

Asian American History – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 55

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Madeline Hsu 00:26

My name is Madeline Hsu. I am a historian. I teach at the University of Texas where I am affiliated with the history department and also the centers for Asian American Studies, Mexican American Studies, and also Asian Studies. I chiefly research migration. I started my research with Chinese migrations to North America, and then have been developing broader sets of interests in US immigration policy, and the big picture of global migrations. My most recent publication project was as a co-editor of the Cambridge History of Global Migrations, where I had the great benefit of working with a team of other historians and learning more about how to frame migration in global and comparative contexts. I am the author of Asian American History: A Very Short Introduction, which is a very short and comprehensive narrative and interweaving of Asian American history with that of broader history and global history.

Madeline Hsu 01:34

My approach covers almost 500 years of history, and integrates literally dozens of Asian American groups. My goal is to try to illustrate, to describe, for a general audience, how Asians fit into the history of the United States as a nation of immigrants. My approach also tries to integrate the history of Asian Americans in the broader fabric of US history, not just by targeting key events, and also trying to situate Asian Americans alongside other racialized groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx Americans, as well as the majority white Euro American population. When I teach and write about Asian American history, I try to make the pitch that we learn a lot by situating Asian Americans at the center of US history. This history is particularly important because Asian Americans, for most of US history, have been excluded from gaining US citizenship--this happened between 1790 and 1952--and this racial prohibition against citizenship for Asian immigrants was then used to justify immigration laws that targeted Asians for severe and almost complete exclusion from legal entry.

Madeline Hsu 03:01

This history, the foundations of immigration restriction in the United States targeting Asian Americans, then produces the foundations of citizenship and immigration restriction in the United States. So Asian Americans have been racialized and also legally defined as foreign aliens, and as foreign aliens, they were given lesser rights and protections in the United States. So the practices of detention and deportation are now such a problem in the United States, and very troubling, how excludable aliens have been treated, trace all the way back to these immigration restrictions targeting Asian Americans. And even though now Asian Americans have been re-racialized as model minorities, they still

experience stereotyping of being essential foreigners and threats. This has been particularly vivid during the past couple of years with the COVID pandemic, but the foundations of discriminations that they experienced as aliens, as excludable immigrants, now are pervasive in US society even though they are being applied to other immigrant groups that are racialized now as foreigners and as unwanted. So the Asian American history from this perspective is at the center of US history and really key to our trying to understand very pervasive and troubling problems that beset US society today.

Madeline Hsu 04:40

I first got interested in this subject through personal history and family experience. I am a second generation Chinese American. I am of the first generation in my family to be born in the United States. Both of my parents were immigrants from China, although on my mother's side of the family, our immigrant history goes back two generations. My great-grandfather came to the United States, established a small grocery store in a small town in Arkansas, Altheimer, Arkansas. But because of the anti Asian immigration laws, he wasn't able to bring a wife or his children. It wasn't until World War II, in which my grandfather served on the US side, and then as a veteran, was able to bring over my grandmother as a war bride, that we started having unified families in the United States. So while I was in college, and while I was in graduate school, I was studying history, but I could not find accounts, I could not find textbooks, or stories, that featured these kinds of experiences of the United States.

Madeline Hsu 05:55

And so that is one of my motives in terms of trying to research this aspect of history to be able to find ways to include my family and the kinds of experiences that we had into broader narratives, the fabric of US history. And some of the things that I found, as I broadened the focus of my research and meeting, is that these kinds of experiences of marginalization on the basis of being immigrants, of being racialized as essential foreigners, as not deserving US citizenship, actually affected many, many racialized groups, including African Americans and Mexican Americans. And so, I think these stories are really important to understand, not just on the part of Asian Americans, who, you know, are often seen as not being very central to the stories of the United States because they are a minority population. And many people view them in fact, as having attained the status of honorary whites; however, we need to look at their long history to understand the ways in which they continue to be racialized as foreigners and as aliens, and to, how these perceptions then shaped US immigration laws and practices around citizenship, and the ongoing, unequal status experienced by people racialized as illegal immigrants. So these are some of the key aspects of Asian American history that I think should be more generally known.

Madeline Hsu 07:36

I also hope that through my research and through my deeper historical context, and also comparative approach, that we can understand the ways in which trans-Pacific immigrants, people who have crossed the Pacific Ocean, are, have been part of the long history of the Americas and the United States. So for example, when I teach about Asian American history, I start in the 16th century, and there were Filipinos who we know arrived in what was then still the Americas, Mexico, through the auspices of Spanish Empire and the galleon trade that was regularly crossing the Pacific Ocean. I also like to talk about the first named Asian immigrants that we know of who was an Indian woman, who came to be known as Catarina de San Juan, who arrived in 1619 as a slave in Mexico. We know her

story because she came to be celebrated for her religiosity, her devotion to her Catholic faith, and so people recorded her life story. I hope to change perceptions that Asian Americans are new arrivals in the United States, that there is this significant intertwining of Asian and American histories, but I also hope that people understand, and through knowing and understanding about Asian American history, how our current systems of immigration regulation developed, and also are now used, you know, legally and institutionally to discriminate against certain populations on the basis of their immigration status as being aliens or as being excludable immigrants.

Madeline Hsu 09:31

These forms of racial discrimination intersect with immigration laws and institutions that I think are less understood, generally, in their discriminatory impacts. And so I hope that, as I continue to do research and try to author these narratives to tell the stories of us histories in ways that are inclusive of Asian Americans, that we can forge this better understanding, sort of a, figure out a way in which Asian Americans participate in and continue to struggle toward moving the US to becoming more truly inclusive and egalitarian and multiracial as a democracy. I hope that this encourages you to take more of an interest in Asian American history and the experiences of Asian Americans, and in order to understand better how the United States is, and can be, a nation of immigrants that includes people from all parts of the world.

Rebecca Parker 10:38

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