

“The Chinese Question”:
Differing Viewpoints Based
on Economics

*An examination of the motivations behind the
different opinions regarding the Chinese Exclusion
Act in the Western and Eastern regions of the United
States*

The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed on May 6, 1882, barred Chinese immigration to the United States for ten years, and was extended for another ten years in 1892 by the Geary Act. The Geary Act not only renewed the Chinese Exclusion Act, but also made punishments for illegal immigration harsher than they had ever been. In 1902, after many conventions and debates, the Extension Act of 1902 made the act permanent.¹

Chinese immigration to the United States first began in the nineteenth century. However, during the second half of the century, problems arose because of the large influxes of immigrants due to the Gold Rush of 1848 and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s.² These massive waves of Chinese immigrants worked for lower wages than any other ethnic group – mainly whites, but other immigrant groups as well. As a result, they were hired over native workers because they would do the same amount of work for less money. Competition for work became a major issue, especially after the railroad was finished and the number of immigrants continued to grow despite the fact that there was no longer a need for the large number of “coolie laborers” pouring in from China.³

However, simply because the act managed to become law did not mean that the majority of the United States felt like the congressmen of California. In the West, the majority of the people and politicians were in favor of Chinese exclusion because they saw it as a solution to the problem of “coolie labor” that was threatening the American workingman; whereas in the East, where the act was generally criticized, some people

¹ Cheryl L. Cole, *Chinese Exclusion: The Capitalist Perspective of the Sacramento Union, 1850-1882* (1978), 11.

² Ibid, 63.

³ Coolidge, Mary Roberts. *Chinese Immigration*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1909. 36-37.

opposed the act because of strictly moral beliefs, but most opponents criticized the legislation because of its lack of overall financial benefit for the country.

To prove that the reason for the regional differences for supporting or condemning the Chinese Exclusion Act were motivated by mainly economic concerns, this paper will examine newspaper articles from Western newspapers such as *The San Francisco Call*, *The Amador Ledger*, and *The Los Angeles Herald* in contrast with newspaper articles from Eastern newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Tribune*, and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* to ascertain the opinions in each region.

On the West Coast, the working-class people felt threatened by the Chinese laborers. The general sentiment towards the Chinese immigrants, captured here in an address of the workingmen of California to the rest of the country (hence why this quotation was found in an Eastern newspaper), was that this cheap labor force was taking all of the jobs and putting Americans on the streets.

The toiling masses of California, once occupying the proud position of being the best paid and most prosperous of any in the Union, are now reduced to want, and in many instances beggary, by a horde of Chinese who have obtruded themselves into every branch of industry. The Chinese come without families...they live in holes...they do not assimilate with our civilizations on the Pacific coast. There is scarcely an employment or manufacture in which they have not entered and supplanted the Caucasian. Not one can hope to compete with the Chinese in any branch of labor in which they choose to enter, unless he sinks to their level...a mere human machine. The Mongolian evil has reached us, and is now destroying us. It will soon be upon you...and unless their influx is checked they will flood the Eastern States, as they already have the Pacific Coast.⁴

Obviously, the people in California wanted the Chinese Exclusion Act to be passed because they were losing their jobs to the “coolie laborers”. Furthermore, this address

⁴ “Proof of Jewell’s Bargain to Suppress It – The Greatest Democratic Leader on the Chinese Question. – “We do Not Want Cheap Labor.” – Facts for the Workingmen to Consider,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 October 1880: 4.

suggests that the only solution was an exclusion act – because the “Mongolian evil” would not stop until it had dominated every aspect of American labor.

Many people living on the West Coast argued that, in addition to being cheap laborers who stole jobs, the Chinese were an inferior race. They felt that the “hordes of the lowest type of humanity”⁵ would never be able to assimilate to American society, and that exclusion was the best solution. A Californian newspaper article wrote, “It has been clearly demonstrated that they cannot, for the deep and ineradicable reasons of race and mental organization, assimilate with our own people and be molded as are other races into strong and composite American stock.”⁶ This excerpt is one example of many articles that argued against the immigration of the “Asiatic barbarians”⁷ based on the logic that since they would never be able to assimilate, the US was better off without them.

In addition to arguing that the Chinese race was inferior, many people on the West Coast were afraid that the Chinese would overwhelm the white population and gain power if they were not stopped. An article from a newspaper in Sacramento presented an example of this sentiment, in which it stated, “We realize that the Chinese cannot build up the civilization which we desire. We are therefore willing and desirous that they should be excluded. We believe that their exclusion is necessary to the settlement of California and the Pacific coast with Americans and maintenance of the Anglo-Saxon civilization.”⁸ The Americans living in California were feeling threatened not only by the cheap labor of the Chinese, but also by the sheer number of immigrants. After the

⁵ “Whole State Firm for Exclusion,” *The San Francisco Call*, 23 November 1901: 2.

⁶ “Chinatown is a Menace to Health: Memorial to the Exclusion Convention Addressed to the President and Congress,” *The San Francisco Call*, 23 November 1901: 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “The Employment of Chinese,” *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, 13 May 1882: 4.

Chinese Exclusion Act was initially passed, proponents of Chinese exclusion used the same argument to support the renewal of the act in 1892 and 1902. During one of many conventions held in California for the purpose of renewing the act, a newspaper article reported that “the effects of Chinese exclusion have been most advantageous to the State...a healthy growth of the State in population has marked the progress of recent years. Every material interest of the State has advanced and prosperity has been our portion.”⁹ This example shows how the supporters of the act wanted to show that by stopping the immigration when they did, they saved the Americans from the risk of being overrun, and that in order to keep the white population safe, the act needed to be renewed.

Many westerners argued that the cheap Chinese labor was not only harmful to the people of California, but that it was also bad for the state financially. They contended that Chinese labor was harmful to the economy because even though the immigrants worked hard for long periods of time, hardly any of their earnings returned to the Californian economy. Most of the Chinese immigrants who came over were adult males that worked to send money back to their families in China. *The San Francisco Call* wrote: “Their earnings do not circulate nor are they reinvested-contrary to those economic laws which make for the prosperity of nations...the distribution of wealth and not its production is today our most serious public question.”¹⁰ This quotation demonstrated how the people were concerned not only with losing their jobs, but also with where the money generated by Chinese laborers was going. Proponents of the act wanted to convince the public that

⁹ “Fight for Exclusion of Chinese: Bars Must Not Be Let Down For Incoming Coolie Labor. Californian Congressmen Believe a Law Similar to the Geary Act Will Soon Be Enacted,” *The San Francisco Call*, 3 December 1901: 2.

¹⁰ “Chinatown is a Menace to Health: Memorial to the Exclusion Convention Addressed to the President and Congress,” *The San Francisco Call*, 23 November 1901: 3.

California wasn't going to flourish financially until that money was going back to the state.

It is obvious that the majority of the West Coast supported the Chinese Exclusion Act throughout its initial passing and two renewals, however the reasons behind the support are less obvious than they appear. The blatant racism targeted specifically at the Chinese was only a mask to cover the Westerners' strongest fear: losing their jobs to the cheap laborers. On the surface, it appeared that the racism and anti-coolie labor sentiment went hand in hand, but in reality the racism against the Chinese was due to their overwhelming presence in the workforce. After the act was passed, articles promoting Japanese exclusion appeared, since the Japanese had started coming over in larger numbers after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. In an article titled "Want Japanese Excluded", labor commissioner Fitzgerald of San Francisco asked his senator to introduce "a bill similar to the Chinese exclusion act, which shall exclude Japanese", in which Fitzgerald believes that "Japanese are seriously injuring American labor".¹¹ This article, along with many others like it, proves how the primary concerns of the people are with the loss of jobs in the labor industry. The people were feeling threatened by Japanese labor, and the first response was to call for an exclusion act – essentially, anything that threatened the labor force was the real problem. Labeling the Chinese as inferior was a tool for getting the act passed – the people of California didn't care about the Chinese people's "inability to assimilate", they just didn't want them taking their jobs.

Similarly, the argument that the Chinese were retarding the economic progress of the state was another tool for swaying the public opinion and making the case for

¹¹ "Want Japanese Excluded," *Los Angeles Herald*, 25 August 1895: 1.

exclusion that masked the people of California's real fear of being completely overrun by coolie labor. The reality was that Chinese labor was helping the State grow financially. The Foreign Miners' Tax Law, passed in 1850, declared that all non-native born miners had to pay a standard tax of three or four dollars a month to the state of California, until the law was declared unconstitutional in 1870.¹² During that time period, California benefitted enormously from this unconstitutional law. In Coolidge's book *Chinese Immigration*, she cites that

The income from the Foreign Miners' licenses in the decade from 1854 to 1865, amounted to one-eighth, and for the whole period from 1850 to 1870, to one-half, of the total income of the State from all sources. From 1855 onward, it is conceded by all authorities that the Chinese paid practically the whole of these taxes—a sum amounting altogether to nearly five million dollars paid into State and County treasuries.¹³

This data, taken from table 1 [see appendix], proves how the Pacific Coast was benefitting financially from the plethora of Chinese laborers and the taxes that they were paying. The proponents of Chinese exclusion could not have truly believed that the economic state of California was being negatively affected by cheap labor; instead they twisted the facts into making it seem like there was no benefit to the huge amounts of money that the Chinese generated, when in fact 50% of the state's income from 1850-1870 was due to coolie labor.

In contrast to the Pacific Coast, the East Coast was mainly opposed to the Chinese Exclusion Act. The opinions in the East were generally focused on business, but there was a small population that took a stand against the anti-Chinese immigration legislation

¹² Cheryl L. Cole, *Chinese Exclusion: The Capitalist Perspective of the Sacramento Union, 1850-1882* (1978), 12.

¹³ Coolidge, Mary Roberts. *Chinese Immigration*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1909: 36-37.

strictly because of morals. An article from an Eastern newspaper sums up the views of the religious protestors by saying that

The monster petition for the repeal of the Chinese exclusion act...embodies the views of nearly all the religious societies of New York and Pennsylvania...The theory of it is that this is a land of equal rights and that the discrimination against the children of the Orient is unwarranted by any facts in the history of our relations with them and contrary to the genius of American institutions.¹⁴

This quotation gives the perspective of the people who were opposed to the act simply because it was immoral and racist, and shows us how most of these people were associated with religious groups. It is important to note that there were significantly less of these types of articles published, which demonstrates how the most opposition towards the Chinese Exclusion Act was largely related to business.

Although the main concern of the East coast was with trade and business relations, many people used morality to try to cover these reasons with arguments about the immorality of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Most articles would start out by condemning the West Coast for its racist and unjust opinion, but we also see that many of the articles immediately talk about the negative effects that Chinese exclusion will have on the economy. A good example of this trend is in an article written by C. P. Huntington, in which he began his argument by stating that “to bar them out is an act inconsistent with the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution”, and then immediately transitioned into saying “...but it is important also, as we have always urged, to let people see that this sort of thing...does not pay in hard money.”¹⁵ As we keep reading, we learn that Huntington had a large business interest in

¹⁴ “Our Chinese Question,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 January 1893: 4.

¹⁵ “‘A Step That Must Be Retraced.’ – Mr. C. P. Huntington’s Denunciation of the Chinese Act,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 January 1889.

the exclusion of the Chinese: he was a chief stockholder in a steamship company that traded with China and transported immigrants. Obviously, Huntington's primary concern was with the economic effects on his business that the act would have. Although many people used morality to try and cover their business intentions, many others voiced their opinions about business concerns regarding Chinese immigration without trying to use morality to cover up their true intentions.

On the East Coast, many people were worried that the United States' economy would be injured if Exclusion Act was passed or renewed. Many people argued that international trade would be dampened if the act was passed, and that it would ultimately hurt the US economy. An argument from the *New York Times* captures the sentiment of concern for the United States as a whole:

China appears to be entirely willing that the immigration of her subjects to our shores should be restricted in whatever measure may be reasonably necessary for the protections of our own interests, but an act so distinctly hostile in spirit and so reckless of every consideration of international comity would naturally be resented. It might lead to the exclusion of Americans from China, the rupture of diplomatic relations with that country, and the paralysis of all direct trade with it. The Pacific coast, from which the demand for excluding the Chinese chiefly comes, has a greater interest than the rest of the country in cultivating trade relations with China, and it would find that a retaliatory policy would seriously affect its ability to keep a profitable commerce across the Pacific Ocean.¹⁶

People on the East Coast saw that while the Chinese Exclusion Act might be beneficial for the people on the West Coast who were being displaced in the labor workforce, the act could have serious consequences in terms of the country's international relations with China, specifically that of trade. And after the act was passed, these fears were realized; in an article on the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the newspaper states that "Official reports show that the exports of the United States to China have greatly fallen off since the

¹⁶ "The Chinese Exclusion Bill," *The New York Times*, 15 April 1892: 4.

passage of the last Chinese exclusion act by Congress. The ‘heathen Chinees [sic]’ is retaliating in a way that hurts.”¹⁷ Easterners did not want the act to be renewed, because it was not benefitting the country economically in terms of international trade.

The reasons behind Eastern opinions, like Western opinions, were mostly economical. The people opposed to the act because of moral standards were of a small number, and did so because of religious beliefs. The majority of people living on the East coast were in opposition to the act because it was ultimately going to hurt them financially. Even though many of the articles have arguments against the lack of “American spirit”¹⁸ of the bill, anyone with a business interest in the West was not going to be positively affected by the Chinese Exclusion Act. For example, Huntington’s business was going to be severely injured if the act was passed, because he relied on the large amount of trade between China and the US. He also made money off of bringing immigrants over to the United States – and if they passed a law saying that the Chinese could no longer enter the US, he’s ultimately would lose that aspect of his business altogether. Many other traders and stockholders felt the same way that Huntington did. In addition, some Easterners argued that “a large labor force is necessary for growth”¹⁹ – basically that the cheap labor was helping California, and therefore the US, grow economically regardless of whether or not the laborers were Chinese or not, and that the immigration need not stop. The people in the East were concerned that the bill would have negative effects on the United States as a whole; they were not losing their jobs like

¹⁷ “Political Points,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 June 1889: 4.

¹⁸ “‘A Step That Must Be Retraced.’ – Mr. C. P. Huntington’s Denunciation of the Chinese Act,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 January 1889.

¹⁹ “Is Chinese Exclusion a Farce?” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 October 1897: 6.

the workingmen in California, and were therefore less concerned with the problems that the people in the West believed to be most important.

While it is important to recognize that the East coast and the West coast had very different opinions about the issue of Chinese immigration, it is also important to acknowledge that both sides' concerns were based on economic considerations. On the West coast, people were concerned with their personal economies – that is, their livelihood. Because Californian workingmen were panicking about losing their jobs and not being able to find work, they blamed the cheap laborers who were getting hired in place of them. As a result, the West coast became predominantly pro-exclusion. However on the East coast, where there was less labor and higher wages, people were concerned that passing and renewing the exclusion act would hurt the country's economy. This reasoning is why we see such clear differences in opinion based on region – it wasn't based on the belief that the Westerners were all extreme racists, or that the Easterners were all welcoming of foreign people. Everything was driven by economics, and depending on where a person lived, they felt either threatened by the Chinese people's presence or by the impact of excluding the Chinese laborers. Obviously, it is also important to acknowledge that when making generalizations, there are always counterexamples. There were people living in California who were anti-exclusion, and there were people living in the East who were pro-exclusion. However, because there were so few of these individuals, we can say that the general pattern was that people, no matter where they were located, were motivated by whatever economical situation favored them. Similarly, even when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed on December 17, 1943, it was not for shame of the blatant racism or unjust decisions of the

past. The main reason for repealing the act was because the United States wanted to be on good terms with China because it had quickly become an ally of the US in World War II.²⁰ The politicians and the people of the US might not have ever repealed the act if an economic opportunity that favored them had not arisen.

²⁰ Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 322.

Appendix

TABLE I.
FOREIGN MINERS' LICENSE TAXES, 1850-1870.
 Paid into State and County Treasuries of California.
 (Controllers' Reports.)

COUNTIES.	1850-1854.	1854-1870.	
Amador.....		\$137,019.35	
Butte.....		151,444.26	
Calaveras.....		130,873.59	
El Dorado.....		375,227.35	
Fresno.....		44,705.95	
Klamath.....		33,038.58	
Mariposa.....		109,543.82	
Nevada.....		103,250.02	
Placer.....		210,011.74	
Plumas.....		59,596.23	
Sacramento.....		53,145.84	
Siskiyou.....		96,374.02	
Sierra.....		59,496.49	
Shasta.....		79,521.00	
Tuolumne.....		116,135.89	
Trinity.....		89,157.17	
Yuba.....		89,916.00	
Ten other mining.....		30,357.40	including \$325.9 taxes in arrears paid in 1872.
Paid to State.....	\$ 87,271.01	\$1,967,814.70	one-half of net pro- ceeds.....
" " Counties.....	85,525.59	1,967,814.70	" " " "
" " Collectors ²⁷ ..	1,745.42	983,907.00	20% of total collec- tions.....
Total Paid.....	\$174,542.02	\$4,919,536.40	by foreigners of all races.....
Paid by Chinese.....	87,271.01		50% of total collec- tions.....
" " " "		4,821,145.28	" 98% " "
Total: paid by Chinese			\$4,908,416.29

²⁷ In 1852-4, Collector was only allowed 10 per cent of total collections; in 1854-61, Collector was allowed 15%, Sheriff 3%, Recorder, 3%; in 1861-69, Collector was allowed 20%.

²¹ Coolidge, Mary Roberts. *Chinese Immigration*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1909: 37.

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Cole, Cheryl L. “Chinese Exclusion: The Capitalist Perspective of the Sacramento Union, 1850-1882.” 1978. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25157813>> (6 March 2010).
 I used this source to look at the information regarding the Chinese immigration issue leading up until 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. This selection, from *California History*, contains a lot of information about the tension leading up to the act and the actions of the Republicans and the Democrats

surrounding the debate. This source draws a lot of support from the Sacramento Union, which was the origin of the Chinese immigration issue, which allowed me to track exactly how the movement for Chinese Exclusion grew and eventually became a law.

Gyory, Andrew. *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

This long and detailed book attempts to explain why the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. The author argues that the politicians were to blame for the racist legislation – not organized labor, and not California. He argues that politicians managed to unite the working class throughout the country (not just in California, where 97% of the country's Chinese immigrants were) and were thus able to pass the act. Even though I did not focus on the why the act was passed, this book still provided a very detailed source of general information about my topic.