

THE FORMATION OF A COMMUNITY: THE CHINESE AND JAPANESE CALIFORNIA EXPERIENCE

Gap Kim

Writer's comment: The theme for our class, Twentieth-Century California History (History 189C), was the "California Dream." It was a fascinating topic which challenged me to see the state of California with new eyes. When I got the term paper assignment which asked me to compare two groups or individuals that had sought out the California dream, I knew right away what I wanted to do: tell the story of the Chinese and Japanese immigrants. More specifically, I wanted to tell their story in terms of their communities. After all, what the Chinese and Japanese immigrants faced in California - racism, discrimination, and oppression - they faced together, with their communities. I want to thank Professor Pak, whose teachings have become invaluable to my understanding of community, and Professor Olmsted, who not only let me pursue a topic which was a little off the given assignment but, more importantly, opened my eyes to see something I could not see before.

— *Gap Kim*

Instructor's comment: The students in Twentieth-Century California History had to write a term paper comparing two groups of immigrants or two individuals who came to California seeking the "California Dream." As the instructor, I provided some suggestions but gave students the option of coming up with their own ideas. A few brave souls, including Gap, chose to go beyond my suggestions. Gap was unusually ambitious and self-directed. He chose to compare the experiences of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, and he did so in intelligent and thought-provoking ways.

— *Gary Olmsted, History Department*

IN THE 1850s, CHINESE IMMIGRANTS BEGAN ENTERING CALIFORNIA in search of gold and the California dream. They had heard that California was the new frontier, a frontier that would provide them with the opportunity for economic riches. Young and ambitious, many of these Chinese immigrants quickly married in their homeland and set out for the gold rush, promising to return (with wealth). Likewise, in the 1880s, when the state of California was undergoing rapid economic transformation, Japanese immigrants - just as young and ambitious as their Chinese counterparts - set out for America where they had heard the streets were “paved with gold.” But little did these Chinese and Japanese immigrants know that what they would discover in California would not be gold and riches, nor wealth and opportunity, but a hostile land that would accept them as half-humans and treat them as slaves. In the end, faced with systematic oppression, societal discrimination, racist laws, and outright violence, these immigrants would be forced to inhabit various ethnic enclaves and communities to protect themselves from the dominant culture that would eventually strip them of their identity, sexuality, and family. In essence, they would be stripped of all the building blocks of a true community.

Immigration

In 1852, attracted by the discovery of gold, more than 20,000 Chinese immigrants passed through the San Francisco Customs House to the gold fields in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Between 1867 and 1870, partly in response to recruitment efforts by the Central Pacific Railroad Company, which was building the western section of the first transcontinental railroad, some additional 10,000 poured into California (Chan 1991). The added presence of so many immigrant workers among the Chinese influenced what other Chinese did for a living. Wherever groups of workers congregated, Chinese merchants opened stores to provision them and to serve their social and recreational needs. Often, these store owners provided rice, noodles, and vegetables not available in Euro-American stores and supplemented the workers’ diet with vegetables grown by local Chinese truck gardeners and meat from pigs, ducks, and chickens raised by Chinese farmers (Chan 1991). While such an association between early store owners and the Chinese laborers can hardly be called a community, their relationship filled a vital social and economic niche that was often lacking for most early non-white immigrants.

Japanese immigration into California followed quite a different pattern. Needing cheap labor in order to maximize their profits, Hawaiian sugar plantation owners sent agents abroad to recruit workers. Consequently, some 39,000 Japanese went to work in sugar plantations on three-year contracts only to later discover the strains and hazards of working in what historians of Hawaii have labeled “industrial plantations” - an efficient, large-scale system that enabled the yield per acre to increase from just under 6,600 pounds in 1895 to almost 8,700 pounds in 1900 (Cole 1973). But in 1900, the Organic Law made Hawaii a formal U.S. territory, ending the entry of contract laborers while declaring all contracts null and void in Hawaii. As a result, labor recruiters from the mainland descended on Hawaii to lure the Japanese workers away with the prospect of higher wages (Chan 1991). Upon reaching the mainland, the Japanese immigrants scattered across California and congregated in farming areas such as the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento Valley, and Livingston. Because California’s climate allowed the Japanese farmers to harvest a wide array of crops throughout the year, they were eventually able to purchase their own farms and climb the so-called agricultural ladder. This in turn would later provide the social and economic conditions for wives, and, in due course, families.

Discrimination

Given the shortage of Euro-American workers in California during the 1850s and 1860s, the Chinese

worked in a wide range of occupations. But as more and more Euro-Americans began settling in California, competition for employment became fierce and racist sentiments began to rise. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed to curb further immigration, and other discriminatory legislation, taxes, and boycotts were instituted (Nee 1974). Chinese workers were barred from unions and consequently unionized jobs, which confined them, and those who came after them, to low-status work. By the time the first transcontinental railroad was built, the same technological wonder which transformed the American West would not only cost the lives of many Chinese railroad workers but leave the survivors unemployed and without a means of returning home. In due time, the railroad would become one of the greatest ironies in the history of the pursuit of the California dream.

The building of the western half of the first transcontinental railroad employed more than 10,000 Chinese workers at its peak, many of whom were former miners (Chan 1991). Despite the prejudiced views regarding their physical strength, the Chinese, literally, became the backbone of the company's construction crews, providing the bulk of the labor not only for unskilled tasks but for highly demanding and dangerous ones as well. Thousands of Chinese worked underground in snow tunnels around the clock through the winter of 1866, and a good many men lost their lives during the winter of 1867, while others met their doom placing dynamite alongside the mountains (Chan 1991). The bodies of those buried by avalanches would not even be dug out until the following spring. But despite their heroic feats, the Chinese were not invited to (nor recognized at) the jubilant ceremonies that marked the completion of America's first transcontinental railroad, one of the most remarkable engineering feats of its time. Instead, the completion of the railroad led to the instantaneous unemployment of 10,000 Chinese workers, who were left to straggle on foot back to California where, rather than a hero's welcome, they were received by the rising flames of anti-Chinese sentiments.

In contrast to the Chinese laborers, Japanese farm workers were able, at least initially, to better their livelihood and discover opportunity in abundant California. Observing and learning from the backlash against the Chinese, the Japanese tried hard to give a more favorable impression than their fellow Chinese immigrants by assimilating to the dominant culture. They wore western clothes, cut their hair to western styles (which, for religious reasons, the Chinese men could not do), ate western food, and even joined Christian churches (Matsui 1919). When their picture brides arrived, wearing kimonos and wooden clogs, their husbands quickly whisked their brides off to dressmakers and shoemakers to outfit them with Victorian clothing and shoes (Chan 1991). Accordingly, many of the Japanese farmers were able to integrate into various white communities, scattering themselves and reaping the benefits of California soil. But despite the fervent efforts to throw away their old ways and to quickly adapt to their new culture, the Japanese farm workers soon discovered that California would have little mercy.

Most of the Japanese farm workers began their journey in California as farm laborers trying to save up enough money to lease land as tenant farmers; they hoped to become land-owners. But in 1913, at a time when more than 6,000 Japanese had become tenant farmers, California passed its first land law as a backlash against the rising number of successful Japanese immigrants (Lukes 1985). Under the law, Japanese farm workers were no longer able to buy agricultural land or lease it for more than three years. Fortunately, because of World War I, the Alien Land Act of 1913 had little effect, as district attorneys did not try to enforce it strenuously, given the nation's need for maximum food production. In 1917, the Japanese of California produced almost 90 percent of the state's output of celery, asparagus, onions, tomatoes, berries, and cantaloupes; more than 70 percent of the floricultural products; 50 percent of the seeds; 45 percent of the sugar beets; 40 percent of the leafy vegetables; and 35 percent of the grapes (Chan 1991). Despite their significant contributions during this period in American history, their experience was similar to that of the Chinese railroad workers. Once the war was over, California's voters would pass an initiative on the 1920 ballot that kept Japanese immigrants from leasing farm land altogether (Cole 1973).

Despite their efforts to assimilate and abide by the discriminatory legal and social system, and despite their hard work and dedication, in the end the Japanese farm workers met with the same disillusionment as had the Chinese: the California dream had become a nightmare of social and political discrimination and economic abuse.

Congregation

Due to discriminatory legislation and outright racist public sentiments, Chinese immigrants, separated from the dominant society, began congregating in small and large ethnic enclaves. To the eyes of white onlookers, such congregation looked natural, as thousands of Chinese workers gathered in San Francisco, the metropolis of the Pacific Coast, where most were employed. But in reality, such Chinese workers lived in filthy quarters and worked in crowded, poorly lit and ventilated sweatshops and factories, where they made shoes, boots, slippers, overalls, shirts, underwear, cigars, brooms, and many other items (Chan 1991). Likewise, other Chinese workers, many of whom had hammered through the mountains to make way for the railroad, would become lifetime laundrymen, not because washing clothes was a traditional male occupation in China, but because it was the type of work considered too low for white Americans. By 1870, almost 3,000 Chinese in California were washing and ironing clothes for a living (Nee 1974). By coming together in ghettoized areas like Chinatown, and occupying a status in an economic hierarchy suitable for a member of an “inferior race,” Chinese immigrants who had once come in search of riches and gold had settled for survival.

Though for different reasons, the Japanese farm workers did not fare much better than their Chinese counterparts. With the Alien Land acts preventing the Japanese immigrants from becoming anything more than tenant farmers, many white farmer owners who leased their land lived closer to towns and cities where they found more “desirable” neighbors (Matsui 1919). As a result, many farming communities such as Livingston, Agnew, and Alviston, left with only Japanese tenant farmers, formed unnatural ethnic enclaves which, from the vantage point of white society, became undesirable communities (Matsui 1919). Nevertheless, such communities, however unnatural, were not without utility. As early as 1877, outbreaks of anti-immigrant violence became common as disgruntled white farm workers marched onto towns like Chico in the Sacramento Valley, burning down the homes and businesses of Asian immigrants (Chan 1991). Likewise, many Japanese farm workers became victims of eviction, violence, and murder all across the state of California. It was only by forming distinct communities that they were able to help and protect each other from a hostile society which preyed upon them as scapegoats.

Community

Displaced by society through both systematic and social oppression, the community formation of both the Chinese and Japanese immigrants in various enclaves throughout California can hardly be seen as the proper working of a community. Even the very notion of a “bachelor society” of San Francisco Chinatown proclaims the delinquency of a forged community. In fact, contrary to the myth of San Francisco’s Chinatown and its bachelor society, its members were not bachelors at all. The lack of demand for women from plant owners combined with the anti-Chinese immigration laws had prevented many wives from accompanying their husbands (Nee 1974). As a result, the husbands were forced to send the money they earned in order to support their families back home and visit whenever they could afford to do so (which wasn’t very often). Nevertheless, the outside world continued to see Chinatown as a bachelor society - enclave - filled with prostitutes, gambling, and other immoral activities. In fact, based on the idea that all Chinese women were prostitutes, in 1875 a federal law was passed known as the Page Law, which forbade the immigration of almost all Chinese women, thus further perpetuating the notion of the “bachelor society” (Nee 1974). As a result, while in most immigrant groups working-age men tended to precede

women, children, or older people to the new land, in the case of the Chinese, legal exclusions were imposed just at the point when men might have sent for their wives and children; these exclusions truncated the natural development of the community.

As with the history of the immigration of Chinese women, the first Japanese women to arrive were prostitutes, but in time they were vastly outnumbered by wives. The history of the Chinese and Japanese community formation in California differed not because of any cultural differences between the two groups, but because, unlike Chinese exclusion, which was imposed rather suddenly, the U.S. government restricted Japanese immigration in stages, thus allowing more time for Japanese men to bring in their women. Still, the creation of a family was awkward and out of the ordinary. Unable to return home, many Japanese men had to resort to a phenomenon known as picture-brides; these women would go through wedding ceremonies with the grooms absent, enter their names into their spouses' family registers, apply for passports, and then sail for America to join their husbands whom they had never met (Lukes 1985). Despite this abnormal process, Japanese wives became important assets to Japanese farm workers, the wives providing unpaid family labor, thus helping them to be competitive. But later, even the immigration of picture brides would come to be challenged by anti-Japanese advocates who contended that the entrance of Japanese women violated the Gentlemen's Agreement, an agreement in which the Japanese government promised the United States that it would stop issuing passports to laborers desiring to emigrate to America.

Conclusion

By coming to California in search of the California dream, both the Chinese and Japanese immigrants gave up far more than they gained. The Chinese lost their lives at the hands of the railroad and in the hazardous sweatshops and factories of San Francisco. The Japanese immigrants relinquished their identity, their heritage, and their chance of owning land. But more importantly, both groups of immigrants had to give up their chance to have a proper family and community, living out the rest of their days as laundrymen, dishwashers, restaurant owners, tenant farmers, and factory workers. Eventually, some Chinese immigrants married what few prostitutes remained in the heart of Chinatown, while Japanese farm workers sent over for picture-brides. But this land, which had once promised them gold and riches, opportunity and wealth, would continue to take from them. California would eventually attempt to move San Francisco's Chinatown outside the city limits, curb further immigration, place the children in segregated schools, and ultimately, remove everything from Japanese Americans all together with their incarceration during World War II, showing how far removed from the Californian dream of wealth and well-being Asian immigrants had become.

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