Racism Has Always Been Part of the Asian American Experience

If we don't understand the history of Asian exclusion, we cannot understand the racist hatred of the present.

By Mae Ngai

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IN THE LATE 19TH century, white Americans faced the prospect that Chinese and other Asians might become a significant portion of the population of the United States. In response, they passed a series of laws excluding Chinese people from immigration and citizenship.

The justification for exclusion was that the Chinese were an "unassimilable" race and therefore could never become Americans. Exclusion soon extended to all Asians and remained in U.S. law until 1952. Its rationale—that Asians pose a racial danger to American society—has endured in our politics and culture to this day.

Imagine, for a moment, that there had been no exclusion laws, and Chinese and other Asians had continued to freely immigrate to the United States. California, the West, indeed, the whole country would look radically different today. Not all of Asia's "teeming masses" would have inundated the U.S.; migration does not work that way. The poorest do not migrate, because they can't afford to, and the wealthiest don't need to. Migration sets patterns, or chains, from certain areas and not others. Still, by 1950, many millions of Asian Americans would have been building their lives in the United States, and, in the process, contributing to the country. Instead, that year there were a mere 320,000 Asian Americans, composing just two-tenths of 1 percent of the U.S. population. Since the immigration reforms of 1965, the number of Asian Americans has increased, but we are still barely 6 percent of the U.S. population. Yet too many Americans still believe that there are too many Asians in the U.S. and that we don't belong here.

For many Asian Americans, the policy of exclusion looms as large as Jim Crow does for Black people. The association is more than a metaphor. In the late 19th century, Jim Crow and Chinese exclusion were related projects of white supremacy, one in the South and one in the West. After the Civil War, the old planter class and the new industrialists in the South responded to the prospect of equality for the formerly enslaved by relegating them to second-class status, stripped of the franchise and other civil rights. The dangers that white supremacists associated with Black citizenship provided an object lesson for why Chinese people should be excluded. A reactionary political alliance of the West and the South pushed the exclusion laws through Congress.

Asiatic exclusion and Jim Crow segregation were two modes of racial management necessary for white supremacy after the Civil War, when the West and the South were being integrated into a national economy based on corporate capital and a polity made up of white male voters. These policies relied on euphemisms and legal fictions—"aliens ineligible to citizenship" and "separate but equal"—to work around the Fourteenth Amendment's promise of equal protection and due process for all. Indeed, in the late 19th century, the Supreme Court would interpret the Fourteenth Amendment to favor the rights of capital, and not those of formerly enslaved people or Asian immigrants.

Laws like these were not preordained, but resulted from a choice made between two competing visions: The nation could be built on the principle of white supremacy or on that of democracy. Frederick Douglass understood that the futures of the South and the West were entwined, and that together, they would determine the fate of the

nation as a whole. "I want a home here not only for the Negro, the mulatto, and the Latin races," he said in 1869, speaking out against Chinese exclusion, "but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours."

Americans today are slowly beginning to appreciate the nature of systemic racism against Black people. We need to expand the scope of our understanding; different historical dynamics have produced different racisms. But although distinct, their histories are connected and their legacies overlap, sometimes chaotically. And if we don't understand the history of exclusion, we cannot understand the racist hatred that continues to be directed against Asian Americans in the present.

CHINESE PEOPLE FIRST CAME to the United States in large numbers during the California Gold Rush of 1848 and '49, which crowned the continental expansion of the U.S. Under the sign of "manifest destiny"—the idea that the West was God's gift to white Protestant Americans—the United States had gone to war with Mexico and annexed its northern half, including California. Westward expansion absorbed the sectional conflict over slavery and brought the genocide of Indigenous peoples across the Great Plains and the West.

The idea of manifest destiny might seem quaint to our ears today, but its core imperative of a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation continued to define the dominant vision of the United States for a century. When Euro-American settlers arrived at the edge of the continent, they celebrated their conquest of the West and their closing of the frontier. From there, they looked out across the Pacific Ocean—the next frontier—with both excitement at the prospect of new conquests and anxiety over the new peoples that might come.

The Gold Rush is often celebrated for the individual daring, ingenuity, and male camaraderie of the 49ers, engaged in a bold experiment in democratic self-government. Less well remembered, but no less true, is that it was also violent and racist. Gold seekers and the fledgling state government of California pursued the extermination of Indigenous peoples. White, native-born Americans agitated against foreign miners, weaponizing manifest destiny for competitive gain, and driving many European, Australian, Chilean, Sonoran, and Chinese miners from the diggings.

Hostility against the Chinese took on a special cast in 1852. California Governor John Bigler, facing a tight race for reelection, made an incendiary speech before the state legislature, claiming that the Chinese, a race of heathens and slaves, were invading the

state and threatening its society of free producers. Leaflets printed by Bigler and newspaper accounts circulated copies of the speech around the state. Many miners were already anxious, because the easy gold in the rivers was being depleted and deep-pocketed capitalists were taking over the industry, replacing independent prospecting with wage labor in underground quartz mines. Bigler's bigotry found a receptive audience. White miners passed resolutions to keep Chinese people out of their districts and provided the votes Bigler needed to win a second term. He operated from the classic nativist playbook: Tap into popular grievances, offer a theory that blames an outsider group, and weaponize resentment for partisan gain.

Chinese miners in California during the 1850s (Fotosearch / Getty)

Chinese people in California were voluntary emigrants and independent prospectors, not indentured workers. Bigler claimed that "coolies … are being sent here under contract … at merely nominal wages … [and] their families have been retained as hostages for the faithful performance of the contracts." His argument that these were not bona fide contracts but were rooted in "moral turpitude" and coercion invoked two contemporary anxieties. One was the use, mainly by the British, of Indian indentured labor in the Caribbean plantation colonies after the abolition of slavery. The other was the more proximate example of slavery in the American South. These two associations—colonialism and slavery—inspired the racist theories against Chinese immigrants, and have haunted Chinese Americans ever since.

Two Chinese American merchant leaders in San Francisco, Tong K. Achick and Hab Wa, wrote a letter to Bigler, refuting his claims. They explained that the Chinese in California included laborers, tradespeople, mechanics, gentry, and teachers; "none are 'Coolies' if by that word you mean bound men or contract slaves." They added, "In the important matters we are good men; we honor our parents; we take care of our children; we are industrious and peaceable; we trade much; we are trusted for small and large sums; we pay our debts and are honest; and of course we tell the truth." Finally, Tong and Hab asserted that there was a positive relationship between migration and trade, that they were mutually supporting elements of foreign contact and exchange. "If you want to check immigration from Asia," they argued, "you will have to do it by checking Asiatic commerce."

A resurgence of racism against the Chinese engulfed San Francisco in the 1870s, including mob violence, arson, and discriminatory municipal ordinances. This hatred emerged after completion of the transcontinental railroad, which brought unforeseen consequences to the West. California's new connection to the East Coast encouraged domestic migration and the importation of cheap manufactured goods, resulting in falling wages and unemployment. Integration into the national market brought the long tail of economic recession from the East. The "coolie" trope was remarkably adaptive to new conditions. The philosopher Henry George gave it theoretical heft, using what was then referred to as the "Chinese question" to test his emerging views about labor and monopoly. He argued that, unlike European immigrants, whose wages eventually rose to the level of native-born workers, Chinese immigrants were a permanent source of cheap labor because they were unassimilable coolies. George imagined a class struggle between workers and capitalists, with the Chinese in the camp of the bosses.

Anti-coolieism also targeted Chinese women. There weren't many Chinese immigrant women in California, but some were wives of merchants and workers, or wives of fishermen who worked alongside their husbands as partners, while others were servants of wealthy Chinese. They also included sex workers who offered services to both Chinese and white men, but the anti-Chinese movement stereotyped all Chinese women as prostitutes, dubbing them "slave girls," female counterparts to male coolie laborers. These attacks portrayed them as diseased and immoral, but that rhetoric was also laced with exoticism and desire. San Francisco's most famous madam, Ah Toy, was said to be so beautiful that men paid an ounce of gold just to look at her.

The Page Act of 1875, the first Chinese-exclusion law in the U.S., barred "Mongolian prostitutes" from entering the country. The law required all women to be interrogated

upon entry to prove they were *not* a prostitute; unsurprisingly, Chinese female immigration plummeted. That satisfied the real motive behind the Page Act, the prevention of Chinese population growth through natural reproduction. The legislation left a legacy of separated families, and helped establish the enduring stereotype of "Oriental" women as dangerous and desirable.

The Page Act also barred foreign contract laborers, but it could not keep out Chinese men, because they were not indentured. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 took care of that—barring Chinese laborers from entering the United States, and all Chinese immigrants from naturalized citizenship. The exclusion laws codified the idea that the Chinese were racially unassimilable. They could never be anything but a coolie race, controlled by despotic masters, without individual personality or will, in no way independent in thought or action. The U.S. Supreme Court layered another theory onto coolieism: that Chinese exclusion was necessary for *national security*. In *Chae Chan Ping v. U.S.* in 1889, the Court wrote,

> To preserve its independence, and give security against foreign aggression and encroachment, is the highest duty of every nation … If, therefore, the government of the United States … considers the presence of foreigners of a different race in this country, who will not assimilate with us, to be dangerous to its peace and security, their exclusion is not to be stayed because at the time there are no actual hostilities with the nation of which the foreigners are subjects. The existence of war would render the necessity of the proceeding only more obvious and pressing.

Previously, federal regulation of immigration had been justified under the commerce clause of the Constitution. In upholding Chinese exclusion, the Court invoked national security to justify racist legislation. But in the 1880s, it was not the Chinese but the racism they faced that had proved dangerous to peace and security, bringing worsening violence against Chinese communities. In 1885 alone, the entire Chinese population of Tacoma, Washington, was violently expelled, and 128 Chinese coal miners from Rock Springs, Wyoming, were massacred.

The Chinese-exclusion laws were subsequently extended to people from the Philippines, India, and Japan (indeed, an entire "barred Asiatic zone" was established in 1917), lumping different national-origin groups into a single racial category, the "Asiatic."

Modern colonialism and global trade meant a greater integration of the global economy and, with it, mass migration, sparking struggles over race and immigration policy throughout the Anglophone world. As Tong and Hab, the Chinese merchants, pointed out in 1852, trade begets migration, and vice versa. Thus American policy makers constructed an "open door" to China that would swing one way, allowing

American products, missionaries, and capital to enter China while keeping Chinese people out of the United States. For all its talk about the equality of nations and the open door, the American approach was typically colonial, treating China as an object of commercial and missionary desire but Chinese people as degraded and backward, undesirable as immigrants.

The settler colonies of the British empire followed the example of the United States. Canada mimicked America's Chinese-exclusion law; Australia adopted an unapologetic "White Australia" policy in 1901. South Africa took inspiration from Jim Crow in the U.S. and from White Australia. In the early 20th century, American and British racists were publishing screeds such as "The Passing of the Great Race," "The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies," and "The Rising Tide of Color" to promote the idea that the temperate zones of the world should be reserved for the white race.

But not only white supremacists connected domestic and foreign policies. Anti-racists and anti-imperialists also found common cause and solidarities across the global color lines. The antislavery book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a best seller in 1901, when it became the first American novel to be translated into Chinese. "The book is not really about the sufferings of the black race as it is about all races under the whites," a book reviewer in Shanghai wrote. "The novel is a wake-up call to rouse us from a deep dream."

RACISMS, WHILE ORIGINATING in specific contexts, must be continually reproduced in order to remain potent, as the late Afro-British sociologist Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists have emphasized. Because the exclusion laws could not eliminate all Asians from the United States (though that was the intention of violent "driving out" campaigns), the western states erected a legal edifice to ensure their subordination and marginalization. Racist laws forbade Asians from marrying white people, attending white schools, testifying in court against white people, owning agricultural property, and holding commercial and professional licenses. Restrictive covenants barred the sale of real estate to "Negroes, Jews and Orientals." Exclusion underwrote the popular understanding that Asian Americans born in the United States were not true citizens, despite their birthright. The presumption of foreign loyalties most famously led to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II on grounds that they were an "enemy race."

Most racist laws against Asians remained in force until the late 1940s, when Black civil-rights activism defeated similar restrictions on African Americans. The Asiatic-exclusion laws themselves fell from 1943 to 1952, the result of wartime foreign-policy

imperatives. When Congress repealed the laws, however, it imposed minuscule annual quotas on Asian countries. Nevertheless, immigration opened a bit, and Asian Americans made small steps in socioeconomic and residential mobility, gaining access to professions and suburbs.

During the Cold War, an ideological space emerged in which Asian Americans could declare opposition to communism in East Asia as a way to assert their loyalty to the United States, as the historian Ellen Wu writes in her book *The Color of Success*. They also cannily promoted stereotyped cultural qualities—that Asian Americans are quiet, good workers, good students, and respectful of their parents—to advocate for their social inclusion. Journalists and sociologists weaponized these ideas to discipline Black and Latino people, and some Asian Americans believed they were better, too. Through these complex dynamics, Wu argues, Asian Americans' place on the racial landscape went from being "definitively not white" to "definitively not Black."

But repeal of the exclusion laws, incremental socioeconomic mobility, and even the establishment of equal quotas in the 1965 immigration law were insufficient to eradicate racism against Asian Americans. That is, in part, because of the weight of history. But it's also because racism found ample grounds for reproduction in the conduct of American colonialism and wars in the Asia-Pacific region, from the Opium Wars and gunboat diplomacy in the 19th century straight through the conflicts of the 20th century.

Although all wars entail the dehumanization of the enemy, the dehumanization of Asians is distinctive in its racial idiom and its persistence across time. It centers around the ideas that, for Asians, "life is cheap" and that, as uncivilized peoples, they do not engage in "civilized" warfare and therefore must be fought with like means. During the Philippine-American War, which ran from 1899 to 1902, the United States invented waterboarding to torture Filipino guerrilla fighters. The U.S. Army also burned villages and rounded up civilians into strategic hamlets, a practice it would later use in Vietnam. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and napalm and Agent Orange on Vietnam. In truth, it was the U.S. military that considered Asian life cheap and engaged in barbaric warfare against Asian people.

The prostitution of Asian women for American servicemen is an enduring feature of the U.S. military experience in Asia. Sex markets have ringed U.S. Army and Navy bases, whether during wartime or Cold War occupation, in Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa, and Guam. The long history of military prostitution generated racist and misogynist stereotypes, in which Asian women were portrayed as exotic,

subservient, and always available. As the Korean American author Marie Myong-Ok Lee writes, the "cultural attitudes and stereotypes about Asian women don't end when a soldier returns home. They become incorporated into American culture … Just ask yourself, are these phrases familiar? 'Me so horny.' 'Me love you long time.'"

Finally, to the hot and cold wars we must add the trade wars. In the 1980s, the introduction of Japanese electronics and automobiles into the U.S. market sparked a racially tinged protectionist movement. In the early 21st century, Americans' anxiety about China's rise as a global economic power has fueled a new round of "Yellow Peril" racism. The figure of the coolie has returned, embodied in factory assembly workers in China's special economic zones and Chinese international and Chinese American university students in the United States. They are imagined to toil under slave-like conditions (ruled by the Communist Party or by tiger moms), their extreme labor posing unfair competition against white American workers and students. The stereotype of the high-achieving model minority, aside from obscuring major differences in socioeconomic status among different Asian groups, is a pathology, not a compliment.

HALL, THE SOCIOLOGIST, famously wrote that we ought to understand "not racism in general but racisms." According to Hall, racism might be everywhere a "deeply anti-human and anti-social practice," but it is not "everywhere *the same*." Specific histories, contexts, and environments produce particular racisms, he said. Hall understood, too, that there's no such thing as "race" in a biological sense. Rather, racism is a way of thinking about social groups according to differences that are presumed to be natural and immutable.

Racism is more than a series of stereotypes. It is ideological—a way of looking at the world that justifies and explains material structures of inequality and frames, if not determines, the life chances of racialized groups. In the United States, there's much to unpack to understand the racisms that are shot through our history and our present, and how each strand of experience is unique as well as related to that of others. In the American context, racisms uphold the logics and practices of white supremacy.

The Indigenous critic Jodi Byrd offers a useful approach that distinguishes between Native peoples, European settlers, and later "arrivants," the latter a diverse category including enslaved people and immigrant workers. Byrd counsels us to recognize distinct racial formations, to acknowledge their respective historical weights and legacies, while resisting the impulse to create hierarchies or analogies of oppression.

In the aftermath of the recent murder of eight people in Atlanta, including six Korean and Chinese women—Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng—which took place on top of a year of pandemic-related harassment and assaults against Asian Americans, I've been thinking about this country's deep ignorance of Asian American communities. Why does it seem so difficult for many Americans to understand that racism is part of our experience, past and present? Some suggest that we remain invisible to Americans, perhaps because we're perceived as quiet. But in fact, we've been speaking up and speaking out for a long time—it's just that few people have been paying attention.

Americans are still struggling over competing ideas of what this nation should be. Sadly, that debate still includes whether Asians belong, or whether racism against them even exists. Although the white-supremacist vision of manifest destiny today animates Trumpism, we still have another choice. Frederick Douglass's democratic vision offers us a path toward a more inclusive future, should we decide to stand in solidarity against all racisms.

https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/we-are-constantly-reproducing-anti-asian-racism/618647/