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## Asian-American Families - Varied Immigration Histories

The immigration of Asians to America can be divided into several distinct waves prompted by different political events. Early Asian immigrants provided cheap labor for the Hawaiian sugar plantations and California factories and fruit growers. Japanese laborers were listed along with supplies (bonemeal, canvas, macaroni) and "Chinamen" on company purchase orders (Takaki 1989). Chinese were imported as cheap contract labor, as *coolies*, and as strikebreakers to replace white workers (Chow 1998). The hope of finding gold in California, striking it rich, and returning to their Asian homeland became unrealistic goals upon arriving in the West. Chinese men outnumbered women and the lack of marriageable Chinese women created a lucrative market for prostitution, until immigration of single women was barred in the 1850s (Chow 1998). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act established a European racial preference for immigration, thus eliminating the development of Chinese-American families and the growth of their communities in the United States.

The 1908 Gentleman's Agreement with Japan restricted immigration of laborers, but a loophole allowed entry of parents, wives, and children of those already in the United States, thus influencing the rise of *picture brides* from Japan and Korea (Takaki 1989). The Picture Bride System was a modification of the arranged marriages by families or professional go-betweens. In these arranged marriages, sometimes older bachelors would send pictures of themselves as younger men, and when young brides-to-be arrived in the United States, they found their husbands-to-be nothing like what they expected. Sometimes the women refused to marry them. Some women became *picture brides* not only out of filial duty, but also as a strategy to start a new life for themselves (Hune 2000). Picture brides tended to be better educated than their husbands, and by the time the practice was curtailed in 1920, there were almost 30,000 American-born children from these marriages (Chan 1991). The 1945 War Brides Act allowed GIs to reunite with their Asian wives, which brought more immigrants to the United States. But it was not until the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 that race was eliminated as a category for immigration (Takaki 1989).

Early Filipino immigrants were predominantly male students, *pensionados*, or those individuals sponsored by the territorial government, and those who chose to remain became unskilled laborers because they could not become naturalized citizens. The Immigration Act of 1965 gave preference to, in order: (1) unmarried children of U.S. citizens; (2) spouses and children of permanent residents; (3) professionals and scientists

or artists of exceptional ability; (4) married children of U.S. citizens; (5) brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens; and (6) skilled and unskilled workers in occupations for which labor is in short supply. But most important for Asian families, the exemptions, for which there was no numerical limit, included: spouses of U.S. citizens, children (under twenty-one) of U.S. citizens, and parents of U.S. citizens (Ng 1998). This facilitated chain migration of Filipinos joining other family members between 1966 and 1970.

Migrations of highly educated Asians began in the 1960s. Between 1972 and 1988, approximately 200,000 Asians with training in the science-based professions entered the United States from the four major sending countries. Engineers and physicians came primarily from India, health practitioners from the Philippines and Korea, and scientists from China (Ng 1998). East Indians were the wealthiest, most highly educated, and most English-proficient of the Asian immigrants (Bacon 1996). As professionals with middle- and upper-class occupations, this group contributed to the stereotypic myth of the "model minority" who have assimilated and produced well-educated, high-achieving offspring.

After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, and the communist victory in Indochina, the Orderly Departure Program was established to facilitate the removal of refugees to the "first-asylum" countries of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These camps began to overflow with refugees from Vietnam and Laos (including the Hmong), and the Khmer from Cambodia (Suhrke 1998). The U.N. Convention and clauses from the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act defined who counted as a refugee and eventually resulted in either repatriation or settlement in the United States providing there were sponsors. Settlement patterns in the United States led to the dispersal of 130,000 first-wave refugees (1975) throughout the country. The second wave of refugees (1981) were predominantly family-reunification cases sponsored by relatives (Ng 1998).

The nationwide dispersal and diffusion of Indochinese refugees mirrored the governmental dispersion of Japanese Americans from internment camps after World War II, using the same rationale of preventing ethnic enclaves and not overburdening any single locale (Chan 1994; Zhou and Gatewood 2000). Ironically, the refugees came to the United States for political freedom and asylum, while the Nisei evacuees, citizens by birth, were denied their constitutional rights, though they eventually received an apology and reparations in 1988 (Takaki 1989). The effects upon families and ethnic communities due to this dispersion contributed to the diversity of experiences of Asian-American groups. Japanese-American families in the Midwest tended to transform their culture (Adler 1998), while the Hmong relied upon secondary and tertiary migration to reunite families and clans (Chan 1994). Secondary migration brought many Indochinese to California, settling in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, and in the Silicon Valley of San Jose. The dispersement of Hmong and Cambodians to frostbelt locations in northern states required major adjustment to a climate different from that of Asia.

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## **Asian-American Families - Family Structures And Gender Roles**

The vertical family structure of patriarchal lineage and hierarchal relationships is common in traditional Asian-American families, but there is diversity in practice across cultures. Based on the teachings of Confucius, responsibility moves from father to son, elder brother to younger brother, and husband to wife. Women are expected to be passive, and nurture the well-being of the family. A mother forms a close bond with her children, favoring her eldest son over her husband (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, and Hines 2000). On rural farms in the west, where Japanese women were isolated and saw other women only once a year, they often became extremely close to their children (Chan 1991). Thus, cultural tradition and living conditions both fostered this close relationship.

Over the generations, as in the case of the Japanese Americans, this pattern changed from the linear male-oriented pattern of kinship to a stem pattern of shared responsibility and inheritance for both sons and daughters (Adler 1998). In contrast to the patriarchal and patrilineal structure of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean societies, the gender structure in the Philippines is more egalitarian, and kinship is bilateral. In employment, women had and continue to have equal status with men (Espiritu 1995). Women held high positions and were role models in all aspects of Filipino society.

For Southeast Asian refugee families, the change in gender relations was a function of the changing gender roles upon relocation. Older men lost their traditional roles as elders who solved problems, adjudicated quarrels, and made important decisions, when they became powerless without fluency in English and understanding of Western culture. Hmong parents found their children were serving as cultural brokers, which undermined the father's ability to support his family, thus reducing his status. Hmong women, on the other hand, discovered that they had more rights and protection from abuse, which made their adjustment easier than their husbands'. In addition, they sold their intricate needlework, providing family income (Chan 1994).

Structurally, Asian-American families historically included split-household families, transnational families, extended families, nuclear families, and multiple nuclear family households. Evelyn Nakano Glen (1983) described Chinese split-household families as part production or income earning by men sojourning abroad, and part reproduction or maintaining the family household, including childrearing and caring for the elderly by wives and relatives in China. Split-household families were common for Chinese between 1850 and the 1920s. In the 1930s Filipino families also had split-household families since men far exceeded women on the mainland. Gender roles became reversed when Filipina women migrated to become domestic workers and nurses in the health care system, becoming family breadwinners with children and spouses in the homeland. Transnational (split-household) families grew out of economic necessity, and transcended borders and spatial boundaries to take advantage of the lower cost of living for families in a developing country (Zhou and Gatewood 2000). Filipina women preferred having kin, rather than strangers, provide childcare, especially during infancy, even if that meant living away from their children. But this arrangement was considered a *broken home* because the ideal family was the nuclear family, and there was an emotional cost of not being able to supervise one's own children. These kinship patterns reinforced the cultural value of familism, or mutual cooperation, collectivism, and mutual obligation among kin (Zhou and Gatewood 2000).

There are a variety of reasons for the creation of extended family households, including the desire for children to support their parents and grandparents, the inculcation of language and culture, economic stability, cultural obligation, and family reunification patterns. Extended families living in the same household was a function of cultural norms, economic needs, and a process of migration. Discrimination in housing and economic necessity after World War II often brought a variety of Japanese family (and nonfamily) members together in one household. In addition, older Issei, who could not speak English, relied upon their children, the Nisei, to help them negotiate daily living in mainstream society (Adler 1998). Households might include parents, children, unmarried siblings, and grandparents. Traditional Asian-Indian families live in a joint family, which includes a married couple, their unmarried children, and their married sons with their spouses and children. Thus, three or more generations may reside in the same household.

Economic opportunities and upward mobility caused younger professionals to move their nuclear families away from parents, who may have preferred to remain in their familiar ethnic communities. Some Filipino families combined nuclear families into multiple family households for economic reasons. But for Indochinese families who were dependent upon welfare, social service agencies defined their family for them as nuclear, not extended, for the purposes of distribution of assistance. Rather than the family being a unit of production, as in Laos, families became a unit of consumption in the United States (Chan 1994). Regardless of how families were defined legally, Vietnamese families pooled and exchanged material resources within family groups, building a cooperative family economy. Informal women-centered social groups and community networks were established to regulate the exchange of resources among households, and to mediate domestic tensions and disputes (Zhou and Gatewood 2000).

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## **American Families - Religion And Cultural Values**

Asian immigrants arrive in the United States with many religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The kinds of interpretive frameworks provided by religion, as a central source of cultural components, become particularly important when people are coping with changing environments (Zhou and Gatewood 2000). Immigrants make sense out of their new environment by utilizing cultural components from traditional religion and subtly altering them to reflect the demands of the new environment. The diversity of Asian immigrant religions include Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Shamanism (Hmong), Christianity (primarily Koreans and Filipinos), and forms of Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Sunni and Shiite Islam, and Syro-Malabar Catholicism (primarily Asian-Indian and Pakistani) (Zhou and Gatewood 2000).

It is through organized religion and family modeling that values and beliefs are inculcated in the younger generation. Although there are distinct differences among the Asian ethnic groups, some of the commonalities in worldview include: group orientation (collectivity); family cohesion and responsibility; self-control and personal discipline; emphasis on educational achievement; respect for

authority; reverence for the elderly (filial piety); the use of shame for behavioral control; and interdependence of families and individuals (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, and Hines 2000).

In the East Asian Indian worldview there are no individuals; rather, each person is born with a distinctly different nature or essence, based upon his or her parents and the specific circumstances of birth. This makes people fundamentally different, rather than same (or equal), and this nature changes over time (Bacon 1996). This holistic worldview makes Asian-Indian identity tied to social relationships, and the inherent inequality gives rise to social rankings based upon social relations. The caste system can be visualized as a system of concentric circles in which the social groups that encompass others are ranked higher than those they encompass, rather than a ladder system of inequality. As a result of this traditional worldview, for Asian Indians social relationships are the building blocks of society. In the Western perspective, individual choice is the foundation of group affiliation (Bacon 1996).

Traditionally, ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns served as self-defense mechanisms to insulate the Chinese from racial conflicts, and were home to *tongs*, or tight-knit fraternal organizations, which provided justice, economic stability, and social services (Chow 1998). Thus, Chinese culture was maintained. Later, in contemporary settings, the ethnic churches are where culture and language are passed on through language schools, summer camps, youth groups, and conferences. The ethnic church is also the place where the development of ethnic identity and socialization of peers (and future mates) play important roles. In some Asian cultures where intermarriage is taboo, or at least greatly discouraged, ethnic churches become the primary venue for friendship and dating.

In the United States, the church has become a major and central anchoring institution for Korean immigrant society. Facing discrimination, Korean Americans find in the close-knit religious community a place where their bruised identity can be healed and affirmed (Ryu 1992). Korean churches, whether they

are Christian, Buddhist, or based on Confucianism, provide for the holistic needs of their members, including social services, education, language classes, or simply socialization in an accepting environment. Approximately 78 percent of Korean Americans belong to a church, making it a social evangelism. Well-to-do Koreans come to the English-language services and feel a sense of belonging that they do not feel in the corporate world of their daily lives. Whether they belong to an organized religion or not, Koreans have always seen their lives in somewhat religious terms (Ryu 1992).

The cultural differences and difficulty of the Hmong to adjust to Western society illustrate the diversity of life experiences and traditions of Asian Americans. The Hmong were slash-and-burn farmers in Laos and came to the United States with few skills for urban living. What was legal and socially acceptable in Laos, such as opium production, polygamy, bride kidnapping, coining, and wife beating, is condemned and illegal in Western society. Values based upon the worldview that what is good for the family supersedes individual interest, and what is good for the spirit supersedes material interest, need to be altered to adapt to the individualism and materialism of American society (Faderman 1998; Hones and Cha 1999). Voluntary placement agencies called *Volags* received \$500 for each refugee they aided and included many Christian religious organizations (Chan 1991). Thus, many of these refugees found themselves being inculcated by well-meaning sponsors with religious beliefs that contradicted their native religions, such as belief in the power of Shamanism for the Hmong. For some, elements of the traditional beliefs such as Chao Fa, or Angel of the Sky, and new religions are creating a Christian religion with a distinctive Hmong flavor (Hones and Cha 1999).

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## **Asian-American Families - Regional And Generational Differences**

Historically, Asian immigrants were concentrated in Hawaii and in states along the Pacific coast, settling in segregated ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, and Little Manilas (Zhou and Gatewood 2000). As the population began to disperse throughout the Northeast, the Midwest, and the South, sizable ethnic communities developed in cities such as Saint Paul and Minneapolis (Hmong), New York (Chinese and Asian Indians), New Orleans (Vietnamese), and Houston (Vietnamese and Chinese). Recent trends of Asian Americans moving into white middle-class suburban areas have been strong, thus decreasing residential segregation.

Generational differences and regional differences both contributed to the increase of outmarrying among Asian Americans. Third and fourth generations, as well as ethnics living in predominately European-American neighborhoods, tend to out-marry more than do recent immigrants or those living in segregated ethnic communities. Interracial marriages were considered illegal in some states until 1967, at the height of the civil rights movement, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared all anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. It was believed that intermarriage was concentrated disproportionately among higher classes of Asian Americans to more advantaged European Americans for upward mobility (Zhou and Gatewood 2000). More children of Japanese-American heritage are born to interracial couples than same-race couples. Higher cross-cultural marriages for Japanese-American women may be the result of preference for a more equitable marriage over the traditional Japanese patriarchal family, and the importance of

family continuity pressuring Japanese men to marry within their race and ethnic group (Ishii-Kuntz 1997).

The ethnic dynamics in Hawaii and the mainland are quite different, and intra-ethnic acceptance of *Hapas*, or people of mixed ancestry, appears to be inverted. In Hawaii, Chinese Hapa are more acceptable than Japanese Hapa, while in west coast cities such as San Francisco and Seattle, Japanese Hapa are more accepted in the ethnic communities than Chinese Hapa (Zhou and Gatewood 2000).

In the early 1900s, East Asian Indians settling in California remained isolated on small farms, and few were able to bring wives from India. Family life was restricted by prejudice against dark-skinned people, though Indians were considered Caucasian and even attained citizenship at the time. As intermarriage with African Americans was discouraged, Mexican-American women became the most acceptable and accessible mates (Hess 1998). The children of these marriages were called Mexican-Hindu (Chan 1991). Naturalization of Asian Indians was reversed in 1923 by the Thind case, and citizenship was not restored until 1946. Studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s indicated that East Indian men preferred to remain single rather than out-marry, and that the shortage of eligible Indian women contributed to the breakdown of the caste system in the United States, as marriages, by necessity, occurred between castes (Hess 1998).

In the Midwest, Minnesota's *Land of 10,000 Lakes* has become the land of 10,000 to 15,000 Korean adoptees. Nationwide, 140,000 Korean-born children have been adopted by American families (mostly European American) since adoption began after the end of the Korean War in 1953 (Zia 2000). The identity development of these Asian adoptees depended on their access to Korean culture and language, the beliefs of the adoptive parents regarding their race and ethnicity, and their acceptance into Korean communities (Mullen 1995). Now, becoming adults, these adoptive children find that they, like some Hapas, or mixed-race Asian Americans, find it difficult to become integrated into their ethnic communities. After adoption from Korea tapered off in 1998, each year

approximately 1,000 children (mostly girls) have been adopted from China. By 1998, the total of Chinese adoptees had risen to 15,000.

Asian-American parent-child relationships have changed across generations for a variety of reasons. For Vietnamese-American families, better language skills, opportunities for education and job training, and familiarity with Western cultural norms have given children greater advantages over their parents for dealing with American institutions. Early Vietnamese immigrants, with higher social status, have attained economic success, but later refugees have less economic capital. Vietnamese youth migrating without older family members and the small number of Vietnamese elders in the United States have contributed to the lack of guardianship for some youth. But generally, traditional family values of collectivism and family hierarchy have remained strong. Interdependence within Asian-American families and communities has continued on some level, while emphasis on independence in American culture has influenced Asian-American youth. Cultural agents, such as television and its emphasis on materialism, popular music with the free expression of crude language, and schools promoting individualism, have been serious concerns that can erode authority and power of Asian-American parents.

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## **Asian-American Families - Effects Of Oppression On Family Life**

Stereotyping, racism, discrimination, and racial profiling have a long history of oppression of Asian Americans in the United States and appear to continue today. Hate crimes against Asians and *glass ceilings* preventing upward mobility in employment have been well documented. Asian Americans have the worst chance of advancing into management positions and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights cited the glass ceiling as one of the major types of discrimination faced by Asian Americans (Zia 2000). Asian-American families attempt to socialize their children to cope with these realities, while retaining a sense of cultural integrity and ethnic identity. Asian-Pacific American children should not accept that they are inferior or less deserving of civil rights because of their race and ethnicity. The United States of America is their home and they need not feel like outsiders (Pang and Cheng 1998). American-born and mixed-race Asian Americans develop their identities as Asianderived people with sensitivities to where they are living, in this case the United States. Thus, it is important to understand the sociopolitical climate of American society and to study one's heritage and family roots.

One overt example of institutional racism came in the 1940s as part of the U.S. government's response to Pearl Harbor. The internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II dismantled the family structure by eliminating traditional parental roles, thus weakening parental authority.

Everyone ate in mess halls, so adolescent Nisei often ate with their friends rather than with their families. Children joined their peers for recreational activities rather than staying in the crowded barracks with their siblings and parents. Nisei sons, who could gain employment in camp, sometimes replaced their Issei fathers as heads-of-the-household. Issei women were relieved of their cooking and farm labor responsibilities and gained more free time to socialize (Adler 1998). Thus, the institutionalization of families destroyed the Asian lifestyle of working together in small businesses or on the farm.

For Koreans, the small retail business became a lifeline when language barriers and job discrimination gave them few options for livelihood. There is a high degree of ethnic homogeneity in that they tend to service co-ethnics, and the owners/managers tend to be college educated and held professional or managerial positions prior to immigration (Chung 1997). Immigration laws gave health care professionals, such as physicians, dentists, nurses, and pharmacists, preference for entry into the United States, but upon arrival, their educational training, certifications, and credentials were deemed unacceptable. Thus, the labor-intensive family-owned business became the only option, and family members, elderly, women, and children, became the employees. Chung (1997) maintains that the unusually high propensity of Asian immigrants' businesses should be regarded as a form of underemployment and a source of cheap labor.

Although there has always been tension when Korean business owners were located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods, this tension escalated to racial animosity after the acquittal of the white police officers in the Rodney King beating. In April 1992, a three-day uprising in Los Angeles left fifty-four people dead and 4,500 shops in ashes, more than half of which were Korean-run businesses. Koreans and other ethnic minorities lost their livelihood in the event termed *sa-i-gu* (pronounced sah-ee-goo), a defining moment of economic devastation for the Korean community, nationwide (Zia 2000). It took years for families to rebuild and major adjustments in family life to cope with the physical and psychological loss.

Asian Americans have been subjects of stereotypes, or group definition by others, depending upon the sociopolitical context of the time. Early stereotypes of immigrants described Japanese and Chinese as *Oriental*s who could not be assimilated. Then, during wartime hysteria, Japanese and Japanese Americans were characterized as the *yellow peril* (although this label had been prominent since their arrival in the 1800s) and any Asian in the United States was still considered a *perpetual foreigner*. Postwar years and the impact of higher education on Asian Americans brought the stereotype of the overachieving *model minority* (Chan 1991). Geishas, gooks, and geeks have been the major staple of Asian stereotypes, with men portrayed as untrustworthy, evil, or ineffectual, emasculated nerds, and women cast as subservient, passive females, or the seductive, malicious dragon lady (Zia 2000). Although stereotyping clearly remains, the desire to be *politically correct* and not offend minorities has tempered the overt expression of group labels and stereotypes.

Asian parents, who had experienced name-calling and stereotyping throughout their lives, advised their children to ignore the comments, or to rise above them by being better (wiser, stronger, *A Japanese family awaits internment in 1942. The U.S. government placed all Japanese and Japanese-American citizens in internment camps during World War II.* NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION smarter) than their tormentors. Some Asian-American parents did not discuss prejudice and discrimination directly with their children, though it was acknowledged as part of life. Children were expected to endure and persevere, which would make them mentally stronger (Adler 1998). This approach also applied to academic success, which brings *face* to their families. These high expectations of Asian-American parents sometimes appear to be unrealistic to the children, but are founded upon the sacrifices families endured for their children's education (Pang and Cheng 1998).

Hate crimes, such as the killing of five Southeast Asian children in a Stockton, California, schoolyard by a gunman wearing military fatigues, and the murder of a Filipino postal worker, Joseph Ito, because of his Asian ethnicity, have become too common (Zia 2000). Racial profiling in the Wen Ho Lee case, the Taiwanese-American scientist at Los Alamo who was accused of being a Chinese spy, is clear evidence that even high-level white collar Asian-American employees

can become targets of racism at any time. There was mounting evidence that Lee was scapegoated and accused of espionage because of his ethnicity (Zia 2000).

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## Asian-American Families - Future Of Asian-american Families

The future of each group will indeed be as complex and diverse as the ethnic groups themselves. When asked what Asian-American parents fear the most for their children, common responses include: the loss of ethnic culture and language; poor self-concept and identity development; the alienation of adolescents resulting in their association with gangs; the ability to get into a good college; and the need to find a good, stable job. But there is a sense of hope, an expectation that hard work and perseverance will bring success, and for some, the belief in meritocracy. Others believe that Asian Americans still have to work 200 percent to get to the same place as their white peers, and that the playing field is still not level for people of color. Nathan Caplan, Marcellea Choy, and John Whitmore (1994) identified six factors that best characterize the value system of Southeast Asian refugees, the latest and poorest group: cultural

foundation, family-based achievement, hard work, resettlement and commonality of the family, self-reliance and family pride, and coping and integration. In terms of priority, parents indicated that education and achievement ranked first, followed by cooperative and harmonious family, while children ranked respect for family members first and education and achievement second. The lowest values, ranking twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth for both parents and children, were desire for material possessions and for seeking fun and excitement (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1994). This seems to indicate that the inculcation of what earlier Asian immigrants viewed as Asian values has been perpetuated through the generations.

*See also:* [BUDDHISM](#); [CHINA](#); [CONFUCIANISM](#); [ETHNIC VARIATION/ETHNICITY](#); [EXTENDED FAMILIES](#); [HINDUISM](#); [INDIA](#); [INDONESIA](#); [JAPAN](#); [KOREA](#); [PHILIPPINES](#), [THE](#); [UNITED STATES](#); [VIETNAM](#)

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SUSAN MATOBA ADLER

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