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Course

Date

Major Turning Points in Asian American History

Introduction

Although Asian Americans are currently recognized as the biggest immigrant group in the US, they have antagonized a long legacy of inequity and exclusion throughout their history. Almost a century back, members of this racial group were not only low-skilled but also worked as low-wage laborers. Moreover, they faced discrimination due to the issue of language barrier. Despite these discriminations, Asian immigrants played a critical part in the development of the US at beginning the 1850s. However, periods of economic struggles such as the Great Depression in 1876 saw these immigrants on the receiving end of the government through the enactment of laws aimed at restricting their rights. Since the government intended minimize the movement of this group by introducing laws such as the *Chinese Exclusion* and the *1924 Immigration Acts*, these events turned out to be essential milestones that changed their lives in the US.

Chinese Exclusion Act

When they first migrated to the US, the Chinese largely provided labor in the agricultural sector, factories, and gold mines. While they primarily worked as laborers, they became successful, and a big number of them ventured into entrepreneurship. The success and expanding migration of Chinese laborers into the US caused a great deal of discomfort among other workers in the country (Dunigan 84). The government responded by enacting legislation that aimed to

limit future migration and settlement of Chinese workers in the country. Notably, this legislation, commonly denoted as the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, threatened to compromise diplomatic associations between the two countries. Objections to the immigration of the Chinese into the US took many forms. Generally, these oppositions stemmed from cultural and economic tensions. However, they later translated to ethnic discrimination.

With the expansion of these tensions, Californian authorities enacted a sequence of regulations that touched on the welfare of Chinese residents in the period of 1840 -1870 years (Lee 30). These requirements ranged from distinct authorizations for Chinese workers, or dealings to averting naturalization. Nonetheless, the federal government managed to disprove much of these guidelines as they violated the Burlingame-Seward Treaty that the US government signed with China. Those who supported immigration limits succeeded in the introduction and authorization of laws to minimize immigration rates into the US in 1879 (Dunigan 86). Although the then-president prohibited the bill due to its violation of the country's agreements with China, it left an essential sign of victory for advocates of exclusion.

After around two years of negotiations for a new treaty with China, Congress eventually approved the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1882. As a part of the Act's requirements, the US suspended the migration of both competent and unqualified Chinese workhands for a decade. Also, the Act obligated the Chinese to have a credential of identification when traveling in and out of the country (Lee 33). The Act was the first in the history of the US to exert extensive limits on migration. The Chinese, especially those who went back home, responded to these humiliating actions by organizing anti-American boycotts. Although the then US president acknowledged the boycotts as a protest against the discriminating treatment of Chinese settlers in the US, he requested the Chinese administration to overpower it as the reputation of the US was

at stake. It was only until 1943 that the Act was repealed to support the drive of a wartime ally in WWII.

Great Strike of 1909

Another major turning point in the history of Asian Americans relates to the 1909 strikes of Japanese workers. It is worth noting that the Japanese constituted the highest percentage of workers on Hawaiian plantations. About seventy percent of them protested over low remunerations and poor conditions at their workplaces. The striking employees wanted to receive the same payments as their Portuguese and Puerto Rican counterparts who did the same work as them and received one dollar a day. As for the Japanese, they were paid \$18 for twenty-six days. Apart from unequal pay and poor working conditions, the Japanese were discriminated against mainly in sugar companies. These discriminations forced them to create organizations that maintained contact with a group that was based in Honolulu.

Most members of this association were hotelkeepers, newspapermen, and other workers of Japanese origin. The most popular newspaper in Honolulu covered the events that surrounded this strike with vigor and prejudice. Based on the newspaper's column, the Japanese went to strike due to the failure of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association to admit the reception of their letters. When the strike first began, the editors of the newspaper were sure that it would remain on Oahu plantation, and it would not spread to other regions. The Bulletin referred to the strikers as misguided people who were not only being lied to but also used by the selfish agitators. However, this strike continued to expand to other areas of Hawaii, which raised significant concerns regarding the issues that Japanese workers noted.

In the letters that the strikers had written to the plantation managers, they argued that they should receive pay raises since they contributed to the expansion of the prosperous industry.

They demanded a payment of \$8 monthly (Kohut et al. 45). Apart from pay raises, they wanted their workdays to be limited to ten hours. According to the protestors, working more than ten hours was considered working overtime. They also demanded to be paid overtime for working on Sundays. Although the strike was expected to end after a few days, it went on to last more than a hundred days. What is more, the striking front remained stable with more workers joining, even though they lacked a union. The strike played a critical part in the benefits that modern-day sugar workers enjoy (Lueck 426).

The 1924 Immigration Act

Congress passed the Immigration Act in 1924, an action that is primarily regarded as a statutory expression of xenophobia towards certain immigrants. In the 1920s, a huge wave of settlers from Europe moved to the US (Yuill 184). The country's policy-makers considered these huge migrations as a threat to the welfare of American citizens. In response, they enacted the Immigration Act. Although it was primarily aimed at European immigrants, it affected their Asian counterparts as well. As part of the Act's provisions, it established a permanent quota structure based on the country of origin (Lehtinen 4). In short, the Act restricted the rates of migration to the US to 2% of the overall number of immigrants from each population that resided in the country in 1890.

The specific part of this Act that applied to the Asians entailed a provision that excluded the entry of foreigners who, based on their nationality or race, were unqualified for residency. Existing laws in the US during the period between 1790 and 1870 omitted people of Asian origin from becoming naturalized citizens (Yuill 184). Consequently, the 1924 Act implied that even Asians who were previously not restricted from moving to the US would no longer be permitted. Specifically, this quota affected the Japanese since the movement of their Chinese counterparts

had already been limited. The law offended many people in Japan due to the desecration of the *Gentleman's Agreement* that the country had signed with the US (Lehtinen 13). Irrespective of protests from the Japanese and their authorities, the decree continued. Moreover, existing pressures between the two countries exacerbated further. By ignoring the protests, the US government implied that the preservation of its racial composition was more vital than maintaining positive ties with Japan.

Conclusion

Prior to the relatively good conditions that Asian Americans enjoy in the US today, they antagonized decades of exclusion and inequality throughout the history of the US. In response to what was considered a danger to the wellbeing of Americans, previous governments enacted a myriad of laws to restrict the immigration of Asians into the country. Although they served to restrict the rights of Asian Americans, laws such as the *Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1924 Immigration Act*, and the 1909 strikes acted as significant milestones to their welfare. Notably, these laws resulted in substantial declines in the Asian settlements in the US. These declines were associated with a century of exclusionary policies grounded in race. After decades of protests, the US government unlocked the gates to immigration from all parts of the world, including Asia. Ever since, Asian Americans have prospered not only in education sector but also in business and other aspects of society.

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