

## TEACHER BACKGROUND

Chinese immigrants were drawn to the United States by economic opportunities. They found jobs but they also encountered misunderstanding, prejudice, restricted access to employment, and were denied citizenship. The readings in this lesson explore some of these issues from the Chinese perspective.

### Violence Against The Chinese Community

---

The discrimination and prejudice the Chinese experienced also found expression in violence against them and their communities. Soon after the first wave of Chinese came to California in 1849, anti-Chinese sentiment occasionally turned violent. Violence increased as anti-Chinese sentiment became more widespread in the decades that followed. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act did not stop the violence; in fact, some of the most violent attacks took place in the 1880s after the passage of the Act.

According to Charles J. McClain, Jr., a legal historian, referring to the 1880s, “It is no exaggeration to say that a kind of mass hysteria was sweeping through the white populace which seemed aimed at nothing less than the removal of the Chinese from all settled human habitation in the Pacific States.” (p. 352-3)<sup>1</sup>

Anti-Chinese groups were organized in most sizable towns and cities in the West where Chinese immigrants were working. McClain quotes a letter in which the U.S. District Attorney for Oregon writes,

“Large bodies of men, presumably citizens of the United States, have in nearly every town and village throughout the state organized themselves into societies whose object, as near as I can ascertain, is to expel the Chinese from our limits.” (p. 352, n.21)

These groups called for boycotts of Chinese-made goods, went on strike to demand that Chinese workers be fired, and incited mob violence in which Chinese residents were rounded up and forced out of town. Less organized vigilante violence was also frequent, tolerated by local law enforcement that turned a blind eye and a legal system that made it difficult for Chinese victims to bring a case against white attackers.

The Chinese were not passive victims in these events. The Chinese community responded quickly to most incidents, bringing pressure to bear on officials and the legal system, demanding restitution and future protection.

One particularly notable incident took place at Rock Springs, Wyoming on September 2, 1884. White miners, angered because Chinese miners would not join them in a

---

<sup>1</sup>Law and History Review, “The Chinese Struggle for Civil Rights in 19th Century America: The Unusual Case of *Baldwin v. Franks*.” Fall 1985, v. 2, n. 3.

## I The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America

strike for higher wages, attacked the Chinese mining camp, killing twenty-eight miners, wounding fifteen others, and running several hundred others out of town. Chinese property valued at more than \$147,000 was destroyed.

It was only six years earlier that the first permanent official mission of the Chinese government arrived to take up residence in the United States. On hearing of the incident in Rock Springs, the head of the mission sent three members of the Chinese mission to Wyoming to investigate. The Chinese miners appealed to them for help in seeking justice. When it became apparent that the guilty would not be prosecuted because no one was willing to testify against any of the white men and both the territorial or federal governments were unwilling to invoke martial law to redress the situation, the Chinese officials began to negotiate with the U.S. government for restitution.

In his letter to President Cleveland, the Chinese minister argued that the U.S. government, in the Burlingame Treaty, agreed to provide “ample protection” for Chinese citizens, yet violence against Chinese continued. He also pointed out that American citizens were compensated for losses resulting from violence in China, and requested, in the name of reciprocity, that the U.S. should indemnify the Chinese in Rock Springs. He calculated Chinese losses at \$147,748.74. Denying any legal responsibility for indemnification, the Congress, at President Cleveland’s request, authorized payment up to \$150,000. This was one of the few indemnity payments made to Chinese who suffered at the hands of Americans in the United States.

## China In The International Community

---

Official Chinese involvement in the aftermath of the Rock Springs massacre reflected a changing Chinese approach to international relations. For four centuries, the Chinese government had closed itself off as much as possible from contact by people who came by sea. Contact was restricted to a few designated ports along the coast. Overseas travel and emigration of Chinese were prohibited and those who left the country were considered felons to be punished by death. Given this view, the Chinese traditionally were unconcerned with the treatment of its nationals outside of China. It took almost a century after the arrival of western missionaries and merchants at the end of the 18th century for China to begin to change its approach to the outside world.

Western and Chinese ideas about how the world was ordered differed dramatically. Historically, China had viewed itself as the center of the civilized world. In fact, the Chinese call their country *Zhong Guo*, meaning the Central Kingdom. Throughout its long history, China had eventually absorbed or overthrown outsiders who threaten its civilization. Never before, however, had the Chinese faced an enemy that held overwhelming and growing military superiority, and one that was as confident in its view of its own superiority.

For close to a century, the Chinese continued to deal with these newcomers in the way they had traditionally dealt with outsiders—as tributaries who accepted the superiority of China. From the Chinese perspective it was unthinkable for China to consider these newcomers as equals. They did not appreciate that this was a different kind of enemy they faced. These newcomers were not the barbarians of old who could eventually be defeated or assimilated. These were not people who would acknowledge the superiority of Chinese civilization or accept the traditional Chinese system of foreign interaction.

The Europeans, on their part, could not understand why the Chinese during most of the 19th century refused to join the international community under the diplomatic rules developed in the West. Despite the urging of representatives from European countries, the Chinese would not send representatives abroad to reside in foreign capitals. The first official Chinese mission to Western countries only took place in 1867. The following year, the Chinese sent the Burlingame Mission to the United States and Europe in an attempt to head off increased western demands for concessions when the Treaty of Tientsin expired. It was not until 1878 that the first Chinese minister to the United States arrived to take up his post, two years after he was appointed. Furthermore, he was charged with duties that included Spain and Peru as well as the United States.

All this left China at a disadvantage in the international community. Coupled with the weakness the Chinese government had shown by a series of defeats by small contingents of western forces throughout the 19th century, China was viewed with little respect in the western world.

## Consequences Of The Exclusion Act For The Chinese Community In The United States

---

After the passage of the Exclusion Act of 1882, it became evident within a few years that Chinese immigration had been reduced to a trickle. Future amendments of the Act and exclusionary immigration policies closed loopholes and brought Chinese immigration to a near halt. For the Chinese this had momentous consequences. Chinese immigrants residing in the United States were unable to return to visit families in China, unable to bring wives over to the United States, and unable to encourage the immigration of young Chinese men and women who would be able to continue the growth of the Chinese community and preserve Chinese culture in the United States.

The Chinese fought the Exclusion Act by funding the legal battles of those facing deportation and initiating a number of court cases which they hoped would question the constitutionality of the Exclusion Act. The sentiment supporting the Exclusion Act was so strong that a legal attack was unsuccessful. However, the 1906 Earthquake in San Francisco created an opportunity for the Chinese to exploit the one legal way in

## **I** The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America

which Chinese could still enter the United States; as children of United States citizens, people could legally enter the United States. With the city records destroyed in the earthquake, many Chinese in the area claimed U.S. citizenship and their claims could not be disproved. Their “children” could legally enter the country, and the strategy of “paper sons” came into being.

Because many Chinese immigrants who came to the U.S. after the earthquake falsely claimed to be the sons and daughters of Chinese Americans living here, the Immigration and Naturalization Service subjected all Chinese immigrants to detailed interrogations and sometimes lengthy detainment. This unique and unnerving immigration experience is reflected in the Angel Island poetry, the Immigration Inspector’s statement, the interview of Leong Sem, and the short story *In the Land of the Free*.

The effectiveness of the Paper Sons scheme is evident in the Census data included at the end of the lesson. Although the majority of Chinese who attempted to immigrate after the Exclusion Act were turned back, enough were able to get in as “paper sons” or “paper daughters” that the number of Chinese jumped upwards in the 1920 census, fifteen years after Chinese Americans were first able to claim they were American-born citizens and begin creating immigration slots for young men and women.

### Gender Imbalance In The Chinese Community

---

Chinese immigrants tended to be young and male, following the pattern of other immigrant groups. However, no other immigrant group experienced such an extreme imbalance of males and females. The census data at the end of the lesson reveals that very few Chinese women immigrated to the United States. Most Chinese men came to the United States with the expectation that they would someday return home wealthy. In the meantime, wives remained home to fulfill their obligations as daughters-in-law, raising children and taking care of their husband’s parents. Many, but not all, of the Chinese women who came to the United States worked in Chinatown brothels.

In 1875 United States’ immigration policy barring the entrance of Chinese prostitutes was broadly enforced to prevent almost all Chinese women from entering the country, making it extraordinarily difficult for Chinese immigrant men to bring their wives. The 1882 Exclusion Act exacerbated this situation because men who were working in the United States could no longer return to China to visit their families; if they did, it was very likely that they would not be readmitted to the United States.

It was not until after World War II that racial restrictions on immigration began to be lifted from the immigration code and by 1960, the gender balance began to reach parity.