

The U.S. and the World: Chinese Immigrants

Instructions

This module will introduce the history of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century. It will also show one of the ways that the U.S. was (and is) connected to the rest of the world. Begin by reading the article “For Further Information.” This will provide you with information about the immigrants, the world they came from and their lives in the United States. A crucial part of this history is the hostility they encountered and the eventual legislation that stopped almost all Chinese immigration. The four documents, which you should read next, show both the hostility toward the Chinese and the viewpoints of two of their defenders. When you have read the article and the documents, take the quiz and participate in the discussion.

For Further Information: Chinese Immigrants to America, 1849-1882



Pearl River Delta, China

In January, 1848 a workman at a mill east of what became Sacramento, California discovered gold. News of this discovery spread rapidly over most of the world, and gold seekers from many nations flooded into California. Among the immigrants were thousands of Chinese farmers from the Pearl River delta in southeastern China. By 1851 25,000 had arrived in California, where they made up one quarter of the total population.

Most of the immigrants were young men from farming families in Guangdong province. This area was located close to the port city of Guangzhou, known in the West as Canton. For many years it had been the center of foreign trade in China and until the first Opium War (1839-42) was the only port that allowed Westerners—from the United States, Britain, and other European countries—to enter China. So the people of this region, although traditional farmers, lived in close proximity to the most important port in China and its door to the outside world.



["Guangdong in China"](#) by TUBS - Own work. This vector image includes elements that have been taken or adapted from this: [China edcp location map.svg](#) (by Uwe Dederling). Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons.

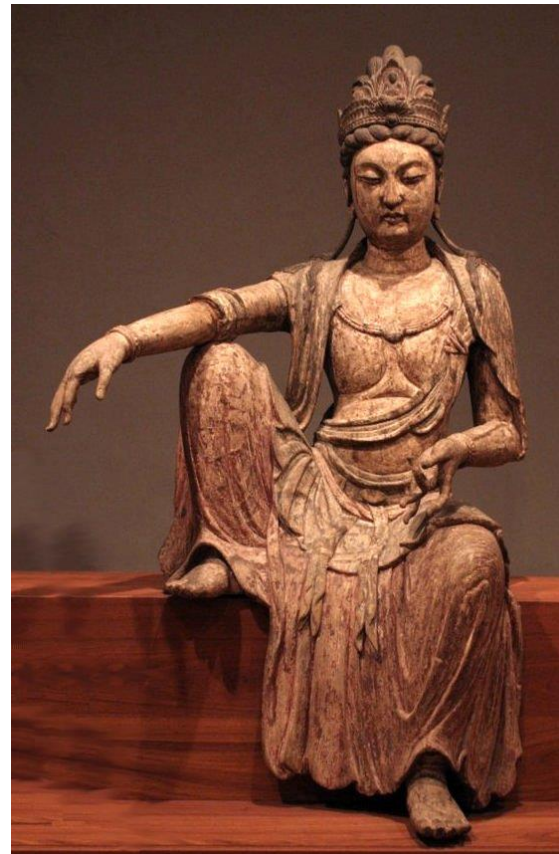
The China of the Immigrants

These immigrants came from a China that was rapidly changing. Up until about 1800 it was one of the most advanced countries in the world. The Chinese had invented paper, printing, gunpowder, and firearms. And by 1800 it is estimated that approximately fifty percent of Chinese men were able to read and write, one of the highest percentages in the world.

In the early 1800s, however, the situation changed dramatically--to China's disadvantage. Beginning in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Great Britain underwent an industrial revolution, in which it developed factories, railroads, and steamship, far surpassing China in industrial and military power. Subsequently, in 1839 to 1842 Britain fought China in the first Opium War, a war waged to force China to allow British merchants to import opium into the country. Britain, equipped with steamships and modern artillery, defeated China, which had to accept the opium and grant Britain other privileges as well. Then, in 1856-60 Britain, this time alongside France, fought another war with China, in which China was again defeated. Shortly after this, the Taiping Rebellion broke out, as a religiously-inspired Chinese rebel waged a war against the central government headed by the Chinese emperor. This rebellion devastated much of southern China. Also during this period a destructive flood struck the Pearl River delta, further adding to the troubles of this region.

Cultural and Religious Background

The China from which these immigrants came possessed a complex and sophisticated culture more than two thousand years old. An important aspect of this culture was Chinese religion and philosophy, which encompassed three major movements: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism emphasized proper behavior, especially with those in various social positions. One of its most important aspects was filial piety, which meant respect and veneration for parents and earlier ancestors. Daoism advocated a natural life, being in tune with nature, and avoiding conflict. Buddhism, which came to China from India, aimed to overcome suffering. In China one branch of this religion called Mahayana became dominant and incorporated many gods, goddesses, and other religious figures into its system. Among the most important for its followers was Guanyin, a divine figure of mercy. Chinese religions, unlike their Western counterparts, are not exclusive; the devout may, and often do, practice all of them.



"Kuan-yan bodhisattva, Northern Sung dynasty, China, c. 1025, wood, Honolulu Academy of Arts" by Haa900 - Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

Immigrant Lives in the United States



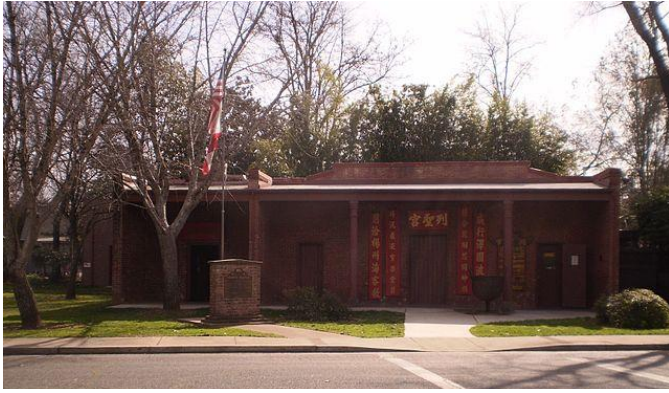
Chinese workers building the transcontinental railroad in the Sierra Nevada mountains. [Public Domain](#)

Most of the young men who arrived in California intended to stay only as long as necessary, send money to their families in China, and return to live there permanently. In California one of their greatest contributions was on the building of the transcontinental railroad that linked California with the Midwest and the eastern United States. Building began simultaneously at opposite ends of the railroad--at Omaha on the Mississippi River and in California. The western leg that began in California faced a major obstacle in the form of the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. Crossing these mountains required leveling steep slopes, blasting through granite, creating tunnels, and building snow sheds to keep the ten or more feet of snow each winter off the tracks. The Chinese comprised a crucial part of the workforce—and sometimes even used work techniques brought from China. Wherever they went, Chinese immigrants faced prejudice and were forced to take jobs no one else wanted. Besides the railroad, they worked in mining, fishing, farm labor, laundries, and restaurants.

In coming to America, the Chinese did not leave their culture and religion behind. Two temples that still exist in Northern California provide examples of a determination to maintain the religions of their homeland. One of them, in Weaverville, is Daoist. The other, in Oroville, has areas for each of the three Chinese religions.



Chinese temple in Weaverville, California. ["Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park"](#) by Jerrye and Roy Klotz MD - Own work. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons

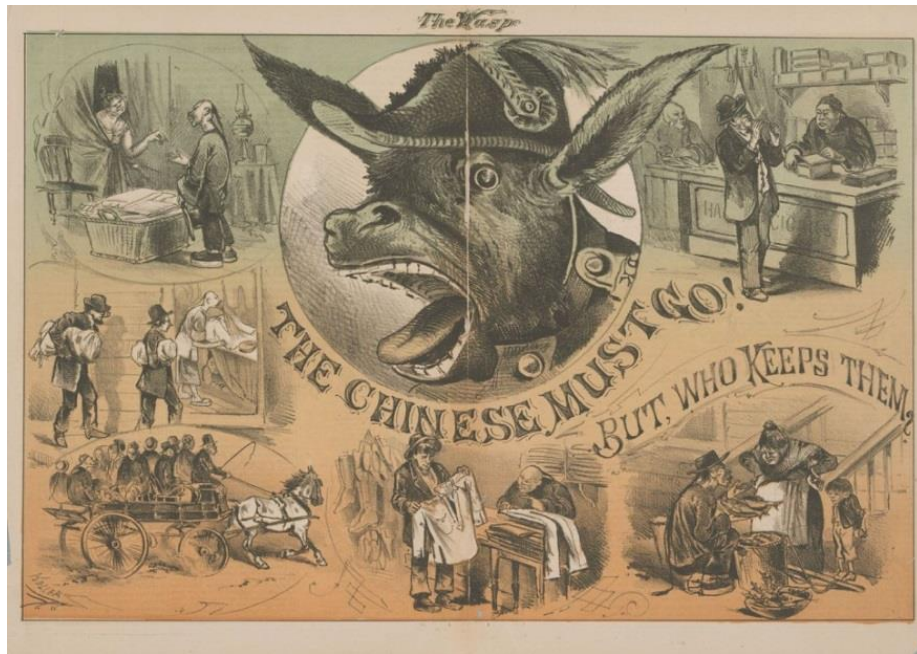


["Oroville chinese temple"](#) by Podruznik at en.wikipedia - Own work. Transferred from en.wikipedia. Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

From the beginning of their time in California (and other nearby areas) the Chinese immigrants confronted harsh prejudice. The state of California, for example, created a tax on foreign miners, aimed primarily at the Chinese. Private employers closed many jobs to the immigrants. And the Chinese sometimes even faced physical violence.

Eventually, an anti-Chinese political movement was organized. In 1882 this movement succeeded in persuading the US Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion

Act, which, with a few exceptions, barred Chinese from entering the United States. This ban continued until 1943, when the United States and China were allies fighting Japan in World War II.



["The Chinese Must Go, But Who Keeps Them?"](#) – 11 May 1878 by George Frederick Keller for *The San Francisco Illustrated Wasp*

The story of these Asian immigrants has both similarities and differences from that of immigrants from Europe. The documents in this module provide insight these differences. They reveal a complex conflict between classes and different ethnic groups.

Copyright 2016 by Vincent A. Clark. All rights reserved.

“Enactments So Utterly Un-American”

By Constance Gordon-Cummings

A very large section of the city [Oakland, California] is occupied by Chinamen--for the Celestials muster strong in San Francisco; in fact they number about 30,000, and about 70,000 more are hard at work in all parts of California. Their special quarter in this city is known as Chinatown. It is built on hilly ground, and its long steep streets are intersected by narrow alleys and wretched courtyards, where an incredible number of human beings are huddled together in the smallest possible compass. The houses are as crowded and as hopelessly dirty as in many parts of the old town of Edinburgh and other British cities, where the very poor congregate. All precautions being utterly ignored, the district is foul beyond description.

But the miracle is to see what really well-washed, neatly dressed, smiling and shining men come forth from their filthy and miserable homes, to do faithful and honest work at fair wages--not necessarily lower wages than those demanded by white men, but in return for which, work is, as a general rule, more conscientiously done.

The cruel and unreasonable howl against Chinese immigration is raised by jealous men who would fain keep a monopoly of all work, and do it on their own terms and in their own fashion--earning enough in a day to keep them idle for a week. They cannot forgive the frugal, patient, hard-working Celestial, who is content to work cheerfully from dawn till midnight, for wages equal to three shillings a day (some can earn six shillings a-day), and contrive to save a considerable sum in the course of a few years. The low Irish and the dreadful San Franciscan hoodlums (young roughs) have no sympathy with the self-denial of men who willingly live on rice and vegetables, that they may save up such a sum as will enable them to return to their own homes, there to invest their little capital, first providing for their parents.

The constant cry against the Chinamen is, that they earn money in America, and take it all out of the country--even importing from China their clothes, their rice, and their opium--and so in no way benefit trade. Their detractors do not take into account the good sterling work by which the country is enriched, both at the time, and in some cases permanently. For Chinese labour has been largely employed in all departments of State work--in railway and road making, and wherever else steady and hard and conscientious work is required. Many masters of large factories bear witness to the satisfactory nature of the work done for them by Chinese hands, in contrast with the manner in which it is scamped by white men, when they are tempted to yield to the general howl, and employ only white labour. . . .

So, however little John Chinaman may be appreciated as the representative of the coming race, his departure from California would be bewailed by many, as a serious loss to the Granite State.

Concluding Note.

The month of May 1881 was marked by the most extraordinary anomaly which could possibly have arisen, among a people whose national existence is based on the Declaration of Independence, and the assumption of liberty and equality of all men, without distinction of race or colour.

This extraordinary event was nothing less than that the American Legislature should have yielded to the clamours of the low Irish in California, and to their ceaseless anti-Chinese howl, to the extent of actually passing a law prohibiting all Chinese immigration for the next ten years, beginning from ninety days after the passing of the Act, heavy penalties being inflicted on any Shipmaster who shall land any Chinaman of the labouring class at any port in the Land of Freedom. An exception is made in favour of merchants, diplomatists, travellers, and students, provided they are duly provided with passports!

A law has also been passed to prevent any Chinaman from becoming an American citizen--the fear being that so many might wish to avail themselves of that privilege, that the whole white population of the Pacific coast would ultimately find itself a small minority, and that the Chinese "Six Companies" (mysterious but mighty potentates, who rule all the affairs of their countrymen in California) would actually rule in the Legislature of the State.

That enactments so utterly un-American could have been suffered to pass, appears so extraordinary, that it has been generally assumed to have been brought forward by the Republican party, solely as a means of making political capital by securing the Democratic vote. If such was indeed the secret spring of action, it is so far satisfactory to know that it failed in securing its object, the Democrats having frustrated that move by voting in favour of the bill. Public opinion appears to have been about equally divided on the question, the Eastern States taking part with the Chinamen, the Western States clamouring for his exclusion.

The clamour, however, has carried the day, and for the next ten years no Chinese workman may enter the Golden Gates of the American Paradise.

Hinton Rowan Helper on Chinese Immigration

Hinton Rowan Helper was from North Carolina. In the 1850s, he became controversial in the South because of his opposition to slavery, especially in his book *The Impending Crisis*. In another book, *The Land of Gold, from California As I Saw It, 1849-1900*, Helper set forth his views on Chinese immigration. An excerpt from that book appears below. What were Helper's major arguments about Chinese immigration? How persuasive were those arguments?

According to the most reliable estimates, there are at the present time about forty thousand Chinese in California; and every vessel that arrives from the Celestial Empire brings additional immigrants. From a fourth to a fifth of these reside in San Francisco; the balance are scattered about over various parts of the State--mostly in the mines. A few females--say one to every twelve or fifteen males--are among the number; among these good morals are unknown, they have no regard whatever for chastity or virtue. You would be puzzled to distinguish the women from the men, so inconsiderable are the differences in dress and figure. The only apparent difference is, that they are of smaller stature and have smoother features. They are not generally neat in their outward habit. . .

Is this Chinese immigration desirable? I think not; and, contrary to the expressed opinions of many of the public prints throughout the country, contend that it ought not to be encouraged. It is not desirable, because it is not useful; or, if useful at all, it is so only to themselves--not to us. No reciprocal or mutual benefits are conferred. In what capacity do they contribute to the advancement of American interests? Are they engaged in any thing that adds to the general wealth and importance of the country? Will they discard their clannish prepossessions, assimilate with us, buy of us, and respect us? Are they not so full of duplicity, prevarication and pagan prejudices, and so enervated and lazy, that it is impossible for them to make true or estimable citizens? I wish their advocates would answer me these questions; if they will do it satisfactorily, I will interrogate them no further. Under the existing laws of our government, they, as well as all other foreigners, are permitted to work the mines in California as long as they please, and as much as they please, without paying any thing for the privilege, except a small tax to the State. Even this has but recently been imposed, and half the time is either evaded or neglected. The general government, though it has sacrificed so much blood and treasure in acquiring California, is now so liberal that it refuses to enact a law imposing a tax upon foreign miners; and as a matter of course, it receives no revenue whatever from this source. But the Chinese are more objectionable than other foreigners, because they refuse to have dealing or intercourse with us; consequently, there is no chance of making any thing of them, either in the way of trade or labor. They are ready to take all they can get from us, but are not willing to give any thing in return. They did not aid in the acquisition or

settlement of California, and they do not intend to make it their future home. They will not become permanent citizens, nor identify their lives and interests with the country. They neither build nor buy, nor invest capital in any way that conduces to the advantage of any one but themselves. They have thousands of good-for-nothing gewgaws and worthless articles of virtue for sale, and our people are foolish enough to buy them; but their knowledge of the laws of reciprocity is so limited, that they never feel in any need of American commodities.

Though they hold themselves aloof from us, contemn and disdain us, they have guaranteed to them the same privileges that we enjoy; and are allowed to exhaust the mines that should be reserved for us and our posterity--that is, if they are worth reserving at all. Their places could and should be filled with worthier immigrants--Europeans, who would take the oath of allegiance to the country, work both for themselves and for the commonwealth, fraternize with us, and, finally, become a part of us. All things considered, I cannot perceive what more right or business these semi-barbarians have in California than flocks of blackbirds have in a wheatfield; for, as the birds carry off the wheat without leaving any thing of value behind, so do the Confucians gather the gold, and take it away with them to China, without compensation to us who opened the way to it.

“Our Misery and Despair”: Kearney Blasts Chinese Immigration

Anti-Asian agitation characterized politics in the American West, particularly labor politics, in the late-19th century. Labor leaders like Denis Kearney and H. L. Knight of California’s Workingmen’s Party often resorted to popular racist arguments to justify the exclusion of Chinese immigrants. In this 1878 address, Kearney and Knight described the Chinese as a race of “cheap working slaves” who undercut American living standards and thus should be banished from America’s shores. While rare, some in the labor movement challenged the racist appeals of leaders like Kearney and Knight.

Our moneyed men have ruled us for the past thirty years. Under the flag of the slaveholder they hoped to destroy our liberty. Failing in that, they have rallied under the banner of the millionaire, the banker and the land monopolist, the railroad king and the false politician, to effect their purpose.

We have permitted them to become immensely rich against all sound republican policy, and they have turned upon us to sting us to death. They have seized upon the government by bribery and corruption. They have made speculation and public robbery a science. They have loaded the nation, the state, the county, and the city with debt. They have stolen the public lands. They have grasped all to themselves, and by their unprincipled greed brought a crisis of unparalleled distress on forty millions of people, who have natural resources to feed, clothe and shelter the whole human race.

Such misgovernment, such mismanagement, may challenge the whole world for intense stupidity, and would put to shame the darkest tyranny of the barbarous past.

We, here in California, feel it as well as you. We feel that the day and hour has come for the Workingmen of America to depose capital and put Labor in the Presidential chair, in the Senate and Congress, in the State House, and on the Judicial Bench. We are with you in this work. Workingmen must form a party of their own, take charge of the government, dispose gilded fraud, and put honest toil in power.

In our golden state all these evils have been intensified. Land monopoly has seized upon all the best soil in this fair land. A few men own from ten thousand to two hundred thousand acres each. The poor Laborer can find no resting place, save on the barren mountain, or in the trackless desert. Money monopoly has reached its grandest proportions. Here, in San Francisco, the palace of the millionaire looms up above the hovel of the starving poor with as wide a contrast as anywhere on earth.

To add to our misery and despair, a bloated aristocracy has sent to China—the greatest and oldest despotism in the world—for a cheap working slave. It rakes the slums of Asia to find the meanest slave on earth—the Chinese coolie—and imports him here to meet

the free American in the Labor market, and still further widen the breach between the rich and the poor, still further to degrade white Labor.

These cheap slaves fill every place. Their dress is scant and cheap. Their food is rice from China. They hedge twenty in a room, ten by ten. They are whipped [whipped] curs, abject in docility, mean, contemptible and obedient in all things. They have no wives, children or dependents.

They are imported by companies, controlled as serfs, worked like slaves, and at last go back to China with all their earnings. They are in every place, they seem to have no sex. Boys work, girls work; it is all alike to them.

The father of a family is met by them at every turn. Would he get work for himself? Ah! A stout Chinaman does it cheaper. Will he get a place for his oldest boy? He can not. His girl? Why, the Chinaman is in her place too! Every door is closed. He can only go to crime or suicide, his wife and daughter to prostitution, and his boys to hoodlumism and the penitentiary.

Do not believe those who call us savages, rioters, incendiaries, and outlaws. We seek our ends calmly, rationally, at the ballot box. So far good order has marked all our proceedings. But, we know how false, how inhuman, our adversaries are. We know that if gold, if fraud, if force can defeat us, they will all be used. And we have resolved that they shall not defeat us. We shall arm. We shall meet fraud and falsehood with defiance, and force with force, if need be.

We are men, and propose to live like men in this free land, without the contamination of slave labor, or die like men, if need be, in asserting the rights of our race, our country, and our families.

California must be all American or all Chinese. We are resolved that it shall be American, and are prepared to make it so. May we not rely upon your sympathy and assistance?

With great respect for the Workingman's Party of California.

Dennis Kearney, President

H.L Knight, Secretary

Source: Dennis Kearney, President, and H. L. Knight, Secretary, "Appeal from California. The Chinese Invasion. Workingmen's Address," *Indianapolis Times*, 28 February 1878.

David Phillips Discusses the “Chinese Question”

David Phillips went to California hoping that a change of climate would help his tubercular son. The following excerpt is from his book, *Letters from California* (1877). How did Phillips describe the "Chinese Question?" How did he account for its being a hot political topic throughout the state? What did Phillips think about this question? View more of David Phillips's thoughts on the "Chinese Question" from *California As I Saw It, 1849-1900*.

Among the Chinamen there are many educated and wealthy merchants--men shrewd, honest and capable. They are here and will remain. Gradually they are bringing their families. Under the laws of the United States, their children, born here, are American citizens, and the males, when reaching their majority, will vote. There are some Chinamen here now over 21, and they vote. Chinamen born in China, under our naturalization laws, it has been assumed, cannot become citizens. Take them to-morrow, were such a thing possible, and allow them all to become naturalized, not one of them would vote the Democratic ticket. Those born here do not. That may explain why Democrats are opposed to Chinamen coming here, in part. In the next place, Bridget and Pat [Irish names] and John Chinaman cannot get along together on the labor question. . . .

Such a thrifty, industrious, alien race, ready to work, are objectionable to other foreign populations, of course, as all the others are permitted to become citizens and vote, and thereby are courted and well treated by all demagogues and knaves. Could the Chinaman vote, the ruffian hoodlums and lawless villains, who are now scarcely restrained from assaulting them in the streets in day time, and who think it brave to assail their quiet homes at night with cobblestones and brickbats, would be dealt with in the most summary manner. The Chinaman's only sin is, he will work. If he cannot get a high price, he will take a low one, but work he will. And then, he is neat, clean, sober and patient, always submissive, peaceable and quiet. . . .

That is what California wants, and that is what is developing the agricultural of the State. Take the 70,000 Chinamen out of California, its industries would be ruined, and the lands, now so productive, would be cultivated without remunerative results. They supply, by their toil, nearly all the vegetables and much of the poultry. They are doing a large share of the farm-work, and build all the railroads and irrigating canals and ditches. They do much of the cooking, and nearly all the washing and ironing. It is said they send the money they save back to China. Why? Because they are not safe, either in person or property, here. Were they protected as citizens are, they would soon own lands, town lots

and houses. As it is now, the low, the vile, the idle, brutal hoodlum, in San Francisco, and all other large towns in this State, may attack the Chinaman's house, smash his windows, and break up his furniture and beat him, and he is--only a Chinaman.

LEGISLATURE OF CALIFORNIA

Is like that of many other States--pretty well filled with ignorant demagogues. They defer to the ignorant rabble, whose votes they court. The rabble vote--the Chinamen do not; therefore, protect the rabble, and down with the Chinaman! The Democratic party of this State is set against the Chinamen and their cheap labor. They always come in at all conventions with a resolution denouncing the Chinese as a dangerous class, whose coming ought to be arrested at once, and means be employed to remove those already here. You are told by the Democracy that they are heathens, and their coming will demoralize this State, and all other sections, whenever they get a footing. Now and then you will find Republicans talking in this same strain. I think some move, as usual for a number of years past, has been made in Congress this winter to arrest the immigration to this country of these Celestials [China was called the Celestial Empire]. Now, in my mind, a Chinaman has the same right to come to this country, find a peaceful home, breathe the free air of liberty, and be protected in his person, his family and property, as any one else. We have boasted, for a century past, that this is a land of refuge for the oppressed and down-trodden of all nations; that under our flag the family of man might gather, assured of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." For a century we have accepted the grand announcement as true, that God has made of one flesh all the nations that dwell on the face of the whole earth, and that all have the same inalienable rights. Let us stand by these grand old truths, and bid the Chinaman, the Japanese and all others, welcome.

But men here are not honest in their utterances on the Chinese question. From what they say, you would infer that they would not hire a Chinaman for any purpose whatever; but when you go to their houses, and on their farms, you find John doing all the work, and these very cheap demagogues living on the profits of his honest toil. If these men could, they would enslave these Chinamen to-morrow. I heard a rather prominent Democrat at Los Angeles declaiming against the Chinamen, and declaring that he was utterly opposed to letting them come here, except under contract, and at rates for their labor which would be merely nominal. I said to him, that it would be rather difficult to enforce such contracts, as the Chinamen would soon find out they could do better, and no damages could be recovered from them for non-fulfillment of the contract. He at once said: "Have a law passed to punish them by flogging, and compel them to live up to their bargains." I suggested that the civilization of the nineteenth century would hardly permit of such harsh and inhuman legislation; and he replied that, then, he was opposed to letting them come here on any other terms. There would not be a word said about cheap labor if these pig-eyed, pig-tailed, saffron-tinted people could be made to work for nothing. . . .

Discussion: Chinese Immigrants in the Nineteenth Century

After reading the material in this module, write a post for discussion. In doing this, summarize each of the documents. Then, on the basis of the readings, describe the situation of the Chinese immigrants and their critics. What were the Chinese immigrants like? Who were their critics? What social class did the critics belong to? Why did they criticize the Chinese? Who were the defenders of the Chinese? What was their social class? Integrate your answers into a coherent response that includes a thesis statement. Your response may require several paragraphs. Please post it in the discussion forum for this chapter.