

Trump's threats against Chinese immigrants and the history of Chinese Exclusion in the US

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The incoming Trump administration is preparing to initiate a program of mass deportations and attacks against the rights of immigrants. There are growing indications that Chinese immigrants will be among the first targeted.

In November, Kimmy Yam of NBC News reported that Trump will prioritize the deportation of “Chinese nationals of military age.” References to “fighting age” immigrants were frequent at Trump’s campaign rallies throughout 2024. During one rally in April, Trump claimed that tens of thousands of undocumented Chinese migrants had entered the US in the preceding months, warning his audience that “they’re all military age and they are mostly men.” Trump accused these immigrants of “trying to build a little army in our country.” In an interview conducted in December, Trump’s incoming “border czar” Tom Homan ramped up this conspiratorial rhetoric, declaring, “Sixty thousand Chinese males, mostly military age, do not leave China without the coordination and approval of the Chinese government. This is a coordinated national security vulnerability that the Chinese government is involved in.”

In portraying Chinese immigrants as an invading army, Trump and Homan echo the worst rhetoric of the Yellow Peril and Chinese Exclusion era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is an escalation of the anti-Chinese rhetoric Trump used throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and it seeks to place the US ever more openly on a war footing against China. As Trump demonizes members of this immigrant population and prepares to round them up for expulsion, many have turned to the history of Chinese Exclusion to better understand how the emergence of such extreme anti-immigrant measures becomes possible and what Trump’s regime of mass deportation may look like should he succeed in establishing it.

The Chinese Exclusion era lasted from the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to its repeal in 1943. During this period, federal law prevented Chinese immigrants from entering the United States.

Recently, the National Public Radio (NPR) newsletter *Planet Money* published “The Price America Paid for its First Big Immigration Crackdown,” a two-part article on the history of Chinese Exclusion written by Greg Rosalsky. That was followed by “The Chinese Exclusion Era,” an episode of NPR’s *Indicator* podcast devoted to the economic consequences of exclusion.

The NPR material covers key episodes from the history of anti-Chinese racism and exclusion from the US. Many of these incidents are not widely known today, and it is rare to see them written about in such popular venues. Part one of Rosalsky’s article looks at the first major wave of Chinese immigrants to the US in the 1850s during the California Gold Rush, as well as the hardships of Chinese laborers who built the Central Pacific Railroad during the late 1860s.

Part two investigates the vigilante violence directed against Chinese immigrants. Readers are introduced to horrific episodes like the Rock Springs Massacre of 1885, when a mob of around 150 armed white men,

most of them miners, attacked the Chinatown at Rock Springs, Wyoming. The mob killed 28 Chinese immigrants and wounded at least 15 others. Vigilantes burned almost 80 buildings to the ground. Hundreds of Chinese fled, never to return. Earlier that year, in Eureka, California, vigilantes backed by the city government rounded up and forcibly marched hundreds of Chinese immigrants out of their homes and workplaces and onto steamships bound for San Francisco. Once the city’s Chinese population was purged, the property remaining in Chinatown was looted or destroyed. These events established the “Eureka method” of expulsion, which was copied in successive pogroms against the Chinese communities of Washington and California.

Supplementing these articles, NPR’s *Indicator* podcast examines the forms of state surveillance endured by Chinese immigrants still living within the US during the exclusion era. *Indicator* reporters also interviewed Nancy Qian, an economist who co-authored a new working paper on the economic consequences of Chinese Exclusion. According to Qian’s research, Chinese Exclusion “reduced the Chinese labor supply by 64 percent,” as immigrants were either chased away by acts of violence or left the US voluntarily rather than live under the surveillance and suspicion of the state. Qian’s research shows that white workers did not benefit from the sudden removal of competition with Chinese laborers. Chinese workers had run much of the service industry, including hotels and laundries, and when they left, those businesses shuttered, reducing the economic vitality of many of the towns dependent on their service. Manufacturing also slowed in the West. Qian’s paper suggests that the Chinese Exclusion Act remained a drag on the Western economy until 1940.

The history of Chinese Exclusion presented by NPR, while no doubt providing a first introduction to these events for many readers and listeners, is limited and distorted by the assumptions that guide NPR’s research. Appealing to the history of exclusion to make a point about Trump’s anti-immigrant policies, the NPR material assumes that the racism of working class whites is to blame for the election of Donald Trump and for his program of mass deportations. In search of a historical parallel in the anti-immigrant movements of the past, NPR also identifies working class whites as the primary aggressors in those events. To the extent that NPR turns its attention to politics, it artificially narrows its scope to focus on the proto-fascist Workingmen’s Party of California and the Republican Party’s responsibility for exclusion. The Democratic Party, which controlled California for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, and spearheaded Chinese exclusion, is ignored.

While it is true that many white workers held racist views toward Chinese immigrants and participated in episodes of mob violence against them, the history of Chinese exclusion cannot be explained on the basis of working class racism alone. In part one of his article, Rosalsky writes that “Racist notions about Chinese people infected American perceptions of their value as community members and human beings.”^[1] But there were no free-floating racist notions waiting to infect white Americans. As a

prominent scholar of Asian American history once wrote, “‘Color’ in America operated within an economic context.”^[iii] To understand Chinese Exclusion, it must be placed in the context of the development of capitalism in the United States and the early development of US imperialism in the Pacific and East Asia.

In an 1858 letter to Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx wrote, “The real task of bourgeois society is the creation, at least in outline, of a world market, and of a type of production resting on this basis. Since the world is round, this task seems to have been brought to a conclusion with the colonisation of California and Australia and the inclusion of China and Japan.”^[iiii] The process described by Marx was characterized by bitter conflicts between the multiple constituencies that converged in California in the decades after it was captured by the United States as a result of the US-Mexican War of 1846-1848. Large capitalists with trading interests in China saw their fortunes, and the fortunes of the US as a whole, waiting across the Pacific. American merchants had been trading with China since 1784, but securing California as an American state in 1850 opened a new phase in US-China relations. The completion of American continental expansion coincided with the adoption of new treaties with the Qing Empire, forced through by the Opium Wars, which offered greater opportunities and protections for US businesses in China. Access to new markets and new sources of labor stood to make these Pacific-oriented capitalists very rich.

The ambitions of capitalists profiting from trade in the East conflicted with the hopes of other settlers drawn to California. Artisans and small producers—what might now be called small business interests—and a skilled section of the labor force migrated to California in the hopes of finding there a refuge from the early industrialization that had undermined their social position “back East.” Above all, they wanted to escape the prospect of becoming permanent wage laborers. These elements saw the introduction of Chinese laborers to the US as a gambit by large capitalists to keep the American working class in check and their wages low. That meant that once driven to work for wages, artisans and small producers might never escape the status of wage laborers again. The loudest voices raised against Chinese immigrants came from within these ranks.

Tensions between big capitalists and small producers, and the resulting consequences for Chinese laborers, were present in California from the Gold Rush period onward, but the situation escalated dramatically after the Civil War. The Union victory ushered in a new phase of rapid industrialization, and, with it, explosive new forms of class struggle exemplified by the Great Uprising of 1877. The capitalist class searched for new ways to discipline workers in the US. In the West, the tactical deployment of Chinese laborers was one of its favored methods. In his classic overview of Asian American history, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, historian Ronald Takaki summed up the dynamic in the West in this way:

Capital used Chinese laborers as a transnational industrial reserve army to weigh down white workers during periods of economic expansion and to hold white labor in check during periods of overproduction.” By recruiting Chinese laborers, employers could “boost the supply of labor and drive down the wages of both Chinese and white workers. The resulting racial antagonism generated between the two groups helped to ensure a divided working class and a dominant employer class.”^[iv]

Exacerbating these divisions was the widespread belief that Chinese labor in America represented a new form of slavery. Beginning in the 1830s, the sugar planters of the Caribbean brought large numbers of Chinese laborers to work their island plantations. These laborers, called “coolies” in the language of the time, were indentured servants, bound by

contract to labor for a particular employer for a set number of years. Chinese laborers worked in the fields with enslaved Africans and were subjected to the same physical punishment and poor living conditions. If the Chinese laborers attempted to run away, they could be thrown in prison or worse.

Opposition to this form of unfree labor by antislavery activists within the US led to the incorrect association of all Chinese labor with unfreedom. Anti-Chinese agitation in the US often adopted the appearance of a struggle between free and enslaved labor. Chinese laborers, who were actually free, were portrayed as servile “coolies,” who by their nature could work for practically nothing and live on very little—a major threat to free labor and the ability of American workers to achieve what was later called “the American dream.”

The broader context of Chinese Exclusion outlined here is reduced by NPR to a question of race relations. A similar oversimplification occurs when NPR attributes the blame for exclusion almost entirely to “white workers.” Working people participated in violence against Chinese immigrants, but a more concrete assessment of the leadership of the anti-Chinese movement, and its class orientation, is necessary.

The figure identified by NPR and many scholars as the embodiment and primary representative of white working class racism in California was the anti-Chinese demagogue Denis Kearney. Kearney led the proto-fascist Workingmen’s Party, which advanced the slogan “The Chinese Must Go!” Rosalsky identifies Kearney only as an “Irish immigrant,” which is true enough. But that leaves Kearney’s class position unclear, as millions of Irish immigrants in the US formed arguably the most oppressed section of the working class in the East—diggers of canals, layers of rail track, and laborers in mines.

When Denis Kearney first settled in California, he was employed as a master mariner attached to a steamship company. By the time he founded the Workingmen’s Party, he owned his own drayage business comprised of three teams of carts and horses transporting goods in San Francisco. Kearney was a regular at San Francisco’s Lyceum for Self-Culture where he earned a reputation for bragging about his success in business and his frequent complaints about the “shiftlessness” of the working class.

Kearney’s eventual rise to leadership of the anti-Chinese movement coincided with a dramatic development in the class struggle in California. On July 23, 1877, around 8,000 workers attended a meeting near San Francisco’s City Hall called by the Workingmen’s Party of the United States (WPUS), a socialist party that traced its roots to the First International. The meeting was called in sympathy with the rail strikes then underway throughout the country. At the meeting, the WPUS raised demands for an eight-hour workday, the establishment of a public works project to provide jobs for the unemployed, and the nationalization of industry.

The gathering was peaceful until the meeting was disrupted by thugs from a local “anticoolie club.” Such clubs were formed in California beginning in the late 1860s, emerging from the ranks of the craft unions and the Democratic Party. As members of the anticoolie clubs called on the WPUS to address the “Chinese Question,” WPUS leader James D’Arcy insisted that the meeting was “a discussion of the broad question of labor and capital, not an anticoolie rally.”^[v] Despite this, the anti-Chinese agitators succeeded in drawing several hundred workers away from the meeting and led them in a two-day rampage against the city’s Chinese population. Hardly ever was the role of anti-Chinese politics clearer; it channeled workers away from their real fight with capital and turned them against an immigrant population that was never their enemy.

During these events, Denis Kearney was among the men organized by merchant W.T. Coleman’s Committee of Safety to wield pickaxes and hickory clubs in defense of businesses against protesting workers. Kearney’s subsequent turn toward “working class” politics appears to have grown out of resentments he maintained after losing money on the

stock market and his hostility toward figures like the government-backed drayman Bob Graham for attempting to monopolize the drayage industry. Prior to forming the Workingmen's Party of California, Kearney attempted to join the unrelated Workingmen's Party of the United States, but he was rejected, in the words of historian Ira Cross, because WPUS leaders were aware of Kearney's "contempt of the working class."^[vii]

While NPR focuses on sandlot demagogues and mob violence, street-level agitators were not the only figures to raise their voices against Chinese immigrants. Among the most prominent figures calling for Chinese exclusion was political economist Henry George. George had been a Republican in the 1860s, but he switched allegiances to the Democratic Party and eventually joined Kearney's Workingmen's Party. George was a reformer whose best-known work, the 1879 treatise *Progress and Poverty*, argued that speculation in, and monopolization of, land was the source of industrial depressions in the US. To correct this, he argued that landowners should pay rent to the state.

George was not anti-capitalist. He was anti-monopolist and sought out ways to make capitalism fairer for small producers. More than anyone, he bound the fight against monopolies to the fight against Chinese immigrants. In George's view, these immigrants were merely a tool in the hands of the monopolists. In his essay "The Chinese in California," George argued that by their customs and beliefs, Chinese immigrants "will live, according to their notions, where an American or Englishman would starve." George argued that "their standard of comfort is very much lower than that of our own people—very much lower than that of any European immigrants who come among us. This fact enables them to underbid all competitors in the labor market." Chinese immigrants would "reduce wages to the starvation point of our mechanics." "And thus in every case in which Chinese comes into fair competition with white labor, the whites must either retire from the field or come down to the Chinese standard of living."^[viii]

Beyond the Workingmen's Party, leading labor organizations of this period, formed by craft unions and claiming hundreds of thousands of members, also directed workers toward the anti-Chinese position. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Knights of Labor both called for the exclusion of Chinese workers. At its founding conference in Pittsburgh in 1881, the AFL, then known as the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, adopted a resolution that declared "the presence of Chinese, and their competition with free white labor" to be "one of the greatest evils with which any country can be afflicted." The AFL pledged to use its "best efforts to get rid of this monstrous evil."^[ix] In resolutions passed at subsequent conferences, the AFL consistently pushed for more restrictive laws against Chinese laborers and perpetuated the myth that Chinese workers in America were slaves.

In the Pacific Northwest, Knights of Labor organizer Daniel Cronin played a leading role in the anti-Chinese movement. In the Washington Territory, Cronin built new chapters of the Knights through cynical appeals to anti-Chinese sentiment. But like the Workingmen's Party of California, the anti-Chinese movement led by Cronin in the Washington Territory in the late 1880s was not an exclusively working class affair. Small businessmen joined its ranks and, in Tacoma, the mayor, sheriff, and several members of the chamber of commerce could be counted among its members.^[ix]

The Knights of Labor also fought for Chinese Exclusion, and tougher enforcement of exclusion laws, at the national level. After the horrors of the Rock Spring Massacre, Knights leader Terence Powderly blamed the violence on the failure of the federal government to uphold exclusion laws. Powderly declared, "The recent assault upon the Chinese at Rock Springs is but the outcome of a feeling caused by the indifference of our law-makers. Nothing short of the enactment of just laws and a full and impartial enforcement of the same will prevent other and far more terrible scenes of bloodshed."^[x] Powderly, who led the Knights of Labor from

1879 to 1893, was appointed by President William McKinley to serve as the Commissioner General of Immigration in 1897. He would continue to serve in various capacities until his death in 1924.

When NPR turns its attention to the role of political parties in Chinese exclusion, it deals only with Kearney's Workingmen's Party and the Republican Party, whose members in California, writes Rosalsky, came to see any position perceived as soft on Chinese immigration as "politically radioactive" during the 1870s. Absent from NPR's analysis is the Democratic Party, which championed anti-Chinese policies from the moment California became a state. Portraying the apparent cowardice of the Republican Party before anti-Chinese mobs while ignoring the reactionary politics of the Democratic Party is more convenient for the political aims and assumptions of NPR writers and podcasters. But the Republican Party of the 1870s and 1880s was only adapting itself to positions held by the Democratic Party since the 1850s.

The Chinese Question, writes historian Mae Ngai, "became a bedrock principle of the Democratic Party in California." Among the major early advocates for exclusion was Democrat John Bigler, an attorney whose political ambitions led him to become California's third governor. In an 1852 address to the California legislature, Bigler called for "measures to be adopted" that would halt the "tide of Asiatic immigration." Insisting that the "Chinese Question" required a national solution, Bigler called on the United States Congress to use its power to "entirely exclude this class of Asiatic immigrants."^[xi] Bigler was in Ngai's estimation "the first politician to ride the Chinese Question to elected office."^[xii]

After the Civil War, the Democratic Party appealed to anti-Chinese sentiment to rehabilitate itself, shed the disloyal reputation it had gained through the secession crisis, and improve its electoral chances. Democrat Henry Haight was elected governor of California in 1867 on the basis of just such an anti-Chinese campaign. In 1870, twelve years before Republican President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act into law at the federal level, the Democratic Party in California passed "An Act to Prevent the Importation of Chinese Criminals and to Prevent the Establishment of Coolie Slavery." The Act objected to Chinese labor, a "species of slavery" that was "degrading to the laborer and at war with the spirit of the age."^[xiii] The act placed all Chinese immigrants then in California under suspicion.

After the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the US Congress and signed into law by President Arthur in 1882, the act underwent multiple amendments, extensions, and legal challenges. In 1889, the US Supreme Court heard *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, popularly known as the *Chinese Exclusion Case*. Chae Chan Ping was a Chinese immigrant who lived and worked in the US between 1875 and 1887, when he left to visit China. In accordance with the laws of the time, Chae secured a return certificate that would allow him to re-enter the US. While he was in China, the Scott Act of 1888, authored by Democrat William L. Scott, amended Chinese Exclusion law to prohibit the return of Chinese migrants who had temporarily left the US, even in cases where they had acquired a return certificate. Chae Chan Ping was detained by immigration authorities upon his return to the US. In its 1889 decision, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the United States to prevent Chae's return and established the federal government's unlimited authority over immigration.

The logic of the Supreme Court's decision to deny Chae Chan Ping's right to re-entry is virtually identical to the justifications now used by Trump and Homan in their own anti-immigrant crusade. The court's decision asserted that the growing number of Chinese immigrants prior to exclusion had amounted to an "Oriental invasion," and that Chinese immigrants, unable to assimilate, represented a "Chinese settlement within the state, without any interest in our country or its institutions." These arguments, and the legal rulings that flowed from them, transformed the Chinese immigrant population into a permanent foreign

presence within the United States, ineligible for citizenship, deprived of political rights, whose mobility was strictly sanctioned, and whose labor was for all of these reasons highly exploitable.

The *Chae Chan Ping* decision was the domestic counterpart and precursor to the Insular Cases decided by the Supreme Court during the first decade of the twentieth century. These cases determined the character of US rule over the territories acquired through the Spanish-American War in 1898. Would the Constitution follow the flag to America's new possessions in the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean? The Supreme Court answered with a decisive "no." The court ruled that the rights guaranteed by the US Constitution did not extend to the people of the new American colonies. As it had with the arguments used to uphold Chinese Exclusion, the court warned that the "alien races" of the colonies could not be assimilated and that the extension of political rights to the new colonial populations governed by the United States would threaten the country. The US now had subject populations of non-citizens both within and outside of its North American borders. The anti-immigrant politics of Chinese Exclusion helped to make that possible.

To identify the broader context of Chinese Exclusion is not to absolve anyone, worker or otherwise, for their participation in racist acts of violence. The influence of xenophobia and racial sectarianism on the working class during the exclusion era was a tragedy for all working people and benefited only the capitalist class. But it is not possible to understand how that tragedy came to pass without situating it within the context of the development of capitalism in the United States and the extension of US interests into the Pacific and East Asia. The anti-immigrant chauvinism of present day has to be understood in the same way.

Contrary to NPR's interpretation of a bottom-up Chinese Exclusion driven by racist white workers, the anti-Chinese movement of the exclusion era was dominated by middle-class elements. While completely invisible from NPR's point of view, the Democratic Party played a leading role. Once this is understood, the anti-immigrant policies of Biden and Harris, and the recent vote by a majority of Senate Democrats in favor of reactionary anti-immigrant legislation like the Laken Riley Act, can be seen for what it is: not a betrayal of principles but a return to form.

The anti-Chinese positions now expressed by Donald Trump and Tom Homan, like those of the exclusion era, are clearly racist and xenophobic. But that is not all they are. They come in the midst of growing class struggles and in the context of escalating conflict between US imperialism and the Chinese state. That Trump now claims a Chinese threat lurks behind the Panama Canal, which he proposes to annex by force, if necessary, is enough to demonstrate that the anti-Chinese rhetoric of his past and future administration, just as in the exclusion era, is significant for reasons that extend far beyond the question of racism in the United States. The attempt to portray Chinese immigrants, once again, as an invading army is the domestic expression of the Trump administration's drive to reassert US global hegemony through a direct confrontation with China.

The dangers posed by the incoming Trump administration are very real. Workers cannot afford to let themselves be tamed by the efforts of the ruling elite and the middle-class pseudo-left to sow divisions among them. The global working class, still taking shape at the end of the nineteenth century, is now fully formed and integrated. The fight against capitalism cannot proceed except on the basis of the unity of all workers, immigrant and non-immigrant.

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[i] Greg Rosalsky, "America's first major immigration crackdown and the making and breaking of the West," 19 November, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/sections/planet-money/2024/11/19/g-s1-34449/americas-first-major-immigration-crackdown-and-the-making-and-breaking-of-the-west>

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[iii] Quoted in David Riazanov, "Karl Marx on China" (1926), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/riazanov/1926/xx/china.html>.

[iv] Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 29.

[v] Philip S. Foner, *The Workingmen's Party of the United States: A History of the First Marxist Party in the Americas* (MEP Publications, 1984), 76.

[vi] Ira B. Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (University of California Press, 1935), 93; Frank Michael Fahey, "Denis Kearney: A Study in Demagoguery," PhD diss., (Stanford University, 1956), 46-48.

[vii] Henry George, "The Chinese in California", *New York Tribune*, May 1, 1869," in Henry George: *Collected Journalistic Writings*, vol 1, ed. Kenneth C. Wenzer (Routledge, 2003), 160-161.

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[xi] *Journal of the Third Session of the Legislature of the State of California* (San Francisco: G.K. Fitch & Co. and V.E. Geiger & Co., 1852), 373, 376.

[xii] Mae Ngai, *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2021), 86.

[xiii] *The General Laws of the State of California, from 1864 to 1871 Inclusive* (A.L. Bancroft and Company, 1871), 253.



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