

The Chinese Exclusion Act:
A Review of the Literature

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HIST 297

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April 23, 2018

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

Abstract

The Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed into law in 1882, set a precedent for legal discrimination in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act added to an era defined by exclusion and discrimination against immigrants. *The Chinese and the Exclusion Act*, published in the *North American Review* by Joaquin Miller and Mary Roberts Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration* are two examples of early literature published following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act that focused exclusively on racism in California leading up to the law's creation. The "California Thesis" proposed by Mary Roberts Coolidge in 1909 dominated the interpretation of the law. Publications did not analyze the Exclusion Act again until the civil rights era where new analysis reshaped the perception of the Chinese Exclusion Act but was still confined to its racial motivations. During the 1900s and 2000s, literature expanded to include the different racial, social, political, and economic motivations that helped pass the legislation.

In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act became the first federal discrimination legislation signed into law that targeted a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was unanimously passed by Congress during the height of extreme prejudice against Chinese immigrants and signed into law by President Chester A. Arthur in May of 1882. The Chinese Exclusion Act was influential in shaping legislation towards immigrants from 1882 to until 1943 when it was repealed by the Magnuson Act. Though the Chinese Exclusion Act set a precedent for legal discrimination in the United States, which reverberates in present-day immigration law. Publications do not comprehensively cover the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was influenced by different racial, social, political, and economic motivations. The debate began in California where a large number of Chinese immigrants caused friction with American laborers during the 1850's gold rush. Early publications about the Chinese Exclusion Act focused exclusively on the racial influence of the law. As the law was renewed and made stronger by the Geary Act, named after California Congressman Thomas J Geary in 1892 for an undetermined amount of time, publications during this time determined whether or not the Chinese Exclusion Act continued to be a law. *The Chinese and the Exclusion Act*, published in 1901 in the *North American Review* by Joaquin Miller is the earliest publication calling for the repeal of the act. Mostly comprising of personal opinion supporting the need for the Chinese right to work in the United States because they worked for lower wages, Miller's article argue the necessity of the Chinese laborer in America, as according to Miller, the Chinese needed us and much as America needed them¹. Cincinnatus

¹ Joaquin Miller, "The Chinese and the Exclusion Act," *The North American Review* 173, no. 541 (1901): 782-89

Heine Miller, better known by his pen-name Joaquin Miller, was well known as a poet and an American frontiersman. Miller's publication, relying on anecdotal evidence and a clear bias in favor of the Chinese and painting them as victims of the wrath of the white laborers, showed how some Americans resisted exclusion of the Chinese, albeit for their labor.

A few years after Miller's opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act, Mary Roberts Coolidge began to analyze its impact with the "California Thesis." In her publication, *Chinese Immigration* in 1909, Coolidge's "California Thesis" asserts that anti-Asian sentiment originated in a California anti-Chinese movement led by workers that targeted Chinese laborers who immigrated to California during the gold rush era in the 1850s. Mary Roberts Coolidge, the first full-time professor of sociology in the United States as well as a political activist, uses data and statistics to backup her claims that white California laborers were antagonistic toward Chinese immigrants due to the perception that they would take their jobs for lower wages. Coolidge's thesis expands on and solidifies Joaquin Miller's assertion that the injustice Chinese immigrants faced from the working class white American and was the sole reason for the passing of the Exclusion Act. Her publication helped shed more insight on the factors that helped pass the law, such as the exploitation of Chinese laborers by politicians who used the sentiment against the Chinese to gain popularity². The first publication analyzing the Chinese Exclusion Act, Coolidge shows clear bias for the Chinese laborer and like Miller, portrays the Chinese as victims of white American laborers. Coolidge's work also disregards opposition to the act, such as Miller, who saw the value of Chinese immigrants as cheap labor. Coolidge chooses to focus only on Chinese immigrants in California as that is where a majority of Chinese immigrants arrived and lacks

² Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Holt and Company, 1909) 375.

analysis of Chinese immigrants in other states to back her assertion, admitting to not wanting to extend the length of her publication. Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration* remained the only extensive and prominent study of the Chinese Exclusion Act for three decades, with subsequent publications supporting Coolidge's thesis.

Elmer Sandmeyer's book *Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1939) continued where Coolidge left off. Sandmeyer's publication set out to expand on the different circumstances leading up to the passing of the act but upheld Coolidge's earlier assumptions of the anti-Chinese campaign being localized in California. Her publication, however, expands upon the social and economic motivations that caused white American workers to dislike Chinese immigrants. Her publication argues that Chinese culture and American culture was incompatible as well as arguing that cheap Chinese labor drove down the living standards for white laborers³. Sandmeyer was one of the first historians to look at the creation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. While Sandmeyer's publication had less of a bias towards Chinese immigrants, it lacked new information that Coolidge's publication did not already cover. While briefly mentioning the difference in values between the Chinese and American that contributed to the friction of both groups in society, Sandmeyer misses the opportunity to expand on this aspect that would have added to the literature. In addition, Sandmeyer's and Coolidge's publication continue to neglect the opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Publications about the Chinese Exclusion Act did not reappear again until 1960's and 1970s, publications focused on the racial and political problems the Chinese faced and refuted many points of the "California thesis". *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the*

³ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1939). 109-10.

Chinese, 1785-1882 published by Stuart Creighton Miller in 1969, looks beyond California in the gold rush era as the origin of discrimination for Chinese immigrants. Miller also asserts that Chinese discrimination occurred long before Chinese immigrants started settling in mass in California in the nineteenth century. Miller's publication argues that California laborers did not have to put much effort into convincing Americans that the "Chinese in America would make undesirable citizens"⁴ and states that California was able to utilize the national sentiment against the Chinese to pass exclusion legislation. Stuart Creighton Miller, a history professor at San Francisco State University as well as Columbia University, uses personal writings to back his claim that opposition to Chinese immigration was shaped by negative accounts of the Chinese made by laborers, travelers, and missionaries. These accounts along with the clash of cultures between the Chinese and Americans gradually shaped stereotypes about the Chinese. Racist stereotypes about the Chinese became widespread and changed the perception of the Chinese by Americans. Like Sandmeyer, Miller only scratches the surface of the cultural and social differences between the Chinese and the Americans that caused friction between the two. *The Unwelcome Immigrant* emphasizes racial factors as the biggest motivator in passing the Chinese Exclusion Act rather than social, political, or economic factors. Miller's refutation of the "California thesis" opened up different interpretations on the causes of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Publications during the 1990s and the 2000s added the racial argument of Stuart Creighton Miller together with the social, political and economic factors of Joaquin Miller, Coolidge, and Sandmeyer. *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act*

⁴ Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928).

(1998), Andrew Gyory argues that national politicians seized and manipulated the issue of Chinese exclusion in an effort to gain votes for white American laborers⁵. Gyory argues that historians like Coolidge, Sandmeyer, and Miller only identified three distinct forces behind the Chinese Exclusion Act. The three being: pressure from workers and politicians in California, racism, and support and lobbying by the national labor movement⁶. According to Gyory the first two were “important but not decisive”, while the third was “nonexistent.”⁷. Gyory asserts that national politicians moved the issue of exclusion to the forefront of national politics under the guise of helping the working man, and when the law was passed, put the blame on the working man. He argues that the competition between the Democrats and the Republicans to bring in voters drove the Republicans to give up their support for racial equality. More important for the Republicans was the use of expediency of exclusion politics to win votes from their electorate than was keeping the parties egalitarian platform, helping legitimize racism in national politics. The analysis of the opposition to the act calls back to Joaquin Miller, who emphasized the opposition groups who supported Chinese immigration. In Gyory’s research he chooses to compare the East Coast and their lack of support or opposition to the exclusion legislation with the heavy support seen in California. Andrew Gyory, a historian from University of Massachusetts, places significantly more importance on East Coast politics shaping the Chinese Exclusion Act. His East Coast argument came with two flaws: the East Coast saw significantly less Chinese immigration than California in the span of a couple years, as well as equating lack

⁵ Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). 15.

⁶ Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 1.

⁷ Idib

of interest towards exclusion legislation as non-involvement, instead of passive support. Gyory's different approach to the Chinese Exclusion Act helped propel the debate past just the racial aspects of previous historians and toward looking at completely new avenues of evaluation.

While historians like Andrew Gyory took the debate to new places, Najia Aarim-Heriot added to the racial argument of Stuart Creighton Miller together with the social, political and economic factors of Joaquin Miller, Coolidge, and Sandmeyer. While Stuart Creighton Miller accepted that racial discrimination against the Chinese occurred nationwide and generations before formal legislation was proposed, Heriot expanded the scope of discrimination for the Chinese to include other minorities. In *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82* (2003), historian Najia Aarim-Heriot argues that anti-Chinese sentiment was influenced by and mirrored anti-African American sentiment in the United States. Heriot argues that antebellum practices of discrimination in the South and in the North had a big influence on the creation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Heriot argument is based on the history of African Americans in California in conjunction with Chinese immigrants during the gold rush. African Americans in California could only take menial trade jobs not sought by white Americans, and when Chinese immigrants arrived they followed the pattern of African Americans by also taking these jobs. With jobs taken specifically by Chinese immigrants and African Americans, hostility towards both increased. In the same way Andrew Gyory argued that Republicans gave up their egalitarian stance for votes, Heriot supports the claim that both political parties used race politics to gain support from their voters. When the issue of Chinese exclusion entered politics it became "as a *racial issue* rather than an immigration issue."⁸ In 1878

⁸ Najia Aarim-Heriot *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-1882*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). 100

the economy experienced a downturn leading to American laborers losing jobs by the thousands, but Chinese immigration in California continued, focusing more hatred and discrimination on Chinese immigrants as well as more support for exclusion legislation. By 1882, Heriot argues that the debate and subsequent passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act reflected the “extent to which racial politics had regained respectability in the national political discourse.”⁹ In *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*, while Heriot connects the racial issues of African Americans to Chinese immigrants that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act, analysis of racial motivations has been an aspect that has been examined since Coolidge, Sandmeyer, and Miller. Similarly, Heriot’s publication only focuses on the racial and political motivations and brushes over the social, and economic aspects. In providing evidence, Heriot relies more on newspapers, government reports, and speeches, instead of personal sources like letters or diaries, which would give better insight on the racial motivations.

New approaches to analyze the Chinese Exclusion Act brought in Asian-American perspectives for the first time. These publications gave the perspectives of Chinese immigrants on America and the effects before and after the Chinese Exclusion Act helped reframe many arguments made about its creation. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (2007), award winning Chinese-American historian Erika Lee presents the perspectives of Chinese immigrants in the context of American history. Erika Lee, like Stuart Creighton Miller and Najia Aarim-Heriot argue that race was “the most important”¹⁰ factor in the creation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Lee expands on the effects the passing of the

⁹ Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants*, 13

¹⁰ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). 21

act made a mark on American history defined by exclusion and discrimination that affected generations of Chinese immigrants and the Chinese-American community. Lee argues that passing of the law changed the United States from being a nation of immigrants “a gatekeeping nation.”¹¹, with new restrictions and the need for legislation that marked Asians, African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans as outsiders. Expanding on Gyory and Aarim-Heriot’s assessment, Lee asserts that the Chinese Exclusion Act helped normalize American discrimination and directly influenced America’s discrimination policy. Lee argues further that the act became the model in which further immigrant legislation was based on, emphasizing the components of the act that shaped American immigration legislation was “pushed to the forefront of use and international policy”¹² after 2001. Erika Lee, a third generation Chinese-American has a clear bias towards Chinese immigrants. Lee is able to use Chinese language sources such as immigrant journals and narratives from San Francisco and from Angel Island to outline the racial discrimination Chinese immigrants faced. Arguments made are one-sided and omits narratives from states other than California, falling into the problems that Coolidge and Sandmeyer faced. These narratives give extensive evidence of both sides of the debate, detailing how some mixed Chinese people, such as John Endicott Gardener, choose to work for the Bureau of Immigration as gatekeepers. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (2007) provides a much needed look at the Chinese immigrants perspective that was severely lacking in other publications. Erika Lee is able to add more legitimacy to the claim that the Chinese Exclusion Act was racially motivated.

¹¹ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 6

¹² Lee, *At America's Gates*, 253

With Erika Lee examining the different racial contributions to the passing of Chinese Exclusion Act and its effects, nearly a decade later Lon Kurashige started looking toward anti-Asian discrimination against other Asians groups the opposition groups to the exclusionists. In the 2016 publication, *Two Faces of Exclusion: The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States*, historian Lon Kurashige looks at the broader anti-Asian politics to focus on the battle between exclusionists and egalitarians that delayed the passing of exclusion legislation until 1882, thirty years after the Chinese arrived in California. The exclusionists were the group supporting the Chinese exclusion act while the egalitarians were those who opposed the Chinese exclusion act and anti-Asian racism. Kurashige asserts that historians such as Coolidge, Stuart Miller, Aarim-Heriot that only focused on the exclusionist side framed the American racial consensus as that of “emphasizing discrimination, abuse, indifference, and the compromising of the democratic ideals”¹³. While the perspective of the egalitarians who sought to keep good relations with the Chinese for trade and economic purposes, their opposition to exclusionism mostly being swept under the rug of history. Kurashige’s egalitarian argument calls back to people like Joaquin Miller, who saw the value of the Chinese as a labor force in America. Kurashige’s analysis of both sides of the debate sheds more light on the factors that played into it, such as immigration and labor “race relations, foreign relations, and national security”¹⁴. Lon Kurashige, a Japanese-American historian, has a bias towards Japanese immigrants and focuses his publication on both Chinese immigrants and Japanese immigrants. Kurashige supports Gyory’s claim that anti-Asian exclusion shaped political parties platforms to ignore egalitarian

¹³ Lon Kurashige, *Two Faces of Exclusion: The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). 6

¹⁴ Lon Kurashige, *Two Faces of Exclusion: The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). 228

perspectives. Kurashige looks at the influence of the rivalry between the West and the East. The West, who primarily sided with exclusionists; and the East, who supported trade with China and therefore were egalitarians. Kurashige expands political arguments to include the rivalry between the West and the East, suggesting that exclusion votes in the West may have not reflected Asian racism as much as hatred toward the East as they would have benefitted from Chinese trade. Kurashige's publication further expands the debate on the Chinese Exclusion Act to include perspectives of opposition groups as well as Japanese-American immigrants.

While there has been numerous publications analyzing the Chinese Exclusion Act, no publication has been able to create a irrefutable thesis after the "California Thesis". Publications have tried to find the reason for the exclusion act but they can not come to a consensus. The Chinese Exclusion Act was influenced by different racial, social, political, and economic motivations that probably can not be covered in one publication. The relevance of the Chinese Exclusion Act on American immigration policy fuel the continued debate on the reason for its passing, and how to prevent similar legislation.

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The Chinese Exclusion Act was the result of a combination of envy of Chinese labor, coupled with a misguided notion of white racial superiority. If you're wondering why the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed, then your search ends right here! Historyplex tells you what was the purpose of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, along with several facts about its background, causes, effects, and significance.Â Historyplex tells you what was the purpose of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, along with several facts about its background, causes, effects, and significance. Home / Uncategorized / Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: Causes and Effects. Chinese Exclusion Act. Unknown to most Canadian citizens, the Canadian government has a history of racial discrimination against Chinese immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Chinese Immigration Irish Celtic Irish Men Irish American American History Irish Famine Light Blue Eyes Propaganda Art Irish Eyes Are Smiling Political Satire. Worst insults and racial slurs against the Irish.Â The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was repealed with the signing of the Magnuson Act on this day, Dec. 17, in 1943. Political Satire Political Cartoons Political Images Us History American History History Posters Modern History Family History Black History. 1921 - Emergency Quota Act.