



The Making of Asian America: A History

By Erika Lee

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The definitive history of Asian Americans by one of the nation's preeminent scholars on the subject.

In the past fifty years, Asian Americans have helped change the face of America and are now the fastest growing group in the United States. But as award-winning historian Erika Lee reminds us, Asian Americans also have deep roots in the country. *The Making of Asian America* tells the little-known history of Asian Americans and their role in American life, from the arrival of the first Asians in the Americas to the present-day.

An epic history of global journeys and new beginnings, this book shows how generations of Asian immigrants and their American-born descendants have made and remade Asian American life in the United States: sailors who came on the first trans-Pacific ships in the 1500s; indentured “coolies” who worked alongside African slaves in the Caribbean; and Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and South Asian immigrants who were recruited to work in the United States only to face massive racial discrimination, Asian exclusion laws, and for Japanese Americans, incarceration during World War II. Over the past fifty years, a new Asian America has emerged out of community activism and the arrival of new immigrants and refugees. No longer a “despised minority,” Asian Americans are now held up as America’s “model minorities” in ways that reveal the complicated role that race still plays in the United States.

Published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the United States’ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that has remade our “nation of immigrants,” this is a new and definitive history of Asian Americans. But more than that, it is a new way of understanding America itself, its complicated histories of race and immigration, and its place in the world today.

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Editorial Review

Review

****Winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature****

****A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2015****

"Sweeping . . . Lee's comprehensive history traces the experiences of myriad Asian-American communities, from Chinese laborers in 1850s California to Hmong refugees in 1980s Minnesota. . . . *The Making of Asian America* shares strong similarities with other broad inclusive Asian-American histories, most obviously Ronald Takaki's *Strangers From a Different Shore*, first published in 1989. Lee's book doesn't radically depart from its predecessors so much as provide a useful and important upgrade by broadening the scope and, at times, deepening the investigations. . . . Fascinating. . . . I suspect Erika Lee will soon join [the canon of key Asian-American histories]." (Oliver Wang *The New York Times Book Review*)

"In this fascinating retelling of the American creation story, Lee uses incisive scholarship, a wide historic lens and rich detail to fill in the long missing Asian-American pieces. Starting with ancient Greece and the Age of Exploration, from enslavement to modern day challenges, Lee tracks the epic Asian-American journey to North and South Americas, East Indies to West Indies, and in doing so, she breaks new ground and inverts the master narrative." (Helen Zia, author of *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*)

"*The Making of Asian America* is a path-breaking approach to Asian American history. Professor Lee will challenge and surprise most of her readers. . . . She is clearly now a distinct and important voice in a debate of growing complexity." (Roger Daniels, author of *Coming to America* and Charles Phelps Taft Professor Emeritus of History, University of Cincinnati)

"A stunning achievement, *The Making of Asian America* establishes the centrality of Asians to American history, and poses alternatives to US national and immigration histories. Asians, this remarkable text reveals, transformed the face of America, and they locate the US firmly within a hemispheric and global order." (Gary Y. Okihiro, Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University)

"Building on the best and newest scholarship, Erika Lee has written a sweeping yet personal and critical history of Asian Americans across centuries, continents, and diverse cultures without losing sight of the global, racial, and historical contexts of Asian migration, exclusion, and resettlement. A definitive and ideal text for college classes and the general public, *The Making of Asian America* is truly an enjoyable, informative, and insightful read." (Judy Yung, Professor Emerita of American Studies, UC Santa Cruz, and author of *Unbound Feet*)

"A fascinating narrative. . . . Deftly weaving together a masterful synthesis of the existing literature with new information culled from hitherto untapped archival sources and with analytical insights on the global currents that have shaped the last five centuries, Erika Lee has created a richly textured tapestry enlivened by vivid stories of hundreds of individuals and groups who played significant, though often unsung, roles in the making of Asian America." (Sucheng Chan, Professor Emerita of Asian American Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara)

"Monumental. . . . Lee handles her scholarly materials with grace, never overwhelming the reader with too

many facts or incidents. She tells an American story familiar to anyone who has read Walt Whitman, seeking to capture America in all its diversity and difference, while at the same time pleading for America to realize its democratic potential. . . . Powerful Asian American stories . . . are inspiring, and Lee herself does them justice in a book that is long overdue." (*LA Times*)

"A well-written, panoramic view of Asian America from the colonial era to the present that sheds light on how Asian immigrants have sought to make their place in American society and, at the same time, continually changed it." (Nancy Foner, coauthor of *Strangers No More* and Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY)

"A sweeping study of the fastest growing group in the United States that underscores the shameful racist regard white Americans have long held for Asian immigrants. A historian of immigration whose ancestors hailed from China, Lee (History/Univ. of Minnesota) delineates the specific history of Asians in America—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hmong, and others—while also lending a general sense of what immigrants have endured: discrimination in work, wages, education, and housing, and even incarceration during World War II. . . . A powerful, timely story told with method and dignity." (*Kirkus (starred review)*)

"Accessibly written for a wide readership, *The Making of Asian America* opens important, new perspectives on the relationship of the U.S. and the world." (Donna Gabaccia, Professor of History, University of Toronto Scarborough)

"Pokes holes in the 'model minority' myth by pointing out that Asians in the United States are overrepresented at both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, and that before World War II, the group was frequently portrayed as being incompatible with American society. An impressive work that details how this diverse population has both swayed and been affected by the United States. Highly recommended for readers interested in this important topic." (*Library Journal (starred review)*)

"Erika Lee's new narrative of Asian American history deserves consideration to complement, if not supplant, celebrated earlier syntheses. Incorporating compelling revisionist approaches, Lee peels back several centuries of time to locate the origins of Chinese in America to the founding of the Spanish empire in America in the sixteenth century. . . . She further insists on the mainstreaming of Asian American history in the United States." (Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Professor of History and American Studies, Brown University)

"In her sweeping, powerful new book, Lee considers the rich, complicated, and sometimes invisible histories of Asians in the United States." (*Huffington Post*)

"Comprehensive, informative, and engaging. . . . *The Making of Asian America* is full of fascinating stories about immigrants who left a mark on their adopted country." (*The Oregonian*)

"Epic and eye-opening." (*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*)

"An ambitious, sweeping, and insightful survey." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"*The Making of Asian America* chronicles the past and connects it to the present. . . . an important document of history." (*Minneapolis Post*)

"Racism, as Lee shows, was the unifying factor in the Asian-American experience, bringing together twenty-three distinct immigrant groups, from very different parts of the world. . . . In the eyes of some, Asians in America are, Lee writes, 'perpetual foreigners at worst, or probationary Americans at best.' If Asians

sometimes remain silent in the face of racism, and if some seem to work unusually hard in the face of this difficult history, it is not because they want to be part of a 'model minority,' but because they have often had no other choice." (*The New Yorker*)

“Accessible yet sweeping. . . . Synthesizing many of the exciting discoveries and arguments that have emerged in the field of Asian American history in the past few decades, *The Making of Asian America* is a must-read for anyone curious about the U.S. and its history.” (*Book Riot*)

About the Author

Erika Lee is the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants who entered the United States through both Angel Island and Ellis Island. She grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and received her PhD from the University of California at Berkeley. She teaches history at the University of Minnesota, where she is also the Rudolph J. Vecoli Chair in Immigration History and Director of the Immigration History Research Center. She is the author of *The Making of Asian America*, *Angel Island* (with Judy Yung), and *At America's Gates*.

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The Making of Asian America

Introduction

The 19.5 million Asian Americans in the United States today make up almost 6 percent of the total U.S. population. They increased in number by 46 percent from 2000 to 2010 and are now the fastest-growing group in the country. They are settling in places that have traditionally welcomed immigrants like New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, as well as in other cities where such large-scale immigration is new: Atlanta, Las Vegas, Houston, Phoenix, and Minneapolis-St. Paul.¹ Asian Americans are changing the face of America. But most people know little about their history and the impact that they have had on American life.

The Making of Asian America tells this story.

Over the centuries, millions of people from Asia have left their homes to start new lives in the United States. They have come in search of work, economic opportunity, freedom from persecution, and new beginnings that have symbolized the “American Dream” for so many newcomers. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Asian immigrants joined millions of others from around the world to turn the United States into a “nation of immigrants.” In the past fifty years, more have come as a result of new immigration policies, as refugees following the wars in Southeast Asia, and as part of increasing globalization.

The making and remaking of Asian America is the story of these global journeys and histories. This book digs deep into the historical record with sources like the first world atlas (printed in 1570), newspaper accounts, and long-forgotten immigrant autobiographies. It also explores contemporary American life through the latest census statistics, policy reports, and social media campaigns. There is an extraordinary range of Asian American lives and experiences.

Consider, for example, Afong Moy, a nineteen-year-old “beautiful Chinese lady” who arrived in New York in 1834 aboard a ship full of snuffboxes, walking canes, and fans imported to satisfy Americans’ taste for imported Chinese goods. She was the first-recorded Chinese woman to arrive in the United States. A decade or so later, Jacinto Quintin de la Cruz and other Filipinos founded a fishing village in Baratavia Bay south of New Orleans. They named it Manila Village to remind them of the home they left behind. While South

Asian and Chinese indentured laborers were being brought to the Caribbean, Peru, and Cuba, my great-great-grandfather joined another stream of Chinese heading across the Pacific to seek their fortunes in the California Gold Rush. In 1919, Shizu Hayakawa left her home in Japan as a “picture bride” to marry a man she had never met. Around the same time, Whang Sa Sun and his wife, Chang Tai Sun, fled from Japanese rule in their native Korea and arrived as refugees. Vaishno Bagai, an Indian nationalist, also sought freedom in the United States and entered the country through Angel Island with his wife, Kala, and their three children. By the 1920s, Francisco Carino had learned from his teachers in the Philippines that America was full of riches and glory, so he too boarded a ship bound for the United States.

Small numbers of family members, students, and professionals began to come after World War II and during the Cold War. They have been joined by even more immigrants and refugees since 1965. Chiyoko Toguchi Swartz married an American soldier and left her home in Okinawa in 1966. That same year, Kang Ok Jim was adopted from Korea and brought to Palo Alto where she grew up as Deann Borshay. Fear of persecution forced Le Tan Si and his family to flee from Vietnam in 1979 while Yeng Xiong joined an exodus of Hmong from Laos after the communists took control of the country. Korean engineer Han Chol Hong arrived in 1983 and after failing to find work, he opened a store in South Central Los Angeles. Vicki Diaz, originally from the Philippines, works as a housekeeper in LA to support her family back home. Rashni Bhatnagar, from India, recently joined her husband, who is an IT worker here on a temporary visa, and Chinese students are now the largest group of international students in the United States.

These Asian American journeys may not be well known, but they have been central to the making of Asian America and of America itself.

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Broadly speaking, Asian Americans are people who can trace their roots to countries throughout East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.² Obscured by the broad definition of “Asian” and “Asian American” is a staggering diversity of peoples that represent twenty-four distinct groups. Chinese and Japanese were the largest Asian American communities in the United States before World War II, but South Asians, Koreans, and Filipinos also came in significant numbers. New immigration since 1965 has brought an even greater diversity of Asians to the United States, including new immigrants from China, Korea, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.³

Asian Americans have differed not only in their country of origin, but also in their immigration and generational status, class position, religion, and gender. These differences have resulted in distinct experiences and histories. It is fair to ask whether there is even one “Asian America,” or one “Asian American history.” Asian Americans with long roots in this country may wonder what they have in common with today’s recent arrivals. Similarly, new Asian immigrants and their descendants may not think that the histories of earlier Asian Americans are relevant to their own experiences. But they should. There is great diversity within Asian America and across Asian American history, but there are also significant similarities and connections. The experiences of previous generations shaped the world that Asian Americans live in today. Likewise, new immigration has helped us see the past in fresh ways. Both the diversity and the shared experiences of Asian Americans reveal the complex story of the making and remaking of Asian America. There is not one single story, but many.

• • •

Asian American history begins long before the United States was even a country and has its roots in world history. Asia and the Americas first became connected through European colonization and global trade after

Christopher Columbus embarked on his search for Asia and “discovered” America. Even though Columbus missed his mark, the idea of Asia remained central to the invention of America, and European colonization on both sides of the Pacific Ocean led to the first migrations of Asians to the Americas.⁴

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Spanish trading ships known as “Manila galleons” brought Asian sailors, slaves, and servants to present-day Mexico as part of the creation of Spain’s Pacific Empire. Thereafter, Asian immigration followed the ebbs and flows of global history. The rise of the British Empire led to the movement of South Asian indentured laborers from British-controlled India to British colonies in the Caribbean while Chinese coolies were sent to Cuba after the end of the African slave trade. And as the United States became a world power and expanded its reach into Asia beginning in the late eighteenth century, Asians have steadily come to our shores. Seen through the lens of world history, Asian American journeys are part of longer and larger patterns that help us understand the making of America in a global context.

• • •

The history of Asian Americans is also immigration history. The most common view of immigration to America is still framed around the “push and pull” idea: conditions in one country—like war, natural disaster, civil unrest, and economic instability—push desperate peoples out while the United States pulls them in with better-paying jobs, land, and freedom from persecution. Once uprooted, these immigrants successfully transplant themselves into the United States where they achieve American dreams of success.⁵

But this is just part of the story. We know that people and families move for complex reasons. Asian immigration has been particularly tied to the U.S. presence in Asia. Americans first crossed the Pacific Ocean in search of trade, investment, and empire. Nineteenth-century trading vessels gave way to massive transpacific steamships that soon brought both Asian goods and laborers to the United States. American labor recruiters and transportation companies encouraged and facilitated Asian immigration into the early twentieth century. Immigration to the United States became an economic lifeline for many families on both sides of the Pacific Ocean even after immigration laws greatly restricted and even excluded Asian immigrants from the country.

U.S. colonial and military occupations and engagements in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia also brought Asians to the United States as colonial subjects, military brides, adoptees, and refugees. And U.S.-Asian international relations, including U.S. relationships with its allies, neighbors, and enemies, continue to affect both Asian immigration patterns and the treatment of Asian Americans in the United States.⁶

Asian immigration is about moving from Asia to the United States and making new homes in America. But it is also about moving temporarily or moving multiple times across the Pacific Ocean and throughout the Americas in search of education, employment, family, and freedom from persecution. The multifaceted journeys that have brought Asians to the United States reveal new ways of understanding both Asian American life and American immigration history in general.⁷

Once here, Asian immigrants have “become American” by becoming U.S. citizens when they could and by participating in American life.⁸ There are some stunning individual success stories that show how Asian Americans have contributed to American society and the American economy. Most recently, the “rise of Asian Americans” as the “highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group” in the United States has been widely covered in mainstream media.⁹ Pro basketball player Jeremy Lin, Yale law professor Amy Chua, aka the “Tiger Mom,” and Bobby Jindal, Republican governor of Louisiana, are all cited as

examples of the proven success of Asian Americans. But Asian Americans have often encountered an America that has excluded them from full participation in American life based on their race. The history of Asian Americans is thus also a history of how race works in the United States.

Broadly speaking, the concept of race has been used to divide humanity into distinct groups. Racism exists when race is used to treat people unequally and to confer different rights and freedoms upon some groups while denying them to others. In the United States, the concept of race was used to justify the enslavement of Africans and the dispossession of indigenous peoples because these groups were believed to be naturally inferior to whites. After the United States became an independent nation, the definition of American became tied to white settlers, and the privileges of American citizenship were extended to whites only as early as 1790. As successive groups of European immigrants came to the United States, they were mostly deemed “white on arrival” and were granted the benefits of citizenship and belonging that were denied to Asian immigrants, who were classified as “aliens ineligible for citizenship” on racial grounds.¹⁰

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these racial beliefs were accepted and supported by pseudoscientific research that allegedly proved the biological basis of human difference and ability. Only after Nazi Germany’s genocidal regime was condemned at the end of World War II did scientific racism lose its credibility. In the United States, new attitudes about race paved the way for new laws, and discrimination based on race was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. More than fifty years later, however, discrimination and inequality still exist, and we have recently seen the rise of new kinds of racism that use racial difference in complicated ways. There’s color-blind racism, which claims that since race no longer matters, racial discrimination and race-based inequality are now things of the past. There’s also cultural racism, in which the term “culture” has come to stand in for “race” to describe how certain cultures possess inherent beliefs, mores, and traditions that determine a group’s abilities.¹¹ Moreover, racial micro-aggressions, or everyday indignities and racial slights that differentiate and denigrate peoples of color, have become increasingly common.¹² Simply put, race still matters in the United States.

There are two main ways in which this history of race has played out for Asian Americans. The first is the simultaneous lumping together of diverse Asians into one homogenous group and the persistent treatment of Asian Americans as foreigners tied to Asia rather than as Americans loyal to the United States. Long before there were sizable communities of Asians in the Americas, Western ideas about Asia, or the “Orient,” circulated widely and laid the foundation for how Asia and Asians would be viewed and treated in the West. Asia was consistently viewed as the West’s Other, an array of exotic lands and peoples that both fascinated and terrified Europeans. Opinions about the vast differences between East and West, what theorist Edward Said called “Orientalism,” justified European conquest and domination of Asia and treated the diverse peoples and empires of Asia as one, homogenous land and culture.¹³

Americans formed their own type of Orientalism. By the time that large-scale Asian immigration to the United States began in the mid-nineteenth century, diverse Asian peoples were considered one monolithic group, regardless of national origin, ethnicity, class, and religion and were fixed in the American mind as backward, submissive, and inferior. They were seen as the opposite of the forward-thinking expansionist American: always Asian and never American.¹⁴ Thus, when Chinese immigrants—the first group to come in large numbers to the United States from Asia—were labeled as foreigners who were racially inferior to whites and incapable of assimilation, all succeeding Asian immigrants were similarly classified with only slight variations. From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Asian immigrants were considered a single “despised minority.” They faced discrimination in every part of their lives. Asian Americans fought for equal rights in the workplace, in the courts, and on the streets, but they remained largely excluded, segregated, and disfranchised until during and after World War II.

Class and education sometimes made a difference. In the early twentieth century, immigration laws granted privileges to merchants, students, and professionals that were denied to working-class immigrants. International relations and U.S. imperialism also differentiated some Asians from others. But more often than not, laws and practices that treated Asians the same were obstacles to all.

Gender discrimination added another layer of complexity for Asian immigrant women, for both their right to enter the United States and to stay in the country were linked to their husband's or father's immigrant status. U.S. citizenship had a gendered dimension as well. Barred from becoming naturalized citizens, Asian Americans could only gain U.S. citizenship through birth in the country. But for some years, native-born Asian American women lost their U.S. citizenship if they married Asian immigrant men, a consequence that did not apply to Asian American men.

How Asian Americans have been defined in relation to the enduring racial divide between African Americans and whites in the United States is the second way in which race has affected Asian American life. Until after World War II, Asians were treated as peoples unfit for U.S. citizenship and as outsiders in American society. They were, as historian Ellen Wu has explained, "definitely not white" and were denied equal rights alongside African Americans and Native Americans.¹⁵ For Asian Americans, this took multiple forms. They were barred from becoming naturalized citizens, prohibited from owning or leasing land and marrying whites in some states, and harassed, driven out, and segregated from the rest of America.

Most importantly though, Asian immigrants were simply denied entry to the country. In response to fears that Asians were threats to the economic, social, and political well-being of the country, new laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were passed to prevent most Chinese immigrants from entering the United States. America became a "gatekeeping nation," and new policies to inspect, interrogate, detain, identify, and deport immigrants followed. So did undocumented immigration. By the 1930s, all other Asian immigrants were largely excluded from the country as well. These policies almost destroyed Asian America before World War II.¹⁶

Moreover, the U.S.'s Asian exclusion laws had a global impact. Anti-Asian racism moved across national boundaries and contributed to an emerging worldwide system of immigration regulation. By the early twentieth century, the United States had set the terms and logic of the Asian "immigration problem" that nearly every country in the Western Hemisphere—from Canada to Argentina—adopted or adapted to. During World War II, these policies merged with new concerns about national and hemispheric security. Japanese Americans were uprooted from their homes and incarcerated in the name of "military necessity." Similarly, Japanese Canadians were sent into exile. Japanese Latin Americans faced restrictions in their daily lives and some were even expelled.

Even as discriminatory laws were struck down and as social attitudes have mellowed, Asian Americans have still not achieved full equality in American life. In contemporary America, Asian Americans occupy unique and constantly shifting positions between black and white, foreign and American, privilege and poverty. Depending on what is happening inside and outside the United States, certain Asian American groups have been labeled as "good Asians" ("model minorities," "honorary whites," cultural brokers, and loyal citizens), while others have been labeled as "bad Asians" (perpetual foreigners, religious others, unassimilated refugees, spies, terrorists, and the enemy within). These labels and stereotypes serve myriad purposes. During the Cold War, the Asian American model minority who achieved the American Dream was held up as proof of American democracy at a time when the United States was being criticized by communist rivals abroad and civil rights activists at home. Today, the privileged model minority continues to be a useful reminder that American success is still achievable even as income inequality grows, the achievement gap between whites and African Americans and Latinos persists, and the United States' power in the world

diminishes.

But this portrait of Asian American success is uneven and incomplete. While some Asian Americans have achieved economic success and cite hard work and perseverance as the keys to their positions of privilege, others—especially working-class immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees fleeing the ravages of war—remain mired in generational poverty and struggle at the margins of American society. Even some of those who have been touted as models continue to occupy an unstable status that can change overnight. Korean storeowners in South Central Los Angeles were targeted in the aftermath of the verdict in the Rodney King case in 1992. South Asian Americans, along with Muslim and Arab Americans, became the victims of hate crimes and labeled as terrorists after 9/11.

On a more daily basis, Asian Americans continue to be seen as outsiders in the United States despite the fact that many are U.S. citizens and are from families who have been in the country for generations. “Where are you from?” they are continually asked. And when the answers “Oakland,” “New York,” or “Chicago” do not satisfy the questioner, they are asked, “No, where are you really from?” The underlying assumption behind these questions is that Asians cannot possibly be real Americans and do not belong in the United States. Instead, they are perpetual foreigners at worst, or probationary Americans at best.¹⁷ The persistence in treating Asian Americans as outsiders in their own country has resulted in everyday racial slights as well as targeted violence, murder, and hate crimes.

Race has never been just a matter of black and white in the United States. Asian Americans have been both included and excluded from the country, sometimes simultaneously. In exemplifying this complicated and contingent history of American race relations, Asian Americans remain absolutely central to understanding the ongoing ways in which race works today.

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The history of Asian Americans is lastly a history of America in a global age. Like many Americans today, Asian Americans live transnational lives and form their identities across national borders. Over the decades, Asian American families, businesses, as well as social, political, and religious organizations have all existed and flourished both within the United States and across nations. During the late nineteenth century, the majority of Chinese immigrant families, including my own, lived in so-called split households. Fathers and husbands worked in American Chinatowns while mothers and children remained in China.¹⁸ The same was true for many South Asians and Filipinos. Today, H-1B visa holders from India toil in Silicon Valley separated from their families back home. Taiwanese high schoolers leave their parents behind to attend American schools and universities. Lao refugee grandparents living in the upper Midwest leave their American-raised children and American-born grandchildren during the bitter winter months and become long-distance snowbirds in sunny Laos.

Asians’ pursuit of equality in the United States has also been connected to homeland politics, whether it was the Chinese Revolution or Korean and Indian nationalism during the early twentieth century, the anti-martial law campaign in the Philippines during the 1980s, or human rights issues in Southeast Asia today. Asian Americans continue to confront both American racism and global inequalities through their transnational lives, activities, and identities that are simultaneously effecting change in the United States and across the Pacific Ocean.¹⁹

Furthermore, contemporary Asian Americans are creating new, multi-layered identities. They are simultaneously racial minorities within nations, transnational immigrants who engage in two or more homelands, and diasporic citizens making connections across borders. Like many contemporary immigrants

around the world, they “don’t trade in their home country membership card for an American one,” as anthropologist Peggy Levitt explains. Rather, they “belong to several communities at once.”²⁰ They might raise their children in the United States, yet send money to elderly parents or extended family in India. They might shop at Walmart as well as the local Korean grocery store, contribute to their children’s local parent-teacher association and to their alma mater in the Philippines, or vote in both the United States and Taiwanese national elections.

Today’s immigrants challenge the either/or dichotomy of becoming American or not. They are transnational not because they don’t want to or cannot become fully American. They are transnational because it allows them to achieve something that is quintessentially American: to improve their lives and socioeconomic status for themselves and their families whether that may be solely within the United States, or often, in the United States and somewhere else at the same time.²¹ These transnational immigrants are helping us all become global Americans.

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Exploring how Asian Americans have made and remade American life over the centuries, this book offers a new and timely history of this important and diverse community. But more than that, it offers a new way of understanding America itself, its histories of race and immigration, and its place in the world today.

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