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Friends or Foes: 19th Century Chinese American Writers Against Nativist Sentiment

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Abstract

For when there is life, there is always a story to tell. Chinese Americans have told their story hundreds of times since arriving during the Gold Rush. They have told stories of tragedy, persistence, loss, and injustice. In recent research, scholars analyzed these writings in response to anti-Chinese sentiment. This paper examines the three primary avenues through which 19th-century Chinese American writers responded to anti-Chinese sentiment: argumentative, autobiographical, and fictional pieces. It is also important to consider the strategies used by the authors: normalizing their culture, addressing stereotypes, showcasing their contributions, highlighting injustices, indicating hypocrisies, and degrading other minorities. Although these pieces fought against nativist sentiment, it is important to note the early contributions to the model minority myth; some early Chinese American writings diminished the qualities of minorities to uplift the Chinese community.

Key Words: Nativism, anti-Chinese sentiment, exclusionary era, xenophobia, model minority myth

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Introduction

Twenty-eight Chinese were killed in the Rock Springs Massacre in 1885, yet this was not an isolated incident. Labeled as the “Yellow Peril,” the Chinese were recognized as criminal, diseased, and dangerous (Railton, 2019); as a result, they were targeted through exclusionary legislation, violence, and discrimination. Chinese Americans have faced nativism—an ideology to protect those who are “established inhabitants” against immigrants—since they arrived during the Gold Rush. Heavily influencing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, this ideology contributed to the decrease in the Chinese population from 105,000 in 1880 to 90,000 in 1920 (Wu, 2017). In reaction to this sentiment, 19th-century Chinese writers responded lengthily. By writing argumentative, autobiographical, and fictional pieces, Chinese writers utilized various genres to dispute anti-Chinese sentiment, progress immigrant rights, and capture their experiences against these injustices.

Argumentative pieces directly responded to anti-Chinese sentiment by calling out clear government oppression. They contrasted nativist stereotypes and arguments to the reality of their contributions, displaying the importance of Chinese Americans within a broader American community. On the other hand, fictional pieces indirectly responded to anti-Chinese sentiment by portraying characters that countered people’s preconceived notions of the Chinese community, reframing the perception of the community to be more innocent. Finally, autobiographies were somewhere in between the direct responses of argumentative pieces and the indirect defenses of fictional pieces. Autobiographies showcased Chinese immigrants' first-hand experiences, their discrimination, and cultural differences; they attempted to humanize the Chinese. These 19th-century pieces, written in English, targeted a general White American audience, acting as a defense and justification for the Chinese American presence in the United States.

In analyzing significant 19th-century Chinese American authors and their pieces, there were recurring strategies that authors used: normalizing their culture, addressing stereotypes, showcasing their contributions, highlighting injustices, indicating hypocrisies, and degrading other minorities. These six strategies sometimes overlapped with authors using multiple within a singular piece.

Although these pieces all worked to extinguish anti-Chinese sentiment, we must acknowledge the role and parallelism they had in the model minority myth. Some pieces drew comparisons to other minorities in the United States (eg, Irish, African Americans, Native Americans). These attempted to uplift the Chinese community while simultaneously downplaying the roles of other minorities, inevitably harming both groups in the process.

Argumentative Pieces

Argumentative pieces written by Chinese Americans in the 19th century included appeals, letters, and magazine articles as common modes of media. They highlighted injustices and showcased their contributions to American development. They often directly attacked the government and its unfair practices, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; however, they also targeted general nativist sentiment that did not directly stem from the government.

In response to discriminatory laws in San Francisco, a group of five Chinese merchants composed “The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint,” an argumentative appeal to the San Francisco City Council in 1873 (Yong et al., 1874). They humanized Chinese Americans and admonished the Board of San Francisco. First, they described how the City of San Francisco has afflicted the “most unjust, most oppressive, and most barbarous enactments” upon them. The superlative and repetitive diction (“most”) emphasizes the cruelty of San Francisco’s actions. Additionally, the adjectives continually get worse (from unjust to oppressive, and finally

barbarous), which widens the significance of San Francisco's enactments every time. Yong et al. (1874) further juxtaposed the discriminatory actions with the Chinese contributions in building the railroads, harvesting, and reclaiming the "swamp lands"; in addition, they highlighted their dedication to civic duties saying, they have "the reputation...of paying faithfully" their rents, taxes, and debts. They painted the Chinese community as dutiful people who are victims of unfair discrimination, innocently questioning, "Why this bitter hostility?" Overall, "The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint" appeals to citizenship and logic to contrast the abuse they have faced with the responsibilities they have performed.

Norman Asing, a Chinese merchant, similarly, wrote a letter to California Governor John Bigler. In 1852, the California assembly condemned "foreign miners as the greatest threat to...the state's mining districts" (Yung et al., 2012). Because of this report, Governor John Bigler "called for immediate, specific measures to 'check the tide of Asiatic immigration' into California" (Yung et al., 2012). He passed a law in hopes that Chinese immigrants would return to China (Sabharwal et al., 2022). As a result, Norman Asing (1852) highlighted a hypocritical part of the governor's character in that "immigration made" him what he is. He argued that the Chinese were skilled in science and the arts, and they owned mass "manufactories...sail[s], and workshops," exemplifying their usefulness (Asing, 1852). Asing attempted to illustrate the necessity of the Chinese community by showcasing Chinese Americans' skills; therefore, he justified their continued existence in the United States.

In the 19th century, there was a common nativist slogan, "The Chinese Must Go." As a reaction, Yan Phou Lee wrote his 1889 argumentative essay "The Chinese Must Stay" in the *North American Review*. Lee spent his childhood in China but had the authority to receive a U.S. education (Cheung, 2003). In his piece, Lee (1889) first discussed the hypocrisy of American

values, arguing that “the American Republic asserted the principle that all men are created equal,” but “this Republic has departed from its ideal” with the laws passed against the Chinese. He illuminated contradictions between American values and actions through appeals to American patriotism and reason. Lee then humanized the Chinese in that they left their home to “get honest work.” This diction (“honest”) contradicts stereotypes of Chinese having alternative motives for coming to America, portraying the Chinese as innocent rather than corrupt. Then, he addressed ten different criticisms of the Chinese community, including but not limited to threatening Christianity, having a quasi-government, lacking desire, and displacing white laborers. For example, against the claim that “the Chinese drain the country annually of large sums,” he identified flaws in logic. Lee (1889) described that “the California Senate...said that there were 180,000 Chinese in California,” while “the statistics of the Custom-House said there were only 104,000 in the whole country.” He realized that, under the differing logic, “the part is greater than the whole” (Lee, 1889). He used the contradictory evidence between two authorities to highlight logical fallacies in nativist sentiment, deconstructing the arguments of the California Senate.

Autobiographical Pieces

In comparison, some authors wrote autobiographical pieces that documented their experiences and choices. Instead of directly responding to nativist sentiment, they indirectly normalized their culture and addressed stereotypes. By using their perspectives and experiences, autobiographies reflected the true experiences of Chinese Americans compared to a third-person perspective, which often distorted Chinese American culture. Writers created books, essays, and articles to communicate their stories.

Wong Chin Foo, a renowned writer, speaker, and protester against the Chinese Exclusion

Act and creator of the term “Chinese American” (Liu, 2024), wrote the autobiographical essay, “Why Am I a Heathen,” in 1887. He reasoned why he chose not to convert to Christianity, explaining how he grew up as a “heathen” but “transferred” to Christianity. By criticizing the hypocrisy of Christian values versus actions, he explained his reasoning to maintain his belief in Confucianism. He criticized that Chinese merchants donated \$40,000 in a “plague-stricken Memphis,” and the Christians “swallowed the sweet morsel without even a ‘thank you’ (Foo, 1887).” However, Christians heavily advertised it when “they paid \$137,000...as petty compensation for the massacre of 23 Chinamen” (Foo, 1887). As a result of this immoral behavior from Christians, he strengthened his choice of “heathenism.” He indicated Christians’ hypocrisies in that they supported “equality” yet excluded the Chinese (Wong & Chan, 1998), pointing out contradictions between Christian values and their actions. As Yung, Chang, and Lai (2012) summarize, Wong explained how he “chose to remain true to Confucian ideals of morality and goodness.” Using his personal experiences with Christianity, he criticized the different forms of Christianity and made a viable argument in support of his identity despite the opposition. By contrasting Christian hypocrisy between values and actions, he normalized his religious beliefs and faulted Christian behavior.

After Foo received disapproval from Christians, he wrote in a letter to the New York Herald, a large newspaper based in New York City (Wong & Chan, 1998). He painted the Chinese as respectful to Christianity, saying that the US sends “missionaries to us and we listen to them.” He asked for mutual respect, wishing they would “hear” what the Chinese have to say. Then, he contrasted this to reality, highlighting that missionaries told the Chinese that they were “heathens” and “are to be eternally damned, no matter how honest, moral and sincere” they were (Wong & Chan, 1998). Foo’s descriptions of Christian missionaries implied that US missionaries

were throwing away their morals to coerce the Chinese into Christianity. This letter positioned the Chinese as victims, and Christians as the ones who were unreasonably closed-minded to other religions.

In addition to writing argumentative pieces, Yan Phou Lee (1887) also published an autobiographical book, “When I Was a Boy in China.” In comparison to Foo’s direct criticism of the Christian community, Lee’s piece was more like a narrative of his childhood. He described the experiences of his life in China and informed readers of the differences between Chinese and American culture. For example, he described the differences between the Chinese year and the English year, the behavior of children, marriage arrangements (the wife moves into the husband’s family’s home religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism), and holidays (Lee, 1887). He framed these all as differences rather than inherent inferiorities or superiorities of the Chinese community, respectfully explaining these differences in culture. His in-depth description of different aspects of their culture humanized the Chinese community as their own culture rather than sub-human or absurd, indirectly responding to the dehumanization of the Chinese. Additionally, he directly responded to the false beliefs of the Chinese community. He criticized that many people rely on an American traveler’s account of China; he argued that an account could not encapsulate the overall Chinese experience. This made the reader reconsider their preconceived notions of the Chinese community. Another instance is when he addressed the myth that girls were typically killed at infancy; in defense, he argued “that infanticide is as rare in China as it is in this country” (Lee, 1887). By addressing this criticism, he made the Chinese community seem less morally heinous. While recent scholars believe Lee’s writings did not do enough to fight against nativist sentiment, Cheung (2003), instead, argues that Lee’s “When I Was a Boy in America” responded to “degrading descriptions of Chinese culture popular during

the 1880s.” Overall, by accurately informing the public of the differences between Chinese and American culture, Lee worked to correct stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese.

Fictional Pieces

Sui Sin Far, also known as Edith Eaton, was one of the most notable Chinese fictional writers of the 20th century. She was of mixed Chinese and English ancestry, but she was dedicated to “counteracting the hatred and prejudice against her mother’s people” (Ling). She went under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far (Water Fragrant Flower) as she strongly identified with her Chinese heritage (Ling, 1983). Under her pseudonym, she published a book (Mrs. Spring Fragrance), which was a collection of her short stories at the turn of the 20th century. She indirectly responded to nativist sentiment by portraying her character with maternal characteristics, which contrasted the stereotypes of the Chinese at the time.

Sui Sin Far wrote a heart-wrenching short fiction story, “In the Land of the Free,” about the separation of families caused by the US’s flawed immigration system. The story begins with an endearing image between a mother and her son; Lae Choo adores her son, calling him “olive bud” and lifting him into her lap (Far, 1909). When Lae and her son arrive at America’s shores to meet Lae’s husband, their son is detained by officers on the basis that their son was not born in America and that there is no evidence that the son is Hom Hing’s (Lae’s husband). They reluctantly allowed the officers to detain their son; however, they only believed it to be a short-term arrangement. Lae is devastated, on the first day without him, she says with tears, “I see him not; I touch him not; I hear him not.” However, as the seasons pass, Lae’s “tears fall continually,” and she eats very little. When ten months pass, a young lawyer finally appears and says that they can return their son with “at least five hundred [dollars] to start with.” Even though they did not have nearly enough money, Lae Choo, with no hesitation, desperately handed the

lawyer all her jewelry, even those with great sentimental value. The lawyer reluctantly accepted the trade. However, when they pick up their son, and Lae Choo desperately calls for him, he tells his mother to “Go ‘way, go ‘way” (Far, 1909). The repetition of the mother's despair highlighted the implications of America’s unfair immigration system on families. She was unable to live properly (sleep, eat, or function well) without her child. She sacrificed immense material goods and her well-being to dedicate herself to her son. Far, through showing the significant effects of anti-immigration sentiment on families, exemplified the absurdity of it. She covered the themes of “racial insensitivity, human costs of bureaucratic and discriminatory laws, [and] the humanity of the Chinese” (Ling). Ling argues that Far’s writing attempted to contrast Lae with the American stereotype of Chinese women as a “sing-song girl, prostitute, or inmate of an opium den”; in comparison, Lae Choo had strong maternal characteristics (“loving, anxious, frantic, self-sacrificing”). By portraying the main character as maternalistic, readers are more likely to sympathize with the Chinese and see them as human. Overall, Far’s piece demonstrated the negative effects of nativist sentiment on the Chinese community and humanized Chinese women.

Creating and Perpetuating the Model Minority Myth

Even though the early Chinese American writings attempted to respond to anti-Chinese sentiment, it is important to note the parallels they had to the model minority myth and how they attacked other minority groups. The model minority myth places Asians as a “hardworking, successful, and law-abiding” minority that has overcome “hardship, oppression, and discrimination” (Shih et al., 2019). Asian Americans, in the model minority myth, are seen as the minority that works hard and, as a result, succeeds. However, this does not consider that Asian Americans have various experiences, and the Asian American experience cannot be reduced to a stereotype. Creating unrealistic expectations generates a higher risk for “somatic complaints,

negative attitudes toward help-seeking, and psychological distress” for Asian Americans (Kim et al., 2022). Additionally, the myth is often used in comparison with other non-white groups such as Blacks and Hispanic Americans (Greenwood, 2023). Whereas Asians are placed “above,” these other minorities are characterized as “inferior.” This “racial framing” perpetuates problems of exclusion, inequity, and racism (Kim et al., 2022). The model minority myth was introduced in early Chinese American rhetoric.

As we can see from Lai Chun-Cheun, Yan Phou Lee, and other writers’ pieces, the Chinese have qualified themselves as hard-working and intelligent. They have done this as a defense mechanism to establish themselves as necessary to the operations of America. Chinese American writers have attempted to showcase their achievements and indicate what they can contribute to the future of American development. However, to make some of their arguments, Chinese writers have put down other minority groups—especially indigenous groups, African Americans, and the Irish—to make the Chinese seem like a “model” and others as inferior.

A piece that parallels the model minority myth is the previously mentioned “The Chinese Question from a Chinese Standpoint” by a group of five merchants. In a section titled “industrious,” Yong et al. (1874) characterized the Chinese as “peaceable and industrious.” Similar to the sentiment of the model minority myth, the merchants identified themselves as high-achieving and hard-working. They also pointed out that, in comparison to the Irish, they have “kept no whisky saloons and have had no drunken brawls resulting in manslaughter and murder” (Yong et al., 1874). A major wave of Irish immigrants came around the first wave of Chinese immigrants; as a result, we see the Chinese comparing and pitting themselves against the Irish. We see the Chinese writers stereotyping the Irish community to highlight their “good” behavior. Directly after mentioning the faults of another minority group, they say, “We have

toiled patiently to build your railroads...aid in harvesting...[and] reclaim your swamp lands.” They juxtaposed the Irish’s stereotyped steadfast and criminal nature with the Chinese’s “patient” and “industrious” behavior. Their diction purposefully framed the Chinese as a “superior” minority and, thus, the Irish as “inferior.” Similarly, Yan Phou Lee (1889), in “The Chinese Must Stay,” also argued that the Irish were “industrially inferior” to the Chinese and did not have “the ability to get above competition.” As Wong and Chan (1998) analyze, “Lee denigrated the Irish” to “find acceptance for the Chinese.” The diminishment of other groups worked to uplift the status of Chinese Americans.

Irish immigrants, however, were not the only ones targeted. Norman Asing, for example, degraded African Americans and Indigenous people in his letter to Governor Bigler. To almost seem more amicable, he argued that the Chinese were as close “to the African race and the red man” as the Governor, and the Chinese “might compare with many of the European races” (Asing, 1852). Here, we see him attempting to distance the Chinese from African Americans and indigenous people while simultaneously allying them with Europeans who were more socially accepted.

In another writer’s piece to Governor Bigler, Lai Chun-cheun, similar to Norman Asing, degrades Native Americans. As a representative of the Chinese merchants of San Francisco, he compared them to the Native Americans. He argues that the Native Americans “know no mutual respect,” and they live in “wild places” and “caves” (Wong & Chan, 1998). By diminishing another community, he attempted to contrast the Chinese American community as dignified in comparison, further trying to uplift the Chinese community.

Although the Chinese, in the short term, uplifted the Chinese; they did so at the cost of other minority groups. Their efforts potentially regressed overall immigrant and racial minority

rights. The beginnings of the model minority myth during these writings would directly harm the Asian community many generations later, and it would indirectly diminish other minority groups by creating stereotypes.

Conclusion

As we analyze these pieces, we must also consider the intersectionality of Chinese American immigrants. Believers of non-Christian religions not only had to face anti-Chinese sentiment, but they also dealt with religious opposition. Wong Chin Foo was heavily criticized for his beliefs in Confucianism, and thus had to adopt the name “heathen.” However, along with this, he had to also deal with biases against his race. Other writers like Sui Sin Far dealt with gender stereotypes, actively battling multiple stigmas and stereotypes. The intersectionality between various social positions must be recognized to view the criticisms different authors opposed and the multiple minority groups they had to defend.

These 19th-century Chinese American pieces give insight into just a portion of the nativist sentiment Chinese immigrants faced. The Chinese have greatly contributed to the development of America: building railroads, contributing to agriculture, working in factories, and mining for gold. In revealing the true experiences of Chinese Americans, we work toward recognizing their contributions to a society that rejected them despite their contributions. This illuminates our government’s historical mistakes and provides a cautionary tale to not repeat these atrocities, which our modern-day history books do not accurately express. We can also see the progression of civil disobedience and advocacy.

All these pieces defend Chinese Americans’ actions, incorporating emotion, sympathy, and reason. They also attempt to criticize anti-Chinese sentiment with reasoning and statistics. By utilizing various genres, including fiction, autobiographical, and argumentative, Chinese

writers addressed stereotypes, normalized their culture, showcased their contributions, and highlighted injustices, but also degraded other minorities and set high expectations for their community. Although these early writings were the roots of literature against nativist sentiment, these writers seemed to preach to a deaf crowd. However, it is not too late to listen to their stories.

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