

## BOOKSHELF

# ‘The Chinese Question’ Review: After the Gold Rush

A history of Chinese labor and immigration in the United States, South Africa and Australia, from the 1850s to the present.



A grocery store in San Francisco's Chinatown, circa 1885.

PHOTO: UNDERWOOD ARCHIVES/UIG/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

*By Andrew R. Graybill*

Aug. 11, 2021 6:15 pm ET

In 1871, a Chinese immigrant named Chung Sun came to California with \$600, hoping to establish a tea plantation. But shortly after his arrival in Los Angeles, a mob of hundreds stormed the city's Chinatown. Though beaten and robbed, Chung Sun was among the more fortunate; as many as 19 of his countrymen died in the riot, some of them lynched from makeshift gallows. While educated and fluent in English, in the wake of the unrest Chung Sun could find work only as a ditch digger, and the sunny optimism that had lured him to America soon melted away. In short order he returned to his homeland, but not before publishing several letters in a local newspaper. As he explained in one missive: "In civility, complaisance, and polite manners, [Americans] are wholly wanting and are very properly styled barbarians."

If the anti-Chinese violence that erupted sporadically in the United States after 1850—from the Pacific Coast to the Mountain West—was of a particularly brutal nature,

historian Mae Ngai argues in her new book that the prejudice experienced by individuals like Chung Sun was sadly typical across the Anglo-American world during the global gold rush of the second half of the 19th century. Faced with an aggregate influx of more than 300,000 Chinese newcomers, various white settler societies grappled with what the book describes eponymously as “**The Chinese Question**” (*Norton, 440 pages, \$30*), which Ms. Ngai summarizes this way: “Were Chinese a racial threat to white, Anglo-American countries, and should Chinese be barred from them?” The answer to that query “played a central part in the making of white settler identity and the modern nation-state,” while bringing about “a new way of imagining, organizing, and governing the world.”

This is not the book Ms. Ngai set out to write. Instead, she began with a more circumscribed plan to “slay the coolie myth,” the tenacious if largely erroneous notion that Chinese laborers of this era were merely indentured servants—“slavish, without personality or will, and pathetically oppressed.” This idea took hold during the 19th-century Chinese diaspora, promulgated especially by white laborers in places such as California. These objections of the working class were rooted not in any humanitarian concern for the supposedly exploited Chinese; rather—as with their hostility to African-American chattel slavery (to which “coolieism” was often compared)—white Americans and European immigrants focused on the perceived injury to their own economic prospects, which they believed would suffer from competition with unfree workers. Cynical politicians mobilized this animosity to great effect. John Bigler, the third governor of California, won re-election in 1853 by leaning into the Chinese Question.

In the course of her research, however, Ms. Ngai uncovered striking parallels between the California gold rush and a pair of other mining frontiers in Australia and South Africa—both in geographical conditions and the process of indigenous dispossession that preceded resource extraction. But of much greater interest to the author is that all three societies “ultimately answered the Chinese Question with legislation excluding Chinese from immigration and citizenship,” including the so-called White Australia Policy (1901-73) and a general program of Chinese exclusion in South Africa (1880s-1980s). Likely more familiar to American readers is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which, for the first time in U.S. history, used race as the basis for barring an entire group of immigrants; the law remained in effect until 1943. As Ms. Ngai explains, the issue of Chinese exclusion shifted the U.S. federal position on immigration from a matter of commerce to one of national security, where it resides today.

This is a work of towering ambition, which led Ms. Ngai—who teaches at Columbia University and is the author of two previous books, including an acclaimed study of illegal aliens in American history—to scour archives on five continents and to familiarize herself with several national histories to complement her primary expertise in U.S. history. There is good reason that many professional and popular historians opt for more narrowly drawn accounts of discrete events or individuals. But the payoffs of Ms. Ngai’s comparison are notable, among them the challenge to American exceptionalism as well as the illumination of key differences between her case studies. To wit: “Chinese enjoyed more favorable legal and social conditions” in Australia than in California, and in South Africa “the Native Question—the problem of how whites could control and exploit the Black majority”—loomed at all times over the Chinese Question (and everything else).

While Ms. Ngai is a lucid and elegant writer, “The Chinese Question” is not a late-summer beach read. All the same, her audience will appreciate how she gracefully threads revealing episodes and anecdotes into her analysis. Consider a fascinating chapter titled “Talking to White People,” which explores the sometimes intractable complexities posed by the language barrier dividing Chinese immigrants from Anglo employers, merchants and legal officials. In casting light on how Chinese both abroad and at home resisted their persecution, Ms. Ngai reports that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s seminal antislavery novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was published in translation in China in 1901 as “A Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven.” In its review, one Shanghai newspaper asserted that “the book is not really about the sufferings of the black race as it is about all races under the whites.”

Ms. Ngai’s study is a book for our time, reminding us of the increasingly interconnected global economy that—since at least the 16th century—has enriched select peoples, empires and nations at the expense of many others. As important, it offers critical context for what Ms. Ngai describes in her book’s epilogue as “The Specter of the Yellow Peril, Redux,” marshaled by both major U.S. political parties and shared by a wide swath of the American public that fears, among other things, China’s ownership of American debt as well as its grip on the U.S. import market. Such anxieties, the origins of which Ms. Ngai so skillfully traces to the era of the gold rushes, help to explain the surge in anti-Chinese racism around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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*Appeared in the August 12, 2021, print edition as ‘After the Gold Rush.’*

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