

Cultural Relationships with the Land: Asian American Perspectives

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Abstract

America has always been a place of ethnic diversity. From the early 1800s to the 21th century, Asian and Pacific peoples have played a vital role in the development of the United States and made lasting contributions in all elements of American society. Based on existing literatures, this paper summarized Asian American perspectives on cultural relationships with the lands.

Keywords: Asian, Land, Culture, Forests, Trees.

Who are Asians?

Asians come from the areas of southern, central, and eastern Asia, and from islands that lie within the Pacific Rim. This region is bordered by Russia to the north, and by Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan to the west. To the southwest, it is bordered by the Indian Ocean and to the east, the Pacific Ocean. People from China, Japan, Korea, Philippine, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei fall under the category of Asian (NPS, 2005). Groups from the Pacific Islands—such as Hawaii, the Marshall Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Mariana Islands—represent a related group. Some institutions link Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Others, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, treat them as separate entities.

The Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians were among the earliest to immigrate in significant numbers and constitute the largest Asian groups that settled in the United States (NPS, 2005). These five Asian immigrant groups shaped the cultural landscape in California, Washington, Hawaii, and in major metropolitan areas like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

History of Immigration

According to William S. Bernard, professor emeritus of sociology at Brooklyn College, Asian immigration to the Americas is divided into five periods:

1. Colonial Period (1607-1775), with Asian settlements reported as early as 1765;
2. Open Door Period (1776-1881), when Asians arrived in the new nation, eager to stake a claim to the country's wealth and prosperity;
3. Regulation Period (1882-1916), where concerns over Asian assimilation to American culture led to legislated discrimination against Asians;
4. Restriction Period (1917-1964), which saw housing covenants and other restrictions against Asian groups become prevalent; and

5. Liberalization Period (1965-present), with the removal of quotas and legal impediments to Asian immigration and the beginning of the process of greater assimilation of Asians into American culture.

Trace back to the American history, the story of Chinese labor in the completion of the trans-continental railroad is a critical one in our understanding of westward expansion and land use movement. However, the history of Asians in America is not limited to labor history. Chinese students arrived on American shores as early as 1847. Filipino and Japanese students attended American schools, colleges, and universities in the late 19th-to-early 20th centuries (NPS, 2005). The latter part of the 20th century, a new generation of Asian immigrants arrived with technological and managerial expertise in medicine and in the information services field. Today, Asian communities are found in diverse locales in the United States,

Asian American

The term Asian American emerged in the 1960s, fueled by the same civil rights issues driving other minority groups to seek equal representation within American society (NPS, 2005). Asian American students no longer wanted to be called Asiatic or Oriental, but wanted a phrase that represented their ethnic heritage and their American roots. People of Asian descent engaged the political and educational establishment in the same manner as young African Americans and Hispanic Americans. In 1968, San Francisco State College, now San Francisco State University, and the University of California at Berkeley were the first institutions of higher education to offer Asian American Studies programs. This period also coincides with the lifting of numerical quotas for ethnic immigrants with the 1965 amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. Recent studies of ethnic minorities in the United States suggest that Asian groups possess a strong sense of place.

However, diverse people such as Asian Americans are often deemed to be “foreign” no matter how many generations lived in America.

Cultural “Assimilation”

Asian Americans as a group have tremendous cultural diversity. It would be a serious mistake to view them as a culturally homogeneous bloc. Groups with a long (multiple generations) history in America such as Chinese and Japanese Americans tend to have a far greater degree of cultural assimilation to mainstream American culture. Cultural “assimilation” refers to an ethnic minority’s acceptance of the dominant cultural pattern of the host society (e.g., language, religion, diet, dress, and child-rearing practices) (Gramann, 1996). The relation with the land of such highly assimilated Asian Americans would be less ethnically distinctive.

More recent immigrants to the United States such as the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian groups displaced by the Vietnamese War, reflect greater differences in all areas such as language, attitudes toward natural resources, and facility-development

preferences. It would, however, be a mistake to predict the total cultural assimilation of all these Asian groups with the simple passage of time, as suggested by the “melting pot” hypothesis, which was favored in the past. Understanding the dynamics of cultural change requires understanding the process of acculturation.

Cultural Relationships with the Land

Why do we even care about the cultural relationships with the land? Because increasing knowledge of the diverse ecological relationships of peoples to their environments affords an opportunity to assess these relationships with respect to ecological principles and to assess their value for helping to solve regional and local environmental problems (Nabhan, 1995). Also, sustainability is increasingly being defined in terms of conserving cultural as well as biological diversity (Manley et al., 1995). The varied past and present approaches of Americans to resource use and land management could contribute significantly to maintaining biological and cultural diversity, and improving human livelihood (Soulé and Kohm, 1989). Investigation of the relationships between such land-management activities and their ecological consequences is a recent field of study.

Cultural use of land by Asians are very similar with others, that is food, timber, medicine, horticulture, crafts, fishery, live stock, recreation, etc. Asian and their land-use practices were successful for thousands of years in maintaining diverse and productive ecosystems. Their fundamental land-use ethic: to interact with nature respectfully and in ways allowing all life forms to coexist. This ethic transcended cultural and political boundaries. It comprised spiritual, philosophical, and economic dimensions that encouraged sustained relationships between human societies and environments. Thus, all life forms are related to humans and must be treated with respect.

Asian American and Forests

It is believed that the authentic virgin forest of the Americas was discovered over 10,000 years ago by the first Asian immigrants, who quickly set about modifying the forest to suit their ends (McNeely et al., 2003). Shifting cultivation was brought to America by Asians based on their practice on the tropical forest land in their native countries. Shifting cultivators plan their lives on the basis of the cycle of clearing and tilling the land, planting, harvesting, and regenerating vegetation in the fallow fields to recover nutrients over the subsequent decade or two before the cycle begins anew. A wide range of crops can be grown in forest fields, transforming a natural forest into a harvestable one which does not necessarily lose diversity on a landscape scale.

Trees played a crucial role in the initial occupation of the western hemisphere. It is now believed that the critical environmental variable that enabled the first humans to move from Asia into North America was the reappearance of trees in Alaskan river valleys, which provided essential fuel sources as glaciers withdrew at the end of the Pleistocene around 11-12,000 years ago (Hoffecker, Powers, and Goebel, 1993). Human influence on forested ecosystems, therefore, began as soon as people moved into the continent. As

they moved further south, the immigrants from Asia continued to modify the American forests. In reviewing the evidence, Denevan (1992) concluded that pre-Columbian human settlement had modified forest extent and composition, expanded grasslands, and rearranged the local landscape through countless artificial earthworks. Agricultural fields, towns, roads and trails were common, having local impacts on soil, micro-climate, hydrology, and wildlife. These early immigrants had a significant impact on biodiversity as well, with some 34 genera of large mammals becoming extinct around the time of first human occupation of the continent (Martin and Klein, 1984).

Asians and Land Ownership

There is no doubt that the Chinese who worked on railroad construction in the nineteenth century made historic contribution in land exploration, development and land management. They later turned into gold miners working claims only made profitable by the low returns that the Chinese were willing to accept. Soon they were followed by Japanese. Some Asians began farming by 1906 on leased lands where they were better able to lease large tracts of land working as migrant agricultural laborers and some began to become truck farmers, an occupation to which many flocked, in spite of anti immigrant legislation (Nomura, 1986-87; Nomura, 1993). These relatively small numbers of Asian Americans today have low visibility.

More significant for public lands has been the recent migration from Southeast Asia. Since 1975, more than 950,000 have entered the United States (Freeman and Welaratna 1993). Over the past seven or eight years, several different nationalities of Southeast Asian immigrants have been increasingly noticeable on public lands. For example, in Washington and Oregon, they harvest special forest products, some of which are highly seasonal, such as mushrooms, and others, such as beargrass which can be harvested any time that its habitat is snow free. Cambodians and Laotians, especially have produced for and organized the beargrass trade, a large portion of which is exported (Freed 1995). More publicity has been given to Southeast Asian participation in mushroom harvesting. As the price of mushrooms for chic restaurants and export to Japan and Europe accelerated over the past several years, examination of permits issued by national forests show increasing numbers of Cambodians and other southeast Asian immigrants including Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese and Thai coming mainly from Tacoma, Seattle, Olympia, and the Aberdeen area of the Washington coast, Portland and northern California.

Since a majority of the Southeast Asian immigrants came to the United States in the latter part of the 1970's, the aging of these people, their increasing familiarity with English, and their increasing integration into regular, full time jobs, the growth of a new generation of U.S. educated and English speaking children, and the low desirability of stoop labor suggests that their participation in the harvest of special forest products will not substantially increase and most likely will decrease in the longer run.

In addition to conflicts among harvesters of special forest products is concern for educating immigrant populations about the ways which public land agencies would like their lands to be treated and for manifestations of racist behavior by local Euro American

residents. Cultural gaps in communication and different histories of land use make this process problematic. Establishing more liaisons with different user communities and encouraging the formation of alliances of people involved in the harvest of these products may help mitigate conflicts and help resolve some of the differences in the way public lands are treated. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management need to bring as many people together as possible to discuss the issues of discrimination, rights, and sustainability in order to determine special forest product management policy and to engage the resource users in the gathering of information about conditions of the land. By involving all parties as early as possible, land management agencies will be able develop policies that are held to by users.

Pacific Islanders and the Land Use Ethic

Hawaiians mind all aspects of the land—all natural and cultural resources are interrelated, and that all are culturally significant. The integrity of a landscape and its sense of place depend upon the well-being of the whole entity, not only a part of it. Thus, what we do to one part of the landscape has an affect on the rest of the landscape. Properly planned, designed, and built features could ensure both physical and spiritual well-being for the inhabitants and users. An excerpt from a speech giving by a Hawaiian demonstrated a strong sense of land-human relationship:

“The spirit of the land speaks to all who have ears to hear, regardless of race. Land is chief; people are its humble servants. It is wrong for some servants to demand supremacy for their family or their racial group thereby arrogantly asserting they are superior over the land. The navigation stories confirm we are all immigrants here -- even someone with 100% native blood has 99% of the bones of all his ancestors buried somewhere else in the world outside. We are ALL servants to the land.”

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