

Who Belongs?

Bernard Bell, 2021.04.18

PBCC Conversation on Race, Episode 4: Asian Americans

Who belongs in America and how do they belong? These questions have bedeviled this country since its founding. In the first three episodes of our Conversation we looked at the experience of African Americans. Large numbers of Africans were captured and brought here via the Middle Passage. They belonged only because they belonged to other people; they were property that could be bought and sold. Citizenship, fully belonging as people, was for whites not for them. After a civil war was fought over the status of blacks, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) extended citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof.” The Naturalization Act of 1870 extended naturalization to blacks. Native Americans didn’t gain citizenship until 1924.

Meanwhile on the West Coast others were arriving who again raised the question of who belongs and how. Who should be allowed to enter? Who should be allowed to stay and in what status? Today we turn our attention to Asians and their place in America. I had originally intended that we hold this episode in early February in conjunction with the Lunar New Year in celebration. But now we are having the conversation against the backdrop of violence against Asian Americans. It has been only a month since the Atlanta-area shootings that unnerved so many. It seems so long ago—there have been so many shootings since then.

1. Asian Immigration

First, let me define the scope of “Asians.” Various government agencies use the category “Asian or Pacific Islander” (API), and now we’re familiar with the term AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander). These terms encompass “East, South-east and South Asia and the Pacific Islands.” This is helpful only if you are dividing the world into 5 or 6 large areas. But this a vast area with great differences. I am restricting my talk tonight to East and South-east Asia, from Japan down to Indonesia. This itself is a diverse area. There are many reasons why people from this region have come to America.

I begin in 1839. The British Empire had what sounds like a very modern problem: a large trade imbalance with China. Why? Because it was buying so much tea: “all the tea in China”! Britain was sending opium from India which the Chinese bought, but China had banned its import and seized stock. Britain resolved this problem with gunboat diplomacy in the first of two Opium Wars. Sending warships it forced the Qing leaders to sign a treaty agreeing to let in opium, to open four more ports to Western powers, and to give Hong Kong island to the British in perpetuity. This was the first of many “unequal treaties” that marked a “century of humiliation.” Thus was China forced open to the West.

The *Chinese* were the first to come to America in significant numbers, following the discovery of gold here in California in 1848. Many young Chinese men came, the great majority from the Sze Yup area of Guangdong Province. They passed through the now-British Hong Kong and the now-booming new city of San Francisco. Most left their families behind and sent money home. They worked in the mines, then formed the great majority of the work crews doing the dangerous work of blasting the Transcontinental Railroad through the Sierra Nevada, then moved into farming, building the Delta levies for example. But there was a backlash of anti-Chinese sentiment and violent attacks. The case of Antioch has been in the news this month: in 1876 a white mob drove the Chinese out and burnt down the Chinatown. Hostility climaxed in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers. Women had already been excluded, and anti-miscegenation laws prevented interracial marriage. It was hoped the Chinese would simply die out. They did not belong.

The next to come were *Japanese*. In 1853 US Navy Commodore Perry sailed into what is now Tokyo Bay

on a mission from the President, to forcibly open Japanese ports to American trade, using gunboat diplomacy. The Japanese response was the Meiji Restoration of 1868, beginning a rapid Western-style industrialization while strengthening imperial power to ensure independence from Western powers. This caused tremendous social upheaval in Japan. Many men went to Hawaii and the West Coast in search of work, mostly in farming. Japantowns formed, of which those in San Jose and San Francisco still survive. Immigration of unskilled labor was halted in 1908, but wives were allowed in. This led to the practice of picture brides and proxy weddings, which allowed the Japanese community to continue from the first Issei generation to the second Nisei to the third Sansei.

Next to come were *Filipinos*. During the Spanish-American War (1898) the US occupied the Spanish territory of the Philippines, annexing it as a US Territory. Now US subjects, many Filipinos moved to Hawaii to work in sugar plantations and to the West coast to work on farms.

Chinese, Japanese, Filipino. They came to Hawaii and California, where they worked very hard. But did these people really belong in this country?

2. US Immigration Policy

2.1 Restrictive policies

Unease over the changing face of America culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, a sweeping piece of legislation whose purpose was “to preserve the ideal of US homogeneity.” It had two main portions. The Asian Exclusion Act portion excluded all Asians except the Chinese who were already excluded and the Filipinos who were US nationals. The National Origins Act portion established quotas heavily favoring immigration from Northern and Western Europe. It was clear that America was white and was meant to be white. Only whites belong and only the right type of whites would be welcomed as belonging.

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the US entry into World War II, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order to remove Japanese people from the West Coast and confine them in internment camps. 120,000 were so interned, of whom 62% were US citizens. Many had family members who were fighting in the US Army, notably the highly-decorated 442nd Infantry Regiment, composed almost entirely of Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans.

In the 1950s the US began to reverse its immigration policies. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 abolished racial restrictions. Asian Americans could now become citizens, but immigration was restricted by very tight quotas. This Act also created the H-1 visa to attract the right sort of immigrant: highly-educated with special skills, therefore presumably also from white countries.

2.2 Liberal policies

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the National Origins Formula from 1924 which had highly favored immigration from north-west Europe. This Act opened the door to more widespread immigration from Asia and other areas, and it favored family reunification. This Act was to have sweeping consequence.

Next to come in significant numbers were *Vietnamese*. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and the end of the Vietnam War the US sponsored the evacuation of 125,000 refugees, and later took in more.

2.3 Reversing the past

As we look back on history and this brief survey of the history of Asian immigration, we find uncomfortable facts. These have to be faced up to for the sake of moving forward. To some extent the US has done this. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 apologized for interning Japanese Americans during World War II, admitted it was due to “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership,” and granted reparations of \$20,000 to each surviving internee. A total of \$1.6 billion was paid to 82,000

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survivors. The bill was sponsored by Norm Mineta, former mayor of San Jose, who was interned as a boy in Wyoming, and by Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming who had met him in the internment camp when they were both boy scouts, Simpson on the outside and Mineta on the inside.

In 2012 the US Congress unanimously passed a Resolution of Regret for the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 2014 the California Legislature passed resolutions celebrating the history and contributions of Chinese Americans in California, and calling for Congress to formally apologize for the Act, just as it had apologized for Japanese internment. A tangible sign of the changed status of Asian Americans has been Norm Mineta's service as San Jose's Mayor (1971-1975), followed by twenty years in the US House (1975-1995), and later six years as a Cabinet Secretary in both Democrat and Republican administrations (2000-2006), and the award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom; and also Ed Lee's service as San Francisco's first Chinese Mayor (2011-2017). So, progress has been made in affirming that Asian Americans do indeed belong.

To learn more about the Japanese American experience, I encourage you to visit the Japanese American Museum of San Jose (jamsj.org). To learn more about the Asian American experience I recommend the PBS series *Asian Americans* (2020).

3. The Changing Face of America

We can all see that the face of America is changing, especially here in California, especially here in the Bay Area, especially here in Cupertino. Here are the census results for the city of Cupertino.

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
population	2,438	3,664	18,216	34,015	40,263	50,546	58,302
% white	93.8	95.1	96.4	91.0	74.3	50.1	31.3
% Asian					23.0	44.4	63.3
% Chinese			1.0	2.6	13.2		28.1
% Indian				0.4	1.9		22.6
% foreign born		7.3				42.8	48.9

I love the diversity of the Bay Area, having myself lived in many places around the world including many years in south-east Asia. And I love the growing diversity of our own congregation. Our PBCC church family continues to change. I am very glad that we have many Asian brothers and sisters. Our church family includes those of Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese origins. This is already a diverse group, with different stories to tell, different reasons why they came here. And our Chinese brothers and sisters are themselves a diverse group. Some are American-born, others are overseas-born. Some were born in Chinatown into families that arrived 140 years ago. Others are recent arrivals. Some are from Hong Kong, Taiwan or a growing number from China. Others are from the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Among our non-Chinese Asians, some had close family members, parents or spouse, who were interned in Japanese camps during World War 2. Some were brought here as young children fleeing Vietnam. It is a rich diversity of peoples. All have different stories to tell.

Many of you know that my parents were long-time missionaries in Thailand. My mother actually intended to go to China to serve with the China Inland Mission (CIM). To prepare she trained as a nurse (3 years) and a midwife (18 months) followed by two years of Bible College. By the end of those seven years China was closed. CIM leadership considered disbanding but decided to move into the neighboring

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countries of East and South-east Asia where there was a large Chinese diaspora. It took on the additional name Overseas Missionary Fellowship: CIM-OMF. Overseas not with reference to the West but with reference to China. It was the China Inland Mission, which had ventured far beyond the comfort and safety of the coastal foreign enclaves. Now it was moving overseas from China. It established a new HQ in Singapore. Since its founding in 1865 the mission had always had its headquarters on the field. So it was the new CIM-OMF that my mother joined in 1953 and my father the next year. They went to Thailand where they served till 1991. In 2005 OMF appointed its tenth General Director: Patrick Fung of Hong Kong, the first Asian to fill that role. OMF was and is very pleased to have a Chinese person in this role. Here is a different sort of Manifest Destiny, different from Britain and America forcing China and Japan open with gunboat diplomacy and Western superiority. Western missionaries took the gospel to a people that had not heard. Chinese came to faith and joined Chinese churches, accepted as fellow Christians, as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Some grew into leadership roles as deacons, pastors and other helpers. Eventually, in OMF days, some joined the mission as formerly-receiving nations became also sending nations; Asians were now full colleagues of the Western missionaries. The *telos* of this process is having an Asian in the senior leadership role, leading an international, multiethnic organization. In 2008, happening to be in Singapore, I attended the ordination service of Patrick Fung as a minister. The sermon was preached by a previous General Director, James Hudson Taylor III, a Caucasian who was born in China and spent his entire adult life in Asia. He preached in Chinese and the sermon was translated into English by a Chinese person. To me this was a beautiful picture of unity in the body of Christ.

I am delighted that here at PBCC we have a diverse family, that so many have found us to be a home, and have entered into our life together. We are brothers and sisters belonging together in Christ Jesus.