

Over a century ago, citizens were concerned about job security and public order

1876 California Report on Chinese Immigration

Edited by Wayne Lutton

Few today appreciate why a popular groundswell of support emerged for the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the last century. A review of this neglected period of our history reveals that it was American workers who led the drive to end the legal importation of Chinese contract laborers, and they did so in the face of fierce opposition from American businessmen who claimed, as do their contemporary counterparts, that enterprises would fail or be forced to move overseas if they did not have a steady supply of contract workers laboring for a fraction of what freemen earned.

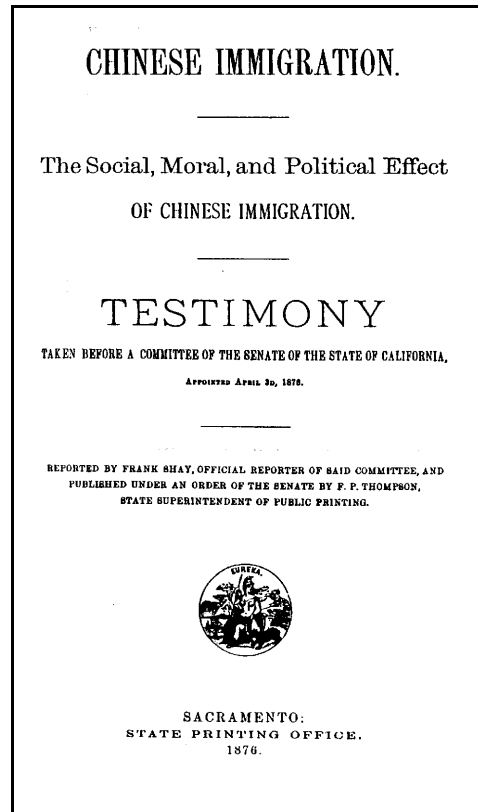
In response to public demand, in April, 1876, the California State Senate created a special committee to investigate the impact of Chinese Immigration, chaired by State Senator Creed Haymond. Hearings were conducted in San Francisco and Sacramento and among the many witnesses called were U. S. diplomats with experience in China; American businessmen who contracted with Chinese syndicates for laborers; the presidents of The Six Companies (the U.S.-based Chinese societies

that controlled the Chinese workers and their communities); Chinese who themselves opposed the abuses of the contract labor system; law enforcement officers; public health officials; and educators.

The following year the California Legislature sent an Address and Memorial to Congress, demanding that federal action be taken to halt Chinese immigration. The special committee's findings were widely circulated and played a major role in forming public opinion. It was not until 1882 that the first of the Chinese Exclusion Acts became law, providing for the exclusion of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years.

We here reprint excerpts from the Report issued by the Committee, a copy of which is held by Park Library at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant.

The first witness called was F.F. Low, former Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States to the Emperor of China. He described the prevailing wage rates for common laborers in China:



Q The great mass of the immigrants here, of the Chinese, is of the very lowest order of Chinese, is it not?

A They are the laboring classes, and, usually coming from seaport towns, might be considered the lowest class of laborers; the agricul-

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tural laborers ranking next to the officials.

Q Where do we get the bulk of our immigration?

A From the laboring classes.

Q What are the customary wages of laborers in China?

A From ten to twenty cents a day. Perhaps ten cents will be nearer the average for common laborers.

Q They support themselves out of that?

A Yes, sir (pp.6,7).

“It seems to me that a large Chinese immigration would cheapen labor to such a degree, as that white labor could not compete with them.”

Testimony of W. J. Shaw, former District Attorney in San Francisco and two-term State Senator, on the potential labor impact of Chinese immigration:

Q From what you have seen of those people, and from what you know of your own knowledge, what effect do you think a large emigration from that country to this would produce on our social and political condition?

A It would have the most deplorable effects. It seems to me that a large Chinese immigration would cheapen labor to such a degree, as that white labor could not compete with them.

Q Is not one of the greatest inducements the wages they get here — ten cents there and fifty and seventy-five cents here?

A Yes, sir.

Q Then, while we benefit them, they will do us as much injury, will they not?

A I am not aware of their having been of any great service, except to persons desiring cheap labor. There are, of course, certain enterprises in this country that have been benefited by Chinese labor (pp.20-21;p.22,p.25).

Testimony of Rev. Otis Gibson, ten years a Methodist missionary in China who, at the time of the hearings, worked with the Chinese community in San Francisco. He explained how The Six Companies provided Chinese laborers:

When a firm wants to employ a large number of Chinese, say one thousand, the manager goes to one of the companies, tells them he wants so many men and agrees to pay a certain price. If the company think they can do better by sending to China, they do so, and induce men to come out (p.31).

Testimony of George Duffield, long a member of the San Francisco police force, concerning crime:

Q How is this population as to criminal propensities?

A They are a nation of thieves. I have never seen one that would not steal.

Q Then nearly all will be criminals?

A Yes, sir.

Q Do you know anything of their spiriting away witnesses and compounding crimes?

A Yes, sir. They will do it all the time — from the Presidents [of the six companies] down.

Q Have they some means of settling cases outside of Court?

A They all do it.

Q And there is no means of getting testimony outside of the Chinese?

A No, sir.

Q Have they any regard for justice here?

A No, sir; not a bit.

Q How does their testimony stand in the Courts?

A They think no more of taking an oath than they do of eating rice. They have no regard for oaths at all. Their own oaths they regard as sacred, and the only way you can get them to tell the truth is to cut off a rooster's head and burn China paper.

Q Is it not often the case that on a preliminary examination there is testimony enough to convict a man, but when you come to the trial these same witnesses testify exactly the reverse, or else will not testify at all?

- A Yes, sir.
- Q **Do you know anything of parties being held in slavery?**
- A. No men are held, but the women are all slaves. The women are in slavery of the most revolting kind (p.48).

“I have come to the conclusion that this immigration will, in the course of time, be a very serious thing for this state ... it will affect the country disastrously.”

Testimony of Max Morgenthau, owner of four factories — the Mission Woolen Mills, Pioneer Woolen Mills, a jute factory and a candle and soap factory — who employed Chinese contract laborers:

- Q **How many men do you employ?**
- A In the neighborhood of two thousand.
- Q **How many Chinamen?**
- A Nearly half.
- Q **How do the wages of the white men compare with those of the Chinamen?**
- A They are from two hundred to three hundred per cent higher. If we had to employ only white men, we could not run our factories — we would have to stop them. When we want Chinamen, we go to some company and say we want so many men, and we get them. Their wages we pay the company, or the man who gets them for us, taking his receipt.
- Q **What effect do you think the presence of these Chinese laborers has had upon the working classes?**
- A I have come to the conclusion that this immigration will, in the course of time, be a very serious thing for this State. I will say now, that if this immigration keeps up, it will affect the country disastrously (p.66-68).

Testimony of Captain R. H. Joy, who had arrived with a boatload of Chinese on April 16, 1876:

- Q **When did you arrive in California?**
- A Two days ago. I came here in command of the British steamer *Crocus*.
- Q **Did you bring any Chinese passengers?**
- A Yes, sir; eight hundred and eighty-two.
- Q **What is the character of these people?**
- A They do not hold a very good character in their own country.
- Q **Is this class a desirable one for any country to have?**
- A I don't think it is, because of the low moral condition of the people.
- Q **Have you been in Australia?**
- A I have.
- Q **How are the Chinese treated there?**
- A Not very well. The inhabitants found that they were being crowded out by the Chinese, and have commenced driving them from the country. Large numbers are leaving.
- Q **In the papers you are credited with having said that all the Chinese you brought here were of the very worst classes — the criminal classes.**
- A No doubt many of them are very bad. All the Chinese around Canton are very bad.
- Q **As an Englishman, what would you think if they were to overrun your country?**
- A It would behoove the Englishmen to drive them out.
- Q **Why?**
- A They work for low wages, and they are not the class of people that we would like to have in our country.
- Q **Why is it that they can work for lower wages?**
- A They can live cheaper. A handful of rice, with water, will suffice for their meals.
- Q **How do their morals compare with those of the English working classes?**
- A They are very much lower in every way.
- Q **What effect, do you think, the introduction of thirty thousand or forty thousand Chinamen into an English city would have?**

A Their standard is so much lower, I don't think they would be allowed in any English city, and I hope never to see that happen (pp.76-77).

Testimony of police officer David Supple:

Q **What proportion of the people belong to the criminal classes—engaged in prostitution, gambling, violating city ordinances, and laws relating to health?**

A About the whole of them.

Q **What is the understanding here in regard to the manner in which these women are held?**

A They are held in bondage, bought and sold. I have had bills of sale translated by Gibson.

Q **Is it possible for these women to escape from that life, even if they desire it?**

A Sometimes the Chief of Police can give some protection, but it is customary for the owners to charge them with crimes in order to get possession of them again. Sometimes they kidnap them, and even unscrupulous white men have been found to assist them.

Q **Do you know what they do with them when they become sick and helpless?**

A They put them out on the street to die. I have had charge of the dead myself, on the street. I have seen sick and helpless women turned out in that way.

Q **What is the general reputation of the Chinese in regard to truth and veracity?**

A I have never yet seen a Chinaman that I would be willing to believe under oath. That is their general reputation. They will testify whichever way their interests may require. That has been my experience, and the experience of everybody with whom I have had any conversation, whether private citizens or officers (pp.80-81).

Testimony of David Louderback, Judge of the San Francisco Police Court:

Q **What do you know about the habits, customs, and social and moral status of the Chinese population in this city?**

A I think they are a very immoral, mean, mendacious, dishonest, thieving people, as a general thing.

Q **What are the difficulties in the way of the**

administration of justice where they are concerned?

A As witnesses, their veracity is of the lowest degree. They do not appear to realize the sanctity of an oath, and it is difficult to enforce the laws, where they are concerned, for that reason. They are very apt, in all cases under all circumstances, to resort to perjury and the subornation of perjury. They also use our criminal law to revenge themselves upon their enemies, and malicious prosecutions are frequent.

Q **Do you know anything of the tenure by which Chinese women are held?**

A. In cases I have investigated, parties have been convicted for dealing in this Chinese slavery — buying and selling women for purposes of prostitution. The women probably never realize that they are free agents, but act as though they were slaves.

Q **About what proportion of the Chinese population in this city are habitual law-breakers,**

“...buying and selling women for purposes of prostitution. The women probably never realize that they are free agents, but act as though they are slaves.”

violators of the city ordinances, thieves, gamblers, prostitutes, and living off the wages of crime?

A The proportion is very great (p.93).

Testimony of Wong Ben, a native of China resident in the U.S. for thirteen years, who worked as an interpreter in the Police and County Courts, concerning the trade in Chinese women:

Q **Who are these keepers?**

A Wong Woon, a big fellow, who keeps a house of prostitution. An Geo, another big fellow — every time a woman gets into trouble he gets her out. He goes and collects commission from women and makes them pay so much a month. He gets lawyers for the gamblers, too, and collects five dollars a week, and ten dollars a

month.

Q Are these men merchants?

A No; they keep gambling-houses, and houses of prostitution. They buy women in China, and bring them here to be prostitutes — and they sell them again here (pp.99-100).

Testimony of Dr. H. H. Toland, a member of the San Francisco Board of Health and founder of a medical university, concerning venereal disease in the city:

Q To what extent do these diseases come from Chinese prostitutes?

A I suppose nine-tenths. I am satisfied, from my experience, that nearly all the boys in town, who have venereal disease, contracted it in Chinatown. They have no difficulty there, for the prices are so low they can go whenever they please. The women do not care how old the boys are, whether five years old or more, as long as they have money.

Q Then the maintenance of this population in our midst, instead of advancing civilization, would seem to be a crime against it?

A That is my opinion.

Q Have you ever read or heard of any country in the world where there were so many children diseased as there are in San Francisco?

A No, sir (p.104).

Testimony of H. H. Ellis, Chief of Police of the City and County of San Francisco:

Q It is in testimony that there are about thirty thousand Chinese living in this city, the most of them residing in seven or eight blocks. Do you know what proportion of that population is criminal, including those who violate the city ordinances in relation to fires and health, and those who live off the wages of the criminal classes, what is the proportion?

A I think almost the entire population (p.111).

Testimony of Matt Karcher, former Chief of Police in Sacramento, discussing crime and labor displacement:

Q Do you know who own or claim to own the Chinawomen who are prostitutes here?

A Merchants here, who pretend to be respectable — Chinese merchants, I mean.

Q Are they buying and selling these women?

A That is my opinion, from my experience.

Q How are they treated?

A Where one is young and good-looking, and makes plenty of money, she is well treated. Those who are unable to make much are treated very badly.

Q How young are the youngest that you know of as being held?

A I have seen them as young as fifteen years.

Q What chance have they to escape from this life, if they desire?

A They have very little chance.

Q Why is that?

A Because the Chinese will swear to almost anything, and if one is taken away by another,

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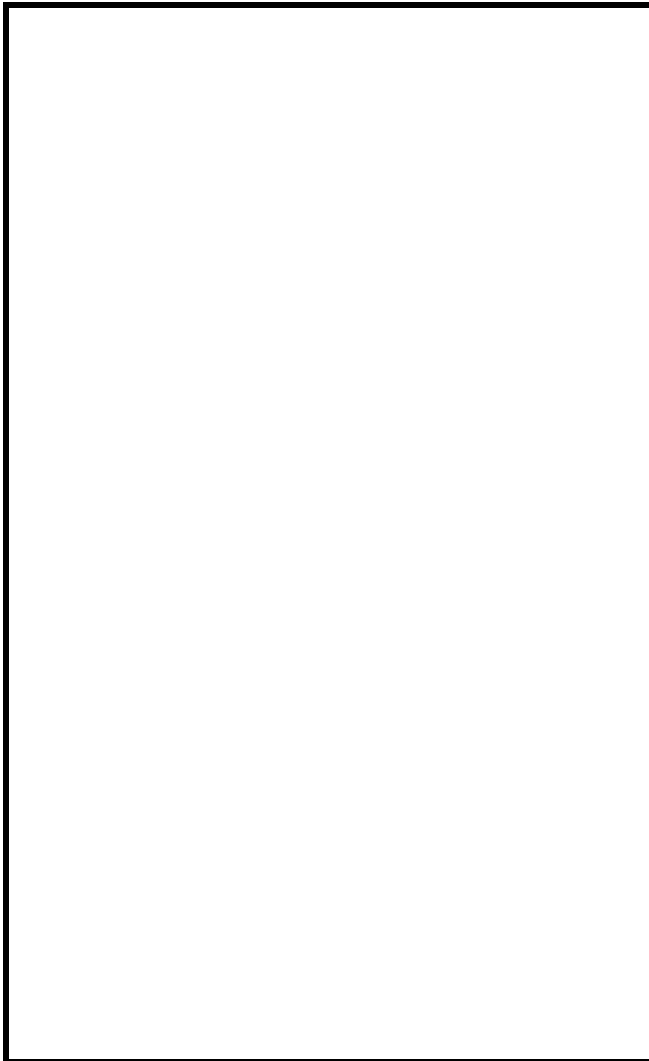
Americans, but it ruins

the Chinese. Their wages, we

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she is simply run off to another locality to be sold into slavery again. Sometimes the farce of marrying is gone through with in order to get the woman, who may be beyond their reach. As soon as the newly-made husband gets possession of his bride he turns her over to her former owners.

The Chinese live together, fifteen or twenty in a small room, and do their cooking there and sleep there. This enables them to live upon probably ten cents a day, or seventy cents a week, while a white laborer would be under an expense, at the very least, of twelve dollars a week. The Chinese use Chinese clothing, live upon Chinese rice, and deal with Chinese merchants. The Chinese washerman has taken the place of the white washerwoman. He has usurped the place of the white girl in families.



He has driven white laborers from the factories, the fields, and the ordinary work of laborers. He has invaded a large portion of our manufacturing institutions, displacing white labor, male and female. He has been enabled to do this from the fact that he works for less than is necessary to support the most economical of white laborers. It is because the laws have been well enforced in California that the people have stood this thing so long as they have. If we should send a population of this kind to any large city in the United States, and the workingmen should understand the character of the Chinese as we understand it, they would rise up and prevent their settling among them (p.128,132-133).

Testimony of Lem Schaum, a long-time Chinese resident of California, who remarked about the impact on wages of continuing high levels of immi-

gration:

Q Suppose the mass of that immigration was stopped, do you think it would have any influence on our commercial relations with other parts of China?

A No. I think this immigration must stop. I say it is not only ruining Americans, but it ruins the Chinese. Their wages, we notice, come down every day. A short time ago Chinamen got thirty-six dollars a month working on the railroad. What do they get now? Twenty-six dollars per month — one dollar a day. This immigration must be stopped in some way (p.138).

Testimony of F. L. Gordon, publisher of a Chinese-language newspaper in San Francisco:

Q What are “hatchet men”?

A Fighting men; a class of men in Chinatown that can be hired to defend any house or store that is threatened, and will cut and kill indiscriminately (p.148).

Testimony of Lee Kan, a native of Canton who had been working in California since 1852, some of the time as an interpreter for the Bank of California, who noted that wages were declining:

Q Are the Chinamen coming here able to get employment as fast as they come?

A No, sir.

Q Have the wages of Chinamen been reduced very much during the last ten years?

A Yes, sir (p.150-51).

The report includes appendices with various data. China was estimated to have one-third of the world's population in 1876. The Committee observed:

This immense population could send out one-quarter of one percent, as colonists to our shores, and then equal in numbers all the white population of the Pacific Coast. Were they sufficiently civilized, well armed, learned, and intelligent, they could spread their rule over the world, and be as dreaded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as were the hordes of Attila, Genghis-Khan, and Tamerlane (all from Chinese territory), from the fifth to the fifteenth (p.168). □