

Anti-Asian Bias in the Prevention and Public Perception of Invasive Species

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In the late 1800s, Asian American immigrants were brought to the United States to replace slavery with cheap labor and the false promises of better opportunities.¹ They brought culturally significant plants, foods, and animals. Between the introduction of these items through immigration and U.S. engagement through trade and conquest with Asian countries, invasive species – organisms who are not native to an area, have no natural predator, and cause large-scale harm to the environment – were introduced to the United States. Despite the United States' role in bringing Asian Americans to the United States, anti-Asian racism quickly spread along with stereotypes and lies about their culture and health. Historically, Americans compared these stereotypes to those of invasive species, thus implying the similarities of Asian immigrants to that of an invasive species. Throughout 20th century United States history, invasive species, especially from Asia, have been correlated with Asian immigrants. Laws and methods for preventing, such as quarantining plants, were crafted using methods that were used on immigrants in the past and are ultimately ineffective. Rhetoric surrounding both nomenclature and public education build upon racist stereotypes. Furthermore, the assumptions made on immigrant-invasive species similarities are false because of the scientific differences between immigrant impact and the impact of invasive species and are based on racist thoughts and ideals.

I will begin by examining the methods for prevention and eradication and then transition into an analysis of why focusing on the immigration aspect of invasive species prevented the holistic outlook needed to fully prevent the spread of invasive species. I will then present a broader analysis of the biases and racism behind the perception of Asian invasive species

When comparing the treatment of Asian immigrants versus plants and animals being brought to the United States, scholars have observed that specific methods for preventing and

¹ Moon-Ho Jung, "Outlawing 'Coolies': Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 679.

eradicating either group are similar. One example we see is the quarantining of both Asian species and Asian immigrants. Citrus cankers was a disease brought over on seeds from Japan that then spread to Florida. In order to prevent the spread of the disease, they ordered the various seeds and trees “to be grown for a year or two in quarantine.”² While this makes sense logically, ultimately quarantining was unsuccessful in preventing the spread of the invasive bacteria. In fact, quarantining the citrus canker might have been unsuccessful because the origin of the trees was not solely from Asia in the first place. The first time an infected tree was found in Florida was in the 16th century when Florida was conquered by Europe. While this was quickly eradicated, after the flare of the disease in the 1900s when they first began to quarantine potential hosts, another flare began in the 1980s that was found to be unique to Florida.³ Science in the early 20th century was admittedly not as advanced as science today and thus we cannot blame the lack of a proper response to this bacteria entirely on the U.S. However, quarantining was not a method unique to preventing invasive species.

Upon careful examination of human immigration, quarantining was not unique to plants and animals. Angel Island was an immigration station that would detain individuals suspected of carrying diseases. According to Angel Island’s records, Asian immigrants were not only the largest group of immigrants quarantined, but they were quarantined for longer time periods and treated worse when compared to other groups of immigrants.⁴ The period of time in which Angel Island showed this unequal treatment the most was the same period of time in which plants from Asia were being quarantined⁵. The mirrored treatments of Asian immigrants and

² Berger, E. “Citrus Canker in the Gulf Coast Country, With Notes On The Extent Of Citrus Culture in the Localities Visited.” *Florida State Horticultural Society*, (1910): 126.

³ Schubert, Tim, Shabbir Rizvi, Xiaolan Sun, Tim Gottwald, Graham Dixon, and Wayne Dixon. “Meeting the Challenge of Eradicating Citrus Canker in Florida- Again” 85 (2001): 344
<https://doi.org/10.1094/PDIS.2001.85.4.340>.

⁴Yung, Judy, and Erika Lee. “Angel Island Immigration Station” (2015): 1

⁵ Yung, Judy, and Erika Lee. “Angel Island Immigration Station” (2015): 5

Asian plants indicates that the logic in prevention of invasive species was built off of the racist and equally ineffective logic in preventing disease from Asian immigrants, which was really a method of preventing Asians from immigrating to the U.S.

If the quarantining of Asian plants and Asian immigrants both started around the same time, then scientists might have truly believed that quarantining was the best option for preventing the spread of invasive species and disease. However, upon examining the specific laws and regulations for importing plants and animals to the United States in the 1930s, the laws were often worded to require quarantining from primarily Asian countries or prevented any importation of plants from Asia at all. For example, mangoes were only allowed to be imported from Central America, South America, and the West Indies and did not have to undergo quarantining⁶. Mangoes grow extensively in South Asia, yet they were not able to be imported due to the fear of disease. Due to the similar climates of South America and South Asia, many diseases found in Asia were also found in South America, yet the same regulation did not apply. There is not only racial bias behind this assumption, but the U.S. could use the regulation to prevent Asia from developing economically. Theoretically, if the U.S. could claim that any plant or animal import from Asia either carried a disease or could be potentially invasive, then the U.S. could potentially target the biggest exports from specific Asian countries and prevent them from gaining a strong trade system. For example, in 1926, bulbs were banned in the effort to stop the spread of disease. In reality, this was an attempt to win a tariff war with several Asian countries.⁷

In sum, we see that the U.S. used quarantining to prevent disease and invasive species as well as preventing Asian immigrants from entering the country. Not only were these methods ineffective for preventing disease and invasive species, but they were based on the racial

⁶United States Department of Agriculture. 1909. "Nursery Stock, Plant, and Seed Quarantine.", U.S. Senate NO. 37.

⁷ Coates, Peter. *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land*. California: University of California Press 2006: 104

assumption that Asian people and goods carried diseases at higher rates than other regions of the world.

Racism towards Asians was not only found in the specific laws and regulations surrounding the importation and introduction of Asian species, but also in the rhetoric behind already introduced species. In the first report to the government of the invasive nature of the Japanese beetle they blamed Japan's lack of "large areas suitable for reproduction and development or the abundant food supply"⁸. They not only blame Japan for the introduction of an invasive bug, but they also word it so that Japan is deemed not as ideal for species as the United States. They imply that Japan does not have enough space or food for the beetle as compared to the United States. These two qualities are also ideal or arguably necessary for humans as well, thus the implication is that Japan does not have the qualities needed to support humans. This shows the superiority the U.S. felt towards Asian countries as well as the refusal to accept blame for invasive species.

Another consideration is the nomenclature of invasive species in the U.S. By naming species after the country or region they originally come from, the public perception of the people from this country or region also changes. For instance, "the common name of *Ae. albopictus* being the Asian Tiger Mosquito holds a crucial role in influencing socio-cultural outcomes."⁹ By naming a species that is causing substantial harm to a region after the area it originally lived in, public perception changes to blaming the area and the people from the region. In this case the public blamed Asia and therefore Asians for the introduction of the Asian Tiger Mosquito.

⁸Simberloff, Daniel. "Confronting Introduced Species: A Form of Xenophobia?" *Biological Invasions* 5, no. 3 (2003): 181.

⁹ Willett, Benjamin. "Miniscule and Might Predators: A Cautionary Tale of the Power of Mosquitoes in California and the Greater United States." Pitzer College, 2023. 18

In addition, invasive species are personified to take on traits that their original region is stereotyped to take on. The public's "attitudes towards foreign pests merged with ethnic prejudices: the gypsy moth and the oriental chestnut blight both took on and contributed to characteristics ascribed to their presumed human compatriots¹⁰". We see this in the previous example of disease and quarantining, where the species introduced from Asia were assumed to carry disease, but we also see it in the exotification of Asian species such as cherry trees in comparison to the "duller" native trees in the United States. Additionally, the perceptions behind invasive species reveal the fears that Americans have of Asians. Many Americans refer to invasive species from Asia as "alien species" and the equation of Asian being alien "signals fears of invasion—military, cultural, and racial—by East Asian immigrants."¹¹

Between rhetoric, nomenclature, and personification of invasive species, it is evident that the U.S. perception of invasive species from the U.S. was influenced by racial biases but also influenced the racial biases themselves. They characterized Asian countries as less desirable than the U.S. and the reason for invasive species and diseases while simultaneously characterizing the invasive species as showing stereotypical Asian traits.

In actuality, just as the stereotypes about Asian immigrants are false, invasive species did not solely enter the United States through Asian immigrants, but rather the romanticization of Asian goods and U.S. colonialism both played a role in bringing invasive species to the U.S. For example, honeysuckle was introduced to America by European gardener William Kerr.

Additionally, George R. Hall, a Kentuckian who enjoyed breeding plants, bred honeysuckle for

¹⁰Pauly, Philip J. "The Beauty and Menace of the Japanese Cherry Trees: Conflicting Visions of American Ecological Independence." *Isis* 87, no. 1 (1996):54.

¹¹ Fink, Lisa. "Alienated Species and Unsettled Ecologies: Locating 'Redneck' Conservation in the Racial Discourse of 'Asian' Carp Invasion." *Johns Hopkins University Press* 75, no. 4 (2023): 826.

its decorative value, despite honeysuckle being a harmful invasive species¹². The romanticization of Asian goods started as a way to demonstrate luxury without relying on European trade. Thus, in the desperation to be seen as powerful and develop trade partnerships with Asian countries, the United States ignored logic and introduced potentially harmful species. As trade progressed between Asia and the United States, the U.S. usurped more economic control and it became a way for the U.S. to spread its power eastward¹³. The U.S. places blame on Asian countries for invasive species, but by the latter end of their trade relationship, the U.S. was the one benefiting the most from the same trade relationship that they claimed introduced so many invasive species. Not only did they receive the social symbols in the forms of luxury garden items and exotic animals, but they were the ones benefiting from it economically.

In fact, the U.S. still benefits economically from invasive species. The “Big River Fish Corporation now harvests, packages, and ships carp to China as ‘Wild Asian Carp of IL’,” taking advantage of the surplus of Asian carp they have by incorporating it into the trade they have with China.¹⁴ The company emphasizes that the Asian Carp is still called Asian, yet they take economic control by trading the fish back to Asia under the Illinois name. They simultaneously place blame on China for the introduction of invasive species, yet benefit from having them in the country. This is not to say that Asian Carp, or any invasive species, do not contribute any harm to the environment, but rather that the United States still uses them to benefit economically alongside placing harmful perceptions on Asians as a whole.

¹²Schierenbeck, Kristina. “Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera Japonica*) as an Invasive Species; History, Ecology, and Context.” *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences*, 2004.

¹³Tchen, John. *New York Before Chinatown*, 1991.

¹⁴Cardozo, Karen, and Banu Subramaniam. “Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 16, no. 1 (2013): 1–23.

Although the U.S. began to push immigrants and pests out of the country, they stole crops and plants with little regard for how they would affect the environment ¹⁵. Rather than accepting their own role in introducing invasive species to their country, the U.S. shifted the blame onto immigrants, which mirrors the progression of their viewpoint on Asian immigrants in the first place. After bringing them to the U.S. for labor, the U.S. government then claimed that Asian immigrants entered the U.S. purely on their own volition in order to steal an education and American women from the U.S.¹⁶ Just as the U.S. were to blame for the spread of invasive species, it was the U.S who forcefully brought Asian immigrants into the country only to blame Asian influence for both. This is to say, they treated immigrants as if they were invasive species and the tactics used for both were similar. Humans and invasive species are not the same, however, and cannot be treated as such.

Even if the U.S. were to assume that all Asian invasive species were brought over through immigration, that does not constitute treating immigrants and invasive species as the same. A common anti-immigration claim is that people themselves could be an invasive species. In theory, this idea makes sense in the context of our environmental issues in modern day, it fails to consider multiple implications that identifying humans, specifically immigrants as invasive species implies. Firstly, invasive species are “small populations” that “have a large effect on an ecosystem ¹⁷.” Humans must be in large populations to have a significant impact. This is true on a worldwide basis, but in terms of immigrants entering the United States, the population influx is not large enough per square mile to have a large impact. Secondly, invasive species have

¹⁵Pauly, Philip J. “The Beauty and Menace of the Japanese Cherry Trees: Conflicting Visions of American Ecological Independence.” *Isis* 87, no. 1 (1996): 56.

¹⁶ Bulosan, Carlos. *America Is in the Heart*, 1943.

¹⁷Switzer, David, and Nicole Frances Angeli. “Human and Non-Human Migration: Understanding Species Introduction and Translocation through Migration Ethics.” *Environmental Values* 25, no. 4 (2016): 443–63.

profound impacts on other organisms. Humans have a large impact on plants and animals around the world, however immigrants impact other humans, not other organisms. While humans might be invasive species as a whole, immigrants specifically are not invasive. Upon this conclusion, we must then consider the ineffectiveness of preventing invasive species through the historical methods previously used.

While many of these methods are either historical themselves or based on historical interpretations, modern day methods for preventing invasive species still hold potential for Asian racism and bias, specifically in terms of public perception and social awareness. Experts say that gaining the support of the public is imperative to prevent the spread of invasive species and education programs should generate “social awareness that will help prevent new introductions and facilitate early detection of nonnative species.”¹⁸ This creates an interesting dilemma. How does the government emphasize to the public that invasive species are dangerous without spreading racist stereotypes? Kudzu is an invasive species that did not hurt Asian perception, but Americans were unsuccessful in preventing the spread of. In 1907 an advertisement in a magazine even went so far as to call the plant a “wonderful Japanese kudzu vine.”¹⁹ This advertisement directly contrasts the accusatory rhetoric of the time and compliments Japan rather than criticizes them. The issue comes in when kudzu became a social phenomenon that represented the southern region of the United States. After this, educators found it hard to convince the public to stop the spread of a culturally significant symbol.²⁰ Thus, kudzu points to

¹⁸ Darrigran, Gustavo, and Cristina Damborenea. “Strategies and Measures to Prevent Spread of Invasive Species.” In *Limnoperna Fortunei: The Ecology, Distribution and Control of a Swiftly Spreading Invasive Fouling Mussel*.

¹⁹“Modernist Journals | McClure’s Magazine. Vol. 28, No. 6.” Accessed December 12, 2023. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr555638/>.

²⁰Alderman, Derek H. “When an Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital.” *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 1 (2015): 49

an interesting dilemma of balancing public perception between Asian countries and invasive species while still maintaining an effective system for preventing invasive species.

In conclusion, the United States has demonstrated racism in the prevention and eradication of invasive species. Furthermore, they have used invasive species to perpetuate racist biases and stereotypical traits. Not only are these methods and ideas factually incorrect, but they show the racism that Asians have had to face throughout time. Invasive species are one of the most pressing environmental issues of our time and thus creating effective methods for preventing their damage is crucial to maintain healthy environments. Scientists must work to eliminate racial bias to create more reliable methods. In education, we must find a way to both stress the seriousness of invasive species while still maintaining an unbiased perspective. This is reflective in general of the social issues we must face in order to improve our scientific understanding of the world and our fight against environmental changes in the modern day.

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