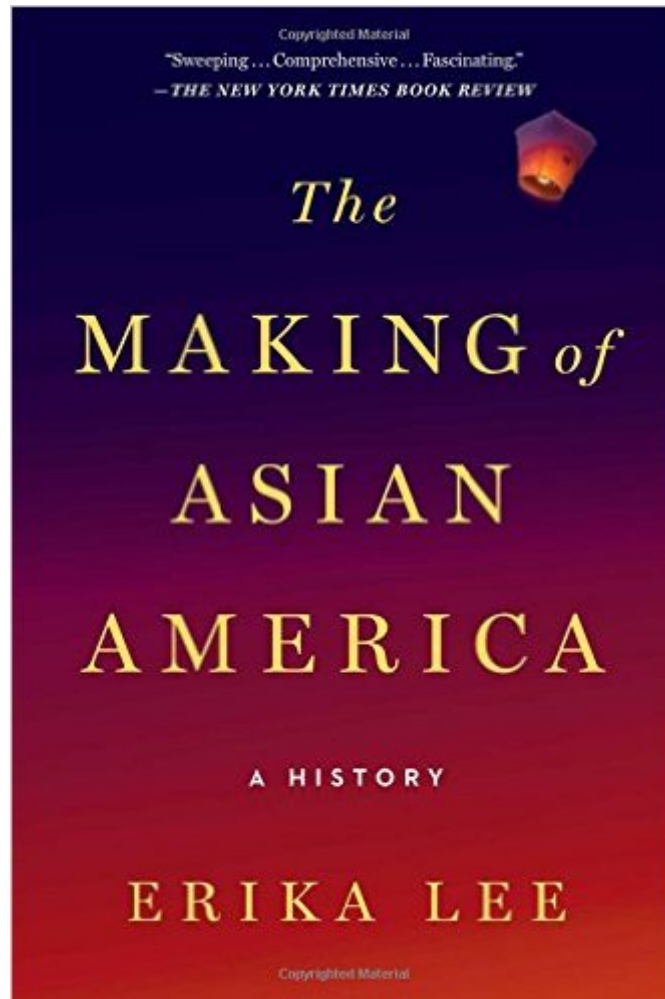


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The Making Of Asian America: A History



Synopsis

A "comprehensive" "fascinating" (The New York Times Book Review) history of Asian Americans and their role in American life, 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 much of their long history has been forgotten. "In her sweeping, powerful new book, Erika Lee considers the rich, complicated, and sometimes invisible histories of Asians in the United States" (Huffington Post). The Making of Asian America shows how generations of Asian immigrants and their American-born descendants have made and remade Asian American life, from sailors who came on the first trans-Pacific ships in the 1500 to the Japanese Americans incarcerated 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 fifty years after the passage of the United States' Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, these "powerful Asian American stories" are inspiring, and Lee herself does them justice in a book that is long overdue" (Los Angeles Times). But more than that, The Making of Asian America is an "epic and eye-opening" (Minneapolis Star-Tribune) new way of understanding America itself, its complicated histories of race and immigration, and its place in the world today.

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Customer Reviews

“I never knew that this happened”•Erika Lee’s America is the continent itself revealing Asian impact on South America and the Caribbean well before the formation of the USA but the bulk of the story is America’s treatment of what were viewed as the oriental “the other” and it is not a happy tale. That said, it is a beautifully written scholarly inquire into how Asians have been rejected, accepted, and have developed their own identities in a constantly changing political universe. Packed full of detail the reader may wish to skim and skip ahead but the delightful human tales along the way will likely suppress that urge. You will want to know how the forces being described can be resolved or blunted. Ignorance, hate, animosity and fear; pride, intelligence, compassion and resolve battle in our nation’s history to find their way; Lee doesn’t miss a beat. As she indicates at the end, the story is very much still in process as America becomes more Asian in composition and more global in direction. A good read.

I’ve read many books on immigration and on Asian Americans. Overall, this is the best. Lee manages to cover two dozen ethnicities over several centuries, and paints a wonderfully informative mosaic. One important aspect is that Asian America is not a single entity; Hmong refugees and Filipina nurses have as little in common as immigrants from Bosnia and Nigeria. One reason this is such a powerful book is perhaps her own family’s experience in the complicated history of Chinese immigrants to America over the last century. The focus is the United States, but Lee also explores relevant history in Canada and especially Mexico. The famous Manila Galleon trade over 250 years made a connection between Asia and New Spain that brought tens of thousands of Asians to what is now Mexico, as slaves and sailors, including a wide range of Asians, not just from the Philippines. She covers Chinese labor that built much of the transcontinental railroad, but does not appear in the iconic photographs. There’s also discussion of the infamous and little known “coolie trade” in which Chinese labor was brought to places like Cuba and Peru, under conditions often little different than slavery. There’s some violent history few Americans know about, including a vicious massacre of Chinese in Wyoming, terrorism in the California gold fields and mobs running Asians out of many Western towns. It’s not just American racism: in Torreon in Mexico in 1911 some 303 Chinese were massacred. The story has many variants. Some Sikhs came to California a century ago, and with state laws against Asians marrying whites, married into the Mexican American community to found a vibrant community. There were Bengali immigrants to New Orleans, Korean migrants fleeing Japanese occupation of Korea, and many more. For me the most troubling portions of the book were the laws against Asians becoming citizens or owning property, leading into the World War 2

internment of more than 120,000 people of Japanese origin; some of these were from Latin American Asian communities, in effect arrested by US authorities. The story is of sustained effort, enduring optimism and eventually more acceptance. Key events were World War 2 when China was an ally, and the 1964 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which changed our history. Among other elements, tens of thousands of war brides came to the US from Japan, and over the years tens of thousands from Korea. The Southeast Asian War was another huge factor in that the eventual Communist triumph brought hundreds of thousands of refugees. One chapter looks at the experience of the Hmong people, enlisted virtually as a people in the US secret war, and coming to the US as a shattered tribal people. This last is on-going and with successes have come failures. Also fascinating is the story of immigrants from South Asia (India and Pakistan). An intriguing chapter is on transnational and global immigrants, a current phenomenon of what might be called multicontinental families using the media of today to maintain both immigration and background. These are often Indian or Chinese families and may be the immigrant pattern of tomorrow. A final chapter summarizes current trends: Asians are the predominant immigrant group (immigration from Mexico has dropped sharply), and oddly, Asian Americans are over represented at both ends of the economic scale, large percentages are affluent and larger percentages are poor than the national norms. And racism remains a formidable obstacle. The book has an excellent bibliographic essay. The photos add considerably to the text.

When I read *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* several years ago, I became aware for the first time of the extensive history East Asians have in this hemisphere. Since then, I have been hunting for a resource that tells the full story of Asian Americans. Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America* does that and more. Lee's narrative is essentially linear, beginning with the Chinese (probably Fujian) seamen that accompanied the Spaniards on their initial trips to the Western hemisphere. But as Lee makes clear in the introduction, "Asian American" covers multiple, diverse groups, and as such she does dip back to the same period a few times to tell the different but linked stories of the different groups of immigrants that came to the Americas, particularly the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians (predominantly from the Punjab region) and Filipinos. I consider myself well-versed in American history. However, there were many facets of the story of Asian Americans that shocked me. Chinese and South Asian coolies who were brought to the Americas were treated almost as badly as African slaves; Filipino immigrants were essentially deported back to the Philippines in the 1930s during one of the many spasms of anti-immigrant hatred; Chinese and Japanese immigrants were among the first "undocumented immigrants" after

the initial exclusionary immigration laws; Korean Americans were among those accusing Japanese Americans of being Fifth Columnists after Pearl Harbor (something I read with great shame as a Korean American); and Japanese Peruvians were forcibly brought to the United States in the paranoia after Pearl Harbor and then some of them (along with Japanese Americans) were deported to Japan. There's more, but that list should give a flavor of what you might encounter. Given the incredibly hostile environment- Chinese Americans were the victims of the largest mass lynching in US History in Los Angeles, 1871- it's remarkable that so many Asian Americans thrived in the United States. Politicians (perhaps most famously Senator and World War II veteran Daniel Inouye), activists (including Grace Lee Boggs) and business people (too numerous to name) have all succeeded in this country, to the point that the "Model Minority" myth took hold of the media narrative around Asian Americans in the 1960s. Lee spends many pages detailing the plight of Asian American communities that are glossed over in the name of perpetuating this myth. While some may know that the educational and financial achievements of the Hmong and Cambodians in this country aren't "models", few may realize that Korean Americans are also over-represented among the poor in this country. And while it has been possible for Asian Americans to overcome many barriers, they have also been the victims of hate crimes (perhaps most famously, Vincent Chin) and feel the sting of the response to the 9/11 attacks doubly, both as reminders of what Japanese Americans endured in the 1940s and what South Asians are endangered by in the present day. The story of Asian America is as complicated as one would guess it would be given the many groups who comprise it. Lee not only tells the story, she helps the reader make sense of it. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in American history.

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