

# The Real Story Behind the Chinese Exclusion Act

Virtue-signaling is a must these days if you want to fit in. Even if you just want to keep your job, it seems one must spout platitudes about social justice, racism, and other woke matters of interest.

But what happens when these virtues run up against each other? Which side does the woke crowd fall on?

The history of the Chinese Exclusion Act seems to be one such instance. As Roger McGrath details [in the July issue of \*Chronicles\*](#), “In high schools and colleges it’s taught that the act was simply another example of American racism.” As such, the Chinese Exclusion Act is something to rail against given its injustice toward a minority group.

Yet as McGrath explains, “The real story is more complex,” and has a lot to do with class struggles, human rights, and even indentured servitude.

The Chinese influx to America began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spurred on by the California Gold Rush. Quality of life was not very high in China, and the earning potential in America lured many to the West Coast. Yet those who came were not looking to settle in America long term, nor were many even in control of their own lives, particularly the “coolies” who were “kidnapped and sold into service.” McGrath writes:

Wealthy Chinese merchants and their enforcers controlled the system, not Americans. The great majority of the immigrants to California came as indentured servants, who remained under the control of the merchants until their period of indenture was completed and all debts to the merchants were paid. California’s constitution prohibited indentured servitude but,

for the most part, the Chinese obediently accepted the system.

McGrath goes on to explain that the Chinese in America usually organized themselves into "tongs," a type of association brought with them from their homeland, which "controlled opium trafficking, gambling, and prostitution, and thereby established a massive income stream." Transport these tongs from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America to today and those concerned about human trafficking and other injustices would – or at least should – have a heyday condemning them and seeking their abolishment.

Yet it was the struggle between the rich and the poor which eventually brought about the Chinese Exclusion Act. According to McGrath, it was the wealthy who clamored for the cheap labor of the imported Chinese laborers, while working class Americans suffered through several periods of economic hardships. Over time these working class Americans gained an upper hand in California politics, eventually causing President Hayes and Congress to negotiate with China and pass the Exclusion Act. "Laborers already here were not expelled," McGrath writes, nor did the act "prohibit the entry into the U.S. of Chinese businessmen, teachers, tourists, government officials, or any other class of Chinese but laborers."

While McGrath notes that there "may have been widespread anti-Chinese sentiment" at the time the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, the historical background indicates that a concern for laboring American citizens, not racism, was at the center of support for the act. As a positive byproduct of the act, the United States was also no longer aiding and abetting the questionable indentured servitude and potential trafficking that went on in the Chinese tongs.

Such an account is quite different from the one we hear today in the mainstream media and our history classes. This makes me wonder: are there other historical figures, practices, or

policies that we outright condemn today because, on the surface, they look to be antithetical to woke politics, regardless of the true history of the matter?

The [Nation's Report Card shows that only 12 percent](#) of high school seniors are proficient in U.S. history. If Americans actually dug into history, weighed the pros, cons, and the surrounding culture of the time in which a public figure acted or an event occurred, would we get a different picture and be less quick to condemn those that have gone before us and the decisions they made?

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