

The Visual Production of Chinese Masculinity in Political Cartoons, Photography, and Laundry

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Introduction

The act of oppressing a group to improve the economic, social, mental, and racial standing of another has remained a constant within United States society. The ways historians and individuals have studied this systematic discrimination, however, have changed and will most likely continue to evolve as new evidence and theories are introduced. In considering today's events and the political tone used to define "us," versus "them," it is relevant to focus on this pattern of fear associated with immigrants or "foreigners." As a group that experienced some of the first xenophobic legislation and founding ideas for immigrant exclusion, the Chinese in North America provide an important narrative and contribution to the overall study of American exclusion. Their entrance into the United States and what it entailed for the racial order of society was unprecedented. In an attempt to study the Chinese American experience it proved to be a unique challenge because of the language barrier that rendered verbal primary accounts more obscure. The growing body of literature in material and gender studies has provided insightful avenues, however, for identifying the varying methods by which Chinese immigrants were subordinated, particularly in contradictory ways.

The subject of masculinity is especially appropriate for this study because the majority of Chinese immigrants traveling to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were male. Yet even as these Chinese men landed and worked within the patriarchal society of the U.S. they did not necessarily attain the privileges of masculinity assigned by American culture. Their identity as men in conflation with their Asian identity offered an intersectional approach to studying race and gender through their experiences. Though Chinese men saw themselves as men, their definition of masculinity did not fit within the "hegemonic masculinity," or dominant version of masculinity, as clarified by Bryn

Williams, of United States society (53). Male Chinese immigrants were defined as not masculine under the United States' white Western concept, and this in turn played an effective role as Chinese men were positioned within the racial hierarchy of society. The racial category of the Chinese presented a problem. They did not fall under the social conception of "black," but also could not be of equal standing as "white" (Daniels 34; Williams 54). Not being white, Chinese were classified as inferior, and one tactic used to substantiate this claim was through attacking their masculinity. This concept in itself was echoed, as later immigrants would come to face similar attacks upon their masculinity. The presumption that race was directly connected to an individual's "inherent" or lack of masculinity was reinforced through visually based constructs. The racialization of masculinity was influential in the subordination of the Chinese male immigrant population, and was achieved through depictions of Chinese "otherness" in political cartoons, photographic manipulation, and the visibility of Chinese men in occupations otherwise defined as "women's work."

Chinese immigrants arrived in North America for diverse reasons. Known as "Golden Mountain," the United States promised a new life for many Chinese and solutions to their economic uncertainty in China. The Gold Rush of 1849 was a powerful incentive for many Chinese struggling to improve the fortune of their families. Approximately one hundred thousand Chinese came to California in search of this precious metal. It is important to note that in describing this growing United States demographic the majority of these immigrants were men. Over ninety percent of Chinese immigrants entering between 1849 and 1882, which was estimated to be nearly three hundred thousand according to Roger Daniels, were adult males. Many were married and this explained in part why they desired not to remain permanently in the United States, but rather to earn enough money to then return with to China. Their stay at "Golden Mountain" was always intended to be temporary (Daniels 16). Though just as many that left for home there were countless that remained and found work in the railroads, mines, agriculture, manufacturing, and domestic or laundry services. The latter profession, however, soon became one of the only employment possibilities for Chinese laborers. The xenophobia within the workspace most likely was

not a new experience for Chinese immigrants whose very admittance into the country was an elaborate and contradictory dance of racial categorizing and documentation. Photography was an important instrument of this process; though the camera could be argued as objective, this objectivity was lost when the only group required to register with photo identification were Chinese immigrants. This “visual regulation,” a concept introduced by Anna Pegler Gordon, was further reinforced through the active caricaturing and stereotyping of the Chinese through visual-based literature like political cartoons. Each of these techniques in the overall racial subordination of Chinese immigrants cannot be fully understood unless placed within a larger discourse of what defined masculinity (Daniels 9-12; Pegler-Gordon 53). In narrowing the focus to the visual or external messaging that went on between Chinese immigrants and Western society it is important to recognize and define briefly, material studies, a form of study related to this research. One of the initial purposes for evaluating the material culture of an individual or community, as explained by Wendy Rouse Jorae, was to generate insight on “people who remain otherwise largely invisible in the historical record” (453). Material possessions offer symbolic and overt reflections of the individual or individuals’ personal understandings and responses to their social standing. Additionally, material culture studies enable greater emphasis to be placed on how race-conscious societies absorb and remanufacture the appearance of persons (Jorae 453-454).

Political Cartoons

Political drawings were instrumental in reinforcing the inferiority of Chinese immigrants. Whether circulating at the local or national level, political cartoons featured in newspapers ensured a wide audience. These images were educational tools. They informed the general public on the standards of acceptability in society. In terms of the Chinese, these mass circulated images worked to emasculate this immigrant body based on the racial identity applied to them by society. Political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, in 1871 printed an image of a Chinese immigrant protected by Miss Columbia from a hoard of angry “nativists.” Nast’s drawing deplored the labor violence Chinese immigrants experienced; in the caption it read “America means fair play for all men”(Nast). The caption textually advocated for equal access

to labor despite a worker’s race, and yet the image itself suggested a racial delineation along the lines of masculinity.



Political Cartoon of Chinese immigrant protected from nativist labor backlash by Miss Columbia. Artist, Thomas Nast, 1871.

Nast’s cartoon depicted a Chinese man sitting on the ground, head bowed, as a weapon-wielding-white-male mob loomed threateningly around the corner; the only thing between the mob and the immigrant was the powerful figure of Miss Columbia. Columbia’s hand hovered protectively over the lowered head of the Chinese man, like that of a mother protecting her child. Vulnerable, the Chinese man hid behind the skirts of Miss Columbia. In the background stood a wall with a list of headlines that called for the political and violent removal of the “Chinese question,” (Nast). The image highlighted a lack of masculinity in the Chinese man, as interpreted from the political drawing. The juxtaposing of the Chinese man between

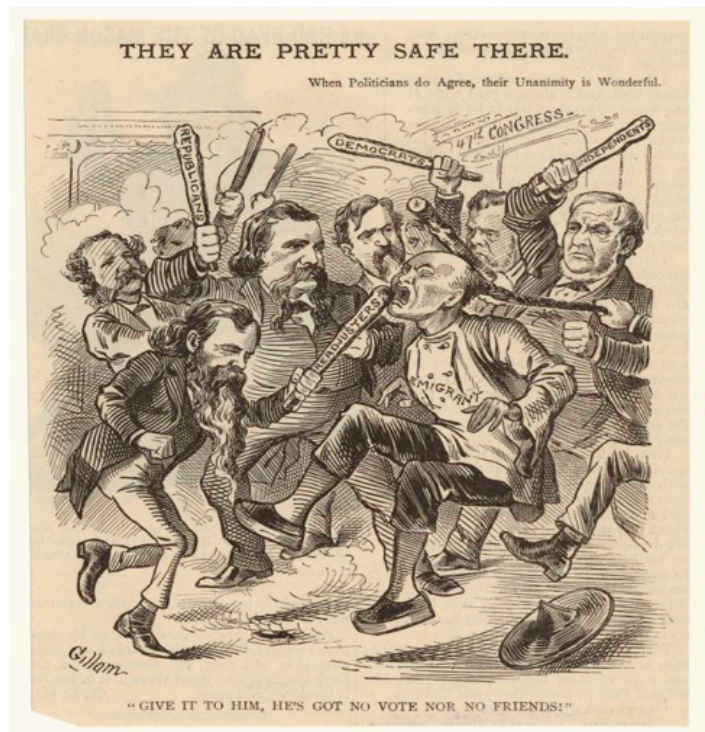
Miss Columbia and the mob worked simultaneously to emasculate the Chinese man, and

thus all Chinese men. Whether dressed in three-piece suits or collared shirts with disheveled neckties, all the men in the mob retained their manliness through the facial hair they sported and Western form of dress. The Chinese man in contrast bared no beard or mustache, and his long tunic and sandal type footwear marked him as foreign. He more closely resembled Miss Columbia with her flowing dress and long tresses, which was similar in length and texture to the Chinese man's own braided hair. Unable to defend himself, the Chinese laborer relied on a woman, which went directly against the socially constructed gender role of the male provider and protector.

Political cartoons in their own way used features of material studies in order to distinguish Chinese immigrants as inferior. By dramatizing the visual markers of difference, whether through dress, adornments, or hair choices, cartoonists capitalized on these cultural symbols to present the popular sentiment of the era. Gillam Bernhard, a political cartoonist, commended the exclusionary policies of the Forty-seventh Congress with an illustration of leading politicians from Washington clubbing a Chinese immigrant. This depiction was a reflection of a popular notion that physically harming individuals of Chinese origins was an acceptable solution for removing the Chinese "problem." Bernhard, similar to Nast, drew viewers' attentions to the noticeable difference in clothing and hairstyle of the Chinese immigrant versus the gang of politicians. Despite the brutal actions of these political figures they were still seen as "respectable" men in their suits, neckties, and prominent beards or mustaches (Gillam).

Bernhard's rendering of the Chinese man's traditional garb stood in sharp contrast to the "respectable" men in suits, most notably the Chinese man's queue, or long braid. Yanked back by his queue, the Chinese man's clean-shaven face was forced to jut out and upward in pain. This particular form of attack shined light on the historical abuse Chinese men received from wearing their hair in this long manner. It was ubiquitous to find analogies made between the queue of a Chinese man and the long hair expected of a young girl or woman, as noted by Bryn Williams in his work, "Chinese Masculinities and Material Culture." The cultural meaning behind the dress and style of Chinese immigrants was disregarded, only placed within the context of the "American"

standard. Williams referenced Edward Said in order to conceptualize "Orientalism," which placed those belonging to "the East," in opposition or contrast to the "Western culture," rather than allowing these individuals to be understood "on their own terms," or within their own cultural framework (Williams 56-57). Failing to be understood within their own cultural history, Chinese men were fitted within the mold they "identified" closest to under a Western mind frame: women. Even when Chinese men began cutting their hair, the only possible reason was presumed to be for the purpose of "Americanization," yet this style choice could just have likely been symbolic of their rejection for Manchu rule during the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911 (Gillam; Williams 56-58; Jorae 468).



Political Cartoon of a Chinese immigrant beaten by political leaders of Washington. Artist, Bernhard Gillam, 1882.

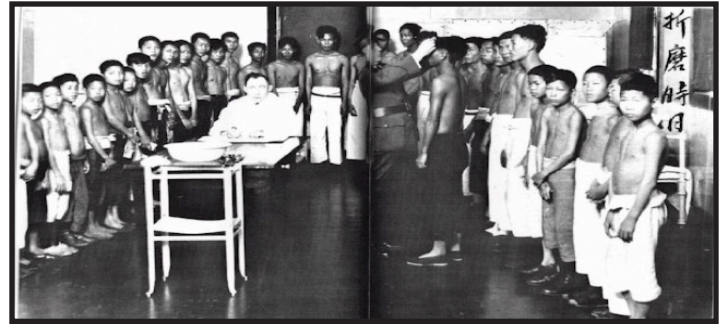
Photography

The reinforcement of Chinese men as not masculine extended farther than cartoons as demonstrated in photography. Understanding the role photography played in the subordination of Chinese immigrants must be accomplished in two parts; the act of requiring or taking the photo and the perception or feelings the actual images attempted to invoke must be analyzed as distinct from one another in order to clearly see how they worked concurrently to

emasculate and thus degrade the Chinese immigrant class. The year 1924 was the first time general immigration laws included a photo identification requirement when applying for visas in the United States. Chinese immigrants, however, had been abiding this law for the past thirty years. In the early 1890s when law makers were debating the inclusion of photographic identity certificates a leading proponent, Representative Thomas Geary of California, argued that photos were necessary since Chinese “look alike, all dress alike, all have the same kind of eyes, all are beardless, all wear their hair in the same manner” (Pegler-Gordon 57). His reasoning won as attested by the very act named after him, the Geary Act, which extended the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 for an additional ten years and contained an amendment necessitating the inclusion of a photograph in identity certificates. The singling out of Chinese immigrants through “visual regulation” by means of photographic evidence reaffirmed and cemented through law the idea that all Chinese can be understood as one identity, which more easily enabled the subsequent social emasculation of this group. They were not seen as individuals with families and personalities and dreams of their own. The Chinese immigrant community was generalized under one representative body, a body that they had no power to personify, but rather was caricatured and painted inaccurately by a social order culturally dissimilar from their own. Now legitimized under law and social thought, the Chinese immigrant body was stripped, only to be re-imagined within a United States ‘ race based framework (Pegler-Gordon 53-57).

The image itself constructed a new identity for this immigrant “body,” which lacked any “real” character in accordance with Western society. As explained previously by Williams, Chinese immigrants were not understood within the context of their own cultural make-up but rather taken at “face-value” in context to Western standards. Having defined these thousands of Chinese persons arriving to the United States as all-alike, it was believed that one Chinese immigrant, or in even broader terms, one Asian immigrant, was representative of all others that fell within this same category. The dehumanization of Chinese immigrants made for an easy re-casting of their identity through the manipulation of the photographic lens. In determining what was included within the frame and what was left out, or how the

angle of the photograph might render one figure or group larger or smaller in comparison to the other subjects were all considerations that changed the messaging of an image. Relying on just the “facts,” or only what the picture allowed a person to view, was symbolic of American society’s own narrow scope (Williams 56-57).



Physical Examination at Angel Island. Asian boys and young men who have immigrated to the United States stand single file waiting to be examined.

Angel Island, the Pacific counterpart to Ellis Island, was an entry point for many Asian immigrants. The photographs of these new arrivals were telling and illustrated possibly their first encounters with United States racial structuring. An early twentieth century photograph captured a medical examination procedure, an experience that all immigrants endured upon admission into the United States. The photograph depicted approximately two-dozen male immigrants of Asian origins lining the perimeter of a medical examination room, and ranging in age from early adulthood to boys of ten years or less. Indiscriminate of age, however, all were stripped to the waist and most were staring back at the camera’s flash. The lack of privacy these immigrants were afforded represented deeper assumptions linked to race and masculinity. Following Western thinking, the disproportionate ratio between Chinese male and female immigrants living in the United States implied a lack of moral grounding. In “Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity,” King-Kok Cheung described Chinese men’s existence in the United States as a “virtual bachelorhood,” since those that immigrated at the turn of twentieth century were “forbidden” to bring their wives or marry white women (174). This lack of stability allegedly left this dominantly male group more at “risk” for committing the “unseemly,” (“Physical”; Cheung 174-175). The photo suggests that a level of comfortableness in seeing

another male's body must have existed in order for these male immigrants to not protest such a violation of "masculine" integrity.

It was clearly identifiable who was in charge because the individuals were positioned around the only person sitting, or privileged enough to sit, the medical practitioner. The immigrants of the picture faced the center of the room where at a table one Caucasian man sat, fitted in a white coat, presumably a doctor or medical practitioner, while another in military-like uniform prodded the face of one immigrant. It appeared as if the center of the room signified the highest level of power, white and male, and the more distant people were from this nucleus, the farther they symbolically were from attaining that privilege. The frame's inclusion of the entire room and centering of the practitioner placed the "patients" symbolically on the edges of power. The picture reflected a sense of obedience or compliance to those of authority that was associated with Asian culture. According to Cheung, this respect was construed as "submissive and passive in the eyes of non-Asians" (175). Masculinity connotes a sense of power, particularly within a patriarchal society like the United States. Chinese male immigrants, however, were refused this privilege and thus held at a status more equivalent to the position of women, though its important to acknowledge that the level of privilege within gender varied in their own right. Even though Chinese males identified with the gender of power, they were racially disqualified (175).



"Golden Spike" Ceremony Promontory Summit, Utah in May of 1869. Uniting of the tracks between the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroad companies. Chinese immigrants were excluded from the photograph.

Extending from this understanding, Chinese male immigrants were accepted within very few avenues of work even though the majority came to the United States for the sole purpose of employment. What jobs, however, were acceptable to this race were often closely tied to their masculinity, as assigned by United States society. Chinese immigrants were seen as cheap disposable labor and thus were often limited to unskilled jobs in railroad construction, mining, and agriculture. Though they performed traditionally "manly" jobs they were not visibly recognized for this service. When the Central Pacific and Union Pacific rails were joined, completing the Transcontinental Railroad, a photo commemorated this "Golden Spike" ceremony in 1869. The photograph casted a wide view to insure workers of both Railroad companies were seen. Despite such a wide frame there was a glaring absence. Of the thirteen thousand Chinese immigrant workers hired to lay thousands of miles of tracks for the Central Pacific Railroad there was not one Chinese worker in the photograph. The purposeful exclusion of Chinese laborers not only disregarded the immense service they had done for the nation, changing the way communication and travel occurred between the West and East states, but also removed them from the category of "male" laborers. In a picture meant to celebrate the achievement of manpower or the progress of man, the presence of Chinese would undermine this message as evident by their "disappearance" (Daniels 9-15; "Golden").

Laundrymen and Domestic Work

The overall messaging of Chinese emasculation was substantiated on one of the most mundane yet intimate levels, laundry. By the late nineteenth century Chinese were increasingly rejected and physically beaten by competing "nativist" laborers, arguing Chinese were "unfair" competition in their ability to subsist on such low wages. Chance of legal recourse was barred if not effectively slowed by Chief Justice Hugh G. Murray's ruling in the California Supreme Court; Chinese were prohibited from testifying against whites "on the grounds of public policy" and as non-white persons (Daniels 33-34). Chinese thus had to resort to alternate forms of employment, which included laundering, tailoring, selling produce, and domestic service in hotels, homes, and boarding houses. These forms of labor were largely unoccupied by women in the West and Chinese could find business in their own ethnic population because they could

cater to the “special needs of the group.” The term “needs” referred to customers being able to speak their native tongue and find products or goods culturally familiar to them (Daniels 77). These occupations were highly visible since they pertained to the daily lives of people. The prominence of Chinese men “compelled” into this line of work, deemed “women’s work,” was considered proof of their “inherent” femininity (Wang 60; Daniels 74-77; Williams 58-60).

The laundering profession was a dual emasculation for Chinese immigrants. The “chore” of laundry as a female task was a gendered pretense in both the United States and China. Wang described through her article, “Race, Gender, and Laundry Work: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the United States, 1850-1950,” how baby girls were preferred within poor households of China because they were more likely to receive work within private homes or commercial businesses than boys. Laundering was not a skill carried over from China to the United States, but instead was a learning experience for many Chinese male immigrants going into this profession. Wang detailed the account of Lee Chew, a Chinese immigrant who upon employment as a domestic servant had to be taught how to wash the clothes by the lady of the house. Therefore, Chinese men were emasculated for completing the tasks of women as defined not only within the United States but also within their country of origin. Most Chinese immigrants left their own country in search of better paying jobs or opportunities, and yet the only stable employment they were allowed were in services that back home, half way across the globe, their female relatives were completing as “chores” (Wang 62).

The proximity for which this work was done in relation to women further emasculated Chinese men. Irish and African American women were prominent and often vocal within the laundry industry. These different groups held a complex relationship with one another as they competed for business and yet simultaneously supported each other. They understood their shared status as a disadvantaged group within the gendered and racial structure of their society. Wang recounted a 1904 strike by female Ohio laundry workers and the use of Chinese laundry men to help their own cause. In order to appease customers while on strike, the laundry women advised their clients to get their clothes washed by the “Chinaman” rather

than the strikebreakers who were hired by their company. Two decades later in San Francisco, Chinese laundry men went on strike themselves, protesting for higher wages. In response their employers attempted to hire African American laundry women as “scabs,” or strikebreakers. This, however, failed as many African American women refused to work against their Chinese male counterparts. These events showcased the ability for relationships to transcend across culture, gender, race, and class. Though the interconnected relations between Chinese men and these diverse women’s groups were unfortunately not seen as models for promoting solidarity. In occupying and interacting within the same space as women, Chinese were crossing the gendered line between the men and women’s spheres. Unlike railroad work, Chinese were allowed to be visible sources of labor for laundering and work in the home. They could not practice or follow the traditional routes of labor that promoted their masculinity and instead were restricted to professions that perpetuated stereotypical assumptions of their passivity and femininity (Wang 81).

Conclusion

Chinese immigrants were an integral part of the United States economy because they were willing to work the most menial and at times dangerous jobs whether in laying the tracks for the transcontinental railroad or tunneling beneath the Earth’s surface in mines. They were, however, always considered temporary guests. The “othering” of the male immigrant body was a reminder of this position and was validated through political drawings, the legal and visual manufacturing of photographs, and the daily exposure to Chinese men performing the roles associated with women.

The emasculation of Chinese immigrants was not consistent. These contradictions made evident the very hand society played in rationalizing the dominance of one race and inferiority of another. Chinese held a dual image of an emasculated and yet sexually threatening. Wang highlighted the fears instilled in little girls about the “lonely” Chinese bachelors. In one incident a Chinese laundrymen, Charles Lee Sing, was charged with molesting a ten-year-old neighborhood girl, in which the only witnesses were five young girls, none older than twelve years of age. Interestingly Sing’s profession would be arguable proof for his innocence. Washing clothes

aligns him more closely to that of a woman, a provider of the home and child. Therefore Chinese men were not men because of their similarity to the domestic labor of women and yet conversely Chinese men were sexual predators because they were “lonely,” but men nonetheless (Wang 84). This serves a powerful example to the conflicting nature of society’s racial organization along the lines of masculinity. More specifically, it speaks to the individuals leading these societies and the social rather than “inherent” forces behind masculinity.

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