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Tracing War Bride Legislation and the Racial Construction of Asian Immigrants

[Caitlyn Jordan](#)

Abstract:

Many historical studies of Asian immigration in the United States focus on the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965, since this Act led to a dramatic increase of Asian immigration and significantly revised former immigration policies. However, war bride legislation—laws governing the immigration of the foreign-born wives of American servicemen—represents an interesting area of political and legal analysis. Between the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act which established highly restrictive national-origin quotas and the 1965 INA, thousands of Asian women immigrated to the United States as war brides, unrestricted by quotas. Their immigration represents a complex period of history during which the category of “immigrant” was consistently revised, racialized, and expanded. My paper surveys the history of these Acts and Amendments and argues that this legislation aimed to replace the perpetual foreigner myth with a gendered and “colorblind” myth about immigrant spouses—a precursor to the model minority myth.

Keywords: My paper addresses legislation about Asian immigration between 1945-1965, focusing specifically on Asian women married to American servicemen (legislation known as "War Bride legislation") War brides, Immigration and Nationality Act, immigration legislation, racial construction, Asian diaspora

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Introduction

At the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, the United States faced another test of racial inclusivity: immigration policy. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act had established

national-origin quotas which limited the number of immigrants allowed into the United States depending on their nation of origin. This was a severely restrictive immigration policy, particularly for Asians, whom the policy categorized as “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and effectively barred from entry.¹ Yet in 1965, the United States radically altered immigration by passing the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965. The act abolished the national quota restrictions—including those targeting Asian immigrants—and prioritized family members of citizens and residents for visa admissions, enshrining family unification as a priority of American immigration policy.² Identified as the law that “changed the face of America,” this Act is typically seen as a watershed moment in American history which led to a rapid influx of Asian immigration.³

However, in focusing on this pivotal moment in American history, many historians have overlooked the time period between 1924 and 1965—or even dismissed it as inconsequential.⁴ Yet, during this time period, thousands of Asian women immigrated to the United States, unrestricted by immigration law’s national-origin quotas.⁵ These women were the wives of American servicemen, and their immigration was made possible by a series of legislative acts that authorized unrestricted immigration for Asian “war brides” and their children with American servicemen: The War Brides Act of 1945 and its 1946 amendment (known as the Fiancées Act), Public Law 213 in 1947, and Public Law 717 in 1950. These acts permitted Asian immigration

¹ The Immigration Act of 1924, Pub. L. No. 68-139, 43 Stat. 154 (1924), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/68th-congress/session-1/c68s1ch190.pdf>.

² Catherine Lee, “Family Reunification and the Limits of Immigration Reform: Impact and Legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act,” *Sociological Forum* 30, no. S1 (June 2015): 529.

³ Margaret Sands Orchowski, *The Law that Changed the Face of America: The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 18.

⁴ Arissa H. Oh, “Japanese War Brides and the Normalization of Family Unification after World War II” in *A Nation of Immigrants Reconsidered: US Society in an Age of Restriction*, ed. Maddalena Marinari, Madeline Y. Hsu, and María Cristina García (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 231.

⁵ Arissa H. Oh, “Japanese War Brides,” 234.

despite the 1924 restrictions, creating contradictory and unsettled legal messages about Asian immigration. Years before the landmark INA of 1965, this war bride legislation revealed shifts in attitudes towards Asian immigration, setting the stage for immigration reform to come.

This paper explores war-bride legislation, beginning with the War Brides Act of 1945, to examine the role that this legislation played in altering social and legal attitudes towards Asian immigration. I argue that war bride legislation played a vital role in expanding immigration policy beyond quota-based language and instilling the principle of family reunification in Asian immigration. However, ultimately, these laws aimed to replace the racialization of Asian immigrants, particularly Asian women, as unassimilable foreigners with a new identity: the colorblind, immigrant wife who, through her marriage and ability to raise children, represents a new possibility of American assimilation.

A Brief History of Asian Exclusion: The 1924 Immigration Act

The history of Asian immigration in the United States is a history of exclusion and suspicion. The notorious Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 expanded on the 1875 Page Act to ban Chinese immigration, becoming the first US legislation to prohibit immigration for an entire racial group.⁶ Meanwhile, politicians such as Senator John Blaine argued that Chinese immigration was that “which reeks with impurity and which cannot come to us without plenteously sowing the seeds of moral and physical disease, destitution, and death.”⁷ Blaine’s language reflects widespread animosity toward Asian immigration, which characterized Asian

⁶ An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese, Pub. L. 47-126, 22 Stat. 58, (1882), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/47th-congress/session-1/c47s1ch126.pdf>.

⁷ Russell H. Conwell, *The Life And Public Services Of James G. Blaine, With Incidents, Anecdotes, And Romantic Events Connected With His Early Life; Containing Also His Speeches And Important Historical Documents Relating To His Later Years*, (Boston: Russel, 1884), 329, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hw2qtn>.

immigrants as inherently diseased and alien.⁸ Although Blaine’s language was directly at Chinese laborers, this form of racism was extended to other Asian groups. For instance, in 1905, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League (later known as the Asiatic Exclusion League) formed to lobby against Asian immigration. This group expressed similar fears of “yellow peril,” the Western fear of being “invaded” by Asian immigrants,⁹ and argued that Asian workers were filthy and unclean.¹⁰ Thus, racism against different Asian ethnic groups assumed a similar form: opponents of more inclusive immigration policies consistently cited Asians’ presumed alienage and impurity as reasons they should be barred from the United States. This stereotype of the perpetual foreigner enfolded anxieties over disease, economic competition, and dilution of the white demographics in the United States and ultimately, kept Asian Americans firmly separated from the category of citizen.

The 1924 Immigration Act continued and formalized this history of Asian exclusion and nativism. As Robert Chang writes, nativism is “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e., ‘un-American’) connections”.¹¹ For Asian Americans, nativism is particularly salient; the racialization of Asian Americans as perpetually foreign places them in this category of “un-American” and federal immigration law can formalize nativism by preventing the entry of immigrants who are deemed undesirable.¹² The 1924 Immigration Act solidified nativism into federal law by extending the 1917 “Barred Zone Act” to limit Asian

⁸ Gregory B. Lee, “Dirty, Diseased and Demented: The Irish, the Chinese, and Racist Representation” *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* 12 (2017): 13, <https://doi.org/10.4000/transtexts.1011>.

⁹ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 76, ProQuest Ebrary.

¹⁰ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 21.

¹¹ Robert Chang, “Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space” *California Law Review* 81, no. 1241 (1993): 1253, <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/faculty/411>.

¹² Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 87.

immigration from all Asian nations except the Philippines and set national quotas based on demographics of the U.S. population from 1890.¹³ This national-origin quota system and limit of Asian immigration aimed "to preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity" and allowed the United States to embark on an explicit project to alter the racial demographics of the nation .¹⁴ In other words, the 1924 Immigration Act ensured that national-origin and race could be deciding factors in the exclusion of immigrants, further racializing the category of "immigrant." For Asian immigrants, the law meant that they were once again placed outside the boundaries of American citizenship, making them perpetual foreigners in both social discourse and legal doctrine.

New Encounters: The Emergence of Asian War Brides and the War Brides Act of 1945

With the 1924 Immigration Act barring almost all Asian immigration, it may seem as if virtually no Asian people immigrated to the United States between 1924 and 1965 (although the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act abolished the "alien ineligible to citizenship" category, it only allowed 100 immigrants per Asian country.)¹⁵ However, close analysis of this time period reveals that immigration patterns were far from stagnant. With the start of WWII, a new phenomenon began: the emergence of Asian War Brides.

During WWII, American servicemen began to travel to Asian countries where they interacted with Asian women, particularly Chinese and Japanese women. Even after WWII, the United States continued to be involved in Asia; the Korean War created new encounters between American servicemen and Korean women, as well as Japanese women near American army bases. With these changing geopolitical relationships came new personal relationships. Servicemen petitioned their commanding officers to allow them to marry Asian women, but

¹³ Andrew Aoki, Okiyoshi Takeda, *Asian American Politics*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 11.

¹⁴ "The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)," Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, last modified May 9, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

¹⁵ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, Pub. L. No. 82-414, 55 Stat. 163 (1952).

these requests faced logistical issues: commanding officers “strongly counseled against such marriage and denied permission outright” since the men’s wives would not be racially eligible for US citizenship and many would arrive in states that had anti-miscegenation laws.¹⁶ Even for those who were successful in procuring marriage approval faced separation once servicemen were rotated back to the United States. This was even worse for couples with children—since they had been born abroad, the children of war brides and American servicemen faced difficulties entering the United States. Therefore, the United States’ continued involvement in global conflicts placed new demands upon the domestic legal system: Americans wanted to be able to bring their spouses and children home, but in order to do so, immigration policy had to be altered.

Starting in 1945, Congress began to pass a series of laws expediting the admission of war brides, which suggests that the law was, from a functionalist approach,¹⁷ fulfilling an emerging social need, one in which Asian immigrants, specifically Asian women, would have to be racially revised as “acceptable.” In 1945, Congress passed the War Brides Act, a piece of emergency legislation that aimed to “expedite the admission into the United States of thousands of alien brides who were married to our soldiers”.¹⁸ This law received almost no debate from Congress, despite the fact that it would allow servicemen’s spouses and children to immigrate in numbers far beyond the quotas set in 1924.¹⁹ The lack of political debate reflected the temporary nature of the bill (the law was set to expire within three years), but it also demonstrated that

¹⁶ Arissa H. Oh, “Japanese War Brides,” 234.

¹⁷ Functionalism refers to an approach to law that pays close attention to the function law plays in serving and responding to needs during specific social and political contexts and is advanced by Critical Race Theorists.

¹⁸ War Brides Act of 1945, Pub. L. No. 271, 59 Stat. 659 (1945).

¹⁹ Philip E. Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, “‘Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers’: Military Spouses, Family Re-Unification, and Postwar Immigration Reform,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 36, www.jstor.org/stable/40785025.

senators were willing to characterize the bill not as immigration reform, but as a necessary piece of legislation to support American servicemen. For example, Senator Richard Russell argued that the War Brides Act was "the least we can do for the men who fought our wars overseas, who have married aliens and who now wish to have their wives join them in this country."²⁰ Thus, from a functionalist perspective, the War Brides Act demonstrates that as the needs of influential members of society changed, immigration policy adapted to suit these needs, minimizing the racialization of these new immigrant war-brides as "foreign" or "unassimilable" by emphasizing their marital and familial connections to American citizens.

As Russel demonstrates, Congress positioned the War Brides Act as a necessary and natural extension of American patriotism. The women's "alienage" was overridden by their husbands' presumed commitment and loyalty to the United States, and the possible racial tensions that could stem from allowing new ethnic groups to immigrate in larger numbers were deemed less significant than the consequences of ignoring American servicemen, many of whom directly lobbied the government for immigration reform.²¹ However, the lack of debate also reflected the law's narrowness—although it allowed "alien brides" to enter the United States, the War Brides Act only allowed spouses who were deemed "eligible" aliens for citizenship to enter, leaving wives of Asian descent on the sidelines since they were still overwhelmingly constrained by restrictions against their countries of origin. Small numbers of Asian spouses were able to immigrate under the new law—for instance, the Magnuson Act of 1943 repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act by setting a small quota of Chinese immigrants (105), so some Chinese brides

²⁰ Philip E. Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, "Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers," 37.

²¹ Susan, Zeiger, "Interracialism, Pluralism, and Civil Rights: War Bride Marriage in the 1940s and 1950s," in *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 182, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qghfs.9.

were permitted entry—²² but the original War Brides Act mainly benefited European war brides, not Asian immigrants. To unify American soldiers and their Asian wives, large-scale change was still needed.

Changing Patterns in Asian Immigration: Amendments to the War Brides Act of 1945

Subsequent amendments to the 1945 Act demonstrate the particular importance of war bride legislation to the historical trajectory of Asian immigration. Amendments such as the 1946 Amendment, Public Law 213, and Public Law 717 expanded entry to additional Asian ethnic groups, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino war brides. Thus, tracing the history of these amendments and additions reveals a shifting approach to Asian immigration, one that slowly started to recognize the national-quota system as racially unequal and replace race-based immigration rationales with the principle of family unification.

The first amendment to the War Brides Act in 1946 allowed Chinese women to immigrate in higher numbers, opening the floodgates for Asian immigration. However, servicemen pushed for further legislation. One corporal hoping to marry his Japanese partner wrote in frustration, “The way I look at it my citizen’s rights are to let me marry who I want to.”²³ As the corporal’s frustration highlights, these servicemen were beginning to view marriage choice as an essential right for American citizens, an interesting foreshadowing of the arguments to come in the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision. Further, his words reflect the growing frustration of servicemen and politicians who were beginning to see the United States’ restrictive immigration eligibility as racially unfair—now that it was affecting their families. For instance, a Senate report notes that the Magnuson Act did not grant non-quota status to the Chinese wives of

²² Magnuson Act, Pub. L. No 78-199, 57 Stat. 600 (1943).

²³ House of Representatives, 81st Congress 2nd Session, “Report No. 2549,” in *United States Congressional Serial Set*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 4.

American citizens, which was a fundamental privilege "accorded [to] other women racially eligible to citizenship who wish to come to the United States to be and reside with their United States citizen husbands."²⁴ This note reflects a growing awareness that the national-origin requirements in immigration law unfairly targeted Asian immigrants. Thus, in 1946, Congress extended non-quota status to Chinese wives of American citizens.²⁵ This move drastically increased the number of Chinese immigrants eligible to come to the United States, and 5,132 Chinese women immigrated to the United States as war brides between 1946 and 1950.²⁶ This shift marked a remarkable opening in America's fiercely closed borders, demonstrating that as Oh writes, "Although America's gates were indeed shut against Asians in 1924, Asian exclusion, while strict, was never absolute."²⁷

Further amendments to the War Brides Act expanded the category of Asian war bride and began to replace race-based rationales for immigration with the principle of family reunification. The Act of July 22, 1947 (Public Law 213) amended the 1945 War Brides Act by adding a statement reading: "The alien spouse of an American citizen by a marriage occurring before thirty days after the enactment of this Act, shall not be considered as inadmissible because of race, if otherwise admissible under this act."²⁸ Although colorblind on its face (there was no specific mention of Asian spouses), this amendment revised Asian spouses' position in American immigration by removing the label of racial inadmissibility. By stating that spouses could no longer be prohibited due to race, Congress replaced these immigrants' racial identification with their familial identification as "spouse." This rhetorical shift emphasized the necessity of

²⁴ Philip E. Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, "Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers," 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ Oh, "Japanese War Brides," 231.

²⁸ Act of July 22, 1947, Public Law no. 213, 61 Stat. 40 (1947).

reuniting American servicemen with their wives and children, regardless of race. For instance, much of the lobbying to expand the immigration for war brides focused on the plight of separated families; a Lieutenant writing to Congress pleaded officials to consider the “long period of waiting for many of us before we could be joined by our wives.”²⁹ Senators who supported expanding the War Brides Act argued that these spouses and children would be model Americans because of their familial relation: “There is no question in my mind that the wife of a soldier, a veteran, who has fought for the country, is going to make a good citizen, and I think the children are going to make good citizens” argued Representative Sadowski.³⁰ This language meant that Asian immigrants—although only those connected to American servicemen—were no longer defined as perpetual foreigners, cloaked in fears of “Yellow Peril.” Instead, this legislation replaced these women’s racialized identities with gendered, colorblind identities: the dutiful, and loyal, wife.

Further legislative additions show that the original 1945 War Brides Act was becoming a precedent, functioning as a foundation upon which immigration policy could be expanded. Since the 1946 amendment only allowed admission for marriages officiated within a thirty-day period, Congress enacted Public Law 717 in 1950. Public Law 717 extended the period of entry for six months and then later, another year.³¹ Underneath this extension, war brides increased in immigration numbers; in 1952 alone, 4,200 Japanese war brides gained entry to the United States.³² Phillip Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad demonstrate the effect of these continued

²⁹ Philip E. Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, “Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers,” 45.

³⁰ Susan Zeiger, “‘Good Mothers’: GI Brides after World War II,” in *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 135, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qghfs.8.

³¹ Oh, “Japanese War Brides,” 236.

³² Oh, “Japanese War Brides,” 237.

expansions in their description of an administrative decision by the Board of Immigration

Appeals in 1951:

In a visa petition under P.L. 717 for the admission of a young Chinese child of an American soldier, the Board referenced the original War Brides Act, P.L. 271, the decision to amend it in 1947, and P.L. 717. In ruling for the petitioner, the Board concluded that Congress passed P.L. 717 not simply to re-unite military families, but also to reverse the original restrictions on Asian entries. In the Board's eyes, the legislative history could be read as an evolutionary movement, wherein one policy begat the next, rather than as a set of transitory measures.³³

This analysis reveals that legal bodies such as the Board of Immigration Appeals recognized that War Bride amendments were not only part of a broader effort to reunite families, but also specifically aimed at increasing the inclusion of Asian immigrants, despite their often-colorblind language. Thus, the War Brides Act of 1945 and its amendments demonstrate that even prior to the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act and Immigration Nationality Act of 1965, the law was recognizing the importance of family unification and gradually moving to broaden the definition of an “eligible” immigrant.

Effect of War Bride Legislation on the 1965 INA and the Perception of Asian Immigrants

The entry of Asian War brides post-1945 began to redefine the eligibility of Asian immigrants, contributing to the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act far exceeded the McCarran-Walter Act and abolished the national-origins quota system. Supporters of this act referenced Asian war brides as positive examples of Asian immigration. For instance, in 1964, Abba P. Schwartz of the United States Department of State said that “the need for a more humane policy towards Asian immigrants became apparent when an increasing number of our servicemen during and after the Second

³³ Phillip Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, “Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers,” 33-34

World War married girls of various Asian ancestry.”³⁴ Schwartz’s words demonstrate that the War Brides Acts and amendments played a crucial role in shifting legal and political categories of “immigrant.” As Arissa Oh argues in her analysis of the War Brides Act’s effect on immigration policy, “Family unification had been available to racially eligible immigrants, by custom and by law, for decades before 1917,” but the new laws of the McCarran-Walter Act and INA of 1965 “enshrined the principle of family unification regardless of race.”³⁵ Thus, the immigration acts that followed war bride legislation expanded the precedent set by the 1945 War Brides Act to extend family unification principles to Asian immigrants as well.

However, Schwartz’s words specifically reference “girls of various Asian ancestry” and the gradual—although certainly very limited—acceptance of Asian immigrants between 1924-1965 was a heavily gendered one. Although the War Brides Act technically permitted male spouses to enter the United States, the vast majority of immigrants from Asian countries during this time were women.³⁶ In fact, by the time of Schwartz’s speech in 1964, approximately 72,700 Asian women had immigrated to the United States, representing a nearly 20% increase in the Asian American population prior to 1945.³⁷ Thus, the shifting discourse surrounding Asian immigration was in part, made possible by the gender of these new immigrants. Both politicians and servicemen alike characterized these women as “domestic spouses,” reducing traditional fears over “Yellow Peril” and the economic threat of Asian immigrants. In adopting this language, these men domesticized female Asian immigrants, making them into icons of American assimilation.

³⁴ Department of State Press Release, April 1, 1964, Abba P. Schwartz, “Foreign and Domestic Implications of U.S. Immigration Laws,” speech delivered at St. Olaf College.

³⁵ Oh, “Japanese War Brides,” 232.

³⁶ Philip E. Wolgin and Irene Bloemraad, “Our Gratitude to Our Soldiers,” 31.

³⁷ Caroline Chung Simpson, “‘Out of an obscure place’: Japanese War Brides and Cultural Pluralism in the 1950s,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (1998): 51, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/9587>.

A 1955 *Life* magazine article illustrates this vision of the Asian war bride.³⁸ The article explores the story of Sachiko Pfeiffer, a Japanese war bride who immigrated to the United States in 1948. The article notes that Pfeiffer and her American husband faced numerous struggles in the United States, including racial slurs and threats from neighbors, but eventually Sachiko's commitment to adopting American mannerisms transformed her neighbors' distaste to acceptance. "She seemed so *clean*, so needing a friend that I started to cry and ran over to her and threw my arm around her shoulder" reports one neighbor.³⁹ This response represents a stark difference from Blaine's caution that the Asian immigrant "reeks with impurity," and the emphasis on clean (added by the journalist) demonstrates that through Sachiko's proximity to American whiteness, she has become the perfect, "unsullied," immigrant and finally, an American. Sachiko's story highlights that Asian war brides represented the possibility of assimilation, despite their foreignness, and Sachiko's final words in the article echo hauntingly: "I content to lose my Japanese blood stream in America."⁴⁰ Thus, the phenomenon of Asian war brides represents several contradictory notions at the heart of American immigration policy: the proposed "colorblind" ability of these women to assimilate versus the anxiety of interracial marriage that their arrival also invoked (supporters of war bride legislation repeatedly argued that they did not support interracial marriage, and suggested that the legislation would mainly benefit Americans of Asian descent who wanted to marry "girls of their own race"); and the traditional fear of Asian "foreigners" versus politicians' desire to publicly support American soldiers' nuclear families.⁴¹

³⁸ Simpson, "Out of an obscure place," 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ "Amending the Act to Expedite the Admission to the United States of Alien Spouses and Minor Children of Citizen Members of the United States Armed Forces," House Report 478, 80th Congress, 1st session, May 28, 1947, 2.

Thus, although the 1965 INA opened immigration to both men and women, it is important to note that the influx of Asian immigration during 1924-1965 both endorsed and was made possible by gender perceptions. On one hand, war brides presented less of a “foreigner” threat through their subordinate position as the wives of Americans; on the other, their gender helped lawmakers racialize Asian immigrants as obedient immigrants who could, unlike the racial narratives of Black Americans at the time, overlook and overcome racism. Thus, it is possible that the influx of Asian war brides represents one of the first instances of the model minority myth, which presents the stereotype that Asian Americans can be distinguished from other minorities through their ability to overcome hardship unaided, and by extension, that the United States actually presents all minorities with equal opportunities for all.⁴² Although the model minority myth rose to prominence in the ‘60s, the conflicting narratives it embodies, in which Asian Americans are both defined by their otherness and held as models of colorblind success, are reflected in the stories of Asian war brides.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that war bride legislation between 1924-1965 gradually broadened the category of an acceptable immigrant who would be “eligible for citizenship” by replacing Asian spouses’ racialized foreignness with the gendered principles of marital and familial unity. A close look at this legislation demonstrates the constructed and racialized nature of the category of “immigrant” and reveals the conflicting ideologies at the heart of American politics and racial formation: both the possibility to become consumed into American identity and the challenge of presumed otherness in a country presenting itself as a nation of immigrants.

⁴² Min Zhou, “Are Asian Americans Becoming White?” in *Contemporary Asian America*, ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 367.

However, the legislative history of Asian immigration during this time is one in which the voices of Asian women are largely absent. Some, like Sachiko Pfeiffer, embraced their new “colorblind” identities (and were publicized by American media outlets because of it); others fiercely maintained their connections to their previous homes. However, the majority of these women did not enter the historical record in their own words—they were the subjects of sentences from lawmakers, from husbands, and from men who did not share their experiences as immigrants, wives, and women. This is changing; projects like the War Bride Project by *The Washington Post* editor Kathryn Tolbert interview women who immigrated to the United States as the wives of American servicemen to understand their experience in their own words. However, the legislative record of the time reflects that these women were not given their own representation in Congress or in local politics, demonstrating that the “official” record is not necessarily a complete one. Future legal and historical examinations of this legislation must continue to be enriched by these women’s own stories about their attempts to navigate shifting legal boundaries and social categories in a new, rapidly changing country.

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