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Published on H-SHGAPE (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Jay W. Driskell

Lon Kurashige's excellent history of anti-Asian racism in the United States offers a timely reinterpretation of the debates over Asian immigration. As political debates rage over the legality and morality of immigration exclusion based on religion, it is useful to revisit the long history of race-based exclusion. Kurashige's book, therefore, is essential reading for all who are interested in the history of the American exclusionist impulse and its deep connection to ongoing political debates about just how the United States polices its borders and its citizenship.

What differentiates Kurashige's book from the existing historiography is his pointed attempt to tell both sides of the story. He widens his lens beyond the tactics and arguments of exclusionists, who successfully limited, and then stopped, Asian immigration to the United States until the mid-twentieth century, by suggesting that we instead consider why Chinese exclusion took so long to enact, and why full Asian exclusion was not accomplished until 1924. If Chinese immigrants first entered the United States in large numbers in the 1840s, why, he questions, was it not until 1882 that the Chinese Exclusion Act passed Congress? While traditional interpretations suggest that it took decades for the virulent anti-Chinese sentiment of Californians to reach the halls of government, Kurashige's answer is more nuanced, and far more valuable. It took decades, he asserts, because a variety of political actors and economic interests opposed exclusion and fought against attempts to exclude Asian immigrants. We must therefore understand the history of anti-Asian racism not as the triumphant march of exclusion through World War II but rather as a protracted battle between special interest groups, some of which supported and some of which opposed Asian immigration. Moreover, analyzing both sides of the debate reveals the intimate ties between anti-Asian racism and larger political issues, including “immigration and labor, race relations, foreign relations, and national security” (p. 228). His careful reading of congressional votes and other oft-neglected sources offers a nuanced
analysis of this decades-long debate that was only resolved with the Immigration Act of 1965.

Kurashige’s book is organized chronologically into an introduction, conclusion, and eight chapters. The chapters trace the debate between the groups he calls “exclusionists” and “egalitarians,” from the 1840s through the late twentieth century. He concludes that the triumph of egalitarianism—as multicultural progressivism—in fact obscured its history, as late twentieth-century debates about Asian model minorities and redress for Japanese American internees erased historical memories of egalitarian impulses and the very real debates over exclusion. His choice to extend the discussion into the late twentieth century and to examine debates over all Asian immigrants, from Chinese to Indians to Filipinos, allows him to craft a thorough and masterful reinterpretation of anti-Asian racism in US history.

In chapter 1, Kurashige uses Senator William H. Seward’s vision of an American empire spreading across the Pacific to illustrate the desires of egalitarians, who sought stronger economic ties with Asia. Their interests culminated with the 1868 Burlingame Treaty (coincidentally signed the day Congress ratified the Fourteenth Amendment), which offered the Chinese government diplomatic relations equal to that given to European nations. Yet even this treaty, which Kurashige marks as “the peak of Republican consensus regarding the fair treatment of Chinese immigrants,” banned the naturalization of Chinese immigrants, revealing the uphill challenge facing those who sought to encourage Chinese immigration (p. 29). This chapter introduces a key element of Kurashige’s argument, which is that anti-Asian exclusion did not exist separately from other political considerations but was intimately connected to other, seemingly non-related political issues. His careful integration of the anti-Chinese story into the larger narrative of the decline of the Reconstruction Republican consensus and the rise of Democratic power in the 1870s demonstrates how historical contingencies assisted the exclusionists in rallying support for their cause.

The most interesting point that Kurashige makes in chapter 2, which addresses the familiar territory of the debate over Chinese exclusion between 1876 and 1882, is the link between exclusionist congressional votes and other regional political issues. His careful parsing of congressional votes during this era reveals a trend in which “members from regions peripheral to the nation’s industrial economy opposed the interests of the northeastern core” (p. 58). This reading of congressional votes suggests that pro-exclusion votes may not have reflected anti-Asian racism as much as horse-trading for votes and antagonism from the West and Midwest toward the economic development plans of the northeastern states, which generally supported trade with China and therefore opposed exclusion.

In chapters 3 and 4, Kurashige addresses the expansion of the exclusionist movement, as it enacted limits on previously exempt classes and immigrants already in the United States and was incorporated into a larger anti-immigrant movement aimed at certain Europeans as well. At the same time, he notes that the acquisition of US territories in the Pacific (Hawaii and the Philippines) prompted both sides to refine their arguments in anticipation of future debates over the status of migrants from those regions. He also notes the significance of improved diplomatic relations with Japan and the emergence of those like David Starr Jordan who sought to restrict Japanese laborers while welcoming Japanese students and other elites. Eastern egalitarians joined together to fight against anti-Japanese legislation, with the support not only of missionaries and church organizations but also of wealthy benefactors, including Andrew Carnegie.

Nevertheless, the outbreak of World War I facilitated the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917, which included the long-debated literacy test and banned immigration from most of Asia,
despite the hopes of Wilsonian internationalists that the end of the war would see a loosening of immigration restrictions. We now know that the 1920s did not witness a flowering of American internationalism but instead saw the rise of isolationism and increased immigration restriction. Kurashige lends nuance to this old debate by tracing the continuing support for the egalitarian perspective in Congress and even in California. His reading of the hearings on Japanese immigration held in 1920 reveal support for the Japanese from a variety of groups. He argues that those who shared common interest with the Japanese—teachers, social workers, businessmen—understood the value of Japanese contributions to American society and saw no need to exclude them. Despite this support, as we know, Congress ignored those who warned of the danger of offending Japan by including Asian exclusion in the notorious 1924 Immigration Act.

Kurashige points to the final exclusion of Asians through the 1924 law as the moment when exclusionist attention turned from the Japanese to Filipinos, whose status as citizens of a US territory made their immigration status more challenging to regulate. Although exclusionists achieved victory with the Tydings-McDuffee Act, which paired Philippine independence with exclusion of Filipino immigrants as aliens ineligible for citizenship, Kurashige argues that the tenor of the debate differed in the thirties. Radical labor unions of the decade allowed Filipino members and opposed exclusion; international organizations, such as the Institute on Pacific Relations, sought to study and publicize Pacific cultures and ease relations between Asia and the United States; and the blatant racism of earlier debates was, he argues, no longer as acceptable, although still prevalent outside the halls of government. In the face of this critique, exclusionists couched their objections as a “necessary evil” rather than “an unambiguous social good” (p. 156).

World War II brought exclusionists their greatest triumph—Japanese American internment—and their final defeat, as Kurashige argues in chapter 7. The need to maintain Asian allies and to mitigate the racism evident in the internment program forced Congress and the president to repeal restrictions against Indians, the Chinese, and Filipinos. Kurashige’s brief, but nuanced, discussion of the internment camps, a topic thoroughly covered by numerous historians, reminds readers that Dillon Myer himself (head of the War Relocation Authority) sympathized with Japanese Americans and that many agency administrators remained committed to nondiscrimination. While he does not suggest that readers ignore the underlying racist assumptions of the camps, his attention to these contradictions contributes to his argument that the egalitarian and exclusionist impulses remained in conflict until Cold War political tensions prompted the revision of US immigration policy to allow Asian immigration and naturalization.

Kurashige addresses a swath of mid-to-late twentieth-century issues in his consideration of “the egalitarian era.” His final chapter includes discussion of the debate on Hawaiian statehood, the emergence of the idea of Asians as a model minority, and the campaign for redress for internees. Using the work of Ronald Takaki as a model, he argues that the development of ethnic studies and identity politics, with their focus on the history of racism and condemnation of assimilation, ignored (not necessarily intentionally) the presence of the egalitarian perspective in the exclusion debate. Recovering the full history of the issue, he concludes, allows us to understand the complexity of history, the humanity of historical actors, and the historically contingent meanings of “egalitarian” and “exclusionist” (p. 227). The Two Faces of Exclusion does much to forward these goals and offers an important reworking of old assumptions about the political dynamics of anti-Asian racism.
Lest one question the timeliness of Kurashige’s work, note that the book went to press early in the 2016 presidential campaign, so he concludes that the absence of calls for mass incarceration in post-9/11 debates over immigration indicates an apparent victory of the egalitarian impulse. Were this book published today, he would undoubtedly revise that conclusion.

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