

TEACHER BACKGROUND

Chinese immigrants had come to San Francisco as early as 1838, but large numbers of Chinese only began to come in 1850 for the same reason many Americans were flocking to California - the 1849 Gold Rush. The Chinese immigrants were mainly peasant farmers who left home because of economic and political troubles in China. Most intended to work hard, make a lot of money, and then return to their families and villages as wealthy men. In this goal, the Chinese did not differ from many immigrants who came to the United States in the 19th century. Living together in communities and neighborhoods, they, like all immigrants, maintained their culture. However, while many Americans looked down on all immigrants, the Chinese were considered racially as well as culturally inferior. Most Americans believed that the Chinese were too different to ever assimilate successfully into American culture. This view was expressed and reinforced by the stereotypic images of Chinese immigrants recorded in the media of the time.

The image of the Chinese that appeared in the media focused on aspects of Chinese culture that appeared sinister and exotic to Americans. The Chinese were criticized for following a different religion, using opium, playing different gambling games (fan tan), speaking a different language, wearing different clothes and styles, eating different foods, celebrating different holidays, and for living in a bachelor society rather than as family men with wives and children. One example of a cultural difference unacceptable to Americans was the queue (long hair worn in one braid down the back) worn by Chinese men. This style had been dictated by the Manchu conquerors when they captured China in 1644 and established the Qing dynasty, making themselves rulers of China. The queue was considered a symbol of Chinese submission to this non-native dynasty. For a Chinese man to cut his hair was a capital crime punishable by beheading. Because most Chinese immigrants expected to return home to China, it was necessary to maintain this hair style. Americans, on the other hand, considered the hair style unhygienic, unmanly, and uncivilized.

19th Century Views

To understand the treatment of the Chinese in the 19th century, one has to consider how white Americans viewed racial and cultural difference at the time. During the 19th century, European Americans looked more towards the social and natural sciences, rather than interpretations of the Christian bible, to find explanation and justification for their notions of racial superiority and inferiority. With scientific-sounding terminology and evidence, the theory of Social Darwinism applied Darwin's biological theory to social phenomena. By the end of the century, the theory of Social Darwinism was widely accepted, especially among the middle and upper classes who attended lectures on the subject at libraries and museums, read books purporting the theory in book clubs, and saw posters and exhibits like those reproduced in this lesson. The theory

held strong appeal for European Americans as it offered a scientific explanation for the successes and failures of various groups of people as well as individuals. Another old notion, that of *noblesse oblige*, also came into play as European Americans sought to bring other “less fortunate” races some of the advantages of European civilization without “polluting” their own gene pool. The expression of these ideas is evident in the materials in this lesson. Students can see how these ideas developed through the 19th century and how they were applied specifically to the Chinese.

Yellow Peril Novels

By the 1880s Chinese immigrants were being viewed not only as an inferior and undesirable population, but also as an actual threat to American culture, American government, and even the Caucasian race. Peoples of European background could not understand how the Chinese could live in such crowded, poor conditions and work so hard for such low wages. They concluded that the Chinese possessed some super-human power, perhaps a result of their mysterious religion, their strange and isolated culture, or induced by smoking opium which allowed them to accept their situation and continue to work hard. Novelists wrote stories in which Chinese characters were outwardly quiet and submissive but were inwardly sinister and cunning. Some of these Yellow Peril novels predicted that Chinese immigrants were part of a secret plan to invade and take over the government of the United States replacing American culture with that of the Chinese.

These novels played on the worst racist fears of 19th century Americans who feared the tainting of American WASP blood and heritage by people of other cultures and races. Similar concerns were expressed with respect to African Americans, Native Americans, and any group of immigrants whose culture or physical appearance was deemed significantly different from that of WASP Americans. Anglo-Americans acted to keep these groups separate from mainstream society and used a variety of ways to do so—reservations, segregation, restricted and exclusionary immigration policies, and schemes to deport people or send them back to their place of ancestral origin.

Some Americans noted the hypocrisy of the nation’s treatment of immigrant groups, Native Americans, and African Americans. The Bret Harte piece highlights the different reaction to bad behavior depending on the race of the offender. However, the majority of Americans during the 19th and well into the 20th century viewed race and society through the lens of Social Darwinism. It was the widespread belief in these ideas that helped in developing a national consensus and effort to exclude Chinese people from the American population.