclusion Act

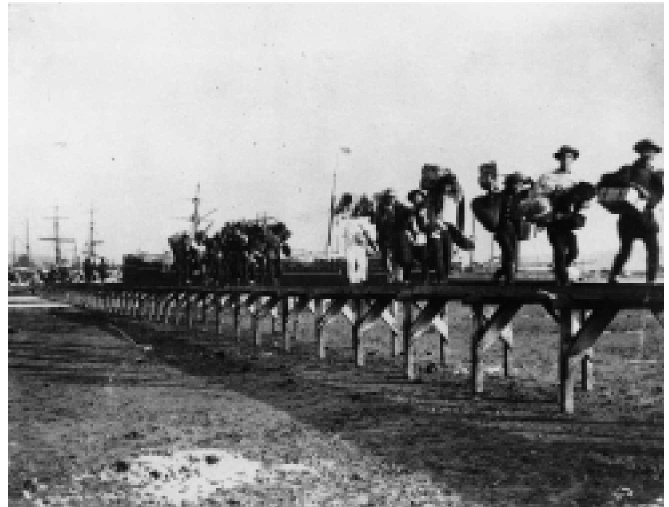
The labor pool was assured in 1868 when China signed the Burlingame Treaty, allowing Chinese laborers to immigrate freely to the United States. The treaty included a clause recognizing the "inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance," but it did not guarantee the right of naturalization.

Chinese workers drying raisins in Fresno, California

Japanese Immigration: Hawaii and the Mainland

Franklin S. Odo and Clifford I. Uyeda

Tales tell of shipwrecked Japanese fishermen drifting thousands of miles east to Hawaii as early as the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. They probably were absorbed into the native Hawaiian population. The first organized groups of Japanese immigrants, however, arrived in Hawaii and Eldorado County, California, in 1868, the year Japan's old feudal system was overthrown and replaced by ambitious officials determined to create a modern and powerful nation. Japan did become a world power but, like other nations that achieved this stature, allowed many of its people to suffer greatly. The government was forced to allow some of them to leave the country to find better lives.



Japanese immigrants on the bridge to Quarantine Island

Workers on Hawaiian Plantations

Thousands of Japanese people left for work on the sugar plantations of Hawaii beginning in 1885. Most were young men, but nearly 20 percent were women, and a few were children. This inclusion of women meant Japanese immigrants were much better off than Chinese immigrants who came before them or the groups of Filipinos who came after them, both with far more men than women.

These early Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawaii while it was still a monarchy—with King Kalakaua reigning over an independent and sovereign nation. Foreigners, mostly Americans, led a rebellion that overthrew the monarchy in 1893, and the United States annexed the islands in 1898.

By 1900, 60,000 Japanese people lived in Hawaii, constituting about 40 percent of the population. The native Hawaiians continued to decline in power and population. The rapid increase in Japanese immigration was due to the growth of the sugar industry, which continued to need massive amounts of cheap labor.

Schoolboys on the Mainland

Many Japanese who went to the American mainland were students who sought an education with the encouragement of their government. These "schoolboys" often did housework in exchange for room and board. During their free time, many went to classes to learn English and study a wide variety of subjects. Those who remained in the United States learned enough of the new language and customs to become the first generation of leaders in the new Japanese American community.

Unlike in Hawaii, where Japanese workers were housed in plantation camps and developed their own communities, the early immigrants on the mainland were scattered and isolated. Still, in both areas, there were enough people to maintain cultural practices, including musical performances, and to start such essential institutions as newspapers and Japanese language schools for the growing numbers of children born to immigrant families. Some of the earliest and most important centers for emotional and psychological support were the Buddhist temples and Christian churches, where Japanese American congregations could socialize and worship in their own language and with their own people and could celebrate their traditional festivals.

Although men usually formed the religious organizations, women often carried out many of the activities, which included teaching the Japanese language and handicrafts. The women's auxiliaries also created such entities as mutual self-help groups to take care of needy families and rotating credit associations to help individuals save money for special expenses.

One of the most striking things about Japanese immigrants was the wide diversity among them. They ranged in age from infancy to middle age. Although the majority came from southwestern Japan, they came from nearly every part, including Okinawa, which had been an independent country until the 1870s. Japanese immigrants who arrived in the 1880s from rural villages in western Japan were extraordinarily different from those who came to America in the early 1920s from bustling cities in eastern Japan. These later immigrants included students from wealthy families, poverty-stricken tenant farmers, Buddhist priests, entrepreneurs with capital seeking to make their fortunes, doctors, skilled craftsmen and a wide range of people teaching the arts and culture of the homeland. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to depict a "typical" Japanese immigrant.

Making a Living

Nearly every immigrant had to find a way to make a living. Most of the Japanese immigrants who went to Hawaii worked on sugar plantations in jobs ranging from cutting cane to bookkeeping to carpentry. On the mainland, Japanese immigrants worked in salmon canneries in Alaska, mined for copper and iron in Wyoming, ran gambling dens in Los Angeles and raised most of California's vegetables. Before 1900 very few Japanese American women worked outside their homes, and three out of four who did were servants, cooks and personal service workers. By 1920, however, more than 10 percent held jobs, with more than a third of them doing agricultural work.

As laborers in the mines or fields of Washington, Oregon and California or on the sugar plantations of Hawaii, Japanese Americans endured long hours of hard and dangerous work. When the conditions became intolerable or the management too brutal to bear, they organized protests and strikes.

On the mainland, labor unions generally tried to keep Japanese immigrants out, even though they were well qualified. This racism prevented unified and effective action.

In Hawaii, Japanese immigrants were in a very different situation since, by the early 1900s, they made up more than half of the laborers on the plantations. In 1909 Japanese sugar workers on the island of Oahu, led by such articulate men as Fred Kinzaburo Makino, staged a major strike. Although the planters improved wages and working conditions after the strike, it was clear that organizing on a racial basis weakened the effort.

By 1920 conditions had worsened. When Japanese workers called another strike, they attempted to include other ethnic workers, especially Filipinos who had been brought in specifically to counterbalance Japanese workers. This strike also was broken, and it was not until the late 1930s that a truly multiracial union, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, could be formed.

These pioneering union efforts reinforced much of the anti-Japanese prejudice that erupted into hostility and racist acts designed to drive them from the mainland.

One of many indications that other Americans would not welcome Japanese immigrants was the San Francisco School Board's decision in 1906 to segregate 93 Japanese American students attending the city's 23 public schools. The resolution was particularly ironic considering the Japanese Red Cross and government had contributed more than half of the total relief resources from outside the United States following the San Francisco earthquake earlier that same year.

President Theodore Roosevelt sent Secretary of Labor and Commerce Victor H. Metcalf to investigate the discrimination against Japanese students, and in 1907 the school board rescinded its order. The incident escalated into an international issue between the United States and Japan. Finally, the "Gentlemen's Agreement" was reached when President Roosevelt persuaded the Japanese government to stop issuing passports to any more Japanese laborers seeking to come to the United States to find work.

"Picture Brides"

The Gentlemen's Agreement did not solve the problems of immigrant men who could not return to their homes with the savings they hoped to accumulate and who, in most of the United States, could not marry women of other races because of antimiscegenation laws. Some of these

Japanese "picture brides"

Filipinos: America's Second-Largest Asian Group

Dorothy and Fred Cordova

Although most people think Filipino migration to the United States began in the late nineteenth century, recent research shows that the first Filipinos came to colonial North America as refugees more than a century earlier.

First Asians in North America

Filipino American historian Marina Espina has discovered that a small group of Filipinos were the first Asians to immigrate to North America. They arrived in Louisiana as early as 1763, when it was a Spanish possession, by way of the galleon trade between the Spanish colonies of Mexico and the Philippines. Louisiana became a state in 1812, and Filipinos fought on the American side against the British in the Battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812.

In the mid-eighteenth century, approximately 100 Catholic Filipino men established an unusual community, St. Malo, near the mouth of Lake Borgne in St. Bernard Parish. They allowed no women to live there. If a man had a family, that family had to live elsewhere. St. Malo prohibited liquor, and the oldest member of the community settled any disputes. In 1915 a hurricane destroyed St. Malo.

Another Filipino community was Manila Village in Jefferson Parish. Built on stilts at the edge of the bayou, the village was the home of Filipino seamen and fishermen for more than a century. About 300 Filipinos, with a sprinkling of Mexicans, Spaniards and other nationalities, lived there. Jacinto Quintin de la Cruz, its founder, introduced the sun-drying of shrimp in the United States. The finished product was sent to New Orleans for export to Asia, Canada and South and Central America.

During the nineteenth century, sailing clippers from different countries sought as crew members Manilamen, known everywhere in the Pacific as hardy and skillful sailors who understood currents and could foretell weather. Ships carried these seamen to European, South American and North American ports, including some in the Pacific Northwest.

Manila Village, c. 1890

Immigrants in the Northwest

The Pacific Northwest was still the Oregon Territory—with vast forests and small communities—when the first Filipinos arrived there aboard British or American trading and exploring ships or German schooners. They landed in Vancouver and Victoria or United States ports immediately to the south. Some Filipino seamen left their ships and made their homes first in British Columbia and later in Washington. There are also records showing Filipino residents in California in the 1820s.

The Port Blakely Company on Bainbridge Island in Washington was the largest lumber mill in the world during the late nineteenth century. Workers came from many different countries. Company files from 1892 recorded several Filipino workers. One, known simply as Manila, is believed to have been the first Filipino in Washington.

Among the first Filipinos in Seattle were 40 hired by the American government in 1903 to work on the steamship *Burnside*. Employed for a three-year period to lay cable in the Pacific and Alaska, many remained in the United States when their contract ended.

These two students, members of the ilustrado *(well-to-do) class, came to America in the early 1920s.*

Early Years as American Nationals

In 1898 American troops captured Manila a few hours after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, ending the Spanish–American War. Thus, the United States could not claim the islands by right of conquest. To avoid further delay, the McKinley administration offered $20 million for the islands. Spain accepted. For the next 48 years, the Philippines was an American colony. Until 1934 Filipinos were American nationals with the right to come to the United States if they could pay passage.

Among the Filipino immigrants who came at the turn of the twentieth century were America's first Asian war brides—the wives of Spanish–American War servicemen. Although most of them gradually assimilated into their new communities, others were never accepted by their husbands' families.

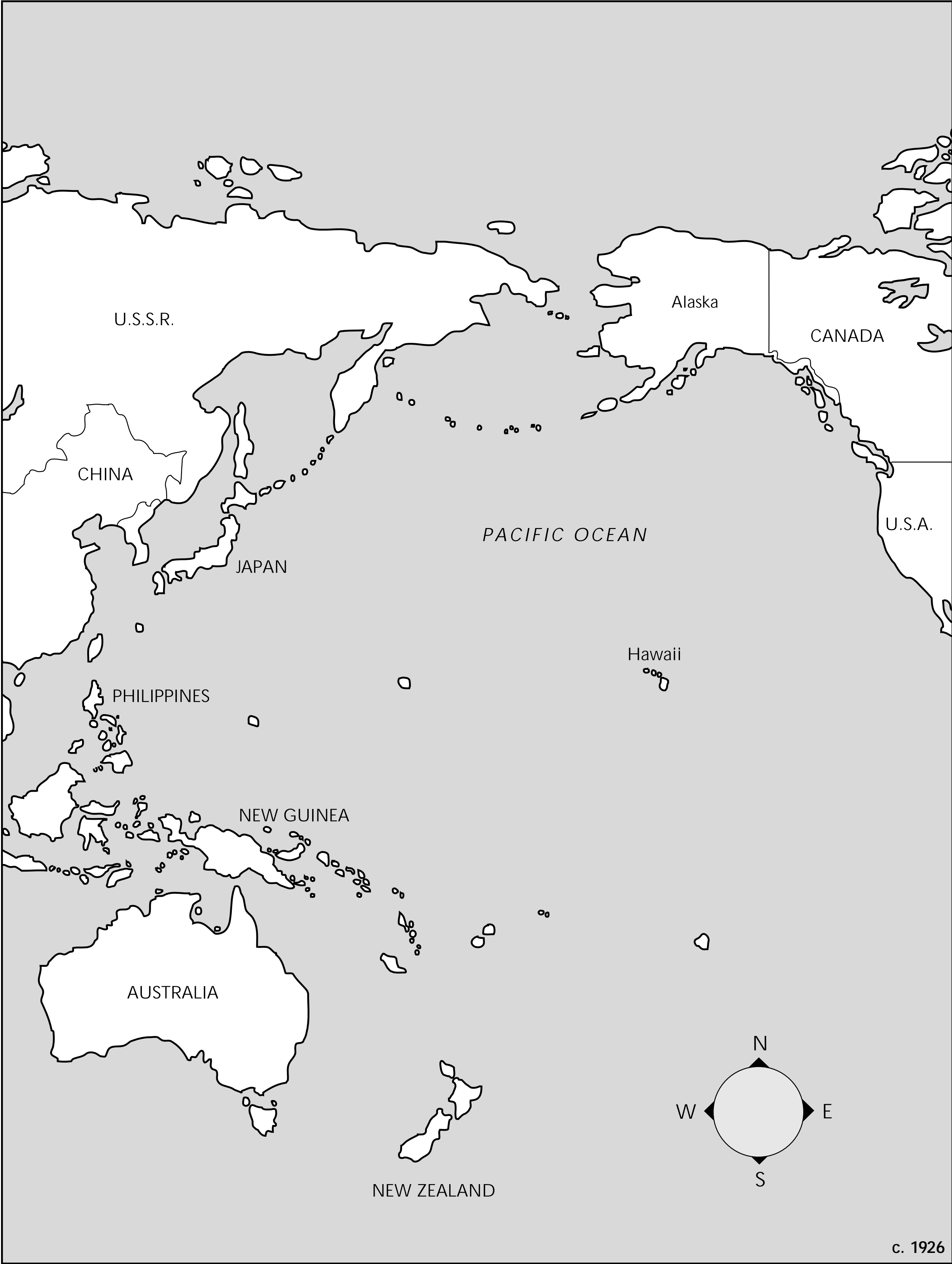
A few years later, responding to the threat of a reduction of Japanese immigration, the Hawaiian Sugar Plantation Association (HSPA) began a frantic recruitment of Filipinos to work on the sugar plantations. Hawaii was then an American territory. The first group of 15 Filipino laborers arrived in late 1906. The following year 150 came. In 1909 the HSPA began large-scale importation of workers. At first there were no provisions for their return to the Philippines. By 1915, however, increased pressure from Philippine government officials prompted members of the HSPA to agree to pay return passage after a laborer completed a three-year contract. Between 1907 and 1919, 28,449 Filipino nationals—mostly men—arrived in Hawaii. Fewer than 4,500 returned.

From 1903 through the 1930s, several thousand young Filipinos came to the United States by enlisting in the United States Navy. The terms of their enlistment made them stewards, and in a few years, Filipino stewards became some of the Navy's best cooks. After serving their tour of duty, some remained in seaport towns and created small Filipino communities.

Americanization through Education

One positive aspect of American influence in the Philippines was the expansion of public education. The United States Army established the first American schools there in 1898. In 1901 the first of more than 1,000 American teachers began arriving. They became known as "Thomasites," named after one of the ships, the *Thomas*, that brought them to the islands. The Thomasites taught English, introduced American ways and began training a new generation of Filipinos through the widespread establishment of public schools.

Beginning in 1903 the first group of 104 bright Filipinos—including a number of women—was sent to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