

Paper Trails of Immigration and Discrimination: Evidence from Chinese Exclusion

In 1875, the United States enacted its first ever federal immigration restriction. The Page Act effectively banned all Chinese women from entering the country and was quickly followed by a series of Chinese Exclusion laws sequentially restricting other types of immigration from China. Legally in force until 1943 (and effective until 1965), these policies were the culmination of years of violent backlash against Chinese immigrants in the American West.

Chinese Exclusion laid the groundwork for the contemporary U.S. immigration system, in fact serving as “the main catalyst that transformed the United States into a gatekeeping nation” (Lee 2003, 9). Now-widespread measures such as visas and registration documents, entry interviews, detention, and deportation were designed to regulate late 19th-century Chinese immigration. In both rhetoric and in practice, the Chinese became the prototypical “illegal alien,” whose unassimilability could only be solved by removal (Lew-Williams 2018). Over a century later, the Supreme Court upheld the federal government’s right to ban immigration based on national origin (*Trump v. Hawaii* 965 U.S., 2018).

As the first major non-white immigrant group in the United States, the Chinese case could provide important insight into core sociopolitical processes like racial boundary formation, immigrant integration, and immigration policy effectiveness. However, here too they have been excluded. This omission has been longstanding; for example, a seminal account of American nativism dismissed Asian exclusion movements as “tangential” (Higham 1955, cited in Lee 2003). Chinese immigrants mainly resided in Western states, so they were not included in foundational analyses of ethno-racial segregation and discrimination, which focused mainly on African Americans in the South and European immigrants on the East Coast. However, ignoring such regional political economies and racial structures can lead to an incomplete or even distorted view of underlying social processes (Fox 2012).

This dissertation therefore aims to re-center the historical Chinese experience in the study of racial formation and immigration policy in the United States. Its three papers will 1) explore the role of anti-Chinese policies in residential segregation patterns before Exclusion, 2) introduce newly digitized archival data and a refined matching algorithm for tracking Chinese immigrants across time, and 3) employ said

methods to assess Exclusion's effects on the geographic mobility of Chinese migrants. I aim to eventually write a book exploring the underlying social conditions leading to anti-Chinese nativism and assessing Exclusion's impact on Chinese immigrants and their communities (including internal and international migration, labor market outcomes, and social mobility trends).

Paper 1: Pre-Exclusion Segregation Patterns and Policies

Chinese immigrant communities are often portrayed as the prototypical ethnic enclave, a “distinct type of community” with a fairly homogenous social structure across space and time (Chan 1984, 24-25). This paper uses full-count historical census data to challenge this misconception. I first show that Chinese segregation patterns varied across space in 1870; next, I demonstrate that segregation increased between 1870 and 1880 in places that passed ordinances restricting where the Chinese could work and live.

This paper will bring the role of restrictive policies in shaping *immigrant* segregation to the fore, drawing on a growing body of work proving the long-term effects of zoning, restrictive covenants, and redlining on persistent segregation in African American communities (see e.g. Rothstein 2017). Though many immigrant groups – the Chinese in particular – faced restrictions on where they could live and work, studies of immigrant segregation still largely rely on group characteristics or network effects to explain residential clustering (Massey & Tannen 2018). The 19th century Chinese were the target of myriad restrictive state laws and local ordinances, including some that became the legal precedent for the restrictions later used against African Americans (see e.g. Jones-Correa 2000).

The first part of this paper highlights that Chinese immigrants were widespread across 1870 California, living in 300 of 348 townships (minor civil divisions) and every county. The mean township's population was 12% Chinese (161 Chinese residents), ranging from approximately 0 to 79% Chinese. This wide dispersion provides preliminary evidence that the Chinese did not simply cluster together. Building on Eriksson and Ward (2019), the next-door-neighbor segregation index shows that while Chinese segregation was high in places, this also varied substantially across the state.

The second part of this paper shows the evolution of Chinese segregation until 1880, focused on 36 townships (accounting for 70% of the total Chinese population) that were able to pass local ordinances. I am currently finalizing a database of the full text of these polices, which I will search by known keywords (such as “laundry”) and street names where Chinese immigrants lived to identify anti-Chinese restrictive ordinances. I hypothesize that 1880 segregation levels will be higher in places that passed such laws.

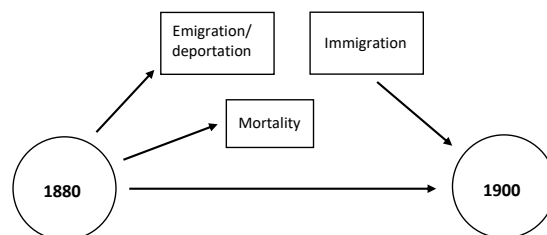
Paper Two: Methods (Matching Algorithm for Non-Romanized Names)

The second paper turns to the issue of tracking Chinese immigrants over time and space. Historical record linkage entails finding the same individual in two or more datasets (typically censuses), using characteristics such as names, birthplaces, and ages. Multiple automated algorithms have been developed to maximize the accuracy and efficiency of such efforts (summarized in Abramitzky et al 2019). However, such approaches are ineffective for historical Chinese communities due to poor and uneven name transcription. A preliminary match of the 1880 to 1900 census is indicative: the “fully automated” approach developed by Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson (2014) matches 1.2%-4.4% of Chinese individuals between 1880 and 1900, depending on the selected parameters.

I hypothesize the match rate would increase substantially if Chinese names were standardized both within and across data sources. For example, currently the algorithm would not match individuals with surnames “Lee” and “Li”. I propose using Chinese character surnames as a form of dimension reduction, drawing on a contemporaneous source (Gardner 1909) to identify the character equivalent(s) of common Chinese surname transcriptions. By condensing multiple spellings into fewer characters (e.g. “Lee” and “Li” are the same character), I will have a more concise set of names to match individuals across multiple data sources. Preliminary work drawing on digitized Chinese Exclusion records from New York supports the potential of this approach. For 100 surnames, one character is used in 90+% of cases, while one character appears 75-89% of the time for another 35 transcribed surnames. This approach could also be applied to other immigrant groups with poorly transcribed names (such as the Japanese).

I am also digitizing immigration, emigration, and mortality records from the US National Archives with the goal of painting a complete picture of changes in the Chinese community from 1880 to 1900. I

begin with publicly available census microdata for 1880 and 1900. Newly collected mortality and emigration/deportation records will measure outflows from the 1880 population, while immigration records count individuals who entered the U.S. after 1880 (shown graphically below).



These data sources include a range of demographic information, including name, age, occupation, location of last residence, date of original and most recent arrival/departure, and certificate (visa) number. My approach is similar to the Early Indicators Project (Costa et al 2018), in that I draw on multiple data sources with the goal of finding a match in any of them. This could mean identifying someone in the 1880 census who died in 1887, or a newly arrived 1896 immigrant in the 1900 census. Though data collection and digitization have moved more slowly than expected due to Covid-19, all emigration records for San Francisco (the major port of entry/exit) are complete and immigration records are in process.

Paper 3: How Exclusion Affected Chinese Migration (Job Market Paper)

My job market paper will employ the data and algorithm described above to assess how different forms of immigration control impacted Chinese migration flows in the late nineteenth century. Chinese Exclusion was not only the first federal immigration restriction ever implemented; its various iterations of increasing stringency and experiments with different forms of border enforcement provide a unique opportunity to study the effects of each policy tweak. The 1882 restrictions allowed Chinese residents of the United States to return, creating a large circular flow. This “propped door” slammed shut with the 1888 Scott Act, which voided return permits; Chinese entries dropped accordingly (Lew-Williams 2014). As new restrictions were sequentially introduced, how did Chinese populations change?

Census data provides high-level insights on how the Chinese-born population in the United States changed under Exclusion. While California’s Chinese population – home to 71% of Chinese-born individuals in the US in 1880 – plummeted, communities on the Eastern Seaboard demonstrated substantial

growth. A traditional explanation of this geographic dispersion is that the Chinese attempted to escape Californian violence, scattering “themselves throughout the country instead of being conspicuously concentrated in one state” (Wu 1958, 12). However, these trends are impossible to disentangle through aggregate data, and difficult to granularly measure due to the lack of 1890 census microdata. By tracking individuals across time, I will be able to assess whether Chinese migrants already present in the western United States moved eastward, or if new Eastern communities were comprised of new migrants. I also aim to answer questions about how many individuals returned home permanently, traveled circularly, or entered the United States for the first time during this period.

The approximately 100,000 unique records I collect will be made publicly available as a panel dataset linking Chinese immigrants present in the US in 1880 to arrival/return records, mortality records, and the 1900 census.

Works Cited

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