

## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Since 1965 the rapid growth of immigration from Asia has contributed to the tremendous diversity in the racial and ethnic composition of the United States population. In the 1990 census, Asian Americans represented the fastest growing group of immigrants, but the diversity among Asians is even more complex than indicated by census data. They represent a multitude of language groups and have many different countries of origin. For instance, Chinese-speaking immigrants may come from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Asian Indians who speak any one of the 18 official languages of India may come from India, England, Fiji, South Africa, or the Caribbean. The reasons Asian Americans immigrate and their situations in the United States are no less diverse than their national origins. They could be well-heeled entrepreneurs seeking better economic opportunities or destitute boat persons fleeing political persecution.

How do different Asian Americans define themselves? How does the media define them? Why are Asian Americans in the United States in larger numbers than ever before? Should the nation welcome them as much-needed workers in the American economy or worry about the social welfare burden they might impose? Should Euro-Americans be concerned that they will somehow create a very different American culture or should they be glad that Asian Americans might enrich the fabric of our lives through new and exciting contributions? Answers to these questions can be attempted only after a study of the new Asian immigration in historical perspective, an analysis of the forces that have governed U.S. attitudes towards Asian immigration in the past, and an examination of the reasons why Asians immigrate to the United States. The material in this unit provides some of the resources that can be used to address these issues.

Students will examine advertisements and other popular media to determine how they reflect changes in American society. They will learn to interpret statistics presented in graphs and tables. They will read American legislative acts and survey relevant global events listed in chronologies. They will read statements made by a great variety of Asian immigrants to learn what prompted these people to leave their lands of origin to come to the United States.

Primary and secondary sources presented in this unit will complement U.S. history textbook content on late twentieth-century U. S. history, including Cold War competition with the USSR, the impact of U. S. military involvement in Indo-China, and the impact of technological innovation on Asian immigration to the United States.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

The history of Asian immigration to the United States has received scant attention in schools and colleges but is an integral part of American history. It raises issues about diversity and democracy, capitalism and economic opportunity, racism

## ***Teacher Background Materials***

---

and discrimination, property rights and citizenship rights, all of which are critical to a full and broad understanding of our common heritage as Americans.

This topic belongs to several eras from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. This unit will set the history of Asian American immigration in the wider context of American immigration legislation and global events and will examine motivations for Asian immigration. It is designed to augment other chapters in recent American history both by presenting information and by engaging students in activities that help them understand factors which affect migration, bring about social change, and influence United States policy.

### **III. CORRELATION WITH NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY**

This unit is designed to accompany Standards 2A and 2B of Era 6, “The Development of the Industrial United States, 1870-1900;” Standards 2A and 3A of Era 7, “The Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930;” and Standard 2B of Era 10, “Contemporary United States, 1968 to the Present,” in *the National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).

### **IV. UNIT LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

1. To investigate legislation regulating immigration to the United States.
2. To assess policies regarding Asian immigration to the United States.
3. To research factors affecting decisions by Asians to immigrate to the United States.
4. To analyze interaction between global economic and social conditions and immigration to the United States.
5. To formulate positions and to propose policies to regulate future immigration in the best interests of the United States.
6. To examine statistical information regarding immigration from Asia to the United States.

## V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ASIAN IMMIGRATION

Asians were among the very early immigrants to the United States, and like other immigrant groups they have contributed to the building of America. Yet millions of Asian Americans who have been in the United States for more than three generations are still mislabeled “foreigners,” and their history in America remains misunderstood. At the dawn of the twenty first century, more and more immigrants from Asia continue to arrive in the United States, answering the call for highly skilled labor in computer and information technology industries, shattering outdated images of immigrants as “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” To understand these Asian immigrants it is necessary to examine the history of each of the major Asian groups, differentiating among people from China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and countries in Southeast Asia.

The first recorded arrival of people from Asia in the modern era occurred in 1790 when Filipino sailors escaped imprisonment aboard a Spanish galleon docked in New Orleans and fled into the bayous. The first large-scale Asian immigration to the United States took place when the **Chinese** came to work the gold fields of Northern California in 1848. American capitalists supported unfettered immigration in those years and welcomed the heavy Chinese immigration of unskilled workers; but organized labor opposed it, first on economic grounds, accusing the Chinese of lowering wages and increasing unemployment among natives, and later on racial and social grounds. For the first time in American history, racism was openly used as an argument for restricting immigration. The anti-Chinese movement led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the admission of unskilled Chinese workers to the U.S.

The years 1890 to 1924 marked the initial period of **Japanese** immigration that was also punctuated by anti-Japanese movements. The Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 excluded Japanese and Koreans from immigration, the Alien Land Acts of California denied Asians property rights, and the Immigration Act of 1917 denied entry to all Asians from a “Barred Zone” in Asia. Immigration from Asia was effectively prohibited by the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned admission of persons ineligible for citizenship, a category that included all Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Asian Indians.

**Filipinos** were allowed unrestricted entry to the United States as “nationals” since the Philippines formally became an American colonial territory in 1902, but there was surprisingly limited immigration. Filipinos were defined as aliens under the Philippine Independence Act of 1934, and from 1935 to 1946, when the Philippines gained independence, they had an immigration quota of 50 persons per year. After 1946, the annual quota rose to 100 persons a year and immigrants were granted naturalization rights. By 1960, there were only 176,000 Filipino immigrants in the U.S., a low number given the close ties between the two countries.

The first significant wave of immigration of **Asian Indians** to the United States took place between 1900 and 1920, when nearly 7,000 agricultural workers, mostly Sikhs from

## ***Teacher Background Materials***

---

Punjab, came to the Pacific Coast. They also worked in the lumber and railroad industries, alongside the Japanese and the Chinese. Like other Asian immigrants, they became targets of the hostility and suspicion of white Americans, who campaigned vigorously against the “ragheads” and “the Hindoo menace.” Immigration from India to the United States virtually stopped when Congress passed exclusion laws in 1917 and 1924.

Immigration from Asia halted completely during World War II. During this time, anti-Japanese sentiment reached its zenith with the U.S. government-sanctioned incarceration of nearly 110,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps.

Small gains for Asians were made after World War II when racial bars to naturalization were removed in 1952 and token quotas of 105 immigrants per annum were granted to Asian nations. Small numbers of non-quota immigrants were allowed to enter, chiefly war brides and other relatives.

Whereas before World War II there were harsh restrictions on immigration from Asia and American policy was one of exclusion and overt racial subordination, there was a change in U.S. policy after the war. American global interests, both economic and political, expanded dramatically, and the United States saw itself as the champion of the new free world. Meanwhile, many Asian nations threw off the yoke of colonialism, becoming proud, independent states that America could no longer humiliate with its discriminatory immigration policies.

The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act reflected this new world order and marked a watershed in Asian American immigration history. It eliminated earlier discriminatory racial quotas and made possible the entry into the U.S. of millions of immigrants from Asia. Comparison of immigration statistics shows that Asian immigration, which was negligible during the period 1901–1930 (3.7%), rose slightly during mid-century, and increased dramatically from 1961 to 1989 (33.4%).<sup>1</sup>

The conditions for Asian immigrants had changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. Whereas earlier they had been primarily single laborers, subject to exclusion, racially oppressed, and denied citizenship, since 1965 Asian immigrants have been mostly middle class, including professionals and entrepreneurs who have come with families to America. Asian immigrants no longer face overt and state-supported racism. Today Asian Americans are an increasingly significant minority in the United States.

---

<sup>1</sup>Source: Douglas S. Massey, “The New Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States,” *Population and Development Review*, 21, No. 3 (September 1995), 634. See also Figure 2b.

**VI. LESSON PLANS**

1. The Asian Americans Immigrants
2. Regulating Asian Immigration
3. Global forces and Asian Immigration
4. Why Do Asians Come to the United States?
5. The Future of Immigration Policy