Framing the "Good Asians": An Examination of Racial Optics within U.S. Discourse on Chinese Americans, 1850–1945

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Chinese Americans have been an integral facet of U.S. history and discourse, serving as a historically marginalized minority group within a population dominated by Eurocentric ideals. This paper traces the evolving racial construction of Chinese Americans in U.S. society from 1850 - 1945, revealing how legal exclusion, cultural vilification, economic pressure, and military necessity categorized their placement in America's racial hierarchy. It specifically explores how the American public created a unique identity for Chinese Americans as the "Good Asians." Beginning with early migration in search of wealth from the Gold Rush and in railroad construction, Chinese Americans were seen as economic threats that impacted the American labor market. Racism persisted through immigration and economic restrictions, as well as violent riots. However, with the continual rise of Japan and shifting geopolitical tensions, this marked a pivotal shift for the Chinese. The United States became aligned with China, and the American public sought to reframe Chinese Americans as patriotic allies. Through positive portrayals in popular media, advantageous legislation, and an empathetic population, it seemed that Americans had fully accepted the Chinese as true Americans. Yet, the creation of the "Good Asians" was deeply conditional. Seemingly pro-Chinese actions were embedded with racial prejudice, and in turn, exposed the fragile nature of American inclusion and enduring struggles for racial acceptance.

Early Sentiments

Chinese Americans have long faced internalized xenophobia and systematic discrimination within the sphere of American society, originating from the "white-only" requirement for naturalization established by the Naturalization Act of 1790 (1). As with many other American minorities, the Chinese faced an underlying impediment: a pervasive ideology that immigrants and minorities could never understand and assimilate into American life. It was further enforced that those from particularly an Asian background were unable to fully comprehend democratic notions of American values (2). This categorized entire cultures and communities as "forever-foreigners," an established term that classified those who were expected to have little involvement within the United States, as corresponding legislation isolated the Chinese. In essence, an extensive facet of Asian American history was built around a de facto legal caste system. Aside from economic and political factors often associated with souring Asian sentiments, it was this initial racial hierarchy and normative whiteness that established early sentiments of the Chinese.

Although small Chinese communities within America have existed since the 1700s, the first wave of Chinese immigrants emerged from the Taiping Rebellion, a destabilizing civil war in the Guangdong Province of Southeast China (3). Coupled with the California Gold Rush and opportunities for low-skilled labor, thousands immigrated to California and dispersed into mining and labor towns in the 1840s. However, their initial arrival and freedom are debated by historians. Many came on credit tickets, a form of debt held by American loaners and immigration agents, in which brokers paid the upfront cost of immigration in return for involuntary labor until repayment. Whether these loans could be considered as a form of indentured servitude or simply contract labor is disputed (4).

Nonetheless, Chinese laborers undertook demanding labor for economic freedom. They accepted long hours and low wages, a cause for resentment from American workers who refused these conditions. Often, American businessmen weaponized Chinese compliance, urging Americans to accept "Chinese" conditions through the threat of replacement. Labeled "Coolies," the Chinese were seen as economic threats, especially as they rarely involved themselves in the American market, opting to send remittances back to their homeland (3). Early economic recourse legislation attempted to limit their impact. The Foreign Miner Tax of 1850 placed a $20 monthly tax on foreign miners (5).

In 1853, a recession forced railroad and mining companies to consolidate and reduce costs. Renowned for embracing the lowest salaries, the Chinese quickly replaced many American workers in a time of fiscal restructuring. Violence erupted in response, with anti-Asian hate crimes and expulsions that killed and displaced hundreds. These attacks were spurred on by a critical fault of the U.S legal system that introduced a judicial ruling that effectively "legalized" murder against minorities. People v. Hall of 1854 centered on the murder of Ling Sing, a Chinese

miner, by George Hall, an American. The murder was witnessed by fellow Chinese workers who testified against Hall during the trial. Despite these testimonies, Hall was acquitted and released (6). The California Supreme Court ruled that minorities like Indians, Blacks, and Asians were inadmissible as witnesses as their testimonies were racially inferior and likely inaccurate (7). These legal precedents would set the stage for immunity against Chinese hate crimes. Fortified by the legal system, the white American workforce continued to utilize ethnocentrism and cultural differences to justify such attacks:

> Chinese do not wear our kind of clothes... and when they die, their bones are taken back to their native country. Chinese are heathens and do not bring their wives and families. Chinese gamble, and smoke opium. They eat rice but not bread. Chinese do not want to be assimilated in our culture (3).

These antagonistic sentiments manifested into vigilante expulsions across mining and labor towns, under the virtuous guise of protecting American interests. The Chinese were often forcibly and illegally expelled from their workplaces across California. At Mormon Bar in 1852, all Chinese were expelled through a local ordinance. In Columbia County, a vigilante group formed to exclude the Chinese, and in Shasta County, these vigilante groups clashed with the local government in Anti-Asian riots (8). In Yuba County, Chinese miners were given an ultimatum to leave by May 3rd, 1852, or face retaliatory violence. The Chinese demonstrated compliance to withdraw; however, American miners attacked before the deadline and forcibly expelled the entire Chinese population from the county (9).

Fundamentally, the Chinese were considered subhuman, and it was clear that public sentiment denounced Chinese presence in their country. Various legislative attempts were made to reduce immigration. In 1858, California passed legislation that placed a foreign miner tax of $2.50 per person and additional taxes on Asian miners and fishermen (10). These taxes proceeded to make working in America increasingly unviable. The Anti-Coolie Act of 1862 outlawed contracted labor from Asian countries, forcing the Chinese to rely on individual methods like the credit tickets to immigrate to the U.S (11). Interestingly, it is argued that these economic pressures bolstered Asian populations. The credit tickets restricted their return to China if debts were unpaid, and paired with economic suppression, immigrants stayed in America much longer to satisfy such financial obligations. Although immigration from China decreased, established Chinese American populations steadily expanded, reaching over 34,000 in 1860 (12).

Chinatowns and the Transcontinental Railroad

Following the end of the California Gold Rush, many Chinese transitioned to low-skill labor in industries like construction and agriculture. Former mine workers branched out into major cities and created ethnic enclaves known colloquially as “Chinatowns.” First established in California in 1850, these communities flourished from an influx of affluent Chinese immigrants, especially those escaping China’s instability. Many were forcibly excluded from American neighborhoods and thus turned towards Chinese communities to immigrate. Intellectuals and wealthy families established private dentistry offices, doctors’ clinics, and research institutions. In response to this injection of wealth, lower-class Chinese formed new restaurants and grocery stores. These numerous private establishments originated from Chinese exclusion in American industries. Educated Chinese workers were often assigned menial work in American companies as the general public insisted that Asians belong solely in intensive, low-labor jobs (3). Consequently, other Asian groups, like the Japanese and Filipinos, established Little Tokyo and Little Manila in the late 1800s in California (13). These cultural enclaves served as protection against racial discrimination. More importantly, it was built to serve the social and cultural needs of Asian Americans, whose necessities were long ignored by Americans (14).

These ethnic havens supported the development of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s and ushered in the second wave of Chinese immigration. Chinese miners and labor workers turned to the railroad for work and likely represented 90% of the workforce. Regardless of their unparalleled efficiency, the Chinese faced many of the same criticisms and treatment as their miner predecessors. They became easy targets as they largely kept to themselves and created a separate community that consumed Chinese food and practiced Chinese customs (15). They wore distinct long robes and queues, which further highlighted cultural differences. This demarcation facilitated the ideology of cultural inferiority and a sub-human existence, which again enabled Americans to justify violence. Anti-Coolie Clubs flourished and organized American labor against the Chinese. Similar to vigilante expulsions in the 1850s, the Chinese, in one instance, had their cabins burned and were driven out in Nevada County in 1867 (10). The perpetrators were not held liable and dismissed. Disparities in legal recognition and protection for the Chinese became especially pronounced. As historian David V. Dufault illustrates:

> In another incident in 1869, the Mariposa Gazette reported the robbery of two Chinamen who would, the editorial said, never get their money back because the crime had been committed

> by white men. Finally, a few years later, another Chinese died violently, but 'little trouble was taken to ascertain particulars as he was a bummer Chinaman.' (10).

In addition to physical violence, Chinese workers were assigned the most dangerous work, such as demolition and engagement with explosive ordnance. Consequently, based on reports of bones sent back to China, Chinese casualties were estimated to be around hundreds to thousands, though underreporting is likely (16). Despite this, the Chinese continued to experience pay inequality. Chinese workers earned $26 a month compared to approximately $50 a month for a white worker (16). As the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, it left many laborers scrambling for new jobs and opportunities. In this search, Americans continually disputed with Chinese workers as they competed for similar jobs. The lack of work was further exacerbated by the Depression of 1870, a financial downturn that left 100,000 Chinese and Americans unemployed. Although some returned to China, many fled to established Chinatowns in Los Angeles and Sacramento. This surge led to the further growth of vibrant Chinatowns, brimming with Asian identity.

Despite its origins in governmental financial mismanagement, enraged Americans searched for a simpler explanation for this economic downturn. Once indispensable and critical for constructing the Transcontinental Railroad, the Chinese were reconstituted as scapegoats. The thriving Chinatowns across California became distinct targets, as they served as ethnic hotbeds. In 1871, a mob of over 500 white and Latino Americans descended onto the Chinatown in Los Angeles, fueled by revenge after the death of a white man following an alleged Chinese mob shootout. Described as one of the worst hate crimes in American history, the Chinatown Massacre of 1871 led to the death of 18 Chinese men (17). These men were dragged out of Chinatown and were beaten, shot, and lynched, with the youngest being a 14-year-old boy (18). This incident had a catalytic impact on the Chinese community and erased 11% of the Chinese population in this particular Chinatown. Those accused were acquitted or released under legal technicalities. Notably, this public and violent incident garnered little public sympathy and racial tolerance, as similar terroristic attacks would persist.

Stifling the Chinese Invasion

With looming fears of economic displacement, newspapers along the West Coast began to advocate against Chinese immigration, labeling it a "Chinese Invasion." Scathing pieces highlighted the vices of gambling and opium usage within Chinese communities, and the categorization of a "parasitic people" spread rapidly among the American public. Politicians in California often ran on anti-Chinese agendas to appease voters (19). Consequently, stricter constraints were placed in hopes of moderating Chinese immigration. A landmark legislative measure, the Page Act of 1875, was the first comprehensive federal immigration ban and served as a precursor for future Asian immigration restrictions. Utilizing morality and public opinion, the act banned all Chinese women from entering the country who were likely to engage in "lewd and immoral conduct" (19). This act was branded as an effort to restrict prostitution, although its guise of protecting America's virtue held deep political and economic interests. Most importantly, this act sought to exploit Chinese male labor and quarantine culture. The Page Act ran parallel to the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, an agreement between China and the United States to improve trade and facilitate easier immigration between the two countries. While American voters encouraged transnational trade in hopes of economic prosperity, the increased accessibility of immigration faced pervasive criticism. Thus, the Page Act was a circumvention of the Burlingame Treaty that manipulated economic gain from China, at the same time, effectively nullifying the treaty's terms (19). On a macro level, the act attempted to stall the Chinese community through the restriction of Chinese women, especially as interracial marriage remained illegal.

In the following years, legislation continued to build against immigration, and no such law is as mainstream or prevalent as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. An all-encompassing piece of immigration legislation, it instituted a sweeping ban on all Chinese labor for 10 years and prohibited Chinese immigrants from gaining naturalization. These restrictions would see continual renewal until 1943 (20). As a result, the Chinese population began to stagnate and decline, as their share within the American population decreased 62% from 1880 to 1920 (12). Chinese Americans would remain the second smallest minority group in the United States with a meager .08% in 1880, only superseded by the Japanese population count of 158 (20). Aside from the inherent population decline, the existing Chinese communities experienced significant economic hostility, systemically relegated to low-skilled work. Organizations lacked trust in the Chinese to work outside the sphere of labor and believed only the white man had the capabilities to do intellectual work. This exclusion from high-paying jobs substantially limited upward mobility for future generations. Despite an unprecedentedly high literacy rate of 88%, the number of skilled Chinese workers reduced by 43%, and the number of Chinese in managerial positions decreased by 33% (21). Overarchingly, there was a drastic 80% drop in Chinese labor, which was especially prominent in urban areas (22). Even within their communities, influential Chinese talent began to flee an ever-changing and oppressive society. Highly educated Chinese, like lawyers, teachers, and diplomats, returned to

China. Powerful Chinese businessmen closed their stores and shifted investment away from Chinese communities and back to their homeland (21). Alongside exploitative wages, poverty became commonplace within the Chinese population.

Violence and Oppression

Following a complete restriction on immigration, the American public seemed to direct its attention inward and towards existing Chinese communities with a population of around 105,000. The late 1880s into the 1920s, especially, characterized a period of violence and expulsion for major Chinese settlements across the United States. The enduring surge in aggression began in Eureka, California, home to a bustling Chinatown for Chinese miners and businessmen. Americans long lamented the apparent vices that festered in Chinese communities, like the existence of whore houses, opium dens, and gambling dives (20). These concerns were catalyzed following the death of Councilman David C. Kendall, on February 5, 1885, who was killed by a stray bullet from two dueling Chinese. The once dormant population, with high rates of unemployment and loitering, gathered in hundreds chanting "Burn Chinatown" and "Hang all the Chinamen" (23). The crowd evolved into a riot, and officials were desperate to satisfy their concerns to prevent further violence. As a result, all 400 Chinese were instructed to leave within 24 hours. Faced with no other option, 4th Street in Eureka was lined with personal belongings, and all the Chinese left on two ferries for San Francisco by noon (23). Some wealthy residents protested the removal of the Chinese, though it was not from virtue or tolerance, but rather their disapproval of losing Chinese servants (23).

Similar incidents occurred in Rock Springs, Wyoming, on September 2, 1885. In the early morning, Chinese and American miners engaged in a labor dispute regarding higher pay. The conflict stemmed from a Chinese tendency to accept lower wages, which in turn created incentives for businessmen to stifle wages for white Americans. Faced with reduced wages, American miners established the Knights of Labor Union, an organization that aimed to protest for higher wages. The members asked Chinese miners to join the strike, but they refused (24). Sensing a white strike, foremen of the mines were instructed to hire only the Chinese and replace disobedient white workers with Chinese ones. This preferential treatment for the Chinese led American miners to call for the establishment of a "Whiteman's Town" (24). The Rock Spring Massacre was the first step to this white-only haven. It began as an early conflict, leading to the death of a Chinese miner from a pickaxe strike, with several others beaten. Then, white miners returned to their camp to retrieve more weapons. In the afternoon, they descended onto Chinese mining camps, killing 28 and injuring 15 (24). After extinguishing the Chinese resistance, white miners began to burn and destroy Chinese establishments. Over 80 homes were destroyed, and the Rock Spring Chinatown was decimated (24). By the next day, the remaining 500 Chinese miners were driven out of Rock Spring, and those remaining in adjacent areas in Wyoming fled in fear of persecution. The violence became so extreme that President Grover Cleveland was forced to deploy the army to suppress the racial riot and protect survivors. Indicative of deep systemic discrimination, even the military protection was begrudgingly provided. Army commanders described protecting the Chinese as undesirable, and the deployment of troops was more likely to maintain political and economic ties with China, rather than provide humanitarian aid. (25). In the aftermath, 22 white miners were arrested on September 7, 1885, in connection with the Rock Spring Massacre. Yet, the perpetrators were all acquitted and released on bail, as fellow white miners refused to testify (26).

Five days after the Rock Springs Massacre, on September 7, 1885, a group of whites and Indians descended onto a Chinese mining camp in Squak Valley (Issaquah) in Washington. They began shooting into tents and killed three Chinese miners: Fung Wai, Mox Goat, and Ying Sun (27). The next day, all Chinese miners fled the area, and their possessions were subsequently burned. The Squak Valley Riot would be the first incident of a troubling string of anti-Chinese hate crimes within Washington. On September 11, a Chinese man was kidnapped, and the Chinese work quarters were burned in Newcastle (28). Eight days after that incident, a mob of white miners drove Chinese miners out of Black Diamond, injuring eight Chinese (28). On September 27th, all Chinese were ordered to leave Franklin Mines in Washington within 24 hours (28). Two months later, in Tacoma, Chinese workers were given a deadline to relocate by November 1st. Chinese communities decided to ignore the warning, and on November 3rd, a large mob congregated. They rounded up all the Chinese and forced them onto a train bound for Portland, Oregon (29). White Americans then burned Tacoma's Chinatown and Chinese homes. A few months later, in Seattle, a large riot organized by the same union from the Rock Spring Massacre, the Knights of Labor, forcibly expelled over 350 Chinese from their homes. The mob led the Chinese to the pier where they were compelled to leave on a steamboat paid by the rioters (30). Rioters could only pay for the passage of 212, and the 150 Chinese remaining were mandated to board a train towards Tacoma. The army was deployed once again to prevent further violence, and the 150 Chinese were given safe passage aboard another steamship. The majority of the expelled returned to China and recounted their violent treatment within the Qing Dynasty, further souring U.S.-China relationships (30).

In a gold mining town located in Hells Canyon, Oregon, xenophobic disputes brewed between the Chinese miners and the American communities. The Chinese arrived only eight months prior, in October 1886, and mainly lived separate from the American mining camps (31). In late May of 1887, seven horse thieves, Bruce Evans, J. Titus Canfield, Frank Vaughan, Robert McMillan, Hezekiah Hughes, Hiram Maynard, and Homer LaRue, arrived at Hells Canyon (31). At this point, the recounting of the events begins to differ. According to Findley, a local historian during that period, the thieves initially planned a massacre against the Chinese, and the gold was merely a bonus (31). Another local historian, Horner, believed this was a spur-of-the-moment crime. The crew had struggled to smuggle stolen horses along the Snake River, as numerous horses drowned. Coincidentally, there was a mining camp positioned near the river, run by the Chinese, that owned a boat. They supposedly asked permission to use the boat, but the Chinese refused. Bruce Evans, the leader of the group, proposed to kill the Chinese and steal the vessel (31). Regardless of conflicting testimonies, what is certain is that on May 25, 1887, the thieves used .22 caliber rifles to ambush and kill 34 Chinese miners. One Chinese miner survived the attack, but the perpetrators stalked and killed him with blunt force to the head (32). The bodies were thrown into the Snake River, the tents and equipment were burned, and around $5000 worth of gold was stolen (33). Only 10 miners were ever identified: Chea-po, Chea-Sun, Chea-Yow, Chea-Shun, Chea Cheong, Chea Ling, Chea Chow, Chea Lin Chung, Kong Mun Kow, and Kong Ngan. Little is known about the 24 other victims, though they were assumed to be from the Chea Clan and likely previously worked in railroad construction (31). The seven thieves were arrested and faced trial, although they were all acquitted and released (33). The Hells Canyon Massacre was then obfuscated from the public, and information about the event only began to resurface in 1995. In 2012, the canyon was renamed Chinese Massacre Cove in remembrance (31).

Yellow Peril

The early 1900s represent a radical transformation of anti-Chinese xenophobia and embody the development of an early doctrine known as Yellow Peril. First popularized in Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm II, this movement exemplified a heightened fear and disdain towards the Chinese, with a continued reinforcement of Anglo-Saxon superiority within the United States. While previous decades of anti-Chinese discrimination drew from economic exclusion, immigration restriction, and violence, the era of Yellow Peril emphasized disenfranchisement based on the perceived inability of Chinese immigrants to assimilate (34). Instead of economic competitors, the Chinese were redefined as contaminants to the cultural majority and counteractive to American values and ideals. In essence, the discussion around the Chinese became one of preserving morality. For example, a San Francisco Chronicle columnist once wrote in 1901:

> I need not to expatiate upon the evils of Asiatic immigration to our shores. All who have eyes may see the blighted corrupting influence… how the presence of Orientals in our City and State, with their degraded habits and practices, has poisoned the pure springs of morality and religion, and corrupted by its evil influence all our social life. (35)

Similar newspapers reinforced and sensationalized common Chinese vices of drug usage and gambling. More specifically, Chinatowns began to be re-identified as red-light districts that served immoral pleasures and enabled moral decay (36). There had long been a sexual imbalance within the Chinese community, with 20-30 males for every female (36). The male dominance led to flourishing prostitution rings within Chinatown that aimed to serve the large population of bachelor Chinese men. Serving as the perennial red-light district, however, white men were drawn in and became regular customers, dominating sexual spaces like brothels and cheap motels (36). The public criticized the Chinese for enticing and corrupting male Americans, with further condemnation that the Chinese catalyzed the corruption of sexual purity and contributed to sexual immorality. In addition, opponents proclaimed the sexual danger Chinese men posed to white women. Citing sexual deviancy combined with opium usage, news organizations warned that rape and other sexual crimes were likely to be committed (36). A critical concern was interracial marriage, which was believed to degrade the sanctity of white women. Americans thought that even a single drop of the "Chinaman's" blood would taint the pure bloodline (37). This fear of miscegenation and the deformation of the American or Anglo-Saxon race furthered the movement of Yellow Peril and its emphasis on morality and reinforcing American values.

Concurrently, traditional Asian culture and religion countered the rising evangelical Americanism within the United States. This strong initiative of forced Christian conversion targeted specific minority groups like African Americans and Native Americans. On the other hand, the Chinese held historic beliefs in religions like Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which posed significant impediments to religious transformations (38). Christian missionaries, therefore, focused their efforts on mainland China, believing it was more critical to evangelize there than among Chinese Americans, whose beliefs and cultural practices were perceived as more deeply entrenched. It follows that, in the San Francisco Call of 1901, Reverend William Rader proclaimed that the proper

place to Christianize the Chinese was in China, and that non-Christian Chinese Americans were simply religious corrupters (39). These beliefs facilitated the development of the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL), a white supremacist group that lobbied for the separation of the Chinese from American society. Their policies were built on a racially dominated framework, partially established upon Christian interests. A primary focus point of dialogue was their efforts to segregate Asian children like the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese into so-called "Oriental schools." The AEL argued to the San Francisco Board of Education that Oriental children could corrupt and demoralize American children (40). However, following Tape v. Hurley, Chinese students had already been permitted to enroll in public schools since 1885. While it granted the right for public enrollment, it created a legal circumvention that established a separate Chinese school system to maintain racial homogeneity within education. The pressure by the AEL and the subsequent decision by the San Francisco Board of Education in 1906 reinforced segregation by creating additional Oriental schools that ensured that Chinese children remained outside of American public schools (40).

A Turning Point

For over 80 years, Chinese immigrants faced exclusionary laws, racial violence, and cultural vilification from the American public. Holding a lower-class identity, the Chinese were commonly considered "forever-foreigners." This negative public sentiment was profoundly entrenched and reinforced within all forms of media and culture. It seemed that the sole existence of the Chinese counteracted what it meant to be American. Despite the historical prevalence of these beliefs, the late 1930s represent a radical transformation within U.S. discourse regarding Chinese Americans. This turning point can be attributed to the shifting global framework and the unexpected alignment of Sino-American relationships amidst the rapid militarization by Imperial Japan.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, China and Japan were viewed by the United States as key strategic and economic partners in East Asia, with a multitude of trade and labor agreements. America consistently highlighted the importance of aligning with the Far East, despite its negative inclination towards Chinese and Japanese Americans. These parallel agreements with two major East Asian countries were quickly challenged during the First Sino-Japanese War. It entailed a rapid Japanese invasion of mainland China from 1894 to 1895. The conflict remained contained and decisive, posing little disruption to American interests in the region (41). This first engagement allowed America to avoid involvement, and the status of Chinese Americans stayed relatively consistent. This changed following the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The scale and brutality of Japan's actions prompted Americans to reassess their views on the Chinese. Japan became more militaristic and violent, and the West noticed the dangers of Japanese aggression (42). As Japan brutally forced its armies into major cities, the Chinese were seen as innocent victims of a hostile conquest and virtuous defenders of their land. The Washington Times wrote on September 1, 1937:

> Blindingly rushing from the oncoming slaughter, Chinese non-combatants crowd into the international settlement in Shanghai. As the invaders creep closer, the grief-stricken and scared inhabitants run through the streets seeking a haven. Dread cholera has now added to the suffering of the much-afflicted people in the war-torn city (43).

A month later, 10,000 Chinese and White Americans protested the occupation of China and the frequent brutality of Chinese citizens at Madison Square Garden. 51 prominent figures participated, including union organizer Joseph Curran, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam. New York's mayor endorsed the rally and proclaimed that New York extended its full sympathy and support to halt the atrocities (44). It seemed that empathy for the Chinese extended to every facet of the American public, as everyday Americans felt more compassionate towards mainland China. This shift held significance for Chinese Americans, who were often perceived as extensions of mainland China. As a result, the praise directed at China elevated the status of Chinese communities in the United States. Philanthropic organizations were established to support both Chinese civilians and Chinese American communities during the war. United Services to China, established by the Rockefeller Foundation, donated millions of dollars to uplift Chinese communities (45). More importantly, as Japan's aggression escalated, China's resistance increasingly aligned with American economic and geopolitical interests, especially as Chinese diplomats promised to cooperate with Western nations like the United States (42). For example, the West routinely established an objective of stability, as it was a critical aspect in maintaining economic connections with the East. During the war, Japan banned commerce in conquered Chinese ports, which severely limited trade with Western countries. In a broader geopolitical sense, the Chinese were seen as the first line of defense against Japanese authoritarianism. In 1937, the Japanese began advancing into southern China, which notably held a considerable number of American interests and American nationals. Especially in the besieged city of Shanghai, there were many American and British diplomats who were trapped. The Sunday Star also reported that America held

investments valued at over one billion in 1937 that the Japanese refused to protect (46). In Nanjing, the evacuation of workers and families from the American oil company, Standard Oil, was contingent solely on Chinese protection. The United States increasingly depended on China to safeguard its economic interests and the safety of its nationals (42). Major newspapers publicly praised the return of many families to the United States and specifically commended Chinese support.

Furthermore, Japanhad direct militaristic combat against the American Navy, further vilifying the Japanese and heroizing the Chinese. The USS Panay, a river gunboat, traveled alongside three American tankers from Standard Oil on the Yangtze River. The gunboat was part of an Asiatic task force aimed at protecting Chinese property and American lives (42). Despite prominent American flags displayed on the mast and painted alongside the hull, Japanese bombers dropped 18 bombs on the USS Panay and its convoy (47). All four ships were critically hit and sunk. Three Americans were killed, and many unreported Chinese workers died. The survivors abandoned the USS Panay and evacuated using motorboats to the shore. On the coastline, many wounded sought out local Chinese towns for assistance. For two extended days, Chinese towns provided sustenance and medicine and alerted American officials to rescue (48). In the aftermath, Japan claimed the USS Panay incident was a catastrophic mistake and quickly paid a remittance of around 40 million. Still, the event raised public outrage and called for a retaliatory response. An artist, James Flagg, drew this poster in 1938 in connection with this event (see Figure 1 [49]).

Figure 1. ***"Importance of Shanghai For Chiang is Political."*** Evening Star*, September 12, 1937.*

While the Japanese apology was diplomatically accepted, the heroism of Chinese civilians in aiding American sailors stood in stark contrast to Japanese aggression, further endearing the Chinese to the American public and reinforcing their image as allies in an increasingly violent conflict.

These increasingly positive views on Chinese Americans within the context of the early Sino-Japanese War reached an apex following the Rape of Nanjing from 1937 to 1939. It was a mass atrocity involving widespread killings and sexual violence against Chinese civilians by the Japanese army. Five prominent American and British journalists in Nanjing quickly released extensive reports that reported the atrocities to the American public. Frank Tillman Durdin, a reporter for the New York Times, stated:

> The unrestrained cruelties of the Japanese are to be compared only with the vandalism in the Dark Ages in Europe or the brutalities of medieval Asiatic conquerors. The helpless Chinese troops, disarmed for the most part and ready to surrender, were systematically rounded up and executed (50).

The reports of Chinese bodies piled 5 feet tall, mass executions by the waterfront, rape of Chinese women, and the thousands of civilian casualties occupied the front pages of all American newspapers (50). The American public was horrified by these atrocities, and Chinese Americans quickly gained sympathy. Previously discussed philanthropic organizations received an influx of donations and support, and Western nationals attempted to contact the Japanese on behalf of the Chinese (50). American missionaries were especially vocal during the Rape of Nanjing. Churches had been sending missionaries to China, reaching 8,235 by 1926, and growing to a sizable population by 1937 (51). These American missionaries established their own communities, churches, and

universities, like Ginling College, an all-female Christian school. However, as American journalists reported, Ginling students became victims of Japanese murder and rape (50). The New York Times further reported anti-American activities by Japanese soldiers, such as looting homes of visiting American professors and burning the American flag. In addition to the empathetic support for Chinese Americans, the Chinese were now seen as brave defenders of American ideals and institutions (50). However, their newfound sympathy did not translate into complete acceptance, and they still firmly held a position as a second-class citizen. It rather positioned them as circumstantial allies within a racial hierarchy that continued to discriminate against Chinese Americans.

World War II and Pear Harbor

As global conflicts escalated within Europe, the United States found itself entrenched in a stance of isolationism and neutrality. Though direct military action was restricted, America increasingly positioned itself against Nazi Germany and its encroachment on Western Europe (52). The American public often called for the U.S. to support its allies abroad and suppress the proliferation of fascism. Although the debates for involvement remained, it had become increasingly apparent that, should the United States abandon its stance of neutrality, it would align itself with the Allied powers.

On September 27, 1940, Japan officially joined Germany and Italy through the Tripartite Pact and formally aligned itself with the Axis Powers (53). U.S. officials criticized the Pact as an effort to control American influence and contain U.S. involvement (54). At this point, America fought essentially by proxy, supplying military supplies to allies like the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. The American public expressed dissatisfaction with isolationism, and many actively called for military action against Japan (54). In response, Americans turned to the Chinese and their prolonged war against the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War. The United States and China became unofficial allies with the common interest of suppressing the Japanese influence. China had joined the early workings of the American war effort, and Americans felt eager to support their fellow Chinese Americans. Dozens of Chinese relief organizations were established to assist, with major groups raising over $1 million (55). Eight white women formed the "American Committee for Chinese War Orphans," advocating for humanitarian aid to China. Traditional non-profits like the American Red Cross added China to their fundraising efforts (55). The United China Relief (UCR), consisting of American churches, women's clubs, and civic groups, aimed to educate Americans about the Chinese war effort. The UCR drew parallels to the American Revolution and noted that, as America bravely fought for democracy from Britain, China was gallantly resisting Japanese authoritarianism (55). They began developing publicity packets, handing out screenings and lectures of the Chinese war effort, providing educational kits, and coordinating with New York City's Fifth Avenue to develop China-related clothing and items (55). The Chinese were prominently displayed, no longer in smear campaigns, but rather as a critical ally. The slogan, "Cheer China," resonated throughout New York City streets. One of UCR's most famous campaigns captured this shifting sentiment: "If the European war does not engulf us, America will yet wake up about China and be ready to do a typical American job for China." (55).

Thus, a new perception formed about China and Chinese Americans. Emerging from its traditional roots was a new China– one that was democratic, Christian, and open to Americanization (55). It seemed that America, now more than ever, was eager to explore and participate in Chinese culture, rather than evading it. The once lamented "Oriental" atmosphere of Chinatowns slowly became a source of appreciation and a component of American identity. When plans were made to modernize San Francisco's Chinatown, city planners and economic officials believed that it would strip away the individuality that gave San Francisco its charm (55). China-relief fundraisers were hosted in Chinatown in a way that emphasized Chinese traditions. Store owners were dressed in traditional gowns, red-buttoned mandarin hats, and performed in dragon costumes. Notably, the engagement with Chinese food represented a significant shift in attitude. Within anti-Chinese propaganda, dogs, cats, and humans were common dishes that were associated with the Chinese. These unusual and immoral eating habits further pushed the notion of racial inferiority and cultural separation among Americans. But as visitors commended the traditional Chinese dishes they tasted in Chinatown, it created a sense of community and appreciation (55). In a way, the food gave a reason for Americans to accept the Chinese besides military necessity. No longer were Chinatowns an undesirable stain on American cities, but an integral hub of identity and culture. These represented the early beginnings of the acceptance and willingness of Americans to carve out a place for Chinese citizens.

The informal partnership between China and the United States would shortly be solidified, as Japanese bombers would attack U.S. soil on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor. The next day, America would declare war on Japan and formally enter World War II. Germany and Italy would declare war on the United States, and America would align itself firmly with the Allied Powers. Consequently, the United States and China became formal allies, and both countries understood the importance of this coalition. China relied heavily on American military supplies, which were sent through the Land-Lease agreement. America adopted a "Europe-First" strategy and relied solely on

China to occupy the Japanese soldiers until Europe was liberated (56). As Chinese and American war efforts continued to intertwine, the Americans had pivotal societal developments around Chinese Americans.

Construction of the "Good Asians"

As the Sino-Japanese American war humanized the Chinese, World War II can be categorized as an attempt to Americanize the Chinese. From 1941 to 1945, there was an enduring effort to replace the historical belief of a "forever-foreigner" and construct an American identity with this original classification as a "Good Asian." It can not be overstated, however, that while the "Good Asian" represented the categorical rise in Chinese reputation, it could only exist due to the vilification of Japanese Americans. The December 1941 issue of Life Magazine, titled: "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese," portrayed Chinese Americans with positive beauty standards that would be appreciated by the American public. It stated that the Chinese had finely bridged noses, delicate bone structure, long legs, and were relatively tall (57). Life Magazine claimed that the Chinese were refined and stood at the pinnacle of Asians. In contrast, the Japanese were seen as pudgy, short, scruffy, and immensely proud to be descendants of the Northern Chinese. The Chinese dominated this newly formed racial hierarchy and were seen as the most desirable.

As World War II escalated, Americans turned towards the Chinese to bolster the war effort, both at home and on the battlefield. Embracing a newfound appreciation, Chinese Americans proudly joined the campaign, believing that it was an immense honor to serve the United States (44). It seemed that the efforts to Americanize the Chinese had been reciprocal. Americans began to accept the Chinese as American, and in turn, Chinese Americans responded in ways that reinforced this emerging status to demonstrate loyalty. Around 20,000 Chinese American men enlisted, serving within mainly non-segregated units. Their inclusion in non-segregated units was surprising, especially in the context of extensive African American segregation. The acceptance into non-segregated units further demonstrated the American acceptance of Chinese as citizens. Back at home, Chinese American women filled the gap in the labor market, working as shipbuilders, mechanics, and aircraft assemblers (58). Local Chinatowns were renowned for raising millions in war bonds, and overall, the Chinese were praised for their patriotism, hard work, and contribution to the war effort. In Hollywood, movies such as "China" and "Dragon Seed" depicted Chinese valiantly resisting Japanese occupation and showed Chinese Americans and Americans violently liberating these controlled communities (59). The most indicative of shifting perception in World War II comes from a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, who writes:

> Next time you're eating or drinking in the district, don't let the fancy neon lights, the Cantonese talk, or the Oriental architecture fool you. These people are American through and through. The fact that their parents may have come from the old country and that their children have a tougher Americanization job on their hands than most of us makes them all the better Americans (60).

The opinion here is clear: Chinese Americans and the various cultures and practices they had were inherently American. The only roadblock, it seemed, for Chinese Americans was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that continued to define them as anti-American. U.S. lawmakers swiftly acted in 1943 to repeal the law and allow Chinese Americans to increase their participation in the United States. On May 25th, a committee within the Senate was established called the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion, with Robert J. Walsh serving as the chairman. They had three main goals: repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act, allow Chinese Americans to naturalize, and create a new immigration quota for the Chinese (51). Congressman Magnuson introduced these objectives in the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act. The support for the repeal was overwhelming, and the act easily passed both congressional houses. President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the bill and called the Chinese Exclusion Act a "historic mistake." For the first time in 60 years, Chinese citizens were allowed to immigrate under a quota and naturalize into American citizens. A month after the act, Edward Bing Kan became the first Chinese American to naturalize after living in the United States for 52 years. While earlier efforts to Americanize the Chinese focused on cultural acceptance and economic contribution, the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act granted the Chinese legal means to claim American identity. Chinese Americans were no longer just perceived as Americans; they were, for the first time in American history, legally recognized as such.

The American Facade Blurs

Superficially, it may seem that the United States had comprehensively accepted Chinese Americans as their own, and that, in this period, the Chinese had finally achieved equality. Yet, beneath this facade of wartime acceptance, longstanding racial prejudices did not fully disappear.

At the onset of World War II, Nazi Germany justified their invasions, partially, by asserting the existence of superior and inferior races. For Hitler, this was a racial war in which the dominant Aryan race was given the right to expand. The United States vehemently opposed all German justifications of war and claimed that Americans should engage in this "good war" against racism. The public

believed in seeking justice for groups that the Germans believed to be inferior, like the Polish and Jewish. However, German and Japanese scholars promptly noted the racial hypocrisy, where Americans had their own racial hierarchy where whites were superior and minorities, like the Chinese, were inferior. In this sense, the Americans were no different from the Germans, and their intentions of fighting a "good war" against a racial war were ignorant of their own racism (58). Japanese propagandists utilized this to highlight contradictions and tarnish America's reputation. In newspapers and radio, propaganda reinforced that while America fights for equality in Europe, the Asians in their own country will never achieve equality (56). They especially noted how in 1942, the Secretary of State, Sumner Wells, stated:

> The discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed or color must be abolished, for America was fighting a war to 'assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world as well as in the world of the Americas' (56).

The Japanese then critiqued America for maintaining anti-Chinese laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, contradicting their stance of equality. The American public realized that to become the champions of righteousness and preserve their international image, they had to redefine their own domestic race relations. Therefore, the effort to Americanize and empower the Chinese was not fully from appreciation, but rather a conceited attempt to be perceived as ethical, moral, and fair.

Similarly, many other seemingly pro-Chinese behaviors contained traces of racial inferiority and discrimination. The integration of Chinese soldiers into non-segregated units seemed to imply that Americans saw the Chinese as equals; however, discrimination within these units was widespread. The Chinese rarely saw any recognition and were among the last to be promoted. Awards and medals were barely awarded, and only recently were initiatives created to acknowledge the efforts of the Chinese. In 2020, six Chinese American veterans were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. One of the recipients, Robert M. Lee, expressed gratitude but noted his disappointment in how long it took to receive the award, highlighting how many other Chinese American veterans could have received the Congressional Gold Medal if they had not died before receiving recognition (61). War films depicting the Chinese, like the aforementioned "China" and "Dragon Seed," did indeed portray Chinese Americans in an affirming manner. However, these supposedly Chinese characters were played exclusively by white actors. Studios consistently utilized yellowface and caricatured the stereotypical image of the Chinese, creating a false and almost negative representation. To play Jade in "Dragon Seed," prominent actor Katherine Hepburn adopted an exaggerated accent, a painted yellow hue, and slanted eye makeup to portray the Chinese (62). These casting decisions reflected an industry-wide assumption that audiences preferred white leads, even in roles meant to depict Asians. More broadly, it illustrates how, despite the tokenistic celebration of the Chinese, American media maintained and favored a Eurocentric structure. Within the scope of popular media, the racial hierarchy persists.

Ostensibly, the pinnacle of Americanization and acceptance of Chinese Americans is widely credited to the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act, yet it also remains deeply entangled with underlying racial motivations. When the Chinese were finally allowed to immigrate in 1943, there was a hard quota of 105 visas per year. This was in stark contrast to European immigration that followed the Immigration Act of 1924, which granted visas derived from 2% of the existing population in the United States (63). This substantially benefited Europeans who had an established population, and their quota was set to 150,000 visas per year. For a country set on embracing the Chinese, it would be extremely disingenuous to only allow 105 Chinese a year, especially after a 60-year ban. Indeed, there was no effort to restore population growth and allow Chinese Americans to establish themselves, and Americans still held concerns regarding the Chinese presence. Another aspect of the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act allowed citizens to naturalize and become American citizens. The Chinese, however, were never recognized as equals to white Americans. Interracial marriage was strictly forbidden, as historic rhetoric of Chinese inferiority perpetually fears that they would contaminate the white bloodline. Legally, the Chinese were seen as Americans, but socially, the Chinese were considered beneath, and miscegenation would continue to be illegal until 1967 (64).

Conclusion

The perception of Chinese Americans radically shifted thought the history of the United States. From the Gold Rush and Transnational Railroad, the Chinese were portrayed as economic threats, ones that stole jobs from Americans and neglected the U.S. economy. Chinese culture was determined to be inferior and the source of vices like gambling, prostitution, and moral corruption. Americans extensively limited Chinese influence, by enacting encompassing immigration restrictions and segregating the Chinese into separate communities and schools. A pivotal shift in Chinese American perception originates from the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Within the shifting geopolitical atmosphere, China had found itself as critical allies to the United States. Therefore, the views on Chinese Americans would radically change. The Chinese were now renowned as being kind,

patriotic, and brave. Most importantly, the Chinese were praised by Americans for stimulating the Allied war effort. This contrasted the Japanese, who were categorically seen as violent American allies. Thus, the American public, who once despised the Chinese, reidentified Chinese Americans as the "Good Asians." From this classification, the Chinese were formally equated as true Americans, however, this positive demeanor did not lead to Chinese equality. Instead, it revealed deeply entrenched racial ideologies, and demonstrated the complex position Chinese Americans occupied within American society. It illustrated the persistent denomination as "forever-foreigner," despite a century of reform and varying racial optics of the Chinese within the United States.

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