

Chinese Americans in World War II

World War II didn't start on December 7, 1941, the "Day of Infamy" with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It didn't even start on September 1, 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. The seeds of World War II started in the immediate aftermath of World War I, both in Europe and in Asia. China had entered that war on the side of the Allies, fully expecting that the Allied Powers would support the return of Germany's Chinese colonies to the Chinese people after the war. President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" declaration that national self-determination should decide the future fate of colonized peoples gave hope to many around the world but the final terms of the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I betrayed all of them. British and French colonies simply expanded around the world while giving the Allied blessing to Japanese colonial expansion in China.

Japan's ascent to empire in Asia had been fueled by the crash industrialization program that it had started in the 1870s when it had been forced open by the US Navy. Fear of Western colonialism, after seeing what the European powers had done to China and much of the rest of the world, had eventually evolved into a deep desire by Japan to emulate the colonial powers and create their own colonies in Asia. Japan's growing economic and military power needed the raw materials and captive markets of colonies for their manufactured goods. The Japanese embarked on conquests across Asia. They seized the island of Formosa (the future Taiwan) from China in 1895 and overthrew and annexed the Kingdom of Korea, a former Chinese protectorate, in 1910. By 1905, they'd also decisively beaten the Russian Empire to assert territorial rights in Manchuria, the first time in modern history that an Asian power had beaten a major European country in war.

The critically weak Republic of China had replaced the Qing Dynasty in 1911. President Sun Yat-sen, the first leader of the republic, had quickly given way to Yuan Shikai, a military strongman, who had ambitions to become the newest Emperor of China. In 1915, when Japan seized the German colony of Qingdao in Northern China during World War I, it presented the so-called "Twenty One Demands" to President Yuan. These demands included the right to colonize Shandong, and parts of Manchuria and Mongolia. It also demanded that Japanese officials be placed into positions supervising the central government and police, essentially turning China into a Japanese colony. In exchange for official Japanese recognition of his impending imperial elevation, President Yuan Shikai, agreed to the territorial demands but refused the other demands. However, news of the secret agreement leaked and the Chinese people universally rose up in angry protest. The May 4th Movement, named for the massive protests that began that day in Beijing in 1919, united all strands of liberal thinking in the new China. They succeeded to the extent that Chinese negotiators refused to sign the Versailles Treaty ending World War I, but the Allied Powers granted Japan's demands anyway. President Yuan, his popularity and support domestically and internationally damaged by the show of weakness towards Japan, put off his coronation ceremony repeatedly until he died in 1916. His death left a power vacuum that was filled with regional warlords presided over by a powerless nominal central government. It wasn't until 1927 that the Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek, established more than nominal military and political control over the country. Even then

their hold on the country was tenuous as they battled with communists and several regional warlords supported by Japan. Meanwhile Japanese demands upon China only increased leading to the full takeover of Manchuria in 1931 and open war between China and Japan in 1937.

Chinese Americans supported the Chinese war effort in many ways. Through boycotts and other methods of peaceful resistance they struck back financially at Japan. Their moral influence on American politics and especially the atrocities that Japan committed in China, reported in lurid detail in the American press and in movie newsreels, helped lead to an official US embargo of the sale of raw materials such as steel and fuel to Japan. Millions of dollars were also raised through fundraising drives across the country to buy weapons and supplies needed by China to continue the war against Japan. Some Chinese Americans also volunteered to serve in the Chinese military and fought Japan directly.

The entry of the United States into World War II marked a major turning point in American relations with China. The vast bulk of the Imperial Japanese Army (four million out of five million men) remained fighting in China throughout World War II until near the very end of the war when they were withdrawn for the final defense of the Japanese home islands. Japanese propaganda highlighting the Chinese Exclusion Act and other discriminatory American legislation against Asians as well as the history of American anti-Asian violence greatly embarrassed the United States. It was feared that China, after suffering the loss of millions of their own people and many defeats, would become disheartened and seek a separate peace thus freeing millions of Japanese troops to fight in the Pacific. The critical importance of China in the war and the loyal service of Chinese Americans in the American military changed attitudes and laws. It wasn't by coincidence that the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was formally repealed by the Magnuson Act in 1943. Chinese and Chinese Americans had earned that recognition with blood.

Most Chinese Americans, having been born and raised here, celebrating the Fourth of July, joining the Boy Scouts, and learning the history of the United States in school were extremely patriotic. Twenty thousand Chinese Americans enlisted in the American armed forces out of a total Chinese American population of nearly eighty thousand in the entire United States, a far higher percentage (25%) than any other American ethnic community. How that happened was an accident of racist American immigration laws and the vagaries of natural disaster.

The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and subsequent laws passed by Congress barred all Chinese immigration to the United States with the minor exceptions of rich businessmen, diplomats, and students temporarily staying in the country. The Chinese American population was decimated by the decision as non-citizen immigrants (and even some US citizens) who'd left the country to visit China weren't allowed to return. The overwhelmingly male immigrants (over 95% of the Chinese American population) weren't allowed to bring wives over from China and they weren't allowed to marry whites legally. In fact any white American woman that married a non-citizen Chinese man automatically lost her citizenship under US law. This left Chinese communities across the United States empty of children, filled with aging bachelors, and inexorably dying away.

Ironically the renewal of the Chinese American community came about because of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906 that destroyed immigration and birth records across the city. The US Supreme Court in *Wong Kim Ark v. United States* in 1898 had affirmed citizenship by birth as laid out by the 14th Amendment and made it applicable even to Chinese that were otherwise not legally allowed to become US citizens. The fiery destruction of birth

records enabled thousands of Chinese to fraudulently claim to have been born in San Francisco thus making them US citizens. It was this 1906 generation of Chinese immigrants and their children that grew up just in time to volunteer or be drafted for military service during World War II. Twenty thousand Chinese Americans had enlisted in the American armed forces out of a total Chinese American population of nearly eighty thousand in the entire United States (according to the 1940 US Census,) a far higher percentage (25%) than any other American ethnic community.

World War II wrought massive social changes for Chinese Americans. Many, especially Chinese American women, entered work in war industries, taking highly paid industrial, clerical, and manufacturing jobs that had been limited solely to whites previously. This gave many of the women their first measure of independent economic power outside of their families. Men that joined the armed forces were offered the GI Bill that paid for their college educations after the war thus opening up professional opportunities for them in the booming postwar economy. Travel across the United States and the world during the war had also exposed them to a universe outside the close confines of their ethnic enclaves. It helped break the limits in the mind that many Chinese Americans had about their lives in the 1940s. Moving out of Chinatowns was now not only something that many could now envision but also something that new jobs and civil rights cases now made financially and legally possible. Tentatively at first, but in increasing numbers, young professional Chinese Americans moved out of Chinatown and into newly desegregated neighborhoods along the West Coast. It was the start of a new era for Chinese Americans in their struggle for equality in America.