



“The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint,” 1873

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Framing Question

How did the Chinese in California confront anti-Chinese discrimination in the late 1800s?

Understanding

To confront rising intolerance in the 1870s, Chinese leaders in California appealed to local governments, Congress, and the President for fair treatment. In an 1873 appeal to the San Francisco city council, Chinese merchants offered a solution to the “Chinese question” that used thinly veiled irony to expose the pretense of Californians’ anti-Chinese demands. While the rallying cry of angry white workers was “the Chinese must go,” state leaders knew they should proclaim “the Chinese must stay,” because the state’s economy was dependent on the cheap labor provided by the Chinese immigrants. By using irony to confront the council with this fact, the leaders challenged them to acknowledge its truth and treat the Chinese justly.

Text

[The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint](#), address to the San Francisco city council by Chinese merchants, June 2, 1873.



“Capital Stocks,” *The Wasp*, 1882

Background

With the opening of the American West, thousands of Chinese emigrated to the U.S. to take jobs building railroads, mining gold and silver, and clearing farmland. Most were poor rural men escaping economic turmoil in China, hoping to return to their families one day. Many answered the recruiting campaigns of American businesses that wanted cheap foreign labor. By 1870, 63,000 Chinese lived in the U.S. — most in California (50,000), comprising nine percent of the state’s population of 560,000. As their numbers grew, so did anti-immigrant hostility similar to the anti-Irish upheavals in the eastern U.S.

Riots erupted in San Francisco in 1867 and Los Angeles in 1871, spurred by white laborers who resented the threat they perceived to their jobs and wages, especially after the economic downturn of the early 1870s. Politicians took up the anti-Chinese fervor in their campaigns and legislation, and newspapers stoked the fears of the “Chinese menace,” especially in San Francisco where one-fifth of the state’s Chinese population lived. “The people of San Francisco have become thoroughly alarmed by the rapidly increasing influx of Chinese,” wrote one California newspaper, “and are using all the means within their power to rid the city of those already there, and to discourage the further immigration of this class.... They have been for years a curse upon this state.”*

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. For what audience was it intended?
3. For what purpose was it written?
4. When was it written?
5. What was going on at the time of its writing that might have influenced its composition?

In spring 1873, the city council of San Francisco took several actions to alienate the Chinese and drive them back to China:

- A resolution encouraging whites to stop hiring Chinese workers and to boycott Chinese goods and services. Such coordinated action would “throw the coolies upon their own resources” and open up jobs for the protesting white workingmen.
- An appeal to Congress to restrict the importation of Chinese labor. Without action, the council warned, “serious troubles will arise, and possibly bloodshed and disorder reign rampant... in organized efforts of the people to rid themselves of this Chinese plague.”
- A business tax on laundries that did not use animal-drawn vehicles to deliver laundry to their customers. This was aimed directly at the Chinese who delivered laundry on foot by suspending bags of clean laundry on long shoulder poles.
- A ban on removing human remains from city cemeteries without a permit. This was also aimed at the Chinese whose traditions called for sending their relatives’ remains to China for permanent burial.
- A requirement that city jailers cut prisoners’ hair to within one inch from the scalp. This would mean cutting the long queues (braided pigtails) of Chinese men — a move intended to dissuade them from choosing jail over a fine for violating the city’s tenement overcrowding laws (also considered a anti-Chinese move by critics). As one city paper noted, “to deprive a Chinaman of his queue is to humiliate him as deeply as possible.”

The mayor vetoed the “pigtail and laundry orders” and the cemetery proposal was tabled [action postponed]. One councilman expressed moral outrage at the enactments. But the anti-Chinese furor did not subside.

In this tense environment, leading Chinese merchants offered a proposal to the city council titled “The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint.” Translated and presented by a sympathetic Methodist clergyman on June 2, 1873, it was published in the next day’s *San Francisco Bulletin*. Coverage of the “pigtail order” and the Chinese proposal appeared in national newspapers, including the top New York dailies. What made it so compelling?

In effect, the Chinese merchants offered a proposal that no one who profited from their labor could accept. The merchants’ “proposal” went like this: “You don’t like what we Chinese are doing here in

America, and we Chinese don't like what you Americans are doing in China. Easy solution. We all return to our native countries and everybody will be happy." With this satiric proposal, the merchants confronted the council with the dire outcome of a "Chinese must go" policy: "Is this what you really want?" Having established this framework, they make their actual request — treat the Chinese with fairness and dignity.

The *New York Times* hailed the address for its "delicate wit and subtle sarcasm [which] can hardly fail to be perceived, even by the average municipal [city] office-holder." "Of course," the *Times* concluded, "Americans will refuse to entertain [consider] this proposition, but will continue to insist upon their right to live and do business in China. How, then can they refuse to permit Chinamen to live and do business here, as, by treaty they have the express right to do?" (After its defeat by western nations in the Opium Wars of the mid-1800s, China had to agree to admit foreigners and to allow Chinese workers to emigrate to America.)

In 1874, the appeal was published as a pamphlet addressed "to the people of the United States of America." This is the text presented here for your study. How did the Chinese leaders use irony, sarcasm, and satire — skillfully placed within their "calm respectful" proposal — to make their case for just treatment?

The aftermath: The mayor of San Francisco vetoed the "pigtail" and laundry orders. The council voted to override his vetoes, succeeding with the laundry order but not the "pigtail" order. The mayor then vetoed the second laundry order, saying it "savors of injustice to impose a heavier burden upon one class of laborers than is borne by others." In 1880 the U.S. suspended Chinese immigration but agreed to protect the rights of current Chinese residents. Two years later Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning all Chinese immigration. Not until 1965 were Chinese again admitted to the U.S. in large numbers. In 2012 Congress formally expressed regret for the Chinese Exclusion Act.

*See newspaper citations at the end of this document.

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1: Introduction

Brothers: Will you listen to a calm respectful statement of the Chinese question from a Chinese standpoint? Public sentiment is strongly against us.

Many rise up to curse us. Few there are who seem

willing, or who dare to utter a word in our defense or in defense of our treaty rights in this country. The daily papers teem with bitter invectives against us. All the evils and miseries of our people are constantly pictured in an exaggerated form to the public, and our presence in this country is held up as an evil, and only evil, and that continually. In California, Oregon, and Nevada, laws designed not to punish guilt and crime, nor yet to protect the lives and property of the innocent, have been enacted and executed discriminating against the Chinese; and the Board of Supervisors [city council] of the City of San Francisco, where the largest number of our people reside, has surpassed even these State authorities in efforts to afflict us by what seems to us most unjust, most oppressive, and most barbarous enactments. If these enactments are the legitimate off-



"Angel Island: the Ellis Island of the West," 1917

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



spring of the American civilization, and of the Jesus religion, you can hardly wonder if the Chinese people are somewhat slow to embrace the one or adopt the other.

Unfortunately for us, our civilization has not attained to the use of the daily press — that mighty engine for molding public sentiment in these lands — and we must even now appeal to the generosity of those, who perhaps bear us no good will, to give us a place in their [newspaper] columns to present our cause.

In the merchants' presentation to the council, they address the members as "Gentlemen." Why was the salutation changed to "Brothers" in the published pamphlet?

Why do they begin with the question "Will you listen to a calm respectful statement?" instead of, perhaps, "We protest on behalf of the Chinese people"?

What is the "Chinese question" that the merchants propose to solve?

In the first paragraph, how do they describe the anti-Chinese intolerance — with rage, sadness, or desperation?

How does their tone change in the second paragraph?

List the five adjectives with which the merchants describe the council's anti-Chinese actions.

How do they soften the bluntness of these words?

How do the merchants imply that the anti-Chinese laws violate American and Christian values?

Why might they have avoided any mention of the specific enactments (e.g., the “pigtail” and laundry orders)?

How do the merchants add a self-effacing tone in the third paragraph? Do they mean it?

What message do they send by hailing the American press as “a mighty engine for molding public sentiment”?

Excerpt 2: Industrious

We wish now also to ask the American people to remember that the Chinese in this country have been for the most part peaceable and industrious. We have kept no whisky saloons and have had no drunken brawls resulting in manslaughter and murder. We have toiled patiently to build your railroads, to aid in harvesting your fruits and grain, and to reclaim your swamp lands. Our presence and labor on this coast we believe have made possible numerous manufacturing interests which, without us, could not exist on these shores. In the mining regions our people have been satisfied with [land] claims deserted by the white men. As a people we have the reputation, even here and now, of paying faithfully our rents, our taxes, and our debts.



“The Chinese Must Go! But, Who Keeps Them?” The Wasp, 1878

In view of all these facts we are constrained [compelled] to ask why this bitter hostility against the few thousands of Chinese in America! Why these severe and barbarous enactments discriminating against us in favor of other nationalities?

From Europe you receive annually an immigration of 400,000 (among whom, judging from what we have observed, there are many — perhaps one third — who are vagabonds and scoundrels or plotters against your national and religious institutions). These, with all the evils they bring, you receive with open arms and at once give them the right of suffrage and not seldom elect them to office. Why then this fearful opposition to the immigration of 15,000 or 20,000 Chinamen yearly?

But if opposed to our coming still, in the name of our country, in the name of justice and humanity, in the name of Christianity (as we understand it), we protest against such severe and discriminating enactments against our people while living in this country under existing treaties.

Why do the merchants begin this section (and two earlier sections) with “We wish”?

When do they switch from “we wish” to “we protest”?

Specifically, what are they protesting?

Why do they say they are protesting in the name of “our country,” justice, humanity, and Christianity?

Why do they state that the Chinese in America do not run saloons or engage in “drunken brawls”?

Why do they repeat “your” when describing their contributions to America’s prosperity?

The merchants then state their grievances as questions, not declarative sentences. Why is this effective here? (For example, they ask “Why these barbarous enactments?” instead of saying “We condemn these barbarous enactments.”)

Write a rhetorical question to deliver the main point of paragraph four (“From Europe...”).

Why do the merchants add “as we understand it” when referring to Christianity in the last paragraph?

When they appeal “in the name of OUR country,” do they mean China or America?

Excerpt 3: Our Proposition

Finally, since our presence here is considered so detrimental to this country and is so offensive to the American people, we make this proposition, and promise on our part to use all our influence to carry it into effect. We propose a speedy and perfect abrogation and repeal of the present treaty relations between China and America, requiring the retirement [withdrawal] of all Chinese people and trade from these United States, and the withdrawing of all American people and trade and commercial intercourse whatever from China. This, perhaps, will give to the American people an opportunity of preserving for a longer time their civil and religious institutions which, it is said, the immigration of the Chinese is calculated to destroy!...

This is our proposition. Will the American people accept it? Will the newspapers, which have lately said so many things against us and against our residence in this country, will they now aid us in bringing about this, to

us, desirable state of affairs? In the meantime, since we are now here under sacred treaty stipulations, we humbly pray that we may be treated according to those stipulations until such time as the treaty can be repealed and all commercial intercourse and friendly relations come to an end.

Signed in behalf of the Chinese in America, by

LAI YONG

A YUP

CHUNG LEONG

YANG KAY

LAI FOON



"The Last Load," The Wasp, 1882

Irony is the difference between what is said and what is meant. What do the merchants say in their proposal, and what do they mean?

Do Americans really want “all commercial intercourse and friendly relations [with China] to come to an end”?

Sarcasm is language that conveys contempt or ridicule, often through witty or exaggerated language. How do the merchants use sarcasm at the end of their proposal?

Why do they ask for respect “in the meantime”?

What is their ultimate request of the council, as stated in the last sentence?

If this was their ultimate request, why did they place it in the context of a satiric “proposal”?

The *New York Times* hailed the address for its “delicate wit and subtle sarcasm [which] can hardly fail to be perceived.” How do you think the city council responded to the Chinese merchants’ proposal?

Glossary

invective: insulting and abusive language

vagabond: wanderer, tramp, vagrant

suffrage: the right to vote

detrimental: harmful

abrogation: cancellation, annulment, repeal; turning against

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