

**A Unifying Enemy: Anti-Chinese Racism and White Identity in the West, 1850-1900**

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The common concept of racial injustice on the American West Coast invokes the genocide of Native Americans to clear space for white society. What is often untold was the persecution of another racialized enemy of white America: Chinese immigrants. From the gold rush to the turn of the century, the newly formed Western states of California, Oregon, and Washington persecuted Chinese Americans through violence and legal action. In new communities of disparate ethnic origins, defining an inferior and threatening ‘other’ allowed Europeans to establish a cohesive, superior identity. The Chinese as a racial ‘enemy’ were used to bind together a new white identity in the emerging societies of the West.

Contemporary racist thought saw the development of immutable biological ‘races’ with whites being superior and non-whites being biologically inferior. In this biological view of race, the Chinese were conceived of as inherently and permanently alien, inferior, and threatening.<sup>1</sup> White Americans viewed the Chinese as completely alien and impossible to assimilate in a way that other races were not. The 1893 cartoon *Be Just – Even to John Chinaman* illustrates this view.<sup>2</sup> In the cartoon, “Miss Columbia” (the personification of the United States) instructs a classroom of ethnic caricatures, who include a variety of immigrant groups as well as Black and Native Americans. The Chinese caricature, however, is being ushered out of the classroom. This implies that the Chinese cannot be ‘taught to be American’ in the same way as other groups. This reflects the racialized view of the Chinese as ‘alien’ in the United States: the “polar opposite to ‘Americans,’” impossible to assimilate.<sup>3</sup>

Chinese immigrants in the West, alongside Black and Native Americans, were a trifecta of ‘racial enemies’ who had to be excluded from new white societies in the West. The

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<sup>1</sup> Erika Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 38.

<sup>2</sup> Judge Magazine, *Be Just - Even to John Chinaman*, 1893, 1893, Granger Academic, <https://www.grangeracademic.com/results.asp?inline=true&image=0008639&wwwflag=4&itemx=3&screenwidth=1280>.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 38.

persecution and purging of the Chinese in the West happened in parallel with anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence and legislation. During the Gold Rush in the 1840s and 50s, state and vigilante militias violently purged the West of both its Indigenous peoples and Chinese immigrant miners to clear the land for uncontested white settlement and use.<sup>4</sup> As California joined the Union as a non-slave state in 1850, white Californians lobbied to defend “free labour” – that is, to ensure white workers would not face the ‘indignity’ of competition from enslaved Black Americans or potentially indentured Chinese workers, labelled as “coolies.”<sup>5</sup> In the 1850s and 60s, southern ‘Black Code’ legislation denying intermarriage, judicial protection, and voting rights to minorities trickled into the West.<sup>6</sup> Legislation targeted the Chinese with special taxes, “cubic air” ordinances limiting the number of Chinese inhabiting one room, and municipal ordinances banning laundries—businesses commonly operated by Chinese Americans—built of wood. Chinese, Black and Native Americans were together viewed as ‘enemies’ of developing white society in the West and were subject to overlapping persecution.

Unlike Black or Native Americans, who were present in the United States from the beginning and could not be fully ousted, Chinese ‘aliens’ were perceived as an invading threat who could and must be removed from the country. The press stoked public hysteria over the “Yellow Peril”: an imminent tsunami of “depraved opium smoking, alien looking, diseased coolies” flooding the West.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, it was predicted that with the end of railroad

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 36–40, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=TG6pfcFWVfsC>.

<sup>5</sup> Pfaelzer, 43; Pfaelzer, 49; “Coolie,” in *Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary*, 4 January 2023, Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230104142907/https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coolie>.

<sup>6</sup> Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Kristofer Allerfeldt, “Race and Restriction: Anti-Asian Immigration Pressures in the Pacific North-West of America during the Progressive Era, 1885–1924,” *History* 88, no. 1 (289) (1 January 2003): 59.

construction that employed huge numbers of Chinese workers, Chinese workers would flock to white towns and take white jobs. This was simply not the case.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1870s, politicians capitalized on anti-Chinese fears as a non-partisan issue to swing votes in an era of close elections.<sup>9</sup> The Western labour movement, which was explicitly anti-Chinese from its origin in white miners' unions during the Gold Rush, demanded and carried out anti-Chinese legislation and violence from the 1850s onwards.<sup>10</sup> Labour found its way into politics through the Workingmen's Party, founded in 1877. Within a year of its founding, the party controlled more seats in California's legislature than the Democrats. They rewrote the state's constitution to deny voting rights to Chinese citizens.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the 1870s, a calculated political attempt was made to convince the national public of the threat of 'invasion' and its consequences. For example, California had a State Senate Committee in 1876 tasked with investigating the "social, moral, and political effects" of Chinese immigration, where panicked testimonies portrayed it as an "evil, unarmed invasion."<sup>12</sup> Politicians in the West demanded that the 'invasion' of the Chinese be halted to protect white society.

Soon, the United States did just that. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented Chinese immigration to the United States for ten years, and was renewed by Congress in 1892, 1902, and 1904 with decreasing opposition each time.<sup>13</sup> It was the first federal law to restrict the immigration of a specific ethnic group.<sup>14</sup> The forces that brought the Act into being have been in historical debate for over a century. The tentative modern consensus is in line with the work of

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<sup>8</sup> Allerfeldt, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 15, <https://books.google.com/books?id=x8OggvKjZSgC>.

<sup>10</sup> Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> S.S. Pincetl, *Transforming California: A Political History of Land Use and Development*, Political History of Land Use and Development (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 23, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=bu7gSKsb0W4C>.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, "The Chinese Exclusion Example," 36.

<sup>13</sup> Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gyory, 1.

Andrew Gyory.<sup>15</sup> In *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (1998), Gyory argues that the motivating pressure behind the federal enactment was national politicians taking advantage of anti-Chinese sentiment to garner votes in an era of close elections, while claiming that white workers had been asking for Chinese exclusion for a long time and stood to benefit from it.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the cause behind the Act, its passing emboldened Western communities to violently purge themselves of their remaining Chinese populations.

By defining and expelling the Chinese as ‘other,’ communities and organizations of disparate European immigrants were able to forge a collective white identity in the West. As argued by Erika Lee, whiteness in the West deflected most racialized anti-immigrant sentiment away from southern and eastern European immigrants.<sup>17</sup> The people in most direct competition with the Chinese were other recently immigrated unskilled workers. A large part of the Western labour movement up until the 1880s was composed of these foreign-born workers, whose insecurity made them potentially more receptive to the racist crusade of their labour leaders to situate themselves with the white majority.<sup>18</sup>

From the 1870s to the 1890s, the trade-union movement rallied around the ‘anti-Coolie’ cause. The Knights of Labor was a powerful union of the era. They were primarily composed of immigrant workers, and radically included Black workers, but the Knights specifically excluded the Chinese from their ranks. The labour movement, through the Knights of Labour and the associated Workingmen’s Party, were major players in the explosion of anti-Chinese violence in the West following the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. White workers crusaded to expel the

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<sup>15</sup> Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 38; Allerfeldt, “Race and Restriction,” 54.

<sup>16</sup> Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 9–16; Gyory, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 40.

<sup>18</sup> Allerfeldt, “Race and Restriction,” 60.

“coolies” from California, Oregon, and Washington State in the 1880s and 90s.<sup>19</sup> However, workers were not the only agitators of violence in this period of ‘expulsion.’

Purges of the Chinese from the West were led by people in power, from labour leaders to mayors to wealthy businessmen, willing to forfeit low-paid Chinese labour “to mark their common whiteness” and create a cohesive identity in the developing West.<sup>20</sup> For example, in Washington in 1885, the German-born mayor of Tacoma led a mob that expelled seven hundred of the town’s nine hundred Chinese residents.<sup>21</sup> At least three hundred lynchings took place in California between 1850 and 1900, approximately two hundred of which were of Asian people.<sup>22</sup> The violent Chinese ‘expulsion’ from the West from the Gold Rush to the turn of the century cannot be done justice in brief. The brutality that occurred was an ethnic cleansing. Jean Pfaelzer states:

Surely the term expulsion doesn’t fully represent the rage and violence of these purges. What occurred...was ethnic cleansing. The Chinese called the roundups in the Pacific Northwest *pai hua* — the Driven Out.<sup>23</sup>

White society in the western states of California, Oregon, and Washington bubbled up from disparate groups of European origin. The racialized Chinese ‘enemy,’ perceived as inherently opposite to American, provided the glue for these splintered ethnicities to fuse into a cohesive, superior white identity. This collective identity of ‘American’ versus ‘alien’ facilitated cooperation between every level of Western society in creating, and responding to, a common ‘threat.’ The foundation of identity in the American West is anti-Chinese racism.

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<sup>19</sup> Allerfeldt, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Allerfeldt, “Race and Restriction,” 57.

<sup>22</sup> Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Pfaelzer, 24.

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