

Ronald takaki,  
strangers from a  
different shore essay  
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Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* is a broad, comprehensive overview of Asians' experiences in America. The book addresses not only the different experiences and obstacles each Asian ethnic group had to face, but also how Americans' own views of Asians have transformed from negative stereotypes to positive ones, tinged with envy and resentment at the success of people many still refuse to consider "American."

Takaki's chief assertion throughout the work is that while Asians have been in America for over 150 years and are now almost ubiquitous in American life, they remain little-known and are still considered "foreign." He claims, "The belief that Americans do not include people with Asian ancestries is usually expressed . . . innocently [and] casually" (Takaki, 1989, p. 6), as though they were incapable of assimilation because of their non-European origins and features.

In addition, Takaki claims, this belief has influenced the writing of American history, which has long overlooked Asians' contributions to the nation, particularly in the West. He criticizes other historians' exclusion of Asians, among them Oscar Handlin's renowned *The Uprooted*, a history of immigrants that wholly omits anyone but Europeans. Takaki tries to fill what he considers a gaping void and states: "Eurocentric history serves no one. It only shrouds the pluralism that is America and makes our nation so unique. . . . Actually, as Americans, we came originally from many different shores" (Takaki, 1989, p. 7).

Takaki's approach is both chronological and ethnographic, examining each major Asian immigrant group's unique history in America. Though often

incorrectly seen as a monolith, Asians manifested rather different cultural traits, and their societies in America assumed very different characteristics according to when they arrived, the occupations they pursued, and the United States' prevalent political moods.

He covers the broad history of Asians in America, starting with the arrival of Chinese in California during the 1840s. Originally driven across the Pacific by instability and poverty at home, they arrived as goldseekers who dubbed California "gam saan," or "Gold Mountain." While there, they mined gold, formed the state's first class of non-white, nearly-powerless farm laborers, and (most famously) helped build the Central Pacific Railroad over the Sierra Nevada. However, says Takaki, white antagonism during economic downturns led to mob violence, prohibitions on property ownership, 1882's Exclusion Act (which curbed Chinese immigration for decades), and being herded into occupations like laundry. In order to protect themselves from increasing violence and maintain some livelihood, they became insular (adding to white Americans' view of them as "mysterious" and "inscrutable"), forming close-knit, mostly-male "Chinatowns" in urban areas, where they were both aided and exploited by merchants and protective groups known as tongs. Takaki compares their experience in the West to that of blacks in the South, except that the Chinese would be "a permanently degraded caste-labor force . . . forced to be foreigners forever" (Takaki, 1989, p. 99).

His account of other Asian groups (most of whom arrived in large numbers after 1890) shows that their lot was little better. The Japanese (the author is himself a third-generation Japanese-Hawaiian whose stepfather was Chinese)

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were similarly segregated and reviled, though they had a far more equal gender ratio than the Chinese and thus more family life and ultimately a larger American population, as well as greater economic success. Despite being legally barred from owning land, Japanese tenant farmers prospered, growing a majority of California's strawberries, tomatoes, and celery before 1940 (Takaki, 1989, p. 189), and they had a thriving urban economy and rising numbers of educated citizens.

However, says Takaki, American society was not yet willing to accept Asian success; "the very success of the Japanese in enterprise further aroused waves of exclusionist agitation, and their very withdrawal into their self-contained ethnic communities [much as the Chinese had done] reinforced hostile claims of their unassimilability and their condition as 'strangers'" (Takaki, 1989, p. 180). It also made it easier for West Coast whites to support their internment during World War II.

Other groups' experiences also fit the pattern of discrimination and exclusion from the American mainstream that Takaki says characterizes Asian-American history. Koreans' experiences resembled those of the Chinese and Japanese, despite their westernization and anti-Japanese sentiments. Asian Indians (many of them Sikhs) were technically Caucasian, but with *U. S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), the courts denied their "whiteness" because of the "unmistakable and profound differences" between them and Europeans (299); they were barred from importing their wives and, in California, many married Mexican women. Filipinos, though American citizens since the Spanish-American War, aroused white hatred for their frequently

intermarriage with white women, were stereotyped as "criminals," and "<https://assignbuster.com/ronald-takaki-strangers-from-a-different-shore-essay-sample/>

were seen by their guardians as backward natives to be 'civilized' by Americans seeking to carry the 'white man's burden' (Takaki, 1989, p. 324). In all cases, Asian Americans were forced into inferior status, denied most opportunities, and in some cases deemed "savages," yet they created communities, maintained their cultural identities, and steadily contributed to life in a nation that believed they could never truly belong.

World War II was a crucial turning point, Takaki maintains, because it gave Asians an opportunity to prove how "American" they were by supporting the war effort, particularly by serving in uniform. Their image in the American mainstream changed from that of mysterious strangers to brave allies, particularly in the case of the Chinese and Filipinos. Also, despite their internment in the Far West, Japanese Americans contributed over 33,000 troops (Takaki, 1989, p. 399), including the heavily-decorated 442<sup>nd</sup> Infantry unit. In the wake of the Allied victory over a racist Axis, the United States was forced to rethink its own racism and a wave of postwar reforms lifted the property, citizenship, and immigration restrictions that had long treated Asians as a foreign presence at best and an enemy at worst.

However, Takaki makes clear that despite Asian Americans' progress and attainment, their image as foreigners persists. A new stereotype based on their academic successes and achievements in scientific and technical careers depicts Asians as passive, studious, and overachieving. Also, the recent incarnation of anti-Asian racism manifests in working-class resentment of Asians' affluence and Asian nations' strong economies. Sometimes this manifests in violence; Takaki uses the murder of Detroit

engineer Vincent Chin in 1982 and other assaults on Asians by disgruntled, racist whites as examples of a mindset that somehow never truly disappeared. An unshakable sense of foreignness appears in both the old and new stereotypes, in which Asians are thought never to be fully attuned to being American, despite their long tenure and undeniable successes despite the United States' long legacy of racism.

*Strangers from a Different Shore* is a well-researched, fluently-written study that covers a broad stretch of an often-ignored aspect of American history. Takaki writes clearly and even-handedly, describing even the most violent incidents and flagrant racism with a subtle but contained revulsion. He also writes a sweeping history in a personal manner, giving special weight to the many interviewees and displaying both their pain and perseverance. This work seeks to cover a large void in the writing of American history, and in the seventeen years since its publication, it has become a landmark monograph in American ethnic history.

#### WORKS CITED

Takaki, R. (1989). *Strangers from a Different Shore* . Boston: Little, Brown and Company.