'The Making of Asian America' -- a history of America's fastest-growing group

Erika Lee

*(Mark Buccella)*

**Special to The Oregonian By Special to The Oregonian**

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**THE MAKING OF ASIAN AMERICA**

Erika Lee

Simon & Schuster, $29.95

519 pages

**By GLENN C. ALTSCHLER/Special to The Oregonian**

Asian Americans, the fastest growing group in the United States, have also been hailed as the best educated, wealthiest, and even happiest. Their achievement, according to the Pew Research Center, represents major "milestones of economic success and social assimilation."

The portrayal of Asian Americans as the "model minority," Erika Lee, a professor of history at the University of Minnesota, suggests in her new book "The Making of Asian America: A History," masks differences among national groups -- and the overrepresentation of Asian Americans at the bottom (as well as the top) of educational and socioeconomic privilege. And it ignores the fact that for centuries white Americans deemed Asian Americans unassimilable and racially inferior.

Lee addresses these issues -- and much more -- in "The Making of Asian American," a comprehensive, informative, and engaging account of the impact of diverse communities of immigrants, often lumped into one group, on American life.

Although her epic 500-year history focuses on the United States -- and events including the California Gold Rush, the building of the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the resettlement of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees in the 1970s and, yes, the hot button issue of illegal immigrants -- Lee does not ignore Asian immigrants in Canada, Central America and South America. Her themes are the "push and pull" of economics and politics on immigrants and the central role of race in American law and culture.

Lee reminds us that men frequently constitute the first wave of immigrants. Dependent on husbands and fathers to sponsor them, Chinese women, for example, constituted only 5 percent of the Chinese population in the continental...
United States in 1910. When male Japanese immigrants found jobs, they often asked matchmakers back home to find them suitable wives.

"The Making of Asian America" is full of fascinating stories about immigrants who left a mark on their adopted country. In 1834, Afong Moy, the first recorded Chinese woman to arrive in the United States, was put on display in New York City. Visitors paid 50 cents to see her in her "national costume," displaying her bound feet, and eating with chopsticks. Wah Lee opened a Chinese laundry in 1851 in San Francisco, where the cost of cleaning clothes had been so high that some sent them to Honolulu. And in the early 20th century, Kinji Ushijima, a Japanese immigrant, became "the Potato King," with 10,000 acres under his control.

These successes were even sweeter because they were the products of struggles against stereotypes and discrimination. And experiences of exclusion and inclusion, Lee concludes, make Asian Americans "uniquely positioned to raise questions about what it means to be American in the twenty-first century."

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