

Institutional Racism: Chinese Immigrants' Encounters in America, 1850-1943

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Abstract

Based on a unique chapter of American history that spans almost a century (1850-1943), this article traces the racial and economic origins of the deplorable sociopolitical status of Chinese immigrants in America by exploring why Chinese immigrants came to America and how they were then unfairly persecuted by a racially motivated legislation—the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act—and the grave consequences it caused to the Chinese American community. By employing archival evidence and legal documents, this essay shows how racism and labor market competition were taken advantaged of as tools to fashion American racial policy particularly toward the Chinese immigrants. Finally, this article concludes that it was this politically instituted law that barred Chinese from becoming equal members of the mainstream American society. This essay intends to offer a racial-institutional perspective to the understanding of the segregation and marginalization of Chinese Americans before WWII.

Keywords

Chinese Immigrants, Racism, Chinese Exclusion Act, Institutional, Marginalization

1. Introduction

In the nineteenth century, among a global wave of immigrants were an astounding number of Cantonese Chinese who emigrated out of China and into America mainly for seeking better opportunities. Therefore, the land of America happened to be an ideal location to chronicle the unique experience of this special wave of Chinese immigrants.

Mainly for whites, this multiracial mixture in the new world may be romantically depicted as “the melting pot”. According to this myth, the mixture of races

is analogous to the process of manufacturing alloys, connoting a harmonious blending of its multi-cultural or multi-racial population (Rife & Paddock, 1954). Unfortunately, a little closer scrutiny will find that the imagery of “melting pot” is largely imaginary: the extermination of native Americans, the inhuman slavery of African Americans, and the systematic and institutional injustice inflicted upon the Chinese immigrants. Such a system of racism continued to persist when this Leviathan expanded to the west coast around 1849 when Chinese immigrants began their immigration into America.

The Chinese immigrants, unlike African Americans, were voluntary immigrants. More than one hundred thousand Chinese laborers, most from a single province Guangdong, indeed came to USA to make their fortunes in the 1849-era California gold rush. Undoubtedly, the overwhelming majority of them came to America for the betterment of their economic conditions. The Chinese emigrants who chose America as their destination largely relied on stories that there was enough gold in California to make them get rich quickly, rich enough to allow them to return home as successful people, and the decision to leave their ancestral homeland was made only by the promise they made themselves: that no matter what happened, one day they would return their homes in China. Unfortunately, these aspiring immigrants collectively succumbed to a systematic violence and oppression instituted against them. However, most emigrants stayed America, enduring prejudice and discrimination, and working hard to make a living, and their heritage is the many crowded Chinatowns dotting America from San Francisco to New York today (Chang, 2003).

In this essay, I mainly focus on the Chinese Americans’ particular experience in the unique chapter of American history: their backgrounds, incentives, unique experiences, and most of all, how racially motivated political institutions, which culminated in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, were fashioned against them.

2. Literature Review

Scores of books and hundreds of articles have been written to record the history of the Chinese immigrants in America. One book that has stood out was *The Chinese America: A Narrative History* by Chang (2003), the author of the best-seller *The Rape of Nanking*. In this engrossing and panoramic book, Chang records, with great details and passion, the Chinese Americans’ struggle for success, its costs and frailties. Chang’s book essentially deals with two main issues. The first issue explains why at certain times in China’s history, certain Chinese made the very hard decision to leave mainland China and their family members to make a new life in America. Chang points out that it was some extreme events at home and opportunities outside alluring enough that compelled them to go to America. The second issue examines what happened to these Chinese immigrants once they reached America. Chang’s book skillfully depicts how the Chinese immigrants struggled to find their place in American society, how they succeeded in some way and how they suffered tremendously from the racism and xenophobia of the mainstream white society. Nevertheless, Chang’s book

covers a span of more than 150 years, is more of a narrative of history than a political analysis of the Chinese immigrants in America.

Another prominent book concerning the history of Chinese immigrants in America was contributed by Tsai (1983). Unlike many other books written from a western perspective, Tsai, in his book *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868-1911*, attempted to recount the Chinese experience in America from the perspective of the Chinese. Drawing upon both English-language and Chinese-language diplomatic correspondences and newspapers, Tsai adeptly demonstrates how China's diplomats courageously attempted to prevent exclusion legislation and its enforcement but eventually had to succumb to American systematic racial hostility. Tsai's accounts of the history aptly show the evolution of China's political and intellectual climate when facing the outside world. However, there is an obvious weakness existing in this book, i.e., a lack of systematic analysis of American politics of racism.

A more recent significant publication dealing with Chinese immigrants in America is Mae Ngai's *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics*. For Ngai, the gold rushes occasioned the first substantial contact between Chinese and Euro-Americans. Drawing on ten years of research across a few continents, Ngai (2021) narrates the story of the thousands of Chinese who left China in pursuit of gold, and how they formed communities and organizations to help navigate their perilous journey abroad. Out of their encounters with whites, arose the pernicious western myth of the "coolie" laborer, a racist stereotype employed to drive anti-Chinese sentiment. In this poignant and provocative work, Ngai deconstructs the Chinese immigrants' coolie myth and revives the history of Chinese in America with all its promise of improvement and constant struggle against racist oppression. This particular chapter of history, spanning nearly two centuries, reveals how the racial bias toward the Chinese has been deeply rooted in Anglo-American views of Chinese and how America has fallen prey to old racialized narratives that may lead to tragic consequences. The strength of Ngai's book lies in its deep analysis of Anglo-America settlers' long-standing racism against the Chinese. That said, one main weakness of this book resides in its overambitious goal to cover too Chinese immigrants in three different countries, thus diluting its focus on the Chinese Americans' encounter in America.

3. Push and Pull: Factors Causing the Chinese Emigration

In 1664, Manchu, an ethnic group from the North, subdued the Ming Dynasty and ruled over China from 1644 to 1911. For about three hundred years of control of China, the Qing Dynasty imposed tyrannical rule over the majority Han Chinese people. During this long period, the attempt to overthrow the alienated government never ceased. Consequently, this persistent political antagonism from within weakened China as a nation significantly whilst the West underwent positive political and technological changes.

China under Manchu's tyrannical rule, *per se*, was as a corrupt and weak na-

tion in nineteenth century compared to the West. When the western colonialists first confronted China in Opium War in 1840s, China was easily defeated by the western powers. In the wake of a series of defeats, China was forced not only to cede its lands as concessions but also forced to pay billions of dollars to the western powers in form of gold and silver. The western powers further demanded political and commercial privileges at the expense of the moribund Middle Kingdom. In turn, the last imperial government had to levy heavy tax on Chinese who were already hardly to sustain their lives. The crisis was then worsened by a series of domestic upheavals. Taiping Rebellion, the most devastating one, from 1851 to 1864, brought the whole country into chaos: a death toll of millions and economic bankruptcy. The Chinese people, wretched and starved, lived on the verge of hunger and death (Fairbank, 1978).

Almost all the Chinese who emigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century were natives of Guangdong, a southern Chinese province with approximately the same size as the state of Oregon. In this hill province, only sixteen percent of the land was cultivated, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much of this cultivated land was used to grow such commercial crops as fruit, sugarcane, indigo, and tobacco instead of rice, the staple food of the Chinese. Consequently, the common folk suffered from the ever-rising price of rice. This situation was further aggravated by the increase in population throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The population grew fast. By 1850, it had increased to twenty-eight million. However, during the Taiping Rebellion, the war swept over the area, and other peasant revolts further devastated the area. Much land was choked with weeds because of the war. The conflicts resulted in large-scale political disorder, social chaos, and economic dislocations (Tsai, 1983). Just as Chan (1986) put it: "Chinese emigrants left to escape poverty in China, which resulted from insufficient land and overpopulation but was exacerbated by the political, economic, and social disruptions caused by western activities."

At that time, the demand in California and other western territories for labor was the paramount motivation for Chinese immigrants. The Chinese were employed for cooking, laundering, grain farming, fruit growing, tide-land draining, mining, and other labor demanded in frontier communities. Gold found in the Sacramento Valley in January 1848 reached Hong Kong in the spring and created much excitement there. "Masters of foreign vessels afforded every facility to emigration, distributing placards, maps and pamphlets with colored accounts of the Golden Hills." America was pictured as a land of abundance and great opportunities that filled Cantonese vacuum of desire and need. They went to California after hearing of gold and higher wages there. They were mostly poor, ignorant, and uneducated, but they were free, and they came to the United States voluntarily to get a good price for their labor (Tsai, 1983).

Geographically, Chinese immigrants in America concentrated largely in California. In the year of 1870, of all 63,199 Chinese in America, California occupied over 80 percent of the total immigrants. In California, about two-thirds of the

Chinese immigrants were either working for the railroad or digging in the mines. Many Chinese chose to return to their native Canton village as soon as they made enough money. In some years, more Chinese returned to China than arrived in the US. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Chinese not only raised crops and fruit, reclaimed marshy lands, fished, and worked in the manufacturing industries of California, they also dug mines, canned salmon, laid railroad tracks, and washed clothing in Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, and Montana (Lyman, 1974).

4. Institutional Racism: The Chinese Exclusion Act

Lacking substantial support and protection from their government, the Chinese immigrants in America became the targets of abuse almost as soon as they set foot on American west, beginning in 1850 with the California Gold Rush. White prospectors often drove Chinese miners from their claims, while state lawmakers slapped them with a heavy foreign miners' tax, and they were also barred from testifying against whites in California's courts. As a result, assaults on Chinese people in California generally went unpunished. Prior to 1879, the anti-Chinese movement was limited to local attacks and political agitation on the West Coast. Discrimination against the Chinese took many forms: personal outrages, municipal enactments, state legislation, and state constitutional ordinances. The Chinese became the convenient scapegoats for many excuses. October 24, 1871, a frenzied mob of 500 people stormed into the city's Chinese quarter in Los Angeles, killing scores of Chinese. Some victims were shot and stabbed; others were hanged from makeshift gallows. By the end of the night, 19 mangled bodies lay in the streets of Los Angeles (Waite, 2021).

Some scholars claim that these similar tragedies were partly attributed to the fact that industrious Chinese laborers posed a competition to the white workers. An eminent sociologist once claimed that the Chinese would be important productive units and serious competitors, and that was well demonstrated by their low wages, low standard of living and their industrious habits. The Chinese laborers were accustomed to the hardest kind of work and the most careful avoidance of all waste. In the absence of organized immigrant labor, with unequal bargaining power, these habits would pose intense competition and undercutting of native labor against white laborers (Tsai, 1983; Takaki, 1990).

More and more restrictions on Chinese immigrants intensified. By the end of the 1850s, more Chinese immigration and gradual improvement in the state's finances led tax interests to favor more restrictive exclusionary policies (Kana-zawa, 2005). The first state laws affecting the Chinese in California was the Foreign Miner's License Tax Law. Passed in 1850, this law imposed a tax of twenty dollars per month on all foreign miners, exclusively on Chinese since they were foreigners forever according to 1790's Naturalization Act and most of Chinese were working as miners in California. The first legislation specifically against the Chinese in California derived from 23 April 1852, when Gov. John Bigler sent a special message to the legislature upon the subject of Chinese immigration: "I

am deeply impressed with the conviction that in order to preserve the tranquility of the State, measures must be adopted to check the tide of Asiatic immigration.” As a result, the California legislature, in the session of 1855 and 1862, passed legislation to discourage the immigration to California of persons who could not become citizens. The Act of 1855 required the owner of a vessel to pay 450 dollars for each passenger who was ineligible for citizenship. The act of 1862 required a monthly payment of two and one-half dollars by each Chinese immigrant over eighteen who had not paid the miners’ license fee (Tsai, 1983).

By 1870, Chinese immigrants accounted for roughly 10 percent of California’s population and a full quarter of the workforce in the state. The campaigns against Chinese immigrants were well organized. In the immediate post-Civil War years, so-called anti-coolie clubs arose. The Central Pacific Anti-Coolie Association, among others, advocated for a ban on Chinese immigration and even defended white vigilantes (Waite, 2021). The urban craft unions representing the aristocracy of labor and the small-producer guilds led the movement. The anticoolie clubs used boycotts to put economic muscle behind their demand to expel Chinese from manufacturing jobs (Ngai, 2014).

Moreover, the ban was accompanied by several anti-Chinese outrages. The more serious and famous ones took place at Denver, Colorado; Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory; Snake River, Oregon; Tacoma and Seattle, Washington Territory; and many California towns. On October 31, 1880, about 3000 white men surrounded the houses occupied by some 400 Chinese on Black Street in downtown Denver. The white men broke windows and doors of the Chinese dwellings; they cursed and yelled: “Kill the Chinese! Kill the damned heathens! Burn their houses! Run them out; shoot them; hang them!” The mob seized the Chinatown of Denver from 2p.m. until 10p.m. Robbery and death took place. The US government refused to do any compensation to Chinese immigrants after this appalling incident. Under the Burlingame Treaty, the Chinese and their property should be protected, but American Congress and the government refused to do anything (Chang, 2003).

Hostility to the Chinese became a political platform on which hundreds of campaigns for public office were launched. Leaders of labor unions defined the “Chinese question” as the central political issue of the day. Business interests perceived the Chinese as an exploitable element in the labor force who, although they ought not to be absolutely excluded, nevertheless should be prevented from assuming full citizenship or social equality. Scorned by officials, patronized by missionaries, defamed by labor leaders, and battered by mobs, the Chinese suffered nearly the full panoply of injustice that a racist society could impose.

In the 45th Congress (1878-1879), senators and representatives from western and southern states began to introduce a number of bills against Chinese immigration. House bill 2143 called for the prohibition of employment of Chinese or Mongolians. The chairman of the Committee on Education and Labor, Albert Willis (D-Kentucky) proposed a so-called fifteen-passenger bill; it provided that

no vessel should take on board at any point in China, or elsewhere, more than 15 Chinese passengers with intent to bring them to the United States. Despite the strong opposition of the Massachusetts Senator George Hoar, the bill was passed by the Congress soon.

Amid this national hysteria, On May 6, 1882, the President Chester Arthur, under great pressure, signed the bill into law. This act provided an absolute 10-year ban on Chinese laborers immigrating to the United States. It was the first time that federal law proscribed entry of an ethnic working group on the premise that it endangered the good order of certain localities. The exclusion act includes: 1) The coming Chinese laborers, skilled or unskilled, to the United States was suspended for 10 years. Since this was renewed again and again, its validity extended until 1943. 2) State and Federal courts were forbidden to naturalize Chinese. What initially was a socioeconomic problem turned into a political issue a bit later by the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1884, the Congress passed a law to pose complete restriction of Chinese immigrants. The exclusion acts of 1882 and 1884 had a great impact on Chinese settlement in the United States. On the one hand, from 1882 onward, the Chinese population in the United States decreased steadily year by year. In three years after the Act of 1882, the number of the Chinese immigrants reached down 22 and 10 in 1887 (Tsai, 1983) (Figure 1).

However, this act failed in appeasing the fanatics, but in inflaming them. Having succeeded in barring the majority of new Chinese immigrants from American shores, the anti-Chinese bloc began a campaign to expel the remaining Chinese from the United States. During a period of terror now known as “the Driving Out,” several Chinese communities in the West were subjected to a level of violence that approached genocide (Chang, 2003). More deplorable is that this institutional injustice and violations were even extended to the Chinese-descended children. In 1882, anti-Chinese actions reached a peak. Senator Saulsbury of Delaware summed up the opinion of many Americans about the Chinese when he declared, “They are of a different race and possess an entirely different civilization, and in my opinion are incapable of being brought into assimilation in habits, customs, and manners with the people of this country” (Lyman, 1974).

The Chinese Exclusion Act and its subsequent amendments erected an official barrier to more than twenty thousand Chinese men in 1884 alone. The wives of Chinese laborers were also prevented from entering America by the same law. Not to mention that many women could not stand the harsh conditions of overseas life and died prematurely or returned to China. The shortage of women in America caused a delay in the procreation of a second generation. Segregation, custom, and law have kept most Chinese apart from other Americans and discouraged not only interracial marriage but also those intimate and primary relations that are prerequisite to non-arranged marriage. Subsequently, fourteen states outlawed marriages between whites and Chinese (Lyman, 1974).

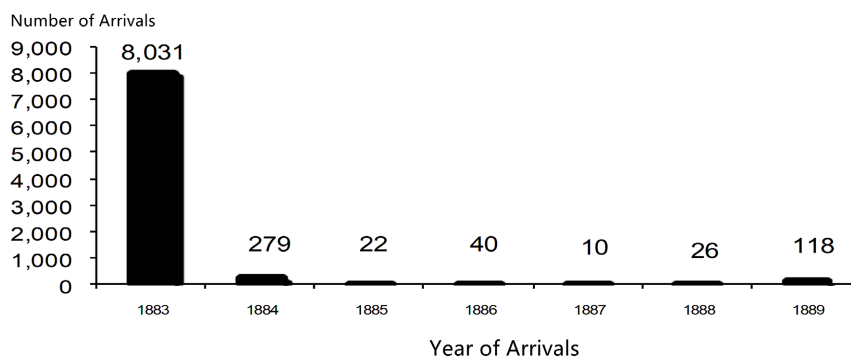


Figure 1. Chinese arrivals after Chinese Exclusion Act (1883-1889). Source: Tsai (1983), *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868-1911*.

The virus of this institutional racial hatred infected the souls of more whites. In the year 1885, violent outbreaks against the Chinese took place in many places. The most tragic and brutal incident occurred on September 2, 1885, at Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory. As a result of the outrage, 28 were killed, 15 others were wounded, and several hundred were chased out of town. The rioters destroyed Chinese property valued at more than \$147,000. After the massacre, not one of the persons who murdered, burned and robbed the Chinese was ever brought to justice by the territorial or local authorities. On the night of Oct. 24, 1885, all the residences of Chinese miners in the area were burned. In Seattle, the rioters further published anti-Chinese proclamations and demanded that all Chinese should leave Seattle before 1 November 1885. On October 30, 1885, several hundred Chinese were driven from Tacoma and Puyallup, and Chinese merchants were given one day to pack their goods and leave. In June 1887, a group of seven American white men attacked a Chinese mining camp at Log Cabin Bar near the Snake River and brutally murdered ten Chinese miners. They took five to ten thousand dollars in gold dust from these dead Chinese and threw the bodies into the Snake River (Tsai, 1983).

This wave of this systematic and institutional racism against the Chinese immigrants never ceased easily. In October 1888, *The Scott Bill* was then signed by President Cleveland. It provided that Chinese laborers who left the USA should not be permitted to return and that all certificates of identity issued to Chinese in the US who had left the country for temporary visits abroad should be declared null and void. Which means that the Chinese immigrants who left for China to get their wives were forever stopped from coming to America. In May 1892, President Harrison signed *The Geary Act*, it stipulates that the suspension of immigration by Chinese laborers be extended for another ten years with a new rigid deportation measure against the Chinese. It denied bail to Chinese in *habeas corpus* proceedings. More importantly, it required that all Chinese apply for a certificate of residence within one year (Chang, 2003).

In 1893, the Congress passed *The McCreary Amendments* and appropriated

funds for their expensive enforcement. The McCreary Amendments provided for an additional six months for registration but rigidly defined the term *merchant* so that those Chinese who were engaged in mining, fishing, huckstering, and laundering were included in the “labor” category. In March of 1894, under the pressure and after unavailing cries of despair, *the Congressman Treaty* was signed, it further limited the Chinese immigration. Later, although the Qing government eventually refused to renew the Gresham-Yang Treaty, the United States extended and reenacted all the anti-Chinese exclusion laws. The exclusion law of 1902 represented a new stage in the exclusion campaign against the Chinese. This law was designed to drive out resident Chinese as well as bar all newcomers. The Deficiency Act of April 1904, Chinese were forbidden to emigrate to Hawaii and the Philippines (Chang, 2003).

5. Conclusion

The Chinese Exclusion Act codified the idea that Chinese were unassimilable and, therefore, would always be foreigners, even those born in America (Ngai, 2021). The Chinese Exclusion Act, as one of the most infamous and tragic statutes in American history, would “frame the immigration debate in the years that followed and result in greater and greater restrictions on foreigners seeking refuge and freedom in the United State” (Chang, 2003). The cumulative effect of these restrictive immigration laws dramatically decreased the number of new immigrants. As originally intended, the Chinese Exclusion act achieved its main objectives by 1910. By that year, the trade unions succeeded in eliminating Chinese workers from the labor market. Legislative restrictions, combining an exclusion of Chinese laborers and their wives with a prohibition on naturalization, promised an eventual elimination of the Chinese population in the United States. Some law which was anti-humanity was enacted in 1921, specifying that an alien-born woman marrying a citizen could no longer automatically acquire his citizenship. The greatest hardship increased for American-born males of Chinese descent, who, because of the disparity in sex ratio, had to go to China to find mates, marry them there and later effect their admission to the USA. Now this was a dead end. The Act of 1924 further tightened the enforcement of the regulations, in that alien-born married women could no longer enter to join their husbands, although their minor children could gain admission and could acquire citizenship through the American-born spouse (Lyman, 1974; Tsai, 1983).

Thereafter, many Chinese Americans as well as China-born families became separated for long years and any American-born woman marrying a man ineligible for citizenship lost her citizenship. The American-born women of Chinese ancestry suffered. Since Chinese immigrants had no naturalization privileges. Hence, if she married a foreign-born man of Asian descent, she would lose her citizenship in America. The rights and privileges of citizenship which were guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States were savagely deprived because of the human innate instincts (Lee, 1960). Additionally, the threat of de-

portation and the conflation of legal and illegal immigrants also rendered all Chinese vulnerable to exploitation and extortion and produced a psychology of fear that resulted in their segregation, marginalization, and return migration (Lee, 2003).

Beyond any doubt, the Chinese Exclusion Act had a catastrophic effect on Chinese immigrants in America. Subsequently, as part of the Chinese Exclusion Act, deportation became a major means of controlling and disciplining the Chinese community in America. It is so aggravating that this exclusion was extended not only to legal and illegal Chinese immigrants but also to native-born Chinese American citizens, whose plight was inextricably connected to that of their immigrant brethren (Lee, 2003). Through the decades following the passage of the Exclusion Act, the Chinese in America continued to live in an inhumane condition: suspended in a state of cultural limbo, not accepted by white American society, yet not able to return to China (Chang, 2003).

For more than half a century, Chinese immigration was totally prohibited in America. Absurd enough, like many other minority groups, the color of the Chinese became the source of arbitrarily imposed inferiority. Prejudice was further strengthened by the institutional yoke on them through codification of injustice against them (Tsai, 1983).

Some involuntary change seemed to come in December of 1943. This change arrived due to a force from the outside. This force was the World War II. Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor unleashed the ferocity of American anti-Asian racism against the Japanese, while the Chinese were portrayed as faithful allies, heroic fighters, and tragic victims. As the Japanese Americans were rounded up and confined in detention camps, a contrasting and more favorable picture of Chinese Americans emerged. The wartime alliance of China with the United States provided an opportunity to enhance the image of and avoid some of the most discriminatory features of Chinese immigrants in America. To counter Japanese propaganda, the US Congress passed a measure in 1943, repealing the discriminatory exclusion laws against Chinese immigrants and establishing an immigration quota for Chinese of around 105 visas per year. But Congress's continued antipathy towards Chinese migration was evident in the annual Chinese quota of 105. This quota was unlike all other immigration quotas because it was not for China but for all Chinese in the world, regardless of their country of birth or residence (Ngai, 2014).

The congressional substitution of a quota system for the absolute prohibition on Chinese entry proved to be an important symbol of the wartime alliance while its lack of substance apparently assuaged the fears of American Sino-phobes. It was not until 1968, however, that the quota based on national origins was finally repealed, and entrance to the United States was made conditional upon the country's need for skills or upon the Chinese desire to unite with their separated family members (Lyman, 1974). The dream of pain and humiliation seemed to come to a temporary relief.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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