

Chinese Immigration during the 1800s in the United States

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Abstract: The first wave of Chinese immigration was between 1849 to 1882, and 110,000 Chinese immigrants had settled on the west coast of the US, attracted by “Gold Mountain” in California and the large employment of railroad workers (Hsieh). When some anti-immigration acts passed, especially the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 which banned Chinese immigration for ten years, only certain documented immigrants were allowed to come to America (Carlin). The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1943 when the US needs a smooth relationship with China in World War II (Ashabranner). Although the Immigration Act of 1965 continuously had a restrictive impact on Chinese immigrants, productive Chinese immigrants made great contributions to the US economy and politics in a large number of industries and business. One example is building the long railroad which allowed communications between the West and the East, and unified the country after the Civil War. They also brought their cultures to the add to diversity in the United States (Documentary: Silent Chinese laborers in the US). As time went on, more and more Chinese started their new lives in the land which across the Pacific Ocean from their hometowns because of political, economic, and academic factors (Hsieh).

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In the 19th century, natural disasters, imperialism, and a devastated economy prompted Chinese people to look for opportunities abroad. From the 1820s and 1830s, Great Britain imported opium to China in order to export tea for a cheap price since they would have

control over China’s economy which had fallen rapidly. During this period of time, 52,929 chests of opium were imported all over China which caused economic and social disruption (Carlin). In order to buy the opium, the Chinese transferred more than ten million dollars of silver out of China. Although the Qing dynasty government tried to suppress the import of opium and fight against the British government, Britain seized the chance to occupy Hongkong in May 1841 and fought back Qing forces (The Use of Black Powder and Nitroglycerine on the Transcontinental Railroad). In late 1857, British and French were allied and began their military operations and forced the Chinese to negotiate. In 1860, British and French troops destroyed the Dagu batteries and burned Yuanming Garden which was the most beautiful collection of architecture in the country (Pennsylvania of the West). How those European countries took advantage of China made China look like a baby who could never stand up. At about the same time, natural disasters hit China. In 1847, people had almost no food to eat in Henan because of the massive drought through the city. After two years, Guangxi had famine, and the Yangtze River flooded Hubei, Anhui, Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. The shortage of food led to starvation and diseases (Pforzheimer). Although the Qing government would have “famine foods” for people, it had increased crimes to get food since there was not enough for so many people, and caused infectious diseases and starvation deaths. Obviously, a significant number of immigrants had raised under such conditions.

The large demands of laborers in the US, reunion with families and personal fulfillment were considered pull factors for Chinese immigration. In 1848, an estimated 300,000 Chinese entered the US to work as miners, especially gold miners in California. The

discovery of gold in Sacramento, as known as the “Gold Rush”, attracted a lot of Chinese immigrants mining in San Francisco with new hopes of getting as much money as they could before they went back to China. Sometimes, their gold would be stolen, therefore, they melted the gold and made them as pots or other utensils. Once they arrived home, they melted the utensils into gold, and covered them with black soot in order to hide their wealth and protect their gold (Hsieh). In 1862, the Pacific Railroad Act authorized Central Pacific and Union Pacific to build a railroad from Sacramento to Omaha. Because of the geology of west coasts, it was not easy to build the railroad, the working conditions were harsh, hard to make any progress and many Irish workers could not endure such working conditions. Therefore, a lot of workers were running away. Then, Charles Crocker, who was the manager of Central Pacific Company, decided to recruit a large amount of Chinese workers. They spread the news in China, and Chinese saw the light of solving the economic problems (Btvprime). Many Chinese came over for the railroad by taking ships over the Pacific Ocean. From 1898 to 1980, thousands of women crossed over to join their husbands or fathers. Some Chinese women came for “business” as well. Those women grew up in China, and then they were brought to the US when they were ready to marry, like Chinese merchants who could give them money. Other women found themselves in slavery sometimes. According to Hsieh, a man told a girl that she had been chosen to be his wife, and how much wealth that he could give to her and her family. The man took the girl to San Francisco as a “slave” and forced her into prostitution (Hsieh). There was no lack of personal fulfillment. In 1910, numbers of Chinese students came to study in the US as well. For instance, Bingxin, who was a famous writer, studied in the US in 1923. Her goals were to study real, advanced knowledge and technology, not necessarily to save China, but to save the self-respect as a Chinese (Mu Ye Ge Zi).

Chinese immigrants “adapted” by developing their own communities, opening businesses of laundries and restaurants, and passing their culture to descendants. Assimilation was never a choice for Chinese immigrants because white people excluded way forced them to live in their small communities (Ashabranner). After the 1870s, anti-Chinese movements, several riots that against Chinese immigration since the Americans had job competitions with them and unaccepted culture

toward foreigners, cut Chinese workers from the labor market, and they had a hard time finding jobs. In order to stay alive, they relied mostly on their own resources. After the government banned them from mining, they found another gold mine in the city (Glass). A family could open a restaurant when the husband could serve as a cooker and dishwasher, and the wife could work as a waitress, barmaid, and cashier in the front. Mostly, their restaurants attracted Chinese customers, especially for bachelor communities of Chinese immigrants. Grocery business was another choice in Asian communities and provided cooking or other goods for Chinese restaurants. Other Chinese immigrants found a low rent location, and could open a business on scrub boards, soap, irons or other life supplies with low costings. Chinese parents passed on Chinese values, languages, and customs to their children, but to keep them away from American culture. They kept Chinese traditions in their families and celebrated Chinese festivals in the US. Some families would come together who had the same family names or same interests and formed a kind of organization in order to help each other looking for jobs, housings, establishing schools, temples etc. Tenacious Chinese immigrants “adapted” to this unwelcome society well based on their strong belief of their culture and the desire to live in the US (Ashabranner).

Chinese immigration was not welcomed by Americans once they realized they had to compete for job opportunities with Chinese workers. Although the Burlingame Treaty was signed by the US and China in 1868 to make an agreement on friendship, trade and mutual rights of immigration, Chinese were not allowed to be naturalized as citizens because of their “undesirable qualities”(Burlingame Treaty). Anti-Chinese riots were active even before the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. On October 24th 1871, two Chinese men accidentally killed a white man in a fight. Then, a group of white men started violence through Los Angeles’ Chinatown which caused the death of 19 Chinese men and boys who were either shot, lynched or stabbed. In 1870, San Francisco passed a law was to tax laundrymen without horses for their delivery wagon, and this law successfully discriminated against the Chinese. White people disrupted their business by murder and destroyed China town (Btvprime). In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed and banned Chinese immigration for ten years except merchants, teachers, students and travelers with documentations.

Afterward, the act even extended ten more years until 1943. In 1892, the Geary Act demanded Chinese laborers to register for a certificate of residence or they would be arrested or deported. On February 1882, Chinese workers were forced to depart and to take a steamship in Seattle. More and more acts passed, they potentially supported the white supremacy, nativism and racism to Chinese (Carlin).

In the Qing Dynasty, thousands of Chinese immigrants came to America and looked for new hopes for their helpless situation under the oppression from French and British imperialism. But they did not expect that the white supremacy had been continued and excluded them from the community. All of the

improvements for Chinese immigrants' today are ascribed to Chinese's high degree of tolerance for hardship and racial discrimination and to the efficient Chinese lifestyle. Nowadays, the society shifted the attitude to Chinese immigrants since China's economic power has become stronger and stronger. China has sent more students, professors, and scientists to study in high standard colleges, and more Chinese merchants and investors are willing to extend their field from China to the US. Comparing to the Mexico immigrants, which always been described as "undocumented" or "low skilled", Chinese immigrants seem more welcomed by America based on how many benefits they could bring to the US.