

The Historical Significance of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act: The Impacts on Chinese Immigrants in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The essay is to discuss the historical significance of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and its impacts on Chinese immigrants at the time. This phenomenon has been observed for many years, and various scholars have explained it from various perspectives, especially on the impacts of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The essay uses the case study method to interpret the racial factors and Chinese immigrants' reactions under the Chinese Exclusion Act. This essay aims to recognize that the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act derives from racial prejudice, and it has led Chinese immigrants to a difficult time. The result of the essay reveals that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act plays a key role in influencing Chinese immigrants in the United States. In conclusion, the essay deepens our understanding of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its impacts on Chinese immigrants. To some extent, it will illustrate that the development of the Chinese Exclusion Act is a long-term process under the intervention of the American government. Furthermore, the essay can help understand how to critically evaluate the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, its further impacts on Chinese immigrants, and the reflection of the American government's attitudes towards immigration in the future. Admittedly, the essay is limited because the Chinese immigrants' experiences are not the same as other immigrants at the time. It does not completely represent the overall trend of immigration in the nineteenth century. Further studies can investigate more examples and debates regarding the immigration history in the United States.

Keywords: *The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Immigrants, Impacts, United States.*

1. INTRODUCTION

From 1870 to the 1920s, the United States had a population boom, which led to significant changes in demography, all of which were induced by immigration. At the same time, the United States experienced various transformations, such as industrialization, rise of the working class, capital accumulation and global interconnections via new technologies [1]. During this phase, the United States expanded its influences and made progress in nation-building, which was mostly attributed to immigration. However, as the number of immigrants to America increased, the government started to evaluate who were fit or unfit in American society. One of victims were Chinese immigrants, as Greene argued that 'the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the first time a specific immigration group was excluded by the federal government because of its race and class' [1]. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was motivated by several factors. The government utilized the 1882 Act to

express its views on immigration control. Chinese immigrants were oppressed and denied status by white people due to racial biases and class anxieties, because Chinese people were considered as evil who attacked American nativism and white American morals and purity. Furthermore, economic tensions among white males and Chinese workers resulted in white workers' intolerance of Chinese workers based on employment competitiveness, so Chinese workers were treated differently compared with white workers [2]. These factors contributed to the rise of anti-Chinese violence in the United States, which made Chinese immigrants' life more difficult than the past, but some concerns about the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and its justification needed to be acknowledged.

The essay's research question is why the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act plays a significant role in influencing Chinese immigrants in the United States at the time. This research question is complex because the

implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act is caused by various factors, and the Chinese immigrants' experiences will provide an in-depth view of the problem of the American government's attitudes towards immigration.

This essay will focus on the racial prejudice in the United States and how it relates to the legislation about restricting Chinese immigrants, and analyze the further impacts of the Chinese Exclusion Act on Chinese family, gender, and social structures. It is necessary to understand how these factors interact with each other and affect Chinese immigrants at the time. Also, this research will be a useful reference to help audiences have a fundamental perception towards the Chinese immigrants' experiences and shape different perspectives to critically evaluate the impacts of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Therefore, the essay is divided into several sections. After the introduction, the essay will discuss the racial factors that promote the Chinese Exclusion Act. Next, the essay will reveal the impacts of the American legal system on Chinese immigrants through the development of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The essay will then interpret the Chinese Exclusion Act's impacts on Chinese family, gender, and social status. Finally, the conclusion will summarize all sections, emphasize the significance of this research and demonstrate potential limitations.

2. THE PROMOTION OF RACIAL FACTORS ON THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT

First and foremost, there were some key aspects to reveal the historical relevance of the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Racial factors such as the rejection of Chinese ethnic culture and antipathy towards different colored people played a major role in mainstream society. Horace Davis, a member of parliament in the House of Representatives, had made multiple speeches on anti-Chinese movement and Chinese Exclusion in California at that time. His cases were against Chinese immigrants in two ways. One was that anarchist Chinese were unable to fit into American lawful and ordered society. He believed that Chinese could not be assimilated like Americans, and they would make no progress in merging with Americans after twenty-five years of engagement. Chinese lived in another world within their own internal administration, in a chaotic semi-feudal society, resurrecting in one form or another the old and horrible hierarchy and class structure that the Civil War sought to abolish. Another argument raised by Davis was that the increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants had an aggressive attitude toward California. He thought that Chinese would threaten native American labourers, who might be compelled to flee the West Coast. Chinese immigrants demanded for voting rights would not be resisted at the time, and eventually if the government had no responses, then

California would become a Chinese province [3]. Therefore, a new policy, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, to restrict Chinese immigration appeared to be not only required, but was also urgent.

Similarly, one of the drafters of the Chinese Exclusion Act, John Miller argued that a mixed race of half Chinese and half Caucasian would result in a civilization that was half-pagan and half-Christian, which was an alien race and not tolerate in American society. He often distinguished European immigrants and Chinese immigrants based on their identities and assimilation in American hostile system. European immigrants were likely to integrate into American society, but Chinese were not fit in the government. As cheap labourer, Chinese immigrants did not deserve their respect. He encouraged white men to work harder than Chinese workers, in order to replace them [4]. Both Davis and Miller tried to explain the rationale of the Chinese exclusion, that Chinese immigrants would not adopt the American way of life and would not benefit America.

Another historical significance of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the Qing government's weakness at the time. In recognition of the adoption of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Qing government's corruption and timidity could not be overlooked, since the harsh immigration policies imposed on the Chinese since 1882, the laws that prevented them from acquiring American citizenship were never applied to races other than Chinese. Following the Opium Wars, the Qing government developed a compromise foreign policy with the United States and other major countries, and did not restrict America from looting Chinese labourer [5]. Later, Wu Ting-Fang, a Chinese minister in Washington at the time, expressed his dissatisfaction with Chinese unequal treatments in the United States, that the United States could not do justice, bullied weak nations, and would not threaten Chinese immigrants who had voting rights [5]. The Chinese government had complained several times in response to Chinese immigrants' situations, but American government took advantage of Chinese difficult situation, only promised to carefully consider the Qing government's complaints, but they never solved these issues. Griswold noted that the rejection of Chinese immigration to the United States occurred at a period when China was relatively weak. And by contrast, the United States handling of the Chinese was preoccupied with the unconventional ways of rebelling against the European invaders. The diplomatic ramifications were far-reaching, the United States would have had the arrogance to reject China's goals entirely [6]. Although the Chinese government attempted to protect the Chinese through diplomatic channels, due to the country's lack of power, Chinese reactions were unattainable in the international community, so the United States continued to break existing treaties and force other treaties with arrogance, and introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act in

1882, which caused the long-term historical significance on the aspects of race and power.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT: THE AMERICAN LEGAL SYSTEM'S IMPACTS ON CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 amended several sections throughout the next two decades, thereby extending the Chinese Exclusion Act forever. This collection of rules not only harmed Chinese labourers economically, but also exploited them to the point of legal exploitation. The legal constraints imposed on Chinese immigrants in the United States at the time were subtle. The purpose of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was to make the Chinese the only object of white Americans' exclusion of foreigners. It barred Chinese labourers from working in the United States for ten years from the date of its passage, and if a Chinese worker lawfully existing in the United States chose to leave the country to see his or her family in China and then re-enter the country, he or she would face deportation, he or she had to register at the time of leaving and acquire a certificate of return to the United States; otherwise, it was unlawful and he or she could not re-enter the country. An American customs officer had to certify the Chinese government's certificate of entry. Chinese people did not have the right to become citizens of the United States [7]. According to Joyce, Chinese immigration decline dramatically from 39,579 to 8,031 in 1882 and 1883 [8]. This act was then extended from time to time, the restriction was increased from 10 to 20 years, and finally the time limit was removed. The act required every Chinese to register in order to obtain proof of residence, and those who did not register were to be deported. At the same time, job opportunities for Chinese were severely limited, and they were barred from decent work. In 1888, Congress approved legislation preventing Chinese employees from returning to the United States unless they had a family or property worth a thousand dollar in the country. Three weeks later, the Scott Act was passed, which prohibited Chinese labourers who had temporarily left the country from returning to the United States, resulting in the expulsion of 20,000 Chinese who had temporarily left the nation to visit their family in China [9]. In 1892, the Geary Act renewed the Chinese Exclusion Act for ten years and required Chinese workers to register in order to obtain residency in the United States [7]. The Act of April 29, 1902, extended the exclusion to all American possessions, and not only were Chinese workers banned from coming to the United States, but teachers, students, businessmen, tourists and government officials, who had been allowed to travel freely under the Chinese Exclusion Act, were also prevented from coming to the United States [8]. Theodore Roosevelt actively promoted the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the Supreme Court ruled that Chinese

exclusion was constitutional, as judges explained that the Chinese were another race, and they could not be assimilated into the local population, living in separate groups and clinging to the customs of their own country [10].

The Chinese were deported simply because the United States of America needed a scapegoat for the negative effects of the recession at the time, and the distinctive appearance and culture of this group of Chinese also caused resentment among whites, who saw them as having strange dreadlocks, being unchristian, behaving strangely, and living in separate groups with little interaction with other ethnic groups. The competitiveness, along with cultural animosity, fueled a rising hate of the Chinese, even leading to the notion that they did not deserve human rights [11]. When it comes to human rights, we already know from the Chinese Exclusion Act that this law not only legitimized a social environment that discriminated against the Chinese within the framework of the law, but that the Chinese were almost completely deprived of their human rights under the Chinese Exclusion Act from a contemporary human rights perspective. Consider the absurdity of a physically capable individual being denied human rights only because of their religious views, habits, and capacity to work hard. In contrast, the Chinese Exclusion Legislation was the only act in American history that used Congress to legislate racial discrimination. Throughout the development of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese were unable to defend themselves and were forced to submit to American law. The legal impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act on the Chinese was nearly devastating and irrevocable, as Chinese employees and Chinese in the United States were forced to pay for racial discrimination while also suffering for the flaws of the American legal system.

4. FAMILY, GENDER, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES UNDER THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT

The Chinese Exclusion Act impacted not just Chinese employees, but also the traditional social structure built by Chinese people in the United States. In the past, despite their low status in American society, Chinese labourers could still be considered a part of American society due to their participation in various construction projects, and they were able to develop to some extent alongside the American society of the time, achieving slow integration. The Chinese Exclusion Act effectively barred Chinese people from American culture, and Chinese labourers who lost their employment were forced to band together to make ends meet. This led to the formation of Chinatown [12], which were places where Chinese people lived, but on the other hand, the formation of Chinatown further disconnected Chinese people from American society at the time, which led to

increased racism and exclusion from the whole American society. The Chinese Exclusion Act also had a profound impact on Chinese women, even though Calavita argued that ‘The law made no mention of Chinese women, an omission eventually dealt with by the court’ [13], which was not the truth. According to American census data from 1870 to 1890, the Chinese female population living in the United States dropped from 7.2 per cent to 3.6 per cent after the Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented in 1882 [14]. Historians have proposed a variety of explanations for this phenomenon. Peffer explained that because Chinese domestic life was patriarchal at the time, emphasizing the grandeur of patriarchal and marital power, married women could only stay at home to raise their children and serve their in-laws. The old Chinese culture was one of filial piety and devotion, and it was regarded more necessary and virtuous to stay at home with one’s in-laws than with one’s spouse who was far away [15]. Other historians feel that the fundamental reason for this severe gender imbalance is because most Chinese males who immigrated to America did so to work for a living. During the gold rush on the West Coast in the mid-nineteenth century, many Chinese moved to the United States solely to escape poverty as an economic motive. Many of them had no intention of emigrating and instead hoped to return to their homeland one day. For economic reasons, many Chinese employees chose to send their earnings back to China to support their families rather than moving their families to the United States, where the cost of living was far greater than in China [16].

However, the establishment of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which reduced the entry of Chinese women immigrants, Chinese wives and daughters were not allowed to come to the United States for reunification, and Chinese women were being treated as prostitutes [15], which were the biggest factors in preventing Chinese workers from staying in the United States. This also damaged the Chinese people’s traditional family-based social structure, making already prejudiced Chinese workers even less able to belong. This also undermines the traditional Chinese social structure of the family unit, making the already marginalized Chinese workers feel even less like they belong, as they have few opportunities to bring their wives and parents to the United States, and thus even those who wish to immigrate and stay in the United States are more likely to leave the country as a result of this factor. The major cause for this was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a series of punitive regulations that barred Chinese labourers and Chinese women from entering the United States, resulting in a substantial decrease in the number of Chinese immigrants remaining in the United States between 1882 and 1943.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the essay has answered the research question from the perspectives of racial factors, legislation, and impacts on Chinese immigrants through the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Chinese exclusion in the United States was an expression of racism, with political, economic, ideological, cultural, and traditional reasons to blame. The length, extent, and intensity of the exclusion were all strongly tied to the American government’s assistance. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act fueled long-standing xenophobic sentiments and resulted in a series of major incidents in the late 1880s that not only resulted in significant damage to the lives and property of Chinese expatriates in the United States, but also severely harmed the friendship between the Chinese and American peoples. One goal of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was to safeguard Chinese labourers in the United States by restricting their access into the labour market, as well as to protect immigrants from other nations in the United States so that they could find employment relatively easily. Nevertheless, the Chinese Exclusion Act failed to remedy the challenges that white labourers faced while also denying Chinese labourers the rights that they should have had. As a federal act, it effectively legitimized an institutional climate of discrimination against Chinese people in the United States, and discrimination and exclusion of Chinese people from local governments to the public grew increasingly uncontrolled. For more than a half-century, Chinese people have been shunned by whites, refused admission into the United States, and even deported by American immigration officials. The legal code applied not just to Chinese individuals who had already moved to the United States, but to any Chinese of Chinese ancestry who attempted to enter the country. It was a moral, racial, and social concept: the American government’s treatment of immigrants of other races and Chinese immigrants was a symptom of its racial exclusion, as were the varying levels of exclusion of different socioeconomic classes. Although the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 ended the era of official Chinese exclusion in the United States, Chinese people of Chinese descent living in the United States continue to face various degrees of exclusion and even discrimination to this day, as a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act’s impact on American society and Chinese people. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act marked the commencement of modern-day racism in the United States, which is thorough, systematic, and ongoing. It is intended that in the future, the American government would better balance the interests and aspirations of different ethnic groups, and that by integrating them into society, each race will get a new identity.

The essay deepens our understanding of the Chinese immigrants’ situations at the time and shows a big picture

of the social context in the United States to help understand the trend of immigration. This research is essential to consider the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act by exploring its cause and effect. Then, it gives an account of potential impacts on Chinese immigrants.

The essay has several limitations. The analysis may be incomplete since other immigration experiences have not been covered in this essay. The single example is not persuasive to explain other immigrants' circumstances in the same period. Future studies can discuss other immigrants such as British and Irish people, which contribute to the constructive research of the nineteenth century immigration history in the United States.

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