

Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia

Yellow Peril

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452281889.n312> *Independent Scholar*

“Yellow Peril” is a vivid metaphor for a flimsy fear that the East Asian race (or Mongoloids) would gradually overwhelm the white American labor force and, moreover, eventually take over America and destroy its Anglo-Saxon civilization. During the late 19th century, white Americans were afraid of Chinese laborers as a racial threat. They firmly believed that Chinese would not assimilate or adapt in America. Later, white Americans perceived Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos in the same way.

During the Gold Rush in California, from 1849 to 1855, Chinese fortune seekers arrived to mine the rich gold fields of Sierra Nevada and beyond. During the building of the Transcontinental Railroad from 1865 to 1869, an influx of Chinese coolies toiled from California to Utah for the Central Pacific Railroad. They later roamed the west to work at farms, factories, and canneries. White Americans disdained the Chinese for their alien appearance and strange habits.

During the myriad economic recessions in the West, the Chinese competed for jobs against white Americans at cheaper wages. Many white Americans agitated for their expulsion from America. Political and labor leaders used Chinese coolies as scapegoats for the economic situation.

During the 1870s and 1880s, Denis Kearney, president of the Workingmen's Party of California, fiercely agitated against the Chinese immigrants. His goal was to rid the country of cheap Chinese labor. He saw the Chinese as a threat to white American labor and his rallying cry was “And whatever happens, the Chinese must go!”

At the national level, from 1881 to 1924, Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, opposed all immigration from Asia. In his view, these immigrants lowered the wages of white Americans. He regarded Chinese laborers as competitors to white laborers.

The Chinese faced constant prejudice in America. White American businesses paid lower wages to the Chinese for menial jobs, and the government heavily taxed their meager earnings.

Legal Discrimination

During early era of yellow peril xenophobia, Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA) of 1882, a federal law that banned the immigration of Chinese. The CEA restricted immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years, prohibited Chinese naturalization, and provided deportation procedures for illegal Chinese immigrants.

In 1892, the Geary Act renewed the CEA for another 10 years. It required all Chinese to carry a resident certificate at all times, punishable by deportation or one year at hard labor. It did not allow Chinese to bear witness in court. They could not receive bail in habeas corpus proceedings. In 1902, Congress indefinitely extended the CEA.

Subsequent federal, state, and local legislation similarly targeted Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos. After the Russo–Japanese War (1904–05), the European nations recognized Japan as a military power and rival to America for supremacy in the Pacific. More restrictive federal acts were enacted that applied to Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos that severely restricted their immigration.

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan to end the importation of Japanese laborers to America. In 1922, the Cable Act stripped American women of their citizenship if they married “aliens ineligible for naturalization,” meaning Asians. By 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act effectively ended all Asian immigration, except from the Philippines, an American territory. Asians were officially deemed an “undesirable race.”

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced evacuation and incarceration of 110,000 Japanese into war relocation centers for the duration of World War II.

The Magnuson Act, the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act of 1943, allowed Chinese immigration for the first time since 1882. Chinese immigrants [p. 971 ↓] already residing in the country were allowed to become naturalized citizens. But, the act continued the ban against property and business ownership by Chinese.

The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 kept a quota system for immigration with strong provisions against aliens with communist or subversive backgrounds. The act abolished racial restrictions from the Naturalization Act of 1790, which had limited naturalization to immigrants who were “free white persons of good moral character.”

California was in the forefront of state legislation that confronted the yellow peril of the Chinese. They required Chinese miners to pay license taxes. Chinese could not testify in court against whites. They levied a tax on Chinese activities in fishing, regulated the size of shrimping nets, and prohibited use of nets. Chinese were also required to pay a police tax. Anti-miscegenation laws prohibited Chinese from marrying white Americans. Alien land laws prohibited buying or owning land by Chinese.

In 1965, with the Immigration and Nationality Act, Congress finally ended the anti-Asian immigration quotas that were kindled by yellow peril.

A Hostile Society

In a hostile society, white Americans discriminated and harassed East Asians with deep animosity. White Americans confined the Chinese to ethnic ghettos, Chinatowns, with menial jobs and marginal businesses. Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos also lived in racial enclaves—Japantowns, Koreatowns, and Filipinotowns. Whites verbally abused and physically assaulted East Asians at businesses, on streets, and in fields, with wide anti-Asian sentiments across the West. The Chinese and Filipino men lived in a bachelor society without wives and children.

There were many anti-Asian riots and massacres, and at times white Americans forcibly expelled East Asians from cities and towns. On October 24, 1871, in Los Angeles, California, the Chinese massacre, also known as the Chinatown War, occurred when a white mob entered Chinatown to attack, rob, and murder Chinese residents on Calle de los Negros. The white mob systemically lynched 18 Chinese. The Rock Springs massacre occurred on September 2, 1885, in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Racial tensions and cheaper wages paid to Chinese with the Union Pacific Coal Department caused the riot between Chinese and white miners. In its aftermath, 28 Chinese miners were dead, 15 were injured, and 75 Chinese homes were burned.

This 1886 advertisement for laundry detergent published in Chicago, Illinois, played to Yellow Peril sentiment with its depiction of Uncle Sam kicking Chinese men out of the United States. Part of its caption reads, "We have no use for them since we got this," a reference to Chinese laundry workers.

To WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: This is a Liquid Washing Compound, and is FULLY GUARANTEED BETTER THAN ANYTHING EVER OFFERED TO THE PUBLIC: Its constant use will not injure the cloths nor turn them yellow. For sale by the Gallon, Half-gallon and Quart. **TRY A SAMPLE AND BE SURPRISED.**

THE MAGIC WASHER

Manufactured by
GEO. BEE, Dixon, Illinois

PROCLAMATION
TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
HEREAFTER NO FAMILY
WILL BE WITHOUT
MAGIC WASHER
UNDER PENALTY OF
BEING DIRTY

**DONT USE THIS
IF YOU WANT TO BE DIRTY**

**MAGIC WASHER
BEATS
EVERYTHING**

THE CHINESE MUST GO

We have no use for them since we got this **WONDERFUL WASHER**: What a blessing to tired mothers: It costs so little and don't injure the clothes.

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From February 6 to February 9, 1886, a race riot occurred in Seattle, Washington, amid rising anti-Chinese sentiment caused by intense labor competition. A white mob, affiliated with the Knights of Labor, forced the expulsion of 200 Chinese from the city.

During May 1887, in Deep Creek near Snake River in Hells Canyon in Oregon, a white gang of horse thieves and schoolboys ambushed and murdered 34 Chinese gold miners.

On July 19, 1921, armed white raiders also expelled 58 Japanese farmworkers from Turlock, [p. 972 ↓] California, as they were considered a threat to white American workers. The Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riot occurred between January 20 and January 25, 1930, in Watsonville, California. The race riot resulted from jealousy among white men because they viewed Filipino men as direct competition for the few white women. One person died during the riot.

The infamous Tong Wars raged in Chinatowns across America from the 1880s to the 1930s. Rival Chinese gangs, known as tongs, fought battles to protect their territories for lucrative businesses in opium, gambling, and prostitution. American newspapers sensationalized the various killings.

During World War II, the federal government expelled and incarcerated 110,000 Japanese in 10 relocation centers, located at remote and desolate places in the interior west. Then, from 1957 to 1968, during the height of the “red menace” during the Cold War, the Immigration and Nationalization Service (INS) implemented the Chinese Confession Program. In exchange for confession of illegal entry into the country under false identities as paper sons, the INS offered legalized status to Chinese. The program yielded almost 14,000 confessions, which allowed the INS to bar future Chinese immigration.

On June 23, 1982, Vincent Jen Chin was beaten to death in Highland Park, Michigan. Two white autoworkers murdered Chin as a scapegoat for the decline of American auto manufacturing due to Japanese competition.

After the announcement of the verdict surrounding the beating of Rodney King, the Los Angeles riots occurred from April 29 to May 4, 1992. African Americans looted and

burned hundreds of Korean businesses in South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown. The violent situation was aggravated by economic inequality and racial divides between Koreans and blacks.

On December 10, 1999, Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, was indicted by a federal grand jury for 59 counts of stealing secrets of the American nuclear arsenal for the People's Republic of China. The federal government imprisoned Dr. Lee in solitary confinement until September 13, 2000. He was released when the federal government failed to prove its case.

Portrayals in Media

In American literature, the recurrent theme for Yellow Peril was the invasion of America by Mongoloids. The J. Allan Dunn novel, *The Peril of the Pacific*, a 1916 serial in the pulp magazine *People's*, describes an attempted invasion of the western United States by Japan. The novel, set in 1920, assumes an alliance between Japanese immigrants in America and the Japanese navy. It reflected white American anxiety about Japanese immigrants.

Philip Francis Nowlan's novella *Armageddon 2419 AD*, the start of the popular Buck Rogers series, depicted a future America in the 25th century. America had been invaded, occupied, and colonized by cruel Hans from China in 2019 c.e.

Arthur J. Burks contributed a pulp series to *All Detective Magazine* (1933–34) that featured detective Dorus Noel, who confronted sinister operators in Manhattan's Chinatown.

In the late 1950s, Atlas Comics published *Yellow Claw*, a Fu Manchu supervillain, a communist Mandarin. Yellow Claw battled Jimmy Woo, a Chinese American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent.

In films, Hollywood racially misrepresented East Asians because studio producers believed that white Americans would not accept them. Through yellowface practices, white actors predominantly portrayed Asian characters. They altered their appearances

with makeup to mimic East Asian facial features. Yellowface ensured that leading roles remained with white actors. East Asians always were cast in supporting roles as sidekicks, servants, war enemies, and so on.

Fu Manchu, based on novels by Sax Rohmer, was stereotyped as the “bad Asian.” He was the sinister master criminal who plotted with exotic weapons. Warner Oland starred as Fu Manchu in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929).

Charlie Chan, based on novels by Earl Derr Biggers, was the “good Asian.” He was a Chinese American detective from Honolulu who investigated mysteries and solved crimes around the world. Charlie Chan was stereotyped for his poor English, traditions, and subservient nature. Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, and Roland Winters all starred as Charlie Chan.

During the 1930s Flash Gordon serials, the evil Ming the Merciless, played by Charles Middleton, [p. 973 ↓] was the sinister ruler of planet Mongo. He was the yellow antagonist against the white, heroic Flash Gordon.

In television series, East Asians were cast in supporting roles as servants. Hop Sing, played by Victor Sen Yung, was the Chinese cook for the Cartwright family in *Bonanza*, a Western. Peter Tong, played by Sammee Tong, was the Chinese houseboy in *Bachelor Father*, a situation comedy. Ms. Livingston, played by Miyoshi Umeki, was the wise Japanese housekeeper in *Courtship of Eddie's Father*, a situation comedy.

The worst yellowface offense in television was the casting of David Carradine as Shaolin monk Kwai Chang in the Wild West, in *Kung Fu*, a Western drama, from 1972 to 1975. Bruce Lee, the legendary Hong Kong film star and martial artist, had developed the concept.

Conclusion

Since the Gold Rush, the specter of Yellow Peril has cast its ugly, yellow shadow on America. The anti-East Asian syndrome continues in America in blatant and subtle ways in mainstream media and politics. At the dawn of the Pacific century, China has

emerged as a major world economic superpower. China is asserting its military power in Asia. Free trade and currency manipulation with China were major national issues during the 2012 U.S. presidential election.

In the 2013 film *Olympus Has Fallen*, Korean terrorists take over the White House. North Korea invades the United States, another repetition of the evil Asian invasion theme. At universities in America, the model minority myth persists, typecasting all East Asians as excelling in academics. The astonishing rise of Jeremy Lin, guard with the Houston Rockets, on the basketball courts of National Basketball Association, has also stirred up yellow peril stereotypes in the American media. An ESPN report derisively used “Chink,” a racist pejorative, to describe Jeremy Lin on the basketball court. On October 16, 2013, during *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, a late-night television program on ABC, during a satirical skit, a young boy offered “Kill everyone in China” as a way to resolve the U.S. national debt. Kimmel, the host, banally replied, “Ok, that's an interesting idea.” The anti-Chinese joke ignited a firestorm of protests in American cities.

The remnants of Yellow Peril persist in America, contributing to the perception of East Asians as perpetual foreigners and “strangers from a different shore.”

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See Also:

- [1848 to 1899 Primary Documents](#)
- [1900 to 1949 Primary Documents](#)
- [Actors, Asian American](#)
- [Chan, Charlie](#)
- [Chin, Vincent](#)
- [Discrimination](#)
- [Hate Crimes](#)
- [Internment Camps, Japanese Americans](#)
- [Pearl Harbor](#)
- [Racism](#)
- [Yellow](#)

Further Readings

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