

Chinese Immigrants

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 prompted people from all over the world to seek their fortunes on the Pacific Coast of the United States. The discovery came during a period of political turmoil and economic hardship in China. The Chinese Empire was losing control of the nation and imperial powers from Europe were forcing their way into the country.

As a result, many Chinese left their homeland to make a living in America. They sailed to San Francisco, which the Chinese immigrants had named the "golden mountain." The number of Chinese entering the country grew to a steady rate of four to five thousand a year in the mid-1850s. Most of these immigrants settled on the west coast and began work in the gold mines.

In 1868, the United States and China negotiated the Burlingame Treaty, which gave China most-favored-nation status for trade, travel, and immigration. The Treaty, supported by the Chinese at the time, allowed an unrestricted influx of Chinese immigrants to provide cheap labor for the expanding railroads. The number of Chinese immigrants entering the United States more than doubled following the Treaty. By 1880, the 75,000 Asian immigrants living in California constituted nine percent of the state's population.

The majority of Chinese immigrants were single males who came to earn their fortune in America. They typically wanted to return to their homeland once they had earned enough money to marry and purchase land in China. Their desire to return home with the money they earned made the low pay and dangers of railroad work more acceptable to them than to most American workers. Thus, the majority of laborers working on the Central Pacific Railroad were Chinese. The Chinese and other Asian immigrant workers were often called "coolies," which in the nineteenth century referred to low or subsistence wage earners.

When the railroads were completed and little gold was left to be mined, as many as half of the Chinese who had arrived before the 1880s went back to China. Those who stayed had to compete for jobs with white workers and faced incredible hardships. Most Chinese men found themselves working as domestic servants to wealthy western women. In these positions, they had to learn how to cook, sew, clean, and do laundry; tasks not required of them in China.

Chinese men soon took advantage of the desire of most white women for someone else to take care of their laundry. As a result, many Chinese men left their roles as servants and opened laundry cleaning storefronts all across the American west. They often formed their own settlements, or "Chinatowns," wherever economic opportunities existed. Within these areas, they could socialize with other Chinese, speak their native language, and find some escape from the prejudice they faced. Since many did not intend to stay in the United States, they felt no need to assimilate into American society. Chinatowns provided these men some sense of community in a foreign environment.

However, even within their own societies, the Chinese still faced challenges. Very few Chinese women made the journey to America, and those who did were brought to the United States, San Francisco in particular, as prostitutes or domestic slaves. Girls as young as ten were bought from families in China that could not afford to pay their daughter's dowry or from orphanages, where even legitimate daughters were left by parents who did not want the burden of raising a girl. Since most Chinese men were not married and did not have families in the U.S., the barriers to assimilation remained high. There were no children to bring home knowledge of the English language and American customs from school as the children of earlier immigrant groups had done.

Circumstances for the Chinese worsened as friction over jobs escalated. In 1877, the major rail lines cut wages by 10 percent, which followed a similar cut that had been made following the Panic of 1873. The wage cut

caused railroad workers in West Virginia to walk off the job, and similar demonstrations occurred across the country all the way to San Francisco. However, the strikes failed, leaving the workers without any improvements.

The Chinese-Americans faced a new challenge in San Francisco during a meeting, known as the "Sand Lot," being held by whites in support of white railroad strikers' goals. A few of those in attendance attacked some Chinese who were passing by. Their actions were likely due to the fact that many European immigrants saw the Chinese as a convenient scapegoat for the economic problems.

This anti-Chinese movement gained momentum when Dennis Kearney, a recently naturalized Irish immigrant, founded the Workingmen's Party of California in 1877. One of the party's goals was to end Chinese immigration. Kearney stirred up resentment in his followers who now saw the Chinese as a danger to their own survival. Kearney's followers began terrorizing the Chinese in the streets, killing some Chinese immigrants and shearing the pigtailed off of others.

Kearney's Workingmen's Party continued to grow and was able to gain a number of seats at the state constitutional convention in 1878, which was held to rewrite the constitution. The group was unsuccessful in its attempts to influence the state's basic law, but the constitution did deny Chinese immigrants the right to vote and prevented them from obtaining jobs on public works projects. The following year, the party successfully elected the Mayor of San Francisco and many members of the state legislature.

By this time, the move to exclude Chinese from the U.S. had become a national issue and had garnered widespread support. The final blow to Chinese immigration came in 1882 when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Act barred nearly all immigration from China for 10 years. The only Chinese permitted to enter the U.S. after the Act was passed were those who could claim a Chinese-American parent. The Act was the second attempt at restricting Chinese immigration—Congress had first passed a bill that would have suspended Chinese immigration for 20 years, but President Chester A. Arthur vetoed that bill.

The door to Chinese immigration remained shut for many years as the Chinese Exclusion Act was occasionally renewed. In 1902, the exclusion became indefinite. The door for Chinese immigration would not reopen until 1943.