

HIST 485 Literature Review

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked a change in American immigrant policy by preventing the entry of a specific ethnic group, the Chinese, into the United States. The Exclusion Act set the precedent for following future legislation: the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 were directly influenced by the Exclusion Act and their effects lasted until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 set a new direction for immigration policy. Yet prior to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, politicians and noted figures from around the country debated for years as to whether the Chinese threatened or contributed to American society. In a period filled with nativism, racial tension, and economic instability, the Chinese became a scapegoat for many of the country's socioeconomic woes. The Chinese Exclusion Act, with its ten-year prohibition of almost all Chinese immigration into the country, simply added a formal and legalized element to the discrimination that the Chinese in the United States had already endured for decades.

The period of Chinese exclusion intrigues scholars across many fields because of its relevance to politics, economy, labor, race, and immigration. Subsequently, studies about the causes and effects of Chinese exclusion have received much attention, yet the literature about the debate on the Chinese Exclusion Act remains mostly limited. Early sociologists who studied Chinese exclusion and the historians today tend to focus on the factors that led to anti-Chinese sentiment but they have not fully analyzed how and why the Chinese Exclusion Act clashed with American values. The focus on the development of anti-Chinese sentiment and the resulting Exclusion Act diverts attention from opposition to the act. The first studies of the Exclusion Act date to the early twentieth century and focus on the effects of organized labor upon Chinese Exclusion. Most important was Mary Roberts Coolidge's "California Thesis," which argued that

organized labor in California swayed politicians across the nation to endorse the Exclusion Act. Significant discussion about the origins of the Exclusion Act did not resume until the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Theories that emerged during this time period focus on the role of racism in motivating anti-Chinese sentiment. Towards the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, the literature concentrated on the experiences of Chinese immigrants and addressed the effects of the exclusion rather than its causes of Chinese exclusion. Currently, the literature related to the Exclusion Act continues to center on the experiences of the Chinese immigrants before and during the exclusion era while further expanding study of the origins of the act. The Chinese Exclusion Act remains a subject of interest for scholars because it provides an example of the effects of cultural differences, misunderstandings, and racism.

The first major study of the Chinese Exclusion Act, *Chinese Immigration* (1909) by Mary Roberts Coolidge, helped to establish the basis for future analysis regarding the act.² Her interest in the Chinese Exclusion movement began during the “excitement incident to the passage and enforcement of the Geary law in 1892” which extended the exclusion act for another ten years.³ Coolidge wrote her book in an attempt to demonstrate the injustices experienced by the Chinese during their time in the United States. The book specifically focuses on the role of organized labor in California in building support for Chinese exclusion and uses charts and statistics in order to back Coolidge’s claim. Coolidge claims that white laborers felt threatened by the

¹ Sucheng Chan, author of *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910* (1989) is one of the foremost experts on Asian American history. She has edited several anthologies regarding Chinese exclusion but has also researched Korean, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese history. In 1996 she wrote an article on the historiography of Asian American studies. While not explicitly looking at the historiography of Chinese Exclusion, Chan’s article on Asian American historiography mentions several of the books in this paper. The article places a different perspective on Chinese exclusion even if only mentioned briefly. “The Writing of Asian American history,” *Organization of American Historians AH Magazine of History*, 10, no. 4, Asian American History (Summer 1996), 8-17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163093> (accessed February 11, 2014).

² Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Holt and Company, 1909).

³ The Scott Act of 1902 made the effects of the Exclusion Act permanent until the need for an alliance with China during World War II led to a change in immigration policy in 1943.

Chinese because of the perception that the Chinese would work any job for lower wages than a white laborer. The resulting competition for jobs, particularly during a time when laborers could usually find work only nine months out of the year, led to California laborers' demands to prohibit Chinese immigration. Coolidge maintains that the anti-Chinese fervor in California spread its way throughout the rest of the nation because of the power that organized labor held over the Democratic and Republican parties. Because the two parties remained deadlocked in a competition for power, organized labor, particularly in California, held particular sway in influencing party action. Coolidge further argues that the politicians involved with the creation and passage of the Exclusion Act used corrupt and unjust methods to discriminate against the Chinese. *Chinese Immigration* was soon pulled from shelves when the federal government discovered Coolidge's accusations of political exploitation and banned the book.⁴

As the first authoritative study on the Chinese Exclusion Act, *Chinese Immigration* has many shortcomings. Most apparent is the blatant bias towards the Chinese population.⁵ Coolidge employs mostly pro-Chinese sources and emphasizes the immorality of organized labor groups and politicians. Coolidge advocates for the Chinese by stating that the Chinese and Americans shared more similarities than they did differences and depicts the Chinese as victims of discriminatory actions. Her enthusiastic view of the Chinese provides insight as to why politicians and laborers had no real basis for demanding Chinese exclusion. Coolidge, a sociology professor, worked at South Park Settlement, a community center that served to help immigrants and the less fortunate assimilate into American culture. It is highly plausible that

⁴ William S. Niderkorn, "Book Charging Anti-Chinese Injustices is Withdrawn," <http://timetraveler.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/16/book-charging-anti-chinese-injustice-is-withdrawn/> (accessed February 10, 2014).

⁵ According to Sucheng Chan, partisan bias during the years prior to exclusion exhibited considerable partisan bias. George F. Seward's *Chinese Immigration in its Social and Economic Effects* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), written before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, addresses reasons why the Chinese faced discrimination in various areas of the labor, like cigar factories and shoe factories.

while she served as director of the settlement house, Coolidge helped Chinese immigrants, especially since San Francisco had and continues to have a large Chinatown. The interactions with Chinese immigrants may have served as part of the inspiration for her book. Her experiences with Chinese immigrants could also account for the bias in her book. *Chinese Immigration* also centers almost entirely on California's role in promoting anti-Chinese sentiment. Coolidge chose to center her study on California because it served as home to the majority of the Chinese immigrant population in the United States and admits that she wanted to include a chapter on the Chinese in other areas along the Pacific coast but was unable to do so because of the already extensive length of her book. The literature that followed Coolidge's book would remedy the lack of information on the Chinese in other regions of the West Coast.

Chinese Immigration's short shelf-life did not lessen Coolidge's influence upon the scholars that followed her. Roderick Duncan McKenzie's *Oriental Exclusion* (1927), published only a few years after the Immigration Act of 1924, which established a cap on the number of immigrants who came to the United States, broadened Coolidge's arguments by applying it to the exclusion of the Japanese.⁶ McKenzie was a sociologist and professor known for his influence on the field of human ecology, which focuses on the interaction between people and their physical and social environments. In *Oriental Exclusion*, he argues that after the legislation blocked the Chinese from entering the United States, politicians and laborers found another ethnic group to eliminate: the Japanese. By drawing similarities between the discrimination against the Chinese and Japanese, McKenzie suggests that the exclusion of Asians assuaged racial and not just economic or political fears of Americans. The continued racial fears

⁶ R. D. McKenzie, *Oriental Exclusion: The Effect of American Immigration Laws, Regulations, and Judicial Decisions upon the Chinese and Japanese on the American Pacific Coast* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928). The Immigration Act of 1924 instated a quota on the number of immigrants who could come from different countries. It also essentially barred Asians from naturalized citizenship.

demonstrated in the Immigration Act of 1924 coincide with eugenics movement in the United States. White Americans believed that in the supremacy of the white race and that the country could only progress through the elimination of unwanted traits and people. McKenzie implies that exclusion of the Chinese and the Japanese indicated Americans' beliefs in the inferiority of Asians.

Nearly a decade later, Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer's book *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1939) expanded upon Coolidge's argument that organized labor in California contributed strongly to anti-Chinese sentiment across the United States.⁷ Sandmeyer was one of the first historians who focused on Chinese exclusion. Though his book did not attract an audience as *California Immigration* did, scholars today still reference it for its information pertaining to California. Like Coolidge, Sandmeyer emphasizes the job competition between white and Chinese laborers and explains how organized labor held power over the political parties. While Sandmeyer does not provide any new information, his analysis demonstrates far less bias than that found in Coolidge's book. However, like Coolidge, both McKenzie and Sandmeyer emphasize the development of anti-Chinese sentiment but do not elaborate on the opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act. Even their chapters addressing the proposal of the Exclusion Act in Congress center on the fierce arguments for Chinese exclusion and the tension between the congressmen instead of on the conflict between the message of the act and national values like the right to equality, property, and opportunity

Significant literature on the Chinese Exclusion Act disappeared until the 1960s and 1970s. Historians turned their attention towards the exclusion and internment of the Japanese in the United States and did not continue to examine Chinese exclusion. However, the United States'

⁷ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1939).

involvement in the Vietnam War, the Immigration Act of 1965, and the Asian American movement contributed to the increased interest in Asian American history. The books published during this time considerably contributed to the historiography of Asian American history as a whole, and also added new dimensions to and expanded upon the analyses on the Chinese Exclusion Act. Rather than focus on the economic motivations for the Exclusion Act, the literature that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s examined the racial and cultural factors that contributed to the passage of the Exclusion Act.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, it resulted in numerous spinoffs, including the Asian American Movement. The Asian community in the United States, mainly those of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent, sought to redefine Asian American identity and rewrite and clarify their history. Perhaps one of the lesser-mentioned but still critical books of the period was *Mountain of Gold: The Story of Chinese in America* (1967) by Dr. Betty Lee Sung.⁸ The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Sung grew up in the United States, graduated from college, and obtained a job with Voice of America, the official broadcast institution of the United States that airs content internationally. While working at Voice of America, Sung discovered that Americans not only harbored intense misconceptions of Asian Americans, but also that the amount of information about the Chinese in the United States was scarce. Sung sought to correct the misconceptions by writing *Mountain of Gold*, one of the first books that focused on the experiences of Chinese Americans. Sung's personal connection to the Chinese American narrative powered her writing and also set an example for other Asian American scholars to follow. She did not center her book on the causes and effects of Exclusion, choosing instead to describe in detail the everyday lifestyles of the Chinese in America and demonstrate the

⁸ Betty Lee Sung, *Mountain of Gold: The Story of Chinese in America* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1967).

importance of Chinese cultural identity. By doing so, she advocated Chinese American rights and sought to correct perceptions of Chinese Americans. Sung indirectly demonstrates how Chinese Americans opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act by continuing to pursue a livelihood in the United States despite legal and racial obstacles.

Outside of the Asian American community, slightly earlier book from the 1960s also did not address Chinese exclusion but directly influenced one of the most important analyses to follow. In his book *Bitter Strength, 1850-1870: A History of the Chinese in the United States* (1964), historian Gunther Barth asserts that Americans harbored prejudices against the Chinese because they saw the Chinese as “birds of passage” immigrants.⁹ “Birds of passage” was the term given to immigrants who came to the United States with no intention of staying but rather, sought to earn enough money to return establish themselves in their native country. Barth argues that the Chinese initially indicated no desire to assimilate into American society and instead remained loyal to China by sending money back to their relatives and maintaining Chinese culture in the United States. To Americans, the Chinese had no plans to stay in the United States and were therefore a drain on American society and resources. Barth further argues that Chinese immigrants did in fact start to settle in and assimilate into American society but the misperceptions that Americans harbored towards the Chinese never disappeared. These misperceptions, as suggested in *Mountain of Gold*, only increased tensions between white and nonwhite workers.

Although Barth’s book analyzed only the years 1850 through 1870 and therefore did not address Chinese Exclusion, his argument inspired Stuart Creighton Miller’s assertion that Americans had developed perceptions of the Chinese that ultimately led to anti-Chinese

⁹ Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

sentiment. Miller acknowledges Barth's influence in the preface of his book, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (1969), which challenges Coolidge's early argument that anti-Chinese sentiment among organized labor in California proved the determining factor in pushing for the Exclusion Act.¹⁰ Miller asserts instead that anti-Chinese sentiment had existed in the United States long before the Chinese began to establish a presence on the Pacific Coast. Miller elaborates on Barth's claim that anti-Chinese sentiment in California emerged as the result of misperceptions between white and Chinese laborers by linking these misperceptions to the creation of the Exclusion Act. Miller chronologically traces the relationship between the United States and China, beginning in the late eighteenth century. His also differs from Coolidge's and Sandmeyer's accounts of Chinese exclusion by mentioning, although in passing, the social conditions in China and the relationship between China and the United States that bred anti-Chinese sentiment. Miller uses letters and memoirs of merchants, diplomats, and missionaries in China in order to demonstrate how Americans' awe and interest in China gradually developed into negative stereotypes. Miller's argument is significant because it perceives racism as the most important motivator for the Chinese Exclusion Act rather than economic factors. Miller also adds to the literature regarding Chinese Exclusion by indicating that anti-Chinese sentiment existed on a national plane instead of being concentrated in the West Coast. The studies after the publication of *The Unwanted Immigrant* would follow one of two routes: support of national racist sentiment or advocacy that California and the West Coast created sufficient pressure to influence Congress.

Alexander Saxton's *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1971) combines the racial elements of Miller's argument and the economic and

¹⁰ Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928).

social elements of Coolidge's California labor argument.¹¹ Like Miller, Saxton traces the progression of racist sentiment in the United States but rather than specifically looking at the relationships with the Chinese, he first begins by establishing that the United States had a tradition of racism. The first groups of people to face discrimination were the Native Americans and, after them, African Americans. Saxton maintains that the Chinese were simply the next ethnic group to endure racial prejudice and that they would not be the last.¹² More importantly, Saxton connects racism with Jacksonian principles. As Americans continued to head westwards across the country, they eliminated any nonwhite people they encountered. Upon reaching California, racist sentiment that had been a part of political tradition mingled with the discontent of the labor force and led to antagonistic beliefs against the Chinese. Saxton refers to the Chinese as the "indispensable enemy" because although white laborers complained that Chinese immigrants increased competition for jobs and wages, the Chinese contributed greatly to the growth of population and economy. Saxton's inclusion of the violence against the Chinese after the passage of the Exclusion Act further supports for a tradition of racist sentiment. Scholars viewed *The Indispensable Enemy* as a welcome addition to the study of Chinese American history even though Saxton's analysis occasionally appears convoluted and tangential.

The 1980s and the 1990s saw both an increase in the literature published by Asian Americans focusing on the experiences of Chinese immigrants during the Exclusion era and the introduction of a new theory of the development of the Exclusion Act. The publication of Andrew Gyory's *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (1998) added a

¹¹ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

¹² McKenzie's previous analysis in *Oriental Exclusion* indicated that the Japanese were the next victims of racial discrimination in the United States.

new layer of politics to the study of Chinese Exclusion.¹³ From the first page of his introduction, Gyory argues that neither organized labor, particularly in California, nor racist sentiment across the country served as the main motivator for the Chinese Exclusion Act. Gyory states that politicians eager to secure votes manipulated the working force to believe that the Chinese posed a threat to their economic and social stability. By presenting themselves as friends of the workingman through their efforts to eliminate the supposed threat of the Chinese, politicians manipulated laborers into voting for them. Instead of a bottom-up effect on the government, government influenced voters from the top down. Gyory is also the first scholar to actually address the debate on the Exclusion Act. He traces the development of political thought and emphasizes the competition between the Democratic and Republican parties which motivated politicians in both parties to try different tactics in order to draw voters. Politicians struggled to maintain traditions on a national and party level. For example, the Republican party had traditionally been known as the party of Lincoln and was associated, to a degree, with racial equality yet the loudest supporters of the Exclusion Act were Republicans. The clash between traditions of equality and opportunity and the preference for white workers over immigrants caused conflict within the party. Gyory's focus on politicians also breaks from the previous studies because his analysis is almost entirely focused on events on the East Coast rather than on the West Coast.

Because Gyory's argument fundamentally challenged the influences of the organized labor and racist sentiment in the nineteenth century, the reaction of the academic community split between welcoming his new perspective and attacking. His supporters applauded his analysis of politicians on the East Coast because it shifts attention from the West Coast and

¹³ Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

California to a region not usually discussed in literature on Chinese exclusion and also emphasized the influence of politicians upon the creation and passage of the Exclusion Act. Gyory's critics argued that he underestimated the power of racism and completely ignored the differences between Chinese immigrants and Chinese coolie labor.

These criticisms reveal another area of Chinese Exclusion studies that lacks attention. As of yet, no book provides an all-inclusive analysis of Chinese immigrants' perceptions of Americans and Americans' perceptions of the Chinese immigrants. The literature on Chinese exclusion focuses on the nativism, unstable economy, and labor tensions in the United States but does not address the views of the Chinese towards the Americans.

Narratives that concentrate on the experiences of the Chinese before and after the Exclusion Act tend to promote the adaptability and resilience of the Chinese community, which suggests opposition on the part of the Chinese. However, it was only through the publication of works, centered on the experiences of Chinese immigrants and mainly written by Asian Americans, that the voices of the Chinese themselves could be heard. Among the better known publications are the anthologies edited by Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in American, 1882-1943* (1991) and *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas between China and America during the Exclusion Era* (2006).¹⁴ Among the authors listed in each of the anthologies are Him Mark Lai and Erika Lee. Lai helped to change the field of Asian American history by legitimizing the study of Chinese American history. He collected and translated Chinese sources and used them, and English sources, in order to depict a more complete history of Chinese American relations. Erika

¹⁴ Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); ed., *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas between China and America during the Exclusion Era* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).

Lee, a historian and professor, wrote *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (2003), one of the better-known publications detailing Chinese lifestyles that appeals not only to scholars but also to the general audience.¹⁵ The power duo of Peter Kwong and his wife Dusanka Miscevic have published several books regarding Chinese immigration including *Chinese American: The Immigrant Experience* (2000) and *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (2005), both of which use Chinese language sources and immigrant narratives in order to show how the Chinese community endured during the exclusion movement and continues to thrive today.¹⁶ Though not Chinese himself, Dr. Charles McClain's *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (1994) addresses how Chinese immigrants fought for equality in the courts prior to and after the passage of the Exclusion Act.¹⁷ Collectively, these books suggest the activism of the Chinese immigrant community to establish an identity in the United States.

While the literature on Chinese exclusion is both varied and numerous, the attention given to aspects of exclusion has been unequal. The first theories of the causes of the Exclusion Act are markedly one-sided because they do not address the Chinese who protested the Exclusion Act and the opposition within the United States. Later analyses incorporate the elements of cultural identity and diversity in order to portray another perspective of the Exclusion Act but the Chinese community remains the focus of these studies, not the debate and

¹⁵ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscevic, *Chinese American: The Immigrant Experience* (New York: New Press, 2000); *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (New York: New Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

passage of the act itself. Scholars continue to study Chinese exclusion not only because of its relevance to today's issues of immigration, but also because, as a stain on American history, Chinese exclusion must be studied in order to prevent a repeated mistake.

I pledge...*Chelsea Chin*

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