

## Folks:

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<http://www.npr.org/2015/10/15/448840691/how-asian-americans-have-redefined-what-it-means-to-be-american>

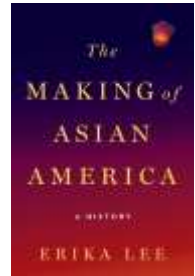
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# How Asian-Americans Have Redefined What It Means To Be American

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Steve Inskeep talks to historian Erika Lee about her new book, *The Making of Asian America: A History*.

Source: <http://www.npr.org/2015/10/15/448840691/how-asian-americans-have-redefined-what-it-means-to-be-american>



STEVE INSKEEP, HOST: Let's hear the very long back story to a big change in America. It's the rise in the number of Asian-Americans. Historian Erika Lee was surprised to learn just how long Asians have lived here. Like many people, she assumed Asians first came to the U.S. in the mid-1800s. You know, they worked in California's Gold Rush and then built railroads. Researching her new book, "The Making Of Asian America," Erika Lee found an Asian presence centuries older than that.

ERIKA LEE: Asians had been migrating to the Americas along with the Spanish colonizers dating back to 1560s and the Manila Galleon Trade that brought Chinese and other Asian luxury goods, spices, jewels to New Spain. And along with those goods came about 40 to 100,000 Asians, Filipinos, Chinese, South Asians, coming as sailors, coming as slaves and coming as servants.

INSKEEP: 1492, Columbus goes to America. There was a great trade between Europe and the Americas from that time across the Atlantic. How was it that the Spanish exploration, though, led to trade and movement of people across the Pacific heading to the Americas?

LEE: Spain's Pacific empire really extended from Manila and Spain's colony in the Philippines to Acapulco and Mexico and the rest of South America. And in order to connect those two far-flung locales, these massive trading ships began running across the Pacific Ocean, bringing goods and also gold from China to the New World. And so historians really look at this as the beginning of globalization.

INSKEEP: Sometimes the cargo itself was human beings. Am I right?

LEE: Absolutely. So we think about the dramatic African slave trade that is engaged in across the Americas and across the Atlantic. There's a much smaller but still pretty dynamic trade in Asian slaves. They were being kidnapped by Portuguese slave traders all across the Pacific, and some of them were brought to the New World.

INSKEEP: So I think you're telling me that the reason that it was possible, from the 1840s onward, for Chinese people to come to the United States to work in the goldfields, to work on the railroads, to work in New York, to do all sorts of things is because there were already, in the earliest times that we know, Chinese communities, people sending word back and forth that there would be an opportunity in this new country.

LEE: There were the trade ships. There was the means, the transportation, the business of transporting migrants that was already set up. In addition to bringing cargo and goods, they started to advertise for ship passage. And then coincidentally, at the same time, U.S. businesses were also looking for cheap laborers after the end of slavery in the United States. So the recruitment of Chinese railroad workers in the 1860s is directly related to the already entrenched transportation systems that were in place across the Pacific.

INSKEEP: Now, let me ask you about your personal side of this story. When did your ancestors first get here?

LEE: My sisters and I grew up thinking that we were third generation Chinese-American because both grandparents on both sides of the family were immigrants, immigrants from China. But as I dug down a little bit deeper, I realized that our family history went back three more generations. And I tracked it down to my great-great-great-grandfather, who apparently was one of those very first Chinese to come to California during the Gold Rush.

INSKEEP: Did he stay?

LEE: He stayed in California. But in the subsequent decades he, like so many other Chinese immigrants, fled California and its really violent anti-Chinese sentiment. And he ended up all the way on the East Coast. He opened up one of the very first businesses in New York City's Chinatown. He also had a business in Philadelphia. But the tragedy of that story is that he remained essentially alone in the United States, with his wife and his children in China. And the family stayed separated across the Pacific Ocean, because of the exclusion laws, for three generations. And that is why it wasn't until my grandparents came over that we not only stayed but really became American.

INSKEEP: Do you have any sense from the record that your ancestors in those early generations in the United States struggled with who they were, whether they were newly minted Americans or whether they were still Chinese?

LEE: Well, the laws not only excluded Chinese immigrants to a large degree, but the laws also prevented and prohibited Chinese immigrants and all other Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. So even if they had wanted to become, quote-unquote, "American" - fully American - by law, they were prevented from doing so. It's really not until 1943 that Chinese immigrants are allowed to become naturalized citizens. It's not until 1952 that Japanese immigrants are allowed to become U.S. naturalized citizens.

INSKEEP: You mention a moment when, I believe it's your great-grandfather, is in the United States and gets the right to bring his wife over from China and to bring his two kids over from China. He's got a son and a daughter. And he brings the son but then brings a nephew, brings another male relative and leaves the daughter behind. Why did he do that?

LEE: It's a question that I could never get answered. Certainly by the time that I was growing up, my great-grandfather had already passed. And my grandmother, this was one of those silences. She refused to talk about how she came to the United States. But I have to say, it was not uncommon. So consider these Chinese exclusion laws. They really place a premium. Not everyone can come. There's decades of anti-Chinese sentiment. It's a very rough-and-tumble place. And in the early years in the far West, women especially are considered to be in danger. But also, on the Chinese side, the idea is when you migrate, you should send the people who are most capable of making money to support the family. And so he's faced with a difficult choice. For whatever reason, it was a tragedy. My grandmother was left behind. And the only way for her to come was by marrying my grandfather.

INSKEEP: Having studied this history so thoroughly, do you feel that you hear today's immigration debate in a different way than most people do?

LEE: Yes. I'm always trying to think about how can we place some historical perspective? What does our history tell us about some of these debates, about border security, birthright citizenship, deportation? And also, quite simply, we've debated immigration before. We've always had some group in mind that we thought was an immigrant menace or a danger to the country. But in fact, we've survived. And we've not only survived; we've thrived as a nation.

INSKEEP: Erika Lee is the author of, "The Making Of Asian America." Thanks very much.

LEE: Thank you.

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## Comments:

*Wild Spice:* Dr. Lee, though I appreciate your emphasis on the Chinese presence in the early United States, it is important to keep in mind that the Chinese represent only one ethnic group among many diverse Asian/Pacific Islander groups here in the United States. Yes, your work gets credit for the Chinese "story" here in America. However, I bristle at the notion that it encompasses the "Asian" experience. I agree that those of Chinese and Japanese ancestry were denied naturalization until the mid-20th century; however, members of other AA/PI groups, especially Filipinos, had a somewhat different, complicated and more nuanced immigration experience compared to the Chinese. Mr. Inskip (I am making the assumption that you are not ethnically Asian), it's important to keep in mind that the Chinese are not synonymous, nor representative of the entirety of Asia. Given the increasing presence of the their presence on the world stage, it is easy to fall into the idea that all people of Asian descent are represented by one dominant group. When, in actuality, this is not the case. Dr. Lee, I appreciate your perspective and eagerly wait to read your book.

*Rebecca Hansbrough:* Educational, honest and dignified is what came to mind - this is one of the best conversations I have heard about the American immigrant experience. Erika Lee paints an expansive picture, connecting early European exploration of the western Hemisphere and active pursuit of trade routes as a catalyst for generating Chinese interest and pursuit in merchant trade outside of Asia. I thought Erika Lee's portrait of her family's arrival to the US, their very difficult personal choices, struggles to navigate within the cultural and legal limitations sobering but I also saw them triumphantly rising above their circumstances and succeeding in spite of their challenges. I've always admired Chinese and Asian culture, work ethic, resourcefulness, independence, value in education and the adventurous spirit. Erik Lee basically reminds us that history often repeats itself. This is a book I am going to read.