The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring

Edited by
Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich,
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Preface

This volume is, in a sense, a sequel to *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), edited by Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich. As the title indicates, that work focused on the history of Asians in the United States in the pre–World War II era, when Asian immigrants were primarily laborers, subject to exclusion, denial of citizenship, and racial oppression. Our primary goal there was to formulate a theoretical understanding of Asian immigration in the context of a developing global capitalism. We saw the immigration of Asians to the United States not simply as a product of discrete pushes and pulls in the homelands and receiving country, but as a more systematic phenomenon. In particular, we attempted to link U.S. imperialism in Asia with dislocations that spurred emigration. At the same time, we tried to show that a changing U.S. capitalist economy, particularly on the West Coast, created a demand for a semicoerced labor force that could be filled by these emigrants.

Even as we were conducting that research, we recognized the need for a follow-up study of post–World War II Asian immigration. Meetings were held by a group of scholars at the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the mid-1980s to get such a study off the ground, but we let it languish. We renewed the interest in 1989 when Paul Ong joined us and we formed a new team of researchers.

From the start we knew that the new Asian immigration is, in many ways, different from the old. No longer were workers the primary immigrants; now middle-class people, including professionals and entrepreneurs, were arriving in large numbers. Moreover, the response by the United States to the new immigrants was no longer one of exclusion and overt racial subordination. Our theories regarding Asian immigration, therefore, needed to be expanded to cover these changes.

Our approach still starts with the effects of global capitalism on Asian immigration. We continue to believe that immigration needs to be understood within this larger context. Since World War II, however, global capitalism has undergone considerable growth and change. Not only has the world economy become much more globally integrated, but the role of Asia in that economy has shifted dramatically as well. No longer are Asian countries subject to Western and particularly U.S. dominance; instead, they have become formidable competitors in the world market. Concomitantly, Asian emigrants are no longer primarily displaced peasants, although there remains a significant component of working-class Asian immigrants accompanying the middle-class migrants.

The new immigration began formally with the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. Before the enactment of this legislation, immigration from Asia had been subject to harsh restrictions. Asia had been singled out for unique treatment in this regard. The shift in law was not simply a product of U.S. recognition of a clearly discriminatory policy, but also a reflection of the changing world order. Asia could no longer be treated in a humiliating manner, particularly when U.S. interests in the continent were expanding dramatically. The change in law that opened the gates to the new immigrants is thus in important ways a result of the globalizing economy.

In this work we use the concept of "restructuring," especially of the Pacific Rim economy. Restructuring is another term for the rapid global economic integration that is taking place. As we see it, the new Asian immigration is not only a product of the restructuring of the Pacific Rim region, but also a force that is contributing to that restructuring. The region is experiencing large-scale growth in trade relations, in capital flows in both directions, and in accompanying political involvements. The movement of people is a concomitant of these flows and in turn plays an important part in them. Immigration, trade, investment, economic aid, political and military involvement all go hand in hand. It is this larger context, the restructuring of the Pacific Rim, that provides the theoretical framework for this study.

Unlike *Labor Immigration under Capitalism*, which centered on

Asian immigration into California and Hawaii, the current study concentrates more narrowly on the new Asian immigration in Los Angeles. We made this choice because the new immigration is far larger and more complex than the old; we could not hope to cover the entire new immigration experience. Rather than spread our coverage too thin, we decided to develop a locational focus. Los Angeles was chosen because it is, indeed, the major center of the new Asian immigration (although we recognize that there are multiple secondary centers as well) and is an important node in the emerging Pacific Rim economy, a "global city" for the region. Thus a study of Los Angeles links the analysis of restructuring to immigration.

Another reason for the focus on Los Angeles is that it enables us to link macro- and microlevel forces. To put it another way, we can combine the global or regional level with the local level and consider how the two interact. This study, however, does not deal much with individual, subjective experiences. Rather, we emphasize how social forces affect processes such as immigration and the economic and political adaptation of immigrants. Despite this "structural" emphasis, we are very concerned with how these social forces and processes play themselves out in the experience of people. Limiting our research to one urban area enables us to develop a more concrete account of the experiences of the new Asian immigrants.

Most of the research reported in this book was conducted before the Los Angeles urban uprising of 29 April to 1 May 1992. The uprising brought the city's new Asian immigrants to the nation's attention, as Korean stores became one of the targets of attack. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to elucidate this event, but this volume may help provide some background for understanding it. The uprising did not come as a surprise to the authors of this book, who could see conflicts brewing. Moreover, we do not believe that the occurrence marks the end of such conflicts. Our hope is that this volume will contribute to an understanding of the role being played by the new Asian immigrants in Los Angeles, that it will point to contributions as well as to areas of conflict, and that it will serve in the efforts being made to resolve the problems.

This book is divided into four parts. Part I presents our basic approach and sketches out the major issues under study. We lay out the general idea of restructuring, particularly as it is manifested in the Pacific Rim region, and relate it to Asian immigration. Part II analyzes developments in Asia since World War II as they affect emigration and conditions in the United States that led to changes in immigration policies. Here we also describe the new immigrants, their settlement patterns, and their class characteristics.

In Part III we turn to the economy of Los Angeles and the role the new immigrants are playing in it. We focus on two industries—garment and health care—and the Chinese-Vietnamese ethnic economy. Our subjects range from the professionals, managers, and workers to the entrepreneurs. While we do not claim this section to be all-inclusive, we attempt to present in it a spectrum of economic activities representative of Asian immigrants in California.

Part IV examines some of the political ramifications of the new Asian immigration, including the involvement of the immigrants in the politics of a suburban area, conflicts with other nonwhite groups, and competition for public funding. Our focus is the impact of post-1965 Asian immigration on the distribution of and struggle for power and resources in the local community.

The contributors to this volume have been trained in different disciplines, including sociology, economics, anthropology, urban planning, and history. We share the belief that an adequate understanding of Asian immigration must be multidisciplinary. Although we try to develop a common language and style, years of professional practice make it difficult to shed the idiosyncrasies of our respective disciplines. We aim more to lay out lines of future investigation than to give a comprehensive account. This book should be seen, therefore, as an orientation or framework that we hope will stimulate more research.

In the course of researching and writing this book, we have benefited from the participation of many individuals and organizations. First and foremost are the numerous informants and interviewees who provided the basis for our explorations. These individuals are acknowledged separately in each chapter. Organizations that provided funding for the project include the Uni-

versity of California at Los Angeles and the University of California at Riverside academic senates, the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, and the Center for Pacific Rim Studies. We are indebted to Sucheng Chan and an anonymous referee for their insightful comments and to Suzanne Hee, Phil Okamoto, Glenn Omatsu, and Karen Umemoto for editing and pulling together the manuscript.

Contents

Part I
Introduction

1. The Political Economy of Capitalist Restructuring and the New Asian Immigration

Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng

Since the mid-1960s, immigration from Asia has been renewed on a large scale. The only other period that witnessed a similar influx started with the gold rush in the mid-nineteenth century and extended to 1934; during this time, thousands of Asians immigrated to the United States. Coming primarily from China, Japan, and the Philippines, they were mostly single men from rural villages, seeking to make money to support families in their home countries and in some cases hoping eventually to return in an improved economic position. Many of them worked as unskilled laborers in the mines, railroads, fields, canneries, and service industries of Hawaii and the West. Some were able to bring wives, establish families, and move into business and farm ownership, creating settled Asian American communities (Chan, 1991; Cheng and Bonacich, 1984; Takaki, 1989).

The early Asian communities faced considerable hostility from the surrounding society. Efforts were quickly made to curtail immigration from each of the Asian countries of origin, so that the scale of immigration was cut to very modest numbers. For those who did manage to come, anti-Asian agitation took the form of segregation, denial of citizenship, restrictions on landownership, physical abuse, and even massacre. The height of anti-Asian action was reached during World War II, when more than one hundred thousand Japanese Americans were evacuated from the Pacific Coast and put in concentration camps.

For two decades after the war, the local Asian American communities developed without any significant new immigration. De facto exclusion remained in place, singling out Asia as the sole continent from which immigration to the United States was unacceptable. This exclusion was eliminated in 1965 with the

passage of a new immigration act that equalized immigration rights for all nationalities. The change of law prompted a new wave of Asian immigration to the United States.

The new Asian immigrants are different from the old in several important respects. Although they include people from such earlier sources as China and the Philippines, new sending countries have emerged, most notably South Korea, India, and Vietnam. No longer constrained by exclusion laws, the new immigrants are coming in much larger numbers than before. Women constitute a far higher proportion than in the past and now make up the majority of immigrants from some countries. And a substantial number are from urban, educated, middle-class backgrounds. These immigrants come to the United States as professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs.

Some of the shift toward higher-educated, professional immigrants is a product of U.S. immigration law, which gives preference to highly trained people. Still, the law alone cannot explain why the United States is pursuing immigrants with these skills, nor can it account for the fact that so many of them are coming from Asia. These new trends need to be explained.

It is important to note that not all the new Asian immigrants are middle-class professionals and managers. Indeed, Asian communities often reveal a class polarization. At one end are the well-off groups we have mentioned, and at the other are people working in low-skilled, minimum-wage, service-sector and manufacturing jobs, or who are unemployed. Although the median income of several of the Asian communities is relatively high, Asians suffer twice the poverty rate of the dominant society.

Much international migration theory has focused on the movement of unskilled labor from poor, underdeveloped countries to the core countries of Europe and North America. Some of the new Asian immigration reflects these old patterns. But the new professional-managerial stratum does not. Old theories are not very helpful in understanding the new conditions, and we must devise more adequate explanations.

The purpose of this volume is to describe and explain the new Asian immigration. Other authors have examined this subject (e.g., Fawcett and Carino, 1987; Gordon, 1990; Light and Bonacich, 1988; Mangiafico, 1988; Portes and Rumbaut, 1990; Rie-

mers, 1985; Weiner, 1990), providing many useful insights. Our approach tends to differ from theirs in stressing the importance of placing the immigration in the context of the restructuring of global capitalism, particularly in the Pacific Rim area. Other authors, notably Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach (1985) and Saskia Sassen (1988), have looked at immigration in this context, but they focus on the movement of labor and do not give much attention to the new professional-managerial immigration. This volume contributes to the expansion of migration theories by including the movement of professionals and managers and examining that movement in terms of global restructuring.

Capitalist Crisis and Restructuring

Capitalist development is never even but proceeds in fits and spurts, partly due to a chronic condition of anarchy in capitalism as a system. Capitalism's reliance on the "free market" allows for uncontrollable swings and imbalances as investors and workers rush from one speculative opportunity to the next. While the business cycle is the most obvious fluctuation in the economy, there are also long-term swings. The distinction between the two types of cycles is the scope of change. When the economy heads into a recession within a business cycle, the change is characterized by a decreased level of economic activity, while societal structures remain largely intact. In long-term cycles a downturn not only affects the level of economic activities, but also precipitates a crisis.

A crisis within a capitalist system means a breakdown in productive expansion and accumulation. It is characterized by a falling rate of profit and an increasingly dysfunctional superstructure, that is, the set of social and political institutions that supports capitalism (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich, 1982; Kolko, 1988). To overcome this crisis, it is necessary to restructure the whole of society. Of course, the distinction between long-term and business cycles is not absolute. Even business cycles force some modification of social and political institutions and relationships. Business cycle–induced changes are more marginal and evolutionary, however.