More than 3 million Asians have immigrated to the United States since 1920. This flow may seem insignificant compared with the nearly 50 million immigrants to the United States from other parts of the world during the same period. The proportion of Asians among all immigrants has changed dramatically, however, since the 1965 overhaul of U.S. immigration law. Asians now constitute the largest stream of immigrants to the United States, comprising nearly half of all annual admissions.

Perhaps because of the recency of large-scale immigration from Asia, most previous studies have focused on immigrants from Europe, Latin

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1. For the purposes of this chapter, Asia includes all countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Middle South Asia (including Iran as the westernmost country). This definition differs in many respects from the one used by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The INS definition of Asia includes these countries plus all of Southwest Asia. From 1931 to 1963, the INS also included parts of the USSR in Asia. Wherever possible, we have adjusted the “all Asia” category to make it consistent with our definition. This could not always be done, however, because the “other Asia” INS category includes data from different regions and also includes a different set of countries in different years and in different tables. These problems may cause minor inconsistencies between tables in the “all Asia” and “other Asia” categories. The Pacific Islands, which the INS classifies as part of Oceania, are excluded in our definition of Asia as well. See Chapter 16 for a discussion of Pacific Islands migration.
America, and the Caribbean. This chapter reviews recent immigration trends from Asia in a comparative framework that includes immigration from all regions of the world. Because immigrant streams from various Asian countries differ substantially in their characteristics, we also compare trends among the major sending countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, China, Korea, and India). In this study we have organized the data in a new way to highlight the major shift in immigration trends since 1965.

We begin with an overview of the historical trends in Asian immigration to the United States and a survey of the racially restrictive legislation that has affected the trend at various times. We then examine the revolution in recent immigration trends and patterns. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the current debate about immigration policies and the implications for the future of Asian immigration to the United States.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Prior to 1875, few statutory limitations on immigration existed and entry into the United States was virtually unrestricted (Cafferty et al., 1983; Select Committee on Population, 1978). Nevertheless, between 1820, when the United States began collecting immigration statistics, and 1853, fewer than 200 Asians were recorded as arriving in American ports (see Appendix Table 6.1). Until 1850, immigration statistics were based entirely on the arrival of ships at Atlantic and Gulf ports and did not include arrivals at Pacific ports. Although estimates of the total amount of Asian immigration during this period vary substantially, it was evidently not until 1849–1852 that large numbers of Asians began arriving on U.S. shores. These early flows originated in South China, and they were spurred on by economic depression, political unrest, famine, and flooding in that area, as well as by the lure of the gold rush in California.

The annual trend in total Asian immigration since 1854 is shown in Figure 6.1, along with historical landmarks in U.S. immigration legislation. Figure 6.2 shows annual totals separately for three countries with a long history of immigration to the United States—China, Japan, and India. Figure 6.3 shows annual totals for five major Asian source countries since 1960—the Philippines, China, Korea, India, and Japan. (Vietnam, another major source country in the recent period, is included in the overall total in Figure 6.1 but is not analyzed separately here. See Chapter 7 for a detailed study of refugee admissions.)

During the initial thirty years of significant Asian immigration (1854–1883), nearly 300,000 aliens from China entered the United States, but only a few thousand Asians from outside China made the journey across the Pacific (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975:108). The import
of Chinese workers was encouraged by a severe shortage of labor in the rapidly developing West. Chinese laborers were brought in to work on the railroads and mines, and in construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. These early Chinese immigrants also provided a variety of personal services as domestic servants and operators of restaurants and laundries. Perhaps because most Chinese considered themselves to be only temporary sojourners in the United States, they made little attempt to acculturate (Brown and Pannell, 1985). Chinese immigrants during this period were stereotyped as being clannish and alien. Their willingness to work for low wages brought them into conflict with organized labor, particularly in times of economic recession. These factors, together with the intense nationalism that characterized the period, created the conditions that led to the eventual passage of racially restrictive immigration legislation.

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred additional Chinese laborers from entering the United States and prevented Chinese aliens from obtaining American citizenship. This act remained in effect until 1943, two years after China became a wartime ally of the United States. The act almost entirely terminated immigration from China soon after its passage, and not until the late 1960s did Chinese immigration regain the levels it had reached before the Exclusion Act was implemented.

Much of the slack in Asian immigration after 1882 was picked up a few years later by the rapidly expanding immigration stream from Japan, which reached a height of 13,000 arrivals per year in the first decade of the twentieth century. A few immigrants from Japan were officially recorded as arriving in the United States beginning in 1861 (just eight years before Commodore Perry’s historic visit to Japan), but the annual flow did not exceed one hundred immigrants until after 1885 when the Japanese government began officially to permit its subjects to leave Japan. Japanese workers were brought into the United States in lieu of Chinese laborers, who were no longer permitted to immigrate. They were also imported to work on the rapidly expanding sugar-cane plantations in Hawaii and the fruit and vegetable farms in California (Nishi, 1985). Many of the sentiments behind legislation to restrict Chinese immigration, however, eventually led to similar demands to limit further immigration from Japan. The Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan in 1907 curtailed Japanese immigration temporarily, but the numbers began to increase again after 1910.

The National Origins Act of 1924 was targeted mainly against the new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, but it also placed severe restrictions on Asian immigration, which dropped from a level of 19,245 in 1924 to only 3,527 the following year. Annual immigration from Asia did not substantially exceed this new level until after World War II. The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 liberalized immigration regulations for Asians and set up quotas for the Asia-Pacific Triangle (Chandrakehar, 1981). Within a few years after the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act, Asian immigration reached an annual level of about 20,000 admissions, finally regaining the heights it had reached in the first decade of the century. This increase, however, was only a minor harbinger of the radical changes on the horizon. The 1965 amendments to the 1952 act abolished the national-origin quota system and ended the strict numerical limits on immigrants from Asian countries. This legislation significantly changed the face of U.S. immigration.

RECENT ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

The contours of recent immigration from Asia have been shaped primarily by the 1965 changes in U.S. immigration law and the political changes that took place in Indochina in the 1970s. Asian immigration has grown dramatically from just over 17,000 in 1965 to an average of more than a quarter of a million annually since 1981 (Appendix Table 6.2). No other region of the world has matched this rapid rise in immigration. In fact, during the same period immigration from Europe declined from 114,329 to less than 65,100. In 1978, Asia overtook North and Central America (including the Caribbean) as the largest source of U.S. immigrants, and it has maintained its predominance ever since. In 1984, more than 44 percent of all immigrants to the United States came from Asia, 31 percent from North and Central America, 12 percent from Europe, and 13 percent from other regions. The rapid rise in the importance of Asian immigration, the decline in the prominence of European immigration, and the slower decline in the proportion of immigrants from North and Central America are depicted graphically in Figure 6.4.

As for individual countries, the transformation has been no less dramatic. In 1960, none of the ten largest sending countries was in Asia (see Figure 6.5). By 1985, however, six of the ten largest streams of immigrants to the United States (and four of the five largest streams) had their origin in Asia. Mexico, with a total of 61,077 legal immigrants in 1985, was the only non-Asian country in the top five.

Recent trends in immigration from individual Asian countries are shown in Appendix Table 6.3. In 1984, some 239,722 Asians immigrated to the United States. The major sending countries in Asia were the

2. We deal here only with the incoming flows of Asian immigrants but exclude a detailed analysis of Indochinese refugees, whose annual flows are analyzed in Chapter 7. For a complementary perspective on the stock of U.S. residents of Asian ancestry, see Chapter 11.
Philippines (42,768); Vietnam (37,236); China, including Taiwan (35,841); Korea (33,042); and India (24,964). The most rapid gains have been registered by Indochina: from fewer than 1,000 immigrants in 1960-1964 to more than 60,000 in 1984 alone. Most of these immigrants arrived from refugee camps in countries of first asylum, but increasing numbers are coming under the aegis of the Orderly Departure Program (see Chapter 7).

Aside from Vietnamese refugees, the largest recent flow of Asian immigrants is from the Philippines. Historically, Filipinos were brought into the United States in response to massive recruiting campaigns in the early 1900s by agricultural interests in Hawaii and California (particularly by the sugar industry). The status of the Philippines as a U.S. territory (the country was ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Paris at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898) established the political, economic, and social linkages that also encouraged migration of Filipino labor to the United States (Pido, 1985). Despite the restrictions placed on the immigration of workers from other parts of Asia, Filipinos were allowed to move to the United States freely as U.S. nationals until 1934.

Immigration from the Philippines dropped to a mere trickle from the years of the Great Depression through World War II. The immigra-
tion stream then began a steady rise to its current place of prominence. Since 1960, more immigrants have come to the United States from the Philippines than from any other country except Mexico. Moreover, the recent deterioration of the Philippine economy and continuing political uncertainties are likely to keep the demand for emigration strong in the coming years.

Japan is the only Asian country that has not shown a substantial increase in the number of immigrants to the United States since the passage of the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act. Japan was the largest Asian sending country in 1960–1964, but by 1984 eleven other Asian countries were sending more immigrants to the United States.

EMIGRATION AND ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

The flow of officially recorded Asian immigrants, as discussed above, tells only part of the story about the volume and impact of international migration. Two additional components of mobility—emigration and illegal immigration—are of numerical importance, although relatively little is known about either of them. Another important component—temporary visits by nonimmigrants—is discussed in a later section.

Only indirect methods can be used to estimate the extent of recent emigration among Asians in the United States. The U.S. government has not collected any emigration statistics since 1958, and the alien address registration program, which might have been used to estimate one component of emigration, was never very complete and in any case was discontinued in 1981. There is no doubt, however, that the emigration of both American citizens and permanent resident aliens is substantial. Warren and Kraly (1985) estimate that since 1900 the ratio of U.S. immigration to emigration for all countries was about 3 to 1. In other words, while 30 million persons immigrated to the United States between 1900 and 1980, about 10 million persons left the United States to live in other countries. Between 1965 and 1979, Warren and Kraly estimate, 1,686,000 residents who were not American citizens emigrated from the United States.

Emigration of permanent resident aliens to Asia is less prominent than is emigration to other regions of the world. According to Warren and Kraly, from 1970 to 1980, 34 percent of legal immigrants were from Asia but only 20 percent of non-U.S. citizen emigrants were Asian. Nevertheless, emigration of Asian non-U.S. citizens was 17.9 percent as high as the flow of legal immigrants from Asia during that same period. Alternative estimates by Jasso and Rosenzweig (1982) confirm the importance of emigration from the United States. They used indirect methods to estimate the range of plausible cumulative net emigration rates of the FY 1971 cohort of legal immigrants to the United States as of January 1979. Emigration rates for Asians were estimated to be lowest for Chinese (7 to 12 percent) and Koreans (8 to 22 percent), considerably higher for Filipinos (20 to 39 percent) and Indians (21 to 40 percent), and higher still for Asians from other countries (41 to 53 percent).

Thus emigration clearly acts to reduce the size of the Asian population in the United States. Moreover, there are thought to be a large number of Asians—particularly residents of Taiwan and Hong Kong—who have obtained immigrant visas to the United States but have never moved to this country. These people continue to live and work in their countries of origin and travel to the United States only often enough to avoid losing their green cards (i.e., their permanent resident status). If the economic or political situation in their home country should deteriorate, or if kinship ties so dictate, they maintain the option of moving to the United States at a moment’s notice. They cannot, however, be considered U.S. residents in any real sense.

On the other hand, the size of the Asian community in the United States is bolstered by a large number of Asians who are in the country without proper documents. Illegal immigration from Asia is somewhat restricted by geographical factors—the distance and cost of travel and the difficulty of entering the United States surreptitiously without inspection by immigration officials. Nevertheless, a substantial number of Asians enter the United States with fraudulent documents, slip across the land borders from Canada or Mexico, or overstay their nonimmigrant visas.

The extent of illegal immigration from Asia and other areas of origin is a matter of continuing conjecture. A myriad of estimates have been published, but all of them are based on questionable assumptions. A recent report by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) indicates that the extent of illegal immigration may have been overestimated. The NAS report concludes that a population of 1.5 to 3.5 million undocumented residents in the United States in 1980 is reasonably consistent with most reliable studies (Hill, 1985). Moreover, there is no empirical evidence to support the contention that illegal immigration has increased sharply in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The extent of illegal immigration from Asia is even less certain than the amount of illegal immigration overall. Undocumented immigration from Mexico, undoubtedly the source of the largest number of illegal immigrants, has received much more attention than the Asian situation. Relatively few undocumented immigrants who are apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) come from Asia. Of the 1.25 million deportable aliens located by the INS in FY 1984, for example, fewer than 1 percent were Asians (INS, 1984). This statis-
tic may be misleading, however, since it reflects the enforcement priorities of the INS more than the actual distribution of illegal immigrants in the United States. Estimates of the stock of illegal immigrants from Asia provide a fairer assessment of the situation. Slater (1985) reports that only about 10 percent of illegal immigrants who were counted in the 1980 census came from Asia. Other conjectural estimates are of the same order of magnitude, but none of them can claim a high degree of accuracy. It is evident, however, that illegal immigration from Asia is less important numerically and politically than, for example, illegal immigration from Mexico.

PREFERENCE CATEGORIES FOR LEGAL IMMIGRANTS

The Immigration and Naturalization Service data recognize two types of immigrants to the United States—those subject to a numerical limitation of 20,000 persons per year from any one country, and those who are not subject to numerical limitation. The latter category of immigrants consists primarily of parents, spouses, and unmarried minor children of U.S. citizens and specially admitted refugees.

Immigrants who are subject to numerical limitation are admitted according to a preference system that was established when the national-origin quota system was abolished in 1965. This system was set up to facilitate family reunification, to admit workers with skills needed in the United States, and to make provision for the admission of refugees. Four of the preference categories (first, second, fourth, and fifth) are for relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent resident aliens, and two of the preferences (third and sixth) are for persons in specified occupations and their dependents. If the quota of immigrants is not filled by persons in the preference categories, space may be available for the admission of immigrants who do not meet the qualifications required by any of the preference categories. The nonpreference quota, however, has totally dried up in recent years.

In 1984, substantially more Asian immigrants were being admitted to the United States outside the numerical limitation than within the limitation (see Appendix Table 6.4). The percentage of Asians immigrating outside the numerical limitation has increased rapidly since the mid-1970s as the number of refugee admissions has soared. Not counting admissions from Indochina, 59 percent of all immigrants from Asia were admitted subject to the numerical limitation in 1984.

These overall percentages mask substantial differences in the method of admission among countries. Among the major sending countries, the South Asian countries and China generally had the lowest percentages of admissions outside the numerical limitation in 1984 (25.9 percent for India, 34.8 percent for Pakistan, and 23.3 percent for China). At the other end of the spectrum, 93.6 percent of all Indochinese immigrants were exempt from the numerical limitation.

Among immigrants subject to the numerical limitation, the majority of Asians who immigrated between 1970 and 1974 came under the occupational preferences and the nonpreference category (Appendix Table 6.5). That situation has changed rapidly, to the point where the vast majority of Asian preference immigrants now enter under the family (or relative) preferences. Immigrants from Europe, Africa, and Oceania are much more likely than Asians to enter under the occupational preference categories, but those who come from North and South America make even less use of occupational preferences.

With regard to the family preferences, almost 90 percent of Asians in this category are either second-preference immigrants (spouses and unmarried sons and daughters of permanent resident aliens and their children) or third-preference immigrants (brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens and their spouses and children). The fifth preference and the second preference have registered more rapid increases in the absolute number of immigrant admissions than any other preference categories. There have also been significant gains in the immigration of sons and daughters of U.S. citizens (first and fourth preferences), but the absolute number of immigrants in these categories is relatively small. Among Asians entering under the occupational preferences, third-preference immigrants, including professionals and highly skilled workers (and their dependents or beneficiaries—that is, their spouses and children) have declined steadily since 1970. The number of sixth-preference immigrants (workers in short supply and their dependents) has continued to increase, however.

Individual Asian countries exhibit distinct patterns of immigration under the preference system despite the fact that in each of the major sending countries more than 80 percent of preference immigrants fell within the family preferences in 1984. The proportion entering under the occupational preferences varies from 2.3 percent for Vietnamese to 19.7 percent for Filipinos. The Philippines provides a particularly vivid example of the transformation that has taken place in recent years. From 1970 to 1974, more than half of all preference immigrants from the Philippines were admitted under the occupational preferences and virtually all of these were in the professional and highly skilled worker category. By 1980, the proportion had dropped to a mere 1.6 percent before re-

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3. The seventh preference, which was reserved for refugees, was abolished by the Refugee Act of 1980. At that time, a separate category for refugees was established with a ceiling that is set each year by the president after consultation with Congress.
bounding to nearly 20 percent since that time. Moreover, within the occupational categories the relative emphasis has shifted away from professionals and toward workers in short supply. There has also been a trend, both in the Philippines and in Asia as a whole, for occupational preference immigrants to bring more of their dependents to the United States.

China is the only major source country for U.S. immigrants that has not experienced a relative decline in the importance of occupational preferences. The proportion of Chinese preference immigrants admitted under the occupational preferences actually increased from 16 percent during 1970-1974 to more than 18 percent during 1980-1984. Moreover, professionals have come to dominate the occupational preferences, whereas workers in short supply had been dominant throughout the 1970s.

ADJUSTMENT OF STATUS

There is a tendency to think of immigrants as persons arriving at American ports of entry loaded down with their possessions and ready to begin life in a new country. This characterization is inaccurate, however, since a substantial proportion of the persons officially counted as immigrants are not newly arrived but rather individuals already physically present in the United States who are “adjusted” to permanent resident status without leaving the country. Under U.S. law, aliens who are eligible to receive immigrant visas may apply to have their status adjusted to that of a permanent resident without having to obtain a visa from an American consulate in a foreign country.

In 1984, some 43 percent of all Asian immigrants were adjusted to permanent resident status after their arrival in the United States. Most of these adjustments of status were related to the large influx of Indochinese refugees who were permitted to become permanent residents after their arrival. In addition, more than 45,000 other Asians adjusted their status in 1984. Even excluding refugees, more Asians were adjusted to permanent resident status in 1984 than persons from any other region. Adjustment of status is particularly common for Asian immigrants who are admitted under the occupational preferences, more than half of whom were already living in the United States in 1984 at the time they attained immigrant status.

Persons who adjust their status originally entered the United States with nonimmigrant visas of various types (see Appendix Table 6.6). From 1970 to 1979, most Asian immigrants who adjusted their status originally entered the United States as either tourists or students. In 1982-1984, in contrast, nearly 70 percent of those who adjusted were refugees. Immigrants from China and India were particularly likely to have entered as students, whereas Filipinos were disproportionately likely to have come as tourists or to have arrived on temporary worker visas or exchange visitor visas.

It is not possible to determine from published INS data what proportion of nonimmigrants who enter in various visa categories eventually adjust their status and become permanent residents of the United States, but an examination of adjustments of status in relation to nonimmigrant admissions gives some indication of the most popular routes used to adjust status. More than 1 million Asians per year came to the United States on nonimmigrant visas during the 1970s, and this number expanded to over 2 million annually in 1982-1984 (see Appendix Table 6.7). More than 85 percent of them came as temporary visitors in 1982-1984, most as tourists but a substantial number for business. Clearly, the proportion of temporary visitors who stay on and are adjusted to permanent resident status is small, probably less than 1 percent (see Appendix Table 6.6).

The largest group of nonimmigrants (after temporary visitors) in 1982-1984 consisted of students and their dependents. In 1984, more than 70,000 Asian students were admitted to the United States as nonimmigrants—substantially more than the average of 42,471 Asian students who were admitted each year between 1970 and 1979. An average of 8,182 students per year were adjusted to permanent resident status in the 1970s, and that number rose to more than 10,000 annually in 1982-1984. Admission to the United States in student status is thus a popular route to eventual immigration. Persons classified by the INS as exchange visitors also have an unusually high propensity to adjust their status, as do temporary workers and trainees.

DISCUSSION

Despite the dominance of Asians in recent immigration flows to the United States, Asian immigration has not figured prominently in the current debate about reforming immigration policies. Perhaps this is because Asian immigrants are generally not perceived to be a “problem.” Illegal immigration from Asia is not a conspicuous issue and its magnitude is relatively small. Moreover, Asians in the United States are considered a model minority in many respects. The only substantial issue concerning Asian immigrants is the flow of refugees since the beginning of the Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Program in 1975 (see Chapter 7). Other legislative initiatives, such as a proposal included in an early version of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill to eliminate fifth-preference immigration, would vitally affect Asian immigration, but few of these proposals were made with Asian immigration in mind. The major features of the Simpson-Rodino bill (employer sanctions and
legalization of some undocumented immigrants), which was signed into law in late 1986, should have little effect on Asian immigration.

Currently a huge backlog exists of immigrant visa applications from Asia (952,290 active applicants registered at consular offices as of 1 January 1985), and more Asians will become eligible for immigration as the pool of Asians in the United States continues to grow. Barring a major revision of the family reunification provisions of immigration law, immigration from Asia will remain strong.

The strength of the demand for immigration is a result of a confluence of several forces. Overall, the differences between the United States and Asia in levels of economic development and opportunity structure are the dominant cause. Related to this differential is the sheer size of the population in Asia and the pressure of the population on the available land and resources (particularly in such countries as China and India). Asia contains well over half of the world’s population and more than 70 percent of the population of the less developed countries. Moreover, the population density in Asia is more than six times as high as the density in the rest of the world.

While the pressures from poverty and density are very real, many countries in Asia are also undergoing dynamic economic and social development, with the result that aspirations are changing rapidly. For some upwardly mobile Asians, even in the newly industrializing countries like South Korea, opportunities at home seem too constricted. There is also a general awareness in Asia that Asian Americans are a highly successful group; for the potential immigrant with a relative in the United States, this awareness is augmented by a specific role model. The close family ties characteristic of Asian families further encourage migration under U.S. family reunification policies and help to provide the resources that are necessary for an international move.

Labor market factors also encourage immigration from some Asian countries, such as India, in which trained professionals cannot be absorbed by the local economy. Moreover, the entrepreneurial skills possessed by immigrants from some Asian countries, such as Taiwan and South Korea, are well rewarded in the United States. The close politi-

4. Based on unpublished tables from the Visa Office, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State. The Asian figure constitutes 53.6 percent of the “registered demand” for immigrant visas worldwide. The backlog is primarily from the following countries: the Philippines (336,284); India (155,197); Korea (123,577); China, Mainland-born (107,448); Vietnam (79,097); China, Taiwan-born (59,541); and Pakistan (43,980). These figures do not include the backlog of adjustment of status cases being processed by the INS or visa applicants who are not subject to numerical limitation. The backlog in certain preference categories is particularly extreme—more than fifteen years for third-preference applicants in the Philippines, for example, and almost twelve years for fifth-preference applicants in Hong Kong.

5. Preliminary data for fiscal year 1985 indicate that immigration from Asia increased by about 9,000 persons between 1984 and 1985, despite a continuing decline in the number of immigrants from Vietnam.