

The Chinese Exclusion Act: Observations of a Centennial

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One hundred years ago, on 6 May 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed an act "to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese," namely, to suspend the immigration of Chinese laborers. This act, the culmination of three decades of racist agitation against the Chinese in California during the last half of the nineteenth century, marked a change from a free and unrestricted to a racist and restricted immigration policy. It represented a watershed in U.S. immigration history and was to have far reaching effects on the subsequent development of Asian American communities.

The racist philosophy embodied by the act became a cancerous sore which continued to fester and spread in the American social fabric. Aimed ostensibly solely at the Chinese, the principle extended to all people of Asian extraction by the 1900s. By 1924 all Asian immigrants were excluded. The apogee was reached during World War II when wartime hysteria led to the forced internment of West Coast Japanese Americans.

During the exclusion era racial prejudice barred Asian Americans from most sectors of the economy. Many Chinese Americans, for example, were limited to working in laundries, restaurants and domestic services, occupations which became

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stereotypes connected with the Chinese. Many localities, especially on the West Coast, limited Asian American participation in the mainstream of American society to a minimum by such practices as racial segregation in schools and public institutions, restrictive housing covenants and anti-miscegenation laws. Within their isolation, many Asian Americans developed feelings of inferiority and alienation from American society. The fact that most were unable to develop their full potentials and contribute their talents constructively represents an immeasurable loss to this nation.

The Chinese Exclusion Act weighed heavily upon the Chinese of America until World War II, when the need to counteract Japanese propaganda and to keep China in the war led to its repeal by the Magnuson Act in 1943. The exclusion era, lasting sixty-one years, profoundly affected the Chinese American community. The predominantly male Chinese population on the U.S. mainland dropped from 150,000 in 1880 to 60,000 in 1920 as Chinese immigration dwindled to a trickle. Many had to enter the country by using fraudulent documents, by crossing international boundaries surreptitiously, or by jumping ships. For those who succeeded, the ever present threat of discovery by immigration officials resulted in lives filled with feelings of insecurity and apprehension which continued to haunt them long after the Exclusion Act had been repealed. A prominent symbol left from this era is the immigration detention building on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Between 1910 and 1940 tens of thousands of Chinese seeking entry into the U.S. went through the portals of this detention house, and on its walls hundreds left poems expressing their hopes and frustrations.

The exclusion of Chinese and other Asians was the application of racist dogma to government policy. It was also symptomatic of underlying racist sentiments in this country. Relatively dormant during periods of prosperity, this prejudice can erupt into hysterical irrational actions during troubled times when minorities because of their obvious physical and cultural differences become targeted as convenient scapegoats.

Today, we are ostensibly living in a more enlightened era. Indeed, many changes for the better have taken place in America during the four decades since the repeal of the Exclusion Act. But with a continuing economic crisis in this country, the entry of tens of thousands of immigrants and refugees from Indochina during the last few years have led to an ominous

upsurge of incidents against Asian Americans as well as calls to restrict Asian immigration. Thus events and ceremonies commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Chinese Exclusion are a timely reminder of the significance of an act that has violated the democratic tenets upon which this nation was founded.

In February of 1982 the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, together with the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee and the Chinese Historical Society of America began the showing of two Chinese American historical exhibits at the Railroad Museum of Sacramento, "Journeys Made, Journeys to Come" and "Island: History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940." The same groups then observed the centennial on May 2 with a program on Angel Island.

Subsequently, the Angel Island exhibit traveled to Seattle, Boston, and New York, where it opened at the American Museum of Immigration at the Statue of Liberty National Monument. In the latter two cities, special Chinatown community programs also marked the Exclusion Act. "Paper Angels," a play about the Angel Island experience by Genny Lim, also opened in New York and then San Francisco.

On May 2 the Chinese Historical Society of America, Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, and Kearny Street Workshop sponsored in the Chinese Cultural Center an exhibit "Unwanted Americans, Chinese Exclusion 1882," which displayed a number of anti-Chinese cartoons and graphics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On that same evening there were also presentations by performing arts groups of works inspired by the exclusion experience.

On 8 May 1982, a one-day national conference, "Exclusion in America: Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Thereafter," organized by the Asian American Studies Program of the University of California at Berkeley, Chinese Historical Society of America, and Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, convened at the Chinese Culture Center. Scholars from across the nation as well as the People's Republic of China discussed the causes and ramifications of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its relevance to contemporary immigration issues.

In view of the current efforts in Congress to revise the immigration laws, these various events assume a special significance. They serve as a reminder to all Asian Americans that equality

under the law cannot be taken for granted and that steadfast vigilance and persistent struggle is necessary to ensure its continued existence. They also point out to all of America that Asian Americans no longer will accept passively the inequities of the past and do insist that the democratic principles lauded so loudly in rhetoric be realized in deed and applied equitably to all regardless of color or creed.