

OVERSEAS CHINESE IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

1. Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, due to many reasons, the number of overseas Chinese (the Chinese that went away from their homeland to live in other countries) increased rapidly; and the United States was one of their most splendid destinations. This article explores the reality of the overseas Chinese to this country by focusing on these main parts: First, an outline of the immigration of the overseas Chinese to the United States. Second, the contributions of overseas Chinese to the economic development of the United States on many aspects. Third, the adverse influence of the overseas Chinese to the socioeconomic circumstance of the country because of their trading and using opium.

2. An outline of the overseas Chinese immigration to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century

2.1. Process of the overseas Chinese immigration to the United States

Prior to the nineteenth century, some Chinese sailors and traders had gone to ports on the western coast of the United States in the late eighteenth century [Sucheng Chan 1989, 37]. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chinese immigration waves to the country became flourished. Between 1855 and 1867, approximately 2,000 to 8,000 Chinese immigrated annually to the United States [Lucie Cheng, Edna Bonacich 1984, 214]. During their first three decades of immigration to the United States, the overseas Chinese concentrated almost entirely on the Pacific Coast, especially in California. Since 1882, they began to disperse to the rest of the country [Sucheng Chan 1989, 42]. However, the Chinese population in the United States was unsustainable. Many overseas Chinese came and then left because

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they considered the country was not the suitable destination for their own lives. The number of overseas Chinese in the United States in 1883 was about 136,000; and this number was the zenith of the overseas Chinese inhabitants in the United States in the nineteenth century [Sucheng Chan 1989, 46]. The immigration process of the overseas Chinese to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century can be illustrated on the table below.

**Immigration process of Chinese to the United States
in the second half of the nineteenth century (Unit: Person)³**

Year	Overseas Chinese	Population percent
1860	34,933	0.11
1870	63,199	0.16
1880	105,465	0.21
1890	107,488	0.17
1900	89,863	0.11

The data of the table above show that, the Chinese immigration process to the United States was firme. The Chinese population in the United States increased constantly and only decreased between 1890 and 1900 when the “Chinese restricted” policy was promulgated in the country.

2.2. Reasons for the overseas Chinese immigration to the United States

The Chinese immigration process to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century was due to a variety of reasons:

First, the socioeconomic chaos in China during the second half of the nineteenth century urged the Chinese to leave their country. During the period, the Chinese people suffered from a series of wars caused by peasant uprisings and foreign invasions. The most serious was the Taiping Rebellion, which started in Guangxi, spread over 18 provinces along Yangtze River and lasted from 1851 to 1864. Besides, there were severe floods and famine over most of China between 1849 and 1878. Furthermore, the significant rise in population between 1830

³ Source: Lucie Cheng – Edna Bonacich (1984), *Labor immigration under capitalism: Asian workers in the United States before World War II*, University of California Press, USA, p. 62.

and 1850 also increased pressure on those in south China to seek a better life overseas [James Jupp 2001, 197].

Second, the circumstance in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century was advantageous to the Chinese immigration. The hearsay of gold discovery in the United States spread rapidly, encouraged many people in all over the world, including Chinese, to come to the country's gold fields to find their luck. Besides the gold rush, there was an urgent demand of labor force in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. In specific, the United States government needed labor force for building the Central Pacific Railroad in the West in 1865. Therefore, they offered an advantageous environment to attract foreign laborers. For instance, the government of the United States established a regular steamship service by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company from Hong Kong and Shanghai to San Francisco in 1867. In addition, they signed the *Burlingame-Seward Treaty* in 1868 providing the Chinese with the "most favored nation" rights, and formalizing the Chinese central government's recognition of the legality of Chinese immigration to the United States [Sucheng Chan 1989, 37–38].

Third, the great progress of maritime transportation since the nineteenth century. Chinese immigration occurred in an era when ocean transportation had been greatly developed and improved. In the seventeenth century, British emigrants had typically waited for 90 days to arrive to the United States. But in the nineteenth century, an average trip from China to San Francisco took only 35 days [Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 32]. With improved and cheaper transportation, travel back and forth between the sending and receiving countries by ship was normal, helped many laborers in general and Chinese laborers in particular to immigrate easily and rapidly to the United States.

2.3. Characteristics of the overseas Chinese immigration to the United States

The overseas Chinese who immigrated to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century had these main characteristics: *First*, the majority of them was from Guangdong and Fukien – two southern provinces of China [Ownby, Somers Heidhues 1993, 197; Susan Lawrence, Peter Davies 2010, 226]. *Second*, many of them were not only the poorest and lowest people of Chinese society with

few options for earning a living besides leaving their homes, but also were skilled workers and ambitious businessmen who immigrated to a new country to improve their social standing [Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 5]. *Third*, they usually concentrated on the places that offered them the advantageous environment for their living and working as well as getting support from their relatives and friends [Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 27]. *Fourth*, most of them were men and more than 90 percent of Chinese men in the United States remained unmarried. In 1890 for example, there were nearly 27 Chinese men for every Chinese woman in the United States [D. Michael Quinn 1996, 166].

3. The role of the overseas Chinese in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century

3.1. On one hand, the overseas Chinese contributed importantly on many aspects to the economic development of the United States

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the overseas Chinese took part in various jobs in the United States. During the gold-rush days, they were found mainly on gold fields [James Jupp 2001, 199]. Some Chinese were cooks and washers of gold-miners [Sucheng Chan 1989, 52]. They were also the principal labor force in railroad building. In specific, there were 11,000 Chinese workers on the Central Pacific Railroad in the United States in 1865, constituted 90 percent of the entire work force [Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 8]. By the time the gold-rush period effectively ended in the 1890s, the overseas Chinese diversified into occupations as market-gardeners, storekeepers, furniture and cabinet makers, fruit and vegetable wholesalers and retailers, merchants, operators of tea rooms, restaurants, and laundries, or to become medical practitioners and fishermen [Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, Ian A. Skogard 2005, 635; Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 24].

Although participating in various economic activities, the overseas Chinese in the United States always performed their typical characters and excellent abilities well. As a result, they were appreciated by the government of the United States at the time. An American officer described the Chinese as being “*as industrious, as moral, and as orderly as any other class of our population*” [Charles J. McCain 1994, 11]. Thanks to their economic activities, the overseas Chinese had the essential contributions to the socioeconomic development of the United States, especially to the growth of remote areas of the West in

the United States. Without mentioning any specific contribution of the overseas Chinese, Governor John McDougal of California state in 1852 described them as “*one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens – to whom the climate and the character of these lands are suited*” [Charles J. McCain 1994, 9].

3.2. On the other hand, the overseas Chinese adversely influenced to the socioeconomic circumstance of the United States because of their trading and using opium

A researcher commented that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, wherever the Chinese settled, wherever opium existed [Ownby, Somers Heidhues 1993, 102]. Opium had been taken to the United States by the Chinese during their first immigration. The Chinese in the United States not only sold opium at their opium dens but also sold it everywhere, and advertised their opium on newspapers. Prior to the 1870s, the main opium users in the United States were Chinese. However, since the 1880s, when opium smoking became popular in all over the country, the users included Americans [Diana L. Ahmad 2007, 10]. Twenty percent of the population of the United States smoked opium occasionally and fifty percent of them smoked it daily [David T. Courtwright 2001, 68].

The opium addicts spent their most money on opium [Charles Dickens 1858, 416]. In the second half of the nineteenth century, an average Chinese worker in the United States earned \$5 per month [Lucie Cheng, Edna Bonacich 1984, 239]. He could spend the money on 37.5 kg of rice. In case he used the same money to buy opium, he had only 104 grams of opium [Yong Chen 2000, 87]. Instead of spending money on food to live and work for a month, the laborers only enjoyed pleasant feeling for few days when they used opium. As a result, their source of nutrition was not enough. For an immigrant laborer, who consumed about six pounds (2,721 grams) opium per year, the total price could exceed \$130, equal to his several month’s income [Yong Chen 2000, 87]. If the laborer spent all \$60 that he earned per year on opium, he only afforded a half of his opium demand. Though laborers almost did not hesitate to smoke opium dottle, their “thirst for opium” could not be satisfied. Without enough food and opium, “*those who use it [opium] are in a short time so debased as to become incapable of any exertion, and their bodies... rendered*

totally unfit and unable to perform or undergo any corporal labor or fatigue". As a result, "*they are under the necessity or resorting to robbery, plunder and depredation to enable them to procure... this pernicious drug*" [Timothy Brook, Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi 2000, 88].

The government of the United States first had not forbidden the use of opium due to its careless consideration to the effect of smoking opium. But then, because of the serious corollary of opium use and "*the Chinese image changed from that of the harmless coolie to that of an evil, opium-addicted mandarin evil*" [Clayton D. Laurie, Ronald H. Cole 1997, 86], they banned the importation of opium to the country from China in 1880 [Yong Chen 2000, 89].

To deal with the rapid immigration of the overseas Chinese and the severe impact on the country, the government of the United States promulgated the *Foreign Miner Tax* in 1850. By the new law, the overseas Chinese were deprived of their rights of possessing houses and lands, marrying white women, going to public schools, approaching some cities and towns, working for public construction plans, fishing in rivers and lakes, and participating to European groups [John Soennichsen 2011, 16]. Since 1852, every Chinese had to pay \$5 in tax for their immigration to the United States; by 1855, the tax increased to \$50 [Charles J. McCain 1994, 12–17]. Furthermore, the money that the overseas Chinese, who had settled before had to pay in tax, increased from \$3 in 1852 to \$5 per month in 1855 [Diana L. Ahmad 2007, 10]. In addition to the restrictive policy of the authority, the overseas Chinese also faced aggressive attitude and action of European groups. The situation went from bad to worse when the European groups broke the peace in Los Angeles in 1871, causing many buildings in Chinese towns to be flamed out, some of overseas Chinese were killed and many kinds of their property were robbed. The restrictive movement of the white Americans to the Chinese was maintained through the 1870s, forced 47 percent of overseas Chinese to leave the United States between 1850 and 1882 [Susie Lan Cassel 2002, 31].

4. Conclusion

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrated to the United States rapidly due to various reasons, such as the socio-political chaos in China, the requirement of labor force in the United

States, as well as the great progress of the maritime transportation at that time. The overseas Chinese were first offered a lot of favors from the government of the United States. But then, because of their rapid immigration and their conflicts with the European settlers, the overseas Chinese had to encounter the interference affairs of the authority and people of the country. Consequently, many overseas Chinese had to come back to China or went to other regions of the world. However, many Chinese tried their best to settle in the United States and to participate to a variety of economic activities in the country. Therefore, they not only ensured gradually their livelihoods but also had an essential part in the development of the United States. Nevertheless, besides the useful contributions, the overseas Chinese also caused the adverse corollary to the country, especially in the business and the use of opium. Their contributions and limitations demonstrated the duplicity of Chinese during their immigration and living in various regions in the world.

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