

## THE ROLE OF CHINA IN US HISTORY

# “The Chinese Question”—Unresolved and Ongoing for Americans

by John Kuo Wei Tchen



*Chinese women and children arriving at Angel Island, San Francisco, California (California Department of Parks and Recreation)*

In 1882, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act—the nation’s first race-based immigration law that was not effectively repealed until 1965–1968. The act exempted Chinese merchants, diplomats, scholars, and students, but prohibited Chinese already living in the US from gaining citizenship. The law claimed one’s race as being all-determining, indeed more significant than one’s nationality. It ruled a British citizen of Chinese origin, for example, as *de facto* excluded on the basis of racial classification. The act was followed by the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act, extending exclusion to a huge global population.

The US Chinese Exclusion Act paved the way for a comprehensive legal framework that established numerical limits on immigration and played out a global racial hierarchy that favored the admission of certain peoples over others. Following the collapse of Reconstruction and the implementation of Jim Crow policies, the political culture that excluded Asians from entering the US and becoming American was refined to favor “Teutonic” and “Nordic” Europeans and dramatically reduce “inferior” European “races” in the Emergency Immigration Quota Act of 1921, made permanent in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. The eugenics theory of the era maintained Nordic “race suicide” could be averted if eastern and southern European immigrants were excluded from further entry. It was believed the eastern and southern Europeans were racially, innately inferior, and if intermingled they threatened to cause racial degeneration.[1] It was these slippery documented/undocumented, American/foreign, citizen/alien cultural-political frameworks that shaped the formation of US modernity, impacting immigration practices and policies, foreign relations and wars, and national identity and belonging.[2]

On June 18, 2012, Congress passed a resolution expressing “regret” for its 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first such statement in the 130 years since the act’s passing. This effort was led by Congresswoman Judy Chu and was organized by a coalition of civil rights organizations. Outside of select media outlets, few Americans took note, indeed few Americans actually have known about and understood this landmark

immigration law that systematically shaped who could become and “count” as an American, and kept Asian immigrants from the US, and still impacts US-Asia relations to this day. What accounts for this American blind spot? this systemic not knowing?

## 1. THE CHINESE EXCLUSION SYSTEM & FOREIGN POLICY

Foremost among new studies is *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980, expanded 2014). *Island* is the work of pioneering historian Him Mark Lai, librarian turned academic Judy Yung, and poet and playwright Genny Lim, who collaborated to document, translate, and contextualize the Chinese-language poems carved into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Detention Center. This community-based, public-history study effectively established a hitherto unacknowledged archive of the migrant experience and agency.[3] The research and oral histories of *Island* also underscore the foundational role community-based scholars have played in the new critical scholarship.

Thirty years after the first edition of *Island*, Washington lawyer Martin B. Gold’s detailing of the various proposed Chinese Exclusion laws, vetoed and passed, became part of the lobbying effort for a congressional apology.[4] In between these two publications have been scores of Chinese Exclusion Act-related studies. Notably, in *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (2003) Erika Lee presents grounded historical scholarship reframed from the viewpoint of migrants’ lives and experience, written in accessible language for communities and the larger public.

In the new scholarship, we gain a sense of how the 1882 act—a law that was nearly impossible to enforce and manage—was but the beginning of a new phase in US national identity and anxiety. We witness the establishment of US-Canadian/Mexican border control without sufficient budgets and systems in place. Indeed, we see a forever-strapped system incapable of fulfilling the paranoid fantasy of absolute control over the national boundaries. It has always been an impossible task to make the system work, including the issuing and maintenance of ID certificates; the management of trans-regional national surveillance files, border patrols, and a never-sufficient network of detention centers; the constant circulation of correspondence; and the overall administration of the immigration exclusion system.[5]

How might the prism of the Chinese Exclusion Act help us better understand US and global histories?[6] More concretely, the arc of Anglo-American “manifest destiny” extending ever westward into the Pacific with China in its sights provides a larger context of not only US immigration-naturalization policies, but arguably more significantly, US expansionist plans and policies linking the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—defining what is often called “the American Century.” The US desire/repulsion for Chinese goods, ideas, and people constantly compromises our twenty-first-century realities and possibilities and brings us back to the unresolved issue of “The Chinese Question.”[7]

This new scholarship is helping us understand the Chinese Exclusion system and how this system of surveillance has developed and morphed into the post-9/11 establishment of the US Department of Homeland Security. Rather than understand the Exclusion Act as strictly an effort to control the borders, the new scholarship interlinks domestic civil society issues with foreign relations within the longer arc of US history. From 1941 onwards, the US has built up hundreds of military bases around the world, forming an “archipelago of empire,” claiming each region of the globe as protecting US national self-interests.[8]

## 2. MIGRANT AGENCY & CHINATOWNS

Despite the exclusion laws, the anti-Chinese violence, the segregation, Chinese migrants have sought to claim the promise of America. This claiming happened in a variety of ways. In New York City, the thousands of hand laundry workers, an occupation niche created by anti-Chinese racism, built Chinatown. In *To Save China, To Save Ourselves* (1995), Renqiu Yu documents the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA), founded in 1933 in reaction to proposed New York City legislation carefully crafted to target Chinese laundries.[9] Recognizing that Chinese immigrants were ineligible for naturalization (until 1943), the proposed law required that laundries be owned by American citizens—an attempt to severely curtail the Chinese laundries that made up 40 percent of the city’s 15,000 laundries. In preventing the law from passing in New York City, the CHLA protected the survival of otherwise excluded and segregated Chinese men, and, after repeal of the exclusion laws, their families. Also, many laundry workers were able to claim US citizenship as “paper sons,” saying their immigration records were destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Tong Pok Chin’s memoir *Paper Son: One Man’s Story* (2000) is an especially powerful narrative about a Brooklyn-based laundryman, poet, and father who in the very act of conveying his stories in print rose above racism and restriction.

In her close study of the Chinese Exclusion Act files, Heather Lee has documented how the structure of the Chinese Exclusion Act led to the rise of Chinese restaurants in communities across the US. Because of the class loophole that exempted merchants, an elaborate partnership system of rotating restaurateurs qualified migrants for admittance.[10] This largely unrecognized history represents a strategy that both facilitated the circumvention of discriminatory immigration laws and enabled Chinese participation in small business networks that defied shut national borders. Chinatown communities also resisted exclusion and segregation by creating zones of prominent presence in which making a living and leading a good life were possible and still mattered.

Chinese migrants used the American legal system to challenge the American legal system. In case after case on the municipal, state, and federal levels, humble Chinese mounted strong opposition to “laws harsh as tigers.” The Wong Kim Ark case, confirming the right of an American-born baby of immigrants to be an American citizen, is still cited in Fourteenth Amendment cases.[11]

### 3. REPEAL & RECKONING

In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was formally repealed. For the United States, allied with China in the fight against Japanese imperial aggression, it became an embarrassing and inconsistent foreign policy to exclude Chinese in immigration law. Yet this repeal meant very little on a practical level. The admission quota for Chinese became 105 persons a year—defaulting to the 1924 eugenics-defined numbers. The Cold War further compounded fears that the “yellow peril” would become a “red peril” from both the “Asiatic” communist states of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. It was not until the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act—a part of President Johnson’s Great Society agenda against the backdrop of the civil rights movement—that the eugenics-defined racial quotas were dismantled. However, the Immigration Act of 1990 codified the “skilled” and class-linked loophole category of “nonimmigrant visas.” Migrants of this era, bringing with them a great deal of educational, financial, and cultural capital, are feeding into myths of Chinese (and Asian Americans) being a “model minority.”[12]

How might we as a nation begin to reckon with the various meanings of the Chinese Exclusion Act? This is the core question raised by the Museum of Chinese in America’s exhibit *Memory Prints: The Story World of Phillip Chen*. Born and raised in Chicago, Chen, a printmaker, was the son and grandson of excluded Chinese who figured out ways to enter the US and survive in the Exclusion Act era. Chen’s gorgeous relief prints exemplify, individually and collectively, the artist’s personal and familial American

historical past. In a layered, powerful, and historically engaged series of schematic images, Chen works through his experiences emotionally and intellectually.[13] These visual prints, like the historical fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston and Fae Myenne Ng, exemplify what Marianne Hirsch describes as the creative intervention of intergenerational postmemory.[14]

Engaged artists, writers, performers, historians, and teachers create spaces in which the work of “those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth” and shaped by traumatic events that have been “neither understood nor received,” can be made manifest, examined, felt, and finally discussed in public.[15] What literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the challenges of producing scholarship as a “reparative critique” has been discussed by a range of scholars dealing with questions of intergroup conflict, historical recognition, and projects of reconciliation.[16]

Can US civil society put aside stereotypes and misunderstandings and begin reckoning with an ongoing history of othering? Rather than the Chinese Exclusion Act being understood as simply a regrettable footnote of the past, it can become a valuable reminder to live up to values of social justice.

What was formulated in the 1870s as “The Chinese Question” still reverberates in the halls of Congress during cycles of electoral campaigns and in the commercial and political culture of the nation. In a moment when the freedoms of democratic republics are being tested, an informed, historically enriched K–12 curriculum is fundamental so public education can prepare the US for the global challenges ahead.

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[1] Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1998); and especially N. Ordoover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Eugenics* (2003).

[2] See John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (1999); and Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2005).

[3] On the use of “migrant” over emigrant or immigrant, see Donna Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86:3 (December 1999).

[4] Martin B. Gold, *Forbidden Citizens: Chinese Exclusion and the U.S. Congress, A Legislative History* (2012).

[5] On the ID system, see John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (1999).

[6] Among such studies are: Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (1985); Hunt, *Arc of Empire: America’s Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (2012); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination* (2003); and forthcoming monographs on Cold War geopolitics and Chinese Americans by Mary Ting Yi Lui (Yale University) and Madeline Y. Hsu (University of Texas at Austin).

[7] New scholarship bears out William A. Williams’s historical arguments. Also see Giovanni Arrighi’s trilogy on “the long Twentieth Century.” The last of Arrighi’s series analyzes the rise of China’s economic power in *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (2008).

[8] Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (2009) provides

an overview of the US “manifest destiny” expansion “facing west” and domination of the Pacific and East Asia.

[9] Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (1992).

[10] Heather Lee, “A Life Cooking for Others: The Work and Migration Experiences of a Chinese Restaurant Worker in New York City, 1920–1946,” in *Eating Asian America*, edited by Robert Ji-Song Ku et al. (2013).

[11] See Charles McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth Century America* (1994), and Lucy E. Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law* (1995).

[12] Rosalind Chow and Joe Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (2008).

[13] For example, see Chen’s discussion of *My Father and Dillinger*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l1eE0oAFg>.

[14] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012).

[15] John Kuo Wei Tchen, “The Story World of Phillip Chen,” *Memory Prints* exhibit pamphlet, MOCA, September 25, 2014–March 1, 2015.

[16] Eric Yamamoto, *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America* (2000), and Yamamoto and Susan K. Serrano, “Reparations Theory and Practice Then and Now: Mau Mau Redress Litigation and the British High Court,” *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* (2014). For recent discussions of Jewish-Nazi Holocaust redress questions, see Nahshon Perez, *Freedom from Past Injustices* (2012), and Richard Vernon, *Historical Redress: Must We Pay for the Past?* (2013).

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