OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Racial Scapegoating during the lead-up to the Chinese Exclusion Act

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the mid-19th century, thousands of ethnic Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States seeking economic opportunities, spurred by events such as the California Gold Rush. At first, Chinese immigrants were accepted by their communities because they were willing to take on laborious, low-paying jobs amid a perceived labor shortage. These Chinese immigrants had a crucial role in many industries, such as agriculture and rail. However, as economic conditions worsened, partially due to the end of the California Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants quickly became scapegoats for white unemployment. Portrayed in the media and news as 'unassimilable' and 'cheap,' they were subjected to systemic violence and actively vilified by labor unions. The attitudes led to the passage of discriminatory laws, notably the Page Act, and the multiple extensions of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which directly targeted Chinese immigrants. This research paper will explore how the media, civil society, and the state apparatus institutionalized the discrimination of Chinese immigrants, racializing the root economic and political causes of rising unrest and unemployment. The framing of Chinese immigrants as racially unassimilable and posing a threat to the white working class made them "easy" scapegoats during the economic downturn of the 1870s. However, it was long-standing racialized legal frameworks and cultural tropes that allowed decades of racial and religious prejudice to be solidified under the Chinese Exclusion Act.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is chiefly composed of nineteenth-century primary materials like newspaper reportings and racist cartoons from that time period. I mainly used sources that were contemporary to the events to portray the most unbiased and unfiltered version of public opinion towards the Chinese immigrants at that time. The limitations of my sourcing was that almost all my sources were white and male-authored, and English-language based; therefore they demonstrate how Chinese immigrants were represented by the male public rather than how the Chinese immigrants understood the hate themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the scale of Chinese immigration to the U.S. increased dramatically. Yet precise estimates of those who managed to naturalize and build a new life for themselves are difficult to calculate, in part due to the 'sojourning' nature of the migrants (i.e. they resided in the US temporarily before returning to China).[1] From 1849 to 1882, around 300,000 Chinese entered the U.S.[2] In the same time span, the ethnic Chinese resident population of the United States increased from approximately 4,000 to 105,000 according to census data.[3] The racist prejudice these immigrants faced rendered the process of naturalization exponentially more difficult.

In a media analysis of the Chinese Exclusion Act, author Sang Hea Kil explains that it was the California Gold Rush that first spurred Chinese workers to the U.S.'s West Coast for their well-being.[4] In the U.S., Chinese workers became integral to a number of industries, particularly in gold mining and railroad construction. Despite this, for predominantly racial reasons, Chinese immigrants became increasingly resented by the American public and lawmakers. This resentment eventually culminated in the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA), the first significant law that restricted immigration into the U.S. on racial grounds, which prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the country and prevented the laborers already in the country from becoming U.S. citizens.[5]

ANALYSIS

Chinese immigrant workers were initially welcomed and praised in the U.S. by enterprises seeking cheap labor and were at times lauded for their "industriousness" by American citizens, but were still regarded as separate from white citizens because of long-standing prejudices. Industries considered them 'indispensable' and actually encouraged their immigration because Chinese laborers worked at two-thirds the cost of white labor.[6] Simply put, a Report of the Memphis Chinese Labor Convention in 1869 stated that "China has the labor that we need, and it can be procured to an unlimited extent," reflecting the

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[1] California Lutheran University, "Immigrant Rights: Chinese in Early California - Chinatown," *"In Your Own Backyard": Civil Liberties Then and Now*, accessed August 16, 2026, https://www.callutheran.edu/college-arts-sciences/history/civilliberties/chinese_civil_liberties_ver2.html

[2] Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, "Lesson 15," University of Washington, accessed August 16, 2026, https://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Pacific%20Northwest%20History/Lessons/Lesson%2015/15.html.

[3] Patrick Crowley, "Chinese-Americans 1785-: Demographics," SCSU Hilton C. Buley Library, accessed August 16, 2026, https://libguides.southernct.edu/c.php?g=15048&p=81577.

[4] Yong Chen, "The Internal Origins of Chinese Emigration to California Reconsidered," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1997): 523, https://doi.org/10.2307/969884.

[5] National Archives, "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," accessed August 16, 2026, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act.

[6] Kil, "Fearing Yellow, Imagining White", 664

contemporary view of Chinese immigrants as something like a biological labor commodity rather than human beings with rights and dignity.[7] Chinese workers took on agricultural jobs, factory work, and were crucial to building railroads. An 1850 edition of the Placer Times, from an article from the San Francisco newspaper in Alta California, portrays this: "We have a great deal of respect for the Chinese, with their nankeens and pigtails, and are pleased to find them of so quiet, peaceable and industrious dispositions."[8] The ostensibly complimentary characteristics of the Chinese as "quiet, peaceable, and industrious" are offset by the ugly patronization of the way in which non-white laborers were expected to behave. The "respect" they received was often conditional and tied to the economic role they played; the "praise" was limited to expected characteristics that made them exploitable laborers. Additionally, the inclusion of "their nankeens and pigtails" emphasized the Chinese cultural differences that isolated them from other Americans. Contemporary references to the apparently "high degree of civilization" that China represented had to be checked by their evaluation as contrary to "[white American] ideas of good taste".[9] A prominent scholar of China, S. Wells Williams, was adamant on the distinction between the Asiatic and Christian, the former being characterized as institutionally "despotic and defective… founded on wrong principles."[10]

After the end of the temporary boom in economic activity that followed the gold rush, Chinese immigrants were unfairly shunned for white unemployment and falling wages by corporations and politicians, masking larger systemic issues like corporate exploitation. In the period known as "The Terrible Seventies," the combination of westbound trains, the Panic of 1873, and the Comstock boom collapse led to the decline of Californian wages and production, which subsequently led to a rapid rise in unemployment. The Chinese immigrants were blamed by the public for taking "white jobs." A political cartoon from The Wasp, an American satirical magazine, demonstrates this.[11]

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[7] Andrew Gyory, Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 31.
[8] *Placer Times* (Sacramento, CA), May 13, 1850, reproduced in *Doug Steps Out* (blog), "Criminal Annals, Part 37 – The Placer Times: The 'Celestials'," October 21, 2019, accessed August 16, 2026, https://www.dougstepsout.com/2019/10/21/criminal-annals-part-37-the-placer-times-the-celestials/.
[9] Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 73.
[10] S. Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 1 (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1848), 381-382, Project Gutenberg, Accessed 16 August, 2026. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/57868/pg57868-images.html.
[11] George Frederick Keller, "What Shall We Do With Our Boys?", *The Wasp*, March 3, 1882, *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion*, New-York Historical Society, accessed August 16, 2026, https://chineseamerican.nyhistory.org/exhibition-highlights/what-shall-we-do-with-our-boys/.



In the picture, a grotesque caricature of a Chinese man dressed in traditional clothes and sporting a queue, the braided hairstyle Qing law required of Han Chinese men, is shown working in a factory with multiple arms, each one operating a different tool. The caricature relies on the contemporary trope that the Chinese workers were tireless and superhumanly productive, which was often used by the magazine's San Francisco-based readership. This had the effect of dehumanizing the Chinese immigrant, portraying him as an unnatural machine rather than a fellow citizen (or even a fully-fledged human being). Furthermore, the figure looms over a sign inscribed as "Chinese Trade Monopoly" while operating tools for cigar-making, sewing, and carpentry, directly echoing the racist rhetoric of labor unions in these exact industries. Outside of the factory, one sees a group of dejected white youth standing in front of a prison, hinting to the magazine's readership that the lack of employment opportunities resulting from the influx of Chinese labor would drive white American boys into a life of crime. Furthermore, in one of the Chinese man's arms, one can discern a bag of money labeled "For China," representing how the Chinese often saved the money they earned to send to provide for their families in China as remittances, another gripe that the white working class had with the Chinese. The title itself epitomizes the maxim that stands at the crux of the matter: "What Shall We Do With Our Boys?" leaving the reader with a rhetorical question whose answer entails holding the culprit accountable (given that the rest of the caricature explicitly attributes the blame for the problems faced by "our boys" to the Chinese immigrants).

It is important to note that contemporaries who held more sympathetic views toward the Chinese-born workers recognized that i) the volatility of employment was a problem that affected the Chinese as much as the American white working class, and ii) the Chinese posed no threat to the stability of employment of the American white working class. In cases of ostensible discrimination by racist employers, the Chinese immigrants were often compelled to abruptly abandon existing contracts.[12] The racist attitudes harbored by their employers led to the Chinese abandoning their workplaces either to return to China or seek work elsewhere in the US, which endangered their prospects of future employment and made for temporary periods of unemployment (on par with the American-born white workers). After a group of Chinese workers would leave such an enterprise, it was common for the workforce to be comprised solely of white American workers, rendering the supposed threat to white employment non-existent. For example, the San Francisco Chronicle referred to the Union Box Factory switching from a Chinese-born male workforce to a workforce made up entirely of white American children and men despite paying the grown "Chinamen" a similar wage to adolescent white girls and a smaller wage than adolescent white boys.[13] This means that American employers were willing to cut their profit margins to attract a white workforce, rather than hire Chinese immigrants to reduce costs, as the racist trope suggested. Moreover, Chinese immigration gave rise to new industries that furnished employment to white laborers that would otherwise not exist in the US. One farmer from Santa Clara communicated to the San Francisco Chronicle that the migrants effectively diversified the labor market and allowed employers to pay native-born workers in California the highest wages in the US.[14]

Despite this, in the public eye, the industriousness of Chinese men remained seen as a threat to the white working class. The Chinese immigrants' willingness to work for less pay than white laborers was exploited as proof of their alleged inferiority, while their motivation to send remittances back home was framed as a marker of their loyalty to China over the U.S.[15] More broadly, anti-Chinese prejudice permeated the rhetoric of even voices that were otherwise sympathetic to the Chinese cause. For example, Augustus Layres, a Californian scholar and editor of a Chinese-English bilingual newspaper, refuted the accusations levied against the Chinese population overtaking American jobs on the grounds that the Chinese supposedly cannot compete with "the white race [in scientific labor]" (referring to legal practice, the sciences and mathematics).[16] Layres' assertion aligns with the contemporary views on race, which permeated public discourse on this question to the point of affecting the rhetoric of those who attempted to stand up for Chinese workers' rights. Chinese-American business owner Norman Asing argued that Chinese immigrants were incrementally closer to white Americans ("we are as much allied to the African

[12]Augustus Layres, *The Other Side of the Chinese Question in California: Or, A Reply to the Charges Against the Chinese as Embodied in the Resolutions Adopted at the Anti-Chinese Mass Meeting, Held April 5th, 1876, in San Francisco*, 11-13, Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection, University of British Columbia Library, accessed August 16, 2026, https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/chung/chungpub/items/1.0056031.
[13] Layres, *The Other Side of the Chinese Question in California*, 12
[14] Layres, *The Other Side of the Chinese Question in California*, 13-14
[15] Kil, "Fearing Yellow, Imagining White", 664
[16] Layres, *The Other Side of the Chinese Question in California,* 11

race and the red man as you are yourself"), effectively using scientific racism to justify the arguments made in his petition.[17]

Chinese immigrants were seen as unassimilable and a threat to "white purity" through harmful, racist stereotypes, reinforced by the media and news outlets. Author Sang Hea Kil writes that the Chinese were seen as endangering the racial boundaries by which Americans defined their nationhood and citizenship. This was because of the political idea that whiteness contributed to the 'construction of the nation and citizenship.'[18] The media further exacerbated the racism demonstrated towards the Chinese, with editors and journalists frequently referring to or portraying them as submissive or childlike and connecting them to insects and vermin.[19] In addition, the racist idea that they were unassimilable was worsened by religious differences. The media often noted their "heathenish souls" or "heathenish properties." This was untrue, as most Chinese immigrants practiced complex and ancient belief systems in their own right, such as Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. To predominantly Christian Americans, however, these practices appeared alien, pagan, and above all irreconcilable with Christianity in any conceivable form of legitimate religious syncretism. Charles Francis Adams Jr., an American author, historian, and the president of the Union Pacific Railroad from 1884 to 1890, stated that the Chinese were semi-civilized and unable to change or assimilate into American culture.[20] Chinese immigrant women were also unfairly singled out. The majority of Chinese who immigrated were men – according to an 1890 census, there were 102,620 Chinese men in comparison to only 3,868 Chinese women in the United States.[21] This was likely because the majority of the Chinese workforce were men. These women were assumed to be prostitutes, and when some were found to have been involved in sex work, they were all labeled as a health threat to the nation.[22]

Anti-Chinese violence spread across the country. In addition, specific groups like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Workingmen's Party of California, an American labor union, continued to push for the removal of Chinese laborers, in part because imported Chinese labor was used as a "strikebreaker." For example, in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, a factory owner imported many Chinese laborers to stop a strike in 1872, causing the workers to petition Congress to pass a law preventing any further importation of Chinese laborers. *The Workingman's Advocate*, an important labor newspaper tied to the Workingmen's Party, wrote, "The time has come when the protest of the American workmen against the further introduction of the beastly, idolatrous Mongolian race, must be heard."[23] This racialized anger was targeted at Chinese workers, which eventually boiled over into acts of violence. On

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[17] Norman Asing, "To His Excellency Governor Bigler," *Daily Alta California*, May 5, 1852, National Constitution Center, accessed August 16, 2026, https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/norman-asing-petition-to-california-governor-john-bigler.
[18] Kil, "Fearing Yellow, Imagining White", 666.
[19] Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 18.
[20] Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 18.
[21] Kitty Calavita, "The Paradoxes of Race, Class, Identity, and 'Passing': Enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1882–1910," *Law & Social Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (2000): 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2000.tb00149.x.
[22] Kil, "Fearing Yellow, Imagining White", 665.
[23] Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 40.

September 2, 1885, in Rock Springs, Wyoming, a group of white miners murdered at least twenty-eight Chinese residents and burned down the town's Chinese quarter.[24] In total, over 150 anti-Chinese riots broke out across the nation between the 1870s and 1880s. Thousands of Chinese were driven out of their cities, and hundreds were murdered.[25]

The hostility and sentiment against the Chinese led to lawmakers passing exclusionary legislation, like the Page Act – passed before the Chinese Exclusion Act – and extensions to the Chinese Exclusion Act, such as the Geary Act. Politicians portrayed Chinese immigration as "a national emergency" and remade the issue of Chinese exclusion in the pursuit of votes. In the late 1870s, social upheavals would provide politicians with the justification to strengthen the political campaign for Chinese Exclusion. First was the Page Act of 1875, which banned the entry of Chinese women into the U.S. under the false pretense that they were coming in for immoral purposes. Later, following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, came the Scott Act of 1888, which stated that any Chinese laborer who left the U.S. would not be allowed to return, no matter the circumstances. Additionally, it nullified the identification certificates that the Chinese immigrants already in the country had to obtain if they planned to leave the U.S. but return at a later time.[26] Following the Scott Act was the Geary Act, which extended the Chinese Exclusion Act for ten years and required Chinese people in the United States to carry a Certificate of Residence to show that they had entered the country legally.[27] Finally, in 1904, Congress extended the Chinese Exclusion Act in perpetuity until it was finally repealed in the Magnuson Act of 1943. While the original 1882 Exclusion Act was supposed to be a temporary emergency measure, its normalization and indefinite extension proved that it was designed for long-term racial engineering rather than short-term economic relief.

Chinese Exclusion in the U.S. is a profound example of how race can be weaponized to divide citizens and deflect blame from the root causes of economic instability. Although Chinese immigrants were initially valued for their efficient and cost-effective labor, their racial and cultural differences made them convenient scapegoats when the U.S. economy turned sour. As public unrest rose, politicians capitalized on the issue to capture votes – casting racist legislation that targeted the Chinese. This legislation, along with propaganda from labor unions, spurred violent anti-Chinese riots, while labor unions utilized xenophobic rhetoric to unify a divided white working class by directing popular dissent to an already marginalized group. The implications of this study are especially relevant today when immigration debates are often less about policy and more about finding someone to blame. Just like how the Chinese carried the blame for the complex economic problems of the nineteenth century, modern political discourse uses similar methods to frame immigrants and asylum seekers as 'the true threats', deflecting

[24] Michael Luo, "When an American Town Massacred Its Chinese Immigrants," The New Yorker, March 3, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/03/10/when-an-american-town-massacred-its-chinese-immigrants.
[25] Ivan Natividad, "Berkeley Expert: In Times of Crisis, Anti-Asian Violence Is an American Tradition," *Berkeley News*, March 17, 2021, https://news.berkeley.edu/2021/03/17/berkeley-expert-in-times-of-crisis-anti-asian-violence-is-an-american-tradition/.
[26] Bailey DeSimone, "The Chinese Exclusion Act, Part 2 – The Legacy," *In Custodia Legis*, Library of Congress, May 16, 2022, https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2022/05/the-chinese-exclusion-act-part-2-the-legacy.
[27] Immigration History, "Geary Act (1892)," accessed August 16, 2026, https://immigrationhistory.org/item/geary-act/.

blame from other systemic issues. Overall, looking at acts like these from a racialized perspective can help us recognize how race can be used as a tool to suppress and persecute minorities.

CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship on the build up to the exclusion act has primarily emphasized different parts of the process, from the racist portrayal of the Chinese to the political motivations that turned the negative public sentiment into law. Building on these approaches, this paper examines all the different racist tropes that lead to the Chinese exclusion act together. However, research in this paper was largely west coast based and almost entirely limited to English-language, public-facing sources. Future scholarship could address these limitations by comparing anti-Chinese rhetoric across different regions, incorporating Chinese language newspapers or personal correspondence, and utilizing accounts from Chinese or American women at the time.

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