

Changes in the Treatment of Chinese Americans

Yitong Sun^{1,†}, Jiayu Shen^{2,†}, Jiajia Guo^{3,†}, Shuohan Jing^{4,†}, Xinye Yang^{5,a,*,†}

¹University of Leeds, Leeds, the United Kingdom

²Ningbo Xiaoshi High School, Ningbo, China

³Beijing Haidian Foreign Language Experiment School, Beijing, China

⁴Xi'an Gaoxin No.1 High School International Course Center, Xi'an, China

⁵Queen Mary University of London, London, the United Kingdom

a. yxy0516@hotmail.com

*corresponding author

[†]These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: The COVID-19 epidemic is spreading worldwide, especially in the United States. Since the large-scale outbreak of the epidemic in the United States in March 2020, Asian Americans have also faced the secondary threat of "racism" and "Asian hatred" due to the COVID-19 virus. They have become the targets of persistent harassment and attacks by diehard Asian haters. Discriminatory words and deeds against Asian Americans have also spread in American society like the covid-19 virus and become an event sweeping across the United States. The rising anti-Asian incidents in the United States not only focused the attention of American society, but also attracted the world's attention. At the same time, it is not difficult to recall the anti-Asian situation in the United States at the end of the 19th century. The Opium War broke out in China in 1840. Therefore, many Chinese citizens chose to make a living in the more developed United States. At first, Asian workers were welcomed by industrialists because of their low wages and hard-working characteristics. They were regarded as "exceptional cultures from a distant land". However, with the increasing number of Asian Americans during the gold rush, American citizens and officials gradually changed their attitudes towards Asian Americans. Finally, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was established to restrict Asians from entering their territory. This article will analyze the changes in Americans' attitudes towards Asian Americans at the end of the 19th century to explore the reasons behind them, and take this opportunity to hopefully shed some light on how we should face racism today during the pandemic.

Keywords: Asian, American, Chinese

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States in 2020, the hatred of Asian Americans has been rising and growing. The rights of Asian descent face challenges. The anti-Asian words and deeds in the current American society are related to the fact that Asians are regarded as the "scapegoats" for the COVID-19 outbreak and are also instigated by some American politicians and media, and correspond to the current complex international situation. The underlying reason is the deep-rooted white supremacy, racism, and xenophobia in American history. In the face of this situation, Asian

ethnic groups and relevant organizations have taken a series of measures to try to unite as many Asian ethnic groups as possible, and unite with other ethnic groups to maintain the safety of Asian ethnic groups and strive for equal rights and interests of Asian ethnic groups. Due to differences and even conflicts in the identity, intergenerational, origin, class status, and political identity of immigrants of Asian descent, there is still a long way to go to achieve overall understanding and cohesion within Asian descent.

2. Literature Review

At present, there is a lot of research on Sino-US relations at home and abroad. While the domestic literature can be traced back to Liang Qichao's *The Prohibition of Chinese Workers* in 1904. Liang Qichao summarized the reasons for the exclusion of China in the United States into several aspects, involving the economy, cultural customs, religion, morality, politics, etc. Zhang Qingsong's *Inside Story of the American Hundred Years of Exclusion of China* focuses on analyzing the causes of Chinese exclusion from the perspectives of racism [1, 2], American domestic politics, and the Qing government's attitude towards immigrants. Also, it introduces the history of Chinese resistance in detail. Huang Zhihu [3] believed that the change in the balance of power between China and the United States was the main reason for introducing and abolishing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Cao Qian [4] studied the Qing government's attitude and measures to deal with the Chinese exclusion law. Yuan Peng [5] and Lin Yan analyzed the origin of the Chinese Exclusion Law from multiple perspectives of American domestic politics, international relations, and economic interests. Chen Xiaoyan [6] believes that the main reason for the exclusion of China by the United States is the vast gap in economic strength between China and the United States. Song Li Ruifang [7], from the perspective of pragmatism in American diplomacy, explained the process of the United States from its limited policy to its exclusion policy. Chen Yifan [8] believed that the economic crisis, the cheapness of Chinese workers, religious and cultural differences and racism were the main reasons for the spread of Chinese exclusion from California to the whole country.

Compared with the domestic research content, foreign research pays more attention to the historical facts at that time. Chapter 4 of *The Making of Asian America: A History*, "The Chinese Must Go!": The Anti-Chinese Movement, which expounds the changes in the attitude of the people and officials of California towards Asian Americans in the form of docu.

Additionally, in the early 1850's *Commentary*. It also reflects that the discrimination against a particular race generated by social groups is closely related to the official attitude. The introduction of *Contagious Divides*, written by Nayan Shah [9], starts with the change in the image of Chinatown residents. And discusses how the complex intertwined political, economic, and cultural forces affect the 'modern' concepts such as Public Health, Race, and Citizenship. The concept of health is a good starting point for studying the relationship between self and society in modern history. All these concepts are disguised as neutral and 'scientific', but they are political. It gives us a clear description of the attitude of local people towards Asian Americans.

Although the Asian citizens who chose to go to the United States as labourers did not leave many written works because, for various reasons, most of the stories were passed from mouth to mouth from generation to generation. Luckily, we can also more or less understand the history of that period through the words left by people from the other side of the ocean. In the current research conclusion, some scholars attribute the American attitude towards Asian Americans to the influence of national relations. There are also quite several scholars who believe that we should not consider it alone but comprehensively from the aspects of economy, culture, customs, politics, etc. Like Liang Qichao's work, *The Prohibition of Chinese Workers* said. However, the existing research often only discusses the perspective of China or the United States. We think the two should be combined and analyzed from the national level and the perspective of individual behaviour. As far as we are concerned, our

research may give a new angle of view to deal with Contemporary social problems.

3. Changes of American Physical Treatment

Since the Chinese Exclusion Act, congress changed physical treatment from eagerly welcoming Chinese to work for them in industrial factories and the transcontinental railroad to adopting means like quotas and requirements about national origins to regulate Chinese immigrants.

During the late 1840s and early 1850s, the feudal rule of the Qing Dynasty had decayed and declined, and the internal class and national contradictions had intensified. That unstable and wicked social situation in China forced many Chinese to emigrate from their own country to America. Moreover, with the thought of gaining twice the money in America than in China, better living conditions, social insurance and social welfare, many Chinese emigrate from their own country to trace their dream of the “gold rush”.

Chinese labour was generally welcomed in California because the Chinese were considered law-abiding, peaceable, and indispensable for developing industries in California [16]. And what those entrepreneurs wanted was high efficiency and economic profit but low average cost. Therefore, Chinese labourers seemed to be the best choice. They bear hardship and work hard even in complex and lousy working environments because they believe in earning more salary and the essence of Chinese inherited by ancestors of being assiduous and diligent. These two contributions made American companies put Chinese immigrants in a critical position. At that time, The Central Pacific Railroad Company was confronted with an acute labour shortage. As a result, Chinese workers were employed to work on the road. This met the urgent need for employment of those Chinese mentioned above.

As a result, the combination of misery in China and opportunity in California explained the sudden influx of 20,000 Chinese in 1852 and 16,000 Chinese in 1854. However, This, in turn, stimulated the anti-Chinese agitation.

As more and more companies in America hired Chinese as their labour and more salary they gained, native Americans felt unconvinced and were pissed off due to many Chinese labors who grabbed their valuable living resources, salary and working places. Meanwhile, anger has reached the boiling point among local Americans. Finally, other workers in California turned against the Chinese. Thus, multiple fiery parades and hate crimes against the Chinese finally infuriated the American government.

Under the pressure of public opinion and society, the United States Congress passed an unprecedented Act in 1882 designed to exclude Chinese as a specific ethnic group, namely the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Act restricted the entry of Chinese into the United States. Those who had left the country to visit their families were not allowed to return to the United States. It also provided a 10-year ban on Chinese labourers immigrating to the United States. Besides, all the non-labourers must deliver qualified certifications from the Chinese government. But this group seemed increasingly challenging to prove their status since the 1882 act defined Chinese immigrants as “skilled, unskilled... and Chinese employed in mining.” Thus a few Chinese could immigrate because of the act.

During World War II, it was not until 1943 that the United States changed its wrong impression of the Chinese and abolished the Chinese Exclusion Act because China and the United States fought together.

After the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, to prevent the entry of Chinese, it was stipulated that all Chinese who wanted to enter the United States should be strictly inspected at the Angel Island immigration checkpoint off San Francisco. During the 30 years since the Angel Island immigration station opened in 1910, more than 1 million people arrived, about 175,000 Chinese were tried on the island, and more than 50,000 were deported to China. They were subject

to lengthy interrogations and detentions to prevent illegal entry. During the opening of the Angel Island immigration checkpoint, San Francisco immigration officers boarded ships as soon as they came ashore to check their documents. Those who failed would be sent back to China on the next boat. Those who qualified would have to wait for questioning at Angel Island.

As a transfer station for Asians (primarily Chinese and Japanese), Angel Island, which often became overcrowded and unsanitary, detained Asians for an extended period, sometimes for months or even years, to avoid illegal immigration.

4. Changes in the Treatment of Asian Americans Mentally

At first, Chinese immigrants were warmly welcomed by the United States. When the first Chinese immigrants arrived in California, they were seen as a boost to the population and will perfectly fit into American society [11, 12].

However, the positive image of Chinese immigrants soon turned out to be the opposite. The most important reason for the negative image may be the immigrants themselves. Early Chinese immigrants in America were regarded as cheap, available labour to help with the industry of the west. At that time, it was promised to the public that they would become part of American society. Wellborn, in his article, quoted the speech in the "Daily Alta Californian" of May 12, 1852. This newspaper wrote: "The China boys will yet vote at the same polls, study at the same schools, and bow at the same altar as our own countrymen."

Chinese immigrants were seen as law-obedient, trustworthy, and hard-working workers. They fit the California industry perfectly, finding jobs in mines, restaurants, and laundry shops. However, as the Chinese gained success, dissatisfaction towards them grew. This section will argue that the overall discriminative impression towards the Chinese was affected by different factors, and the economic factor was not always the most significant one.

It was mentioned before that from the economic perspective, some labour unions believe Chinese immigrants represent unfair economic competition because they usually ask for very low wages. The national labour movement supported the exclusion and saw the act as a success for the labour market [10]. However, the detail is much more complicated than this. After successfully sending the first immigrants to California, Chinese companies started bringing more immigrants to the United States with lower quality. Under such a "coolie" system, these new Chinese immigrants usually lived in extreme poverty, with lower moral standards, and many were criminals. The new immigrants soon flooded the cheap labour market, which led to a negative impression of the Chinese.

In addition, the Chinese did not melt into American society like many other ethnic groups. On the contrary, they insisted their original lifestyle. Senator James G. Blaine, in his famous speech in 1879, explained his own idea of why the Chinese must be excluded: ".....You cannot work a man who must have beef and bread, and would prefer beer, alongside a man who can live on rice." [13] analysed 126 newspaper articles about Chinese immigrants in 1882 when the exclusion act was published. It was found in the research that the Chinese were constructed as "coolie slaves", "cruel murderers", "evil heathen", "celestial invaders", and "uncivilized unassimilators" in the articles.

It can be seen from above that the promise made when the first Chinese immigrants arrived in California was a dead end. The Chinese remain dissociative from American society. They lived together and refused to receive either American education or their religion. As a result, the Americans saw them as "evil heathens", and racism started to grow on these distinctions. Also, their career as coolies was not favoured by the public because the concept of coolie could be linked to slaves. Accordingly, the anti-Chinese movement was supported by the anti-slavery ideology. When considering the Chinese as slaves, the exclusion act seemed righteous because it helped to stop slavery in America by banning the import of more new slaves.

Another reason Chinese immigrants were discriminated against was that they were claimed to be

responsible for several critical public issues, and public health was one of them. Lee [11, 14] in his book wrote that the government and many scholars would blame the immigrants for serious social problems. In the 1896 San Francisco epidemic, Chinatown was regarded as a “laboratory of infection” because of its poor sanitation standard. This phenomenon repeated in 1939 tuberculosis.

Whether the Chinese were responsible for the epidemic is unknown now, but the epidemic strengthened American society's discriminative atmosphere. The epidemic draws a line between the “clean” American society and the “dirty” Chinatown. It indicates that Chinese immigrants will threaten American society instead of being a part of it. Also, it creates an atmosphere of fear for Chinese immigrants. Kil applied the term “purity and danger” to describe this mindset. By defining what is “pure” and “dangerous”, the white world confirms that they are superior to other races. This white supremacy will eventually exclude the dangerous factors affecting this purity.

Further, although the first immigrants were welcomed, Miller [15] argued that the root of discrimination could be traced back to 1840 when China lost the Opium War (1839-1842). His theory is that the war was the first significant event about China covered by media (newspaper articles), so before the Chinese arrived, their negative image is deeply rooted in American society. Gyory [16] holds a different opinion. He argues that although the discriminative atmosphere grows against the Chinese, the negative image does not directly lead to the Exclusion Act. However, the discriminative atmosphere still influenced the whole exclusion movement.

As we can see from above, under the discriminative atmosphere, the Chinese Exclusion Act distinguished between civilized citizens and uncivilized Chinese. The Chinese, in this context, are considered unable to exercise full citizenship. These are all why they were banned from entering the United States.

5. Conclusion

From 1840, after the First Opium War (Britain's invasion of China, 1840-1842) started, Chinese people first moved to America to participate in the gold rush in California because they couldn't stand the environment in China, the social environment and China were in the war. At that time, most Americans welcomed Chinese to work for them in factories and on the railroad in America. The Chinese people were considered positively law-abiding, peaceable, and indispensable, and had a fair social status as American citizens.

The combination of misery in China and opportunity in California explained the sudden influx of 20,000 Chinese in 1852 and 16,000 Chinese in 1854. For example, the Central Pacific Railroad Company was confronted with an acute labour shortage. As a result, Chinese workers were employed to work on the road. This met the urgent need for employment of those Chinese mentioned above. And all those events touched off the anti-Chinese agitation, and Americans began to exclude Chinese workers.

From 1854 to 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act became noticeable. Gradually, the American government started to adopt some means to regulate Chinese immigrants. Because unequal competition between Chinese and American workers radically increased, the American Government tried unveiling fresh policies about resisting the Chinese. In this way, the Chinese Exclusion Law was set up.

Within the Chinese Exclusion Law, Chinese workers must provide their qualifications taken from China. However, their decreased social status made them harder to qualify for. Chinese workers gradually had a negative figure in the American perspective and became harder and harder to live in America.

In 1840, the gold rush led to a surge in Chinese workers working for America. American thought considers them quiet, peaceful, industrious, and thrifty. They fit the California industry perfectly, finding jobs in mines, restaurants, and laundry shops. However, as the Chinese gained success,

dissatisfaction towards them grew. After the first batch of Chinese workers was successfully sent to California, Chinese companies started sending more low-quality Chinese workers to America. The new Chinese workers came to America because they couldn't survive in the harsh social environment in China. In this way, those people were very low-quality, and sometimes they committed a crime in California. Therefore, some negative aspects of Chinese workers were shown to the American people.

The time passed to 1854, and the effect of changes was wholly shown. As the gold rush reached its fever pitch, the unfair economic competition became more and more serious. Because of the increased number of cheap Chinese workers in California, the job chances of native American sharply decreased. It caused substantial unfair economic competition between Chinese workers and native American workers. And also, they couldn't fit into American society. They insisted on living their own way and didn't want any changes. This would make Americans think that Chinese people were weird and had negative feelings about them.

Public health also influenced a lot. In the 1896 San Francisco epidemic, Chinatown was regarded as a "laboratory of infection" because of its poor sanitation standard. American thought that their living area was cleaner than Chinatown. This white supremacy will eventually exclude the dangerous factors affecting this purity.

For the reasons above, American workers started to complain about that and despised Chinese people. After that, the discrimination between Chinese workers and Americans became more and more noteworthy. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Law was proclaimed, and the tension between them peaked. The Chinese workers were considered "Low-quality" and "uncivilized" and were not allowed to exercise some civil rights in America. That led to Chinese workers' lives being more and more difficult. As a result, their status in American society became lower and they were very stressed about living here and working.

Changes in the treatment of Asian Americans are shown in 2 aspects, physical and mental. Physical changes were shown, from giving some beneficial laws to the Chinese to introducing laws restricting Chinese workers. And mental changes were shown as the changes in the feeling of Americans toward the Chinese workers, from upbeat and welcoming to negatively excluded Chinese. Those changes led to a dilemma for Chinese workers living in America and made the tension between China and America peak.

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All the authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first authors.

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