

## FEATURE



# The blood, sweat and tears history of Chinese in 19th Century America

## The 130th Commemoration of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act

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The 1848 news that gold was discovered in California excited the Chinese in Kwantung Province. Plagued by wars and poverty, they determined to join the Gold Rush across the Pacific Ocean. They came to America West in mining, building railroad, setting up levees, cultivating plantation in crops and fruits, manufacturing a variety of items such as boots, cigars and can goods, thus contributing to the development and prosperity in the region. They worked hard and led a simple life of rice and tea. The only way for homesick relief was a visit to Chinatown. The stereo-type image of a plain flat yellow face in alien strange clothing with a long braided hair behind the skull, unable to naturalize sojourner and an idol worshipper was the easy scapegoat attacked by White workers.

As the Gold Rush and Civil War were over, Blacks were free from the South and White

workers came from East Coast by the Trans-Continental Railroad to compete with the Chinese in the cheap labor market. As a member of Workman Party, Denis Kearney was a strong advocate that "Chinese Must Go". He blamed the Chinese for working at starving wages and taking away American worker jobs. On March 6, 1881, California declared a public holiday so that citizens could organize a day of parade in anti-Chinese campaign. On May 6 1882, US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The blood, sweat and tears history of Chinese in America in 19th Century is disappointing and heart breaking. It meant cultural contradiction, political sanction, social discrimination and economic disparity. There were two distinct characteristics on the Chinese Exclusion Act, in human rights and civil rights: the first time to sanction a group by race

irrespective to where they came from; the first time to forbid a group by ethnicity to become citizens by naturalization.

Chinese in America in 19th century had a difficult time. They were confronted with hundreds of laws and regulations from city, state and US Congress with virtually no rights. Worst of all, they could not testify in court against Whites. It seemed they had to endure discrimination and violence passively. However, they did not stand still passively, expecting Divine intervention. Instead, they hired lawyers to fight in court for protection, survival and empowerment. Toward the last decade, with the aid of Chinese Consul, they united in protecting their rights. It was a powerful, brave and impressive chapter of American history.

In the Fall of 1884, San Francisco Chinese family, Joseph and Mary Tape sent their daughter Mamie to Spring Valley School but was refused based on race. They fought to California Supreme Court with a favorable ruling. It was seventy years before Brown vs. Board of Education of 1954.

The date of July 10 1892 was significant. A group of Chinese in New York City set up Chinese Equal Rights League to campaign against US policy of Chinese Exclusion with Mr. Wong Ching Fook as the founder. He fought against racial discrimination, protected the rights of Chinese, promoted peace, justice and equality and racial harmony. He was the “Martin Luther King” for the Chinese.

Being in the first group of Education Mission Students and having completed his education, he was naturalized in Michigan.



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However, his citizenship was taken away later, victimized by 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

As reported in July 16 and 19 in New York Times, Denis Kearney visited New York City. Mr. Wong challenged him for a duel and Kearney was chicken out. On February 3 the same year, he published a Chinese-English bilingual weekly newspaper Chinese-American. This newly coined “Chinese-American” was used since then.

Throughout the year of 1876, he gave about eighty lectures in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago to promote Chinese culture and civilization to dispel myth and misunderstanding. He pointed out that those missionaries to China circulated publications that China was degrading, uncivilized and superstitious so that they would be able to secure more funding. This kind of literature became the base of racial attack. He said that in this Christian

dominated land preaching love and peace, Chinese in reality, were robbed, discriminated, persecuted and murdered. However, he might not be aware of Ms. Donaldina Cameron who saved and sheltered many prostitutes and concubines in her San Francisco church. He frequently shared and promoted Chinese culture and customs to the American general public through magazines such as Atlantic, North American Review and New York Times.

The Six Companies of San Francisco had the tradition of protecting Chinese in America. In 1853, California governor John Bigler advocated of getting rid of Chinese. The Six Companies wrote him a protest letter.

On April 5 1874, San Francisco held a meeting in passing a resolution to remove

Chinese in California. This resolution was dispatched to US Congress and the President. The Six Companies followed a letter to President Grant detailing Chinese contributions to America. In 1876, they lodged protest in writing against Chinese bias in English newspapers.

The following year, they delivered a letter to US Congress reaffirming the friendship between American and Chinese peoples and urging to uphold the Treaty of Tientsin in protecting Chinese in America. In 1878, Denis Kearney stirred up White workers to attack San Francisco Chinatown. The Six Companies sent a letter to San Francisco Police Department demanding protection. In the same year, they sent a letter to President Hayes protesting media bias against Chinese.

Of importance was in 1892, San Francisco Six Companies and the Chinese Consulate organized and mobilized 110,000 Chinese in America to refuse the order of carrying a national picture identity paper under the Geary Act. It was the first large scale of civil disobedience in US history seventy years before Dr. Martin Luther King. From time to time, The Six Companies put up the fight for Chinese by Habeas Corpus to prevent deportation. They did an admirable and courageous job.

In 1898, San Francisco native born Chinese-American, Wong Kam Ark had a landmark case. He successfully argued and won in Supreme Court by the Fourteen Amendment. This case is a significant precedent that native born are indeed American citizens regardless the status of their parents. It is still relevant even today especially for Latinos in Arizona.



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In 1898, US fought the Spanish-America War. They defeated Spain in Manila, the Philippines and won the status of world power. The stone monument at Union Square in San Francisco was a commemoration of this war. There were about two hundred recruited Chinese sailors in American warships. Impressed by their courage, Admiral George Dewey was willing to petition for their American citizenship. Such warm-heart goodwill was coldly rejected by Secretary of Treasury through the Navy Department. On this unfaithful and ungrateful decision, New York Times harshly commented on its editorial. From then on, the Chinese risking their lives in fighting for US in this battle became the victims of Chinese Exclusion. This brave and honorable page in history was forgotten and sank into oblivion.

Mr. Dean Lung had a humble extraordinary story. He was the domestic servant for retired Army General Carpenter who was bad tempered and abusive. One evening, the heavily drunk

Carpenter beat him up for no reason. On the next day, Carpenter apologized and asked what he would like for gratitude and apology. Lung replied, "You pay me for my service. I desire for myself nothing more. But American people know little about Chinese culture and philosophy. Could you do something about that?" Carpenter made a large donation with the additional \$12,000 life-time saving from Lung to Columbia University to establish the Chinese Department and library, along with the Dean Lung Professorship of Chinese in 1902. Dean's gift and advocacy are memorable and meaningful.

In 1895, the Chinese Native Sons of California set up Chinese American Citizen

Alliance to organize themselves to Americanize so as to protect their rights. In 1906, Chung Sai Yat Pao (Chinese-American Daily Newspaper) editor, Ng Poon Chew, an activist in Oakland, California, fought for social equality and American citizenship.

In 1861, Ching Government set up Chungli Yamen for dealing with foreign countries. In addition, it sent out representatives to Western countries. On July 27 1878, Representative Wu Ting Fang on his official way to Washington D. C. stopped over at San Francisco for reports of racial violence against Chinese. By the end of the year, a Chinese Consulate was set up in San Francisco to monitor and protect.

The September 2, 1885 Rock Springs of Wyoming violence was disturbing. A mob of one hundred fifty attacked Chinatown, burnt and looted, resulting twenty eight Chinese killed, fifteen wounded and property loss of around one hundred fifty thousand dollars. The Chinese Consul visited the State Department and demanded Federal troops for protection and a Sino-American Investigation Team for site visit. Congress in June 1886 made indemnity to property loss but with no compensation for victims and survivors.

On February 17, 1890, City of San Francisco ordered Chinese in the city to move home and business to a designated undesirable area. Failure to comply would mean six month jail term. Chinese Consulate strongly protested to Secretary of State followed with a lawsuit. On August 26 1890, court ruled that Chinese would not have to move.

Between 1897 and 1903, Wu Ting Fang was the Washington D. C. Chinese Consul. He actively paid attention in protecting Chinese students and businessmen. He pointed out an



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August 19 1902 New York police raid on Chinese laundries. They arrested thirty-nine people and put their names on blank warrants. The suspects were handcuffed as if they were criminals. Such abuse of power in invasion of privacy without proper warrant by law enforcement violated the legal procedure. He questioned this abuse of “rule of law”. Wu was later retired and was replaced by Liang Chang who sent two strong worded documents to State Department indicating his determination in protecting Chinese in America.

In April 1905, San Francisco Chinatown staged a boycott of American goods. Twenty one Chinese cities along with the support from Chinese in Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaya, Vietnam, Siam, Australia and Canada protested against the Chinese Exclusion Act and unfair treaties. It impacted the trade and got President Roosevelt’s attention. He urged fair treatment to the Chinese in San Francisco. However, there was no change in the policy.

After the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, City Government seized the opportunity of attempting to swallow the golden section of Chinatown by ordering to rebuild Chinatown in the remote Hunter Point. Consulates Liang Chang and Oweyung Gan successfully argued and earned the respect and right of rebuilding in the same location. The Earthquake and Fire also destroyed the vital records in City Hall. Chinese were quick to claim “paper son” or “native son” to enter America. Angel Island Immigration Center was the station to process would-be immigrants in matching long answers. It was a humiliating and intimidating experience.

World War II brought US and China together. They became comrades in arms in Asia Pacific Theater. In April 1943, Chinese charming First Lady, Madam Soong Mei Ling spoke in American Southern accent at US Congress and won hearts and minds. President Roosevelt and Congress repudiated Chinese Exclusion Act with an entry quota of 105. However, there was no celebration in American Chinatowns. Large scale Chinese immigration became a significant reality only after the meaningful 1965 Immigration Reform.

In 2009, California apologized for discrimination against Chinese. I commented at Public Radio KQED San Francisco in "Perspective" aired on October 15 2009. Below is the transcript.

Recently, the California Legislature passed Resolution ACR 42 apologizing for the past persecution of Chinese living in California in 19th and 20th Century.

I am excited not because I enjoy being a naturalized citizen, able to vote, choose my college, own my home, work for the State, and sit on a jury in Court. It is because Chinese laborers were denied all these in the Gold Rush Days. Instead, they paid high fee in gold mines with lower wages. They built the Trans Continental Railroad with a tough reputation of "ten miles a day". They established agriculture and the fish industry by building levees and canals. However, the labor unions saw these hard workers as scab labor and demanded that "Chinese must go". Many Chinese families were driven out overnight by lynch mobs. The California Legislature and local governments discriminated against Chinese with unfair laws. And in 1882, California politicians lobbied Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act barring Chinese immigration for sixty-one years.

This year, the California legislature closed an unjust chapter of history. It means a great deal to me and my family that the Legislature not only remembered Chinese laborers who helped build the Golden State but

also recognized the contributions of present day Chinese Americans such as Gary Locke, Secretary of Commerce, and Steve Chu, Secretary of Energy. As a proud citizen learning from history, I will work with all people by building a California that honors racial, religious and cultural diversity with equality, liberty and justice for all.

Last October, California Congresswoman Judy Chu sponsored a Congressional Resolution in apologizing 1882 Chinese Exclusion. On June 19 2012, the House of Representatives unanimously passed a bipartisan Resolution introduced by her in bill, House Resolution 683.

Chu said: "Today the House made history when both chambers of Congress officially and formally acknowledged the ugly and un-American nature of laws that targeted Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act enshrined injustice into our legal code, "it stopped the Chinese, and Chinese alone, from immigrating, from ever becoming naturalized citizens and ever having the right to vote. The last generation of people personally affected by these laws is leaving us gradually, and finally Congress has expressed the sincere regret that Chinese Americans deserve and reaffirmed our commitment to the civil rights of all people. This is only the fourth time that Congress has passed such a resolution of regret in the last 25 years. This makes today a rare moment in history for the Chinese American Community." •

This long Resolution detailed the violence and injustice against Chinese and showed regret. This courage is better late than never to bring peace and dignity to those who lost their bodies and souls in building America. It however stopped short of an apology.

This year marked the 130 years commemoration of Chinese Exclusion Act. Remembering history helps defeat racism and discrimination. Recently, a small number of people with malicious agenda spread culture bias and racial spin against Chinese. As seen lately in

the San Francisco Bay Area, there is a big advertisement Board saying “The Bay Bridge 100% foreign steel” shown with a China’s five star flag. It was reported in TV news program that China low price products take away American manufacturing jobs. It makes one wonder why in the free market competition full of Harvard MBAs do not out bid their Chinese counterparts. This type of sensational advertising would stir up the Kearney’s slogan and would be exploited by politicians for political gain. It reminds that in 1898, there was a book on “Yellow Peril” alleging Ching Royal Navy sent three battleships and occupied California and Oregon, demanding “Americans Must Go”!

Chinese historical thinking of “falling leaves returning to its roots” has changed in the 20th century. Chinese-Americans take pride in their contributions in building America by labor and talent, and in the struggle for human right and civil right. Many highly educated elite of Chinese descendants have joined the main stream and actively participated in American democracy, voting and running for office. Chinese Americans need to work together and demand Congress set up a national monument to commemorate Chinese victims of racial injustice and massacre. Still in American history book, the Chinese Exclusion Act is excluded on record in this nation of immigrants.

This Chinese chapter would be a good educational lesson. The following step would be a monument documenting Chinese immigration history and their significant contributions in building this country, with an ideal site in San Francisco, California. Learning from history, we can stop racism and discrimination and help build

America to be a more open, dignified, progressive and harmonious land of diversity in unity.

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