

Asians and Asian Exclusion

Summary: Chinese and Japanese immigration to California in the 19th century was met with much nativist racism and negative stereotyping. Asian families were often not allowed to immigrate with working men, leading to a large male population that was then perceived as at risk of drug addiction and soliciting prostitution. Buddhists in America had to navigate the degree to which they attempted to assimilate or accommodate Christian influence. Similar interactions occurred with Punjabi Sikh workers in the western United States. Quota immigration systems in the first decades of the 20th century severely limited the number of Asian immigrants who could enter the U.S. The immigration door from Asia to the U.S. was effectively shut following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924.

The Chinese and Japanese immigration of the second half of the 19th century began a new chapter in America's religious history. The broad Confucian respect for family, popular temple Daoism with its deities of protection, and Buddhism in its many forms—all found their way to American shores. With the Indian immigration that began in the early 20th century, Sikhs from the fertile farmlands of the Punjab added their traditions to this new burst of religious diversity.

This new encounter would have even more far-reaching theological challenges for the majority Christian population. Some Asian immigrants brought with them previous experience of Christianity, both negative and positive, through Christian mission efforts in Asia. Americans for their part had some knowledge of Asia, again through missions and through the literature of the Transcendentalists. On the whole, however, there was nothing but ignorance and misunderstanding to guide this encounter. Significantly, the first chapter in the Asian American experience was set in the context of economic expansion and competition in the American West, where difference of any kind often became an excuse for antagonism.

Invectives against “Chinamen,” “Japs,” and “Ragheads” marred the first decades of America's homegrown encounter with Asia. From the 1850s to the 1920s, anti-Asian agitation from the local to the national level was fueled by fear, stereotype, and racism. The agitation that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 grew to include other Asian immigrants. The Japanese and Korean exclusion movement dilated into the Asiatic Exclusion League, formed in 1908 to work for the exclusion of all Asian immigrants whom the league declared to be “utterly unfit and incapable of discharging the duties of American citizenship.”

For the Chinese who began to come to America in the 1850s, California was known as Gam Saan, Gold Mountain. The gold rush was in full steam. For those who were not lucky with gold, there were jobs on the railroads or in factories. Some Californians praised the arrival of the Chinese, whom they called “the Celestials” as part of the diverse, burgeoning growth of America in the Industrial Age. In 1852, the *Daily Alta* California newspaper expressed confidence that the Chinese would soon “vote at the same polls, study at the same schools and bow at the same altar as our own countrymen.” Unfortunately this confidence was not borne out: the new state of California proposed Chinese exclusion legislation, in support of which the governor scoffed at the very idea that the Chinese could ever vote intelligently. When Chinese and Japanese students were permitted to attend schools, the schools were separate by legislative order. And, of course, the Chinese worshipped at their own altars. The first Buddhist and Daoist temples opened in San Francisco in the 1850s and, eventually, there were hundreds of small temples on the West Coast and in the frontier territories of the Rocky Mountains.

Protestant familiarity with Chinese religion was hazy at best. The Chinese were routinely caricatured as “pagans” and “heathens,” labels that emphasized both racial differences and non-Christian allegiances. One missionary to China had claimed that “the four marks of Paganism were Tauism, Boodhism, ancestor worship and opium addiction.” Bret Harte’s poem “The Heathen Chinees,” depicting a cheating Chinese gambler, was published in 1870 and reprinted in newspapers across the country. Family-minded Christian citizens condemned the “bachelor societies” of which Chinatowns, large and small, were composed. Such groups of men living together were said to be breeding grounds for drugs and prostitution. At the same time, the state moved to prohibit the wives or families of Chinese from coming to the U.S., thus contributing to the very social problems they were so quick to condemn.

The Japanese came in the 1860s. Determined to avoid the negative stereotypes of Chinese immigrants in the U.S., the government of Japan set a strict “standard” for people allowed to emigrate. Many were literate and skilled workers, and 20% to 30% were women. Nonetheless, some Americans used anti-Chinese sentiment to fan the flames of anti-Japanese feeling as well. An 1891 San Francisco newspaper carried a headline that summed up the fears of many Americans: “Undesirables: Another phase in the immigration from Asia; Japanese taking the place of Chinese; Importation of Contract Laborers and Women.” Despite their best efforts, the Japanese were lumped together with the Chinese.

For the Japanese, the 1909 “Gentleman’s Agreement” permitted the immigration of the family members of laborers already in America, but prohibited any further laborers from coming. Because marriage in Japan could legally take place by proxy and then be formalized in America, “picture brides,” known to the husband only by a photograph sent from Japan, flocked to California shores. For the Japanese in America, the encouragement of family life helped balance the ratio of men to women and allowed for a second generation to develop, often easing the way for the older immigrants in the community.

For most Euro-Americans of this period, judgments about the “otherness” of the Japanese focused on their dress, the picture bride system, and Buddhism. Christian missionaries saw the opportunity for evangelism right here at home. As a group of Japanese Buddhists explained it to their headquarters in Japan, “Towns bristle with Christian churches and sermons, the prayers of the missionaries shake through the cities with church bells. To strong Buddhists like ourselves, these pressures mean nothing. However, we sometimes get reports of frivolous Japanese who surrender themselves to accept the heresy—as a hungry man does not have much choice but to eat what is offered him.”

Such calls for spiritual leadership from the burgeoning Buddhist community were heard by a young Jodo Shinshu priest, Soryu Kagahi, who arrived in Hawaii from Japan in March 1889 to engage in a mission of his own. He established the first Japanese Buddhist temple in Hawaii, while also providing much needed guidance to the physically and spiritually taxed workers on Hawaiian plantations. Yet Christians unsure about a religious tradition they had never encountered took note of Kagahi’s efforts with concern. The Hawaiian Evangelical Association, for instance, warned its members against “a Buddhist organization among us, which encourages drinking,” a rumor which clearly indicates how much such groups still needed to learn about the new religious traditions being transplanted in their soil.

The lotus flower of Buddhism began to bloom in Hawaii and a decade later on the American mainland. But Japanese Buddhists themselves were at first uneasy about how “Buddhist” they should be. Kagahi, for instance, attempting to reach out to the Christian culture he encountered, suggested that Buddhist missionaries should use language that placed the Eternal Buddha and the Christian God under the same umbrella of the “Absolute Reality.” Such “blending” of theological terms would become more common in the future, as Japanese Buddhists sought to make their religious tradition “relevant” to both the Christian and scientific worlds of 20th century America. But in the late 19th century Japanese Buddhists were still on the defensive.

As the century turned, Japanese immigrants struggled between seeking the guidance of their faith to help them in their new lives and leaving that faith behind in the quest for “accommodation.” Such a struggle divided the Japanese community into Buddhist practitioners who were eyed with suspicion by the dominant culture and Christian converts who were welcomed only ambivalently. This division created tensions within the immigrant population that reproduced themselves in families and in the hearts and minds of individuals who strove to be culturally Western but religiously Buddhist.

Sikhs from India also brought a new religious tradition to America. They were referred to generically as “Hindus,” meaning virtually anyone from India. There were, however, only a few Hindus and Muslims among the Punjabi workers who came from 1900-1910 to British Columbia and then worked their way south to Washington, Oregon, and California. On the whole, they were Sikhs. They wore turbans wrapped around their uncut hair in faithfulness to one of the five observances of every devout Sikh—to let the hair grow, as God and nature intended. Again, it was one distinctive characteristic that was singled out for caricature, earning them the pejorative slur “ragheads.”

Like the Chinese, the Sikhs came as single men, some intending eventually to return to the Punjab, others hoping to make a new life in America. Most of them eventually settled into the agricultural work they knew well from the fields of home. They organized a *gurdwara* in Stockton, California in 1912 which became the primary social, cultural, and religious center for the Sikhs of the Central Valley for more than fifty years. Due to the laws prohibiting the immigration of wives and family members from the Punjab, those who wanted a settled, married life often married Mexican women with strong Catholic extended families. Thus, the first major “interreligious” encounter was often in the context of marriage. It created a subculture of Mexican-Sikhs who, with names like Jesús Singh, observed Sikh festivals with the community in Stockton and were, at the same time, baptized Catholics.

Much of America’s anti-Asian agitation and sentiment from the 1850s to the 1920s was rooted in economic and not religious terms. Chinese workers were hired to replace striking workers at the North Adams shoe factory in Massachusetts. Sikh mill workers were perceived to be a threat to those seeking employment in the lumber industry in Bellingham, Washington. Explicitly anti-Chinese agitation culminated in the 1882 Federal Chinese Exclusion Act, which was renewed and broadened in 1892 and in 1902. The Congressional debate over exclusion often turned from economics to the question of cultural and religious compatibility.

The federal Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 established a quota system for immigration which also excluded those ineligible for naturalization as citizens. The Federal Naturalization Law of 1790 had limited the naturalization of foreign-born persons to “white” persons only. As Asian immigrants came to America, this law became the basis of excluding Asians from citizenship. In 1922, Tad Ozawa, a Japanese man who had lived most of his life in America, graduated from Berkeley High School and the University of California, was ruled to be ineligible for citizenship. In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind, a Punjabi-born Sikh who had served in the U.S. Army in World War I, was also ruled ineligible for citizenship. By 1924 the immigration door from Asia to America was effectively shut.