

Report of the California State Legislature Joint Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration

Introduction

During the Gold Rush (1848-1854), about 24,000 Chinese immigrants came to California. Racial discrimination forced most to leave the gold mining camps in search of other work. Some became laundries, cooks, gardeners, farmers, and domestic servants. Others gravitated to dangerous jobs in railroad construction and mining. Although the Chinese immigrants proved tireless workers, many white laborers resented their willingness to work for low wages and refusal to abandon their language or cultural traditions. By the 1870s, California in general - San Francisco in particular - became increasingly dangerous for Chinese and other Asian immigrants. Democrats controlled California state politics during Reconstruction and voted with the Southern Democrats on most issues. Cities like San Francisco passed ordinances and codes aimed at the Chinese population similar to the Black Codes in the South. Chinese people were segregated from whites, restricted in their employment options, subject to additional taxes, and targeted by law enforcement and armed vigilante bands of white men.

Despite the fact that the federal government facilitated Chinese immigration at the behest of business and political interests in California looking for cheap, controllable labor, as soon as the economy stabilized, white Californians increasingly resented Chinese workers. The massive economic collapse in 1873 exacerbated nativist sentiment and violence, leading to several anti-Chinese riots in San Francisco between 1873 and 1877. While city and state political leadership enforced racist policies, it was working class white men initiating the violence and rioting. The Chinese were invited to California when there were not enough white laborers to build infrastructure and work in the gold mines and on the railroads. Less than 20 years later, white men claimed Chinese workers undersold white laborers and therefore Chinese workers were the reason they could earn a living wage.

The largest nativist riot happened over the course of two days in July, 1877 in San Francisco. What started as a labor rally in support of a living wage quickly turned into a violent mob who set out to destroy Chinatown and terrorize the Chinese people living there (Chinatown denoted the segregated neighborhood outside of the city limits). Following the riot, the state legislature held hearings to determine the causes of the riot. An excerpt from the Committee Report is excerpted below¹.

¹ [*Report of the Joint Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration*](#) is believed to be in the public domain.

Primary Source

The Chinese have now lived among us, in considerable numbers, for a quarter of a century, and yet they remain separate, distinct from, and antagonistic to our people in thinking, mode of life, in tastes and principles, and are as far from assimilation as when they first arrived.²

They fail to comprehend our system of government; they perform no duties of citizenship, they are not available as jurymen; cannot be called upon as a posse comitatus³ to preserve order, nor be relied upon as soldiers.

They do not comprehend or appreciate our social ideas, and they contribute but little to the support of any of our institutions, public or private.

They bring no children with them, and there is, therefore, no possibility of influencing them by our ordinary educational appliances. There is, indeed no point of contact between the Chinese and our people through which we can Americanize them. The rigidity which characterizes these people forbids the hope of any essential change in their relations to our own people or our government.

We respectfully submit admitted proposition that no nation, much less a republic, can safely permit the presence of a large and increasing element among its people which cannot be assimilated or made to comprehend the responsibilities of citizenship. The great mass of the Chinese residents of California are not amenable to our laws. It is almost impossible to procure the conviction of Chinese criminals, and we are never sure that a conviction, even when obtained, is in accordance with justice.

This difficulty arises from our ignorance of the Chinese language and the fact that their moral ideas are wholly distinct from our own. They do not recognize the sanctity of an oath, and utterly fail to comprehend the crime of perjury. Bribery, intimidation, and other methods of baffling judicial action, are considered by them as perfectly legitimate. It is an established fact that the administration of justice among the Chinese is almost impossible, and we are, therefore, unable to protect offenses against our own people. This anomalous condition, in which the authority of law is so generally vacated, imperils the existence of our republican institutions to a degree hitherto unknown among us...

² In 1878, the Chinese comprised 1 percent of the California population, and a miniscule 0.002 percent of the nation's population.

³ Posse comitatus refers to the common-law or statute law that allowed a county sheriff (or other law officer), to conscript any "able-bodied man" (meaning: white man) to assist in "keeping the peace" or to pursue and arrest a felon. This reference has specific context as well; during the height of the Gold Rush (1848 until about 1852), white men in San Francisco formed posses to harass and terrorize the Chinese, Latino, and Indian communities within the city as well as the mining camps outside of the city. These civic/mob leaders took inspiration from the growing white supremacist rhetoric of pro-slavery Americans during the decade leading up to the Civil War (1861-1865). After the War ended, California Democrats fervently supported their fellow Democrats in the southern states called the Redeemers.

We are of the opinion that the evidence quoted fairly represents the situation from a humanitarian standpoint.⁴ That it shows how great the effort has been to civilize and convert these people – how wholly that effort has failed. We find that even here the Chinaman, true to his instinct, and in violation of our laws, resorts to force to resist the influences that true men and good women in their devotion would throw around him....

We now come to an aspect of the question more revolting still. We would shrink from the disgusting details did not a sense of duty demand that they be presented. Their lewd women induce, by the cheapness of their offers, thousands of boys and young men to enter their dens, very many of whom are inoculated with venereal disease, and some of our physicians treat a half dozen cases daily. The fact that these diseases have their origin chiefly among the Chinese is well established...

But we desire to call your attention to the sanitary aspect of the subject. The Chinese herd together in one spot, whether in a city or village, until they transform the vicinage into a perfect hive – there they live in a space that would be insufficient for an average American family.

Their place of domicile is filthy in the extreme, and to a degree that cleansing is impossible except by the absolute destruction of the dwellings they occupy. But for the healthfulness of our climate, our city populations would have long since been decimated by pestilence from these causes. And we do not know how long this natural protection will suffice us. In almost every house is found a room devoted to opium smoking, and these places are visited by white boys and women, so that the deadly opium habit is being introduced among our people...

We now call attention to an aspect of the subject of such huge proportions, and such practical and pressing importance, that we almost dread to enter upon its consideration, namely, the effect of Chinese labor upon our industrial classes. We admit that the Chinese were, in the earlier history of the state, when white labor was not attainable, very useful in the development of our peculiar industries; that they were of great service in railroad building, in mining, gardening, general agriculture, and as domestic servants.

We admit that the Chinese are exceedingly expert in all kinds of labor and manufacturing; that they are easily and inexpensively handled in large numbers.

We recognize the right of all men to better their condition when they can, and deeply sympathize with the overcrowded population of China.

But our own people are the original settlers of California, their children, and recent immigrants from the East and Europe. They cannot compete with Chinese labor, and are now suffering because of this inability. This inability does not arise out of any deficiency of skill or will, but out of a mode of life hitherto considered essential to our American civilization.

⁴ The “evidence” presented consisted of testimony from police officers, business leaders, and Protestant clergy – all testified that the Chinese were dangerous and uncivilized. See the full report for details.

Our people have families, and condition considered of vast importance to our civilization, while the Chinese have not, or if they have families they need but little to support them in their native land.

Our laborers cannot be induced to live like vermin, as the Chinese, and these habits of individual and family life have ever been encouraged by our statesmen as essential to good morals.

Our laborers require meat and bread, which have been considered by us as necessary to that mental and bodily strength which is thought to be important in the citizens of a Republic which depends upon the strength of its people, while the Chinese require only rice, dried fish, tea, and a few simple vegetables. The cost of sustenance to the whites is four-fold greater than that of the Chinese, and the wages of the whites must of necessity be greater than the wages required by the Chinese. The Chinese are, therefore, able to underbid the whites in every kind of labor. They can be hired in masses; they can be managed and controlled like unthinking slaves. But our laborer has an individual life, cannot be controlled as a slave by brutal masters, and this individuality has been required of him by the genius of our institutions, and upon these elements of character the state depends for defense and growth.

To compete with the Chinese, our laborer must be entirely changed in character, in habits of life, in everything that the Republic has hitherto required of him to be.

As a natural consequence the white laborer is out of employment, and misery and want are fast taking the places of comfort and plenty.

Now to consider and weigh the benefits returned to us by the Chinese for these privileges and for these wrongs to our laboring class. They buy little or nothing from our own people, but import both their food and clothing from China; they send their wages home; they have not introduced a single industry peculiar to their own country; they contribute nothing to the support of our institutions; can never be relied upon as defenders of the State; they have no intention of becoming citizens, and are a constant tax upon the public treasury...

In considering the Chinese question it is necessary to remember that however true economic axioms are, their applicability depends upon the character of the convictions held by those who are to exercise final judgement regarding them. Thus, it may be perfectly true, in an economic point of view, that capital ought to be free to employ the cheapest labor it can procure. It may also be perfectly true that the employment of cheap labor stimulates manufactures and quickens the creation of capital. But it does not at all necessarily follow that the effects of an unlimited supply of cheap labor are beneficial to the majority, and in a country where the majority rule it must be ultimately impossible to gain consent to economic systems which cannot be shown to produce this general satisfactory result....

But in truth there are two distinct theories of political economy at present in conflict...(one) theory may be said to leave the personal equation out of consideration altogether. It assumes at the outset that the production of capital is the alpha and omega of industry and commerce, and it takes for granted that wealth means success. Cheap labor, according to this theory, is always acceptable, and competition should be left free to regulate wages. If the workman cannot earn

more than bread and water because of the fierceness of competition, he must accept his meager fare cheerfully, and console himself with the reflection that the laws of supply and demand have settled his lot for him, and that complaint is useless. In countries where the voice of labor is powerless, and where the usage of centuries has accustomed men to this lifelong struggle for the bare necessities of life, this theory is endured.

But the United States represents a different form of government; a form of government which begins by recognizing popular rights and goes on recognizing them to the end. Here the people are the government, and as in all nations, the majority must work for a subsistence, the question whether the majority shall work for starvation wages, or shall insist upon reasonable remuneration, can only be answered in one way. And thus, out of this more popular form of government, has arisen what may be called the new political economy. This is the theory that takes largest account of the personal equation, instead of ignoring it; which lays down the proposition that the greatest happiness to the greatest number is the true end and aim of all legislation and government, and which holds that great aggregate wealth is a far inferior desideratum to general moderate prosperity⁵. It is from this especially American standpoint that the Chinese question must be discussed, for assuredly it will at last be settled in accordance with these views.

Let it be shown that without the Chinaman our local industries would be paralyzed; that our manufacturers could not compete with Eastern rivals; that a great many undertakings involving much capital would fail – all this may be granted, and yet all this is insignificant when the broader aspect of the question comes to be considered. For after all, what is it that we are doing here upon the Pacific Coast?

Are we engaged in building up a civilized empire, founded upon and permeated with the myriad influences of Caucasian culture; or are we merely planted here for the purpose of fighting greedily, each for his own hand, and of spoiling a country for whose future we have no care? If the latter, then indeed we should welcome Chinese labor, and should encourage its advent, until it has driven white labor out of the field.

But if we have higher duties; if we owe obligations to our race, to our civilization, to our kindred blood, to all that proclaims our common origin and testified to the harmony and consistence of our aims – then assuredly we must decide that the Chinaman is a factor hostile to the prosperity, the progress and the civilization of the American people. And be observed that however broad our philosophy, it must necessarily be limited by race, nationality, and kindred civilization. We owe allegiance to those ancestry of literature, of progress in all its forms and phases. Europe, not Asia, appeals to us, and we should be recreant to those instincts which are often the safest guides if we imperiled the future of our own race by subjecting them to a competition for which they are unfitted, and the only effect of which could be to brutalize and deteriorate them. There are some very “advanced” thinkers who maintain that competition is the truest test of superiority, and who even go so far as to assert that if American labor cannot compete with Chinese labor the fact proves its essential inferiority and indicates the Chinese as the coming race...

⁵ Desideratum is Latin for something wanted or needed, i.e., desire. This is an interesting point – better to have more people with modest wealth than a small group of people controlling most of the wealth. Please keep this in mind when you read Andrew Carnegie’s *Wealth* in a few weeks.

...We willingly admit that (the Chinaman) offers a tremendous temptation to capitalists, and to all other who need work done at low rates. But when all is said that can be said in his favor we still fall back upon the consideration that it is American and not Chinese civilization that we are trying to build up, and that since Chinese labor means American destitution we must rid ourselves of it.