
A Gold Rush: Hardships For Asian Living In America

Asians in the Californian Gold Rush

Introduction

Having been a part of the Asian-American population for a little over a decade, I encountered hardships that only an Asian living in America would know. Reflecting upon those times, I wondered about the first Asians who came to America and the hardships they faced. The first Asians consisted of the mass of Chinese who came during the California Gold Rush. Although they had different problems than Asian-Americans face today, some difficulties are similar to those we have today.

Motive

Contrary to popular opinion, the Chinese Empire was not always powerful and almighty. Although it had great power among Asian countries, China was outmatched by western powers. The English Empire, which had reached its prime, had grasped China entirely. From 1820 to 1830, British merchants use the Pearl River as a major vein for the opium trade. Opium had a large influence upon the Chinese. It made many Chinese people into opium addicts, increasing the demand for opium. Due to the opium demand increase, British trade companies were able to strip more resources from China. Therefore the legalization of opium was debated over. However, despite strong Chinese government opposition to opium trade, English traders continued to trade with Chinese smugglers. The ban of opium was therefore even more harshly enforced. Ships were not even allowed to have opium on Chinese waters. Later on, this made it impossible for opium cargo ships to land. As a result, naval war ensued and the First Opium War was declared. The Chinese navy was no match for the Royal Navy. Although the Chinese published false reports to keep national morale up, its ships were burned and smashed in masses. Despite, their superior numbers, the cannons of the West tore holes into the frail Chinese hulls. Consequently, China lost both the First and Second Opium War with England and France. China was punished by England and France by having to burden the war expenses for both sides and accept more European goods. Therefore, China experienced an economic recession. Local people were devastated by foreign business competition and heavy taxes. Economic hardships hit the Chinese people, mostly who were peasants, hard. Rebellions sprouted throughout China and the people were unhappy and oppressed. Chinese people had every reason to leave their country and find a new home.

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The California Gold Rush

The California Gold Rush started when James W. Marshall found a shiny object on the ground of John Sutter's farm. Marshall, a foreman on Sutter's farm, took the object for inspection and found it to be gold. Surprisingly, Sutter was terrified by the discovery of gold on his land. John Sutter had traveled to California to build an agricultural empire. He feared that gold would attract an uncontrollable amount of people to his area, making it impossible for him to achieve the dream he dreamt of. Therefore, he tried to keep the news of gold secret. Obviously, Sutter failed to keep word from getting out. Rumor got from Sutter's Mill, Coloma, California to the nearby San Francisco. In March 1848, Samuel Brannan, a San Francisco newspaper publisher and merchant, published a report on the discovery of gold in Coloma after setting up a gold prospecting supply store. He strolled the streets shouting, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" The recent end of the Mexican-American War made the prospect of travel even more attractive. California had become liberated of Mexican rule. The Treat of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded the Californian territory to the United States. Local Californian residents searched for gold and also set up businesses to accommodate for the expected mass of people who would come search for gold. Many Californian families divided labor among themselves. The women of the family would manage the business, the most popular business being boarding services, while the men would go to search for gold in the hope of striking it rich. People from Oregon, the Sandwich Islands, and Latin America (Mexico, Peru, Chile, etc.) flocked to California. These miners were referred to as the "forty-eighters" or the "Argonauts", named after the famed travelers of Greek myth. Most of these miners were successful. In fact, they found ten to fifteen times more gold than the prospectors of the East. Some were so profitable that they earned a six-year wage in a mere six months. As these successes took place, rumor once again spread across the world like wildfire. On August 19th, 1848, the East Coast of America was also introduced to this new gold fever as the New York Herald first reported the discovery of gold. This created the second large wave of miners. This was the flood of the famous "Forty-Niners". Most of them were Americans, however, many others came. The Chinese were included among this vast group. The awful conditions in China along with promising rumors of gold in the Americas attracted many Chinese people to California. With the entrance of the Chinese, America observes its first mass immigration of Asians. America also observed many changes in their society. Population skyrocketed, resulting in the creation of new towns and urbanization. San Francisco grew from about 1,000 people in 1848 to 250,000 people in 1850. This type of growth and wealth provided by miner consumption and gold made California into one of the most advanced regions of the West. However, along with great advancement in American society came one of the greatest obstacles that American and the rest of the world have to face with the world today: racism.

Daily Life

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At first, the Chinese lived in miner camps and small towns like all other miners. However, times changed. Due to the Foreign Miner's License Act, nearly all the Chinese population immigrated to the city of San Francisco. Racism in the urban environment crowded the Chinese into one ethnic neighborhood. The neighborhood was famously named Chinatown. Chinatown was densely populated for it was one of the only regions that the city allowed the Chinese to own land. Most of the Chinese who made the trip over the Pacific were men. Even among the women who were willing to make the trip, many were denied due to United States policies. Furthermore, nearly all the Chinese in Chinatown were poor. They depended on either labor jobs located on the railroads and the mines or small shops located in Chinatown. Even though the small Chinatown was bustling, the quality of life was not very high. The richest Chinese citizen was most likely a woman named Ah Toy. She was a prostitute who found most of her money by wooing the ship captain during her trip to the United States. Her tall and attractive figure attracted many men and she made her living as a high-price prostitute who hosted peep shows that earned much fame among the men of the West. She opened a prostitution chain in Chinatown, which trafficked Chinese girls. Seeing that the richest person in the Chinese community was a successful prostitute and human trafficker, a conclusion can be made about the quality of life of the Chinese people. As a result, we can observe that the Chinese lived very humble lives and that their main neighborhood, Chinatown, can be seen to as a poor ethnic neighborhood instead of the interesting marketplace that we stereotype China to be.

Racism

After 1851, the majority of Chinese gold seekers start to arrive in California. However, they were not discriminated against at first. In fact, they were very welcomed. Due Confucius ideals and the culture of China, the Chinese showed amazing passion for work. Their humble backgrounds and difficult economic situations amplified their passions even more. Their motives for wealth and money were more desperate than ever and they did not want their hard trip across the Pacific Ocean to become a trip in vain. The Chinese immigrants took work where they could find it. Even if the work offered a relatively low wage, the Chinese showed a relatively high willingness to take the job. Therefore, they were well welcomed by the other miners of California. Among the highly ambitious miners, the Chinese showed a rare humble personality. Although all the others came to strike it rich, the Chinese were here to make a living. They took the humble jobs that other miners were unwilling to take. Therefore, they proved indispensable as laborers. They were the cooks, carpenters, and assistants that these miners needed. Governor McDougal referred to them as "one of the most worthy of our newly adopted citizens". Their hard work and grit was highly praised by all the people of California. The Chinese were also very satisfied with their new home. Rather than a country ridden of war and poverty, America showed opportunity for a new live. Now that their presence was accepted, they had no complaints at all.

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This time of peace could not stay for long. As gold became exhausted, these ambitious miners could not stay happy. They were frustrated, for they could not find the gold that they had made their long trip for. As the gold dried up and feelings grew bitter, the evil of racism started to appear. The people started to blame others. The majority of the miners were Americans and as the majority race, they took up a strong racist cry. They declared that California was for Americans and as that cry complied with California's attempt for statehood, racism against the Chinese saw its peak. The Chinese were very different from Americans and therefore the easiest targets for racism. The Chinese had a very different attire and appearance compared to the Western miners. They were described by William Perkins to be "mostly dressed in the national costume: petticoat trousers reaching to the knees, big jackets lined with sheep or dog-skin, and quilted, and huge basket hats made of split bamboo." They could not have been more different from the European, Latin American, or American miners. Therefore the Chinese became main victims of anti-foreigner laws. In 1850, the state legislature passed the Foreign Miner's License law. This law, as the name suggest, required foreign miners to have a license. All non-US citizens were charged \$20 per month. Although the law was later repealed, it forced many Chinese people to give up their mining hopes. Therefore, many Chinese left miner camps penniless for San Francisco. The first Chinatowns started to emerge in San Francisco. High discrimination prohibited the Chinese from buying land, marrying Caucasian women, or even receiving an education. The creation of Chinatown was inevitable. The Chinese had no choice but to form ethnic communities. Divided, the Chinese were extremely vulnerable; united, they could at least find support from their next-door neighbors. On the other hand, San Francisco felt a tremendous burden in taking care of these poor foreigners and the law was viewed as a failure. The law was repealed but not before Governor Bigler released the value of the Chinese as a political punching bag. He criticized the Chinese of being "contract 'coolie' laborers", "avaricious", and "ignorant of moral obligations". Bigler's strong remarks sparked the renewal of the foreign miner tax. But the new foreign miner's tax was a more lenient \$4 per month. Despite this new tax, Americans found new reason to hate the Chinese. In 1853, gold was discovered in Australia. This brought huge panic in California. Migrant inflow drastically decreased and residents of California also moved out of California in search of better luck in the Southern Hemisphere. Sudden consumer decrease caused prices on all products, from houses to butter, to skyrocket. This created great discord in the Californian community. The people who stayed in California needed more money in order to survive. As a result, strikes started among labor workers. However, this backfired and repelled East Coast investors. The drop in investment hit West industries hard, creating a lose-lose situation for both businesses and residents of the Far West. The suddenly unemployed laborers and the unlucky miners now had to compete for work in a suddenly miniscule job market. The Chinese became the targets once again. Since the Chinese worked for cheap prices and were not American, accusations started to fly around. The Chinese were accused to have deprived honest, hard-working white Americans of jobs and to have sent back their earnings to China. They were viewed as Asian leeches that were sucking the blood out of the United States. The Chinese's thrifty antics also

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frustrated these people. William Perkins also stated in *El Campo de los Sonoraenses or: Three Years Residence in California*, “they consume little of the food or merchandise of the country. Rice, their great staple, they generally bring over with them in vast quantities”. Their frequent remittances and thrift consuming habits frustrated the whites to the extent of hate.

Actions against racism were also taking place as racism was building up. From the start of the Gold Rush, as soon as anti-Asiatic feelings started to mount, some Chinese accused American racism through the formation of unions and legal complaints in Sacramento. They claimed, “we are not the degraded race you would make us.” to Governor Bigler. However, their pleas fell short of making any difference at all. In fact, racism grew even stronger. The peak of Chinese racism hit when California passed the first ban on immigration of a specific ethnic group with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Conclusion

The first Asians of America during the period of the Gold Rush were no different from the Pilgrims that came over on the Mayflower. They faced harsh push factors in their homeland as their economic security and homes were threatened. They both made a great journey in attempting to make a new life. Both groups worked hard to make a living. However, due to ignorant racial stereotype and generalizations, the first Asians of America were denied of the American dream that they came from. Jealousy and ignorance led to the suffering of many Chinese Americans and became the start of the Asian discrimination within America. When we go to America and face the mighty mountain called college, we will face even a mightier mountain called racism. Although we might feel that our lives are tough, we should never forget the first Chinese who were victims of this type of racism. Even though they took a long and daring trip across the largest ocean in the world and tried to make a new living in a new continent, they were denied by their fellow peers and even persecuted from their new homes. The most honorable of these Chinese were those who stood up to this nonsense and tried to make the world a better place. Later on, Asian racism became less severe and made it possible for kids like us to dream of going to the USA today.

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