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A Study of Racial Discrimination against Chinese Immigrants in America

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I. Introduction

In August, 2011, I spent a month in Bay Area, California. During the first few days, I stayed at my aunt’s place in Marine County, which is separated by a narrow strait from downtown San Francisco. To see the panoramic view of Bay Area, I took a ferry to Angel Island, which is located between San Francisco and Marine County, and that was when I first encountered the fascinating history of Chinese Americans. I visited the Angel Island immigration station which was regarded as “The Ellis Island of the West” or “The Pacific Gateway of America.” On the slope descending toward the coast stands an old-fashioned building containing a spacious and empty room whose windows grated and locked. Studying the illustrative boards on every historical spot, I found out it was where the immigrants were imprisoned until their identities were confirmed. I also saw some Chinese-written poems carved into the wall. These poems recorded their miserable situation during detention and the anxiety for admissions into the country. Chinese immigrants, assumed “guilty” by the federal law, were imprisoned for up to a few years. Compared to the White, who only spent one or two night on the island, Chinese were obviously treated differently. Why should the Chinese be confined under such a discriminatory regime? Why did a stark inequality take place in a country founded with a promise of equality to all human? Why was there discrimination in the first place? I went to the library for answers to these questions. I wish to present my findings to you in this paper which mainly concerns the history of Chinese Americans from mid-19th to mid-20th century and the analysis of discrimination at that time. Also, the stories of Chinese American depicted here took place mainly in California, U.S., in spite of the wide spread of Chinese around the world during that time. The terms “Whites” and “Westerners” are both used in the thesis to refer to Europeans or people whose skin color is white.

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A. Background

The immigration has been the makers of the U.S. After the Declaration of Independence had been given birth, the country was always regarded as a land of opportunities for immigrants from around the world to commence the new and escape the old. The country embraced those in pursuit of a dream, including Chinese, who escaped any kind of hazards possible in their hometowns. People from province of Guangdong made up the most migratory population from China since the city of Canton, the only port open to trade, had been in contact with the Europeans for long.

*The Gold Rush

As early as 1850’s when the Gold Rush of California emerged, Chinese had set foot on the land of California. Chinese were among the gold seekers from all over the world drawn to the word of gold, but Chinese were exclusively discriminated. An Argentinean miner put down the following words in his diary:

“All day long I see the stupid faces of these men who are so civilized and refined in the arts and so brutish in their customs and habits.” (Jean, 2007)

However, Chinese were really skillful at mining techniques. They introduced a device called the Chinese waterwheel to brought gold out of riverbeds after other miners had given up. (Hoobler, 1998) Their success was resented by other miners.

In 1850, the California Legislature passed a law taxing all Asian miners 20 dollars a month. Furthermore, conventions of white miners set deadline for Chinese to leave the mines. Those who insisted on staying eventually suffered the destruction of their camps, robberies and even murders. (3)

*After the Gold Rush

After 1860, most Chinese were kicked out of the mines and transformed their career paths to agriculture, domestic service, railway construction, and manufacturing. They were hired again for jobs that were believed to be too dirty, dangerous, or degrading for the Whites. They had no choice to take whatever job offered because they bore the responsibility to raise a large household back in China. The wages they could get may have been the lowest in America but quite handsome in China.

*Typical Industries Chinese Were Involved In


1. Railroad Construction

After the Mexican-American War, California became a part of the United States. But not until the completion of Transcontinental Railroad was California actually united with the U.S. Transportation helped build up California’s political stature and economic cooperation with other eastern states. However, it was Chinese that broke through the Rocky Mountain. Between 1863 and 1869, Chinese, though physically small and slight, exerted all their physical and spiritual strength overcoming the most dangerous part of the construction. Their speed, skill and bravery led to the conclusion made by a railroad manager,

“I do not see how we could have done the work … without them.” (4) (Hoobler, 1998)

2. Fishery Industry

In 1860’s, there were already diligent Chinese living on fishery fortune brought by the cold Pacific currents. They used traditional methods from their hometown and caught large quantities of sardine, herring and sharks. (5) Their boats, as described by a visitor to one such village:

“The boats were little, flat-bottomed dories, square at the stern, sharp at the bow, about 15 feet long and strongly built.” (6)

We can easily link their vessels to the ancient oriental-style boats in beautiful Chinese paintings. But things didn’t go as romantic when the white fishermen urged the officials to impose tax on Chinese. As a result, the Chinese fishery industry declined and was mostly replaced by Italians.

3. Agriculture

Modern California has been the most important fruit supplier in the world, but the stories behind was the contribution of Chinese. Early when there was nothing but wilderness in California, Chinese reclaimed the land. They constructed an intricate irrigation system and turned marshland in California’s Central Valley into some of the most productive farmland. (7) (Erika & Judy, 2010) Since most of the early Chinese immigrants were from farming areas in Guangdong Province in China, they held better farming skills than the Whites. However, few of them were able to become independent farmers because most were prevented from owning land by local laws. (8) In 1870, The Sidewalk Ordinance was passed to ban people from walking on the sidewalks while using poles to carry goods. Since only Chinese vegetable peddlers used poles to carry their commodities, this ordinance was in an obvious attempt to shot Chinese down on the streets. (9) (Huping, 2010)

4. Laundry
Laundry, not requiring much capital to open up, was an ideal business for newly settled immigrants. In addition, it was lucrative in the time of Gold Rush with the absence of women for white immigrants from eastern America. While laundries provided the Chinese with a stable source of income, their daily operations were rather tiring. They often worked for 14 to 16 hours a day in dark and humid conditions and made a profit only because they charged much less than their white competitors. (Huping, 2010) Most work was done by hands, and all laundry loaded up in a wooden trunk were delivered by human workforce. However, their success, gained through hard work and low wages, soon fueled jealousy and racism. In 1879, Laundry Ordinance was passed to rule that anyone who carried laundry without using wagons drawn by horses would have to pay a high license fee. (11) Chinese, again, were treated unjustly.

Nevertheless, the fact that Chinese immigrants were characterized as industriousness was generally admitted. To aid their desperate families back home, they had no choice but to work harder. No matter what job they took, how hard they worked, and how much obstacles they faced, to feed the family an ocean apart was their top priority.

*Violence against Chinese*

Without citizenship, Chinese could not vote, own land, testify in court against the Whites and determine their future in this country, even though they paid taxes and made contributions to the growth of economy. The fact that Chinese were barely protected by laws made them easy targets for racists. During an economic depression in California in 1870’s, the slogan “The Chinese Must Go” broke out and a series of harassments, attacks and murders led by racists in every Chinatown followed. In 1871, an anti-Chinese riot led to the murders of 21 Chinese by a white gang. Similar violent crimes soon sprung up in other cities, with Chinese-owned stores and residences destroyed. It was estimated that more than 100 Chinese were killed in Idaho in 1867 alone. (12) (Huping, 2010)

*Chinese Exclusion Act*

Well goes an old saying goes, “He who wants to hang a dog will surely find a rope.” When jobs were eaten up by Chinese, white blue-collar laborers were spurred to find ways to change this situation to fit their own good. They voted. Since Chinese could not vote, no doubt the government made the obvious political choice. In 1882, Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal level regulation, was passed to prohibit Chinese laborers from entering the country and denied their rights to gain US citizenships. Furthermore, the Scott Act of 1888 banned the re-entries of Chinese residents in America after leaving the U.S. (13) It made impossible for Chinese immigrants to reunite with their families in China.
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*Angel Island*

Angel Island, located on the west coast of California was on the main passage for Chinese to enter the U.S. Since it’s geographically isolated from San Francisco, the island is ideal as an immigration station, where Chinese Exclusion Act could be enforced. Every Chinese arriving at the island was first separated from other white passengers. Then they had to undergo a series of embarrassing medical examinations involving the requirements to strip down naked. A Chinese immigrant once recalled, “The doctor told us to take off everything. Then they checked you and checked you. We never got used to that—and in front of whites.” (14) (Erika & Judy, 2010) Secondly, they were interrogated to confirm their relationships with a U.S. citizen. Questions like “Who lives in the third house in the second row of houses in your village?” and “How many steps lead up to your house?” were repeatedly asked for up to several hundred times in an interrogation. (15) (Erika & Judy, 2010) It was an obvious attempt to confuse and then deport those who failed to answer the tiring questions. In addition, to ensure all immigrants admitted into the country had a legal status, the officials imprisoned anyone who held suspected identities until they were either confirmed or deported. The detention often lasted several months or even years. Charles Jung, who worked as an interpreter at Angel Island once said, “The only place in the U.S where a man is guilty until he is proven innocent is at the immigration station.” (16) (Erika & Judy, 2010)

Not until China and the U.S became allies during WWII was Chinese Exclusion Act repelled. For sixty years or longer, discrimination practiced by both the government and its people had cast a shadow on Chinese Americans. Would it possibly come to a stop?

B. Causes of Discrimination

Biologically, our genes conduct the inevitable minor differences between each other. Geologically, areas located in different latitude nourish different people in application to the local temperature, climate and environment. Sociologically, we were all generalized by our mother culture, which differs from the others’. Our attitude, food and customs are all shaped in that particular way. Thus, it is natural for individuals to be different from each other. Racial discrimination erupts when people are incapable of learning this universal truth. Therefore, hatred, instead of understanding, follows.

In the case of Chinese Americans, discrimination was caused by the following factors:

*Division between Two Races*

The Chinese community is an autonomous unit separated from the communities of other races. Chinese newcomers settled primarily in Chinatowns due to a preference for living among fellow Chinese. In order to protect themselves from the violence of anti-Chinese people, Chinese ran businesses mainly in Chinatown and served predominantly Chinese. (17) In other words, Chinese formed something like a
“Vatican” in a Rome city, which hardly had any connection with the outer world. The phenomenon is similar to the sociological term “Territory” in a social group on which one “survive”. This made it impossible for the Whites to assimilate Chinese culture. Also, the perspective that Chinese did not belong to America was encouraged.

**Isolation Policies of Qing Dynasty**

Starting from 1723, Qing Dynasty closed its border, barred the entry of Catholic missionaries and imposed the “red or brown-hair barbarian” theory on European traders. The stereotype toward Chinese of being self-centered and conservative was then shaped.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

Cognitive dissonance is a sociological term that refers to the discomfort caused by holding conflicting ideas simultaneously. “The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance. They do this by changing their attitudes, beliefs or blaming and denying on others.” In this case, Westerners eased their cognitive dissonance between two races by discrimination.

For thousands of years, Chinese have been living on rice. Before the invention of machine, a rice farm required large labor force to cultivate. So, only with the cooperation of the whole family could they manage to survive. Besides, strong emotional ties are also the “glue” that holds individuals together as an unity. Likewise, Chinese were often taught to extend their loyalty to their government as well as their emperors. However, Westerners have different styles. They tended to be more of individualists. Wiki defines “individualists” as followed:

“Individualists promote the exercise of one’s goals and value independence and self-reliance while opposing most external interference upon one’s own interests.”

As Jackson Turner, a late-19th-century historian, explained: “(In the mid-19 when the white pioneers marched westward across Rocky Mountain) Complex society was precipitated by the wilderness into a primitive organization based on antisocialism, materialism and self-reliance...They seldom hesitated to pass laws to control the economic and social practices of their neighbors when regulation suited their purposes.” (Irwin, 1978)

Chinese’s philosophy toward the origin of men also differed from Westerners. Influenced by Confucianism, they thought everyone was the creation of their parents. So their emphasis on family connection, respect and obedience to parents was remarkable. On the other hand, Westerners, influenced by Christian religion, believed everyone was the creation of god. Kids were not the property of parents but individuals who followed the rule of God. This, again, reflects the individualism
mentioned above. (22) (黃光國，鄭昭明，2002)

    It gives us a clear conclusion that Chinese were more likely to modestly follow an order or sacrifice whatever necessary for the welfare of a group, which helped harmonize the society, while Westerners had stronger tendency to break the convention and fulfill their own welfare. Thus, it is conceivable that Chinese Americans were firmly attached to their family back home and minimized their personal quality of life to save as much as possible. They planned to return after their painful struggles overseas. We can also imply that Chinese did not desire to adopt themselves to their working places in America as where they really belonged to, since they inherently have not been migratory people. (23) (Elmer, 1991) Quite on the contrary, Westerners fought solely in the pursuit of personal right and democracy, not for anyone else. They belonged to the land of “Big West,” not to anywhere else. (24) (Irwin, 1978) The different attitudes toward the single land then crashed. Chinese were considered thieves of gold during Gold Rush and thieves of jobs after railroad was completed. (25) (Mae, 2010) They were also charged of unwillingness to integrate and disloyalty to America. (26) (Peter & Dušanka, 2005) To maintain the purity of the conception “national community,” which evoked by Nationalism, Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted.

*Chinese Problems in Cities


*Imperialism

    Qing Dynasty had long suffered from the afflictions of Imperialism of western countries. The discrimination based on countries to countries could also stretch to their people. Thus, Chinese laborers were treated like colonial slaves.

*Competence on Jobs under Big Capitalists

    The emphasis on the value of obedience in Chinese ethics and Chinese’s lack of civil rights were tremendous advantages to big capitalists who could act without limitation on the efforts to control the Chinese labor. (27) (Lucie & Edna, 1984) With so many cheap and diligent Chinese workers around, more and more white laborers became unemployed.

*Appearance
The most distinguishable feature of Chinese, besides their yellow-colored skin, was the queue, a specific hairstyle worn by people of Qing Dynasty. Westerners often joked about the long pigtails and connected them with pigs. (28)

*Reinforcement of Discrimination by Whites Dominating Social Media

Language barriers kept the exchange of opinions between Chinese and the Whites impossible. Thus, Chinese newspapers catered to the taste of Chinese, mainly dealing with the affairs of their hometowns. English newspapers, however, focused on local news and public opinions. To catch up with the Chinese-hating trend, they also demonstrated cartoons and slogans that reinforced the negative images toward Chinese. (29)

C. Denial of Chinese’s civil rights and its legitimacy

Obviously, democracy became a tool to enact unjust law at that time. To test its legitimacy, we should study four relating laws to civil rights in the U.S:

1. *The Declaration Of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

2. *The 14th Amendment of 1868*: “...nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

3. *The 15th Amendment of 1869*: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied … on account of race, color, or previous to condition of servitude.”

4. *Civil Rights Act of 1875*: “It is the duty of government … to mete out equal and exact justice to all, of whatever nativity, race or color.” (30)

However, except for the first one, all of the above fall invalid if one is not classified as an U.S. citizen. Chinese Americans living in America between 1880’s and 1930’s were mostly classified as permanent residents and were authorized only to live and work in the U.S. Though they contributed a lot to the America’s economy, their civil rights were denied by law. Then here comes a dilemma: according to the Declaration of Independence, all men should share the equal right to pursue liberty and happiness. Democracy carries out this promise and fulfills the need of the majority, but how about the minority? Who is among the term “all men?” The idea that government should base all their judgment on the sheer equality of all mankind might be the correct answer on a test, but things are not always as simple as that. German philosopher, Carl Schmitt suggested that the core concept of democracy was the “people,” not “humanity.”

“The democratic conception of equality requires the possibility to distinguish who belong to the “people” and
who is exterior to it.” “This is an attempt to foster an identity of the governed and the governors, and without it the society will become apolitical.” (31)

All men are created equal,” a promise made on the land of America and should have ensured the country to embrace everyone coming to seek equality and opportunities. However, America failed to cash its check. But what made this happen? As Nationalism, flourishing in the 19th Century, reshaped its people, the attitude toward a nation came to a definite basis of sovereignty.

So, when we consider the legitimacy of a series of discriminatory laws, we at the same time have to realize they were the reflections of the common interest of “people”, and, by the word “people,” the government no longer meant “humanity” but “those who belong to their democratic society.” This conclusion is confusing, though, since democracy and humanity are both key elements to our society. But time is changing.

V. Conclusion

What is an “American”? What is the value of America? These questions have been discussed by thousands and have been given different answers. However, they are still under debate. As we dig more deeply into the history of Chinese Americans, who brought progress and hatred to America, we know more clearly about how people react when they encounter the different races. I believe the case of Chinese Americans will go beyond sad historical facts and enable us to see things in new perspectives. All those tragedies come from one single word—discrimination, which resulted from the lack of sympathy and the failure to understand different cultures. As citizens of Taiwan, we should not avoid talking about this issue since history repeats itself: As early Chinese Americans crowded America, labor is flooding from south-east Asia to Taiwan. A similar mistake seems to emerge here in our own land. Only for the reason of our superior economic status, we tacitly or literally discriminates those who come here to seek a better life, but shouldn’t their contributions to our society be appreciated and shouldn’t we understand their differences? In the society proud of its democracy, do we really put more emphasis on humanity than on economy?

In 1948, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was made by UN and marked an important milestone in the history of human right. On March 5, 1965, U.S president Lyndon B. Johnson publicly addressed a speech to advocate the abandon of racism: “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” …a strong sentence in the speech that tackled the American about what is truly the priority, profit or humanity. (32) After decades of struggle, the Americans have gradually changed. On October 7, 2011, not a long time ago, the U.S Congress passed a resolution expressing “regret for six decades of legislation targeting the Chinese people for physical and political exclusion.” (33) Living in the era of humanity, the Americans now have a different attitude toward the “rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled.” (34) How about us?
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