Will Hunt

141 HIS—19th Century US History

Fall 2023

**Chinese Exclusion: Burdens of White America’s Insecurities Placed on (Yet Another) Minority**

The Statue of Liberty, the iconic copper statue that sits in the New York harbor, has been the first sight of a new nation for many immigrants who have come to the United States and resultingly came to represent a new life full of freedom and beginnings. Located near the historic immigration center on the east coast, Ellis Island, and in the economic hub of the nation, New York City, the grandiose statue has become the symbol that pops into one’s mind when talking about the ideas of the US as a melting pot, accepting and open to all, where opportunity for welcome newcomers is in abundance. Donated to the United States in 1884 by France, the messaging of the statue contradicts entirely what was going on at that time in the nation, as, just two years earlier, the United States government had instituted the Chinese Exclusion Act. While it was the first piece of legislation that outright denied a group official entry and the ability to migrate legally to the United States, it was far from the first instance of anti-immigrant sentiment dictating American life. Prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, other non-white inhabitants of the land that would become/was the United States had been constantly marginalized; most specifically the groups most scholarship focuses on, including Black people and Native Americans. The disparity between the espoused values of our nation and the Statue of Liberty as a place open to all, versus how the nation actually functioned is quite large. The true nature of the nation’s racialized practices cannot be adequately viewed without also examining the treatment of Chinese immigrants. Throughout the mid to late 19th century, white settlers were discriminatory, racist, and violent towards Chinese individuals due to their perceptions of the Chinese as a threat to white settlers’ societal status, with whites viewing themselves as superior and determined to maintain that hierarchy.

This paper will follow a structure that has ideas build on top of one another, resulting in a conclusive ending, in hopes of most effectively eliminating opposition to the thesis. It will begin by discussing white treatment of Native American and Black people on US land prior to and during the 19th century; then it will transition to the wave of Chinese immigration and the reasons why the Chinese began immigrating to the United States; next it will talk about Chinese participation in labor which led to white Americans feeling that their societal position was being challenged; it will continue by discussing the actions that whites’ took against Chinese Americans in response to the feeling of insecurity they were experiencing, including things like federal legislation, and violence or force; finally, it will talk about the racialization of the Chinese and how that has perpetuated stereotypes through today, and how we can, and must, combat those to avoid future marginalization and racialization. Other key things to note in the paper are the scopes. Temporally, the scope of the paper is centered around the 19th century, and geographically, since most Chinese immigration happened to the West Coast, the anecdotes and statistics largely hold most relevance there.

Historically, mistreatment of non-whites on the land now known as the United States goes back all the way to Columbus and the first European settlers. Reportedly, within the first 40 years of the Columbian era in America, 12 million natives were killed.[[1]](#footnote-2) The first settlers would burn down villages and chop off individuals’ hands when they did not forfeit over their gold to white settlers; implicitly, white settlers made the oft unfounded assumption that non-white inhabitants had stashes of gold to hand over in the first place.[[2]](#footnote-3) Juan Gines de Sepulveda, a famous Spanish philosopher, rationalized war against the natives for four reasons: the severity of the sins they had committed, the rudeness of the natives’ nature and how they should serve those of higher nature, the goal of spreading Spanish faith, and to protect weaker natives from other natives.[[3]](#footnote-4) Sepulveda’s ideology clearly shows the belief of western Europeans that they were superior and saving the ‘savage,’ backwards natives, a mental framework that was passed on for generations and still resides to some degree in the racialization of non-white people. Amid European settlers abuse of Native Americans, the transatlantic slave trade opened. The first importation of Africans to the New World arrived in 1619, with a ship landing off the Virginian coast packed with captive black bodies.[[4]](#footnote-5) Africans, much like Native Americans, were abused and dehumanized. The imported Africans were to be slaves and, according to John Locke, every slave owner was to “have absolute power and authority over his negro slave.”[[5]](#footnote-6) To ensure this, white owners would beat, whip, kill, and commit so many more brutalities, with the intention of suppressing the liberty to freely think, act, and express oneself.[[6]](#footnote-7) They justified this by claiming that Africans were less than human. Harking back on Sepulveda’s ideology of superiority of the European, we can see this get passed down through generations, and eventually be perpetuated against blacks and natives in the law and practice of the United States government. In the original Constitution, pro-slavery policy was included, with Article I, Section 9, Clause 1, which restricts the ability of the government to ban the slave trade for 20 years, the fugitive slave clause (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3), and the three fifths compromise (Article I, Section 2, Clause 3). Anti-native policy was more so carried out with a blind eye turned away, and less often legally codified. The federal government constantly promised the natives protection of land, and then would inevitably take over the promised land, creating a vicious cycle of upheaval, and eventually just tried to assimilate ‘acceptable’ natives in order to strip them of their culture, doing this through education at boarding schools like that known as the Carlisle School, a school in which the creator’s goal was to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”[[7]](#footnote-8) Changing and altering an entire group to fit the norms of white society—while simultaneously noting that their conceptualized race will keep them from ever truly fitting in--is embedded in the structure of the United States and has been present on this land long before the creation of the nation that exists today. Understanding that the Chinese not just get discriminated against due to an inherent white dislike of specifically Chinese people, but because they were different than white society and posed a threat to what white society wanted as many other groups historically had is key to understanding the conflicts that arose with Chinese immigration.

Chinese immigration into the United States, and around the world, was quite prevalent during the 19th century. In fleeing China, the people were looking for better, more secure economic opportunities. The Chinese nation had been engaged a in grueling and tumultuous war with Britain known as the Opium Wars. The Opium Wars were a direct result of Britain’s abuse of power, in which they forced illegal trade of opium through China from India, resulting in many Chinese people getting severely addicted to the dangerous drug.[[8]](#footnote-9) In response to this, China began confiscating the opium that was passed through its borders, angering the mighty British. A quote from the *Northern Star*, as laid out in *History Workshop* examines the stark contradiction of the actions of the British:

The Chinese and the Afghans must certainly think us an odd sort of people to send among them one set of men to proclaim 'peace on the earth and good will towards men', and another set armed with murderous weapons to cut them at the word of command, murder the flower of their country, and incarnadine their soil with blood.[[9]](#footnote-10)

With British forces wielding their weapons and encroaching upon the Chinese, Chinese farmland was destroyed. To find a way to make a stable living and acquire sustenance, migration was virtually required. In concurrence with the Opium Wars, an abundance of gold was found in California, starting a massive migration to the area by those who hoped to strike it rich with discoveries of their own. Chinese people, a lot of whom had their way to obtain wealth decimated in China, fled to California in hopes of being one of the lucky few who found gold.

As the Chinese arrived on the West Coast, there was immediate competition for labor. By 1852, “there were twenty thousand Chinese in the state” mixing with countless other individuals who had struck out into the American west to find gold.[[10]](#footnote-11) In the gold mines at the time there was no contractual or wage system. There were no large organizing or hiring companies in place; it was first come, first serve. Whoever found the gold first got to keep it.[[11]](#footnote-12) Minor coalitions existed at the time but were not large enough to introduce systems of wage labor. Because of this system, or rather the lack thereof, miners wanted as little competition as possible to increase their chance of success. The less people in the area, the more likely one might be to find gold before someone else. With the influx of Chinese immigrants and the hordes of other people flocking to the mines, the dispersion of gold became so widespread that there was no real way to accumulate incredible wealth from the gold search unless one found an untapped, rich spot and managed to shield it from others. Rather than seeing everyone as competition, white miners turned to the Chinese to blame for their own lack of luck. Competition amongst workers continued into other aspects of the economy too, fueling the tension.

The new Chinese Americans were astute laborers in other capacities aside from mining as well. From the beginning of Chinese migration, it was evident that they, on average, as a whole, were very productive. Their consistency with their work yielded a massive increase in production. Anecdotal evidence of this can be seen in the case of a Chinese man, named Ah Maun. Ah Maun came to the US and got hired as a cotton picker in Memphis, TN. His first day on the job, he was scoffed at and mocked by black plantation workers. Time passed though, and Ah Maun got the hang of the work, soon becoming an exemplary cotton picker and “not a negro on the plantation could being as much cotton to the gin house as Ah Maun.”[[12]](#footnote-13) The story of Ah Maun was just one of many. It was common practice for Chinese people to come in and completely change the perception of what was viewed as productive in low-skill jobs, as they were even referred to as “the ideal human mule.”[[13]](#footnote-14) In other high-skill jobs, similar patterns occurred. In Pittsburgh, the epicenter of the booming steel industry of the 1870’s, Chinese workers immigrated in and began occupying jobs; white people saw this as job theft, and Chinese immigration as a threat to their economic opportunities.[[14]](#footnote-15) For the Chinese to be able to outperform both working class and middle-class jobs strictly with their increase in efficiency scared the white population.

Chinese labor was also far, far cheaper. During the late 60’s when construction on the transcontinental railroad was at its peak, Chinese Americans were willing and able to take lower wages for the same jobs as white workers which made them more attractive to hire. White workers would constantly be hopping job to job, looking for higher wages, often resulting in unemployment; contrarily, the Chinese maintained consistency with one job for a lower wage which made them much more attractive to those hiring.[[15]](#footnote-16) On the Pacific Railroad, one portion of the larger transcontinental railroad, over 10,000 Chinese laborers were hired for construction, a number that would’ve been unimaginable to white settlers only a couple years before.[[16]](#footnote-17)

This large increase in Chinese labor greatly scared the white settlers. The white settlers felt as if their nation, livelihood, and dominance was getting stolen right in front of their eyes:

While white citizens worried that Native Americans and African Americans would contaminate the nation, they feared the Chinese might conquer it. One anti-Chinese leader in Tacoma, for example, openly worried that if “millions of industrious hard-working sons and daughters of Confucius” were “given an equal chance with our people,” they “would outdo them in the struggle for life and gain possession of the pacific coast of America.” White Americans coveted Indian lands and required black labor, but many saw no reason to tolerate the Chinese.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Because the Chinese were seemingly able to accumulate a sizable amount of wealth through hard work in a relatively short time, the white settlers felt threatened. Their position societally, in their eyes, belonged at the top, so they must put down any group who approached that. Anecdotally, we can see that in the case of Chin Gee Hee of Seattle. Chin had accumulated a good amount of wealth and had solid ties to the Chinese government. His wealth and connections protected him originally, but that didn’t last long. Whites drove all the Chinese out of Seattle, and despite him holding “surprising power on a national and international scale,” Chin too was forced out.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Violence and brute force were widespread tactics used by whites to suppress Chinese immigrants. Oftentimes, like in Tacoma and Seattle, whites would try to force out Chinese by issuing decrees, and if not ignored, would institute physical consequences. These consequences would typically be group beatings, destruction of property, confiscation of wealth, and many more unique forms of torture and destruction. In literature discussing Chinese culture in America, one thing that often gets omitted is lynching. Conversations around lynching, scholarly and otherwise, typically center around African American lives in the American South. Lynching, despite maybe never hearing of it when referring to Chinese, happened on the West Coast. This practice was not state sanctioned, but instead was a way for rambunctious and aggravated white society members to make a statement to A person standing on a bridge

Description automatically generatedChinese immigrants. The government tended to look the other way, permitting extralegal violence even if not outwardly encouraging it. One famous lynching was the lynching of Hong Di. Di was a 17-year-old child who was a houseboy for a family in California. One day while his employers, the Billiou family, and their friends were sitting around for dinner, he pulled out a loaded colt and shot the homeowner’s friend, William H. Weaver, in the shoulder, and then turned around and shot Mrs. Billiou in the heart, killing her instantly. He then fired at the Billiou daughter, Annie, narrowly missing her, then firing at her again, missing, and then chasing the girl through the house. Eventually Di was captured after fleeing the scene. Di was sentenced to life in prison, enraging the courtroom. The sheriff who patrolled the jail that Di was held willfully agreed to let a mob overrun the jail, capture, and publicly hang the boy.[[19]](#footnote-20) Violence in general, but lynching specifically, has been a way for whites to display their power in a visual form that seeks to discourage further subversion from marginalized groups. The sight of one hanging, lifeless at the hands of another man or other men, is supposed to frighten and scare others to fall in line, serving as a threat and warning in addition to individual punishment. It is a performance of grotesque violence and physical force, thinly veiled to mask their own insecurities.

In addition to brute force and violence, legislation was a major way for whites to restrict the Chinese to show their alleged superiority. The main piece of legislation barring these immigrants was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, but the initial anti-Chinese legislation was the Page Act of 1875. The Page Act was instituted to give discretion to the immigration officers on which women from China to let into the country.[[20]](#footnote-21) The foundations for the Page Act stemmed from falsely conceived notions about the promiscuity of Chinese women, and the desire of the nation to stop new Chinese babies from being born citizens in the US. The vision that is associated with Orientalism and China is again rooted in bigotry and belief in white supremacy. Orientalism was overexaggerated stereotypes to paint the Chinese, and specifically women from China, in a primitive, exoticized light. Orientalism and the Page Act set the stage for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act barred all Chinese from entering the country. The idea of an exclusionary Chinese act had been floating around California for quite some time before the national legislation, but never came to fruition. Eliminating all Chinese immigration was seen by white Americans as a way of preserving culture, when in reality it was completely against the immigrant culture that the nation was built upon.

By creating legislation barring entry of the Chinese, the white settlers were race-making and further entrenching their categories of white versus other. It created an image that Chinese were inherently bad and had arrived to take over the nation rather than to be a part of it. Legislation and self-appointed violence completely and utterly villainized the Chinese in the 19th century, and much of the manufactured disdain remains today. Although there is no direct anti-immigration legislation against the Chinese, we can see the distaste for Chinese in our culture with former President Donald Trump placing the blame for the spread of COVID on China, saying it only had to do with Wuhan and derogatorily dubbing it the “China Virus.” As a result of these comments and the uneducated people who believed them, we have recently seen a massive uptick in anti-Asian and specifically Chinese hate. The superiority complex and desire to appear the strongest or toughest on a national and international stage is present today, and in some ways only intensifying. Moving past it is no simple task, dues must be paid, starting with a necessary destruction of that mindset that Sepulveda preached so long ago. Only once white Americans recognize their wrongdoings towards Chinese Americans, and so many other groups, can we begin to alter the discourse surrounding these people--their historical and contemporary experiences--hopefully yielding to a more equitable system for all.

**Bibliography**

Behrendt, Stephen and James Rawley. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*. University of Nebraska, 2005, Lincoln.

Bhattar, Kala. “Why We Should Celebrate ‘Indigenous People’s Day’ Instead of Columbus Day.” *UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog*, 2021, Birmingham. <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/tag/christopher-columbus/#:~:text=He%20tortured%20innocent%20Native%20Americans,back%20as%20slaves%20to%20Spain>

Boswell, Terry E. “A Split Labor Market Analysis of Discrimination Against Chinese Immigrants, 1850-1882.” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1986 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095307>.

Carew, Jan. “Columbus and the Origins of Racism in the Americas: Part Two.” Vol. 29, Issue 4, pp. 38-40, 1988.

Channing, William Ellery. “Slavery.” Published by Edward C. Osborne, 1836. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/60239656>

Guan, Shijie. “Chartism and the First Opium War.” *History Workshop*, No. 24, 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288779>.

Hanes III, W. Travis. *The Opium Wars*. Sourcebooks, Inc., Naperville, 2002.

Kanazawa, Mark. “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California.” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>

Lee, Erika. *At America’s Gates.* Univesity of North Carolina, 2003, Chapel Hill.

Lew-Williams, Beth. *The Chinese Must Go.* Harvard University Press, 2018, Cambridge.

Ngai, Mae M. “Chinese Gold Miners and the ‘Chinese Question’ in Nineteenth-Century California and Victoria.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 101, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44285273>

Ostler, Jeffery and K. Tsianina Lomawaima. “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression.” *Journal of American Indian Education*, Vol. 57, No. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jamerindieduc.57.1.0079>

Rhoads, Edward J. M. “‘White Labor’ vs. ‘Coolie Labor’: The ‘Chinese Question’ in Pennsylvania in the 1870s.” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502811>.

Sirmans, M. Eugene. “The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina 1670-1740.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1962. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2205410>

“Struggling for Work.” *Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History.* Library of Congress, 2023 Washington D.C.

1. Carew, Jan. “Columbus and the Origins of Racism in the Americas: Part Two.” Vol. 29, Issue 4, pp. 38, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Bhattar, Kala. “Why We Should Celebrate ‘Indigenous People’s Day’ Instead of Columbus Day.” *UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog*, 2021, Birmingham. <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/tag/christopher-columbus/#:~:text=He%20tortured%20innocent%20Native%20Americans,back%20as%20slaves%20to%20Spain>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Carew, Jan. “Columbus and the Origins of Racism in the Americas: Part Two.” Pp. 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Behrendt, Stephen and James Rawley. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*. University of Nebraska, 2005, Lincoln. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Sirmans, M. Eugene. “The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina 1670-1740.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1962. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2205410> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Channing, William Ellery. “Slavery.”Pp.43, Published by Edward C. Osborne, 1836. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/60239656> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ostler, Jeffery and K. Tsianina Lomawaima. “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression.” *Journal of American Indian Education*, Vol. 57, No. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jamerindieduc.57.1.0079> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Hanes III, W. Travis. *The Opium Wars*. Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Guan, Shijie. “Chartism and the First Opium War.” *History Workshop*, No. 24, 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288779>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ngai, Mae M. “Chinese Gold Miners and the ‘Chinese Question’ in Nineteenth-Century California and Victoria.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 101, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44285273>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Kanazawa, Mark. “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California.” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. “Chinese Cheap Labor.” *Scientific American*, Vol. 27, No. 21, 1872. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26055725>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Lee, Erika. *At America’s Gates.* Univesity of North Carolina, 2003, Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Rhoads, Edward J. M. “‘White Labor’ vs. ‘Coolie Labor’: The ‘Chinese Question’ in Pennsylvania in the 1870s.” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502811>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Boswell, Terry E. “A Split Labor Market Analysis of Discrimination Against Chinese Immigrants, 1850-1882.” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1986 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095307>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “Struggling for Work.” *Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History.* Library of Congress, 2023 Washington D.C. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Lew-Williams, Beth. *The Chinese Must Go.* Pp. 6,Harvard University Press, 2018, Cambridge. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Lew-Williams, Beth. *The Chinese Must Go.* Pp. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Lew-Williams, Beth. *The Chinese Must Go.*Pp. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Lee, Erika. *At America’s Gates.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)