

Blue Heavens: Asia-America's Failure to Assimilate

“Because my house had bare walls, I began rushing all about.
The waves are happy, laughing ‘Ha-ha!’
When I arrived on Island, I heard I was forbidden to land.
I could do nothing but frown and feel angry at Heaven.” (Lai et al 46)

Assimilation is the adaptation to a culture. The United States of America has always had newcomers to take on the job of assimilation, and it is evident by their roles in U.S. society today that Asia America has failed at this task. This is due to many factors brought by standards impossible to meet and behavior within the immigrant group that has pushed its country away. The written explanation of this mass failure will begin in the present and work its way back allowing us to see the strings that have existed throughout this history. Through American politics, the educational system, and jobs and socioeconomics we can see that Asians don't quite fit. In addition we can see more personal misrepresentations and social faults in American media.

This failure will show itself to not be black and white, and in that case, neither yellow nor brown. The immigrants spoken about will be those who are arriving today and those who arrived after since the 1850's. In Jean Wu's and Min Song's *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader* the term Asian-American is used to describe members from or descended from South, Southeast, and East Asia (14). There is no reasoning for this today as there is a sizeable number of immigrants from Western Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, however as many histories continue to use this definition, this paper will too. Also, each individual group faces its own unique problems from within and outside. Each group carries its own culture and history. Most importantly the failure argued here is just that—an argument—and if it is true, it is not to be applied to every Asian-American. Similarly, the immigrant groups who have successfully assimilated aren't a commentary of each individual of those groups. Assimilation is a layered struggle; its proceeding success or failure is chosen by the state's mainstream culture.

On August 31, 1987, *Time Magazine* released an issue with the title *Those Asian-American Whiz Kids* (Brand). The cover displays six children of East Asian descent. They are surrounded by books, a computer, and to top it off, a basketball to indicate an interest in sports. They are set against a blackboard in a school setting. The image roars “Perfect students!” On June 19, 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man, was murdered in a suburb outside Detroit. His killers roared, “It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work”. How do these two events exist only five years apart? Vincent Chin's killers had mistaken him to be Japanese. People in Detroit's domestic automobile industry, which was primarily white, had been losing their jobs. In looking for someone to blame, companies settled on the Japanese automobile industry. This led to hatred of all that may have matched the image of the successful Japanese stealing their jobs, even if that person was a fellow U.S. citizen. Vincent Chin himself was adopted from China by Chinese immigrants. He grew up in Michigan and was murdered eight days before he was going to be married. The case was not seen as an issue of civil rights, and Chin's killers were charged with manslaughter. They served no jail time (Wu). Revisiting the *Time's* piece that said “setting the educational pace for the rest of America and cutting a dazzling figure at the country's finest schools,” how do Asian-Americans get celebrated for their success but also murdered for it?(Brand.)

California's literature gives insight to how the Asian immigrants were first seen. "A big Chinaman, remarkably evil-looking, with his head swathed in a yellow silk handkerchief and face badly pock-marked, planted a pike-pole on the Reindeer's bow and began to shove the entangled boats apart." Jack London wrote in *White and Yellow*, a short story in his *Tales of the Fish Patrol* collection. He describes his teenage years working on baits in San Francisco, California during the 1890's. Throughout these stories he has interactions with Chinese shrimp catchers. He alienates himself from and generalizes them; he only gives one character a name, "Yellow Handkerchief". He recounts the shrimp catchers sabotaging London and his crew. "The crew responded in like fashion, and though I made my meaning plain by signs, they refused to understand. Realizing the inexpediency of discussing the matter, I went forward myself, overran the line, and let the anchor go." He uses the terms Moguls, Orientals, and Chinamen when talking about them and almost always uses "they." They are completely different, in accent, looks, goals, and instincts, and London appears to be know them in a way that the Chinese don't know him. "I was familiar enough with the Chinese character to know that fear alone restrained them" (London).

Lee Chong is the first character introduced in Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, taking place in the bay town of Monterey, California during the 1930's. He's a Chinese grocery store owner and almost everyone in town owes him money. Steinbeck gives Lee Chong more depth than London gave to Yellow Handkerchief. The cleverness in Lee Chong's business techniques are credited to him as an individual. He is incredibly stern but his actions throughout the book show him to have a soft-heart, which makes him a bit mysterious. However, he contributes to and helps his community(9-16). There is another Chinese character in this book who Steinbeck refers to simply as Chinaman, an enigmatic mystery. He appears throughout the entire story, frightening the people of Cannery Row. He interacts with one boy who sings slurs to him and the boy nearly faints after receiving a deathly glare(24-16).

The first major wave of Asian immigrants were Chinese immigrants to California. Most came because of the California Gold Rush and many had the intentions of returning to China. America had one of its largest immigration waves at the end of the 19th century ("Chinese Immigration to the United States"). In times of economic privation America blaming its immigrants isn't uncommon. The Chinese especially were willing to work for lower wages. The native white laborers were especially upset by this. The Foreign Miners Tax was passed in 1850. It required foreign workers to pay a tax of approximately three dollars per month, about ninety dollars today ("A Legacy of War"). The tax was repealed the next year due to revolts but reenacted in 1852. A supporter of the tax, Hinton Rowan Helper, a notable critic of slavery wrote about Chinese immigrants when visiting California. He believed Chinese labour in the states was of no use to anyone. He was highly doubtful of successful assimilation of the Chinese more than any other group. He disdained them more than others "But the Chinese are more objectionable than other foreigners, because they refuse to have dealing or intercourse with us; consequently, there is no chance of making any thing of them, either in the way of trade or labor. They are ready to take all they can get from us, but are not willing to give anything in return" (Rowan). This along with London's and Steinbeck's writing show a pattern of an aloof character living in a different world. The more disagreeable writings against the Chinese show hauteur from the authors who can't connect with these immigrants. David Phillips, another visitor to California saw the Chinese as vital to the developing state. He wrote "Now, in my mind, a Chinaman has the same right to come to this country, find a peaceful home, breathe the free air of liberty, and be protected in his person, his family and property, as anyone else." He continues by praising their efforts and work ethic. He chastises those against the Chinese accuses them of completely evil intentions. "If these men could, they would enslave these Chinamen to-morrow" (Phillips). Rossiter W. Raymond, a

commissioner on mining statistics summed it all up. “They are the most reasonable in the matter of wages, and the most unreasonably exact, in the matter of payment, of all our laborers... Apart from every other advantage or disadvantage attendant upon their employment, apart from the discrepancy of wages even, this one attribute of fidelity to the interests of the employer will certainly carry the day for the almond-eyed laborers, if our white workmen do not recognize the danger in which they stand, and avert it by more sensible means than they have yet used.”(qtd in Cone). There was a disconnect and that scared the white workers.

The continuation of this sentiment can be seen in the laws that followed. The Naturalization Act of 1870 that extended the right of naturalization to only white and “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent,” excluding Asians. (“Asian American History Timeline”). It was at this time anti-Chinese riots were peaking. On October 24th 1871 around twenty Chinese people were killed in L.A.’s Chinatown. Bodies were burned, hanged, and buried to be hidden. It was one of the largest mass lynchings in U.S. History. Over 10% of this Chinatown was gone. With a mob of about 500 people, no one was convicted for the murders. (Kelly). This hatred accompanied the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It banned immigration from China. Perfect teamwork between social attitudes and legislation.

Angel Island was the Ellis Island of the West. Most early Asian immigrants came through here more often than anywhere else went back.

“Alas.

Such tyranny of the White Rac!

Such tragedy of the Yellow Souls!

Like a homeless dog forced into a confining cage,

Like a trapped pig held in a bamboo cage,

Our spirits are lost in this wintry prison;

We are worse than horses and cattle.

Our tears shed on an icy day,

We are less than the birds and fowl.” (Lai et al 174)

In this time when people couldn’t naturalize and become U.S. citizens a sense of belonging anywhere was gone. A letter from Vaishno Das Bagai demonstrates this. He didn’t have the rights he deserved in British India or in the “free” America where he had moved his family in 1915. They also came through Angel Island

“ I do not choose to live the life of an interned person: yes I am in a free country and can move about where and when I wish inside the country. Is life worth living in a gilded cage? Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and the bridges burnt behind.”

He left this letter behind as he locked himself in a hotel room turned on the gas and died.
(Rani.)

The history that followed was Chinese exclusion got increasingly more grim. Involving more discriminatory legislation that produced by and fed American society. The early 1900’s was a time of hatred towards all. Using the K.K.K. as a model of what bigoted white Americans stand for, it can see how horizons expanded as to who was excluded. A group that had previously focused on attacking the

Black citizens of its country was changing. They did not like the religions of new white immigrants and how they were urbanizing societies and taking their jobs (“The Reemergence of the KKK”). The U.S. dealt with this with quotas. The Immigration Act of 1924 limited the amount of visas available to each country. It also came with an appalling “Asiatic Barred Zone,” altogether excluding people from this zone which included much of South Asia, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East (“Immigration Act of 1924”). Asian immigrants are often left out of much the U.S.’s mainstream history, especially from this time period. Perhaps it’s the lack of immigrants, the shame of having had these laws, or a sentiment that is still held against them today.

“We were green horns from Ireland and we didn’t know anything... He said ‘Don’t worry about anything because you never know who you’re going to meet or who you’re going to see here! This is America.”

(Coan 112)

A piece of our history that also demonstrates thoughts on different immigrant groups can be seen in one of America’s biggest violations of civil and human rights, Japanese Internment Camps.

Almost immediately after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans on the West coast were forced into camps as they were a threat to national security. Immigrants from other countries the U.S. were also interned but only citizens of those countries above a certain age. Japanese internment camps kept women, children, and American citizens. Dorothea Lange was an American photographer. She was hired by the government to document the experience through her photos. (Chambers). *I am an American, Oakland, 1942* is one of her photographs. It shows a grocery store on a street corner with a mailbox and car parked out front. It appears very typically American but comes with a disclaimer. The window of the store has a large sign saying “I AM AN AMERICAN.” The actual store belonged to a Japanese-American who was forced to leave and shut down his shop. Him and so many others put up such signs to defend themselves, although they shouldn’t have had to. (Lange. *I Am An American*).

These people were terrorized by their state and neighbors. The assumption was that their rights to success and happiness were secondary to white citizens. Vincent Chin’s killers killed him because of the job loss in that area. Even though Chin wasn’t in the same profession as them, but had he been, he deserves what his hard work brings him. He was killed because they thought he growing in life but his looks and cultures say it’s not his right.

Intelligent Alien Life

In 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Immigration Bill under the Statue of Liberty. The bill ended the national origins quotas started in the 20’s. Under the Statue –the first glimpse of America for so many – Johnson said the following description of the quotas “This system violates the basic principle of American democracy -- the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man.” (“The Legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act”). This bill led to the largest and most unexpected wave of immigration to the U.S. Post-1965 most Asian immigrants were highly-skilled workers coming in masses. With a continuously strenuous vetting process, only the best of the best, those cut out for what the country wants were allowed in. With highly educated, innovative, and needed people entering, it only makes sense that they and their families be successful. Since then, a myth of these immigrants and their children being naturally intellectual and hardworking has been perpetuated. A myth displayed on the *Time*’s cover. This myth puts the Asian-American

population at the same starting point as other minority groups in the nation. Vijay Prashad's book *The Karma of Brown Folks* illustrates how these minority ethnic groups get pinned against each other, focusing specifically on Indian-Americans, America's wealthiest ethnic group. He says "we are not merely a solution for black America, but a pointedly a weapon deployed against it. The struggles of Blacks are met with the derisive remark that Asians don't complain and ask for handouts." (Prashad 6-7). An article in *New York Magazine* called *Why do Democrats feel Sorry for Hillary Clinton*, discusses racism in the atmosphere of the most recent U.S. presidential election. It concludes with Asians' amazing ability to cope with bigoted America. It glosses over every horrible piece of history, lynching, WWII sentiments, and a ban on them. In awe it declares how incredible Asian success has been despite it all, but fails to mention that those allowed in in recent years and who have stayed are required to succeed. (Sullivan. "Why Do Democrats Feel Sorry for Hillary Clinton?"). This celebration of the model minority myth seems to be putting down all minorities and isolates Asians, making them perpetual foreigners. It makes the Black and Latino working class seem as though they aren't working hard enough. It's a silent oppression existing in our mainstream culture and could have only been perpetuated by our mainstream culture.

What does this look like on the social level for Asians? "New line cinema presents that Asian guy from American Pie." the movie trailer introduces John Cho. "And that Indian guy from Van Wilder," introducing Kal Penn (Leiner. Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle Trailer). *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* is a stoner movie. It's a wild tale of two friends who want to get burgers from the fast food restaurant White Castle. Hollywood has produced many stoner films in its lifetime, but this one is a little different. This film has two Asian leads, a Korean-American and an Indian-American. In an interview with Larry King, John Cho said this about the films, "They are so against the grain of what you would expect from an Asian-American that I found a real freedom in that." (King"John Cho and Larry King Discuss MILFs). It really was about the American Dream, as Kumar dramatically stated. Unfortunately *Harold and Kumar* is very much so one of a kind. The images created by Steinbeck and London continue to exist very prominently. After so many years in this country this vast and diverse immigrant group connect all its people with lack of proper representation. A character can't casual be a fourth generation Chinese-American the same way a character can be Irish-American. This isn't just in Hollywood. Positions that put people in power on social and professional levels are blocked off to Asians. The Bamboo Ceiling describes the lack of Asians in corporate leadership despite the amount their education and experience. In 2014 only 2.6% of Fortune 500 companies had Asian CEOs. Perhaps in only seeing Asians as cogs in a system, white America loves Asians. The kids on the Time cover are the passive and easily manipulated model minority (Does The 'Bamboo Ceiling' Shut Asian Americans Out Of Top Jobs?).

Both the celebration and murder are a way to suppress and isolate groups of people. Both are destructive and both work against assimilation. The memoir *Paper Daughter* by M. Elaine Mar shows this model minority theory to be false by recounting racism she endured, economic and cultural struggles she had to work through. She writes "... I am more 'minority' than 'model'; that as an American I continue to lie if I perpetuate the myth of a classless, integrated America" (Mar 9). And this lie is a dangerous one. Taking the title model minority itself would imply that this group is being treated the best. The *Time's* cover would imply those kids are untouchable. However Vincent Chin could be touched and he was beaten to death. Assimilation and a model minority cannot exist simultaneously. You need to become part of a majority to have assimilated. How is a nation integrated if it alienates one of its most successful groups? And what does it mean for all the other ethnic minorities groups, if this is the best it can get?

Angel Island detained:

“ Even though it is said that drifting is a man’s lot,

Why am I imprisoned when I am not guilty?

Giving repentance and regrets to Heaven, I reprimand myself daily.

I ask the blue heaven, does it know my plight?” (Lai et al 88)

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