East Asian Business Proliferation in the United States

Abstract

It is difficult to abridge a comprehensive understanding of East Asian businesses without unconsciously painting an incomplete picture. According to a 2020 census, there are over 600,000 Asian-owned firms in the United States.[12] Along with the hundreds of thousands more of the past and the thick veil that has historically been cast over the Asian community, the magnitude and complexity of such businesses are difficult to distill into an extensive but still digestible capsule. This paper aims to trace the evolution of East Asian business development in the U.S. since the first wave of mass immigration from China in the 19th century. By studying the resilience of these communities in various historical contexts over time, this paper reviews the marginalization and economic perseverance of the Asian American population at large.

The exploration of East Asian business development is an outlook into how these marginalized groups have combated displacement and discrimination. Simultaneously, the lens of marginalization magnifies how and why East Asian businesses have historically developed in the U.S. Therefore, to understand how East Asian businesses have proliferated in time, it is imperative to observe their development from a historical standpoint—to better encapsulate the context in which they existed—and to first understand the immigration patterns from East Asia to the United States throughout history. It is a history afflicted with political strife, economic turmoil, and social alienation.

Each wave of East Asian immigrants and each specific community faced unique and different obstacles that cannot be generalized into one. East Asia is, as with other regions, not free of geopolitical dispute. While mainland China itself claims Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau as administrative regions, the independence of the three is a contested matter. While this research is not meant to address the geopolitical conflict in East Asia, it must be acknowledged that even within mainland China itself, there are countless diverse ethnic groups that cannot be consolidated into one identity, whether it be culturally or economically. Thus, it is evident that in regions outside of mainland China, there would also be cultural and economic diversity and distinction, which has historically translated over to the U.S. immigrant population. Therefore, the Chinese diaspora, the first significant wave of East Asian immigration to the U.S., refers to the collective mainland immigrants, as immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong did not begin arriving en masse until the mid-1900s, shortly after the Japanese and Korean diasporas.[37]

Business itself is a broad term, encompassing all things from multibillion dollar corporations to selling products online. In the context of East Asian businesses, the focus is on small businesses—the historically commonplace, the roots that have allowed East Asian immigrants to establish themselves in the U.S. These small businesses, even in the present day, are most often clustered in ethnic enclaves, located in urban regions with greater immigrant concentration. One such urban enclave is San Francisco's Chinatown, a historic landmark that captures the journey of Chinese immigrants over the centuries. A review of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake reveals the deliberate attempts at forced displacement faced by East Asian immigrants in the hands of city officials, who wished to relocate Chinese immigrants to the impoverished and desolate outskirts of the city. Nevertheless, East Asians and their businesses have continued to persist in the U.S., preserving old practices and innovating new operations, such as boba shops.

While what is magnified within history is often determined by the substantial—the larger number of deaths, the larger countries—it is also often determined by what fits a narrative, resulting in the erasure of marginalized groups. Even in the present day, a review of the racism and erasure faced by East Asians through the COVID-19 pandemic, the stereotyping that has afflicted their ability to receive higher education, and the global indifference toward the mass genocide of twenty million Chinese individuals during World War II demonstrates that history is still only as complete as circumstances and people make it.[39] It is for this very reason, the rampant erasure of Asian presence and history, that close examination and unfiltered account is necessary.

The Chinese Diaspora

Although Chinese immigrants began arriving in the United States by the late 18th century, with the California Gold Rush in 1849 came the first notable wave of East Asian immigrants, predominantly of Chinese heritage. During the Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants found work as miners and manual laborers. Beyond manual labor, the Gold Rush also presented other opportunities, such as canning, logging, and garden work. The most popular among the Chinese was laundry service; in the clothes of their customers, launderers would occasionally find specks of gold left behind.[13]

However, the influx of immigrants resulted in the passage of the Foreign Miners License Law, which required non-U.S. citizens to pay $20 a month for the right to mine.[15] Simultaneously, Chinese immigrants were prohibited from becoming citizens through any means, and although the law pertained to all non-U.S. citizens, it was Chinese and Latino immigrants that were targeted and charged in large numbers. Along with violent crime at mining sites often in the forms of arson and murder, many Chinese miners left for larger cities. Consequently, some Chinese immigrants migrated to Hawai'i, where they primarily worked in agriculture, but many migrated to San Francisco where they established the first Chinatown in the U.S.[14] While the majority of the Chinese population migrated westward, spreading out throughout California, small populations settled down in a plethora of other areas as well. Take, for example, the settlement of Chinese migrants in Oregon in the 1860s, where they clustered in the Granite and Union Creek areas to establish mines.[3]

A Chinese grocery store in San Francisco Chinatown, circa the late 19th century. Photo courtesy of Underwood Archives/Getty Images.

As the excitement of the Gold Rush died down and prospects became seemingly less likely, Chinese immigrants turned toward agriculture, railroad construction, and low-wage industrial jobs. The majority of Chinese immigrants began working in construction, particularly on the Transcontinental Railroad between 1863 and 1869. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was largely funded by Leland Stanford, who later founded Stanford University using much of the wealth generated by the construction of the railroad. While few European Americans were willing to work such brutal labor, upwards of 15,000 Chinese workers were employed to construct the railroad, where they worked long hours in harsh conditions

along steep cliffs, even during harsh winters, and were typically paid around half that of white workers. In addition to fatal working conditions, they were subjected to abuse at the hands of supervisors, and thousands of these Chinese workers died during their efforts.[2]

Chinese laborers constructing the Transcontinental Railroad circa the 1860s. Photo courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

While initially, most European Americans trifled such low-wage and labor intensive jobs generally occupied by Chinese immigrants–whether it be agriculture, construction, or industrial labor–economic hardship during the 1870s led many to resort to competing with the Chinese for low-paying, manual labor jobs. The competition for employment between European Americans and Chinese immigrants fed into anti-Chinese hate, eventually resulting in the Chinese Massacre of 1871, where a mob of over 500 in Los Angeles Chinatown lynched nineteen Chinese men.[13] However, agriculture remained a prospective and domineering job for Chinese immigrants. By the end of the 19th century, Chinese Americans constituted near 75 percent of agricultural workers on the west coast.[17]

With the increasing number of small servicing businesses–in particular, Chinese restaurants, East Asian grocery stores, and Chinese antique or art shops–more European Americans began to foster a curiosity for Chinese culture by the end of the 19th century. Additionally, as Chinese immigrants adopted their bicultural identity and attempted to preserve their Chinese heritage, ethnic communities began to organize Chinese festival celebrations in large cities such as San Francisco or New York, increasing European American exposure to Chinese culture. However, the influx of Chinese immigrants saw its end with the continued rise of anti-Chinese sentiment. With the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese laborers were strictly limited from entering the United States under the basis of endangering localities.[2]

The Expanding Worldview of the 20th Century

During the late 19th century, Japanese civilians began experiencing social unrest and economic decline as a result of rapid industrialization; the Japanese agricultural infrastructure was particularly affected by industrialization and urbanization. As a result, a large number of Japanese immigrants began their journey to the United States in the late 19th century. They largely settled down in Hawai'i and worked in the agriculture industry, often as indentured laborers in sugarcane fields.[22] The large influx of Japanese immigrants lasted until the roaring twenties, and during the early 20th century many began settling down along the Pacific coast as opposed to the concentrated migration to Hawai'i as seen during the late 19th century. Like Chinese immigrants, many Japanese immigrants owned small businesses such as restaurants or grocery stores. During World War II, when xenophobia toward the Japanese following the bombing of Pearl Harbor led to the mass internment of Japanese Americans, Japanese Americans were forced to desert their belongings, homes, and businesses alike. Following their release and return from these internment camps, Japanese Americans often

found themselves no longer withholding the property they once owned prior to internment, with little, but often no, compensation.[2] As a result, Japanese Americans were left to rebuild their businesses from scratch, while struggling to provide for themselves and their families during the process.

Japanese Americans preparing to evacuate their store in San Francisco Japantown, following their notice of internment circa 1942. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Korean immigrants, unlike the Chinese and Japanese, first began arriving in large numbers to the United States in the 20th century. Similar to the Japanese, Korean immigrants arrived en masse to Hawai'i, working on pineapple and sugar plantations. The Immigration Act of 1924, however, barred the naturalization and immigration of all East Asians, putting a temporary end to mass immigration of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese people.[2] It was only under the condition that Asian students were arriving in the United States with the purpose of earning a higher education at select institutions that East Asians were permitted to enter the country.

The 1952 McCarran and Walter Act nullified the prohibition of naturalization and immigration of Asians set in place by the previous immigration acts. Resultantly, during the 1950s and early 1960s, many Koreans arrived in a second wave to the United States, seeking employment as doctors, lawyers, and professors. They became characterized as the "model-minority," though not free from discrimination. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act nullified the quota system put in place by the previous immigration acts as well, the necessity of increasing the number of professional workers from Asia being recognized by the U.S. government.[2] This led to a third wave of Korean immigrants. While the first two waves of Korean immigrants in the early to mid-20th century were characterized by blue collar laborers and refugees, the third wave was substantially characterized by the voluntary arrival of white collar workers seeking better economic opportunities.[23]

With a progression toward a more open-door immigration policy during the 20th century, the influx of East Asian immigrants, and in turn businesses, continued to advance. The late-20th century saw the beginning of Mongolian immigration to the U.S. Immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan continued to arrive in the U.S., although not in the outstanding masses seen by the initial Chinese, Japanese, and Korean diasporas.

Urban Enclaves

As Chinese immigrants began shifting away from railroad construction following the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in the late 1800s, they began migrating in the masses toward urban enclaves, creating Chinatowns. Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves served not only as safe havens, but as opportune business districts, and Chinatowns across the U.S. have seen the roots of East Asian business proliferation. While East Asian immigrants struggled to find employment in a white-dominating society, ethnic enclaves openly offered employment and business opportunities to East Asian immigrants.[19]

As early as the late 1800s, Japanese immigrants, like the Chinese, began to cluster in Japantowns, the first being in the Western Addition of San Francisco, in close proximity to Chinatown. In 1945, following the release of the interned Japanese Americans, many began returning to the West Coast, clustering once again in the Western Addition of San Francisco. However, in the late 1940s, much of the reestablished Japantown in San Francisco was obtained by the government through eminent domain and turned into a large-scale urban renewal project, displacing much of the Japanese and erasing their businesses.[24]

Koreatowns, similarly, were predominantly established in large urban regions such as Los Angeles, California. Koreans first began arriving in Southern California in the first decade of the 1900s, and the first Koreatown was established in Riverside, California during this time. Much like other immigrant groups, the first wave of Korean immigrants began as manual laborers. However, following the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, as a new wave began arriving in the U.S., more Korean immigrants began establishing small businesses. The Los Angeles Koreatown shifted westward from Riverside following this influx, where Korean grocery stores, restaurants, offices, and nightclubs proliferated.[25]

At the foundation of ethnic enclaves were hotels and rooming houses, where Asian migrants often sought safe shelter. Banks, cosmetic services such as barbershops, bathhouses, grocery stores, restaurants, and drug stores were among the common and most successful businesses in ethnic enclaves. As such urban enclaves began growing in size and popularity, some even developed tourism related businesses. In 1958, San Francisco Chinatown pioneered the first Miss Chinatown pageant. Bars, nightclubs, and other nightlife began attracting more attention and visitors to the larger enclaves. Along with these social brackets came underground businesses, such as prostitution, gambling, narcotics, and more. Gang activity also increased, especially in larger cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, or New York, where extortion, trafficking, and theft were sources of income.[3]

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake: An Account of Marginalization

As an epicenter of East Asian enclaves, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 devastated these ethnic communities and businesses. With a magnitude of 7.9, the earthquake resulted in an estimated 3,000 deaths and another five billion dollars in damage. But beyond the deaths and the material damage that ensued was conflict in the form of spatial inequality and displacement. While natural disaster is often believed to be an event that equally afflicts the rich and the poor, natural disaster does not truly transcend societal institutions. Rich neighborhoods such as Nob Hill were prioritized when it came to extinguishing the fires that resulted from the earthquake, and with the large quantity of water that would be needed to extinguish the fires, little water was designated to Chinatown and other poor, ethnic communities. Instead, the extinguishing of fire in these ethnic communities consisted of the use of gunpowder and dynamite.[27] The deliberate blowing up of buildings in this area was intended to stop the spread of fire, but due to poor planning by the San Francisco Fire Department, instead contributed to the spread of fire to otherwise unaffected areas.[26] As a result, the San Francisco Earthquake disproportionately devastated the poor and ethnic communities as opposed to the rich, predominantly white communities.

Following the San Francisco Earthquake, the geographical boundaries were redrawn to benefit the elite property owners while the proletariat were planned to be confined to the outskirts. In reality, the redrawn boundaries would conversely only benefit white

property owners. East Asians were prohibited from claiming benefits of citizenship following the disaster and were confined to refugee camps by the army, only to be relocated continuously due to complaints of white civilians regarding the unwanted proximity of East Asians to their homes. San Francisco mayor Eugene Schmitz issued statements following the disaster that the police should not waste time on thieves, and his statement was redirected toward Asians, especially the Chinese, who were then shot by the police simply for picking an item up or having full pockets.[26] Additionally, city officials and white residents envisioned the displacement of Chinatown to the very edge of the city instead of in the center as it was prior to the earthquake. The San Francisco Chronicle article published on April 27, 1906, detailed the "hope that the Chinese quarter may now be established in some location far removed from the center of town,"[28] making way for commercial profit off of the newly available land. However, following the deliberation, city officials calculated that the displacement and suppression of Chinatown would result in lost tax revenue and trade profit, and the Chinese were finally permitted to rebuild Chinatown.[29]

San Francisco's Chinatown after the 1906 earthquake. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The Cultivation of History

While Asians are the smallest non-native ethnic group in the U.S. at 6.3%[30] , Asian businesses constitute around ten percent of all U.S. businesses.[12] The 2000s has seen the continued growth of common historical businesses, whether it be grocery stores, restaurants, nightclubs, or agriculture. Restaurants over a century old can still be found in various Asian enclaves. In the historic San Francisco Chinatown, Sam Wo, located on 713 Clay Street, has been open since the area was first rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake. It is a family business still run by the daughter of the first owner, and offers the same traditional dishes as it once did over a century ago. To the west of Sam Wo is Eastern Bakery, which is the oldest bakery in Chinatown dating back to 1924.[5]

In addition to these historic enterprises has been the growing popularity of newer innovations. While milk tea itself has been around for much longer, boba, or tapioca pearls, originated in Taiwan in the 1980s. Since then, it has traveled over to the U.S., where shops known as "boba shops" that serve bubble tea have seen growing popularity, especially in areas such as Northern California that have a large Asian community.

Although growing tolerance toward the Asian community can be found in various parts of the U.S., increased hatred is also commonplace in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A rise in violence against Asians, especially the Chinese community, has spiked, with anti-Asian sentiment in the form of shootings, stabbings, and robbing. Asian businesses have been vandalized and boycotted, and the owners verbally and physically accosted. While Chinatown can typically be seen flooding with tourists, it has seen record levels of desertedness, even while neighboring businesses have seen a return of customers.[20] While Asian Americans saw the lowest level of

unemployment across all racial groups during the Great Recession from 2007 to 2008, they have experienced a higher unemployment level, at 6.3%, than white workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.[36] This is reflected by the result of the Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the U.S. (STAATUS) Index of 2022, with 1 in 5 Americans displaying the belief that Asian Americans are at least somewhat at fault for COVID-19.[34]

A vandalized Chinese restaurant in Wyckoff, New Jersey circa June of 2020. Photo courtesy of ABC News.

Preservation of Historical Monument

The establishment of East Asian culture in the U.S. through business innovation contributes directly to the rich diversity and the economic growth of the U.S. According to the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Asian American enterprises generate over $300 billion in sales and provide employment for over 2 million workers.[35] However, it is important to recognize and view these economic innovations in the context of the greater U.S., where East Asians were historically deemed ineligible for citizenship and denied access to education, jobs, and government services. Therefore, the analysis and appreciation for East Asian proliferation in the U.S. can be seen through the lens of their small businesses, where necessity of employment and survival became the hearth of innovation and toil. Nonetheless, the struggle of East Asian immigrants should not be remembered by the success of their businesses only, but rather by the continued struggle against hardship that has been overcome. The erasure of East Asian immigrant history in the U.S. is rampant, with stereotyping of East Asians as self-serving and solitary. Instead, East Asian immigrants, although hardworking and capable of making do with what they had, should not be boiled down and forgotten for the prejudice, discrimination, and cruel circumstances faced by the "model minority".

In 2021, 1 in 6 Asian American adults reported a hate crime experience. However, in the wake of present inequity, the discrimination faced consistently by East Asians is still forgotten.[32] The STAATUS Index of 2022 reported that an estimated 42% of Americans are unable to name a single historical event or policy pertaining to Asian Americans.[34] While legislation such as affirmative action justly provides the historically marginalized black community with support and opportunity, it simultaneously fails to recognize the marginalization faced by the Asian community and contributes to the erasure of Asian discrimination. In a study conducted by Princeton University sociologists Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford in 2009, the results displayed that Asian Americans had to average 140 points higher than white applicants on the SAT to receive equal consideration for admission.[33] This is not to argue the issue of affirmative action and whether such legislation should be continued or terminated. Rather, to pose that in order to recognize both the erasure of and the extent to which Asian Americans have historically contributed to U.S. social and economic infrastructure in the face of discrimination, all marginalized groups must be recognized as having complex framework, distinct and unique to one another, and unable to be justly clustered into one for consideration.

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