The Good Immigrants

HOW THE YELLOW PERIL BECAME THE MODEL MINORITY

Madeline Y. Hsu

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In practice, America's limits on Chinese immigration ultimately proved stricter than Chinese officials had expected in permitting entry *only* to those of the explicitly stated exempt classes. Despite early concerns for maintaining friendly ties to China, anti-immigration sentiments intensified through the final decades of the nineteenth century with the U.S. federal government assuming increasingly sovereign understandings of its authority to restrict immigration. The Scott and Geary Acts (1888 and 1892, respectively) imposed further restrictions on Chinese entry by abolishing the exempt status of returning laborers, requiring Chinese to bear Certificates of Residence to verify their legal entry, and authorizing deportation of those found to have landed illegally.[35] Chinese government complaints that the American immigration bureaucracy treated even admissible Chinese as "suspects and criminals" rather than "subjects of a friendly power"[36] only prompted Congress to enact exclusion permanently in 1904, reflecting the growing willingness of Congress and U.S. presidents to unilaterally impose immigration restrictions despite the risk of retaliation against American business and expatriate communities in China.

The United States could insult China in part because the latter's precipitous decline had continued, marked by the imposition of more onerous treaty conditions, exactions of payments, and, in 1894, its unprecedented naval loss to Japan culminating in the Treaty of Shimonoseki and the ceding of Taiwan. In contrast, when the United States sought to limit the entry of Japanese from the rising world power in 1907, it did so by treaty negotiations that produced the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement. Unable to protect itself in either battle or diplomatic negotiations, China saw its international stature wane with the waxing of Western, military-backed, economic and missionary activities and influence. Christian educational facilities increased in numbers and attendance, particularly after 1905 when the abolition of the imperial examination system that had emphasized Confucian learning opened up the most prestigious career path of government service to those with foreign training. Growing American investment by missionary groups in educating Chinese resulted in the establishment of over 6,380 Christian schools in China by 1918 and growing numbers of Chinese traveling to study in the United States.[37] Missionary efforts to civilize Chinese and shape China's destiny ran into serious interference from the intensification of exclusionary activities in America, which imposed hostile entry conditions on Chinese students and fostered highly alienating, discriminatory conditions of residence.

Although students were legally exempt from exclusion, the immigration bureaucracy that implemented the laws tended to treat all Chinese as racially ineligible for admission without consideration for distinctions of class, education, or legal status. This overenforcement subjected Chinese diplomats, merchants, students, and other elite Chinese to humiliating treatment, such as extended stays on board ships or in unsanitary detention facilities, invasive medical inspections, and even strip searches only to reject their documents and refuse them permission to land. Although the Qing did not dispute the U.S. right to limit immigration, it did object to harassment and efforts to turn away those Chinese whose rights to enter had been enshrined by treaty and by law.[38] According to Adam McKeown, by the turn of the twentieth century, states generally accepted the principle that nations could control their borders, although selective restrictions on mobility could convey dismissive and denigrating attitudes to those facing barred gates.[39] Americans such as missionaries, business groups, internationalists, and educators joined their voices to protest the injury inflicted on their aspirations abroad by such hostile treatment toward representatives of a friendly nation.

Enforcing Exemptions: The Strategic Value of Educating Chinese

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed the nadir of Chinese entry rights into the United States. Presidents such as Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt had appointed organized labor leaders and activists in the anti-Chinese movement, such as Terence Powderly in 1897 and Frank P. Sargent in 1902, as commissioners of immigration. Powderly and Sargent directed the Immigration Bureau to complete exclusion by assuming that even Chinese of the exempt classes were attempting fraudulent entry. Any

Chinese seeking to enter America, including diplomatic representatives, faced humiliating medical exams and nitpicking evaluations of entry documents that turned many away in violation of the legal entry rights of exempt Chinese. Against such exclusionary forces, "Open Door" advocates for maintaining amicable relations mobilized to protect their educational and commercial aspirations for China in light of the considerable damage inflicted by their national inhospitality to Chinese visitors, who found that the reality of America fell far short of the model of advanced civilization and civility proclaimed by missionary educators. In 1905 a confluence of events enabled this coalition to persuade Roosevelt and his sympathetic secretary of state, Elihu Root, that benign treatment of Chinese students was strategic to the advancement of U.S. interests in the western Pacific.

The missionary establishment openly criticized such excessive enforcement of the laws and the concept of exclusion itself as violations of American ideals of democracy and justice that undervalued the character and potential of individual Chinese.[40] In perhaps the most famous case, in September 1901 a Presbyterian missionary, Luella Miner, returned to the United States accompanied by two Chinese students on their way to attend Oberlin College. Not only were the two Methodists from staunchly Christian families, Fei Chihao (Fay Chi-hao, n.d.) and Kong Xiangxi (H. H. Kong, 1881–1967) had also distinguished themselves during the Boxer uprisings by risking their lives to save Americans. They bore letters verifying their admission to Oberlin and guarantees of their student status from the leading Chinese official, Li Hongzhang. Nonetheless, immigration officials held them in San Francisco on the technical grounds that their documents were improperly written in Chinese rather than in English and did not include all the required information. The young men remained on the West Coast a full year, first in the infamously oppressive detention facility on the docks of San Francisco known as "the Shed" and then confined in a hospital while Miner rallied letters of support from the American Board of Foreign Missions, the "renowned missionary" Judson Smith, the Ministers Union of Oberlin, Representative Theodore Otjen of Wisconsin, and the widow of a missionary killed in the Boxer uprisings. Ambassador Wu Tingfang protested as well.

Miner herself was a particularly influential advocate who published widely and to broad acclaim through vehicles such as the *Advance*, *Independence*, and *Outlook*. She evoked constitutional and Christian ideals and reminded merchants and missionaries of how America's Open Door policy advanced their interests. Through this agenda the United States aimed to protect its commercial interests in China by urging other foreign powers to maintain equitable trade conditions for all with reduced interference in Qing government tariff policy. She stressed the foolishness of antagonizing well-connected students such as Fei and Kong and explicitly warned that at a time when the Chinese government was encouraging study abroad, competitors such as Germany, Russia, and England were receptive to Chinese students in contrast to the United States. Miner bluntly predicted that trade opportunities would almost certainly channel elsewhere as well.[41]

Fei and Kong reached Oberlin after a delay of more than a year. Miner publicized their case to attack the exclusion movement through a double autobiography that depicted their travails. She underscored her personal commitment to their cause by dedicating all her royalties to fund their American educations, predicting great returns on this kind of investment for "if these young men succeed[ed] in their noble purpose of obtaining in America a mental and spiritual training," they would be positioned for "lifting China out of the darkness of her past into the light of the new century, and into the glorious possibilities which lie before her as a nation."[42] In Miner's eyes, Fei and Kong could accomplish this great destiny in a number of ways: "It remains to be seen whether the training received abroad . . . will lead them into the high calling of the ministry, or into that of the teacher with its boundless opportunities for molding the intellectual and spiritual life of the new China, or into that of the editor and translator, with its ever-widening influence."[43] Proselytizing was not the only path by which American-educated Chinese could help their homeland.

Miner directly attacked the Chinese exclusion laws, pointing out that they not only undermined efforts to influence Western-educated Chinese but also violated America's Christian ideals. Evoking "the grievous wrong inflicted on these noble men by our Chinese exclusion laws," she appealed to ideals of Christian acceptance for all peoples regardless of race while reminding her readers that national origin was a poor measure of individual quality: "We have made the laws; if they are working injustice it is ours to change them. Is it not a sad anomaly—the doors of a Christian land bolted and barred against Chinese Christians who have shown such heroic loyalty and tender love to her citizens, while they are swung open wide to the offscouring of every other nation under heaven?"[44] Miner pointed out the flaws of a system of immigration restriction based on race and urged that individual merit be the chief criterion instead. Although articulated in the twentieth century's first decade, this alternative principle of immigration selection would gain ground only when the Sino-American coalition of World War II ate away at the racialist imperatives of exclusion.