

In
Strangers from
a Different Shore:
A History of Asian
Americans.

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Preface to the New Edition

Confronting "Cultural Literacy"

The Redefining of America

When the first edition of *Strangers from a Different Shore* was published in 1989, I was invited to be a guest on NBC's *Today* show, with Jane Pauley. I flew to New York and checked into my hotel the night before my interview. Arrangements had been made for a limousine to pick me up at 8:00 A.M. and drive me to NBC for a live appearance at 8:20 A.M. But the limousine was late. Taking a taxi, I arrived just in time and had to be rushed into the studio. I was still trying to catch my breath and struggling to overcome my nervousness when Jane Pauley welcomed me to the *Today* show and then quickly asked, "Professor Takaki, I need to ask you some questions, you know, like an exam. Will you compare for us Ellis Island and Angel Island?"

What a perfect opening question, I thought. Here were forty million Americans watching the program, and most of them undoubtedly had never heard of Angel Island. Even if they lived in San Francisco, they probably viewed this scenic island in the middle of the bay as a recreational place to bike, hike, and picnic. In my answer, I said, "Jane, both of us have read E. D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*." This was a best-seller at the time, and Jane quickly nodded. "Well, in the back of the book, there's a long list of terms that every American should know, and this list includes Ellis Island but it omits Angel Island. Ellis Island was the entry point for European immigrants, and Angel Island was the location of the immigration station for 'strangers from a different shore' — for Chinese and Japanese immigrants."¹

The point I was making was clear: cultural literacy, as defined by Hirsch as well as by educators and pundits like him, reflects a widely held but mistaken view that "American" means "white" or

European in origin. This ethnocentric notion leaves out many groups, including Asian Americans.

Two years later, Arthur Schlesinger reaffirmed this narrow view of American identity in his declaration of war against multiculturalism, a book provocatively entitled *The Disuniting of America*. Studying our racial and ethnic diversity, he warned, separates groups from one another and fragments our society. This "ethnic" ideology nourishes "a culture of victimization" and inculcates the "illusion" that membership in one or another "ethnic" group is "the basic American experience." He castigated the "multicultural zealots" for rejecting "the notion of a shared commitment to common ideals." The allegiance to "ethnicity," he warned, threatens "the brittle bonds of national identity" that hold "this diverse and fractious society together." As an alternative, Schlesinger urged Americans to renew their commitment to the nation's principles and to remember the origins of its political foundations. Aggressively, he asserted that the "unique source" of America's ideas of liberty, democracy, and the rule of law was Europe. These were "European ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern."²

But Schlesinger's understanding of our diversity is mistaken and his fears of our expanding ethnicities are unwarranted. This is what the history of Asian Americans shows so clearly. Their experiences were "basically American" and reflected a "shared commitment to common ideals," re-visioning them in ways the Founding Fathers had not intended and would not have approved. They struggled to make our national principles racially more inclusive and therefore distinctly "American," no longer purely "European."

Indeed, the story of Asian Americans is woven into the history of America itself. The Chinese began coming here during the 1849 California gold rush, and my Japanese grandfather sailed across the Pacific in 1886, before the arrival of most Jewish, Italian, Hungarian, and Polish immigrants. Like Oscar Handlin's "uprooted," Asians also belonged to the "great migrations that made the American people."³ Asians were members of what Walt Whitman called "the vast, surging, hopeful army of workers," who transformed the western deserts into farmlands, built the transcontinental railroad, and toiled in factories from San Francisco to North Adams, Massachusetts.⁴

More important, while Asian Americans experienced the "victimization" of discrimination and exploitation, they also fought against the exclusionisms designed to force them to remain strangers

in America. When Thomas Jefferson wrote those powerful words "all men are created equal," entitled to "liberty" as an "unalienable right," he was not thinking that this would become the creed for a racially diverse America. For Jefferson, the new nation was to be a white republic, and this vision of America's "manifest destiny" led his fellow policymakers to enact the 1790 Naturalization Law, which restricted naturalized citizenship to "whites."⁵ Thus, when Asians arrived, they found themselves politically excluded from their adopted country.

Facing discrimination, Asian Americans did what Abraham Lincoln wanted all of us to do: recognize America as a nation, "dedicated" to the "proposition" of equality, and pursue the "unfinished" work of making this ideal a reality.⁶ After Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Law in 1882, an immigrant angrily scolded the policymakers. "No nation can afford to let go its high ideals," Yan Phou Lee wrote in the *North American Review*. "The founders of the American Republic asserted the principle that all men are created equal, and made this fair land a refuge for the world. Its manifest destiny, therefore, is to be the teacher and leader of nations in liberty. Its supremacy should be maintained by good faith and righteous dealing, and not by the display of selfishness and greed. But now, looking at the actions of this generation of Americans in their treatment of other races, who can get rid of the idea that that Nation, which Abraham Lincoln said was conceived in liberty, waxed great through oppression, and was really dedicated to the proposition that all men are created to prey on one another? How far this Republic has departed from its high ideal and reversed its traditional policy may be seen in the laws passed against the Chinese."⁷

While Lee's demands for inclusion and justice were easily dismissed at the time, they could not be forever denied. Protests continued, and a turning point came during World War II. By serving in the U.S. military during World War II, Asian Americans shared what Lincoln called "the mystic chords of memory" stretching from battlefields to patriot graves. In a letter written from the battlefield, a Japanese-American soldier explained to his family why he was ready to die for this country: "By virtue of the Japanese attack on our nation, we as American citizens of Japanese ancestry have been mercilessly flogged with criticism and accusations. But I'm not going to take it sitting down! I may not be able to come back. But that matters little. My family and friends — they are the ones who will be able to back their arguments with facts. . . . In fact, it is better that

we are sent to the front and that a few of us do not return, for the testimony will be stronger in favor of the folks back home.”⁸ Many Japanese-American soldiers had left behind families unjustly evacuated and incarcerated in internment camps. Altogether, 33,000 Nisei served in the military; many of them did not “come back” to America. All of them had earned the right, through bloody sacrifices in defense of our democracy, to call upon their nation to rededicate itself to its founding principle of equality.

The victory over Nazism with its ideology of Aryan supremacy spurred Asian Americans to renew their claims on America. In 1952, they successfully helped lobby for the provision in the McCarran-Walter Law, which nullified the “white”-only restriction in the 1790 Naturalization Law. Harry Takagi explained the meaning of this victory: “It was the culmination of our dreams. I can’t think of any other legislation that so united the JAACL [Japanese American Citizens League]. The bill established our parents as the legal equal of other Americans; it gave the Japanese equality with all other immigrants, and that was a principle we had been struggling for from the very beginning.”⁹

The Civil Rights Movement of the sixties stirred criticisms of the bias built into the U.S. immigration laws. When Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Asian Americans raised a logical question: If racial discrimination was illegal, why was it still enforced in the laws regulating entry? “Everywhere else in our national life, we have eliminated discrimination based on national origins,” Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Congress in 1964. “Yet, this system is still the foundation of our immigration law.”¹⁰ A year later, lawmakers abolished the national-origins restrictions and reopened the gates to Asian immigrants. Finally, racial restrictions had been removed from immigration legislation, and the Statue of Liberty had become a symbol of hope for all people.

The history of Asian Americans has much to teach us about how all of us might get along with one another in the twenty-first century. The importance of knowing this story was suddenly reinforced in my mind on a Monday morning in June 1997. While I was writing this preface, I received a phone call from the White House, inviting me to attend a meeting of scholars and civil rights leaders with President Bill Clinton. The purpose was to brainstorm ideas for his major speech on America’s race relations in the coming century. I had already known from the newspapers that Clinton would be making his speech in California, where the population is 10

percent Asian American and where the university’s flagship campus at Berkeley is 40 percent Asian American. I listened intently when the president’s assistant said that Clinton wanted to recognize our society as “multiracial” and take the discourse on race “beyond black and white.” “So,” she stressed, “your presence as an Asian-American scholar at the meeting would be very important.” I asked, “When is the meeting taking place?” She replied, “Tomorrow. So you have to catch a plane out of San Francisco today. Sorry, but that’s the way we often do things around here. The speech is scheduled to be given this Saturday.”

Within hours I was flying to Washington. As I looked down at the vast continent where peoples who had come from all over the world were working and living, I wondered what I would tell Clinton. I decided I would first describe the demographic face of America in the twenty-first century. Remembering Franklin D. Roosevelt’s striking statement “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” I came up with what I thought would work as a memorable phrase for Clinton’s speech — “We will all be minorities.”

This new identity will occur first in California within a few years and then in the entire nation by mid-century. Projected to become 10 percent of the U.S. population, Asian Americans will be part of this tremendous social and cultural transformation. This immense diversity ahead of us, I thought, could be viewed as a danger, sweeping us downward toward “the disuniting of America.” But this coming “brave new world” of various cultures and ethnicities could also be seen as an opportunity for us to face our future by reaching toward a more inclusive and more accurate understanding of our past.

Here, I reflected, the history of Asian Americans offers an important lesson. In the telling and retelling of their stories, these immigrants and their descendants contribute to the creating of a larger memory of who we are as Americans. They reassure us that we can be ethnically diverse and still one people, restlessly and hopefully striving toward “a more perfect Union.” Bursting with their varied visions of America, Asian Americans rebel against the ethnocentrism embedded in Hirsch’s enclosing cultural literacy and Schlesinger’s exclusionist view of the past. Urging us to *rethink* the way we think about our nation’s history, these “strangers from a different shore” tell us the time is opportune for the redefining of America.