Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s

Early Chinese Immigration  In the early 1850s, thousands of Chinese traveled east across the Pacific Ocean to the United States for the same reason many Americans came west across the Great Plains: the promise of gold in the mountains of California. Though gold brought the Chinese to California in large numbers, they were familiar with the West Coast long before the Gold Rush. By 1600, in fact, the Chinese knew enough of California to have drawn a map of the coast. Some evidence indicates that early Chinese explorers might have visited North America hundreds of years before Columbus did.

Early Chinese prospectors were some of the first to venture into the Gold Country and send word of the riches to their home villages. During the 1800s, conditions in China were unstable, so many young men eagerly seized the opportunity to earn a fortune in California. Thousands left their families behind to brave a treacherous 60-day journey over the Pacific. The number of Chinese immigrants jumped from just a few hundred a year to over 20,000 in 1852. Chinese-American miners soon became a common sight in the mountains of California.

Competition Leads to Violence  Chinese miners were quick to discover that white miners resented their competition. To avoid confrontation, they operated the less desirable sites and worked in large groups for protection. Nevertheless, the Chinese became a focal point of white miners’ anger and frustration. California governor John Bigler declared the Chinese “a danger to the welfare of the state.” Such statements stirred the California legislature to pass a special tax that took over half of the average Chinese miner’s wages. The law allowed any citizen to collect this tax. Financial harassment soon degenerated into outright violence. In 1856 the newspaper the Shasta Republican reported: “Hundreds of Chinamen have been slaughtered in cold blood in the last five years by the desperados that infest our state. The murder of the Chinaman was almost a daily occurrence; yet in all this time we have heard of but two or three cases where the guilty parties were brought to justice.”

Atrocities against Chinese became so common that the phrase “a Chinaman’s chance” came to mean no chance at all. In fact, an 1850 law prohibited the Chinese—along with Native Americans and African Americans—from testifying in court against a white person. Terrorized, most Chinese left the hills or returned home to China or to the safety of San Francisco’s growing Chinatown.
The Transcontinental Railroad Opens Opportunities A new opportunity opened up for Chinese workers with the building of the transcontinental railroad. In July 1862 Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act, which gave two large railroad companies, Central Pacific and Union Pacific, approval to construct and operate a railroad that would reach from coast to coast. Union Pacific began in the East, and Central Pacific in the West. Competition between the two soon became a race to see which company could lay the most track before the two met.

Central Pacific Recruits Chinese Workers The owner of Central Pacific, railroad tycoon Charles Crocker, could not find many men willing to do the dangerous work of clearing land and laying track. Unable to retain white workers, Crocker and labor bosses began to recruit Chinese laborers. Chinese men who had been driven out of the gold mines seized this opportunity. Chinatown had provided them with safety but not jobs, and they were eager to work. The new Central Pacific workers faced the most difficult of all railroad work: laying track through the treacherous Sierra Nevada mountain range. One construction worker wrote: “The rugged mountain looked like stupendous anthills. They swarmed with celestials [Chinese], shoveling, wheeling, carting, drilling, and blasting rock and earth.” Historians estimate that between 500 and 1,000 Chinese workers lost their lives in this dangerous work. This labor earned a Chinese worker about $35 per month, the same as his white counterpart. However, unlike the white workers, the Chinese had to provide their own food. Surprisingly, this proved to be an advantage because Chinese meals were more nutritional and disease free than those provided by the companies.

A New Track-laying World Record Despite the dangerous conditions and low wages, the Chinese laid track at the tremendous rate of nearly a mile per day. In fact, the Chinese were so skilled and efficient that Central Pacific handpicked a crew of 848 Chinese workers to challenge Union Pacific’s track-laying record. On April 29, 1869, this select crew laid more than 10 miles of track in 12 hours, a new world record. Yet, when the time came to celebrate the meeting of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific at Promontory Point, the company leaders failed to acknowledge the accomplishments of the Chinese laborers. In all the speeches made that day, the tremendous efforts of the Chinese were mentioned only once in passing. Furthermore, when the railroad was completed in 1869, many Chinese workers were once again unemployed and unwelcome. Many returned to China to rejoin their families. Others brought their families to California. Unfortunately, various national events reignited racist feelings against the Chinese.
Anti-Chinese Violence  The 1870s saw a sharp downturn in the U.S. economy. As the recession deepened, unemployment grew, and frustrated workers often blamed Chinese immigrants for taking whites' jobs. Dennis Kearny, a recent Irish immigrant and leader of the Workingman's Party, pointed to Chinese as the root of the unemployment. Speaking before crowds of angry, hungry workers, Kearny portrayed the Chinese as deviously determined to undermine white labor by working for inhumanly low wages. His racist rhetoric contributed to a wave of violence that swept across the state and led to the brutal beatings of Chinese and the burning of many of their businesses. The *San Francisco Bulletin* asked, "Why is it that these people [the Chinese] are beaten and maltreated at high noon on our streets and no arrests invariably recorded?"

Legal Harassment  In addition to the violence, Chinese also faced legal harassment. State and local governments passed numerous laws directed at Chinese, from an ordinance that forced Chinese to shave off their queues (braids of hair) to a tax that forced many Chinese laundries out of business. Like African Americans in the South, Chinese were prohibited from attending public schools with white children.

In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The act was designed to stop nearly all immigration from China. Although a few lawmakers spoke out against the bill, it was passed overwhelmingly. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first law ever passed in the United States that excluded immigrants from a specific ethnic group. The Chinese Exclusion Act did allow some Chinese to immigrate—such as teachers, students, merchants, and those related to American citizens. Chinese who sought admission to the United States after 1882 had to go through a rigorous screening process to prove that they qualified for admission. Not until 1943, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was lifted, were Chinese from all backgrounds allowed to immigrate to the United States.

Angel Island Processing Center  Between 1910 and 1940, all Chinese arriving in America were processed on Angel Island, a tiny island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. As soon as the ferry docked at Angel Island, the Chinese were separated from other passengers and taken to separate barracks for processing. At any one time, between 200 and 300 males and 30 to 50 females were detained on Angel Island. The immigrants were detained for weeks, or even months, as officials processed their immigration papers and interrogated them. Usually, this meant that the Chinese had to convince officials—through documentation and interrogations—that they were merchants or were joining family members who were American citizens.
307. CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT
May 6, 1882
(U. S. Statutes at Large, Vol. XXII, p. 58 ff.)

For references, see Doc. No. 306.

An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese.

WHEREAS, in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore,

Be it enacted, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or having so come after the expiration of said ninety days, to remain within the United States.

SEC. 7. That the master of any vessel who shall knowingly bring within the United States on such vessel, and land or permit to be landed, any Chinese laborer, from any foreign port or place, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be punished by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars for each and every such Chinese laborer so brought, and may also be imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year.

SEC. 8. That the two foregoing sections shall not apply to Chinese laborers who were in the United States on the seventeenth day of November, eighteen hundred and eighty, or who shall have come into the same before the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act.

SEC. 9. That in order to the faithful execution of articles one and two of the treaty in this act before mentioned, every Chinese person other than a laborer who may be entitled by said treaty and this act to come within the United States, and who shall be about to come to the United States, shall be identified as so entitled by the Chinese Government in each case, such identity to be evidenced by a certificate issued under the authority of said government, which certificate shall be in the English language or (if not in the English language) accompanied by a translation into English, stating such right to come, and which certificate shall state the name, title, or official rank, if any, the age, height, and all physical peculiarities, former and present occupation or profession, and place of residence in China of the person to whom the certificate is issued and that such person is entitled conformably to the treaty in this act mentioned to come within the United States.

SEC. 10. That no Chinese person shall be permitted to enter the United States by land without producing to the proper officer of customs the certificate in this act required of Chinese persons seeking to land from a vessel. And any Chinese person found unlawfully within the United States shall be caused to be removed therefrom to the country from whence he came, by direction of the President of the United States, and at the cost of the United States, after being brought before some justice, judge, or commissioner of a court of the United States and found to be one not lawfully entitled to be or remain in the United States.

SEC. 11. That this act shall not apply to diplomatic and other officers of the Chinese Government traveling upon the business of that government, whose credentials shall be taken as equivalent to the certificate in this act mentioned, and shall exempt them and their body and household servants from the provisions of this act as to other Chinese persons.

SEC. 12. That hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed.

SEC. 13. That the words “Chinese laborers,” whenever used in this act, shall be construed to mean both skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining.