

## Chinese-Americans in the U.S., 1848-1979

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### Abstract

Attracted by gold rush, many immigrants from China began to enter the U.S to seek fortune in 1848. However, they received miserable treatment and experienced deep prejudices from native-born American whites. The anti-Chinese sentiment among the whites reached climax when the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted in 1882. Further Chinese immigration was thus barred. In order to shun from outside hostility, the Chinese retreated to inner-city regions and developed the Chinatowns. Like most immigrants, Chinese-American parents also faced the problem of educating their children and helping them to adjust to the new culture while still keeping them clinging to their traditional Chinese culture. But the young generation was different from their parental generation. They wanted to get integrated into the host society and were more inclined to have their voices heard. In the 1970s, they launched the Yellow Power Movement to fight for equal rights.

**Key words:** Immigrant; Anti-Chinese; Chinatown; Yellow power

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1848, tidings that gold was discovered in California spread quickly and prospectors overseas began to flood to California. Many Chinese came to America, lured by

good fortunes or “gold” out there. “As gold fever traveled eastward, overland migration to California skyrocketed, from 400 in 1848 to 44,000 in 1850.... The Chinese were the largest group to come from overseas.” (Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson & Woloch, 2003, p.298-299) Most of them were young, healthy, unmarried men who hoped to make money and then return to their native country; and they are called “birds of passage” (Danzer *et al.*, 2003, p.460) that only lived temporarily in America. Between 1850 and 1880, about 200,000 Chinese arrived in America; by 1870, 40,000 came to California and constituted about 1/4 of the state’s labor force (Henretta, Brody, Dumenil & Ware, 2003; Jones, Wood, Borstelmann, May & Ruiz, 2003).

### EARLY CHINESE AMERICANS

After the Burlingame Treaty was signed in 1868, the annual number of Chinese arrivals doubled and could reach as many as about 10,000, and the Treaty well served its purpose “which was to provide cheap labor for railroad construction crews” (Carnes & Garraty, 2006, p.482). The Treaty formally established friendly ties between the U.S. and China, and at the same time China was granted most favored nation status. The Burlingame Treaty was supposed to provide “citizens of the United States in China of every religious persuasion and Chinese subjects in the United States shall enjoy entire liberty of conscience and shall be exempt from all disability or persecution on account of their religious faith or worship in either country” (Wikipedia, n.d.). But the treaty did not stop discrimination against the Chinese.

### Migrant Workers

“From 1850 to 1871, the federal government made huge grants to the railroads” (Danzer *et al.*, 2003, p.420). In the 1860s, the two railroad companies — Union Pacific and the Central Pacific — began a race against each other to construct rail tracks. Many Chinese were shipped to

America by railroad agents who went to China to recruit laborers with the promise of good fortune in America. The Chinese laborers were mainly employed by Central Pacific Railroads. They slaved hard but were treated miserably. They worked far much longer but earned significantly less than whites, and they had to supply their own food while whites enjoyed free meals. The worst is that many laborers lost their lives and were found dead “clutching their shovels or picks” (Danzer *et al.*, 2003, p.443). In 1869, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads met in Utah, and Chinese immigrants helped complete America’s first transcontinental railroad. Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad said, “Without them (Chinese workers), it would be impossible to complete the western portion of this great national highway” (Carnes & Garraty, 2006, p.495).

After the gold fever and completion of the railroads, farming became California’s major industry. “West’s agricultural development intensified the demand for cheap labor, which was shifting from wheat, the state’s first great cash crop, to fruits and vegetables. Such intensive agriculture required lots of workers: stoop labor, meagerly paid, and mostly seasonal.” (Henretta *et al.*, 2003, p.480) In addition to being cheap laborers, the Chinese brought with them expertise of agriculture which greatly promoted California’s agricultural advances especially in raising the production of fruits and vegetables, and the shift to produce farming (Nash, Jeffrey, Howe, Frederick, Kavis & Winkler, 2004). The Chinese were also employed to do some farming-related jobs, such as building dams and canals. In addition to farming, the Chinese took jobs in “cigar, woolen-goods, and boot and shoe factories, laundry industry” (Jones *et al.*, 2003, p.521).

### **Anti-Chinese Sentiment**

In fact, discrimination ensued as soon as the Chinese stepped onto the new land. No description is sharper than Colville’s: they (the Chinese) were “unique”; their appearance made people wonder “that nature and custom should so combine to manufacture so much individual ugliness” (Colville, 1856, as cited in Saxton, 1975, p.18).

With Chinese immigrants’ fighting for job opportunities against native-born American workers, widespread resentment was aroused: for one thing, Americans disliked immigrants’ differences from theirs — language and customs; for another, Chinese immigrants tended to accept job offers for low wages which greatly threatened native workers. This tendency deteriorated with fewer job chances and arrivals of more and more Chinese, especially after Chinese had accumulated enough wealth for the government. “The tension within laboring ranks appeared more dramatically in the anti-Chinese campaign of the 1870s and 1880s as white workers in the West began to blame the Chinese for economic hardships.” (Nash *et al.*, 2004, p.642) The Chinese were described as “Yellow Peril”. Anti-Chinese organizations were formed.

Native-born American whites held the banner which said “The Chinese Must Go”. Some Chinese businesses were burned. Some of the Chinese were expelled or even killed. On Broadway, the Chinese were mocked to amuse American audiences.

Finally, in 1882, American Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and subverted the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which turned out to be a heavy blow to other Chinese who wished to enter America and those who left and wanted to re-enter America. The Exclusion Act stopped further Chinese laborers from entering America, and the few Chinese non-laborers seeking entry had to get certification from the Chinese government to prove that they were qualified to immigrate, which was very hard in reality since it was extremely difficult to prove that they were not laborers. For those who were already in America, when they left America, they were required to obtain certifications to re-enter. At first, the Act was intended to last 10 years. In 1892, the law was extended for another ten years as the Geary Act which was made permanent in 1902. The extended act in 1902 required “each Chinese resident to register and obtain a certificate of residence” (Retrieved 15 July, 2012 from <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=47>); otherwise, s/he would be deported from the U.S. The Chinese resisted the treaty by calling on people back in China and other Chinese-Americans in America to boycott American goods. Although this received some effect, the restrictions still remained. The law, the first of its kind in targeting a particular minority group, was not annulled until 1943 when the U.S allied with China in the war against Japan and when the anti-Chinese sentiment gradually calmed.

Against widespread anti-Chinese sentiment in California, Pun Chi, a merchant, drafted the appeals in Chinese for a redress of grievances which were then translated in English by a missionary in Chinatown, William Speer. Chinese immigrants’ conditions can better be seen from his appeals to Congress in behalf of Chinese immigrants in California: robbers robbed, wounded, and even murdered Chinese immigrants at will and got away with bad acts because Chinese were denied by the court the right of testimony; bad men from other countries followed those robbers’ conduct since they found that they could get unpunished; heavy taxes were levied on Chinese; collectors of the mine licenses took unlawful extractions. Pun Chi pointed out that “the first root of them all (the wrongs) is that very degradation and contempt of the Chinese as a race” and the treatment degraded them “beneath the negro and the Indian” (Johnson, 2009, p.24-25).

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### **CHINATOWNS**

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Under wild attacks from all sides, the Chinese withdrew from competitive labor market and entered occupations that other immigrants were not so eager to take. After Chinese laborers left the railroads and the mining

industry, they “changed their economic strategies, residential patterns, and geographic locations to cope with the host society’s harsh conditions” (Li, 2005, p.31). They moved to low-rent districts of urban centers, lived under extremely crowded conditions like most new immigrants, and thus established Chinatowns which sprang up in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Boston, and other cities.

The presence of the Chinese was feared because the part of the city or town where they gathered took the character of a foreign settlement. The Chinatowns were described as “racialized minority ghettos inhabited by marginalized, unassimilable foreigners” (Li, 2005, p.31). The certain degree of segregation of Chinatowns from the mainstream society consolidated the Chinese unity and solidarity as a whole group. And “ironically the discrimination that had kept them isolated from the mainstream economy may have proved somewhat beneficial as they weathered the 1930s”. (Henretta *et al.*, 2003, p.714) Although businesses in Chinatowns also suffered, they fared better than their American counterparts because they could “turn inward to the community, getting assistance from traditional Chinese social organizations such as *huiguan* and kin networks” (ibid).

“Chinatowns have existed in the United States since the late nineteenth century, and became **historical primary** ‘ports of entry’ for Chinese immigrants.” (Li, 2005, p.32) Known as “cities/towns within cities”, Chinatowns “provide[d] many of its residents with convenient access to shopping, transportation, restaurants, foods, and place of work; and it provide[d] the opportunity to live among Chinese-speaking persons” (Loo & Mar, 1982, p.95).

Chinatowns were regarded as harbors by Chinese to shun animosity from the outside. However, “Chinatowns’ boundaries were set and the Chinese could not choose occupations or residences outside these boundaries, unless they operated small businesses not directly competing with the White majority.” (Li, 2005, p.35) Most of the Chinese were engaged in restaurants or laundries which only provided limited income for their survival. Some organizations were developed in Chinatowns; their “elaborate social structures mirrored traditional China in many ways” (Healey, 2006, p.353), based on family, clan, *huiguan*, and district associations. These organizations performed various roles in maintaining the order and benevolent development of Chinatowns.

In his analyses of New York Chinatowns, Yuan (1963) postulated four hypothetical stages of development of Chinatowns: involuntary choice, defensive insulation, voluntary segregation, and gradual assimilation. Involuntary choice meant that the Chinese retreated to Chinatowns because of the host society’s prejudice and discrimination. Defensive insulation referred to the joint efforts made by the Chinese against hostility from outside world. The third stage, voluntary segregation, was the stage in which group solidarity was developed among

Chinese. Finally was the forth stage, gradual assimilation, in which the Chinatowns, after years of development and with their increasing strength, began to mobilize toward the host society.

After the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the moderate development of Chinatowns, second-generation Chinese Americans, brought up in American culture, began to diverge from their parental generation. They went out of their enclaves and moved towards mainstream society to start their pursuits. This group of people was said to be “**mobile and Americanized, and with educational credentials** comparable to the general population” (Healey, 2006, p.354). During the 1960s and 1970s, a body of new Chinese organizations was established: Greater Chinatown Community Service Organization in 1963, Chinese American Civil Association in Boston in 1964, Chinese Cultural Foundation of San Francisco in 1965, New York Chinatown Planning Council in 1965, Chinese Economic Development Center in 1976, to name just a few. These emerging communities, compared with the old ones which were preoccupied with ethnic solidarity and protection of Chinese immigrants’ interests, more encouraged integration of Chinese into mainstream society. After Sino-American relations were normalized in 1979, an increasing influx of immigrants from China entered the U.S, “Chinatowns in major cities continued to thrive with Asian investment” (Li, 2005, p.36).

## THE CHINESE-AMERICAN FAMILIES

Chinese families of the first or second generation in the U.S are mostly of the nuclear type. But when many Chinese students arrived in America in the 1940s, the changing political regime in mainland China made them unwilling to return to their homeland. These individuals became United States citizens and some took professional careers after they had completed their education. By the 1970s, they became grandparents of their American-born children and later were included in the extended family. Having been socialized in China in the most formative years of their lives, immigrants of the 1940s met some difficulty getting along with their increasing Americanized children and grandchildren.

Due to different cultural backgrounds and traditions, Chinese-American parents inevitably displayed differences from their American native counterparts in child-rearing practices. Lin and Fu (1990) made a review of **foregoing studies and summarized four significant** ways in which Chinese-American parents differed from parents of American origin: more control of their children, less expressive of their affection, less likely to encourage independence, and more emphasis on the value of academic achievement. With a desire to bring up their children with knowledge of Chinese history and culture, many parents sent their children to Chinese schools daily

after public school hours were over. Before 1949, it was the practice of many Chinatown-based families to send their teenage children back to China for Chinese education.

In general, Chinese children grew up in the midst of adults, not only their parents but also members of the extended family in contrast to American children whose world was socially and structurally separated from the adult world. Sharing the same real world with their parents, Chinese children's process of socialization was likely to be accelerated while American children had to relearn what they had got from their parents when they reached different stages of their life cycle. Also, it was because Chinese children were exposed to adults' companionship that they were more aware of what socially approved patterns of behavior were and what other people thought of them. Due to strong self-consciousness, Chinese children seemed to be less aggressive than American-born peers. Sollenberger (1968) in his study found that 74 percent of Chinese parents demanded their children to show no aggression under any circumstances, and no Chinese parents strongly urged their children to defend themselves or punished them for running home for help in case of encountering attacks from other children.

At the same time, in order to help their American-born children overcome potential cultural differences, Chinese-American mothers tried to acculturate them towards the mainstream society mainly in the following aspects according to a comparative study conducted by Chiu (1987): cultivation of children's independency, avoiding communication with children, upgrading the position of mother, breaking the child's will, and suppressing sexual curiosity. However, the young Chinese after all grew up in a brand-new culture, and they found some of their parents' practices out of date and incompatible with the target society's cultural norms, so they still had to look for new models among their peers.

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## THE YELLOW POWER MOVEMENT

After the Nixon's visit of China in the 1970s, many universities and schools in America began to emphasize Asian studies and opened Chinese-related courses. Chinese Americans seemed to take pride in their own heritage and Chinese identity. But this did not mean that they were not prejudiced any more. The 1970s witnessed the emergence of Yellow Power Movement when Asian-Americans began to speak out for justice and equality.

In 1971, a group of Chinese Americans formed Chinese American Leadership Council, the purpose of which was to influence the White House, Congress, and state and local governments for improvement in the basic well-being of Chinese Americans. The Council also addressed problems such as language difficulty, unemployment, juvenile delinquency. In the same year, Chinatown parents in San Francisco registered protests

against massive transfer of Chinese American children from their neighborhood school. They argued that the neighborhood school system gave their children the opportunity to obtain an education in Chinese language, art, and culture through additional facilities maintained by the Chinese American community with classes beginning at the close of the public school classes.

The Yellow Power Movement also consisted of the mass protest in 1975 staged by Chinese Americans in New York City against the beating of a Chinese engineer. The protest group marched to City Hall on a large scale, and many Chinese Americans closed their businesses and offices to express anger in unity. The once-quiet minority group was no longer silent. The Yellow Power Movement further expressed itself in the open confrontation against the use of "Chinks" by an Illinois high school athletic team. Several Chinese American civic groups tried to persuade the school and city authorities to change the name of the football team, although in vain.

The contributions of the Yellow Power Movement lay in re-educating the white majority as well as in raising all Asian-Americans' consciousness of a new identity. Young Chinese Americans realized through historical records that the Chinese American minority had long suffered from prejudice and discrimination. They were convinced that it was about time to get organized with other Asian Americans to fight for equal rights and justice as citizens in the U.S. Young Chinese Americans came to understand that they needed to develop a new set of values and ideals consistent with the dual culture in which they grew up. They began to search for harmony between their parental culture and the American culture. The group unity developed from the strength of the Yellow Power Movement not only reduced psychological alienation of Asian Americans, but also promoted social and economic welfare of the once-silent Chinese Americans through political participation.

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## CONCLUSION

Chinese Americans were once a neglected minority which had been deprived of the right to express their voices. Early Chinese American immigrants, sustained by the thought of their family they had left behind in China, withstood the hardships of racial prejudice, persecution, and low-status occupations. Not until the ameliorated Sino-U.S. relation in the 1970s, did the situation of Chinese Americans in the U.S. get improved. Along with the rising position of China on the international stage, Chinese Americans began to reevaluate the importance of their Chinese cultural heritage. This in turn raised their consciousness in search for a new identity through joined efforts with other Asian Americans. Their consistent struggle finally drew attention from the host society and their voices began to be taken into account.



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