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# AMERICA WAS EAGER FOR CHINESE IMMIGRANTS. WHAT HAPPENED?

*In the gold-rush era, ceremonial greetings swiftly gave way  
to bigotry and violence.*

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*Tarred as a “coolie race,” the Chinese were cast as a threat to free white labor.* Illustration by Mojo Wang

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, settlement of America's western frontier generally reached no farther than the Great Plains. The verdant land that Spanish conquistadors called Alta California had been claimed by Spain and then by Mexico, after it secured its independence, in 1821. In 1844, James K. Polk won the Presidency as a proponent of America's "manifest destiny," the belief that it was God's will for the United States to extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, and soon took the country into a war with Mexico. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in 1848, Mexico ceded California to the United States, along with the vast expanse of land that today comprises Nevada, parts of Arizona, and New Mexico.

California was sparsely populated and almost wholly separate from the rest of the country. Sailing there from the Eastern Seaboard, around South America, could take six months, and the overland journey was even more arduous. The fledgling town of San Francisco consisted of a collection of wood-frame and adobe buildings, connected by dirt paths, spread out on a series of slopes. Fewer than a thousand hardy inhabitants, many of them Mormons fleeing religious persecution, occupied the sandy, windswept settlement.

That changed with remarkable suddenness. On the morning of January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall was inspecting progress on the construction of a sawmill on the banks of the American River, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about a hundred and thirty miles northeast of San Francisco. In his recounting, he spotted some glints in the water and picked up one or two metallic fragments. After studying them closely, he realized that they might be gold. Several days later, he returned to New Helvetia, a remote outpost in the Sacramento Valley, where he asked his business partner, John Sutter, to meet with him alone. The two men conducted a test with nitric acid and satisfied themselves that the find was genuine. Sutter implored those working the mill to keep quiet about the discovery, but, in May, 1848, a Mormon leader who owned a general store at the

outpost travelled to San Francisco and heralded stunning news. “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!” he reportedly shouted as he strode through the streets, holding aloft a bottle full of gold dust and waving his hat. Within a few weeks, most of San Francisco’s male population had decamped for the hills. The town’s harbor was soon filled with abandoned ships whose crews had rushed off in search of wealth.

It is uncertain exactly how word of the gold rush reached China. According to one account, a visiting merchant from Guangdong Province named Chum Ming was among the many men who ventured into the Sierra Nevada foothills and struck it rich. As the story goes, Chum Ming wrote to a friend back home, and the news began to circulate. Mae Ngai, a professor of Asian American studies at Columbia University, begins her book “The Chinese Question” (Norton) with a more verifiable fact: the arrival of a ship carrying California gold—specifically, two and a half cups of gold dust—in Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1848. A San Francisco agent of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the fur-trading concern, had requested that British experts in China evaluate it. The ship also brought copies of the *Polynesian*, a Honolulu newspaper, which reported on the immense quantities of gold being extracted by prospectors in California.

Soon, word spread through villages across the Pearl River Delta, a populous area in southeastern China. At the time, it was illegal for Chinese citizens to leave the country, and Qing-dynasty officials offered little protection for emigrants. Nevertheless, men throughout the region began booking passage on ships bound for Gum Shan—Gold Mountain. Ngai writes that they were just like other gold seekers from around the world: farmers, artisans, and merchants, who mostly paid their own way or borrowed money for the voyage to America. The trip across the ocean was frequently a miserable experience. It generally took ten to twelve weeks to sail from Hong Kong to San Francisco. Shipmasters often stuffed the men into overcrowded, poorly ventilated, disease-ridden holds. One ship arrived in San Francisco harbor having lost a hundred Chinese en route, a fifth of those on

board. “There can be no excuse before God or man for the terrible mortality which has occurred on some of the vessels containing Chinese passengers,” William Speer, a Presbyterian missionary who treated many Chinese after they disembarked in San Francisco, wrote.

In 1849, three hundred and twenty-five Chinese passed through San Francisco’s customhouse. The next year, the number increased to four hundred and fifty; the year after that, it was twenty-seven hundred. In 1852, the arrivals jumped to more than twenty thousand. By the late eighteen-fifties, Chinese immigrants made up about ten per cent of the state’s population, and even more in mining districts. California, teeming with white Americans, Native people, Mexicans, Blacks, Chinese, Irish, Germans, Frenchmen, Hawaiians, and others, had become the substrate for a nettlesome experiment in multiracial democracy that had little precedent in the country’s history.

**A**t first, the reception for the Chinese in America was generally positive. In the summer of 1850, city leaders in San Francisco held a ceremony to welcome them. A small group of Chinese immigrants assembled in Portsmouth Square and were presented with Chinese books, Bibles, and religious tracts. The Reverend Albert Williams, of the First Presbyterian Church, who was among the speakers, later wrote that they were united in conveying “the pleasure shared in common by the citizens of San Francisco, at their presence,” and in the hope that more of their brethren would join them in America, where they would enjoy “welcome and protection.” In January, 1852, in an annual message to the state legislature, John McDougal, California’s second governor, called for more Chinese to come. McDougal, a Democrat, had advocated at California’s constitutional convention for excluding from the state certain classes of Black people. But he believed the Chinese could be a source of cheap labor for white Americans. He suggested that the Chinese, “one of the most worthy classes of our new adopted citizens,” could help with the gruelling work of draining swamplands to make them arable. Many California businessmen envisaged a golden age of trade

between China and the United States and embraced Chinese immigration as part of that interchange.

As the numbers of Chinese climbed, however, curiosity gave way to hostility in the mining districts. In the spring of 1852, a gathering of miners in the town of Columbia, in the Sierra Nevada foothills, approved resolutions that denounced the flooding of the state with “degraded Asiatics” and barred Chinese from mining in the area. Around the same time, along the banks of the north fork of the American River, several dozen white miners reportedly drove off two hundred Chinese miners, and then, accompanied by a band playing music, headed to another camp to do the same to four hundred more.

Ngai explains that McDougal’s successor as governor, John Bigler, a Democrat facing a difficult reelection campaign, recognized a political opportunity in the growing anti-Chinese sentiment. In April, 1852, he called on the state legislature to limit Chinese immigration. His speech was filled with racial overtones, alluding to a coming inundation from China and misleadingly depicting Chinese immigrants as coolie laborers, bound by oppressive contracts. Bigler’s tarring of

the Chinese as a “coolie race” would prove to be a resilient epithet, becoming a convenient political instrument whenever white Americans on the West Coast needed a racial scapegoat, Ngai writes. The label likened the Chinese to enslaved Black people and, therefore, cast them as a threat to free white labor. Bigler explicitly differentiated the Chinese from white European immigrants, arguing that the Chinese had come to America not to receive the “blessings of a free government” but only to “acquire a certain amount of the precious metals” and then return home. He also doubted that the “yellow or tawny races of the Asiatics” could become citizens under the country’s naturalization laws even if they wanted to. Anti-coolieism, Ngai writes, became a kind of shape-shifting, racist cause.

**T**he Chinese of the gold-rush era are mostly anonymous to us today. The absence of their voices from historical accounts perhaps contributes to the mistaken impression that they were passive in the face of abuse. Ngai helps make clear that this was far from the case. Shortly after Bigler’s 1852 comments, for instance, two Chinese merchants, Hab Wa and Tong Achick, issued a confident retort that was republished in newspapers across the country. Growing up in Macau, Tong had attended a school founded by Protestant missionaries, and he was fluent in English. He was the head of one of the biggest Chinese-owned businesses in San Francisco. He and Hab went to great lengths to dismantle Bigler’s claims. “The poor Chinaman does not come here as a slave,” they wrote. “He comes because of his desire for independence, and he is assisted by the charity of his countrymen, which they bestow on him safely, because he is industrious and honestly repays them. When he gets to the mines, he sets to work with patience, industry, temperance, and economy.” They insisted, too, that Bigler was wrong that the Chinese were not interested in citizenship: “If the privileges of your laws are open to us, some of us will doubtless acquire your habits, your language, your ideas, your feelings, your morals, your forms, and become citizens of your country.”

The citizenship issue underscored the ways in which the Chinese complicated America's racial stratification. The Nationality Act of 1790 stipulated that you had to be a "free, white person" of "good character" to qualify for naturalization, but Ngai points out that some Chinese did manage to become citizens during the nineteenth century. Norman Assing, a prominent Chinese merchant, was apparently one of them. In 1849, Assing (whose Chinese name was Yuan Sheng), having previously spent time in New York and Charleston, South Carolina, arrived in San Francisco, where he opened a restaurant, started a trading company, and became an important leader in the Chinese community. His own response to Bigler was published in a San Francisco newspaper a month after the comments. Assing, who described himself as "a Chinaman, a republican, and a lover of free institutions," assailed Bigler for a message that threatened to "prejudice the public mind against my people, to enable those who wait the opportunity to hunt them down, and rob them of the rewards of their toil." The Framers of the Constitution, he maintained, would never have countenanced "an aristocracy of skin."

As Chinese immigration increased, mutual-aid organizations, or *huiguan*, representing people from different regions and dialect groups, formed to assist new arrivals. Most immigrants came from just four counties, in the western part of the Pearl River Delta, and each had its own *huiguan*. Why this parcel of China, no bigger in size than Connecticut, accounted for so much immigration to America remains the subject of debate. When the inhabitants of the Siyi, as the counties are known, began making their way to America, it was a time of upheaval in their homeland. The population had risen, making land increasingly scarce. Political tumult was also roiling China. The worst unrest came during the Taiping Rebellion, in which at least ten million people were killed. In Guangdong, an insurgency by members of a secret society, who became known as the "red turbans," and a savage conflict between the Punti population and the Hakka, a minority group, contributed to the turmoil. Yet other regions of China experienced greater economic privation, and the timing and the location of the

upheavals don't quite correspond with the overseas exodus. A decisive factor seems to be that the inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta were unusually familiar with the West. Canton (now Guangzhou), the provincial capital, had a long history as an important trading port and had extensive ties to California. It was also a frequent destination for American merchants and missionaries. Hong Kong, another commercial hub, was just a short journey away by boat.

In early 1853, the heads of the four *huiguan* met with members of the state assembly's committee on mines and mining interests. Through Tong Achick, who served as the group's interpreter and represented one of the associations, the *huiguan* leaders condemned the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants in the mines and voiced other grievances, including the fact that Chinese testimony was not being allowed in court. The committee members were, in many respects, sympathetic. In the majority report, they expressed skepticism that America was in danger of being overrun by Chinese and pushed for an expansion of trade between the two countries. The *huiguan* leaders, for their part, promised to do their utmost to discourage more of their countrymen from coming. "We have no authority there, but very confidently believe we could exert much influence," Tong said, suggesting that immigration would soon taper off. The promise of Gold Mountain riches, however, proved irresistible. Despite rising hostilities, the Chinese continued to come.

Huie Kin was born in 1854 and grew up in Wing Ning, a tiny rice-farming village of about seventy people tucked away in the hills of Xinning (known today as Taishan), an impoverished, mountainous county in Guangdong Province. At one end of the village was a bamboo grove; at the other was a fishpond. Huie shared a room with his father, along with the family cow; the kitchen stove occupied one corner. His mother slept in the only other room. Because the space was so cramped, Huie's two brothers slept at the village shrine; his two sisters spent their nights at a home for unmarried girls.

One day, as he later recalled in a memoir, a member of his clan returned from America with stories of gold found in riverbeds. Huie became obsessed with travelling to Gold Mountain, and three cousins joined him in his resolve. To Huie's surprise, his father supported his decision, and borrowed money from a wealthy neighbor, using their family farm as security on the loan, to pay for his passage. On a spring day in 1868, the fourteen-year-old Huie and his three cousins left their village before daybreak, each with just a bedroll and a bamboo basket carrying their belongings, and caught a small boat to Hong Kong. While waiting for their ship to depart for America, Huie spent his days on the waterfront; he saw his first Europeans, "strange people, with fiery hair and blue-grey eyes." Finally, they set sail on a large ship with three heavy masts and billowing sails. Midway through the two-month voyage, Huie's eldest cousin, the leader of their group, suddenly became feverish and died; his body was wrapped in a sheet and lowered into the ocean. Huie and his other cousins stood for hours staring out into the inky blackness, overwhelmed by grief. When the fog lifted on a cool September morning and they finally glimpsed land, the feeling was indescribable, as he later wrote: "To be actually at the 'Golden Gate' of the land of our dreams!"

By the time Huie and his cousins arrived in California, the gold rush there was over. Most of the easily worked claims were depleted. Individual prospecting in creeks and streams—washing and sifting dirt, looking for gold nuggets—had given way to larger-scale industrial mining operations that employed legions of Chinese. Some Chinese miners moved on to other territories, such as Oregon and Idaho, where gold had been discovered as well. Huie's first job was as a household servant, making a dollar-fifty a week. Thousands of other Chinese earned wages building the transcontinental railroad which were far more lucrative than they could garner in China. Still more were employed in factories making cigars, slippers, and woollen garments; some even began running their own factories. Others capitalized on their success in the goldfields to open stores or restaurants.

Gold Mountain prosperity set in motion a cycle of migration. Fathers sent for sons; brothers wrote to brothers and cousins; returning villagers inspired others to venture across the ocean. Lee Chew was a sixteen-year-old in Guangdong when a man came back from America and constructed a palatial estate in their village, taking up four city blocks. “The man had gone away from our village a poor boy,” Lee later wrote. “Now he returned with unlimited wealth, which he had obtained in the country of the American wizards.” Lee said he became fixated on the idea that he, too, could become a wealthy man in America. His father gave him the equivalent of a hundred dollars, and Lee travelled to Hong Kong with five other boys from his village. They each paid fifty dollars for steerage passage on a steamship to America. He worked for two years as a household servant and then started a laundry, before eventually opening a store in New York’s Chinatown.

In the mid-eighteen-seventies, the United States entered into a prolonged economic depression. By 1877, nearly a quarter of the workforce in San Francisco was reportedly unemployed. The result was a cauldron of fifteen thousand idle white workmen. Anti-coolie clubs spread, calling for boycotts against goods that did not have a label that said “Made by White Labor.” Violence against the Chinese became increasingly frequent. “The Chinese were in a pitiable condition in those days,” Huie Kin recalled. “We were simply terrified; we kept indoors after dark for fear of being shot in the back. Children spit upon us as we passed by and called us rats.”

Even though several million Irish and German immigrants had streamed into American cities, it was whites’ resentment toward the Chinese that became a virulent nationwide movement. In 1876, the national platforms of both the Republicans and the Democrats singled out “Mongolian” immigration as a problem. (As Ngai observed, for the party of Lincoln, in particular, the stand marked a shocking retreat from the principles of equal rights.) On May 6, 1882, President Chester Arthur signed into law a ban on the immigration of Chinese laborers, which became known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law also

prohibited Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens. For the first time in its history, America closed its gates to a class of people on the basis of race.

But the violence against the Chinese did not stop. “The Chinese Must Go” (Harvard), by Beth Lew-Williams, a history professor at Princeton, includes a list of almost two hundred communities that between 1885 and 1887 expelled, or attempted to expel, Chinese. In Tacoma, a group of white vigilantes forced about two hundred Chinese to leave, in November, 1885, and the Chinese sent anguished telegrams to the authorities, begging for help: “People driving Chinamen from Tacoma. Why sheriff no protect. Answer.”

Handwritten letters in neat cursive from officials in the Chinese legation to Thomas Bayard, the Secretary of State, read like a diary of violence. American-style pogroms raged in Squak Valley, Coal Creek, Tacoma, Seattle, and on and on. In September, 1885, two Chinese officials and an interpreter travelled to Rock Springs, in the Wyoming Territory, to investigate a brutal episode in which white coal miners massacred at least twenty-eight Chinese and drove out several hundred others, torching their homes and firing on them as they fled. A report

from Huang Sih Chuen, the Chinese consul in New York, identified each Chinese victim: “Tom He Yew was 34 years. He had a mother, wife and daughter at home. Mar Tse Choy was 34 years. He had parents, wife and daughter at home. Leo Lung Siang was 36 years. He had a wife at home.” Husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, killed in a faraway land where they would never cease to be regarded as strangers.

**T**he ordeal of the Chinese in America is only a portion of the history of persecution documented in “The Chinese Question.” Ngai’s principal insight is that the story of Chinese exclusion is a global one. Soon after the American gold rush began, hundreds of thousands of fortune hunters from around the world began converging on British colonies in Australia, after gold was discovered there. Just as in America, violence and efforts to halt the influx followed, culminating in a series of initiatives that came to be known as the “White Australia” policy. Early in the twentieth century, the British colony known as Transvaal, in southern Africa, became the setting for another harrowing episode for Chinese migrants, after mining magnates began importing tens of thousands of indentured laborers from China. Deep antagonism developed between Chinese miners and their white bosses, triggering violence, strikes, and other disturbances. In 1907, a newly elected colonial government in Transvaal, led by two Afrikaners who favored white supremacy and racial segregation, ended the Chinese-labor program. At the same time, the government moved to restrict Asian immigration and the rights of Indians and Chinese living in the colony. Ngai points out the similarity to the anti-coolieism rhetoric on the other side of the world: “Americans and British alike opposed the ‘slavery’ of the Chinese—but did not support their freedom.”

In the United States, the Chinese-exclusion laws were not repealed until 1943, and the impetus was not an overdue reckoning with the country’s egalitarian values but a shift in the geopolitical order. China had become an ally of the

United States in its war against Japan. Still, the number of Chinese immigrants allowed into the country was negligible. The national-origins quota system that favored immigration from northern and western Europe was not set aside until 1965. Australia and South Africa did not begin to lift their restrictions on Chinese immigration until the nineteen-seventies. The grandchildren of Chinese immigrants who survived the bigotry and violence of the late nineteenth century in America are the grandparents of fifth-generation Chinese Americans today.

More than a century later, the global struggle over the Chinese Question has receded, but the complicated racial dynamics resulting from Asian immigration to the Western world have not. The years from the California gold rush to the end of the Chinese-labor program in South Africa coincided with a humbling period for China, as it contended with foreign incursions, internal rebellions, and financial crises. Today, by contrast, China is an economic, political, and military juggernaut, vying with the United States for global influence. Both Democrats and Republicans have sought to amplify the threat posed by China's authoritarian regime. This approach has raised anew the bugbear of the unassimilable Other in our midst. When President Trump spoke about the "China virus" and the "kung flu," it was possible to hear echoes of John Bigler invoking Chinese coolies, and British settlers warning about the Asian hordes. "The Chinese Question never really went away," Ngai writes. "The idea that China poses a threat to Euro-American civilizations remained just beneath the surface."

And yet the status of Asian immigrants in America today is, indisputably, different. The United States is undergoing a demographic transformation. Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the country; their numbers have grown twentyfold since 1965. Much of the modern wave of immigration has been linked to skill-based allocations, and the Asian immigrant has often come to be seen as a success story, the "model minority." It's a misleading characterization; income inequality among Asian Americans is the highest of any racial or ethnic group. Nevertheless, Asian immigrants are no

longer viewed as definitively nonwhite, as they were in the nineteenth century; in some circles, they're considered "white-adjacent." The historian Ellen D. Wu has traced the emergence of the model-minority story to Cold War imperatives, as American policymakers sought to renovate the country's image, amid the tumult over the civil rights of Black Americans. In a contest of moral suasion, a narrative of Asian American ascent was a powerful way to burnish the credentials of the United States as a beacon of freedom and opportunity for all. But the surge in anti-Asian attacks during the coronavirus pandemic is merely the latest evidence of the brittleness of this narrative. Overt discrimination against Chinese or other Asian immigrants may no longer be legally sanctioned, and violent expulsions of Chinese may be a matter of history, but for many Asian Americans a sense of belonging remains elusive. ♦

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Michael Luo, the editor of *newyorker.com*, is writing a book about the history of Chinese exclusion in America.