CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

CHINESE AMERICAN 美籍華人
EXCLUSION / INCLUSION

What was the Chinese Exclusion Act?

Intense social conflicts divided economic classes, racialized groups, and immigrants from the native born as America industrialized in the 1870s, and economic depressions spawned widespread hardship and insecurity. A search for culprits began. Fear and envy of the Chinese—too industrious, too different—started in the West but spread nationally as political parties used the "Chinese Question" to lure supporters and win power.

The **Burlingame Treaty** of 1868 had allowed for open immigration between the US and China. But in 1882, Congress passed the **Chinese Exclusion Act** after revising and weakening the Burlingame Treaty. The act and the new Angell Treaty excluded Chinese laborers from entering the United States but exempted students, teachers, merchants, and diplomats in order to protect US trade and treaty interests. This compromise resolved the political contest between those eager to ban Chinese laborers and those interested in trading with China. The act also forbade Chinese from naturalizing as citizens, closing previous loopholes.

The Chinese Exclusion Act marked the first time the US explicitly restricted immigration based on race and class. Chinese and their commercial, religious, and diplomatic allies reacted swiftly, and often successfully, mounting civil disobedience campaigns and suing for their civil rights.

Despite these challenges, Congress repeatedly authorized Chinese Exclusion and tightened its exemptions. President Theodore Roosevelt made it permanent in 1904, and the law was enforced until 1943.

"Among the Chinese on the Pacific Coast," in *Harper's Weekly*, May 27, 1893. New-York Historical Society.

1875

The Page Act

National debate over the "Chinese Question" led Congress to pass the Page Act, directed at Chinese and other Asians. The act enforced the 1862 ban on the "coolie trade," even though Chinese migrants came to the US voluntarily. It also required that women prove they were not prostitutes. Prostitutes of every background worked the American West, but the Page Act slashed immigration rates for all Chinese women for decades to come.

E.S. Wells Chemicals, *Rough on Rats advertisement*, ca. 1870s–80s. Chinese Historical Society of America Collection.

1870s–1880s

Racial Stereotypes

This pesticide advertisement capitalized on the racial stereotype that Chinese ate rats. Such depictions became popular sales techniques, creating indelible images for white Americans and a belief that Chinese people were unable to assimilate. Untrue! wrote shopkeeper Wong Ar Chong to abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in 1879: If allowed to "enjoy the same privileges," Chinese would become "as good citizens as any other race."

1882

Chinese Exclusion Act

President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act after months of negotiation and debate. The act barred Chinese laborers from immigrating for 10 years, but was not supposed to affect merchants, diplomats, students, teachers, or laborers already in the US.

An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese [The Chinese Exclusion Act], May 6, 1882. National Archives.

1880s

Anti-Chinese Violence

The political campaigns that evoked economic anxieties and racial animosities to achieve Chinese Exclusion also fueled waves of violence against the Chinese. Across the American West and Midwest, cold-blooded beatings and murders, arson of Chinese-owned property, and riots and mass expulsions in cities like Denver, CO (1880), Eureka, CA (1885), and Seattle, WA (1886) unleashed years of terror on Chinese Americans.

The Chinese Must Go! poster, 1885. Washington State Historical Society.

Timeline continues on reverse side >

1886

"Phases of Chinese labor in San Francisco," in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* June 7,1879. New-York Historical Society.

Yick Wo v. Hopkins

Yick Wo's legal victory established that under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, laws could not be enforced in a discriminatory manner. After requiring that all laundries obtain licenses, San Francisco refused to issue them to Chinese proprietors and arrested those who stayed in business. Represented by top lawyers, Lee Yick and Wo Lee sued the sheriff, winning a landmark Supreme Court ruling for equal protection under the law.

1889

"The Chinese Question again," in *The Wasp*, November 16, 1889. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The Scott Act & Chae Chan Ping *v.* United States

Chae Chan Ping challenged a revision to the Exclusion Act (the Scott Act, passed in 1888) that barred all Chinese laborers, regardless of prior residence. Chae had attended his father's funeral in China, returning a week after Congress passed the new law. Denied reentry, Chae sued and lost. The law stranded nearly 20,000 Chinese Americans who were abroad at the time, separating many from property and family in the US.

1892

The Chinese American [newspaper]. Chicago History Museum.

The Geary Act

President Harrison signed the Geary Act that extended Exclusion for another 10 years. It also required all Chinese in the US to register with the government, carry photo ID cards, and provide white witnesses to prove their legality. Risking imprisonment with hard labor, the vast majority of Chinese refused to comply, instead contributing money to legal defense funds.

1898

Identification photograph from affidavit, "In the Matter of Wong Kim Ark, Native Born Citizen of the United States [detail]," 1904. National Archives at San Francisco.

United States *v.* Wong Kim Ark

Wong Kim Ark was denied reentry to the US after visiting his parents in China, even though he was born in California and therefore a citizen according to the 14th Amendment. Wong's lawsuit went to the US Supreme Court. His landmark victory secured this constitutional protection for all people born on US soil.

1900–1901

The English and French forces have a land battle with the Boxers [detail], 1900. National Archives, College Park, MD.

Boxer Rebellion

Widespread resentment in China against foreign encroachments and worsening conditions led to the Boxer Rebellion. The Boxers, a secret society, attracted broad support for their effort to force all Westerners out of China. Anger over the insulting policy of Chinese Exclusion partly fueled attacks on Americans. Two thousand US soldiers joined the 20,000-strong contingent of Western and Japanese troops sent to put down the uprising. The American consul in China sent home this Boxer-produced battle image.

1901–1903

Fei Chi Hao and Kung Hsiang Hsi [Kong Xiang Xi, 孔祥熙]. Oberlin College Archives.

Tightening Border Controls

Students Fei Chi Hao and H. H. Kung (Kong Xiang Xi)—who helped save American missionaries during the Boxer Rebellion—were trapped in immigration limbo and partial detention for 16 months while enroute to Oberlin College, despite having prestigious supporters. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a Chinaman to get into the United States," said one. Kung later became an important figure in Chiang Kai-shek's government.

1903

"Over 300 Chinamen arrested in big round-up by police," in *The Boston Herald*, October 12, 1903. Boston Public Library.

Immigration Raids

One busy Sunday morning in Boston's Chinatown, the police arrested anyone that looked Chinese in order to check their papers. Some hours later they released some individuals, but detained others for days. The arbitrary arrests sent shock waves through Chinese American communities around the country.

Source: Exhibition, *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion.* On view at Chinese Historical Society of America.

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