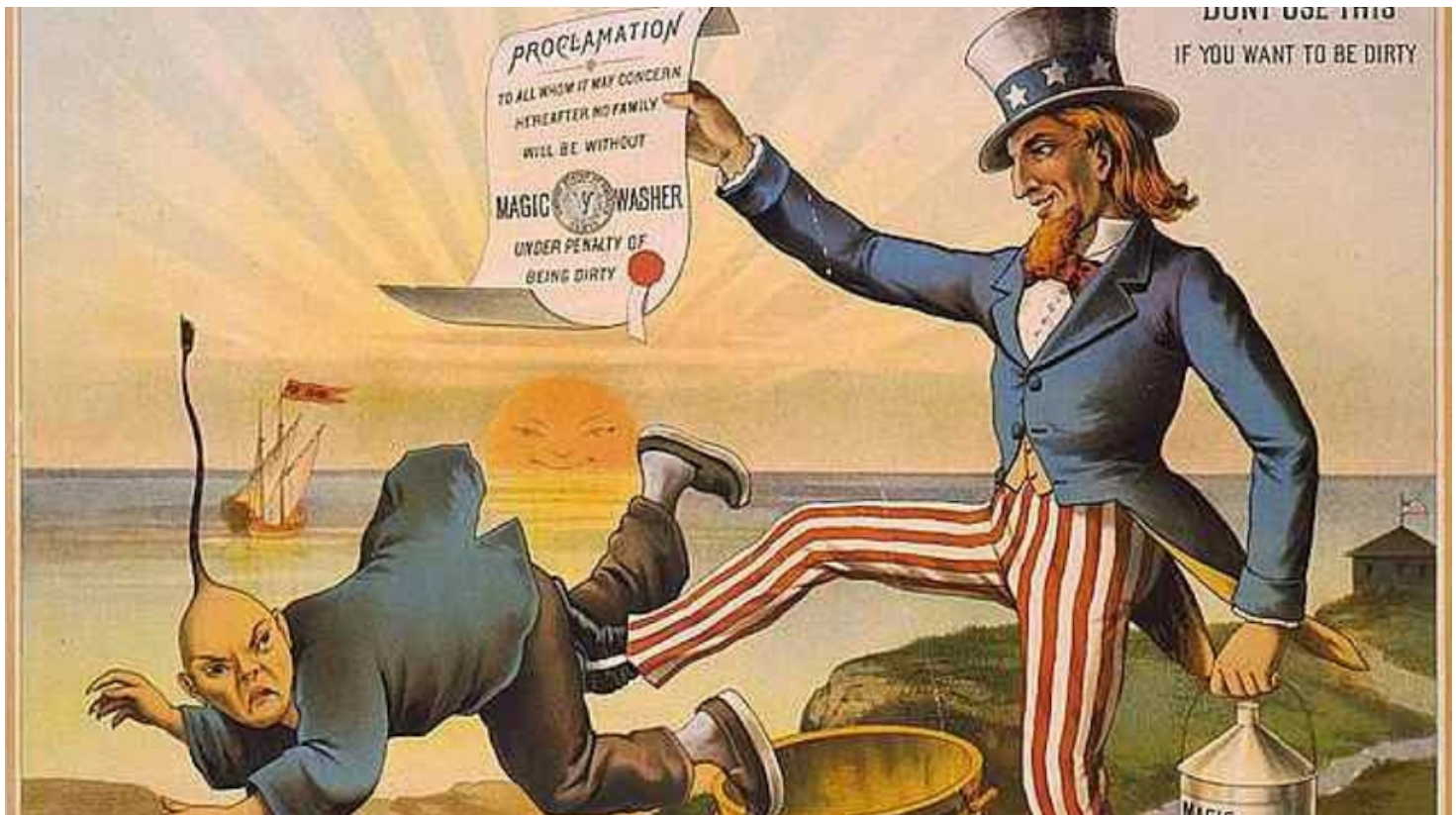


# Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts

By Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.22.17

Word Count 903

Level 1120L



This advertisement from the 1880s reflects the sometimes vicious anti-Chinese sentiment of white Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the 1850s, Chinese workers migrated to the United States. First they worked in the gold mines, but they also took agricultural jobs and factory work, especially in the clothing industry. Chinese immigrants also were particularly important in building railroads in the American West. As Chinese laborers grew successful in the United States, a number of them even started their own businesses.

As the numbers of Chinese laborers increased, so did anti-Chinese sentiment among other workers. This finally resulted in legislation in 1882 called the Chinese Exclusion Act, which aimed to limit future immigration of Chinese workers to the United States.

American objections to Chinese immigration took many forms. It generally stemmed from economic and cultural tensions, as well as ethnic discrimination.

## Chinese would work for lower wages

Most Chinese laborers came to the United States to work to send money back their families in China. At the same time, they also had to repay loans to the Chinese merchants who paid for their travels to America. This left them little choice but to work for whatever wages they could.

Non-Chinese laborers often required much higher wages to support their wives and children in the United States. Therefore, many of the non-Chinese workers in the United States came to resent the Chinese laborers, who might squeeze them out of their jobs.

Like most immigrant communities, many Chinese settled in their own neighborhoods, often called "Chinatowns." Tales spread of Chinatowns as places where large numbers of Chinese men met to do unlawful things, like gambling or smoking opium. Some advocates of anti-Chinese laws argued that admitting Chinese into the United States lowered the cultural and moral standards of American society. Others had a more racist argument for limiting immigration. They said the Chinese should be kept out of the United States because of their skin color.

### **California sets new restrictions**

The California state government passed a series of laws from the 1850s through the 1870s to address these rising social tensions. These actions were aimed at Chinese residents, and some required special licenses for Chinese businesses or workers. Other measures prevented them from becoming citizens.

Anti-Chinese discrimination and efforts to stop Chinese immigration violated the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Treaty with China. So, the federal government was able to end most of California's laws against the Chinese.

Then in 1879, laws were passed by Congress to limit the number of Chinese arriving in the U.S. to 15 per ship. Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed the bill because it violated U.S. treaty agreements with China. Nevertheless, it was still an important victory for those who wanted to keep Chinese out of the U.S.

Democrats, led by supporters in the West, advocated all-out exclusion of Chinese immigrants. Republicans were sympathetic to the concerns of the western states. But the Republicans supported free immigration. In order to satisfy the western states without offending China, President Hayes sought a revision of the Burlingame-Seward Treaty in which China agreed to limit immigration to the United States.

### **U.S. changes its treaty with China**

In 1880, the Hayes Administration appointed U.S. diplomat James B. Angell to form a new treaty with China. The resulting Angell Treaty allowed the United States to restrict, but not completely prohibit, Chinese immigration.

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. This suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of 10 years. The Act also required every Chinese person traveling in or out of the country to carry a certificate identifying his or her position as a laborer, scholar, diplomat or merchant. It was the first law in American history to place broad restrictions on immigration.

American presidents and congressmen addressing the question of Chinese exclusion had a difficult challenge. They needed to balance Americans' anti-Chinese attitudes while not violating treaty

promises and maintaining good relations with China.

The factors in the U.S. ultimately won over the international concerns. In 1888, Congress passed the Scott Act, which made reentry to the United States after a visit to China impossible, even for long-term legal residents. The Chinese government considered this act a direct insult, but was unable to prevent its passage.



### Chinese merchants try a boycott

In 1892, Congress voted to renew exclusion for 10 years in the Geary Act. By 1902, it was expanded to prevent Chinese living in Hawaii and the Philippines from entering the U.S. The Chinese government and Chinese people strongly protested this decision. Congress ignored them and later extended the Exclusion Act indefinitely.

In China, merchants responded to the humiliation of the exclusion acts by organizing a boycott of American goods in 1905. Though the movement was not accepted by the Chinese government, it received unofficial government support in the early months.

President Theodore Roosevelt recognized the boycott as a direct response to unfair American treatment of Chinese immigrants. But with America's reputation at stake, he called for the Chinese government to suppress it. After five difficult months, Chinese merchants lost the energy for the boycott, and it ended quietly.

The Chinese Exclusion Acts were not repealed until 1943, when China and the United States were allies during World War II.