

Asian and Pacific Islander Americans — Identity, contributions, and challenges

Throughout May there have been many celebrations of a rich heritage that is thousands of years old to mark Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. As they come to a close, we take the opportunity to reflect on the impact the Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) community has had on this country. And while their contributions have shaped the history of the United States, their history of experiencing and addressing racism has remained mostly unknown and uncovered by the mainstream media and academia. And the current crisis may well be one of those moments that shapes a lasting legacy for the next generation of API Americans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging and at the same time unifying for most Americans. Americans have banded together to applaud the work of our essential workers, sew masks and provide meals for those in need. It has also led to division and discrimination marked by a surge in hate crimes against API Americans. As political rhetoric from the White House and its supporters has continued to blame China for the pandemic, API Americans have reported being verbally-abused, shunned, and physically assaulted. We saw the first signs of Sinophobia as Chinese restaurants saw a decline in business all over the country beginning in February. Between March 19 and May 13, over 1700 incidents of discrimination from 45 states and Washington D.C. were reported to STOP AAPI HATE, an initiative of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies Department.

On May 27, 2020, National Organization for Women (NOW) issued a [statement](#) unequivocally condemning these incidents of hate; urging support for H.Res. 908, which condemns all forms of racism related to COVID-19. Federally, little is being done to track coronavirus-related hate crimes. This is in stark contrast to the immediate response from the DOJ to the similar rise in hate-crimes following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They asked public officials to issue statements, conducted outreach to affected communities, and coordinated civil rights enforcement. In 2003 during the SARS outbreak, the CDC formed a community outreach team which worked to document, monitor and ease discrimination.

This uptick in discrimination is part of a much longer history of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. Large-scale migration from Asia began with Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century and they were the first to experience nativist hostility. Deemed the “yellow peril,” they faced open animosity, which eventually gave way to violence. Rather than taking action to combat these blatant acts of discrimination, the US government followed suit with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which stopped immigration from China and subsequently in 1924, ended immigration from Asia altogether.

The Naturalization Act of 1790 stated that only “free white persons” were eligible for naturalized citizenship. In 1922, *Takao Ozawa v. United States* held that Japanese, deemed non-white by science, were not eligible for naturalization. Soon after, in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Supreme Court, ironically, conceded that although Indians were considered Caucasian scientifically, they were not seen as “white” by the common understanding and therefore, ineligible for naturalization. It was only in 1952 that the Walter-McCarran Act nullified all previous federal Asian exclusion laws and granted all Asians the right to naturalization.

As we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote, it is important to recognize that Asians were still barred from naturalized citizenship at the time. Whilst enduring continued hostility, API American communities had few outlets through which to remedy their situation without a voice in government. At every step of the way, API Americans had to fight for incremental progress, and they were often met with staunch opposition.

Even though they were barred from citizenship and hence could not vote, there were API suffragists that fought for women's rights. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (1896 – 1966) moved to New York from China at the age of nine. Lee became involved in activism and women's rights very early on and by the time she was sixteen years old, Lee helped lead a suffrage parade on horseback in New York City. When the 19th amendment was passed, Lee and many other women of color still could not vote. It would take another almost twenty-five years for Lee to be granted that right with the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. Nevertheless, she continued to advocate for women's suffrage and equal rights.

Other notable suffragists included API women who were born in the United States and therefore eligible for citizenship. Wilhelmina Kekelaokalaninui Widemann Dowsett (1861 – 1929) actively campaigned for the rights of the women of Hawaii to vote prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, helping organize the National Women's Equal Suffrage Association of Hawaii, the first women's suffrage club in the Territory of Hawaii in 1912. Clara Elizabeth Chan Lee (1886 – 1993) became the first Chinese American woman to register to vote in the United States in 1911 following the passage of Proposition 4 in California. Lee also founded the Chinese Women's Jeleab (self-reliance) Association to promote women's rights in both the U.S. and China.

API Americans are often falsely perceived to have achieved greater socioeconomic success compared to other immigrant groups. The culprit is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which prioritized professionals and others with specialized skills, leading to an influx of Asian immigrants that tended to be wealthier and better educated. Still, not only is the "model minority" stereotype grossly generalizing and misleading of the API American experience as a whole, it is harmful when used to justify the exclusion of the community from assistance programs or pit minority groups against one another.

Now, as API Americans face increased harassment and discrimination related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the model minority myth is problematically being used to defend their integration into society, as doctors and scientists on the front lines. Even prominent API Americans are encouraging their own community to raise coronavirus relief funds and resources, unlike any other ethnic group. And when public officials calling out hate against API Americans bolster their statements with shout-outs to API American groups supporting pandemic relief, they fail to unequivocally denounce the hate, harassment, and discrimination.

It is important to recognize that this is not the first time discrimination against API Americans has been sanctioned by the United States government. It is up to us - to stand up to hate, to embrace our API American neighbors and to erase their unease and sense of invisibility, letting them know that we recognize them as full participants in the American experience.

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To learn more about the API American experience, we recommend [ASIAN AMERICANS](#), a five-hour film series that examines the role of Asian Americans in shaping American history and identity, from the first wave of Asian immigrants in the 1850s and identity politics during the social and cultural turmoil of the twentieth century to modern refugee crises in a globally connected world.

We encourage all who have witnessed or experienced micro-aggressions, bullying, harassment, hate speech, or violence against Asian-Americans to report at [Stop AAPI Hate](#). More information will lead to better response and prevention of further incidents.