

Homeland Comfort in an Alien Land:
The Role of the Huiguan in Exclusion Era Los
Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Chinese immigrants in the mid 1800's faced legislative discrimination as well as a brutal race-riot to establish themselves in Los Angeles. The organizations called huiguans they had developed to support travelers in China played an important role in supporting them in America. These organizations helped Chinese immigrants face many obstacles in Los Angeles, including legal exclusion from emigrating to America.

“At home I was in poverty
 Constantly worried about firewood and rice.
 I borrowed money
 To come to Gold Mountain
 Immigration officers cross examined me;
 No way I could get through.
 Deported to this island, like a convicted criminal.
 Here—
 Mournful sighs fill the gloomy room.
 A nation weak; her people often humiliated
 Like animals, tortured and destroyed at others’
 Whim”¹

In his chronology of the history of the Chinese in America, Historian William L. Tung notes two events for the year 1871. The first entry concerns the employment of Chinese laborers by Southern planters. The second records, “There was a massacre of Chinese Laborers in Los Angeles. Only the bravery of a few American individuals saved them from total annihilation.”² This is only partially true. Bravery by Anglo-Americans did play a role in these events, but so did Anglo-American savagery. The bravery exhibited by the Chinese survivors of this night far eclipsed any shown by their Anglo-American neighbors. Eurocentrism relies on being the arbiter of the rules to set the interpretation of the narrative of the dominant power structure’s actions. This is extremely clear in the historiography of the 1871 massacre of Chinese Angelinos, and the role the Chinese neighborhood associations played in the events of that evening. This paper argues that the Chinese population in Los Angeles was targeted for murder because of their conscious self-removal from Los Angeles society. Various factors come into play in the misreading and elides that occur in the telling of this story in English. Primary sources in the Cantonese voices of Chinese immigrants are lacking due to the Great San Francisco Earthquake and the subsequent fire that wiped out most records held by the organizations widely known as the “Chinese Six Companies,”³ or by a more accurate moniker of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations (CCBA). For these voices we must turn to the graffiti left on the walls of the quarantine housing immigrants from Asia were forced to inhabit on their arrival,

folk songs and rhymes compiled by Chinese booksellers, or the writings of Cantonese literary societies that arose in San Francisco among elites.⁴ As we can see from the verse above, the journey to America for many Chinese seemed less like an opportunity to find a better life, than a humiliating prison sentence to be endured for financial gain.

The Chinese had two names for America, Jinshan or Gold Mountain, and Huaqi or Flowery Flag. Contrary to the belief that Chinese laborers worked under the “coolie system” of indentured servitude, most came here to work under a contract labor system known as “credit fare.”⁵ They were merchants, traders, laundrymen, miners, farmers, rail-line installers, and other skilled professions. The work they performed created the infrastructure that the Western United States came to rely on. For their efforts, they also became the first group whose national origin targeted them for removal and exclusion by the American government.⁶ As a response, the traditional regional assistance organizations that helped Chinese travelers with various day-to-day necessities, and helped the merchant class maintain social control, picked up another role as legal defenders and organizers of the Chinese diaspora in America.⁷

“School lets out for the summer.
 No need to go home right away.
 Bustling are the parks and museums;
 So, hurry and rent a bicycle
 Just to ride around.
 Start pedaling, roll down the streets!
 It’s soothing and pleasing to the soul, a truly
 dashing experience.
 But my companions tease me about what a big
 Show-off I am.”⁸

Los Angeles Chinatown was not as large and central to the Chinese Diaspora’s existence as San Francisco’s. Out of the 39,584 total Chinese living in California in 1868, only 179 had made the journey south to Los Angeles in time for the 1870 census.⁺ This explains why the majority of the literature on the subject is focused on Los Angeles’s northern neighbor. To specifically understand the Chinese Experience in Los Angeles, The Chinatown

War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871 by Scott Zesch is an indispensable resource. The racist riot and massacre that occurred in Los Angeles Chinatown in 1871 are the focus of the narrative, but Zesch does an excellent job of transporting the reader to the era and locale. César López discusses the history of the street most closely associated with Early Chinatown in the essay, “Lost in Translation: From Calle De Los Negros to Nigger Alley to North Los Angeles Street to Place Erasure, Los Angeles 1855–1951.” published in the Southern California Quarterly. This in-depth analysis of the street’s history examines how the rhetoric of racist derision has real world consequences. Driven Out by Jean Pfaelzer explores the persecution of Chinese immigrants across the entirety of America’s West Coast. Anti-Chinese violence perpetrated by Americans was so prevalent in the 1880’s that Pfaelzer took inspiration in the anti-lynching activism of Ida B. Wells, and the Washington D.C. Vietnam Veterans Memorial designer, Maya Ying Lin, who both “forcefully and simply listed and named those wronged,” which is exactly what Pfaelzer does in chapter seven.¹⁰

Sucheng Chan is one of the foremost scholars of the Asian-American experience. She was the first Asian-American woman to become a provost in the University of California system, and founded the first Asian-American studies program at a large research university in the United States. Chan’s Asian Californians is a broad examination of the emigration that occurred from all Asian nations. Chan also edited the work Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People Resources, and Ideas Between China and America During the Exclusion Era. This work is part of a trilogy on the exclusion era and compiles essays that Chinese in America created a transpacific network that evaded American attempts to thwart it. The writers assembled here represent modern scholarship’s attempts to improve the historiography of the subject.

Two of the most important texts to this essay were Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943 By Madeline Y. Hsu, and The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China’s Policy Toward Exclusion by Yucheng Qin. Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home examines the interrelations that developed between the communities in Southern China and the diaspora in the United States. This book attempts to “construct bridges between the historically related but as yet critically unlinked fields of Asian American and Asian studies.”¹¹ Yucheng Qin’s The Diplomacy of Nationalism also attempts this feat by studying the Chinese institutions known as huiguan in China as well as the United States. It focuses on how a confederation of disparate organizations that existed to provide services integral to members

of Confucian society traveling abroad, rose in stature and power to become the bulwark against oppression known as the Six Companies. Qin also discussed the huiguan's part in the California labor market and the effect it had on immigration in the essay, "A Century-old 'Puzzle': The Six Companies Role in Chinese Labor Importation in the Nineteenth Century" published in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. In "Men of Tang among Fanren" released in the *Journal of California History*, David Torres-Rouff explores the way Chinese racial hierarchies were woven into, and elided by, the racial hierarchies of late nineteenth century Los Angeles.

"Living stranded under the Flowery Flag
 Is like shouldering a heavy cangue
 Never for one moment do I stop wishing to go
 back to China,
 But the road is long and I cannot gallop away.
 A heart left hanging—
 Wife at home sends me these words:
 You have been there across the ocean for a long,
 long time;'
 By all means remember to come home soon."¹²

Qing Dynasty China was a complex and ancient civilization while California was still deciding on the issue of whether to enter the nation as a slave state. Chinese explorers and merchants had been plying the waters of the Pacific and Indian Ocean since at least the Tang Dynasty.¹³ This culture of seafaring and trade in the province of Guangdong, a province that Americans of the era called Canton, explains why they made up the largest Chinese provincial population represented in the United States at the time.¹⁴ A gender imbalance existed among Chinese immigrants to California. Chinese women immigrated in far lesser numbers than the men. A "multigenerational pattern of male sojourning" explains some of the discrepancies in immigration rates, but "patriarchal cultural values that discouraged and even forbade 'decent' Chinese women from traveling abroad, anti-Chinese legislation, and the expense and trouble" served as formidable deterrents to female emigration from China.¹⁵ The travel costs incurred from the long journey across the Pacific also played a significant role in keeping the number of female Chinese immigrants low. Only those who had prospects of strong earning potential made the expensive trip with

the hopes of recouping their investments. This meant that men who performed work would sponsor other family, such as sons and other male household members, who could do the same while leaving wives and daughters back home.¹⁶ As the poem that introduced this section makes clear, the desire to balance providing for a family, while being separated from them by a major ocean, was stressful for both parties.

Few of the Chinese who did make the long and expensive journey planned on permanently settling. Most intended to stay only as long as it took to make enough money that they could return home relatively wealthy and proud. When the gold mountain did not give up its wealth as quickly and easily as they were led to believe, those sojourners eventually turned into permanent residents.¹⁷ Chinese society in America tended to remain isolated from the general populations. This separation arose from the racism they faced from white Americans, as well as a sense of their own national history. Chinese in America were well aware that they hailed from one of the “great ancient civilizations,” and that they had an extended support system that was waiting for their return. This fact helped buffer the racist disdain they faced from the Americans they encountered, but also widened the divide that would lead to the violence and legislative discrimination they would face.¹⁸

The first huiguan was established in Beijing in the sixteenth century to assist examination candidates from the Wuhu district. Other districts adopted the institution and they became increasingly popular and eventually formed confederacies in China to advance their interests. Their foundational purpose of assisting candidates for governmental positions meant that once those candidates achieved those positions, strong bonds would be formed between the government and the huiguan.¹⁹ The concept of “native-place” identity is a strong one in China. Peoples identities had been tied to their homelands for generations. Travelers to America referred to themselves as Jinshan ke or Gold Mountain guests and brought their native-place associations with them.²⁰ Historian Madeline Hsu notes that this conception of Chinese sojourners had of themselves challenges “traditional conceptions of space and identity (that) privilege(s) the territorial boundaries of nation-states while falling short of describing the complex realities and potential significance of people who move place to place.” It also allowed the people of Guangdong to “claim an economic niche in the United States even as they remained active and valued members of family and village units in China.”²¹ The role of the huiguan in Chinese society in America supports this analysis.



Figure 1 Officers of the Chinese Six Companies courtesy of the Roy D. Graves Pictorial Collection, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library

Huiguans performed a variety of services for their members travelling abroad. They maintained cemeteries, provided medicine, paid burial expenses for their indigent members, provided lodging and cooking space, settled disputes, ensured members paid their debts, organized work-gangs for American capitalists, facilitated jobs for Chinese sojourners, and issued exit permits for sojourners returning to China.²² In San Francisco the Ning Yung, Hop Wo, Kong Chow, Young Wo, Sam Yup, and Yan Wo huiguans organized to form the confederation known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association or the “Chinese Six Companies” to combat growing anti-Chinese sentiment. Although this was not the first time huiguans had banded together for their common in-terest, the CCBA eventually came to be “the acknowledged leader of the Chinese community.”²³ The two huiguans that came to prominence in the Chinese community of Los Angeles were the Sam Yup huiguan comprised of a more urban and educated population of Guangdong, and the Sze Yup huiguan whose members were “more ru-ral.” The more “working class” Sze Yup eventually became the more dominant huiguan in Los Angeles.²⁴ The Los Angeles branch of the CCBA formed in 1889 and had their headquarters in the Garnier building which is the oldest surviving structure of Old Chinatown and is now home to the Chinese American Museum.²⁵ Contrary to the dominant image in the California media of the period, the huiguan served to provide a legal structure for the

Chinese Community in California, a function that was important in the liminal space of 1800's America such as Los Angeles.

“My friends, remember by all means:
Don't let yourself be stranded in a foreign country.
Brows besieged by sorrow from frequent worries
of home;
Thousands of miles of clouds and mountains further
impede a gloomy stay.
Separation brings out misery.
Have your belongings packed and ready.
A journey to America is only a search for wealth.
Return to the old country quickly, to avoid
going astray.”²⁶



Figure 2 Old Chinatown, Los Angeles, which was the scene of the Chinese Riots of 1871 courtesy of the USC Libraries Special Collections

The Chinese sojourners who found themselves in Los Angeles must have felt they had gone astray. Los Angeles' Chinatown was a quintessentially liminal space. Among the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods in Los Angeles, it's central plaza had begun to exemplify the indicators of what later generations would label “bad” neighborhoods. Most Chinese settled on or around the street known in Colonial Los Angeles as Calle de Los Negros

due to the dark-skinned inhabitants that originally lived there, but had obtained the racialized epithet of “Nigger Alley” concurrent with the arrival of American governance.²⁷ Corrupt police oversaw the trade in drugs and women, while taking a cut and turning a blind eye to the criminality around them. Chinese women were trafficked with impunity, opium was ubiquitous in Chinatowns, and gambling was a common pastime.²⁸ Los Angeles was one of the most violent areas in America at the time and Chinatown was its “deadliest section.” The violence was not limited to the “transient hooligans” that had fled less lawless regions for the benefit that Los Angeles’ frontier culture offered them. The lawyers, legal authorities, and town councilmen that made up the city’s elite were also prone to violent outbursts. This attitude of violent lawlessness carried over into the culture of Chinatown.²⁹ In 1869 Los Angeles’ police force transitioned from a volunteer organization to a paid one. It was constituted of only six officers and they had already established a reputation for being violent, inept, and corrupt.³⁰ Since the inhabitants of Chinatown could expect scant protection from the police, the huiguans stepped in to fill the void. They constructed their own jail to obtain some sense of order for themselves when their public servants could not or would not provide it for them.³¹

Californians at the time had trouble comprehending the communal benefit provided by the huiguans and falsely charged them with importing slave labor and sex workers. California newspapers spread these spurious claims throughout the state without fully understanding the nature of the mutual-aid societies.³² Californians also confused huiguans with other Chinese social groups such as the tongs and other secret societies. This is partially due to an overlap in membership between different associations, as well as a general American indifference to the nuances of Chinese fraternal organizations.³³ Tongs were organizations of former rebels that had fought in or supported a series of uprisings and regional conflicts back in China. When they arrived in America, they switched their focus to the money they could make from facilitating the “three vices” that were associated with Chinatowns in California; prostitution, gambling and opium. The Hip Yee Tong was originally formed with a mission to protect Chinese women from prostitution, but soon became the largest provider of prostitutes when they realized the enormous profits to be made.³⁴ Los Angeles’ city officials turned a blind eye to these activities as long as they were confined to Chinatown. Patronage of these illicit establishments was a multi-ethnic endeavor that helped increase tensions between the Chinese and other ethnic groups in the area.³⁵ Considering the lawless nature of Calle de los Negros in the mid 1800’s, the opportunities to exploit this environment would be obvious to groups accustomed

to evading the tax-collectors and other bureaucrats of the Qing government. The hyper-masculine nature of Los Angeles Chinatown was ripe for the development of these extra-legal groups.³⁶ As far as the Los Angeles elites were concerned, the Chinese would regulate their own affairs, an attitude that helped contribute to the massacre that occurred in 1871.

Western media portrayals of Chinese women often portrayed them as indentured sex-workers with little say in their destiny.³⁷ The female Chinese laborer is often elided in the histories. This stems from the fact that tradition decreed that “proper” women remained behind in China,³⁸ or were unobserved by other Californians due to remaining in the home to take care of the domestic sphere and therefore not encountered in a casual setting. Many Chinese women did work in the agricultural sector and in laundries, but these occupations were not highly visible due to their distance or occlusion from city centers. Historian Sucheng Chan has performed work that contradicts the binary between “virtuous women” and prostitutes. Chan’s research suggests that many single Chinese women emigrated at a young age, performed sex-work, and then left the profession through marriage or other means. This complicates previous narratives of Chinese women and sex-work and indicates that we must view this population as “an overlapping continuum; they do not represent two distinct entities.” Some Chinese women arrived in America to jobs in the sex-trade and found husbands after some time performing their profession. Others went on to management positions as brothel owners or madams.³⁹

While the sex trade was one method by which interethnic contact occurred in Los Angeles, medicine was another. Chinese doctors were in one the professions exempted from exclusion.⁴⁰ Chinese doctors were popular among both the Chinese and European members of Los Angeles society in the mid-nineteenth century. The skill with which Chinese medical practitioners were able to treat ailments that western doctors were unable to led them to charge a higher fee. Angelinos who sought the skills of these practitioners therefore tended to be from the upper classes that could afford the expensive, yet effective treatments.⁴¹ Chinese medicine was also the only form available to the Chinese population of Los Angeles as they were excluded from seeking treatment from public medical facilities. Despite the popularity among the western elites in Los Angeles, Chinese doctors were banned from advertising their services and resorted to calling themselves “herbalists” to circumvent these attempts.⁴²

“Drifting around, all over the place,
 Seeking food everywhere in all four directions,
 Turning east, going west, always on an
 uncertain road;
 Toiling, rushing about, much ado for nothing.
 Fed by wind and frost,
 I search for wealth, but all in vain.
 If fate has excluded me so, what more can
 I say?
 After years of sojourn, I sigh in fear.”⁴³

The author of the verse above was likely referring to fear of economic failure, but the events of October 24, 1871 would soon make clear that other dangers lurked in the American hinterlands that dwarfed economic ones. The limited nature of encounters between Anglo-Americans and the Chinese in Los Angeles helped feed a cul-ture of misunderstanding and resentment between the two groups that resulted in an event of racialized violence that was so terrible, newspapers in Nashville, Tennessee remark in horror on it.⁴⁴ One October night in 1871 the tensions that had been building between the two groups spasmed into violence. Nineteen people were murdered by a mob of five hundred of their neighbors in or around the vicinity of Calle de Los Negros. The city’s nascent police force either participated or ignored the violence.⁴⁵ A gun battle erupted between representatives of two rival huiguans concerning a dispute over control of a Chinese woman named Yut Ho. Some of the gunmen involved had arrived from San Francisco as muscle for the Sze Yup Company allied Nin Yung Company to settle a dispute with the Hong Chow Company.⁴⁶ The violence that occurred left a Nin Yung Member named Ah Choy lying in the middle of Calle de los Negros dying of a gunshot wound to the neck. When an Anglo-American police officer was shot, and a local tavern owner fatally wounded trying to stop the disturbance,⁴⁷ the tensions that had been building finally boiled over into an orgy of lynching and violence.

Dr. Chee Long “Gene” Tong was “the most popular physician in the city.”⁴⁸ This fact did not spare his life. Seized by the angry mob with his wife and housemate, he begged for his life while preparations were made to hang him. Begging for his life in both Spanish and English, he reminded the crowd that he had not participated in the

earlier violence of the evening and promised the lynch-mob his life savings if they would spare his life. In response the crowd tore off his pants looking for money. While he continued to plead for his life, one of the members of the crowd shot him through his mouth and the rest hung him from the rafters of the gate of a local business named Tomlinson's corral and lumberyard.⁴⁹ Looting was rampant during the night with some of the most prominent members of Los Angeles' Chinese merchant community being targeted due to rumors that had circulated concerning their wealth. The Coronel Adobe building that served as their home was "in shambles." By the time the sheriff was able to deputize twenty-five "law-abiding citizens" to help restore order in Chinatown the violence had "run its course." In a little over a half-hour's worth of violence, the estimated loss in lives, money, and property of the Chinese community was nineteen people, the building that housed a large population of them, and between fourteen and thirty thousand dollars.⁵⁰

The next day the surviving residents who had been sheltered in the town jail or had ended capture by other means gathered to collect the bodies of their compatriots. The burials took place that same day in the pauper's section of the city cemetery. Anglo-American sightseers toured the locations of the massacre including the Coronel Adobe and Tomlinson's Corral (the attention prompted the owner to tear the offending gate down.) The Coronel building had been rendered uninhabitable and other Chinese homes had their barred their doors and windows against a rumored second attack. Many Chinese residents packed their belongings and left the city.⁵¹ The county coroner investigated the matter, interviewing seventy-nine of the massacre's witnesses over a course of four days. The coroner's inquiry was hampered by a combination of darkened locales of the crimes, the large and mutable nature of Los Angeles population, and the impaired, implicated, or reluctant witnesses.⁵² A grand jury was impaneled by judge Ygnacio Sepúlveda to examine the case two weeks later. Despite the fears of the judge and the local press that the deep-seated prejudice against the Chinese would prevent the application of justice in the matter, the grand jury found twenty-five Angelinos culpable in the murders and another twelve for other lesser crimes. They also found eight Chinese responsible for the deaths of the tavern owner and Chinese gunman that ignited the violence.⁵³ After eight Anglo-Americans had been convicted for their participation in the events of the evening, the California Supreme Court reversed their convictions on the grounds "that any person had actually been murdered." This was a stunning decision that derailed the upcoming trials of other indicted conspirators.⁵⁴ In the end, only seven people served less than two years in prison each for one of the most horrific hate-crimes in American history.

“So, liberty is your national principle;
Why do you practice autocracy?
You don’t uphold justice, you Americans,
You detain me in prison, guard me closely.
Your officials are wolves and tigers,
All ruthless, all wanting to bite me.
An innocent man implicated, such an injustice!
When can I get out of this prison and free
my mind?”⁵⁵

The treatment of the perpetrators of the Los Angeles Massacre is not surprising given the way anti-Asian sentiment was becoming codified in United States law. The hypocrisy of a nation allegedly founded on the principles of immigration, personal liberty, and equality under the law treating a specific set of immigrants for second class status was quite clear to the Chinese who landed on its shores. References to American legal authorities as predators like wolves and tigers are common in the songs and poems of Chinese sojourners for good reason. California had passed a series of increasingly targeted and harassing measures aimed at its Chinese population including the Foreign Miners Tax in 1853, the “Queue” Ordinance, and the Laundry Ordinance in 1873.⁵⁶ Anti-Chinese sentiment was exacerbated by white laborers fears that the presence of immigrant workers would depress the labor market. However, Chinese laborers were as aware of the value of the work as Anglos and would not hesitate to move on to more lucrative ventures if they felt they were being exploited.⁵⁷ Chinese immigrants were also quick to turn to the courts when they felt that they had been wronged. In the ten years between 1873 and 1883 they filed more than twenty-two civil suits in Los Angeles courts.⁵⁸

During the Tongzhi Period (1862-1874) of the Qing Dynasty, the government of China launched a series of reforms called the Self-Strengthening Movement aimed at “fortifying the Qing through selective borrowing from the West.”⁵⁹ These reforms included ending the ban on emigration and opening to western ideas and technologies. The Zongli Yamen was founded as an official governmental liaison to foreign countries and ideas. This also led to Anson Burlingame, a former American minister to the court at Beijing, being appointed as the Chinese envoy

to the United States and Europe.⁶⁰ In 1868 the Burlingame treaty was signed despite a lack of imprimatur from the Zongli Yamen but with the backing of the CCBA.⁶¹ This indicates the strength of the private CCBA relative to the governmental Zongli Yamen at the time, a position that would reverse itself over time. The treaties signing signaled that both the United States and the Emperor of China acknowledged the “inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects.”⁶² The CCBA had an important role in the discussions leading up to the ratification of the treaty and their efforts were considered highly successful. The CCBA had been agitating for greater protections of Chinese in the United States for years before the Qing government even acknowledged the need to formulate a foreign policy position on its citizens abroad.⁶³ In dealing with matters in America, the CCBA still proved to be the primary authority.

The victories gained by the signing and ratification of the Burlingame Treaty would prove to be short lived. Shortly after it was signed, the xenophobic current making its way through American politics started pushing for amendments designed to weaken the protections the treaty afforded. A major depression led to American labor groups scapegoating the Chinese for their economic woes. The transitory nature of Chinese sojourners did nothing to quell the economic anxieties felt by white, working-class Americans fearful that the Chinese laborers were taking their jobs.⁶⁴ The next several years saw steady erosions of the Burlingame protections that culminated in the Exclusion act of 1882 and later the Geary act of 1892.

In 1882 the United States Congress passed the first law in its history that barred a group from immigrating to the country based solely upon their race or country of origin.⁶⁵ This piece of legislation barred all Chinese “laborers” and Chinese women from entering the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect until 1943 when it was finally repealed. The passage of the act inflamed tensions between the two countries and made life harder for the Chinese already in the country. Despite the act’s strict enforcement, American authorities found that stopping a determined group of individuals from entering a country as vast as the United States is extremely difficult. Chinese immigrants were able to avoid the act’s restrictions through a combination of “protest, evasion, and, especially, persistent litigation.”⁶⁶ The CCBA utilized its network of “political and legal resources” to resist the act, while the tongs got involved in the lucrative business of smuggling immigrants across the border. The Chinese government made strenuous protests against the discriminatory nature of the act, but their pleas fell on ears deaf-

ened by xenophobia and hypocrisy. The most effective resistance against the act came from the educated classes of Chinese-American society whose knowledge of bureaucratic and legal maneuvering they acquired from dealing with the Qing system made them formidable foes in court.⁶⁷

Ten years later Congress further restricted the freedoms of the Chinese in America by passing the Geary Act which required that Chinese people carry photo identification and proof of immigration status at all times. Compliance with the law was required within a year of its passage and failure to do so carried a penalty of forced labor and deportation. This was the first time immigrating to the United States carried possible criminal penalties in the history of the nation. This law was derided as the “Dog Tag Law,” and it led to possibly the “largest organized act of civil disobedience in the United States.”⁶⁸ The CCBA posted notices throughout the Chinatowns in America stating that Chinese people should not register as mandated. They also raised money for legal defense by charging members a one-dollar fee and urged the Chinese government to utilize diplomatic and economic pressure on the United States to repeal the act. The drive for resistance was extremely successful, by the time there was only a month left to comply with its provisions, only “439 out of an estimated 26,000 eligible Chinese” had done so. Loosening of some of restrictions placed on the Chinese had no effect in compelling their cooperation either.⁶⁹ These tactics backfired however, when the deadline came and went un-registered Chinese faced imprisonment, deportation, and vigilante mobs. In 1898 further racialized restrictions on immigration were passed for Filipinos, and in 1902 Hawaiians joined the list of banned ethnicities.⁷⁰ For the Chinese in America, repression became the norm.

As we have seen, despite America’s historic antipathy towards its non-European citizens, it was the Chinese who became the first group targeted for exclusion due to their ethnicity. The legal hurdles and physical violence they faced gives testament to the determination and ingenuity they needed to establish a place in the American experiment. The Chinese in Los Angeles that survived the massacre showed a greater resiliency than many of its inhabitants by remaining after the horrors they had witnessed. A large part of this survival strategy rested on the organizational skills that had been in place for centuries back in their homeland and the huiguans were an important organizing force. By marshalling these resources, the Chinese in Los Angeles were able to resist the legal and extra-legal forces that white-supremacy brought to bear on them.

Endnotes

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