

## Discrimination against Asian Canadians

To the Asian community, the opportunity to immigrate to Canada seemed very appealing in the nineteenth century. A promising future was offered for those seeking a better life in a prosperous country. Thousands of Chinese and Japanese families were interested in the offer. Once in Canada, they were hired for cheap labour; to ‘work on the [schemes] most dangerous and least paid jobs’. Chinese immigrants were needed for the construction of public infrastructure.



[www.lib.washington.com](http://www.lib.washington.com)

Anti-Chinese racism began when white Canadians were afraid of losing labour to the Asian community during the economic depression of the 1860's and 1870's.

White Canadians tried unsuccessfully to get the government to restrict immigration. The government imposed a 'head tax' for each Chinese immigrant entering the country. The purpose of this process was to limit immigration, because it became less accessible. The government also introduced laws to exclude the Japanese from professions in the civil service and in teaching and they also were

refused the right to vote.

Discrimination against Japanese and Chinese immigrants began in the nineteenth century. The Japanese community was negatively perceived prior, during and after the Pearl Harbour attack on December 7, 1941. All people of Japanese origin were considered a threat. Despite the evidence of loyalty of most Japanese to Canada, the entire race was convicted without further interrogation. Twelve weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, the War Measures Act was implemented and Japanese Canadians living within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast were relocated. The government insisted that the relocation was for ‘national security’, where the families were sent to ‘ghost towns’ in Alberta and Manitoba. They were removed from their homes and sent to Prisoner of War Camps. ‘Between 1943 and 1946, the Federal Government sold off Japanese-Canadian-owned-properties. The government also tried to deport many, but the Asian community protested and were offered freedom.

## Obasan

Joy Kogawa wrote *Obasan* as a semi-biographical novel to express the struggles of the



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Japanese Canadian community during the nineteenth century. She tried to give a voice to the victims of the War Measures Act. She considered it important to give her version of history: ‘After war, the story

of the victors is told, silencing the stories of the victims.’’ (bnet.com)

Through her characters, she wrote about the suffering endured by Japanese Canadians. She experienced the evacuation herself when she was a young girl and decided to tell her story to protest against racial discrimination. In the novel, Naomi Megumi Nakane, who is a 36 year-old Sansei (Japanese born), remembers the evacuation through family journals, pictures, and letters. She was only 5 years old at the time of the withdrawal, but suffered tremendously after the War Measures Act when her father died and her mother was deported to Japan.

The novel demonstrates the different views of Japanese Canadians who lived in British Canada during the WWII. ‘‘Some people want to fight. Others say our only chance is to co-operate with the government.’’ (p.91) Some just try to fit in and be accepted as Canadian citizens like Stephen: ‘‘[He] is always uncomfortable when anything is ‘ too Japanese’’’. (p.217)

Kogawa exposes the way Japanese Canadians were portrayed :‘‘[they were] treated as though they were a mass of buried bones’’. In the novel, Naomi’s uncle dies and he is ‘‘represented by the registration number 00556 signed by the RCMP officer’’. (p.24) This demonstrates the lack of respect that they were given in Canada.

## **In the Media**

Usually in the media, the Asian community is perceived in a stereotypical way by the dominant Western societies. A good example of the way Asians were seen in the nineteenth century is the article published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1886 about the “Yellow Peril”. This refers to the massive immigration of Asians to North America and the fear expressed by Americans of losing their jobs and culture to the Asians.

In movies, most of the Asian characters are created by white authors and are given exaggerated accents to caricature and humiliate this nationality. In the media, the Asian men are often presented as predators of white women. Asian women are portrayed as “China Dolls” and “emerged as sexually corrupt, immoral, and threatening to the white population. Babysan, a cartoon character sketched as an exotic, curvaceous, slanted eyed woman, was published in the East Asian edition of the *Navy Times* during wartime.”

(Wikipedia)

The web is another place where one can see how Asian women are perceived. I typed “Asian Women” in a research tool and hundreds of websites offered dating services and exotic young girls ready for love. This is another type of media that does not help the Asian women’s image. Media encourages this discrimination, stereotype and prejudice, which inspires the othering and categorizing of race.

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