

Friend or Foe?: The Complex Relationship between Chinese and Japanese Communities in the
United States during World War II

Tiffany Wen

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During World War II, the United States government issued Executive Order 9066 to counter Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. This order effectively marked all Japanese residents living in the country as potential threats to national security, leading to the creation of Japanese concentration camps across America. Japanese residents were evicted from their homes and lost their jobs, forced to adapt to life behind barbed wire. As a result of the incarceration, the U.S. job force suffered a severe shortage of employees, but this gap was quickly filled by Chinese residents who took advantage of Japanese incarceration to boost the Chinese community's economic standing. This tension between the two Asian ethnicities started long before the Second World War began. Between conflicts in China and Japan and the meddling of the American government, Chinese and Japanese residents in the United States often found themselves at odds with each other. During Japanese incarceration, Chinese residents chose to distinguish themselves from Japanese residents as much as they could, rather than fight for Japanese residents' freedom. This strategic differentiation, while a survival tactic, also revealed the deep-seated divisions fostered by the U.S. government's anti-Asian legislation. Ultimately, the lack of a pan-Asian alliance within the United States during the 20th century, due to external causes like targeted government policies and internal factors such as inter-ethnic racism between Asian ethnicities, contributed to the lack of Chinese solidarity against the incarceration of Japanese residents during World War II.

The hostility between Chinese and Japanese residents in America started long before the beginning of World War II, dating back to the influence of white supremacy in the United States during the start of Asian immigration. With the creation of selective legislation, the U.S. government effectively created divisions amongst Asian ethnicities as they fought for white approval within the country. Ever since the arrival of Chinese workers in the United States, the

government discriminated against the immigrants, ensuring that legislation always favored white workers rather than creating equal opportunities for both groups.¹ This anti-Chinese legislation symbolized the deep-rooted discrimination many immigrants faced early on in the 1800s.² Even when Chinese workers spoke out against their discrimination and unjust treatment, the U.S. government turned a blind eye.³ This discrimination and anti-Chinese sentiment eventually led to the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which effectively barred Chinese immigration into the country. The amount of anti-Chinese legislation the American government passed not only demonstrated the severe amount of discrimination Chinese immigrants faced, but also symbolized the white supremacist belief that non-white people could never truly belong in America.

The idea that Asian immigrants could never assimilate into white culture also arose in many legal rulings and scholarly texts, reflecting the popular treatment towards Asian residents in the U.S. In the *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* Supreme Court case, when Chinese immigrant Chae Chan Ping challenged the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Court asserted that the legislation was constitutional due to the idea that Chinese immigrants could never fully assimilate into the American way of life. According to the Court, the Chinese ways of life were so drastically different from white ways of life that there would never be hope of the two

¹ Jeremy Chan, “Chinese American Responses to the Japanese American Internment and Incarceration,” *Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal* 16, no. 2 (2019): 209, accessed October 30, 2023. https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1136&context=hastings_race_poverty_law_journal

² Joan S. Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism: The Relationship between Chinese and Japanese in the American West, 1880s-1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 2 (2008): 50, accessed October 30, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543330?seq=9>

³ Pun Chi, “Remonstrance from the Chinese in California.” Mark Twain in His Time, University of Virginia (1870), accessed November 27, 2023. twain.lib.virginia.edu/roughingit/map/chiremon.html.

coexisting in such proximity.⁴ This idea of the Chinese's inability to assimilate was nothing new: in 1901, San Francisco mayor James Phelan explained in his article "Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded" that while the Chinese were good for the economy because they worked quickly and were able to robotically mass produce materialistic items, their simple presence in the U.S. presented a threat to democracy due to the Chinese's role as a producer, rather than a consumer. Phelan argued that while the Chinese made up many of the laborers in factories, they rarely contributed to the U.S. consumer economy, as the Chinese typically bought from Chinese-owned stores or made their own materials.⁵ Moreover, after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, many regions in the United States began forcefully removing Chinese immigrants from the country. For example, in Tacoma, Washington Territory, white residents began expelling Chinese residents from their homes using what they called the Tacoma Method, driving them to the British Territories, reasoning that through the Chinese Exclusion Act, non-Chinese residents had the right to act as vigilantes and actively enforce the legislation.⁶ This anti-Chinese legislation and white residents' anti-Chinese sentiment demonstrated the full extent of racism that Chinese residents experienced while in the country. As a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was a sudden drop in Chinese immigration, and Japanese immigrants began entering the U.S. in larger numbers, taking over occupations that the recently expelled Chinese had left behind.⁷

When white Americans realized that Japanese immigrants had begun replacing gaps in the workforce, they began redirecting their past racism against Chinese residents towards Japanese residents, and the U.S. government began creating targeted anti-Japanese legislation.

⁴ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 208.

⁵ James Phelan, "Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded," *The North American Review* 173, no. 540 (1901): 670-675.

⁶ George Lawson, "The Tacoma Method." *Overland Monthly and out West Magazine* 7, no. 39, (1886): 234.

⁷ Wang, "The Double Burdens," 31.

Interestingly, many of the discriminatory legislations the government passed targeting Japanese residents mirrored the anti-Chinese acts passed in the decades before. For example, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and Gentlemen's Agreement, both of which severely limited the number of Japanese immigrants allowed to enter the country, contained many similarities to the Chinese Exclusion Act in their exclusive purposes and anti-Asian sentiments.⁸ Moreover, as World War II and Japanese incarceration began in the early 1940s, the justifications that many judicial courts used in their imprisonment were the same as the reasoning used by the Court in *Chae Chan Ping*: as Asians, Japanese residents could never fully assimilate with the white American way of life, and therefore, the government was correct in separating the Japanese from other residents in the United States.⁹ Overall, the general sentiment white Americans felt towards Japanese and Chinese residents in the U.S. heavily rested on the legislation being passed by the government against one ethnic group or the other. The immigration legislation passed at a given time demonstrated the full extent of which groups the U.S. viewed as a friend and which they viewed as a foe, something that also influenced the perspectives that each ethnicity had of each other.¹⁰

Ever since Chinese and Japanese immigrants began entering the U.S., the two groups have viewed each other as economic and social enemies, rather than people to collaborate with. Because of the limited job opportunities for Asians in the U.S., the two groups competed with each other for better wages and occupations while also facing much hatred and discrimination from white workers.¹¹ During the height of anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S., Japanese residents worked to differentiate themselves from the Chinese, making sure to dress in more Americanized

⁸ Wang, "The Double Burdens," 28.

⁹ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 209.

¹⁰ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 209.

¹¹ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 208, 210.

clothing, adopt white mannerisms, and assimilate with the American ways of life in order to set themselves apart as an ethnic group.¹² Amongst these economic and socially divisive reasons, the Chinese community in the United States began participating in anti-Japanese boycotts in the 1910s and 1920s, and interestingly enough, the Chinese national identity in America grew stronger through these anti-Japanese ideologies and protests.¹³ Through discriminating against another Asian ethnicity, the Chinese community grew stronger and more connected, which was a trend that carried into World War II.

Building on these pre-existing tensions between Japanese and Chinese residents in the U.S., the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II created a gap in the workforce—one that Chinese workers jumped to fill in, all the while making sure to separate themselves from the Japanese ethnicity in the process. When Executive Order 9066 was passed, many Chinese Americans began staging anti-Japanese boycotts in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States and support for anti-Japanese legislation.¹⁴ These boycotts also worked to boost a unified sense of identity within Chinese communities,¹⁵ a result echoing back to the protests staged in the early 20th century.¹⁶ However, this case of anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II was not singular within the Asian American community. In order to better assimilate with white Americans and avoid being targeted themselves, many Asian Americans worked to distinguish themselves from Japanese Americans.¹⁷ For example, both Chinese and Korean Americans began wearing button pins stating their ethnicity in an attempt to clarify that

¹² Wang, “The Double Burdens,” 32.

¹³ Wang, “The Double Burdens,” 29.

¹⁴ Wang, “The Double Burdens,” 44.

¹⁵ Wang, “The Double Burdens,” 45.

¹⁶ Wang, “The Double Burdens,” 29.

¹⁷ Jane Hong, “Asian American Response to Incarceration.” Densho Encyclopedia.

Updated June 16, 2020.

https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Asian_American_response_to_incarceration/

they were not Japanese.¹⁸ This differentiation amongst Asian minority groups was also encouraged by both U.S. and Chinese American media in an attempt to boost anti-Japanese sentiment. In fact, many Chinese magazines and newspapers began printing advertisements encouraging Chinese residents to dress as non-Japanese as possible and to buy hats stating that they were not Japanese.¹⁹ During World War II, Chinese residents ensured their own success and safety in America by separating themselves from the Japanese ethnicity and using Japanese incarceration to their own advantage.

The severe anti-Japanese sentiment felt by the Chinese American community was also greatly influenced by the Sino-Japanese War occurring in mainland China. Beginning in the early 1930s, Japan invaded China to conquer more land. In response to Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, a Chinese American community known as the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance began a movement known as *Jiuguo Zijiu* to spur China's leaders into action against Japan's attacks. Chinese residents in America staged protests against Japanese goods, and during Rice Bowl parties, in which Chinese Americans gathered to express their anti-Japanese ideology,²⁰ Chinese Americans worked to raise funds in the U.S. for Chinese resistance against Japanese occupation.²¹ They viewed mainland China's inaction against Japanese attacks as a symbol of shame, deepening the anti-Japanese sentiment simmering within many Chinese American communities.²² Japan's attack brought about many atrocities and massacres of the Chinese people, among them the Nanjing Massacre, in which Japanese soldiers massacred thousands of

¹⁸ Hong, "Asian American Response."

¹⁹ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 212.

²⁰ Theodore Gonzalez, "You're Invited to a Bowl of Rice Party," National Museum of American History (2018), Accessed November 27, 2023.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/youre-invited-bowl-rice-party>.

²¹ Hong, "Asian American Response."

²² Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 216.

Chinese civilians.²³ Undoubtedly, these war atrocities enraged Chinese Americans greatly, worsening the preexisting divides between Chinese and Japanese Americans. This hatred fed into the anti-Japanese sentiment Chinese residents expressed during Japanese incarceration, manifesting in the many ways Chinese residents worked to distinguish themselves from the Japanese through anti-Japanese boycotts.

This separation between Asian ethnicities, however, did not simply arise naturally; rather, the U.S. government's influence in creating pointed policies and choosing which ethnicity to view as a friend during World War II also caused these rifts to deepen. Even before the war began, the United States used targeted legislation to distinguish which Asian ethnicities they favored.²⁴ These historical microaggressions quickly fed into the belief amongst the Asian community that in order to find equality in America, Asians must set each ethnicity apart from the other, rather than stand in solidarity with each other to fight against racism. Thus, when Japanese incarceration began, Chinese Americans worked to separate themselves from the Japanese ethnicity instead of standing in solidarity with the Japanese and fighting against anti-Asian racism.²⁵ During World War II and Japanese incarceration, the United States selected Chinese Americans as their "friend" and Japanese Americans as their "foe," ignoring the decades of discrimination the government had thrown at Chinese residents just years before. The government's arbitrary selection of Asian friends and foes demonstrated the U.S.'s tendency to distinguish along ethnic lines for the convenience of the white citizen, even if it meant creating toxic competition amongst Asian ethnicities to do so.²⁶

²³ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 217.

²⁴ Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 190.

²⁵ Wang, "The Double Burdens," 50.

²⁶ Wang, "The Double Burdens," 50.

This separation along ethnic lines was also reflected in many magazines and newspapers during the Second World War. For example, in order to find differentiating features between the two ethnicities to prevent white Americans from discriminating against Chinese residents, *Life Magazine* published an article in 1941 listing features of the Chinese American, among them being “delicate,” “friendlier,” and European-passing, while describing the Japanese American as a “more massively boned head[ed]” individual who “betrays aboriginal antecedents.”²⁷ This differentiation also demonstrated the extent to which white Americans contributed to the divisiveness between Chinese and Japanese residents in the United States, especially during World War II. Moreover, by stating that Chinese Americans could be mistaken to be European, the magazine clearly attempted to relate the Chinese to the features of a white person while alienating the Japanese even further to paint their ethnicity as foreign and threatening. While the lack of solidarity between the two groups was in part caused by historical factors in the U.S. and in their ancestral nations, the tensions between Chinese and Japanese residents during World War II were also greatly exacerbated by U.S. legislation specifically targeting ethnicity over the other, creating additional alienation amongst pan-Asian groups.

Ultimately, the tension between Chinese and Japanese residents was both influenced and compounded by a severe lack of a pan-Asian alliance in America, and Asian ethnicities only exacerbated white supremacy by working against each other. Throughout these struggles for recognition in the United States, Chinese and Japanese residents frequently put each other down to gain favor with white Americans. Instead of working together to fight against white supremacy, the two ethnicities separated themselves from the idea of “Asian” and chose to

²⁷ “How to Tell Japs from Chinese,” (Chicago, IL): *Time, Inc*, December 22, 1941, accessed October 30, 2023, <http://digitalexhibits.wsulibs.wsu.edu/items/show/4416>.

individualize themselves as Chinese or Japanese instead.²⁸ By creating conflict and tensions within minority groups, the U.S. government could continue justifying its racism and discrimination toward people of color.²⁹ Through this separation, the minority group's fight against white supremacy in America was weakened. To truly protest against the discriminatory nature of the American government, Asian ethnicities needed a unified front in order to truly liberate themselves from the chains of white supremacy.³⁰ For example, the Third World Liberation Front's collaboration between minority groups brought about more concrete change and protests against discrimination and ignorance in America.³¹ However, given the government's divisive legislation and selective favoritism towards specific ethnicities in minority groups, the fortitude of pan-Asian alliances would prove difficult to establish and propel.³²

Overall, such a lack of pan-Asian unity in the United States stemmed from the white supremacists and discrimination put into place by the U.S. government, especially in regard to immigration and ownership within America. Additionally, the conflicted history between China and Japan also heavily contributed to the lack of support and solidarity shown by Chinese residents in the U.S. during Japanese incarceration. Asian immigrants' attempts of assimilation and white-washing through the rejection of their heritage and the subdivision between ethnicities only exacerbated white supremacy, demonstrating how Asian Americans both fostered white supremacy and became victims under such a discriminatory foundation. Moreover, the weak support that Chinese and Japanese ethnicities gave to each other during each other's struggles

²⁸ Alex Hing, "The Need for a United Asian-American Front, 1970," In *The Columbia Documentary History of the Asian American Experience*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 373.

²⁹ Chan, "Chinese American Responses," 212.

³⁰ Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," 190.

³¹ "San Francisco State University Third World Liberation Front Position, 1968," *The Pacific Ocean: An American Lake?: Through 1975*, (San Francisco, 2020).

³² Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," 190.

also represented how fractured the unity between Asian ethnicities was in the United States. Especially during the incarceration of Japanese Americans, Chinese residents demonstrated their lack of solidarity for the Japanese residents' plight, instead taking Japanese Americans' struggles as an opportunity to propel themselves further. The struggle for equality in America is not singular to any one ethnicity, and instead of using each other as stepping stones to achieve equality for one minority group, a pan-Asian alliance is necessary for the United States to recognize and correct its discrimination against people of color as a whole.

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