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The Chinese Exclusion Act: Why It Matters Today

By Grace Dunigan, Class of 2019

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first American policy restricting immigration. As can be seen by the appropriate title of the act, the policy restricted Chinese immigration to the United States. In the late 1800's, the United States was facing a time of inevitable economic downturn after the boom of the California Gold Rush from 1848-1855. People were having a hard time finding jobs that would pay well enough to support their families. Native-born American citizens knew the current labor laws and what was considered acceptable pay. Chinese immigrants, however, did not. Most Chinese immigrants at the time were working to support themselves and send the rest of their earnings back home to China. The Chinese were willing to work longer hours for less pay, making them more attractive to employers. This did not sit well with American citizens, who saw the Chinese as stealing their jobs. The solution created was the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, which halted all Chinese immigration to the United States. The restriction on Chinese immigration, done via the

Chinese Exclusion Act, was a dark time in American immigration policy shaped by political pressures very similar to what we are experiencing today.

After the boom of the California Gold Rush, lasting a little over five years, the United States was in a period of economic downturn. While the economy was still doing considerably well for the time, the bubble surrounding gold had burst, leaving many people out of work. Americans were working to support a family, but also looking to get the most money out of their labor. As native-born Americans, they knew the labor laws and rights that were given to them. They also suffered no prejudice as accepted members of society and simply required higher wages for manual labor. The Chinese immigrants were often men working to support themselves and send the rest of their money back home to China. The Chinese immigrants were uninformed of these laws and would work for lower wages and longer hours. They also suffered societal prejudice, since the Chinese appeared different than their American counterparts. To employers, particularly the railroad companies, the Chinese workers were more attractive in a business sense, since they were willing to work for less money and for longer hours. Therefore, Chinese immigrants began getting hired over Americans. This was unacceptable to many Americans, who began accusing the Chinese workers of stealing their jobs.

Western states with high immigrant populations, mainly California, began pressing Congress to do something about immigration. The public demonized Chinese immigrants in particular. Like most immigration populations, the Chinese settled in their own towns, known

as “Chinatowns.” These, were cast as places where Chinese men went to gamble, smoke opium, and engage in prostitution. Basically, these Chinese settlements were considered the moral slums of America at the time. While this was not true, it was the perception of most of America. Popular newspapers like *The Chronicle* called the Chinese workers “heathens” and “cruel murderers” (Kil 2012). This distaste for the Chinese only grew over time, and more pressure from the West was put on Congress to do something about the increasing rates of immigration. Meanwhile, between the 1850’s-70’s, the Californian government passed a series of laws aimed at Chinese immigrants, ranging from introducing requirements for special licenses for Chinese businesses, to preventing naturalization (Office of the Historian). The federal government did not adopt these laws due to the fact that an anti-immigration act would violate the Burlingame-Seward Treaty of 1868 with China (Office of the Historian). Chinese immigration was still permitted nationally, but restricted in California. By 1879, immigration reformists had succeeded in getting restrictive policy before Congress. In 1879, the number of Chinese was limited to fifteen per vessel, in attempts to lessen the immigrant flow. In 1880, a new treaty was negotiated with China, known as the Angell Treaty, which permitted the United States to restrict, but not completely prohibit, Chinese immigration (Office of the Historian).

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which in accordance with the Angell Treaty, did not completely restrict immigration. Chinese laborers, whether skilled or unskilled, were excluded for ten years. and the Act

did not suspend the immigration of scholars, diplomats, or merchants. The Act also required every Chinese person traveling in or out of the country to carry a certificate identifying his or her status as a laborer, scholar, diplomat, or merchant (Office of the Historian). This was a victory for the West, which had been pushing for this type of law for decades. In 1892, Congress voted to renew the Chinese Exclusion Act for ten more years in the form of the Geary Act. The Geary Act added responsibilities to the Chinese Immigrants, requiring that they obtain certificates of residence (Immigration to the United States). Those that did not have these certificates faced deportation. In 1902, the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended indefinitely and remained in place until 1943 when it was repealed due to China being an ally of the United States in World War II.

The Chinese Exclusion Act had many different effects on American immigration and culture. Existing Chinese immigrants were ridiculed and were the subjects of racial discrimination all across the country, most notably along the West Coast. Chinese immigrants found ways around the Exclusion Act in the form of “paper” sons and daughters. Paper sons and daughters were immigrants who would attempt to enter America by passing as the son or daughter of a current United States resident (Yesley 2015). By claiming their family was already living in the United States, immigrants were able to enter the country. Angel Island became a prominent immigration station after the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Located on the San Francisco Bay, this facility operated as the main immigrant processing station on the West Coast. Angel

Island not only served as an immigrant-processing site, but also a location where Chinese people were subject to harsh interrogations, invasive medical testing, and lengthy detention (Yelsey 2015). It was at Angel Island where Chinese immigrant's fates would be decided. Inspectors would question immigrants for hours, cross checking their answers against previous ones given by relatives and fellow asylum seekers (Yelsey 2015). If the inspector did not deem the answers good enough, the immigrant would not be permitted entry. However, the Chinese did not go silently. They constantly fought for the right to become equal citizens through political lobbying and community organizing (Yelsey 2015). In 1943, due to the terror of war and complicated alliances, the Chinese were allowed to immigrate to the United States once again. This was because the Chinese and Americans were allies during the Second World War. Unfortunately though, the racial discrimination did not stop and is still an issue today.

We can see similar themes in the Chinese Exclusion Act in our own immigration policy today. Even after one hundred and thirty five years, we still use the same ideas when trying to deal with immigration issues and ask the same questions about what should be done. The implementation of President Trump's travel ban on seven Muslim majority countries shows that the same ideas of exclusion still persist (Wang 2015). If we can simply keep a group of people perceived as undesirable out of our country, we will be able to avoid co-existing with that group. Additionally, we are currently seeing accusations of Hispanic immigrants stealing jobs from Americans. This is

a popular theory out West, where many immigrants come illegally through Mexico. This is the very same thing that happened to the Chinese in the early 1880's, only now we are targeting Hispanic immigrants. We again see the theme of exclusion with the proposed "wall" to cut off undesirable immigration to the United States through the boarder of Mexico. However, just like the Chinese used "paper" sons and daughters, Mexican immigrants will find a way through even the highest and strongest of walls. America, in many countries around the world, is still seen as the land of opportunity for many reasons. Whether immigrants from the Middle East are seeking religious freedom, or Japanese workers are seeking better business opportunities, America is seen as a desirable country with boundless opportunities. Regardless of the immigration policy passed, people are going to find their way onto our land. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first major act restricting immigration to America, and it was based on one nationality. We singled out the Chinese as the sole source of economic trouble, despite the fact that they were building the railroads later travelled on by millions. For one hundred and thirty five years, Americans have been having the same political pressures and arguments about what to do with immigration and implementing the same types of policies to combat their problems.

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