

PART ONE

Early Chinese Immigrants,
1852–1904

The first Chinese to immigrate to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century came principally from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province in southeastern China. Attracted by stories of the California gold rush, they came not only as miner-prospectors, but also as artisans, merchants, and students. Many more arrived as laborers to work in Hawaii's plantations and the mines, railroad lines, farmlands, fisheries, and factories of the American West. From 1852 until 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, over 300,000 Chinese entered the United States. They were part of an international migration of labor from Asia linked to the global expansion of European capitalism, in which workers, capital, and technology moved across national borders to profit entrepreneurs.

After China was defeated in the Opium War by Britain and forced to open to outside trade and political domination, life for the Chinese people in Guangdong Province deteriorated. Aside from suffering increased taxes, forfeiture of land, competition from imported manufactured goods, and unemployment, they also had to contend with problems of overpopulation, natural calamities, bandits, and the devastation caused by peasant rebellions and the ongoing Punti-Hakka interethnic feud. Because of their coastal location and their early contact with foreign traders, many were drawn to America by news of the gold rush and by labor contractors in search of young, able-bodied men to work in the New World. Moreover, a strong entrepreneurial tradition had emerged among some of the Chinese in this region, causing them to seek new opportunities abroad. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, emigration patterns were firmly established, and many villages in the Pearl River Delta came to depend on the remittances of men who had gone overseas for work.

Like other immigrants in America at this time, many of these Guangdong

men intended to strike it rich and return home. More than half of them were married, but most did not bring their wives and families. Because of cultural mores against women traveling abroad, limited economic resources, and the harsh living conditions in the frontier West, it was cheaper and safer to maintain a split household and support the family in China from across the ocean. But later, when Chinese men wanted to bring their families to join them in America, they were prevented from doing so by anti-Chinese immigration laws. The absence of women set the patterns of nineteenth-century Chinese immigration and community development apart from those of most other immigrant groups, resulting in a bachelor society marked by social vices and a decades-long delay in the emergence of a sizable native-born generation.

The reception the Chinese received in the United States was hostile almost from the start. Arriving at a time when European Americans, imbued with a strong sense of manifest destiny and white supremacy, were expanding into the American West, laying claim to its lands and riches, Chinese immigrants fell victim to racial discrimination and class exploitation. Although some welcomed the Chinese as new members of the American family, many in the country saw them as cultural threats, labor competition, and racial inferiors. Even before their arrival, many white Americans held pejorative ideas about the Chinese based on false images and assumptions about their land of ancestry. China, in their view, was a backward, heathen, and degenerate country, and its people, especially its poor, part of the dregs of humanity. They were not seen as the stuff from which “real” Americans were made. Moreover, the racial difference of the Chinese set them apart, with white Americans considering them as a separate people, akin to other subordinates such as Africans, Mexicans, and American Indians.

As a result, the Chinese faced racist laws and actions almost from the moment of their arrival. As early as 1852 the California state legislature enacted a Foreign Miners’ Tax, which was aimed particularly at the Chinese miners. Until it was repealed in 1870, the tax accounted for \$5 million, a sum representing between 25 and 50 percent of all state revenue. As hostile miners resorted to physical violence to expel the Chinese from the mines and a number of mining counties passed resolutions and special taxes to exclude them, Chinese miners fanned out into gold fields throughout the West, reworking leftover claims abandoned by white prospectors or hiring themselves out to work borax deposits and mine coal and quicksilver. Not only did their hard labor reap immense profits for mining corporations, but the Chinese also contributed to the economy by supplying goods and services to miners—hence the development of Chinese camps throughout the mining areas.

In addition to mining, Chinese workers were also closely associated with the expanding railroad industry that boomed in the mid and late nineteenth century. Inspired by dreams of tapping the riches and markets of Asia and the resources of the western part of the country, American entrepreneurs

pushed for the building of a transcontinental railroad that would link up the country and expedite trade between the two coasts. In this effort the federal government provided railroad barons with incentives of \$16,000 to \$48,000 and one square mile of land for each mile of track laid—land that had been taken from the American Indians. Even so, in the 1860s the Central Pacific Railroad, facing the rugged terrain of California's Sierra Nevada and the scarcity of reliable labor, made little progress on the western end of the railroad line, until they hired Chinese workers. These workers proved so capable and effective that some 12,000 to 14,000 Chinese, four of every five men hired by the Central Pacific, were soon put to work in all phases of construction—leveling roadbeds, boring tunnels, blasting mountainsides, and laying tracks. The work was hard as well as dangerous. To carve a roadbed out of the granite promontory of Cape Horn, towering 1,400 feet above the American River, Chinese laborers lowered themselves from the top of the cliff in wicker baskets to drill holes and light explosives, pulling themselves up before, hopefully, the gunpowder exploded beneath them. Working through two severe winters in the High Sierras, the Chinese lived in caverns carved out below the snow level and were often victims of snow slides and avalanches. While no record was kept of the number of lives lost in this endeavor, one newspaper reported that there must have been at least 1,200 deaths, based on the 20,000 pounds of bones that were shipped back to China before the completion of the railroad in 1869. Chinese labor was also instrumental in laying tracks and telegraph lines throughout the western states.

From the 1860s to the 1910s, Chinese farmers helped to make California into the nation's premier agricultural state. Chinese labor was used to reclaim swamplands in the Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta, increasing the land value from \$1–\$3 an acre to \$20–\$100 an acre. They helped to lay the foundation of the wine industry in Napa and Sonoma by constructing roads, stone bridges, rock walls, wine cellars, and irrigation ditches. They cleared land; planted, pruned, and harvested grapes; and made wine. The farming skills that they brought with them from China were put to good use in the growing of citrus fruits, beans, peas, sugar beets, and hops—commercial crops that became the mainstay of the state's agricultural economy. As tenant farmers and truck gardeners, the Chinese specialized in potatoes, garden vegetables, fruits, peanuts, and celery. Chinese vegetable peddlers became a common sight in many towns as housewives came to depend on their fresh produce. In other parts of the country as well as in Hawaii, Chinese helped to develop new varieties of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, including jasmine, the Bing cherry, Gim orange, Chinese cabbage, and taro.

Chinese also entered the fishing industry along the West Coast and proved adept at fishing, curing, and canning. In the 1860s and 1870s Chinese fishing villages dotted the California coastline and ringed San Francisco Bay. Chinese fishermen caught a variety of fish, shrimp, and abalone, which they dried and

sold locally or shipped to China, Japan, and the Hawaiian Islands. In fact, it was the Chinese who introduced abalone meat and the decorative shells to white Americans. By the mid-1870s, Chinese workers also made up the bulk of the labor force in salmon canneries in the Pacific Northwest. In the young cities of the West, they could be found as domestics and laundrymen, but also as workers in the developing factories, such as in San Francisco's woolen, cigar, shoe, and garment industries. Once the Chinese learned the trade, they would pool their capital to start their own small factories, specializing in inexpensive lines such as ready-made clothing, undergarments, slippers, and boys' shoes to avoid competing with white manufacturers. They proved to be such hard workers that after the Civil War, labor recruiters tried to bring them to the Deep South to replace former slaves and to factory towns in the Middle Atlantic and New England states as strike breakers.

Thus, when an economic depression hit the West in the 1870s, anti-Chinese sentiment and violence broke out among white workers, farmers, and fishermen who saw the Chinese as unfair competition and the cause of all their economic woes. Denis Kearney and the Workingman's Party, based in San Francisco, became the most vocal forces in making the Chinese racial scapegoats. Throughout the West in the 1870s and 1880s, murderous mobs regularly stormed Chinese settlements, looting, lynching, burning, and expelling the Chinese. Their goal to drive the Chinese out of all areas of profitable employment and ultimately out of the country was finally realized with the help of opportunistic politicians who pressured Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act prohibited the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years and barred Chinese from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. Only diplomats, students, teachers, merchants, and visitors were exempted. The ban on Chinese labor, which was applied to Hawaii after it became a territory of the United States in 1898, was made indefinite in 1904 and not repealed until 1943.

The message behind the anti-Chinese movement was evident: the Chinese were tolerated as long as there was use for their labor to help develop the economic infrastructure of the American West. Racist attitudes, policies, and practices sought to prevent them from settling down, owning land, becoming naturalized citizens, intermarrying, or integrating into mainstream society. But the Chinese refused to be driven out of the country. Many moved to eastern and midwestern cities and to the South, where they could find work and where their presence was better tolerated. By the turn of the century, Chinese could be found in every state of the union. They worked where they could, usually in agriculture, domestic service, restaurants, or laundries, and they clustered in Chinatown communities that sprang up in many towns to serve their social, economic, and political needs. There, they could shop for Chinese foods and supplies, look for work, socialize with kinsmen, frequent brothels, attend Chinese operas, worship at temples, observe tradi-

tional holidays and customs, and find protection from racial persecution. In the larger Chinatowns, family and district associations, fraternal organizations, and labor guilds were formed for social control, mutual help, and labor arbitration. Tongs or secret societies involved with prostitution, gambling, and drugs also thrived, and the stiff competition for control of these illegal activities often led to assassinations and fights, known as tong wars.

In response to racial discrimination, the Chinese found ways to pool together resources to start businesses, sustain strikes and boycotts, and use the judicial system and diplomatic channels to defend their civil rights. By so doing, they contributed significantly to the molding of American constitutional jurisprudence and expanding notions of fairness under the law. For example, in the 1862 case of *Lin Sing v. Washburn*, the California Supreme Court nullified a law imposing an onerous tax on Chinese immigrants only. In the landmark cases of *Wong Kim Ark v. United States* (1898) and *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886), the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed the citizenship of any native-born person and equal protection of the law for all residents irrespective of race or nationality. The Chinese consulate was also instrumental in pressuring the U.S. government to honor its treaties with China and in seeking retribution on behalf of Chinese victims of discriminatory laws and racial violence.

The situation was different for Chinese in the Hawaiian Islands, where racial discrimination was not as virulent as on the mainland. Recruited in large numbers to work in the sugar plantations beginning in 1852, Chinese laborers soon moved on to raise livestock, grow rice, taro, coffee, garden vegetables, and fruits, and eventually become shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen in Honolulu and other towns. Because they had been encouraged to bring their wives to work in the cane fields and were allowed to marry native Hawaiian women, the Chinese in Hawaii were able to develop family life and integrate into the larger society at an earlier date than on the mainland. Nevertheless, learning from the experiences of their counterparts on the mainland, the Chinese in Hawaii early on formed organizations to provide fellowship, social control, protection, and arbitration. They also maintained close ties to their homeland and culture, establishing their own newspapers, schools, and temples even as they planted roots in Hawaii.

Chinese immigrants left few records and documents about their experiences in America during this early period. Although some were literate, many were not. Furthermore, the constant struggle for survival and the attitude that they were only in the country temporarily meant they had little time, energy, or inclination to record their experiences. Very few letters, diaries, or other written records survived in either China or the United States. The destruction of wars, revolutions, and great social upheavals took their toll as well. What have survived are a few letters, editorials, speeches, petitions, reports, and ephemeral material produced by the Chinese that were published or retained by the Chinese government and religious or social organizations

in America. There are also some memoirs from these early years, and poems or folk songs handed down through the generations. The following selections draw from these types of rare material.

We begin this section with three folk songs sung by women in the Pearl River Delta lamenting the long family separations caused by their husbands' sojourns in Gold Mountain. Although we failed to find any personal accounts of Chinese miners, farmers, fishermen, factory or domestic workers, we were able to include the reminiscences of five immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth century: Wong Hau-hon, a railroad worker; Huie Kin, a community leader and the first Chinese minister in New York; Wen Bing Chung, who came with the Chinese Education Mission in 1871; Sing Kum, an abused slave girl who found refuge in a San Francisco mission home; and a Mrs. Teng, who came to Hawaii as a bondservant in 1891. The remaining voices in this section attest to the individual and collective efforts of Chinese immigrants to establish communities, protest racial discrimination, maintain ties with China and Chinese traditions, and make America their home. Especially poignant and disturbing are two reports, one documenting the atrocities committed against Chinese miners at Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, and the other describing the difficulties involved in locating and returning the remains of the deceased to China. We end the section with a selection of letters from emigrant family members, complaining about problems at home and beseeching their men to return soon. Together, these voices provide us with a glimpse of who some of the early immigrants were and how they tried to establish meaningful lives in the inhospitable environment of nineteenth-century America.