

The Chinese Must Stay

Yan Phou Lee¹

Introduction

The Chinese American population was growing at its fastest pace during the 1860s, just as the federal government was debating the definition of a “citizen” and the relationship of the citizen to the state. The Fourteenth Amendment established “birthright citizenship” with no racial restrictions. Accordingly, any children of Chinese immigrants were equal citizens under the law. Most white Americans, especially Californians, were appalled by the idea of racial equality under the law. Moreover, nativist sentiment grew exponentially during the 1870s. Anti-Chinese violence escalated, particularly after the economic collapse of 1873. As the Report from the Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration illustrates, as white men increasingly could not earn a living wage in the middle of an economic collapse, they blamed Chinese laborers for their struggles. The political leadership agreed. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first significant law restricting immigration into the United States of a racial/ethnic group. It was the first law in a series of legislative, executive, and judicial acts by the U.S. government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries excluding immigrants based on race, religion, or ethnicity.

The Chinese Exclusion Act ended general immigration from Chinese, although “merchants, teachers, and students” were given special dispensation. As a result, Yan Phou Lee, born in China in 1861, was allowed to immigrate to the United States to attend Yale University. Lee prided himself on his assimilation to American society. He converted to Christianity, married a white American woman (two actually, his first marriage ended in divorce), and wrote many articles and essays arguing that the Chinese can and will assimilate if given the chance. Lee wrote his essay, *The Chinese Must Stay*, in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Lee published his autobiography, *When I was a Boy in China*, in 1887, two years before he published the essay below.

Primary Source

No nation can afford to let go its high ideals. The founders of the American Republic asserted the principle that all men are created equal, and made this fair land a refuge for the whole world. Its manifest destiny, therefore, is to be the teacher and leader of nations in liberty. Its supremacy should be maintained by good faith and righteous dealing, and not by the display of selfishness

¹Full source here: [Yan Phou Lee, *The Chinese Must Stay*](#). Original essay published in the *North American Review* Vol. 148, No. 389 (April 1889). This source is believed to be in the public domain. A modern reprinting of the essay can be found [here](#).

and greed. But now, looking at the actions of this generation of Americans in their treatment of other races, who can get rid of the idea that the Nation, which Abraham Lincoln said was conceived in liberty, waxed great through oppression, and was really dedicated to the proposition that all men are created to prey on one another?

How far this Republic has departed from its high ideal and reversed its traditionary policy may be seen in the laws passed against the Chinese².

Chinese immigrants never claimed to be any better than farmers, traders, and artisans. If, on the one hand, they are not princes and nobles, on the other hand, they are not coolies and slaves. They all came voluntarily, as their consular papers certified, and their purpose in leaving their home and friends was to get honest work. They were told that they could obtain higher wages in America than elsewhere, and that Americans were friendly to the Chinese and invited them to come. In this they were confirmed by certain provisions in the treaties made between China and the United States, by which rights and privileges were mutually guaranteed to the citizens of either country residing in the other³. No one can deny that the United States made all the advances, and that China came forth from her seclusion because she trusted in American honor and good faith.

So long as the Chinese served their purposes and did not come into collision with the hoodlum element afterwards imported to California, the people of that State had nothing to complain of regarding them. Why should they, when, at one time, half the revenue of the State was raised out of the Chinese miners? But the time came when wages fell with the cost of living. The loafers became strong enough to have their votes sought after⁴. Their wants were attended to. Their complaints became the motive power of political activity. So many took up the cry against the Chinese that it was declared that no party could succeed on the Pacific coast which did not adopt the hoodlums' cause as its own⁵....

Those who remember events of some thirty-five years ago will see nothing strange in the antagonism of one class of laborers to another. Opposition to the Chinese is identical with the opposition to the free immigration of Europeans, and especially of the Irish; for it was once urged against the trans-Atlantic immigrants that their cheap labor "would degrade, demoralize, and pauperize American labor, and displace intelligent Americans in many branches of employment." There was a bitter conflict, but the sensible view prevailed. For it was found that a greater supply of unskilled labor made it possible for skilled laborers to command higher wages and more regular employment.

² [List of anti-Chinese legislation in California.](#)

³ The 1868 Treaty of Burlingame should be in your notes (if not before you read this, then after).

⁴ Serious shade. What does he mean here?

⁵ The Workingman's Party of California formed in the 1870s; their primary issue (only issue, really) was ridding the state of Chinese immigrants and punishing the railroad corporations for hiring Chinese labor. The Party gained control of the California state legislature in 1877, and promptly held hearings about the threat of Chinese immigrants. The record of those proceedings is the *Report of the Special Committee on Chinese Immigration*. California representatives, mostly Workingman's Party, lobbied for the 1882 Chinese Exclusion act, using the Report as evidence of why the Chinese were a threat. The Workingman's Party legislature also rewrote the California state constitution in 1878 denying Chinese people the right to vote.

Why is it that the American laborer was soon raised to a higher social and industrial plane, and ceased to fear Irish competition, while the Irish still dread the competition of the Chinese? It is simply because the Irish are industrially inferior to their competitors. They have not the ability to get above competition, like the Americans, and so, perforce, they must dispute with the Chinese for the chance to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Such industrial conflicts occur every day, as, for instance, between trade-unionists and scabs, Irish and Germans, Italians who came yesterday and Italians who came today. Let them fight it out by lawful means, and let the fittest survive; but you do not take the side of one against the other – least of all, the side of the strong against the weak. Why, then, take the side of the European immigrants against the Chinese? But you say are many objections against the latter which cannot be made against the former, and the Chinese stand charged with too many things to make them desirable. Ah, yes! I see. But it is only fair to look into these charges before we pass our judgment. It has been urged:

- I. *That the influx of Chinese is a standing menace to Republican institutions upon the Pacific coast and the existence there of Christian civilization.*

That is what I call a severe reflection on Republican institutions and Christian civilization. Republican institutions have withstood the strain of 13,000,000 of the lower classes of Europe, among whom may be found Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Nihilists, political assassins, and cut-throats; but they cannot endure the assaults of a few hundred thousands of the most peaceable and most easily governed people in the world!

Christianity must have lost its pristine power, for, having subdued and civilized one-half the world, it is now powerless before the resistance of a handful of Chinese! Surely the Chinese must be angels or devils! If angels, they would go without your bidding. If devils, you would not be able to drive them out. . .

- III. *That the Chinese race seems to have no desire for progress.*

In the last fifteen years the Chinese Government has educated upwards of two hundred students in Europe and America, has built arsenals and navy-yards, established schools and colleges on Western models, disciplined an army that whipped the Russians, created a navy that would put the American navy to shame, put up thousands of miles of telegraph wires; and it is now busily opening up mines, building railroads, and availing itself of American capital and experience to put up telephones and establish a national bank. The Chinese are not ashamed to own that they appreciate the Americans.

- IV. *That the Chinese have displaced white laborers by low wages and cheap living, and that their presence discourages and retards white immigration to the Pacific States.*

This charge displays so little regard for truth and the principles of political economy that it seems like folly to attempt an answer. But please to remember that it was by the application of Chinese "cheap labor" to the building of railroads, the reclamation of swamp-lands, to mining, fruit-culture, and manufacturing, that an immense vista of employment was opened up for Caucasians,

and that millions now are enabled to live in comfort and luxury where formerly adventurers and desperadoes disputed with wild beasts and wilder men for the possession of the land. Even when the Chinaman's work is menial (and he does it because he must live, and is too honest to steal and too proud to go to the almshouse⁶), he is employed because of the scarcity of such laborers. It is proved that his work enables many to turn their whole attention to something else, so that even the hoodlum may don a clean shirt at least once a month. You may as well run-down machinery as to sneer at Chinese cheap labor. Machines live on nothing at all; they have displaced millions of laborers; why not do away with machines?

Besides, are you sure that Chinese laborers would not ask more if they dared, or take more if they could get it? It is the Chinese who are constantly displaced by Caucasians. As soon as an industry gets on its feet by the help of Chinese "cheap labor," Chinese workmen are discharged to make room for others.

V. *That the Chinese do not desire to become citizens of this country.*

Why should they? Where is the inducement? Let me recite briefly a few of the laws and ordinances which, though couched in general terms, were made for their special benefit:

The Foreign-Miners' License Law, which forced every Chinese miner, during a period of twenty years, to pay from \$4 to \$20 per month for the privilege of working claims which others had abandoned.

An act of the California Legislature, 1885, laid a tax of \$55 on each Chinese immigrant. Another, 1862, provided (with a few exceptions) that every Chinaman over eighteen years of age should pay a capitation-tax of \$2.50.

A San Francisco city ordinance, passed March 15, 1876, provided that all laundries should pay licenses as follows: those using a one-horse vehicle, \$2 per quarter; two horses, \$4; no vehicle, \$15. This is discrimination with a vengeance!

I maintain that a sober, industrious, and peaceable people, like the Chinese, who mind their own business and let others do the same, are as fit to be voters as the quarrelsome, ignorant, besotted, and priest-ridden hordes of Europe⁷. Are you sure the Chinese have no desire for the franchise? Some years ago, a number of those living in California, thinking that the reason why they were persecuted was because it was believed they cared nothing about American citizenship, made application for papers of naturalization. Their persecutors were alarmed and applied to Congress for assistance, and the California Constitution was amended so as to exclude them.

In view of the above-mentioned evidences of the fostering care of the State of California, you will not be surprised that very few venture to bring their families to America. Many would have brought their families over, if they could have been assured of protection.

⁶ Poor house.

⁷ Lee deploys anti-Catholic sentiment to offset anti-Chinese sentiment.

VI. *That the Chinese live in filthy dwellings, upon poor food, crowded together in narrow quarters, disregarding health and fire ordinances.*

The Chinaman does not object to dainty food and luxurious lodgings. But the paternal government of California taxed him as soon as he came ashore; permitted its agents to blackmail him at intervals; made him pay \$15 a month for carrying his customers' washing in his hand; levied a progressive poll-tax without providing a school for him; a road-tax before he began to travel, and, when he went to the mines, collected a water-rent of thirty cents a day, and a progressive license-tax from \$4 to \$20 per month. Even if he earned five dollars a day, he could not have fifteen cents to live on.⁸

VII. *The Chinese neither have intercourse with the Caucasians nor will assimilate with them.*

Yes, just think of it! As soon as the ship comes into harbor, a committee of the citizens get on board to present the Chinaman with the freedom of the city (valued at \$5). A big crowd gathers at the wharf to receive him with shouts of joy (and showers of stones). The aristocrats of the place flock to his hotel to pay their respects (and to take away things to remember him by). He is so feted and caressed by Caucasian society that it is a wonder his head is not turned (or twisted off)...

VIII. *The Chinese come and go as pagans.*

Mr. Beecher said in reference to this charge: "We have clubbed them, stoned them, burned their houses, and murdered some of them; yet they refuse to be converted I do not know any way, except to blow them up with nitro-glycerine, if we are ever to get them to heaven." In spite of these doubtful inducements to become Christians, more than 500 have been admitted to the church.⁹

IX. *That the Chinese immigrants are mostly criminals.*

While the Chinese population was one in ten, their quota of criminals was only one in eighteen; and that, too, when judges and juries were more or less prejudiced against them. Every fair-minded man can testify that the Chinese are the most law-abiding people in the community, that they are not easily provoked, but are patient (oh, too patient!) under insult and injury. They

⁸ From 1873 to 1883, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed more than a dozen ordinances directly specifically at Chinese laundries. The ordinances targeted the laundries in various ways, such as by imposing a maximum hour rule so that different laundry owners could not share one laundry space, zoning rules to push laundries from white neighborhoods to the outskirts of town or to toxic industrial areas, taxes on laundries with horse-drawn vehicles, prohibiting drying racks on roofs, and banning the use of a mouth tube to squirt starch on clothes, a common practice in Chinese laundries.

⁹ Henry Ward Beecher was a well-known and influential Congregationalist clergyman and social reformer during the nineteenth century. The whole Beecher family was famous and influential – Henry's father Lyman Beecher was also a well-known (Presbyterian) minister and reformer, and served as President of Lane Theological Academy in Cincinnati (Henry graduated from Lane). Two of his sisters were also famous: Harriet Ward Beecher, abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Catherine Beecher, educator and reformer, best known for her book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*. The whole Beecher family lived in Cincinnati from the 1830s-50s.

seldom appear in court-rooms in the character of prisoners. You have never seen one drunk in your life. But, you say, he smokes opium. That, I answer, is his own affair. The law provides no penalties against private vices. You have never heard of Chinamen who organized strikes, stuffed ballot-boxes, and corrupted legislation at the fountain-head. Why, then, are they not as desirable as other immigrants? Is it a crime to be industrious, faithful, law-abiding? Wrong to coin one's honest toil into gold, and, instead of wasting one's earnings in drink and debauchery, to support wife and children therewith?...

X. *That the Chinese bring women of bad character to San Francisco, and that their vices are corrupting the morals of the city.*

How serious a charge this is we cannot realize until we get at all the facts. Just imagine California, the most virtuous of States, and San Francisco, the most immaculate of cities, lying helpless under...Chinese immorality! Have you ever been to San Francisco? Unless you can endure paradise and Eden-like purity, you would better not go there. Why, the Sabbath stillness in that city is simply appalling. The people all go to church, and if you suggest whiskey toddy or a base-ball game on Sunday, they will turn up their eyes, throw up their hands, and pray the Lord to have mercy on you. There are no drunken brawls at any time (except in Chinatown), and it is the policeman's picnic-ground (except in Chinatown)¹⁰.

Californians are pure, moral, and religious, in all that they do. As for having disreputable houses, or women with loose morals about them, I tell you they are as innocent as lambs. Indeed, Satan could not have made a greater commotion in Eden than the Chinese in California. One would suppose that such a model community would 'clean out' those bad Chinese women. But it did not. It deputed a number of special policemen to watch them and arrest them, but it seems that these specials had the marvelous power of transmuting their brass into pure gold, and that, in the exercise of that power, they were as blind as bats. If the virtuous community of San Francisco permitted their morals to be corrupted, it is their own fault.

Such are the charges made against the Chinese. Such were the reasons for legislating against them – and they still have their influence, as shown by utterances of labor organs; by the unreasoning prejudice against the Chinese which finds lodgment in the minds of the people; and by the periodical outbreaks and outrages perpetrated against them without arousing the public conscience.

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¹⁰ Note his tone here. More shade.