

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT ON THE ATTITUDES OF THE  
AMERICAN POPULOUS

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Throughout its history, the United States has been boastful of its “melting pot” mentality, where people from any country have been welcome to join the “land of the free”. During the nineteenth century, however, this mentality was put into question during several events which caused a large influx of immigrants. Specifically, the large amount of Chinese immigrants caused Americans to act in a way contrary to their own beliefs. At first warmly welcomed, Chinese immigrants already in California and Hawaii would be widely discriminated against due to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Although the act did not affect Chinese immigrants already in the United States, the legislation's ideas would instill themselves into the American population, changing their economic and social attitudes towards the Chinese and causing them to act against America's “melting pot” ideals.

Before large amounts of Chinese immigrants came to the United States, the United States was well aware of the economic benefits that the Chinese offered. By the early nineteenth century, a strong, mutually beneficial trade arrangement had been established between California and Canton.<sup>1</sup> This trade arrangement not only allowed Chinese goods to have an impact on California's economy, but also gave Chinese merchants a chance to incorporate themselves into the Californian market and American culture. The Chinese integration into Californian culture was seemingly welcomed, as rooms were filled with imported furniture and buildings were “put up in San Francisco by Chinese workmen”<sup>2</sup> without any issues. This arrangement also allowed news to travel between the American west coast and southern China and was unimpeded by political boundaries.

Not only was the country of China as a whole of economic benefit to the United States,

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1 Yong Chen, “Origins of Chinese Emigration to California,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 52.

2 *Ibid.*, 53.

but their labor force was as well. As seen with William Hooper in his Hawaiian sugar plantation, Chinese workers worked harder than the native Hawaiians and were easier to house, noting that “they [were] highly pleased” with a single “large comfortable building”.<sup>3</sup> Despite occasional collusion with the native plantation workers, the Chinese laborers proved to be more effective, even when provided with lesser living conditions and a poor working environment. The low cost of hiring Chinese workers, of course, was of much economic benefit since more work could be completed at a lower cost. With this, Hooper's American plantation, which employed both Hawaiian and Chinese labor, reflected America's idea of a multi-cultural environment, where several ethnicities could peacefully work together.

The same economic benefits and social views were reflected in the gold mines of California as the Chinese streamed in during the Gold Rush. It may have been thought that the large amounts of Chinese immigrants would simply take most of the gold for China's economy. Thus, the passage of the Foreign Miners Tax of 1852 meant that the United States economy would still benefit from a large amount of Chinese miners, since each miner had to pay a flat tax.<sup>4</sup> Along with this, directors who hired Chinese miners did so at “very poor wages”<sup>5</sup>, meaning that American mining companies benefited from hiring cheap Chinese labor. Chinese laborers also encountered no problems while working alongside American workers, as in 1857 it was reported that “the Chinese enjoyed equal rights” and “were not interfered with”<sup>6</sup>. Thus, Chinese miners provided America with an economic benefit whilst remaining as an equal in American society.

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3 Ronald Takaki, “Native and Asian Labor in the Colonization of Hawai'i,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 59.

4 Gloria Kim, Lecture on January 12, 2015.

5 J.D. Borthwick, “Writer J.D. Borthwick Observes Chinese Miners in California, 1857,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 64.

6 *Ibid.*, 64.

The benefits of Chinese immigrants were not only monetary benefits, however. The Chinese were often willing to do work that white Americans were not willing to do. For instance, during the construction of the trans-continental railroad, the “Chinese soon became the backbone” of the project and were willing to complete very dangerous tasks that often cost them their lives.<sup>7</sup> These workers were also paid low wages, benefiting the American trans-continental railway project. After the project's completion, many Chinese workers continued to be of a benefit to the larger American society by setting up much needed laundries in residential areas.<sup>8</sup> These laundries were initially found to be useful in the surrounding community to both Chinese and Americans alike. Thus, not only was the work of Chinese immigrants important, but it was also accepted and often praised as useful, and Chinese immigrants were widely welcomed.

Despite the benefits that Chinese immigrants brought to American soil and their welcomed arrival by the Americans who believed that America truly was a “melting pot” of nationalities, some politicians disagreed. In the years leading up to 1882, several pieces of legislation were passed such as the 1875 Page Law that tightened regulations on American immigration.<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1882, with many politicians in agreement with editor Henry George who claimed that the low wages of the Chinese hurt the economy by lowering all wages and that the Chinese make no attempt to become Americanized<sup>10</sup>, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, which banned new Chinese laborers from entering the United States. Although there were some smaller exclusionary acts already in effect, the Exclusion Act showed that it was okay to violate America's identity as an accepting conglomeration of cultures. This contradiction was noticed

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7 Sucheng Chan, “Shifting Chinese Immigrant Employment,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 83.

8 *Ibid.*, 85.

9 Gloria Kim, Lecture on January 12, 2015.

10 Henry George, “Editor Henry George Supports Chinese Exclusion on Economic and Racial Grounds, 1869,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 98.

and pointed out by some politicians<sup>11</sup>, but their complaints were relayed to a majority of deaf ears. The arguments made regarding the economic and racial problems of the Chinese would be absorbed by the American populous, marking a shift in their economic and social attitudes.

The influence that this new precedent had was seen throughout the American Chinese labor community. In 1885, American miners, for instance, decided to work together with Chinese miners in order to fight for higher wages.<sup>12</sup> The Chinese, feeling no ill-will against them, agreed to collaborate on the issue. However, after being turned away by mining officers, the Chinese refused to continue with a strike with the American miners, creating a large amount of animosity from the Americans. Influenced by the recent precedent set by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the American miners immediately felt that the stubborn Chinese workers were a threat to their wages and should be forced to leave. Without means to legally evict the Chinese miners from the mines, the Americans took it upon themselves to violently slaughter the Chinese and burn their communities. Although legally these Chinese miners weren't committing any sort of crimes, they were punished by American miners who felt justified due to recent anti-Chinese government actions. The Chinese miners, feeling that they were of equal standing to the American miners and under protection of America's "melting pot" mentality, never thought they would be attacked and peacefully fled from their American attackers.<sup>13</sup>

The same change in attitude was seen in the post-1882 Chinese laundries, where white Americans now treated laundrymen as if their "status was low" since they "constituted no competitive threat".<sup>14</sup> The discrimination existed to such a degree that the once relied upon

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11 George Hoar, "Senator George Hoar Declares Chinese Exclusion Un-American, 1882," in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 101.

12 Chinese Laborers, "Chinese Laborers Report on a Race Riot at Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, 1885," in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 66.

13 Ibid., 70.

14 Chan, "Shifting Chinese Immigrant Employment," 86.

Chinese laundryman was now ostracized from society as if he was a member of an “inferior race”, a label that should not be received in a land where “all men are created equal”.

The new attitude toward Chinese immigrants also extended into the manufacturing sector. Chinese immigrants, who used to make up the majority of American factory workers, were “driven out of ... manufacturing as a result of anti-Chinese sentiment”<sup>15</sup>. These workers, who were once praised for their ability to work hard with low wages, were driven out of the places they worked due to a changing social attitude influenced by the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The workers weren't the only things being removed, however. The anti-Chinese sentiment brought on by this new legislation also called for a boycott against Chinese-made goods, effectively removing them from the market<sup>16</sup> and rooms in which they were once praised for their beauty. Thus, the influence of the legislation not only changed the way that the American populous thought, but also what they bought.

The Chinese population in America was not blind to the sudden change of heart brought about by the 1882 Exclusion Act, and many, such as the Chinese Merchants of New York, began to question America's belief in a multinational nation and claim that they've been denied of “common manhood ... recognized according to the principles of common humanity and American freedom”<sup>17</sup>. Many members of the Chinese elite also sought to fight for their rights through the American legal system and wrote publicly that the American government and American people had not lived up to “their own professed standards”.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese population in America was well aware of the contradictions that the United States was making.

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15 Chan, “Shifting Chinese Immigrant Employment,” 85.

16 Ibid., 85.

17 Chinese Merchants, “New York Chinese Merchants Oppose Renewal of Chinese Exclusion Act, 1892,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 107.

18 K. Scott Wong, “Chinese Responses to Exclusion,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 128.

The way that the Chinese were treated upon their arrival into California and Hawaii in the early nineteenth century agreed with the United State's belief that their nation was a “melting pot” of many ethnicities. China's economic benefits, their hard working laborers, and their friendly nature made them quickly welcomed within American society. However, by the late nineteenth century, the government no longer wished to welcome them, passing the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and violating their own “melting pot” mentality. This new mentality greatly influenced the economic and social attitudes of the American populous toward the Chinese, creating a situation where Chinese all across California and Hawaii were treated as if they didn't belong, directly contradicting the values of the United States.

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