

The Making of Asian America: A History. By Erika Lee (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015). Pp. 519. Hardcover, \$29.95.

In *The Making of Asian America*, Erika Lee recounts the sweeping history of Asians in North and South America, ranging from the sixteenth century to the present and including groups from every corner of the Asian continent. Rather than making a narrow historiographical intervention, Lee provides a concise synthesis of the arguments and insights made by multiple historians of Asian America, including herself, on a wide assortment of topics. There is, however, an underlying theme that connects the multiple episodes in Asian American history the author includes in the book. Highlighting the “global journeys and histories” of Asian individuals, families, and communities who built new lives for themselves in the Americas, Lee demonstrates how these complex yet similar journeys “have been central to the making of Asian America and of America itself” (2, 3).

In the book’s first section, “Beginnings: Asians in the Americas,” Lee describes the journeys of those who traveled from Asia to the Western Hemisphere from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. She first discusses *los chinos*, those Asians who sailed or were forcibly brought to New Spain during the two and a half centuries of the Manila galleon trade. First arriving in 1580, these original Asian Americans built small communities and raised families with indigenous peoples along the coast of Mexico. Jumping forward in historical time, Lee then details the coolie labor system of the nineteenth century, in which imperialist powers used Asian migrants to replace or supplement slave labor in the British West Indies, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America in the wake of emancipation. These early movements, Lee asserts, laid the initial groundwork for and ultimately shaped the Asian immigration to the United States that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In Part Two, “The Making of Asian America During the Age of Mass Migration and Asian Exclusion,” Lee devotes seven richly detailed chapters to the multiple groups of Asian immigrants who arrived in the Americas from the 1840s to the 1930s. She recounts the perilous and often humiliating journeys of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, and Filipino migrants who sought prosperity in Canada, the United States, and Latin American countries like Mexico and Peru. Lee also details the nativist and racist resistance these immigrants encountered in many of these countries, including harassment, mob violence, expulsion, and most significantly, exclusion. Indeed, the author asserts, the passage of exclusion laws specifically targeting Asian migrants in the nineteenth century created the first undocumented immigrants, and gave rise to the issues of illegal immigration and border policing with which Americans continue to grapple in the present (205).

In the third section, “Asian America in a World at War,” Lee illustrates the impact that World War II and the early years of the Cold War had on different Asian American communities. The bulk of this section is dedicated to detailing and explaining the shameful internment of first- and second-generation Japanese Americans, Canadians, and Latin Americans under the pretext of “military necessity” during the war. Lee ultimately attributes the mass incarceration to racial prejudices against Japan and Japanese people held by key figures in North and South American

governments at the time. Moving beyond World War II, during which time Japanese Americans were branded as “bad Asians,” rendering other Asian minority groups “good Asians” by comparison, the author describes how the political and social statuses of Asian Americans were altered by the changing political concerns and exigencies of the Cold War. In particular, Lee highlights the argument made by historian Ellen Wu, who contends that the stereotype of the Asian American as model minority took hold in the 1950s specifically because it valorized the nuclear family and upheld anticommunist ideals (277). As Lee demonstrates elsewhere, this stereotype has persisted throughout the twentieth century and remains unfortunately prevalent in the twenty-first.

In Part Four, “Remaking Asian America in a Globalized World,” Lee focuses on Asian American activism in the second half of the twentieth century, in addition to the journeys of Southeast Asian refugees who began arriving in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, after which new waves of immigration “resulted in the racial restructuring of U.S. society” (286), a new generation of Asian American activists took inspiration from the freedom struggles of the 1960s to vigorously campaign for their civil rights. Adopting a pan-ethnic and transnational identity, these activists protested American imperialism in Asia, particularly the Vietnam War, and worked to secure greater rights and privileges for newly arrived immigrants. Lee also details the trials faced by Southeast Asian refugees in the last decades of the twentieth century, who were initially welcomed into the United States but were eventually marginalized and resented. These groups, the author illustrates, have suffered particularly high rates of unemployment and poverty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, offering stark contrast to the “model minority” stereotype often imposed on Asian Americans.

In the final section of the book, “Twenty-First Century Asian Americans,” Lee dismisses the myth of the “Rise of Asian Americans,” demonstrating the existence of Asian Americans at both extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum of wealth and privilege (376). She also describes how, according to historian Franklin Odo, the pervasive stereotype of the model minority has led Asian Americans to be overly accepting of novel forms of racism (381). Bringing her epic history up to the present day, Lee concludes that “one thread that connects this history across time is how Asian Americans have...continued to build communities and shape American life in ways that have been central to the making of the United States” (391-392).

Written for a general audience, *The Making of Asian America* is a highly accessible and enjoyable read. Erika Lee’s masterful work of synthesis represents the best introductory material for anyone and everyone interested in the history of Asian America.

Samuel C. King

University of South Carolina