

BOOK REVIEW

Driven Out:

The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans

By Jean Pfaelzer

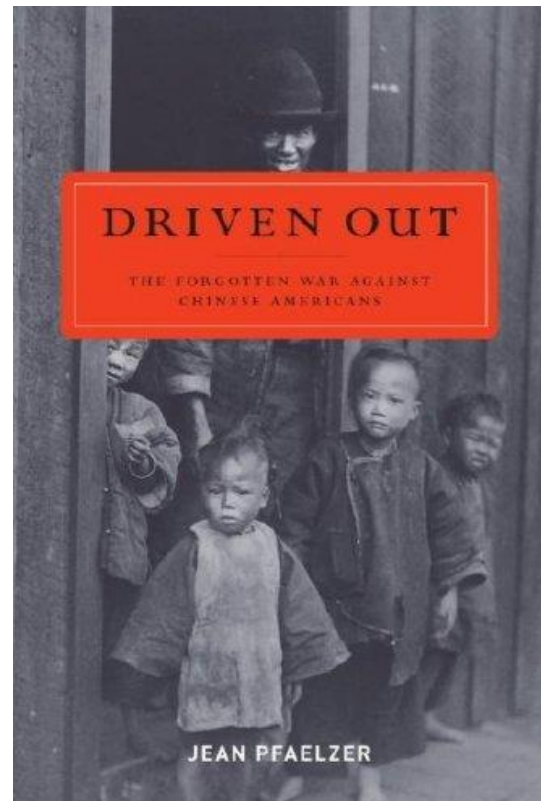
Random House, 2007

Reviewed by David Chesanow

It's ironic, perhaps, that Jean Pfaelzer's *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* hit the bookstore shelves on May 29, just as the United States Senate was gearing up to vote on immigration legislation that would create a guest-worker program in this country. While there are both similarities and differences between "undocumented aliens" in the U.S. in the 21st century and the Chinese who arrived on these shores in search of work and a better life in the 19th century, one thing is certain: Today's public discussion about how to treat foreign laborers is more civilized than it was 125 years ago.

After all, white Protestant nativists – and even immigrants whom the nativists vilified – were vocal in their objections to the Chinese even as the latter were helping to build the railroads, working as launderers and domestics and laboring in mines, in canneries, in logging camps and on ranches. Notes Pfaelzer, "The white man's racial rhetoric was, in fact, about himself: the Chinese worked too many hours; the Chinese worker was drugged on opium; the Chinese worker was slovenly; the Chinese debased the town and created the need for civic jobs; the Chinese ate rats; the Chinese were renters; the Chinese lived in overcrowded housing; the Chinese demanded the right to own property; the Chinese were expected to send scarce money back to their homeland."

The Chinese were also regarded as "sojourners," people with unbreakable ties with their empire across the ocean and incapable of assimilating and becoming good, loyal American citizens – even if white Americans would have



Between 1840 and 1900, more than 2 million Chinese laborers left their homeland to work in plantations and mines around the world. Twenty-five thousand of them joined California's Gold Rush. By the 1860s, Chinese immigrants were a vibrant part of the state's economy... But by the turn of the century, more than half of a Chinese American population that once reached 80,000 was gone - deported, exiled or dead – and the survivors herded into urban ghettos...

—From a book review by Tony Platt

them. (Sound like the subtext of the current immigration debate?)

The nearly 200 expulsions of Chinese populations from American communities in the American West and Northwest from the early 1850s to 1906 is the subject of Pfaelzer's book.

These assaults on life, liberty and property ranged from the spontaneous to the systematic – from armed gangs of resentful white prospectors evicting their Chinese counterparts from the California gold fields, to average citizens joining in boycotts to deprive their resident “celestials” of their livelihoods.

For example, in Eureka, Calif., in early 1885, an unfortunate incident in which a city councilman was shot to death during a dispute between two Chinese turned into an excuse for vigilantes to round up more than 300 Chinese residents, imprison them in warehouses, then force them onto ships bound for San Francisco. In Washington Territory in November of that same year, after considerable rabble-rousing by Tacoma's civic and business leaders, several hundred members of the city's white population followed virtually the same program as Eureka by herding their remaining 200 or so Chinese residents (others had left in the days preceding) nine miles to a remote train station, where they spent a cold, rainy night in unheated outbuildings before being loaded onto a train for Portland. Tacoma's Chinatown then mysteriously caught fire and burned to the ground.

By contrast, in late 1885 and early 1886, the white citizens of Truckee, Calif., sought a more peaceful means of expulsion by boycotting Chinese businesses and those that employed Chinese workers. Never mind the fact that Truckee's Chinese were “renters, shoppers, and low-paid laborers, and white agents made money from their legal, real estate, and commercial transactions,” and that “seemingly, this interracial relationship benefited everyone,” writes Pfaelzer: The so-called Truckee Method, while slower than the Eureka Method, achieved the same goal.

Pfaelzer's scholarship is exemplary, not merely because it reveals that expulsions of Chinese were common exercises in ethnic cleansing – rather than just a few isolated incidents – in small towns and large over a period of more than 50 years, but because most of this information was there all along for the sifting, in newspaper accounts and public documents. No newly uncovered treasure trove of documents, no long-buried diaries suddenly brought to light: Rather, Pfaelzer took what everyone else seems to have missed and added an essential and long-overdue chapter to our nation's past.

But Pfaelzer gives us much more than a litany of shameful events: She shows that beleaguered Chinese were willing to stand up for themselves by using the legal system to sue for reparations, by testifying to the injustices that they were subjected to, by striking for fair wages and refusing to supply goods to hostile businesses – even purchasing arms to defend their homes and their lives. Certainly, the Chinese understood the rights and duties that American citizenship entailed; what they were denied were legal status and the paperwork.

One hopes that “Driven Out” will become a mainstay of college surveys of 19th century American history. The events then and now warrant it.

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David Chesnow has written about the 1885 expulsion of Tacoma's Chinese population for other publications.