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Honors US History: Lewis

### Chinese Immigration in the 19th and 20th Centuries:

#### A Lesser-known Stain on America's Legacy

The United States was founded on Thomas Jefferson's belief that "all men are created equal," yet the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century shows that this idea was not a reality for everyone. The mid-19th century was a period of rapid westward expansion. With Manifest Destiny fueling the massive effort, Americans pushed the natives out, journeyed west, and expanded the frontier at a remarkable speed. The expansive land and rich resources in the west proved attractive to foreign immigrants, especially the Chinese whose country was in turmoil. As Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States, they quickly faced animosity from the locals. After years of violence and discrimination, the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States. Despite making major contributions to society, Chinese immigrants faced widespread, fierce backlash for almost one hundred years in the United States; however, Ric Burns, director of the 2018 PBS documentary *The Chinese Exclusion Act*, believes that the Chinese Exclusion Act remains "the biggest part of American history that people don't know about."<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act and the general mistreatment of Chinese immigrants, fueled by xenophobia and racism, stained America's legacy and was yet another example of Americans failing to abide by the values laid out in the Constitution.

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Fang. "How the Chinese Exclusion Act Can Help Us Understand Immigration Politics Today." *HuffPost*. Last modified May 25, 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chinese-exclusion-act-immigration-politics\\_us\\_5b06a90fe4b05f0fc84552cf](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chinese-exclusion-act-immigration-politics_us_5b06a90fe4b05f0fc84552cf).

The prosperity in China brought by the isolationist policies of the Ming Dynasty faded away as the Qing Dynasty began. The Opium War with the British and problems with overpopulation caused disastrous changes in China. As western goods flowed into the country, unemployment and poverty among Chinese were rampant. Over-farming damaged the land and led to massive flooding, particularly in 1855, that slowed agricultural production for decades. As the most commonly grown crop in China, rice was crucial to the success of the Chinese economy. Rice farming was “backbreaking work,”<sup>2</sup> and instead of a family selling the rice, most of it was eaten to survive. Therefore, very “little money [was] changing hands” at the time and the Chinese economy lacked stimulation.<sup>3</sup> Due to the failing Chinese economy and news of the California Gold Rush, Chinese began flocking to the United States to start a better life for themselves. In 1830, only three Chinese people were recorded by the United States census, but by 1850, that number became four thousand.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1850s, most of the Chinese immigrants were young males looking to make money then return home, but early reactions to these new immigrants were quite varied. Cartoons from the time showed that some people perceived the Chinese as greedy and worse for the country than previous immigrants from Western Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keng Wong Li. "Interview of Li Keng Wong." *Scholastic*.  
[http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/asian-american/angel\\_island/interview.asp](http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/asian-american/angel_island/interview.asp).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. The Landmarks of the American Mosaic. N.p.: Greenwood, 2011, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Immigration Cartoon*. 1880. Photograph. [https://quest.eb.com/search/140\\_1644895](https://quest.eb.com/search/140_1644895).



the Chinese is desirable.”<sup>9</sup> The initial response to the Chinese immigrants was mixed; racism contributed to a large group who disliked the Chinese people, but the Chinese had promising support from some prominent figures: Governor McDougal and William Speer. However, as more Chinese arrived and began taking jobs formerly held by white laborers, the negative sentiment began to outweigh the positive.

California Governor Bigler’s negative view of the so-called Chinese *coolies* showed the changing attitudes of white Californians towards Chinese immigrants. Bigler aroused popular disapproval of Chinese immigrants in an infamous speech given in 1852, in which he stated that many “*coolies* ... are sent [to the United States] ... under contract to work in [American] mines for a term ... [and then] return to their native country.”<sup>10</sup> This nationally-publicized speech accused the Chinese of coming to the United States under slave-like conditions to make money and take jobs from white laborers. Furthermore, the Governor proposed a tax be placed on all Chinese immigrants, and he suggested barring all future immigration of Chinese laborers, foreshadowing the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.<sup>11</sup> Many Californians wholeheartedly supported the governor and used this speech to justify discriminating the Chinese. Norman Asing, a respected Chinese immigrant who could write in English and was “much attended to the principles of the government of the United States,”<sup>12</sup> published a letter in response to the Governor’s speech. Asing claimed that “it is out of [the Governor’s] power to say ... in what way or to whom the doctrines of the Constitution shall apply.”<sup>13</sup> This response did not gain much

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<sup>9</sup> Mildred Wellborn. "The Events Leading to the Chinese Exclusion Acts." *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1/2 (1912): 49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41168895>.

<sup>10</sup> Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

popular support, but it showed the willingness of the Chinese to cooperate with American law and contradicted the stereotype that the Chinese were uneducated and uncivilized. The controversy surrounding Governor Bigler's speech revealed the growing racial tensions between whites and Chinese immigrants.

Governor Bigler's speech helped popularize the misnomer "*coolie*" across the United States. The word "*coolie*" connoted that the Chinese were enslaved workers. During the Opium War, many Chinese citizens were abducted and sent to South America and the Caribbean to replace the African slaves once the trade of African slaves was outlawed. From 1840 to 1890, it was estimated that "as many as 250,000 Chinese were sold into slavery via the coolie trade."<sup>14</sup> These *coolies* faced horrible conditions: unsanitary journeys to their destinations, work with sometimes less than three hours of sleep a day, and early death as a constantly looming threat. However, the overwhelming majority of Chinese immigrants to America were voluntary laborers who worked as merchants or sold their possessions in order to gain passage to California. Even the few Chinese immigrants in the United States who were under some sort of labor contract often did not obey. An unidentified American merchant stated that "fifteen coolies I brought to San Francisco ... were no sooner ashore than they resisted their contract, and each turned his separate way."<sup>15</sup> Chinese immigrants to the United States wanted to make money on their own terms. Lee Yan Phou, a famous Chinese-American author, claimed in 1889 that "Chinese immigrants never claimed to be any better than farmers, traders, and artisans ... they all came voluntarily, as their consular papers certified, and their purpose in leaving their home and friends

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Mae M. Ngai. "Chinese Gold Miners and the Chinese Question." *Journal of American History* 101, no. 4 (March 2015): 1087. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav112>.

was to get honest work.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike most of the stereotypes at the time, most Chinese immigrants came to the United States legally and many Chinese were educated, hard-working citizens. A small number of white Americans at the time understood the difference between *coolies* and the Chinese immigrants in the United States; Joaquin Miller, a frontiersman and poet, believed “that all tax-paying and substantial citizens of our cities ... want and need [Chinese immigrants since] ... they do the lowest work.”<sup>17</sup> Miller understood the importance of the Chinese workers in the American workforce, particularly in the west, but he was in the minority. Tensions and disagreements increased as the Chinese began finding success in California.

Chinese immigrants who worked in gold mines faced severe discrimination and backlash from white citizens. Because many Chinese immigrants came to the United States after hearing of the California Gold Rush, Chinese miners made up a large part of the mining population and offered substantial competition to white miners. The California state legislature passed the Foreign Miners’ Tax of 1850 which constituted that all foreign miners pay a flat rate of \$20 a month. This tax did not explicitly mention the Chinese, but the intention was clearly directed at the Chinese miners. Although the tax was eventually repealed and amended several times, it had a strong impact on Chinese miners. The “vexatious and burdensome” tax caused thousands of Chinese miners to leave the placer mines, which decreased the production of gold.<sup>18</sup> Many Chinese who fled the mines moved into cities and eventually began what later became known as *Chinatowns*. The decrease in Chinese miners lowered the public revenue from the Foreign

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<sup>16</sup> Yan Phou Lee. "The Chinese Must Stay." *The North American Review* 148, no. 389 (April 1889): 476. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25101763>.

<sup>17</sup> Joaquin Miller. "The Chinese and the Exclusion Act." *The North American Review* 173, no. 541 (December 1901): 786. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25105257>.

<sup>18</sup> *The New York Times*. "The Tax on Chinese Miners in California." February 10, 1868. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/92389433?accountid=6603>.

Miners' Tax. Many white residents of rural California counties, "which formerly depended on [the tax] for a considerable portion of their revenue,"<sup>19</sup> became even more disgruntled once money stopped flowing into their pockets.

Although a significant number of Californians disliked the Chinese miners, a few white miners defended them. In some mining towns, like those in Tuolumne County, riots broke out as Chinese miners were ordered by the townspeople to leave within 15 days; several Chinese miners died in the chaos.<sup>20</sup> The longer Chinese immigrants stayed in the United States, the more backlash they faced. Apart from racism, Mark Kanazawa, a professor of economics at Carleton College, believes anger with the Chinese was mostly "driven by the simple fact that foreign miners competed with native miners for the scarce gold."<sup>21</sup> As the amount of gold in California dwindled, this antipathy towards the Chinese increased. In a report complaining about Chinese neighbors, a California resident complained of a "continual accumulation of foul air, and the dreadful stench arising from the yard."<sup>22</sup> Negative stereotypes associated with *coolies* continued to be used against the Chinese miners, and many white miners felt that the Chinese were dirty and "swindling"<sup>23</sup> them out of their money. However, a few white miners believed the Chinese were hard workers. Chinese miners were noted for being particularly resourceful; one white miner stated that they often took "old, abandoned claims that nobody thought had enough gold in them to buy salt ... and worked [them] with profit."<sup>24</sup> Chinese miners used honest, fair methods

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> David V. DuFault. "The Chinese in the Mining Camps of California: 1848-1870." *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1959): 155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41169382>.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Kanazawa. "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California." *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (September 2005): 784. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>.

<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*. "Three Thousand Chinamen in One House." May 31, 1869. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/92501509?accountid=6603>.

<sup>23</sup> *The New York Times*. "The Tax on Chinese Miners in California."

<sup>24</sup> Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. 12.

to beat white miners in the competition for gold. Chinese immigrants saw the gold mines as an opportunity to make money for themselves and their families in a foreign land. However, the severe backlash from white miners towards the more successful, resourceful Chinese miners further hurt the Chinese's reputation among white Californians, which led to continual conflict for years to come.

The Transcontinental Railroad was a successful project that connected the frontier with the East Coast, and the Chinese workers received unlikely praise from white people. As construction approached the Sierra Nevada, the Central Pacific Railroad needed a large supply of workers in order to complete the massive project. The Chinese were chosen by Charles Crocker, an owner of the company, but the decision was unpopular among many Americans. Crocker believed the Chinese would work well for his project because many of the gold mines were shutting down, there was a large number of available workers, and Chinese historical sites, like the Great Wall, were well built.<sup>25</sup> Once the project began, some white workers gained respect for the Chinese since “they [were] ready to begin work the moment they hear the signal and labor steadily and honestly until admonished that the working hours ... ended.”<sup>26</sup> The Chinese laborers showed their ability to work hard, and since they were not in competition with white workers, they were complimented for their work ethic rather than punished for it. As shown by the image below, even without proper equipment or clothing, the Chinese still contributed heavily to the Transcontinental Railroad's eventually completion in 1869.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Chinese Railroad Workers*. Photograph. <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/TFPVXD908400090/UHIC>.



The Chinese's were indispensable in the creation of the Transcontinental Railroad, and "no other national project before or after would ever be so dependent on participation by Chinese laborers."<sup>28</sup> The Transcontinental Railroad was critical to the development of the Western Frontier. However, once the railroad was completed, the Chinese's work on the project was seemingly forgotten and animosity among whites toward the Chinese in California remained.

After the Panic of 1873, anti-Chinese sentiment rapidly increased, particularly among labor unions and the government. White Americans believed "the Chinese were robbing them of food for their families and enriching some of the very wealthy capitalists blamed for the depression."<sup>29</sup> The Panic of 1873 affected every American citizen; however, many Chinese were comparably successful due to their willingness to work long hours for little pay. The Chinese immigrants became the scapegoat for many bitter Americans. Labor unions were hit particularly hard by the recession, so they were the first leaders of a large-scale, anti-Chinese movement. Denis Kearney, president of the Workingman's Party, believed the Chinese were "cheap slaves ... whipped curs, abject in docility, mean, contemptible and obedient in all things."<sup>30</sup> Like his predecessors, Kearney had little to no evidence of Chinese *coolies* in the United States, but he

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<sup>28</sup> Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

used the stereotype anyway, which fueled the growing xenophobia among white laborers.

Kearney's immense popularity in California led to new additions in the 1879 California State Constitution: no Californian corporation was permitted to employ someone of Chinese descent.<sup>31</sup>

The California State Constitution showed that anti-Chinese rhetoric was becoming the norm in American politics at the time. The general population soon followed in the wake of the government; reports and violence against Chinese people in California increased.<sup>32</sup> With an overwhelming majority of the government and general population in agreement, the approval of a federal immigration bill was imminent as news of what was happening in California spread rapidly in newspapers across the country. In the spring of 1882, anti-Chinese efforts succeeded, and the Chinese Exclusion Act was signed into effect by President Arthur.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 faced little opposition from non-Chinese people initially; however, some vocal critics questioned the act and its morals. The Chinese Exclusion Act stopped almost all immigration from China to the United States for a ten year period. If one could prove they were not a laborer, they could be granted entrance into the United States, but the comprehensive law made it difficult to avoid being considered anything but a laborer, skilled or unskilled. An article in the *American Advocate of Peace*, a popular political-commentary journal, stated "[Americans] claim these rights for ourselves in every part of the globe, and it is in the last degree dishonorable in us to deny them to others of any race."<sup>33</sup> Following the Thirteenth Amendment and the Civil War, Americans once again were forced to question the morals of their racist actions.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>33</sup> "The Amendment of the Chinese Exclusion Act." *American Advocate of Peace* 55, no. 12 (December 1893): 277. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27900003>.

As years went by, more people began to question the Chinese Exclusion Act. Some people believed the Chinese Exclusion Act conflicted with the idea of fair competition. The aforementioned Joaquin Miller argued that the United States should “bring in the Chinamen, and plenty of them, to help to take [the jobs of Californians] if they do not want to work.”<sup>34</sup> Miller’s words contain parallels with Social Darwinism; let the government be *laissez-faire* and allow the best to naturally succeed. In addition to those claiming the Chinese Exclusion Act was morally wrong, some white judges in California helped the Chinese. Judges Ogden Hoffman and Lorenzo Sawyer believed the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which established relations between Qing-era China and the United States, overrode the Chinese Exclusion Act. Therefore, these judges spent their time helping the Chinese avoid jail time and improve their lying techniques.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act still had popular support though and was extended for another ten years before being made permanent in 1902. White people like Miller, Hoffman, and Sawyer were anomalies at the time. In actuality, the Chinese received little white support at the time.

Chinese immigrants developed complicated systems among themselves in order to enter the United States once the Exclusion Act was passed. Chinese immigration fell to ten people in 1887, but many Chinese were continuing to enter the United States illegally.<sup>36</sup> Li Keng Wong’s father emigrated from China and came to the United States “for a better life ... [after hearing] about *The Golden Mountain*, [San Francisco].”<sup>37</sup> A popular method of entry was through the “Paper Sons” system developed by Chinese immigrants. Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act including special rules for families, Chinese-Americans created documents with fake names and

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<sup>34</sup> Miller. "The Chinese and the Exclusion Act." 788.

<sup>35</sup> Soennichsen. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. 71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Keng Wong Li. "Interview of Li Keng Wong."

families in order to help their friends and other distant relatives come to the United States. Wong's father claimed, "he had three daughters and three sons to bring."<sup>38</sup> The "Paper Sons" system was complicated and often required years of preparation for the lengthy and detailed United States immigration interviews. Chinese people were forced to rely on and trust each other in order to enter the country. Luckily, Chinese culture heavily emphasized kin networks; history professor Grace Peña Delgado, writes that many Chinese shared "bonds of kinship through *guanxi* (关系) [which] inextricably linked Chinese to one another through the expectation of *bao* (报) and *ganqing* (感情)."<sup>39</sup> Chinese traditional social values of connection, reciprocation, and feeling allowed for many paper sons to enter the country during the late-19th and early-20th centuries with remarkable efficiency. These advanced networks highlighted many of the positive traits of Chinese immigrants and demonstrated their determination and desire to live in the United States to start a new life.

The Chinese Exclusion Act is an under-discussed piece of American history. As the 20th Century progressed, the Chinese Exclusion Act slowly fell out of the limelight of American politics, and they were repealed rather quietly in 1943. Policy towards immigration changed greatly in the 20th century: from the restrictive National Origins Act of 1924 to the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished the previously established quota system. In a century of World Wars and Jim Crow, other minority groups took the brunt of white-hate in America: African-Americans, German-Americans, Japanese-Americans, etc. The dramatic events of the Civil Rights Movement and Japanese Internment have overshadowed the Chinese Exclusion Act.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Grace Peña Delgado. "Neighbors by Nature: Relationships, Border Crossings, and Transnational Communities in the Chinese Exclusion Era." *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (August 2011): 406. <https://doi.org/10.1525/Phr.2011.80.3.401>.

Filmmaker Ric Burns said that “if [someone wants] to know about immigration in America and [they] don’t know the story of Chinese exclusion, it would be like saying [they] want to know about race relations in America, but . . . have never heard of slavery.”<sup>40</sup> Although the Chinese Exclusion Act may not have been as dramatic or memorable as other recent issues in American history, it is crucial in the history of race and immigration: two issues that have become increasingly relevant in modern times. Therefore, this tragic aspect of American history should be emphasized in schools. Chinese-Americans made a major contribution to American society in the 19th century, and the mistreatment they faced from the American government and people exposes hypocrisy in the core values on which the United States was supposedly founded.

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<sup>40</sup> Marina Fang. "How the Chinese Exclusion Act Can Help Us Understand Immigration Politics Today."

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