

Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 19th Century

Imagine you were in a field that was part of the Pearl River Delta near the South China Sea searching for food. It was 1850 and your stomach rumbled of hunger since you couldn't remember the last time you ate. The Qing dynasty had been in power ruling China since the 1600s and ordinary people in southern China tried hard to fit into the empire that was ruled by people from northern areas. It seemed like each year the population was increasing, but food was getting harder to find and afford and the rulers were out of touch with what people needed. With poverty across much of the land and the Taiping Revolution from 1850 until 1864, many Chinese people, especially men, decided it was time to start a new life in America. Unfortunately, America presented other challenges for Chinese immigrants, such as growing anti-Chinese feeling, laws and even violence.

During the 1850's, China had a bloody civil war between the ruling Qing dynasty, who followed Confucian beliefs, and a Christian group in southern China that was referred to as Taiping. This civil war became known as the Taiping Rebellion and the people who fought this long civil war came from different social classes. The Qing dynasty military was made up of landowners and wealthy farmers, while the Taiping were from the lowest classes, including miners. During this period, China also suffered from severe plagues and famine, which meant that ordinary people had trouble surviving violence, hunger and disease and between twenty and thirty million Chinese people died. This long and violent civil war motivated and forced many Chinese people to flee from China.

Overcrowding was another major problem in China, with natural disasters pushing the majority of Chinese people to move to Pearl River Delta. People chose Pearl River Delta because there was good farmable land and the possibility of commerce. The only problem with moving there was that too many people had come, so there wasn't enough space or jobs. In addition, China suffered from famines during the 19th century, so millions of Chinese families experienced starvation. One solution for some Chinese people was to immigrate to America because there was farmable land and better economy.

Gold was found in California in 1848, and this discovery led to a wave of many tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants to the United States in hope of a better life and more economic

opportunities. Steamships of Chinese immigrants arrived in the San Francisco, California harbor during the mid-19th century, which was also where the first Chinatown neighborhood in the U.S. was established. Some early Chinese immigrants in America who were mining during the Gold Rush made a fortune. Gold back then was considered an expensive resource for trading and if Chinese immigrants found that gold, they could support their families. First families sent their sons to go to America, and then their sons would send back money for them. In America, immigrants believed there was a fair chance to make an ample supply of money, but in China the country was financially corrupt. In America, Chinese immigrants formed mining groups that worked together to find gold, and these certain groups were called tongs. Common jobs for Chinese immigrants were either merchants or apprentices to merchants.

Since jobs in America were more available than in China, large numbers of Chinese people emigrated to America. For instance, in America railroad companies paid for Chinese immigrants to come to America and work for them. Chinese immigrants took this opportunity and came to America. Immediately, when Chinese came they were recruited either for mining in the Gold Rush or working on railroads.

For the Chinese immigrants who came to America, life was very difficult. These immigrants were usually only men, which meant that they were separated from the rest of their families who remained back in China. Chinese miners worked hard, spending long hours in all kind of weather, sifting sand from riverbeds. Later gold had to be mined on mountains which was even harder work. Quickly, working conditions in America got hard, including working long hours and in bad weather conditions. Even though jobs in America were harsh, Chinese battled through and succeeded. Although some Chinese immigrants did find gold it was clear that they would never strike it rich. Since the gold was low and out, people found other jobs with companies or restaurants, which then became more common for miners to take as work.

Second, Chinese immigrants experienced discrimination laws. In the late 1870s, California and much of the rest of the U.S. were suffering from a poor economy and many people were out of jobs. So Congress passed a law in 1882 banning all immigration from China. No other country or nation had been targeted before by the American government resulting in banning them from immigrating. This was part of a growing attitude of discrimination against Chinese immigrants. This ban lasted until 1943, so the early Chinese immigrants to the U.S. did not have opportunities to bring other relatives during this period.

Also, the Chinese immigrants faced discrimination by people. Anti-Chinese groups attacked Chinese immigrants, there was a lot of violence such as riots against Chinese miners, other miners felt they were taking away their jobs. They were discriminated in neighborhoods and schools because of how they looked differently. It got so bad that even the U.S. government established a tax on hiring or employing foreign miners, so it became more difficult for Chinese immigrants to continue to work in this field.

The story of Chinese immigration to the United States is an example of how immigrants faced natural and economic troubles in their homeland and then overcame discrimination and other hardships in America. They were a group of people who worked hard because their goal was to succeed. Today Chinese immigrants have achieved their ambition of finding work and a safe place to raise a family. They are now the third-largest foreign-born group in the United States after Mexicans and Indians, numbering more than 2 million people and comprising five percent of the overall immigrant population in 2013. Chinese overcame discrimination, a law banning immigration to America from China for ten years, and assimilating to a new life style. Chinese show that they have assimilated by making Chinatowns and sticking together. Today Chinese immigrants can take great pride in their many successes in America.