

Excludable Aliens vs. One National People: The U.S. Chinese Exclusion Policy and the Racialization of Chinese in the United States and China

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INTRODUCTION

In 1905 Wang Jingwei, a Chinese student at the predecessor of Hosei University in Tokyo and a member of the Tongmenghui, a revolutionary organization founded by Sun Yat-sen, categorized four different patterns of racial assimilation within the modern nation: (1) “races of equal strength merge to form a new nation”; (2) “a majority conquering-race absorbs the defeated minority”; (3) “a minority conquering-race assimilates a majority race”; and (4) “a conquering-minority is assimilated by a defeated majority.”¹ Based on this typology, Wang argued that, up until the Manchu conquest in the seventeenth century, China had belonged to the second category, namely, the majority Han had absorbed various minorities in China. After the Manchu conquest, in which a majority race (the Han) became in danger of being assimilated into a minority race (the Manchu), China fell into the third category, namely, the majority had been assimilated into a minority race. In Wang’s view, however, China would soon move into the fourth category, given that recent years had

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seen a rapid increase in the momentum of Chinese nationalism propelled largely by the Han.² This prediction by Wang was driven by a desire, common to revolutionary partisans, to bring an end to China's dynastic history and establish a modern Chinese nation-state.

Wang basically articulated his analysis of race-nation linkage from the perspective of ideas of social Darwinism, which gained currency among Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries beginning in the late nineteenth century, especially after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and the suppression of the Boxer Uprising by foreign troops (1901).³ For certain intellectuals and revolutionaries apprehensive about the future of China, social Darwinism offered both a bleak diagnosis of China's present ailments and a glimmer of hope for the future. According to the principle of the survival of the fittest, the existence of China seemed to be in danger precisely because it was being approached and occupied by imperial powers. At the same time, however, the future was still undecided, leaving room for China to change the course of its history by the efforts of its people. With this understanding of the historical conditions surrounding China, Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries formulated discourses of the Chinese as one race and one national people in order to build a new Chinese nation-state, and advocated strengthening China by establishing a republic and making its people enlightened and productive.⁴

During this period in the United States popularized ideas of social Darwinism were also generating a sense of unease and uncertainty about the country's future. These worries, moreover, helped deepen the perceived need in the United States for a reformulation of the notions of race, nation, and citizen. In the case of the United States, however, the drive for reformulating these concepts did not come from the urge to intervene in the course of history, but largely from the fear that the United States would degenerate by absorbing undesirable elements. One such undesirable element was thought to be Chinese immigrants. In order to exclude them, the U.S. government passed a series of Chinese exclusion laws beginning in 1882. Just like Chinese immigrants, African Americans had also become objects of assimilation fears. In order to shut African Americans out the public sphere and to segregate them, Southern states began to enact a series of disfranchisement and segregation laws beginning in the late nineteenth century. As the United States became a continental and transcontinental empire, moreover, new U.S. colonial subjects became objects of surveillance to eliminate undesirables.

In newly acquired U.S. territories, such as Hawaii and the Philippines, there were large populations of Chinese. Owing to new historical conditions, many overseas Chinese were caught up in U.S. immigration policy. As the overseas Chinese in both the United States and its territories were treated as undesirable elements, the new notion of Chinese as one race and one people was extended to include even Chinese living outside of China. In conjunction with this development, overseas Chinese became more conscious of the new inclusive and expansive conception of the Chinese race. In other words, the Chinese exclusion policy was in some ways instrumental in spreading the new overarching notion of being Chinese and building a sense of solidarity as Chinese, connecting Chinese inside and outside China. The growing sense of oneness of Chinese people culminated in a nationwide anti-American boycott movement in China in 1905.

This article takes up the first few decades of the Chinese Exclusion era, a period in which the exclusion policy increased its severity by broadening the range of “Chinese” who were subject to exclusion laws.⁵ By tracing this intensification process, I show the way that the Chinese exclusion policy was connected to and incorporated into the race-based citizenship regulation system of the United States. I argue that Chinese, as an unassimilable alien race, became a reference point for assessing the eligibility for membership in the U.S. nation for those who were on the margins of the category of U.S. citizenship, such as African Americans, colonial subjects in newly acquired territories, and immigrants from various parts of the world. I also explore the ways that the emerging notion of Chinese as one race and one people, which was promoted by Chinese reformers and revolutionaries, came to mobilize thousands of Chinese to protest against U.S. immigration policy. Through this examination, I elucidate how the two notions of Chinese—as an unassimilable alien race in the United States and as one national people in China—were transnationally linked by means of the notion of “race” in conjunction with that of “survival,” both of which were informed by the ideas of social Darwinism, linking internal and global relations.

MAKING CHINESE RACIALLY EXCLUDABLE ALIENS

Secretary of Commerce and Labor Oscar S. Straus, in his annual report to the president in 1907, in regard to the Chinese exclusion policy in the United States noted:

[It] has never been the purpose of the Government; as would be appear from its laws and treaties, to exclude persons of the Chinese race merely because they are Chinese. . . . As the laws [are] framed, however, it would appear that the purpose was rigidly to exclude the persons of the Chinese race in general.⁶

As Straus observed, although the Chinese exclusion policy was aimed at stopping the flow of Chinese laborers, it was also utilized as a measure to prevent the Chinese from becoming a part of the nation. A congressional statement that accompanied the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—the first in a series of laws to ban the entry of Chinese laborers—clearly declared that “the Chinese are peculiar in every respect.”⁷ This sort of rendition of Chinese immigrants—as an alien race irreconcilable with U.S. institutions and civilization—was, moreover, held well before the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act.⁸ The racial component behind issues of Chinese immigration to the United States became an important subject with the enactment of the citizenship provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment. Chinese immigration was no longer just a labor problem but had become closely linked to matters of citizenship and race.

The citizenship provisions in both the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment were directed primarily to secure citizenship for newly freed African American slaves. The first sentence of the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment codified the definition of citizenship: “All the persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”⁹ This definition indicates, however, that U.S. citizenship was to be extended not only to African Americans but also to others who were born or naturalized in the United States and subject to its jurisdiction, regardless of race. By extension, then, a large number of Chinese who resided in and were born in the United States would become U.S. citizens. Realizing this, Republican Senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania opposed the citizenship provision, arguing against the assimilability of Chinese during the congressional debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1866. He not only doubted the fitness of Chinese to become citizens but also raised the question of the meaning of U.S. citizenship:

Is the child of the Chinese immigrant in California a citizen? . . . If so, what rights have they? Have they any more rights than a sojourner in the United States? . . . I should like to know, because really I have been puzzled . . . the

lines and boundaries which circumscribe that phrase “citizen of the United States.” What is it?¹⁰

As this suggests, in the midst of the attempt to statutorily protect the citizenship status of recently freed African Americans, Chinese immigrants were drawn into the debate over the eligibility for and definition of U.S. citizenship.

In the eyes of some African Americans, however, such developments appeared alarming. They worried that if the fortunes of African Americans were tied to those of Chinese immigrants on the issues of citizenship, African Americans’ fragile status as U.S. citizens would become even more tenuous. Such anxieties led them to make a clear demarcation between themselves and the Chinese. As historian Helen H. Jun points out, just when the anti-Chinese movement gained political momentum nationwide, African Americans began increasingly to articulate their own differences from Chinese immigrants by emphasizing their military service, Christian morality, and nationalist identification.¹¹ An article published in 1873 in the *San Francisco Elevator*, one of the premier black weekly newspapers, claimed that while the “Negro seeks to be an integral part of the nation,” the Chinese were “unlikely to become converted to the tenets of our religion, incapable to understand the system of our government, to appreciate our civilization, morals and manners, and persistently adhere to the doctrine of the inferiority of the races.”¹² It is clear from this line of argument that the logic employed was identical to that employed by the anti-Chinese movement to disqualify the Chinese as citizens of the United States. By describing Chinese as unassimilable aliens, African Americans tried not only to dissociate themselves from Chinese immigrants but also to defend their own eligibility for U.S. citizenship. What they feared most was being lumped together with Chinese and as a result losing their newly acquired rights.

Even though many African Americans attempted to dismiss any linkages or similarities between themselves and the Chinese, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 did have an impact on African Americans. Section 14 of this act stipulates that “hereafter no state court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship.”¹³ The act, in effect, barred Chinese immigrants from naturalized citizenship. As race-based legislation designed to exclude one prominent minority population, this act suggested to African Americans that they might be next in being deprived of U.S. citizenship and many of the rights associated with it.

Given this worrying situation, the black press began raising their voices against the Chinese Exclusion Act. African Americans, however, did not move on to forming a united front with the Chinese in defense of Chinese immigrants. Instead, they condemned the Chinese Exclusion Act on the grounds that it distorted the principle of citizenship into a race-based policy, and thus endangered the ideal of liberal democracy in the United States. Moreover, the black press maintained their previous stance of drawing a clear demarcation between African Americans and Chinese immigrants. While they criticized the Chinese Exclusion Act from the standpoint of the principles of law and justice, they carefully maintained and asserted the difference between African Americans, legitimate constituents of the United States, and the Chinese, a culturally and morally alien race.¹⁴

Such distinctions between African Americans and the Chinese were also expressed, though not necessarily in the form African Americans wished for, in the congressional debate over the Chinese Exclusion Act. One significant dissimilarity between the two groups that was pointed out on the floor of both chambers of the U.S. Congress, was the fact that while Chinese could be returned to their homeland, African Americans “were a part of the people here; [and thus] we could not send them abroad.” Based on this reality, proponents of the bill asked “[since] we have already one race problem unsettled in this country . . . should we fly to another? Shall we take more of that class into the body-politic?” Their concern revealed their mode of thinking: the issue of Chinese immigration was a race matter that the United States should not have to take on. Congress also questioned whether the United States had to “aid in the increase and distribution over the surface of our domain of a degraded and inferior race, and the progenitors of an inferior sort of men, to the exclusion of the highly civilized, progressive man of our own race?” The promoters of the bill ardently stressed the magnitude and gravity of the issue and urged fellow members of Congress to support the bill to prevent the flow of “the stagnant blood of Asiatic servitude” into the nation.¹⁵ As was apparent in their language, they bolstered their contention that the Chinese were a degraded race harmful to the United States, and to do this they utilized ideas of social Darwinism supported by Spencer’s then-popular maxim of the “survival of the fittest.”¹⁶

Based on the logic of the same axiomatic law, Theodore Roosevelt, then a member of the New York State Assembly, hailed the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He concluded that “the Chinaman

is kept out because the democracy, with much clearness of vision, has seen that his presence is ruinous to the white race." For Roosevelt, it was democracy that defended the United States from possible decay. For "democracy, with the clear instinct of race selfishness, saw the race foe, and kept out the dangerous alien." By bringing up an analogical comparison of the Chinese and African Americans, moreover, he argued that "the presence of the negro in our Southern States is a legacy from the time when we were ruled by a trans-oceanic aristocracy," and if the United States had not become a democracy, "Chinese immigration would have been encouraged precisely as the slave trade . . . [and] the result would in a few generations have been even more fatal to the white race." In the view of Roosevelt, then, democracy functioned as a watchdog to discern which races were detrimental to the white race, the latter consisting of "the best portions of the new world's surface," and thus save the nation from racial degeneration by shutting out all destructive races.¹⁷

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century anxieties about race degeneration were a driving force behind the tightening of the Chinese exclusion policy. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was just the beginning of this intensification process. Over the years, the U.S. Chinese exclusion policy increased in stringency through efforts to plug loopholes in the exclusion laws.

INTENSIFYING THE EXCLUSION POLICY BY EXPANDING THE CATEGORY OF "CHINESE"

When the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 came into practice the United States faced a new task of distinguishing *personae grada* from excludable aliens. This was because the bill did not provide a specific definition as to who was a laborer, who belonged to the "exempt class," and who was Chinese. Roughly one year after the law took effect, the question of exactly who was to be counted as "Chinese" was raised in a case taken up by the U.S. circuit court in Massachusetts.

In 1883 the United States Attorney in Boston brought charges against the master of a British ship for landing a Chinese laborer in that port in violation of section 2 of the Chinese Exclusion Act.¹⁸ The man in question, Ah Shong, was shipped as a carpenter by the master in December 1882 from Manila and was to serve in that capacity until the return of the vessel to Britain. However, after the vessel arrived in Boston in June

1883, Ah Shong disappeared, taking all his belongings with him. Since he never returned to the vessel, he was subsequently discharged of his duties. In court, the defense argued that Ah Shong was born in Hong Kong after its secession to Great Britain in 1843, and thus he had never been a subject of the emperor of China but was and had always been a subject of the queen of Great Britain. After deliberation, in August 1883 Judge Thomas L. Nelson decided to dismiss all charges on the grounds that the laborer in question was a subject of the British monarchy.¹⁹ In Ah Shong's case, the category of "Chinese," namely someone subject to the Chinese Exclusion Act, seems to have been limited to those with Chinese nationality who were "subjects of the Emperor of China."

This rendition of "Chinese" was, however, soon overturned in San Francisco by Justice Stephen J. Field, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. In September 1883 Ah Lung, who had come from Hong Kong to San Francisco on the steamship *Oceanic*, claimed his British nationality. Although this case was identical to the aforementioned Ah Shong case, the decision delivered by Justice Field was precisely the opposite of that in Ah Shong's case. Justice Field declared that Ah Lung had "all the peculiarities of the subjects of China" and, because he was also a laborer, his allegiance to Great Britain did not exempt him from the Chinese Exclusion Act. Behind this decision was fear on the part of the defenders of the Chinese exclusion policy, which included Justice Field, that "the Island of Hong Kong would pour Chinese laborers into our country every year in unnumbered thousands, unless they also were covered by the Restriction act." In order to halt the mass influx of Chinese laborers from Hong Kong, Justice Field further insisted that the wording in section 2 of the act—"any Chinese laborer from any foreign port or place"—was "sufficiently broad and comprehensive to embrace all Chinese laborers, without regard to the country of which they may be subjects."²⁰

Justice Field's interpretation and decision was reflected in the 1884 amendment to the first Exclusion Act. Section 15 of the amendment stipulated that "the provisions of this act shall apply to all subjects of China and Chinese, whether the subjects of China or other foreign power."²¹ All Chinese, regardless of their country of origin, became subject to the Chinese exclusion laws. In the Scott Act of 1888, furthermore, the definition of "Chinese" was again amended by a slight switch of the words—from "all subjects of China and Chinese" to "all persons of the Chinese race" (emphasis added).²² Chinese, as the object of Chinese exclusion

laws, were now expressly mentioned as a race, thus making race openly manifest as a determinant of the judgment of assimilability to the United States. With this new definition of the Chinese as a race, moreover, exclusionists moved on to resolving a pending problem: the citizenship of native-born Chinese. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese from naturalized citizenship, but citizenship for American-born Chinese was still protected by section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The attempt to abrogate citizenship of native-born Chinese in the United States was made in the case of Wong Kim Ark, born of Chinese immigrant parents in San Francisco in 1873. When Wong came back to San Francisco from a trip to China in 1895, his readmission to the United States was denied in spite of his status as a U.S. citizen, and he was detained on board the steamship *Coptic*. Wong filed a writ of habeas corpus with the federal district court alleging that he was being unlawfully confined. He also claimed his right to enter the United States as a citizen. Arguing the case against Wong, U.S. District Attorney Henry S. Foote insisted that Wong became a citizen "by accident of birth" on the soil of the United States. Since his parents were Chinese, Foote continued, Wong had "been at all times, by reason of his race, language, color, and dress, a Chinese person" and thus could not possibly be considered a U.S. citizen. Based on the rationale expressed by exclusionists, moreover, Foote warned that "to force upon us as natural born citizens, persons who must necessarily be a constant menace to the welfare of our country" would endanger the "very existence of our country." Foote's arguments were, however, refuted by Judge Morrow in his ruling that "it is enough that he is born here whatever the status of his parents," and "no citizen can be excluded from this country except in punishment for crime. The petitioner must be allowed to land and it is so ordered."²³ The birthright citizenship of Wong Kim Ark, a native-born Chinese, was thus upheld by the court.

Yet other native-born Chinese were not as fortunate as Wong. Beginning in 1892, the U.S. Department of the Treasury mandate required that two white witnesses verify claims of nativity in Chinese cases. For native-born Chinese, to produce two white witnesses to testify as to their birth in the United States was a difficult hurdle to overcome. Even though overturned in court, the Chinese exclusion policy was, in real terms, extended to native-born Chinese by reason that they were descendents of Chinese immigrants and thus inherited the attributes of an unassimilable race. By changing the criteria for determining Chinese from *jus soli* to

jus sanguinis, the Chinese exclusion policy expanded the range of excludable Chinese, eventually to the maximum extent possible.

At about the same time that the Chinese exclusion policy increased in stringency, laws to disfranchise and segregate African Americans were enacted in the Southern states. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court officially formulated the “separate but equal” doctrine. Justice John M. Harlan, the lone voice against this ruling, passionately defended the civil rights of African Americans. In his dissent, Justice Harlan cast grave doubt on the Court’s decision to deny African Americans’ equal rights, by pointing out the paradoxical situation of race-citizenship relations between African Americans and Chinese immigrants:

There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race. But, by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race . . . who are entitled, by law, to participate in the political control of the State and nation . . . are yet declared to be criminals . . . if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race.²⁴

Harlan pleaded for equal rights for African Americans by highlighting the distinction between Chinese as an excludable alien race and African Americans as legitimate citizens. Harlan’s claim, however, did not draw support from the defenders of the Chinese exclusion policy. On the contrary, the “one-drop rule” that deems anyone with African ancestry whatsoever (even one drop of African blood) as a member of the black race was also applied to the Chinese via the exclusion policy.

Lawrence Klindt Kentwell, a twenty-two-year-old businessman and student at Columbia University Law School experienced “the most humiliating hold-up” when he returned from the Philippines to his home in Honolulu in 1904.²⁵ Kentwell, born of an English father and a Chinese mother, made several trips to San Francisco and New York in the 1890s and the early 1900s, but he had never been questioned or detained at the ports because he was a British subject and he looked like a white middle-class Westerner. In February 1904, however, an immigration inspector in Honolulu who knew that Kentwell “had Chinese blood in his veins” singled him out from other passengers on the steamship and demanded

that he show his papers. Immediately after this incident, Kentwell began a campaign protesting the U.S. government's classification of him as Chinese. He claimed that "my father is an Englishman, and as I was born in British territory and under the laws of nations, I am English, the Exclusion Act notwithstanding."²⁶ His allegation was, however, disregarded by immigration officials in Honolulu and Washington, D.C., solely because Kentwell was half Chinese by blood. As evidenced in Kentwell's case, the Chinese exclusion policy also operated according to the "one-drop rule." Moreover, the "exempt class," which included merchants, teachers, students, government officials, and travelers, was no longer exempt from the exclusion.

The escalation in the harshness of the Chinese exclusion policy was in fact closely linked to the expansion of the United States in terms of its constituents and territory, and also to the increasing fear of degeneration resulting from the incorporation of undesirable elements into the nation. In 1898, the United States annexed Hawaii and then attacked and acquired most of Spain's colonies, including the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. This expansion of U.S. territory evoked vigilance and anxiety among the exclusionists, for there was a large population of Chinese laborers in the newly acquired territories. They feared that these Chinese would flock to the U.S. mainland. Such fears, moreover, drove them to press Congress to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was about to expire. They also pleaded with the government to even further strengthen the Chinese exclusion policy in order to respond to the new realities posed by the United States becoming an empire. In November 1901, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors called a Chinese exclusion convention to encourage Congress to extend and strengthen the Chinese Exclusion Act. It brought together about three thousand delegates for the purpose of protecting the United States from the invasion of "a nonassimilative race," who "have not in any sense altered their racial characteristics, and have not socially or otherwise, assimilated with our people."²⁷

In 1902, to no one's surprise, Congress passed the new law to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act indefinitely and "to prohibit the coming into and to regulate the residence within the United States, its territories, and all territory under its jurisdiction . . . of Chinese and persons of Chinese descent."²⁸ With the renewal of this act, the range of the excludable Chinese was extended, literally, to anyone with Chinese blood coming into or residing within all U.S. territories. Senator George Hoar of

Massachusetts, one of a small minority who voted against the bill, gave a critical account of the way that the Chinese exclusion policy had been intensifying over the years:

We have been going on with this sort of legislation, step by step. We could not wash out this spot with water and so we took vinegar. We could not wash it out with vinegar and so we tried a solution of cayenne pepper. And now comes to the Pacific Coast to us with a proposition of vitriol, which they hope will work.²⁹

Through gradual processes, as Senator Hoar described, the Chinese exclusion policy enhanced the harshness, finally to the level that it had become enforced in an almost indiscriminate manner.

Under the renewed Chinese exclusion law, in which the category of “Chinese” was stretched to the maximum possible range, many who fell under this category were taken into custody. In 1904, three exhibitioners from Shanghai who had been invited to participate in the St. Louis World’s Fair were detained in San Francisco. In 1905, Wah Sang, a Protestant minister who preached the Gospel to the Chinese under the auspices of the Methodist Church, was arrested in Texas for having violated the Chinese Exclusion Law. In that year, T. King, who was on the trip back to Shanghai from London after graduation from the University of London, was detained with her three brothers when they tried to land at Boston to take a train for Vancouver.³⁰ These incidents represented just the tip of the iceberg. Ng Poon Chew (Wu Panzhao), a Chinese newspaper publisher in San Francisco, deplored the situation and stated: “The Exclusion Law has been carried out with such vigor that it has almost become an extermination law.”³¹ As a result of concern over the unjust treatment of Chinese, the backlash against the U.S. Chinese exclusion policy grew rapidly among Chinese within and beyond China’s border, which culminated in the anti-American boycott movement in 1905. Behind this surge of anti-American sentiment and protests was a swell of Chinese nationalism fueled by the formation and spread of the new notion of Chinese as one race and one national people.

EMERGENCE OF THE CHINESE AS ONE RACE AND
ONE NATIONAL PEOPLE

There was no all-encompassing notion of the Chinese nation before the beginning of the twentieth century in China. In his article written in 1899, Liang Qichao, a scholar and political reformer in exile, bemoaned that “the Chinese people do not even know there is such a thing as a national people [*guomin*].”³² In the view of Liang, who was concerned about a China whose sovereignty was being encroached on by imperial powers, the notion of *guomin* was vital for the survival of China because it was an idea that integrated and unified Chinese into one national people. Just a few years after the above comment was made, however, the revolutionary Zhang Shizhao noted that “the grandest term that has the greatest attraction and impact on the country [China] is none other than *guomin*.”³³ As Zhang observed, *guomin* was gaining currency at an amazing pace among intellectuals, reformers, and revolutionaries. The rapid and extensive spread of the notion of *guomin* was not simply owing to the historical situation in which China found itself but, as well, to the growing impact of the global discourse of social Darwinism, the latter inciting a sense of urgency among many Chinese to strengthen their country.

The ideas of social Darwinism caught the wide attention of the Chinese public through a series of short essays written by Yan Fu in 1895 that introduced the work of Herbert Spencer. The doctrine of “the survival of the fittest” exercised a profound influence on certain reformers and revolutionaries, prompting them to perceive the historical conditions of China from the perspective of global competition. Their bleak diagnosis for China utilizing the insights of social Darwinism took into account recent upheavals such as defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and the subsequent suppression of the Boxer Uprising by foreign troops (1899–1901). They saw China as having entered a period of *wangguo* (loss of the state), which traditionally meant a change of dynasties but now gained a new connotation—national subjugation, or a condition of being colonized by foreign powers.³⁴ To overcome what they saw as China’s colonization, or *wangguo*, reformers and revolutionaries wanted Chinese to unite as one national people. Having been baptized in the ideas of social Darwinism, which saw “race” as a fundamental element for the survival of nations, many now sought racial unity and determination through the idea of consolidating all Chinese into one race. These

ideas of a one-race China were divided into two different versions that were rooted in different interpretations of *wangguo*.

Reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who both advocated a constitutional monarchy for China, maintained that China had fallen into a state of subjugation to imperial powers. The onset of foreign powers in China required nothing less than a new conception of China that could deliver national cohesion. They promoted a conception of Chinese that they hoped could unite the Han, the Manchu, and other minorities as one “yellow race” (*huangzhong*) who were all descendents of the Yellow Emperor. Their notion of the Chinese as a distinct race was based on an imaginary lineage of the mystical figure purported to be the ancestor and progenitor of all Chinese. In contrast, however, revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen, who advocated a republic, forged a more racially purified notion of the Chinese as one race. They understood *wangguo* in terms of Manchu rule in China, and for them it was the Qing government rather than Western powers that was the source of the problem. Sun and others thus promoted the idea of Chinese as the “Han” descendents of the Yellow Emperor, a superior race that constituted an absolute majority in China.³⁵

Although reformers and revolutionaries embraced different visions of racialized identity of Chinese as a “yellow race” and as a “Han race,” they were in agreement that race was indeed the single most important and promising means to incorporate all Chinese, regardless of their age, class, or gender, into one Chinese nation as a community united by blood ties. In this vein, Zou Rong, a young revolutionary who had just come back from Japan, described how race could serve as a catalyst for uniting people to tackle *wangguo*. In 1903, he argued that “when men love their race, solidarity will arise internally, and what is outside will be repelled.” For Zou, a Han nationalist, what is foreign to the Chinese race was first and foremost the Manchu. Nevertheless, Zou did not ignore the threat posed by foreign imperialists. Zou went as far as to claim that the clash between China and Western powers was unavoidable if Western powers kept harassing China, because “the yellow and white races . . . are fundamentally incapable of giving way to each other.” From this conviction, he urged his “revered and dear 400 million compatriots” to stand up for the great cause: “China is the China of the Chinese.”³⁶

The new notion of Chinese as one race and one national people spread quickly through the activities of the reformers and revolutionaries at home and abroad. One significant trigger for mobilizing Chinese inside

and outside of China, under the banner of Chinese as one race and one people, was the U.S. Chinese exclusion policy. The harsh treatment of Chinese in the United States was regarded as demeaning Chinese to the level of “slaves” (*nuli*)—subjugated people who were considered to be the antithesis of free and independent “national people” (*guomin*). Lin Shu, a famous translator, lamented in 1901 in his notes for the translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that “recently the treatment of blacks in America has been carried over to yellow people.” He astutely recognized the race-based discriminatory system in the United States that interlocked Chinese and African Americans. Lin, furthermore claimed that “the yellow people are probably treated even worse than the blacks.” Nevertheless, he continued, “our country’s power is weak, and our envoys are cowardly and afraid of arguing with the Americans.”³⁷ As Lin claimed, the Qing government was not succeeding in securing the rights of Chinese in the United States. Given the situation, some reformers and revolutionaries began to seek resolution through popular movements, such as organizing a boycott to end the U.S. government’s Chinese exclusion policy. It was overseas Chinese communities that ignited waves of protest against the Chinese exclusion policy.

From the mid-nineteenth century, a number of Chinese began to cross the Pacific to places such as California and Hawaii. Most of them were *huagong*, Chinese laborers from the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong Province. They were engaged in digging mines, building railroads, and working at sugarcane plantations, being incorporated into the capitalist-colonial world system as cheap labor. During the late nineteenth century, more Chinese laborers moved from rural to urban centers—some looking for better opportunities, some escaping from anti-Chinese persecution in the Northwest, and some giving up the idea of becoming farmers because the Chinese exclusion laws prohibited Chinese ownership of land. San Francisco’s Chinese community was one of those communities that grew rapidly by absorbing those inner migrants. Liang Qichao, who visited in 1903, described the daily situation of this highly variable and patchy immigrant community by observing that “the *Sanyi* and *Siyi huiguan* [regional associations] behave almost like enemy countries and bloody murders are constantly occurring.”³⁸ As Liang argued, the Chinese community in San Francisco was, like other Chinese communities in the United States, not a cohesive one.³⁹ He went on to say that “unless an issue touches the interests of the Chinese people as a

whole, those *huiguan* will never sit down at the negotiating table in the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association [also known as the Chinese Six Companies—the umbrella organization for Chinese mutual benefit associations].”⁴⁰ The issue of a growing Chinese exclusion policy was one that led to uniting those belonging to different native-place and clan associations, as one national people. Under the situation that, regardless of native place, clan, and occupation, Chinese were lumped together as an inferior race to be excluded, overseas Chinese communities gradually moved on to organizing boycotts to tackle the discriminatory treatment of Chinese in the United States.

UNITING CHINESE UNDER THE BANNER OF RACE AND THE 1905 ANTI-AMERICAN BOYCOTT

The first fires of the anti-American boycott movement were lit in Hawaii in 1903, which had recently become a territory of the United States. The Chinese community in Hawaii cast a vigilant eye on the course of events surrounding their status under the new ruler. They observed carefully the implications of the Chinese exclusion policy that linked it to the ambitious moves of the United States to extend its dominance to the Pacific and Asia. The acute caution and wariness of the Chinese in Hawaii toward the mainland largely resulted from their witnessing the harsh reality of the *wangguo* (loss of the state) of Hawaii, caused by the encroachment of imperial powers—first through the massive depopulation of native Hawaiian islanders by epidemics of diseases brought by Westerners, and then with the end of the Hawaiian kingdom as a consequence of colonization by the United States. An article in 1903 in *Xin Zhonguo bao* (New China Daily), a Chinese newspaper founded in Hawaii in 1900, pointed out that the annexation of Hawaii and colonization of the Philippines was a stepping stone for the United States to expand its sphere of interest in the Pacific:

The United States kept the principles of the Monroe Doctrine, but it reversed course and invaded Honolulu, attacked Cuba, and occupied the Philippines. . . . Honolulu was an important place in the Pacific. So the United States took it over and made it into its second naval base to protect its business interests. The Philippines were the strategic gateway to southeast China, so the United States occupied them . . . to control trade routes.”⁴¹

Some Chinese in Hawaii, in particular those who were involved in activism led by the Chinese Empire Reform Association (Baohuang hui), thought that one effective measure to check the expansion of the United States in the Pacific region was to demonstrate the great might of the Chinese people by pressuring the U.S. government to change its foreign policy and lift the Chinese exclusion ban. The *Xin Zhongguo bao* suggested in 1903 that although “the United States is a strong country and China is a weak country . . . [since] China has large population” it should resort to mass protests by boycotting American goods.⁴² The first beacon of an anti-American boycott that was lit in Hawaii traveled quickly to other overseas Chinese communities as well as to China itself. In 1904, newspapers such as the *Shibao* (Times) in Shanghai and the *Zhongguo ribao* (China Daily) in Hong Kong ran articles calling for boycotting American goods.⁴³

In May 1905, a nationwide anti-American boycott movement erupted first in Shanghai and then spread to Guangzhou and other places through newspapers, handbills, speeches, plays, and songs. Novels like *Ku she-hui* (The bitter society), which detailed “a history of blood and tears of the lives of *huagong* [Chinese laborers]” were also published and aroused sympathy among many Chinese.⁴⁴ The rising sentiment of compassion for overseas Chinese laborers furthermore mobilized the idea of Chinese as one national people. A boycott pamphlet published in Guangzhou in 1905 claimed that “if the gentry, peasants, artisans, and merchants were all Chinese people, why is it that only laborers have to suffer—aren’t they on a par with people from the other three classes?”⁴⁵ Class barriers were now broken down by the all-inclusive notion of “Chinese.”

In addition to class barriers, gender divisions were also overridden by the umbrella category of “Chinese.” Many handbills encouraging women to participate in the boycott were distributed. One of the handbills said that although women had bound feet and were dependent for their livelihood on their husbands, “if they participate in the movement of boycotting American goods, they can carry out their duty as members of the nation.”⁴⁶ Participating in the boycott was now regarded as working for this national cause and was advocated as a citizen’s duty for all Chinese people, including women. In a similar vein, a handbill entitled “An appeal to the two hundred million compatriot sisters” called for Chinese women to join the boycott based on the logic that if a woman boycotted American goods, “a dozen of [her] family members [also end up] not

buying American goods.”⁴⁷ Women’s role as the guardians of the family was advocated as crucial in the boycott.

Moreover, the rhetoric of Chinese women as “mother of the nation” was also mobilized in the boycott. A female character in a boycott novel, who asked for the support for the boycott from other women, said:

Among the overseas Chinese, workers form the greatest numbers, and they also suffer the most. If workers can get out of the bitter sea onto the happy land, merchants and students will automatically enjoy the same rights. If we just revise the treaty in order to benefit merchants and students alone, the workers will not have the same rights. Sisters! Aren’t they our children too?⁴⁸

Clearly the notion of Chinese as one race and one people was extended to overseas Chinese, and the predicament of overseas Chinese was assumed to belong to all Chinese, regardless of class and gender. There was even a song upholding the spirit of the boycott proclaiming that “we would risk our lives to fight against exclusion and to accomplish our goal. My fellow one hundred thousand compatriots [in the United States], do you hear me?” The boycott became a ground swell mass movement involving thousands of Chinese nationwide. The imagined community of the Chinese race thus extended beyond national borders.

In face of massive demonstrations against the Chinese exclusion policy in the United States, William W. Rockhill, a U.S. government minister to China, demanded that the Qing government suppress the anti-American protests. The Qing government, after having repeated perfunctory responses to the U.S. government, finally came to terms with the leaders of the boycott. The participants of the boycott, as expected, leveled their criticism at the action taken by the Qing government. The merchants in Huai’an, Juangsu Province, for instance, published an open letter of protest in the *Xinwen bao* (News Daily):

To boycott is the right of individuals, and the government does not have the right to interfere. . . . We want to let the world know that China has an incompetent government . . . but has competent national citizens. . . . The government cannot violate the people’s will.⁴⁹

They claimed that the Qing government had violated the rights and the will of the Chinese people in order to appease the U.S. government. They also turned their fire on the U.S. government that had pushed their

“incompetent government” to quell the boycott movement: “If the U.S. government under the Democratic Party could not stop the exclusion of Chinese laborers, how dare your government ask our [Chinese] government to stop our people boycotting American goods.”⁵⁰

As they correctly observed, the U.S. government did not have any intention of changing the Chinese exclusion policy. Although Theodore Roosevelt, now the president of the United States, admitted that “undoubtedly one of the chief causes of the boycott has been the shortcomings of the United States Government and people in the matter of the treatment of Chinese here,” he nonetheless maintained that the exclusion policy reflected the American people’s will.⁵¹ In a similar vein, Secretary of War William H. Taft also expressed empathy for the boycott in his interview with the Shanghai-based *Nanfang bao* (Southern News), noting that “there can be no doubt that the protest you did raise . . . called the attention of the whole American people to the grave injustice and abuse of the laws of immigration by some of our immigration officers.” Yet, regarding the possibility of relaxing the Chinese exclusion laws, Taft firmly replied that “at present it was impossible owing to the strong sentiment against it.”⁵² As Taft stated, relaxing the Chinese exclusion laws was not exactly an option for the United States, not simply because it stood against public opinion, but also because the Chinese exclusion policy was part of the ideological foundation for defining and maintaining the boundaries of U.S. citizenship. In other words, the existence of the Chinese functioned as a reference point for assessing the eligibility for membership in the nation of those on the social margins or geographic periphery, such as African Americans, U.S. subjects in newly acquired territories, and immigrants from various parts of the world. Put differently, the concept of the Chinese as an unassimilable alien race had become an indispensable pillar supporting the system of race-based U.S. immigration and citizenship policies.

CONCLUSION

The conflict over the U.S. Chinese exclusion policy between the U.S. and China highlighted the different notions of “Chinese”—one as an unassimilable alien race and one as a national people. These differences reflected different historical conditions in the United States and China. The United States—an expanding empire nation-state in terms of its constituents and territories—feared “degeneration” from absorbing undesirable

elements into it. China—a country on the verge of being overrun by intruding imperial powers because of the weak Qing government—feared *wangguo*, namely national subjugation. In order to tackle their respective predicaments, the United States and China each took advantage of their respective notions of “Chinese.” The logic behind this parallel development of mobilizing notions of “Chinese” was the race-nation linkage informed by the “survival of the fittest” doctrine found in social Darwinism. Based on this rationale, in the United States, “Chinese” became a benchmark for the race-based selective system of immigration and citizenship. In China, conversely, “Chinese” became the basis for the solidarity of one national people whose fates were linked through blood.

The historical situation that brought these two notions of “Chinese” into a head-on clash was the expansion of the United States and China into the Pacific region: one through territorial expansion across the Pacific and the other through population movements within the world-system network in the Pacific region. The encounter between the two in the Pacific region led to the formation and intensification of the Chinese exclusion policy through the racialization of the Chinese. This development, moreover, also led to a momentum in China toward a different sort of racialization of the Chinese. These two directions in racializing the Chinese eventually resulted in a collision: the anti-American boycott movement. The movement revealed the reality of an increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of a world in which the notion of race could be used as an ideological variable in the formation and development of the nation-state, in effect positioning the modern nation within a network of global relations.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 36.

² *Ibid.*, 36–37.

³ In this article, I take social Darwinism to be a global discourse that transformed the historical consciousness among intellectuals not only in Western countries but also in non-Western countries, though in different ways, and generated an increasing sense of interconnectedness in the world. For the influences of Darwinism in China, see James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴ For the emergence of the conception of Chinese as one race and one people, see Wang Lei, “The Definition of ‘Nation’ and the Formation of Han Nationality,” *Social*

Sciences in China Vol. 4, no.2 (June, 1983):167–88; Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Sung-chiao Shen and Sechin Y. S. Chien, “Turning Slaves into Citizens: Discourses of Guomin and the Construction of Chinese National Identity in the Late Qing Period,” in *Dignity of Nations: Equality, Competition, and Honor in East Asian Nationalism*, ed. John Fitzgerald and Yongxiang Qian (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006); and Rebecca E. Karl, *Stating the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁵ On U.S. Chinese exclusion policies from the 1880s to 1900s, see Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Kitty Calavita, “The Paradoxes of Race, Class, Identity, and ‘Passing’: Enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882–1910,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 25 (2000): 1–40; Lucy Saylor, *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); and Adam McKeown, “Ritualization of Regulation: Enforcing Chinese Exclusion, 1898–1924,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 377–403.

⁶ Quoted in Ng Poon Chew, *The Treatment of the Exempt Classes of Chinese in the United States: A Statement from the Chinese in America* (San Francisco: Chung Sai Yat Po, 1908), 5.

⁷ *Congressional Record*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., vol. 13, part 4, 2608.

⁸ For images of Chinese immigrants before the exclusion era, see Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of Chinese* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); and John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

⁹ U.S. Const., Amendment XIV, Sec. 1.

¹⁰ *The Congress Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., part 4, 2890.

¹¹ Helen H. Jun, “Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship,” in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 306. Among African Americans, there were those like Frederick Douglass who expressed sympathy toward the Chinese.

¹² Quoted in Jun, “Black Orientalism,” 313.

¹³ 22 Stat. 61 (1882).

¹⁴ Jun, “Black Orientalism,” 309.

¹⁵ *Congressional Record*, 47th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 13, part 4, 1713, 1519, 1645, 1977.

¹⁶ For the influence of social Darwinism in the United States, see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); and Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, “National Life and Character,” in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt: American Ideals with a Biological Sketch* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1897), 307.

¹⁸ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, section 2 (22 Stat. 59): “That the master of any vessel who shall knowingly bring within the United States on such vessel, and land or permit to be landed, any Chinese laborer, from any foreign port or place, shall be deemed

guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$500 for each and every such Chinese laborer so brought, and may be also imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year.”

¹⁹ “The Chinese Question: Judge Nelson Renders an Elaborate Decision in the Case of Ah Shong,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1883, 5.

²⁰ “Chinese from Hong Kong,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1883, 8.

²¹ 23 Stat. 115.

²² “That these provisions should apply to all persons of the Chinese race, whether the subjects of China or other foreign power,” 25 Stat. 504.

²³ Quoted in Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 105.

²⁴ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537, 561 (J. Harlan Dissenting).

²⁵ “Exclusion–Boycott: A Chinese–American Student Cries ‘Check’ in the Game,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1906, 5.

²⁶ Quoted in Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 79–80.

²⁷ *For the Reenactment of the Chinese Exclusion Law: California’s Memorial to the President and the Congress of the United States*, Senate Document no. 191. 57th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 4.

²⁸ 32 Stat. 176.

²⁹ “Chinese Exclusion Bill,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1902, 3.

³⁰ Ng Poon Chew, *Treatment of the Exempt Class*, 8–9, 11–12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² Quoted in Karl, *Stating the World*, 69.

³³ Quoted in Shen and Chien, “Turning Slaves into Citizens,” 50.

³⁴ Karl, *Stating the World*, 15.

³⁵ Dikötter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 116–19.

³⁶ Tsou Jung (Zou Rong), *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903* (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968), 106, 113.

³⁷ Lin Shu, “Translator’s Notes to Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” in *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present*, ed. R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 78.

³⁸ Liang Qichao, “Xin da lu you ji [Memories of travels in the New World],” in *Jindai zhongguo shiliao congkan* [Compiled historical documents of modern China], ed. Shen Yunlong, vol.10, (Taipei: Wenhai Chuban she, 1966), 389.

³⁹ A large number of Chinese who came to North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century originally heralded from a region along the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province and spoke Cantonese. Yet they were subdivided by subdialects and regional groups, such as *Sanyi* [three counties] group who came from Nanhai, Shunde, and Panyu Counties, and *Siyi* [four counties] group who came from Xinhui, Taishan, Kaiping, and Enping Counties.

⁴⁰ Qichao, “Xin da lu you ji,” 388.

⁴¹ “Ni dizhi jinli ce [A proposal for a boycott against the exclusion policy],” *Xin Zhongguo Bao* [New China Daily] (1903), in *Fan mei huagong jiu yue wenxue ji* [A collection of the literature protesting against the U.S. exclusion of Chinese laborers], ed. A. Ying (Beijing: Zhonghua shuji, 1960), 591.

⁴² “Ni dizhi junli ce,” in Ying, *Fan mei huagong jiu yue wenxue ji*, 591.

⁴³ Local newspapers, many of which came into being at the turn of the century in China and within overseas Chinese communities, along with the development of telegraphy communication, played a significant role in the creation of the 1905 anti-American boycott movement. See Youngming Zhou, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), chap. 4.

⁴⁴ A. Ying, “Guanyu fan mei huagong yue de wenxue [Concerning the literature protesting against the U.S. exclusion of Chinese laborers],” *Fan mei huagong jiuyue wenxue ji*, 11.

⁴⁵ “Tongbao shounue ji [A story of suffering of fellow Chinese],” in Ying, *Fan mei huagong jiuyue wenxue ji*, 552.

⁴⁶ Zhi Qun, “Zhengyue zhi jinggao er [Second warning about fighting against Chinese exclusion],” in Ying, *Fan mei huagong jiuyue wenxue ji*, 651.

⁴⁷ Lin Guanhong, “Jinggao er wan wan tongbao jiemei [An appeal to two hundred million compatriot sisters],” in Ying, *Fan mei huagong jiuyue wenxue ji*, 649.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Guanhua Wang, “The 1905 Anti-American Boycott: A Social and Cultural Reassessment” (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1994), 189.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 125.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Roosevelt to T. C. Fieldlander, November 23, 1905, in Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol.5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 90–91.

⁵² W. K. Roberts, *The Mongolian Problem in America: A Discussion of the Possibility of the Yellow Peril, with Notes upon American Diplomacy in its Relation to the Boycott* (San Francisco: Organized Labor Print, 1906), 24.