

Chinese Immigrants - How to cross frontiers?

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Abstract

The issue of racial injustice has always been a topic in today's democratic world. Especially during the epidemic, the status of Chinese Americans has once again been questioned and discussed. My research method is mainly based on the target of different classes of people. One is the bottom-level people engaged in labor activities, so I found a group of Chinese coolies. The others are Chinese immigrants with capital who can afford to live in other countries. In my research, I championed a case of a two-fold definition for the frontier, one is the geographical frontier, and the corresponding characters are the Chinese coolies, mainly about how they came to Latin America across the vast Pacific Ocean, what is the purpose of their search for this new continent, and what did they experience during their journey. Another definition is about the ideological frontier, mainly referring to the barriers established by racism, social Darwinism, and Manifest Destiny, how Chinese immigrants are socially isolated, and how they use the law weapons against these prejudiced ideologies.

Keywords

Chinese immigration, Chinese Exclusion Act, Nativism.

1. Introduction

The word "frontier" can refer to an area unfamiliar to a group of people. In the late 19th century, the California Gold Rush, the civil war in China, and opportunities to work in plantations in Latin America drove Chinese people—especially in southern China—to seek opportunities for prosperity in the New World. For Chinese people in the late 19th century, the New World was a new frontier both literally and figuratively: it was a place separated from China by the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, but it was also inhabited by people who were culturally and linguistically different. Moreover, even after conquering the physical frontier, Chinese immigrants faced another even more daunting frontier: nativist ideologies and discriminatory political systems. This research is to understand and compare the relationship between different races in today's society and how Chinese immigrants were treated by the New World two hundred years ago and to finally answer my questions about how the frontier between different races needs to be crossed.

2. Chinese Coolies in the Late Nineteenth Century

By the late 19th century, China's Qing Dynasty government was confronting many internal and external crises. The Qing Dynasty's defeat in the Opium War with Great Britain in 1841 resulted from the Qing's contempt for modern Western science and technology and boundless self-confidence. [1] In order to fight against powerful external enemies and pay for the damages demanded by Western powers, the Qing court increased taxes. [2] Increased taxes imposed significant burdens on the lower class and, when combined with the pressures of a series of uprisings during the mid-to-late-19th century (such as the Taiping Rebellion, the largest civil war in human history in which 20 to 30 million people died).[3] Many Chinese people made the decision to leave China in search of prosperity abroad.[4] Some people took this opportunity,

and many became known as “coolies.” The English word “coolie” is of Indian origin and refers to menial work or difficult physical labor;[5] in Chinese, the word for “coolie” is kuli 苦力, literally “bitter labor.”

After Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, slavery came to an end in the US and would soon be abolished in the rest of the Americas. To maintain the plantation system, especially in Latin America, landlords set their sights on China, seeking labor resources that could replace enslaved Black people. “Chinese workers seemed an ideal replacement workforce for slaves because the planters believed them to be a racially distinct, cheap, and controllable labor force.” [6]

3. Crossing the Physical Frontier

For Chinese people wishing to cross the physical frontier of the Pacific Ocean, their first stop was one of the major port cities on China’s east coast. Kulangsu, an island located off of Fujian on China’s east coast, was the largest coolie export area in China in the late 19th century.[7] The conditions of the coolies during the transportation were often deplorable, and ships often carried more than a few hundred coolies.[8] Aboard the ships, passengers were subject to corporal punishment by the crew. Deaths of Chinese while on transport ships were common, and in some cases, coolies died at rates even higher than enslaved Africans on the Middle Passage.[9] Ship owners benefitted from the coolies they transported in both life and death, purchasing “all-risk” insurance for coolies so that the ship owners would receive compensation from an insurance company if coolies died in transit. [10]

The leading cause of death on coolie ships was disease problems due to poor sanitation. In one case, on a voyage to Havana, a captain abandoned a group of sick coolies on a deserted beach because he thought it would be too expensive to treat them. Most starved to death and wild dogs and pigs ate others.[11]

In terms of relative cost, Chinese coolies became far more affordable than African slaves. In the early 1840s, the international African slave trade was on the decline and had been made illegal in the British Empire.[12] However, Cuban plantation owners realized that Chinese labor was plentiful, cheap, and legal.[13] In addition, Chinese coolies could be lured to Cuba with the promise of wages and then be forced to work in slave conditions. In Cuba, coolies quickly became cheaper than enslaved Africans: in 1845-1850, the price of a Chinese coolie was about 125 pesos, which was half of the 335 pesos for an enslaved African, and between 1847 and 1873, more than 138,000 coolies were brought to Cuba to work as laborers.[14]

4. Alone on a New Frontier

“Those laborers are not citizens of the United States; they are aliens. That the government of the United States, through the action of the legislative department, can exclude aliens from its territory is a proposition that we do not think is open to controversy. Jurisdiction over its territory to that extent is an incident of every independent nation.”

Mass Chinese emigration presented a challenge for both Chinese coolies, as well as to China’s government. The late 19th century was a world in which modern diplomatic protocols and procedures were coming into being, one of which was the understood responsibility of a country to advocate for and protect its citizens even when the latter were abroad. However, until the late 19th century, the Qing Dynasty did not accept that it had commitments to its subjects abroad.[16] Even after it accepted that reality, it lacked a diplomatic service and had no missions or embassies abroad. When the Qing finally did send diplomats abroad, they generally investigated claims of abuses, but could not improve conditions for Chinese

laborers.[17] As a result, the Chinese in the New World were mainly on their own in their fight against discrimination and racism.

When coolies arrived in the New World, they were classified by governments as “aliens.” They voluntarily left the Qing government and embarked on other countries, their identity was not guaranteed, and they became stateless. Therefore, coolies were vulnerable to economic exploitation and racist violence.[18]

In the 19th century, ideas of Manifest Destiny and Social Darwinism permeated the American consciousness.[19] Americans increasingly saw white Christian culture as superior and other cultures—particularly that of the Chinese—as inferior. Additionally, there was a widespread belief that Chinese immigrants could not assimilate and would always be loyal to China rather than the United States. Chinese immigrants could never be democratic citizens because they lacked any understanding or appreciation of democratic ideas.

Despite negative American attitudes, the Chinese continued to immigrate to the US in search of opportunity and found it in abundance.[20] Chinese immigrants sought gold throughout California and the American West and contributed much labor to building the Transcontinental Railroad.[21] However, the success of Chinese immigrants and their growing numbers unnerved White American laborers, who sought to end Chinese immigration and who began to launch attacks against Chinese people. One such incident occurred on October 31, 1880, when an argument broke out between a Chinese man and White patrons at a tavern in Denver, Colorado.[22] Those initial scuffles led to a riot in which about 3,000 people attacked Denver’s Chinatown, killing one person and injuring dozens.[23]

The rising tide of anti-Chinese sentiment culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed on May 6, 1882, which banned the immigration of Chinese people to the United States for ten years.[24] The Act simultaneously alleviated the economic concerns of White workers while also making clear that the US sought to maintain “racial purity.”[25] From 1785, when the first three recorded Chinese landed in Baltimore Harbor from Guangzhou, to 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted, there were nearly 322,000 Chinese immigrants in the United States. At the time, about 25% of California’s workers were Chinese men.[26] The influence of the Chinese Exclusion Act was extensive. After the law was enacted, Chinese emigrants to the United States decreased significantly. According to the United States Census, in 1880, there were 105,465 Chinese in the United States, 89,863 in 1900, and 61,639 in 1920. [27]

Despite the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, anti-Chinese sentiment remained.[28] For example, in 1898, a union in Butte, Montana, circulated a leaflet calling for a boycott of Chinese and Japanese businesses and those who supported them.[29] Even though Chinese immigrants were no longer entering the US, White Americans still resented what they saw of Asian companies, restaurants, and labor practices that lowered the neighborhood’s standard of living and took jobs away from “deserving” White people.

5. Resistance and Testimonies

One way in which coolies exercised agency during this period of intense anti-Chinese sentiment was through direct resistance. Oppression and unfair treatment often lead to resistance. In 1859, a coolie merchant ship named *Norway* left Macau en route to Havana, and something went wrong. Many coolies contracted diseases before leaving the port due to poor sanitary conditions, and other coolies, who had been recruited through coercion and false statements, were left with psychological problems, which led to suicide.[30]

On the sixth day of the voyage, the coolies mutinied.

Three days later, at midnight, the emigrants rebelled, lighting below decks and trying to pry the hatches open. As the coolies attempted to push their way through the gratings, the seamen shot at them and indiscriminately below decks.[31]

Documents describe the mutiny as barbaric. During the conflict, the ship caught fire, and most Chinese were trapped in their cabins, begging the crew to let them out. The captain refused. By the time Norway reached Havana, 130 coolies had died, 70 of them killed during the mutiny and the remainder killed by disease. While the Norway mutiny was particularly bloody, such mutinies (and high numbers of dead) on coolie ships were not rare and, according to data gathered by Arnold J. Meagher occurred on one of every eleven such voyages between 1847-1874, for coolie ships traveling from China to Latin America.

In addition to rebelling against injustice, Chinese coolies also tried to use less direct and violent methods to secure their rights. For example, they appealed to representatives of the Qing Dynasty who were residents of the New World, hoping that such diplomats could appeal to the local government. Nearly 3,000 coolies in Cuba composed petitions to Qing Dynasty representatives describing the process by which they were trafficked to Cuba and the abuses that took place there. For people whose voices were so often ignored or lost to history altogether, these written records and oral histories leave behind a vivid description of the hellish system of slavery into which they fell.[34] In writing to the Qing Dynasty's representatives, one petition read, "We are hoping that your honor [the ambassador] has the plan to save our lives" (Petition 53). Others begged, "We beg your honor to show pity on our ant-like lives. Save us and right this injustice" (Petition 84).[35]

Chinese coolies sought to organize to protect themselves. Pointing out in another petition that there were no doctors for the sick, no graves for the dead, no letters to send home, and no date to return to China, the Chinese planned to set up an association and elect leaders. Those who benefitted from the coolie trade in Cuba found this effort to be so threatening that it hired spies within the coolie's organization, arrested the leaders, accused them of rebellion, and relocated them to another area where they would be forced to continue hard labor. [36]

6. Chinese Immigrants at an Ideological Frontier

Having braved a physical frontier, Chinese immigrants in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century were forced to traverse a new ideological frontier in pursuit not of riches, but of dignity and human rights. In 1888, Congress passed the Scott Act, which prohibited Chinese residents in the US from re-entering if they left the country. In 1892, Congress voted to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act for another 10 years as part of the Geary Act, which also required Chinese in the United States to obtain proof of residency to prove that they had entered the country legally.[37] In response, Chinese immigrants launched a series of legal challenges to these laws, culminating in two unsuccessful Supreme Court cases: *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* (1889) and *Fong Yue Ting v. United States* (1893)

In *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, the petitioner, Chae, a Chinese worker, resided in San Francisco from 1875 until June 2, 1887, at which point he returned to China. The Scott Act was passed while Chae was out of the country. On his return to the US on , 1888, Chae was told that his residency permit had been canceled, his land rights abolished, and he was prohibited from entering the United States. Chae launched a legal challenge which eventually ended up before the Supreme Court. The Court in favor of the United States government and Chae was deported.[38]

In the landmark Supreme Court decision *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, a group of Chinese laborers faced deportation because they did not possess residency permits as required by the Geary Act.[39] The first petitioner in the case came to the United States in roughly 1879

intending to settle in the country permanently, and expressed no intention of returning to China. However, he did not obtain a residency permit and was arrested for violating the Act.

A second petitioner in the case, arrested on similar charges, was deported without a legal hearing.

The third petitioner applied to the United States Revenue Collector for proof of residence. But the collector refused to give him a certificate because the witnesses were Chinese (the Geary Act required that witnesses be white); He was also deported.

The petitioners lost the case, and the United States Supreme Court affirmed that sovereign states have the right to bar foreigners from their territory or to admit them only under circumstances and conditions it deems appropriate.[40]

7. Conclusion

Facing both physical and ideological frontiers, Chinese immigrants adopted a variety of methods to coordinate and negotiate through the situation in which they found themselves. There were, to be sure, some people who engaged in direct, sometimes violent resistance. However, for the most part, coolies tried to use their testimonies to fight against racial and economic prejudice. Chinese people living in the United States appealed to the values of freedom and democracy and sought to protect their rights using the US's legal system. Both direct resistance and legal resistance failed in the late 19th century and almost certainly left many Chinese immigrants feeling that their situation was hopeless. However, that was not the case. In the mid-to-late-20th century, Chinese immigrants—along with other minorities in the United States—fought and won the rights to which all Americans are entitled.

The best way to cross an ideological frontier—especially one as difficult as racism—is to resist through negotiation. Although sometimes communication does not achieve the desired result, the attempt to do so shows the other party that a group of people is determined to improve through legitimate means. Violence will only deepen the depth of the frontier and increase misunderstandings between the two sides. Mutual respect and frank cultural exchange is the best way to solve the problem.

Appendix A: Kulangsu, by Edwin Joshua Dukes

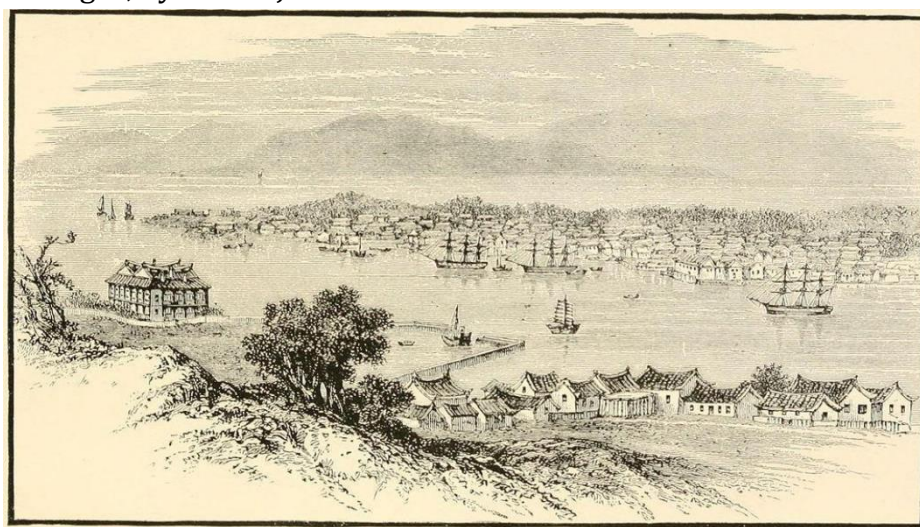


Figure 1: Edwin Dukes' 1885 Painting of Kulangsu's Bustling Port

This scene was painted by Edwin Joshua Dukes in 1885 and depicts Kulangsu, then the largest exporter of labor in China. This picture shows a bustling port and the ships pictured could well have been used as coolie transports.

Appendix B: Coolie Ship Arriving in Singapore



Figure 2: Chinese Coolie Ship Arrival in Singapore, 1900

This picture was taken in 1900 and shows a ship carrying Chinese coolies arrived in Singapore. The people in the picture are dressed very simply and their faces stoic. The two white sailors in the foreground of the picture are probably officers on the ship.

Appendix C: Anti-Chinese Riot, Denver, Colorado, 1880



Figure 3: Anti-Chinese Violence in Denver, 1880

This picture depicts anti-Chinese activity in Denver, Colorado in 1880. Local whites beat down the doors of Chinese residences, rushed in, and assaulted the Chinese residents living there.

Appendix D: Poster Calling for Boycott of Chinese and Japanese Restaurants, 1898

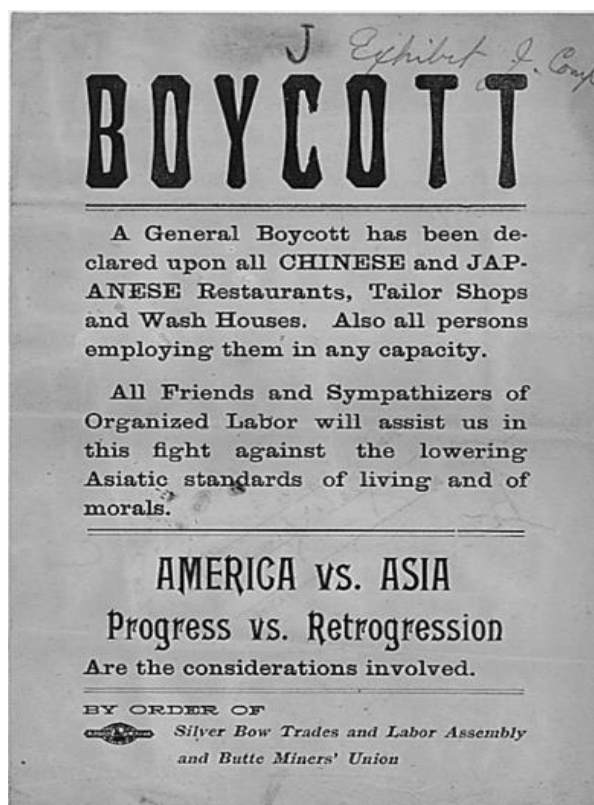


Figure 4: Union Boycott of Chinese & Japanese Restaurants

This document is a leaflet about union boycotts of Chinese and Japanese restaurants in the late nineteenth century. It is mentioned in the document that they will unite with members of the union to boycott Chinese and Japanese restaurants and those who support them

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