THE CHINESE LABOR EXPERIMENT

CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE NORTHEASTERN UNITED STATES, 1870–1880

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ABSTRACT: In the early 1870s, three employers in the northeastern United States experimented with hiring Chinese men from California and Louisiana to work in factories in North Adams, Massachusetts; Belleville, New Jersey; and Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Searching for an alternative to their unionizing White workers, the employers sought to capitalize on the belief that Chinese migrants were a cheap and docile source of labor. This article examines the historical roots of Chinese labor in the United States, the stereotype of the Chinese worker, and why White fears of a "yellow peril" stealing jobs largely failed to materialize but nonetheless influenced future anti-Chinese legislation. Widespread interest in replicating the labor experiment declined in part because the Chinese workers themselves asserted control over their movement and subverted their employers' expectations. This article aims to highlight the agency of those Chinese laborers and expand upon West Coast–centric perspectives on nineteenth-century Chinese American history.
KEYWORDS: Chinese American labor, North Adams, Belleville, Beaver Falls, Chinese immigration

INTRODUCTION

For decades, seven thread-bound chapters of Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* sat untouched in the basement archives of the Beaver Falls Historical Society Museum. A steel town that followed the rise and decline of industry in nearby Pittsburgh, Beaver Falls was once home to a namesake

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cutlery factory that brought in several hundred Chinese workers in the 1870s to counter labor disputes among local employees. Though the strikebreakers did not stay beyond the length of their four-year contract—the Chinese presence was gone by the 1880 census—the memory of their arrival and labor survived in the annals of local history. The Beaver County Genealogy and History Center started a drawer of assorted newspaper clippings dedicated to any mention of Chinese people in the area. The largely volunteer-run museum, sharing a building with the local branch of the Carnegie Free Library, cobbled together a glass case of photographs, illustrations, and other artifacts as a representation of the Chinese workers' brief stay. The "mythical" Chinese labor story in Beaver Falls had already circulated around older generations of residents, so when museum director Betty Anderson reached into a storage box and found a soft book with yellowing rice paper pages in 2014, she simply added it to the existing exhibit case as an item that came to Beaver Falls with the Chinese workers.[1] The illustrated woodblock manuscript laid on display, unrecognized, until Chinese-speaking visitors in 2019 pointed out a few things. For one, the text was upside-down. More importantly, the visitors identified the book as an early printing of one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, produced during the Qing Dynasty and possibly two hundred years old (Figure 1). The discovery sparked international attention and a newfound interest in investigating the story behind the first Chinese presence in western Pennsylvania.[2]

The phenomenon of Chinese workers in Beaver Falls performing specialized manufacturing labor was not entirely a historical anomaly. Facing a whirlwind of rising trade unionism and a shifting racial and economic landscape in the years following the Civil War, enterprising factory owners and employers began toying with the idea of breaking strikes with Chinese workers; a new, supposedly cheaper source of labor already in use in the western states. In June 1870, young Chinese men arrived in North Adams, Massachusetts, to begin multiyear labor contracts in Calvin T. Sampson's shoe factory. A few months later, a similar demographic of Chinese workers began their contract at the Passaic Steam Laundry in Belleville, New Jersey. The aforementioned Chinese workers brought to the Beaver Fall Cutlery Company in 1872 formed the third major instance of this larger labor experiment testing the use of Chinese workers in the northeastern United States. On paper, the Chinese were the ideal labor source: their contracts outlined lower wages, popular stereotypes painted them as docile, and employers

figure 1. The copy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* found in Beaver Falls in 2014, shown to visitors at a reception after the unveiling of the new historical marker commemorating the Chinese workers in the 1870s. An old Beaver Falls Cutlery Company sign is on display in the back. Image by the author, Oct. 9, 2021. Courtesy: Beaver Falls Historical Society and Museum Archives.

found them capable of learning new work. Yet the experiment did not lead to the widespread financial and operational success that employers envisioned, and predictions of cheap Chinese labor taking over American manufacturing and industry failed to materialize in the late 1870s.

Why, then, did employers' interest in expanding the Chinese labor experiment in the northeastern United States decline, even before the legalized exclusion of Chinese laborers in 1882? As this article argues, the experiment did not last for a multitude of reasons beyond the most obvious claim of social hostility in the form of anti-Chinese racism. It is true that the displaced white workers opposed the Chinese, as they did other groups of strikebreakers and cheap labor, but it was not racially charged opposition from local workers alone that dismantled the labor experiment. American employers also struggled to understand the Chinese workers' goals, failing to account for the motives behind their labor in the United States, and they quickly found that the Chinese were not the subservient mass of labor that popular stereotypes depicted. The use of cheap Chinese labor in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls—the labor experiment of the Northeast—was not merely a fanciful idea held by a few factory owners but rather emblematic of the tricky web of economic and social anxieties under fierce national debate in the years following the Civil War. Despite the experiment's rather disappointing results—the "cheap" Chinese labor did not lead to massive financial and operational success that employers across the country could replicate—it nonetheless played into the growing fears of a "yellow peril" taking over the United States that culminated in the infamous anti-Chinese legislation of the decades to come.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The commonly used diction surrounding foreign-born people in the United States would label these Chinese workers "immigrants," a term that indicates a desire for permanent residence. However, as thisarticle later discusses, the term "sojourner" better describes a large number of the Chinese laborers within the scope of this research. A sojourn is a temporary stay, and many Chinese men sought to return to China after earning money in the United States.[3] The tendency of historical narratives to group Chinese sojourners with other Asian and European groups who arrived as immigrants erases some of their story, but labeling all Chinese workers as unassimilable

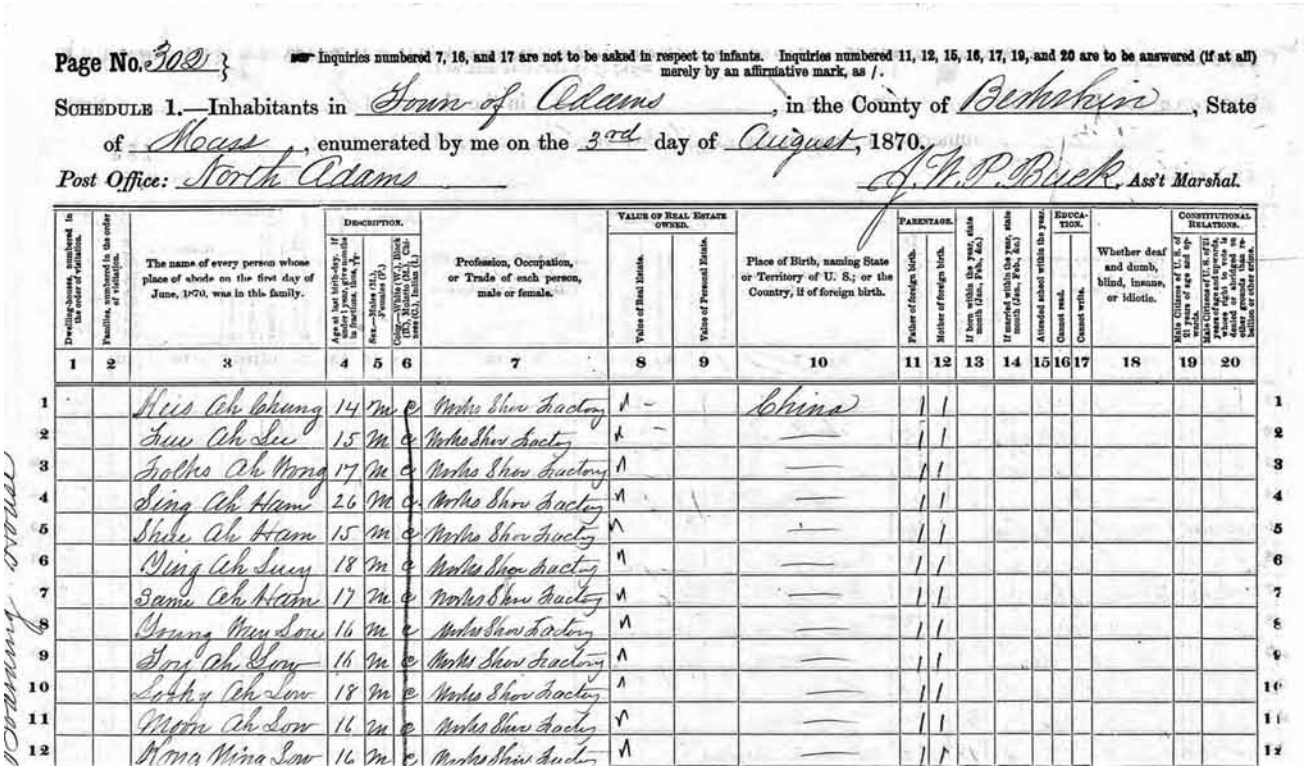
sojourners is a similarly problematic view that formed the basis for several pro-exclusion arguments; many wanted to return home, but others did want to settle in the United States. Given the overwhelming lack of the Chinese workers' own voices in the historical record, this research pieces together their motives from the evidence of what they did while taking care to acknowledge that their goals and experiences were not monolithic.

overview of primary sources

The fascinating narratives of the Chinese workers in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls are most thoroughly recorded in the newspapers of the time. Massachusetts-based publications like the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and *Lowell Daily Citizen* relayed the arrival of the first Chinese in the Sampson factory, while the *New York Times* reported on several visits and stories at the Belleville laundry. The *Beaver Argus, Beaver Radical, Pittsburgh Post, Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, and other western Pennsylvania newspapers ran frequent features on the Chinese at the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company. The scope of the reporting expanded far beyond the immediately impacted communities as well; newspapers across the country, from the *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Journal & Messenger* in Macon to the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* in Maine, latched onto the developing labor experiment with reprinted articles, editorials theorizing on the future of Chinese labor in the United States, and more.

Official records corroborate details of the Chinese labor force in the three locations. For instance, the 1870 census lists the Romanized names of seventy-five Chinese men in North Adams, ranging in age from fourteen to thirty-two, with their occupation recorded as "Works Shoe Factory" (Figure 2).[4]

Unfortunately, a major limitation of this research is the absence of key primary sources. Without the labor contracts themselves, signed between Chinese agents and the companies that employed Chinese workers, reconstructing the exact stipulations of the labor agreements depends heavily on possibly erroneous secondary reports. The Chinese workers' own voices are also largely absent from the narratives of the northeastern United States. Though several White-authored newspaper articles state that the Chinese workers could read and write in their own language, their books and writings are hard to locate.[5] Local reporters recorded statements and brief interviews



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Inquiries numbered 7, 16, and 17 are not to be asked in respect to infants. Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 19, and 20 are to be answered (if at all) merely by an affirmative mark, as /.

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in Town of Adams, in the County of Berkshire, State of Mass, enumerated by me on the 3rd day of August, 1870.

Post Office: North Adams

J. H. P. Buck, Ass't Marshal.

Dwelling-houses, numbered in the order of visitation.	Families, numbered in the order of visitation.	The name of every person whose place of abode on the first day of June, 1870, was in this family.	Description: Age at last birthday. If under 1 year, give months in fractions.	Description: Sex—Males (M.), Females (F.)	Description: Color—White (W.), Black (B.), Mulatto (M.), Chinese (C.), Indian (I.)	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male or female.	Value of Real Estate Owned: Value of Real Estate.	Value of Real Estate Owned: Value of Personal Estate.	Place of Birth, naming State or Territory of U. S.; or the Country, if of foreign birth.	Parentage: Father of foreign birth.	Parentage: Mother of foreign birth.	If born within the year, state month (Jan., Feb., &c.)	If married within the year, state month (Jan., Feb., &c.)	Education: Attended school within the year.	Education: Cannot read.	Education: Cannot write.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	Constitutional Relations: Male Citizens of U. S. of 21 years of age and upwards.	Constitutional Relations: Male Citizens of U. S. of 21 years of age and upwards, whose right to vote is denied or abridged on other grounds than rebellion or other crime.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
		Hus Ah Chung	14	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1 –		China	1	1									1
		Tuw Ah Lee	15	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1 –		—	1	1									2
		Foltes Ah Wong	17	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									3
		Sing Ah Ham	26	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									4
		Shoe Ah Ham	15	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									5
		Ging Ah Suey	18	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									6
		Same Ah Ham	17	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									7
		Young Way Sow	16	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									8
		Jon Ah Sow	16	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									9
		Lobby Ah Low	18	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									10
		Mow Ah Low	16	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									11
		Kina Kina Low	16	M	C	Works Shoe Factory	1		—	1	1									12

FIGURE 2. A page from the 1870 census listing forty of the Chinese men in North Adams, Massachusetts with occupation "Works Shoe Factory." Their ages range from fourteen to thirty. From: 1870 United States Census, Adams, Berkshire, Massachusetts, Ancestry.com.

with the Chinese, but they were biased and often unfamiliar with the nuances of Pidgin English. The same challenge arises in locating personal letters, mailed home to China through a complex network of carriers. Even in places with larger Chinese populations elsewhere in the country, only a small proportion of telegrams and letters—received or unmailed—survive from the Chinese immigrants and sojourners.[6]

Previous scholars of Chinese American history have turned to more unusual sources, like Chinese-English translation pamphlets and Chinese poems etched onto the Angel Island detention center walls, to piece together the thoughts and identities of the Chinese on the west coast.[7] However, difficulty in finding such creative sources to illustrate the motives of the Chinese workers in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls forces this article to rely on prior scholarly analyses of Chinese workers in other parts of the United States.

Secondary Literature and Historiography

The complexity of the Chinese experience in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century is reflected in the intricate historiographical debates within the field of Chinese American studies itself. Building upon the assessments of scholars Roger Daniels and Shirley Hune, historian Sucheng Chan's overview of the Asian American historiographical tradition aptly summarizes relevant developments in Chinese American studies since the early twentieth century alongside the literature surrounding other Asian diasporas in the United States. Chan identifies landmark works of historical interest by not only historians, but also "missionaries, diplomats, politicians, labor leaders, journalists, propagandists, and scholars trained in sociology, economics, social psychology and political science" that have shaped the field.[8]

The initial wave of writing, beginning with the earliest arrivals of Chinese in America, was highly partisan in the context of the debate over Chinese immigration and the varying racial stereotypes surrounding people of Chinese descent. Around the time of the Chinese labor experiment in the Northeast, popular audiences of the late nineteenth century were reading the conflicting works of missionaries like William Speer and Otis Gibson, who promoted a view of the Chinese as hard-working and harmless, and writer M. B. Starr, who warned of the threat of a Chinese "invasion."[9] A few decades later, in 1909, sociologist Mary Roberts Coolidge published the first scholarly work in Chinese American history. Her volume, simply titled *Chinese*

Immigration, is particularly useful as a snapshot of the author's openly partisan, radically pro-Chinese views at the time, but it elicited opposition from contemporaneous historians and labor economists like Ernest Bruncken and Ira B. Cross, who criticized the writing as too prejudiced "in favor of the Orientals."[10] Though *Chinese Immigration* only briefly mentions the specific instance of contract labor in North Adams, Coolidge's larger discussion of the Chinese in America set the stage for later scholars writing in support of Asian immigration.[11]

As scholars beyond the first wave continued to develop studies of Chinese American history through the twentieth century, most attention focused on the relatively large population of Chinese immigrants and sojourners west of the Rocky Mountains. Research on Chinese American labor history followed the same geographic focus on the Pacific coast. The works of Gunther Barth and Alexander Saxton in the 1960s and '70s put forth new analyses of early Chinese labor in California, where labor historian David Roediger also discusses the overlapping labor and anti-Chinese movements.[12] Later books by Chris Friday and Mae Ngai interrogate Asian labor within the larger backdrop of the American West in Pacific salmon canneries and gold mining, respectively.[13] Saxton and Ngai also contribute to a body of relevant literature that focuses on the perception of indentured Chinese "coolie" labor, both within and outside the United States, and how the term was intentionally conflated with Black slavery for political gain. The works of Walton Look Lai, Moon-Ho Jung, Lisa Yun, and Lisa Lowe further outline the cruelties of "coolie" labor in the Western Hemisphere and the projection of the American slavery debate onto the presence of Chinese workers and the controversy surrounding the Chinese labor question.[14]

Though some of this existing literature on Chinese American labor touches upon its effects in the eastern United States, only a few articles by scholars Edward J. M. Rhoads and John Jung explicitly examine the contract labor in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls. They construct the stories of the Chinese workers but mainly point to anti-Chinese animosity and violence among local populations as the dominant rationale for the labor experiment's failure to expand beyond three sites in the Northeast.[15] This article, however, demonstrates that the interest in hiring Chinese workers in industry east of the Rockies was much more widespread than previously suggested. The labor experiment conducted by three employers in the 1870s was emblematic of a popular interest in importing cheap Asian labor throughout the country. Its failure to take hold in more places was not only

due to localized violence and hostility against the Chinese. It also showed the inability of White American employers to appeal to the motives of Chinese workers, which were often unique from those of European immigrants, and triggered the realization that the Chinese were not a uniformly obedient labor force that could be transplanted to any location. These latter two points in turn exacerbated existing ethnic antagonism.

This study also situates the Chinese workers alongside African American labor, a topic Moon-Ho Jung and James Loewen have analyzed in the context of the American South, to compare the Northeast's Chinese labor experiment with African American strikebreaking and labor migration to northern industry of the same time period. How did the perceptions and reactions of native White northerners and European immigrants differ between distinct non-White ethnic groups? Did organized labor view the different workforces as similar threats? The process of answering these questions surrounding the experiences of Chinese contract workers builds upon earlier analyses of African American strikebreaking by scholars Sterling Denhard Spero and Abram Lincoln Harris, economist Warren C. Whatley, historian Joe William Trotter, and others.

By the 1870s, concerned White residents across the entire country wondered if cheap Chinese workers would soon take over jobs in every sector as the contracted labor arrived in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls. Though largely disappointing for the three employers who had hoped for massive savings and increased profit, and not widely replicated as White Americans feared, the premise of the failed labor experiment still had a significant impact in turning public opinion against the Chinese. The next section addresses the historical forces already at play prior to the labor experiment. These include the economic conditions in both China and the United States that facilitated the movement of Chinese laborers internally and abroad; the places where those workers ended up throughout the nineteenth century (from Southeast Asia through Latin America and the Caribbean); and the national debate over labor that Chinese workers already performed in the United States through 1870, considered along with other racial and ethnic groups. After situating the issues surrounding Chinese labor in the United States against the broader global history of imported Chinese labor in the New World, this article lays out the details of the Chinese employment in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls before delving into the central argument.

CHINESE LABOR MIGRATION WITHIN ASIA

The arrival of Chinese workers in North America built upon a complex history of economic conditions and labor migration both within and outside China. Exploring the movement of Chinese workers elsewhere in the world in the decades prior to their 1870 arrival in the northeastern United States is necessary to fully understand their story.

Internal mobility had been increasing in the centuries prior to mass nineteenth-century emigration from China, as labor and tax systems became less rigid and allowed for more land sales and variety in occupations. Expansion of the money supply and introduction of New World crops like yams and maize allowed the population and economy to grow, but the burgeoning demand outpaced the availability of cultivated land for largely rural families.[16]

In order to survive, Chinese families turned to the redistribution of labor to supplement family income. Women and children could produce cloth to sell in local markets for additional money. Excess male labor could work outside the family's property, and indeed many men went to work elsewhere cultivating new farmland on terraced hillsides and alluvial plains. The traditional Chinese principle of "estate household" held that all members would contribute to and benefit from a pool of shared resources, even if the family was geographically dispersed through migration or labor export. A complementary explanation termed "hostage theory" held that keeping women—mothers and wives—at home would ensure the return of their husbands and sons. Chinese culture dictated the continuity of a "spatially extended family" that linked them to ancestors and heirs, and male workers sojourning away from home thus remained tied to their families through several moral obligations.[17]

With the material and psychological support of the traditional Chinese conception of family, millions of men left home in search of new opportunities. Though some wealthier merchants and entrepreneurs moved around the country for reasons other than land shortage, most migrants were poor and searching for wages. Some found work as farmhands, goods haulers, laborers on public works, and miners, depending on skill level. Others found themselves vagrants, unemployed in places with large crowds of fellow migrants desperate for work. Most labor migration followed these patterns within China.[18] However, a small yet highly visible proportion of sojourners went abroad. This outward movement was technically in violation of

geographically restrictive imperial policy until 1754, when Emperor Qianlong implemented a recommendation that acknowledged and permitted sojourning; yet even in the years prior, those desperate for work still skirted the bounds of official policy and accepted temporary labor abroad as necessary for survival. The idea of permanently settling outside China was rare among most classes of Chinese people, with the exception of political refugees, as it would indicate a renunciation of family and homeland. Most sojourners sent remittances home and intended to return to join their family once they had saved enough money, but the risky journey abroad and potential for exploitation and low wages sometimes made a return home unlikely, especially for workers considered unskilled.[19]

Nonetheless, Chinese labor migration began spreading through Southeast Asia as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Significant numbers of Chinese workers ventured to uncolonized kingdoms like Japan, Siam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Vietnam as well as port cities occupied by European colonial powers like Malacca, Manila, and Batavia, present-day Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Occupying a class higher than common laborers but firmly below government officials in the social and political hierarchy back in China, Chinese merchants gained privileges and new powers in Southeast Asia through their relationships with rulers of host countries or as tax collectors and middlemen for European colonial regimes.[20] Artisans found economic niches in skilled work like carpentry or masonry, while the lower classes of common laborers worked in agriculture and extracting local resources in plantations and mines.[21]

The Chinese who migrated throughout Southeast Asia in the early colonial period integrated into local society in a variety of ways; though traditional ties to families back home were strong, some men ended up settling rather than sojourning, integrating into their host country's society and intermarrying with the local population. However, in European colonies, friction with the colonialists in power resulted in frequent violence as well. Fears of the influx of an "alien" Chinese race led in some instances to not only mass expulsions, but also massacres of Chinese populations and retaliatory acts that left both White Europeans and Chinese workers on edge. Even though the colonial economies depended heavily on Chinese labor, the clashes that resulted from cultural ignorance and racial fear foreshadowed the coming centuries of hostile and exploitative interactions between Western powers and Chinese workers.[22]

CHINESE LABOR MIGRATION TO THE NEW WORLD

As Southeast Asian economies continued to develop, Chinese labor migration began to spread across the Pacific to fill labor shortages in European colonial holdings in the New World. The earliest recorded instance of imported Chinese labor in North America took place at a British trading post in Vancouver Island's Nootka Sound, when navigator John Meares brought fifty Chinese workers and sailors in 1788.[23] However, the brief settlement dissipated after the Nootka Crisis, a dispute between British and Spanish land claims in the Northwest, and the next large-scale effort to import Chinese labor into the New World did not occur until the beginning of the nineteenth century in the Caribbean.

Through various intermediaries, British officials recruited two hundred Chinese workers in Macau, Penang, and Calcutta to sail in 1806 on the *Fortitude*, a vessel of the East India Company, to Trinidad, a newly acquired British colony that needed more workers to cultivate the fertile land.[24] Captain William Layman of the Royal Navy theorized in his original proposal that bringing "free men inured to a hot climate" to Trinidad would introduce an example of "industry and good management" for other British colonies of the West Indies to follow as the African slave trade across the Atlantic declined. "China has always been the most fertile and best cultivated country on the face of the globe," Layman proclaimed, adding that the "great ambition" of the Chinese would transform "woody wastes and drowned parts of Trinidad into rich, fertile, and productive land." Moreover, if the British were to copy the mode of Chinese labor in places like the Southeast Asian island of Java, Layman wrote that cultivating the 1,360 square miles of arable land in Trinidad with Chinese workers would cost only £35,951,600, which was £12,947,200 lower than the calculated expense for using enslaved Africans.[25] These estimated financial benefits, coupled with the British government's fear of slave revolts following the Haitian Revolution in nearby Saint-Domingue and their desire to find labor sources outside the African slave trade, made the importation of Chinese to Trinidad especially appealing. The Chinese could thus form an adjacent racial group to enslaved Black workers and White landowners in the existing plantation environment, planting and processing the sugarcane.[26]

The execution of the "Trinidad experiment" overlooked several of Layman's proposed ideas and failed to create a permanent Chinese settlement of free labor; within a decade of arrival, most of the imported

Chinese "colonists" had left, taking advantage of an option within their original agreement to return to China at the expense of the British government after at least a year. Some of the "radical errors" Layman described in the early years of the experiment centered around the selection of Chinese colonists, the lack of female recruits, the scattering of Chinese across the island, and failure to establish clear compensation plans. Despite the British government's intention to carefully select a balance of Chinese men and women to settle together and form a self-sustaining community in Trinidad, the "ill-selected and ill-managed assortment" contained no women, and the men were "hawked and distributed about to various planters" instead of living and working in the same place.[27] White planters disliked the Chinese "men of bad character" and condemned the experiment, which the British government would not repeat again for several decades.[28]

British Caribbean planters began expressing a greater interest in imported Chinese labor in the decade after Parliament passed the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which ended slavery in most British colonies. Though the government forced many of the formerly enslaved to remain bound in economic servitude as apprentices, the end of legal slavery pushed Caribbean planters to search for a different source of plentiful, cheap labor.[29] The 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the first of the unequal treaties between China and foreign imperial powers that ended the first Opium War, made the idea of recruiting Chinese workers more feasible, as it forced China to open up to free trade. From the thousands of impoverished Chinese people in the coastal provinces displaced by the war, militarily dominant European powers could easily recruit and impress large numbers of Chinese migrant workers with foreign legal protection in treaty ports.[30]

Caribbean plantation owners ventured to Asia to scope out the Chinese labor force. A planter from British Guiana traveled to Southeast Asia in 1843, reporting on the "strong and powerful Chinese men there who were "from infancy accustomed to toil" and "industrious and eager to earn money."[31] J. Crawford, Esq., the British Colonial Land and Emigration Commission's expert on China, responded to written queries about the nature and availability of Chinese workers with a description of the Chinese as "a sort of ambidextrous people who can turn their hands to anything," but cautioned that they needed to be treated with the same consideration as British workers, lest they become "discontented, disorderly, and roguish."[32] Yet as the British and other European powers introduced Chinese laborers across their colonial

holdings, they received vastly different treatment than White European workers. Imported Chinese workers soon went beyond the growing economies of Southeast Asia and sugar plantations of the Caribbean, to Australia and elsewhere in the New World.[33]

"COOLIE" LABOR IN THE NEW WORLD

Though not explicitly enslaved, the imported Chinese workers were hardly free. Chinese labor as it existed in the New World colonies resided in a hazy category between forced and voluntary, depending on the method Chinese emigrants used to pay for their travel expenses. They often chose to migrate in search of work, but many fell into predatory arrangements with outside creditors, while some were even forced into cruel labor contracts. The fewest in number but most "free" paid their own overseas passage; those who took loans from merchants, brokers, and shipping companies were less free; indentured Chinese laborers, yet another step down, were bound to multi-year contracts; and criminal facilitators and foreign labor agencies coerced or tricked the least free workers into ships, where they came under total control of masters.[34]

It is these last few categories of indebted or forced workers—often called "coolies," a term for low-wage laborers deriving either from the Chinese words for hard or bitter labor, or from Hindi for servant—that Western powers came to associate most with the imported Chinese in the Americas. As the labor migration system continued to develop, the now-derogatory term "coolie" came to apply broadly to any indentured worker of East or South Asian descent.

From the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, major sites of low wage "coolie" labor beyond the British colonies included Peru and Spanish Cuba, where the governments turned to Chinese men as a cheap, easily available alternative to enslaved Africans. In Peru, planters needed a large labor force to cultivate sugar and cotton and enslaved African labor had filled the labor demand since the beginning of Spanish colonial rule. After gaining independence in 1821 and working to consolidate internal debt, the mid-nineteenth-century guano boom revitalized the export economy as European demand for the fertilizer increased, and the Peruvian state and its merchants benefited from trade relationships with powers like Great Britain. However, due to factors including the British abolition of the slave

trade and low reproduction rates among enslaved families, Peruvian planters began facing a labor shortage; from 1792 to the abolition of slavery in 1854, the number of enslaved workers decreased from 40,337 to 25,505. Attention during this time turned from enslaved Africans to Chinese contract laborers, and the Peruvian government began to pay planters to free their existing enslaved workers and import cheaper Chinese labor. Over 100,000 indentured Chinese "coolies" would arrive in the decades between 1849 and 1874 to mine guano, cultivate sugar and cotton, and work on railroad construction.[35]

Cheap labor costs similarly motivated the importation of indentured Chinese workers to Spanish Cuba. Though slavery was not abolished until 1886, the consistent low cost of employing "coolie" workers appealed to sugar planters. The cost of enslaved Africans from 1845 to 1875 steadily rose from 335 to 715 pesos per worker, but the cost of a Chinese worker never surpassed 420 pesos. From the 1840s to the 1870s, British, French, American, Portuguese, Danish, Chilean, and Russian ships recruited or impressed and trafficked over 150,000 Chinese "coolie" laborers to Havana, where they helped to quintuple Cuba's sugar production.[36]

Ample evidence illustrates parallels between the treatment of "coolie" laborers in places like Peru and Cuba and the enslaved Africans they worked alongside or even replaced, from their entry into the labor system and the ship conditions during ocean passage to the harsh work and cruel physical punishments they faced in the New World. Further political unrest and a weakened Chinese government created conditions along the Chinese coast where foreign labor agencies and labor gangs could lure and kidnap poor and defenseless men who were searching for jobs. "Coolie" brokers could also buy captured prisoners from feuds between different ethnic groups and lineages.[37]

The workers, whether forced or of their own volition, boarded overcrowded junks and barracoons for transport across the Pacific. Often locked below deck, they suffered violent treatment, rampant illnesses, and a lack of adequate food supplies, leading to high death rates on the months-long voyages to their destinations in the New World.[38] Desperate to escape the horrors they experienced, some jumped overboard, while others staged mutinies against captains, sailors, interpreters, and other authority figures. Though these mutinies often failed, a small minority were successful in stopping voyages, and European traffickers unequivocally feared brewing unrest among their passengers. A British official in 1874 compiled a list of "coolie" ship mutinies with detailed descriptions of cause and place. He noted cases

ranging from a "great sickness" that wiped out 300 Chinese workers and triggered an unsuccessful 1850 revolt on the Peruvian-bound British ship *Lady Montague*, to an 1851 mutiny aboard the ironically-named *Victory* during which the Chinese passengers killed the captain, officers, cook, and part of the crew before plundering the cargo and landing in the Gulf of Siam. In 1857, the Havana-bound Dutch ship *Henrietta Maria* was discovered drifting near the present-day Philippines, the body of a crew member found on board with knife wounds and about two hundred Chinese passengers missing. In total, he listed thirty-four mutinies, though other records indicate as many as sixty-eight revolts occurring between 1847 to 1874.[39]

The transpacific crossing was brutal, yet it offered a glimpse into the cruelty that faced the often-uninformed Chinese passengers in the New World. Exploitative labor conditions quickly dashed the collective dream of sojourning briefly abroad and earning enough money to return home to China. Upon arrival in ports like Callao, Peru, the workers disembarked and lined up dockside, their contracts for sale to labor agents.[40] Nearly half of the predominantly male Chinese workforce in Peru died from suicide, exhaustion, or ill treatment.[41] In Cuba, "coolies" were stripped naked for buyers to inspect, then sent to work on sugar plantations alongside enslaved Africans, where they faced virtually identical forms of violence like shackling, beating, and shooting. Forced into the fields even with cracked skulls and broken bones, over half of the "coolie" population died of malnourishment and abuse before the completion of their eight-year contracts.[42] "Coolie" workers encountered harsh conditions in British colonies as well, under a state-supported system of unequal power and contract-enforced captivity.[43]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States could not ignore the rise of "coolieism" in the New World as the debate over American slavery raged. American ships were already involved in the lucrative transportation of Chinese labor across the Pacific to South America and the Caribbean, with a notable 1852 mutiny occurring on the US ship *Robert Browne*.[44] In 1853, Humphrey Marshall, a Kentucky planter serving as US commissioner to China, warned that British use of "tractable, obedient coolies" would tilt economic competition so far in their favor as to threaten both American imperial ambitions and the institution of slavery in the United States.[45] The government could also point to indentured Chinese labor as an allegedly free alternative to enslaved Black labor, which could satisfy Southern planters' labor needs while technically ending slavery, but it was impossible to overlook the similarities between "coolieism" and slavery on plantations in places like Cuba and Peru. At the same time, even if Congress

was not explicitly encouraging the importation of indentured Chinese workers, the Chinese foreigners were already arriving on the west coast in large numbers, many locked into contracts with creditors and labor agents that seemed reminiscent of "coolieism." What, if anything, could the United States do to balance economic demands without endorsing a new and contentious form of forced labor?

chinese and "coolies" in california

Though a few Chinese names—mostly students, sailors, or merchants—appeared on census records as early as 1830, the first substantial wave of Chinese migrants to the continental United States did not occur until the 1848 discovery of gold in California. Word of *Gam Saan* ("Gold Mountain") quickly spread in the coastal Chinese provinces, and letters home from sojourners in places like San Francisco only corroborated the fantastical stories of opportunity in a wealthy land across the ocean. In stark contrast to the harsh conditions Chinese workers endured on Caribbean and South American plantations, labor brokers advertised the United States as a place with "great pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description," where the Chinese would be welcomed. Villagers marveled as early sojourners returned with enough money to throw grand feasts and build palaces.[46]

Some of the wealthier migrants, including merchants, paid their own passage. Common laborers, however, did not have the requisite money up front. Creditors stepped in accordingly, providing the money for a ticket in exchange for the initial amount plus interest paid out of future earnings. Enthusiastic "Chinese poor" went into debt hoping to become rich in California, where they anticipated making tenfold what they would earn in South China.[47]

Work was abundantly available, especially as mining expanded, but dreams of wealth and success in American society sadly failed to materialize for many Chinese sojourners stuck making low wages in mining and service jobs. Though the credit-ticket system financed sojourners' initial voyage across the Pacific, it also postponed their return home until they had cleared their debt, which Chinese mutual aid organizations called *huiguan* enforced through the issuance of debt clearances. Translated as "company," *huiguan* provided solidarity and structure for new arrivals, acting as intermediaries

with White society, but they also maintained social control and administered disciplinary action within the Chinese community.[48]

At face value, the exploitatively low wages and widespread debt within the credit-ticket arrangement resembled "coolieism" to many Americans who criticized the Chinese influx of the 1840s and 1850s, whether for racist reasons or moral opposition to a system perceived as debt peonage. White observers could not decide whether the Chinese workers in the United States were "coolies" bound to labor contracts or free wage earners. Some reports, like that of visiting Englishman William Redmond Ryan, assumed the Chinese in California were akin to coolies, describing them as "consigned, with houses and merchandise, to certain Americans in San Francisco, to whom they were bound by contract as laborers."[49] Other witnesses, like Presbyterian missionary William Speer, called the claim that the Chinese were "coolies" a "fiction." To Speer, the Chinese were not "brought over by capitalists and worked as slaves . . . against their will," but instead willing, honorable, and industrious wage earners.[50]

As the California legislature debated the Chinese question and potential restrictions on those they perceived as coolies, political opportunists took advantage of the uncertainty to further blur the distinction between free and indentured Chinese labor.[51] Democrat John Bigler, first governor of California after statehood, issued a brash message in April of 1852 that wove false claims and racial anxieties into a vitriolic characterization of the Chinese population living in the state. Deliberately erasing the agency and identities of the Chinese workers, he claimed that the "present wholesale importation to this country of immigrants from the Asiatic quarter of the globe," in particular the "class of Asiatics known as Coolies," were nearly all hired by "Chinese masters" to slave away in mines for three or four dollars a month while their families in China were held hostage, though he simultaneously acknowledged that he knew little about mining contracts. He also warned that a swarm of twenty thousand Chinese were leaving China for California, and the state would become overrun by over one hundred thousand of the "coolies," who would remove gold from the United States without making any effort to integrate into American society.[52] Nearly all of these claims had little basis in reality—the Chinese workers in California were not the "coolies" of Caribbean and South American plantations, and no evidence suggests that families in China were held hostage—but Bigler's words echoed with a White demographic who had already watched the Chinese population nearly double from 4,180 to 7,520 in 1851. Most notably, through his speech,

Bigler found his key political messaging strategy in a racial trope comparing the Chinese to enslaved Black workers. Both, as he claimed, posed a threat to his White constituents' independence and free labor as a whole.[53] By projecting swirling debates over American slavery and free wage labor onto the question of Chinese workers, the influx of Chinese on the west coast became a social, economic, and political issue with national implications at the dawn of the Civil War.

nationalizing the "coolie" debate

A young gold seeker named Henry George set out for San Francisco in 1857. Though he ended up working as a journalist, his proximity to Chinese miners, construction workers, and other laborers generated extensive writing on the impact of the Chinese on labor throughout the United States and spurred the production of his later scholarship on political economy.[54] His musings published in Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* aptly illustrated one perspective in the anti-Chinese arguments that proliferated as the Civil War broke out—namely, that allowing Chinese labor would recreate the institution of slavery that was driving a wedge between different factions of the country, and that cheap Chinese workers would undercut White wage earners agitating for their rights.

George embraced Bigler's reductionist view of Chinese labor in the United States as "coolieism" equivalent to chattel slavery. With similar disregard to the motives of Chinese workers in California and whether they were actually indentured or not, George claimed that all Chinese workers, as perpetual foreigners unable to assimilate into the American working class in the same manner as European immigrants, would soon become the ideal labor force for "big capitalists" bent on consolidating expenses. Permitting the inflow of Chinese workers would lead to a racially stratified society like the antebellum South, where the "laboring class are of one race, the ruling and employing class of another."[55]

Opposition to "coolieism," which in public debate often became synonymous with any Chinese labor, could be interestingly twisted to fit both pro-slavery and abolitionist arguments in the tense era that ushered in the Civil War. Supporters of American slavery pointed to "coolieism" replacing slavery in the post-abolition Caribbean with scorn, claiming that abolitionism was hypocritical, and one form of slavery would always

succeed another. They also felt that the horrors of Caribbean "coolieism" revealed the moral superiority and natural order of slavery in the southern United States—New Orleans-based journalist J. D. B. De Bow praised the "humane conduct" of American slaveholders and claimed that they "preserved" the lives of their four million enslaved people, and thus the American institution ought not to be tainted by the "ineradicable evils" of the "coolie" trade. Abolitionists opposed to "coolieism," on the other hand justified their views as part of their mission to eradicate all forms of enslaved labor.[56]

On the other side of the debate, proponents of "coolieism" also found support among both pro-slavery and abolitionist camps. Pro-slavery propagandist Daniel Lee saw the "coolies" as a "muscular force" worth of the South's destiny and considered the introduction of "coolies" a step towards reopening the trans-Atlantic slave trade. After all, as he claimed, "coolieism" in the Caribbean already resembled the previous century's African slave trade to the point that the banned slave trade ought to be legalized again.[57] Again in disagreement with pro-slavery ideologues over chattel slavery but oddly aligned on views concerning the Chinese question, some abolitionists saw "coolieism" as a way to wean the South from slavery.

A year after the outset of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed an 1862 bill titled "An Act to Prohibit the 'Coolie Trade' by American Citizens in American Vessels," that tagged nearly all Chinese subjects leaving China as "coolies." The law prohibited American citizens and residents from activity to "build, equip, load, or otherwise prepare, any ship or vessel" that would "transport Chinese subjects known as 'coolies' to be held to service or labor."[58] However, controversy over the presence of Chinese workers was far from over. The most famous instance of Chinese labor began in 1864, when the Central Pacific Railroad started to hire thousands of Chinese workers to brave dangerous conditions in order to complete the western side of the first Transcontinental Railroad. Then, through the late 1860s, direct competition between Chinese and White Californians spilled beyond mining camps into new types of labor, like construction and cigar manufacturing.[59] Chinese labor would also spread geographically; now recruited from existing populations in California or the Caribbean, rather than from the coast of China, Chinese workers began entering into contracts with employers who transported them to areas with labor shortages in the eastern United States.

expansion of chinese labor

In California, mining evolved from individual panning and sluicing on increasingly exhausted placer sites into capitalized, larger-scale processes that employed White and Chinese workers to excavate gold and quartz underground. The 1869 completion of the Transcontinental Railroad released scores of Chinese workers trained to tunnel, drill, and handle dynamite that White workers often refused to touch—key skills for hydraulic and deep underground mining that made them valuable to companies in search of labor.[60] In response, the White miners' league staged a ten-month strike calling for the expulsion of Chinese from mining companies, claiming that their availability had depressed wages.[61]

Chinese cigar makers and construction workers also faced hostility and sometimes outright violence from White competitors. Tensions built among San Francisco's White artisans as mass cigar manufacture with Chinese labor displaced White craft guilds. In February of 1867, a riotous mob of four hundred White workers assaulted a group of Chinese working on construction for the Potrero Street railway, throwing stones and bricks before burning the Chinese living quarters and threatening other places that employed Chinese laborers. Despite initial arrests, the state supreme court released all of the White attackers, but it was clear that the White working class was embracing "anticoolieism" as a potent political force.[62]

Around the same time, during Reconstruction in the postwar South, plantation owners searched for cheap labor to replace the formerly enslaved population. Though sharecropping and other exploitative labor arrangements with emancipated Black workers were still common, some ambitious planters sought to hire "coolies" from California and the Caribbean for a variety of economic, social, and political reasons. Journalist Whitelaw Reid reported in 1866 a common sentiment across the South that plantation owners could drive the Black workers out and "import coolies that will work better, at less expense."[63] The editor of Mississippi's *Vicksburg Times* wrote in 1869 that "emancipation has spoiled the negro and carried him away from the fields of agriculture, a complaint to which the southern planters' convention in Memphis responded that it was "desirable and necessary to look to the teeming population of Asia for assistance in the cultivation of our soil and the development of our industrial interests." For a low price, the Chinese presence could intimidate Black workers into submission through constant

competition for wages, "regulating" the "detestable system" of Black labor.[64] Bringing in Chinese workers was also politically beneficial for southern Whites, as the non-voting Chinese could play a role in displacing Black voters. As Reconstruction Governor of Arkansas Powell Clayton explained, "Undoubtedly the underlying motive for this effort to bring in Chinese laborers was to punish the negro for having abandoned the control of his old master, and to regulate the conditions of his employment and the scale of wages to be paid him."[65]

The attempt to import Chinese workers to the Mississippi Delta for agricultural work largely failed, as they refused wages lower than promised once they became acclimated to the new labor. Many instead set up small grocery stores, living alongside and selling to the Black tenants and sharecroppers the White planters had expected them to rival.[66] However, importation of "coolies" to Louisiana proved far more successful for the White plantation owners there, who continued to bring in hundreds of Chinese workers through the late 1860s to places like Plaquemines Parish and the Atchafalaya Basin.[67]

In 1870, the year that contracted Chinese labor first arrived in the Northeast, masses of Chinese workers were not only continuing to arrive in Louisiana and other southern states like Georgia and Arkansas, but also simultaneously entering the Pacific Northwest.[68] A plant on the Columbia River hired thirteen Chinese workers into the rapidly growing salmon canning industry, which would come to employ nearly three thousand Chinese by the next decade.[69] To White Americans across the country, the Chinese were growing in number and expanding in geography, synonymous with cheap labor yet feared or denigrated for racial and cultural differences. In the Northeast, the economic anxieties of the Reconstruction era and increased labor unionism set the stage for continued clashes between employers who saw the Chinese as a cost-saving measure and the White workers who saw their livelihoods threatened by the Chinese.

CHINESE ARRIVALS IN NORTH ADAMS, BELLEVILLE, AND BEAVER FALLS

Around the beginning of June in 1870, Massachusetts shoe manufacturer Calvin T. Sampson sent his agent, George Chase, from North Adams to San Francisco, where he was to recruit a group of Chinese workers. Sampson was a wealthy factory owner whose establishment was a "fine brick building

in spacious grounds of its own . . . fitted up in a style surpassed by no factory of its kind in the country." But he watched as the members of the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin, the shoemakers' trade union, "cracked their whip" over manufacturers and capitalists, who had no choice but to "obey or give up their business." His first attempt at importing foreign labor had failed, as the White French workers he recruited from Canada almost immediately joined the Crispins. Given the latest demands from the increasingly unruly union, he was willing to take a chance on Chinese workers, whose labor had produced favorable results elsewhere in the country on major projects like the Transcontinental Railroad.[70]

Chase entered into a contract with San Francisco's Kwong Chong Wing company to hire seventy-five hand-selected men of "intelligence and general good character" for a minimum of three years, or up to ten years if desired. Each worker would receive $23 a month the first year and $26 a month thereafter, with transportation, lodging, and fuel for cooking provided as well. In a nod to the importance of returning home for the sojourners, the contract also specified that Sampson would pay to send the body of any Chinese man dying in Massachusetts back to San Francisco, to be shipped home to China.[71]

That September, Captain James Hervey of Belleville, New Jersey hired sixty-eight Chinese men to work at the Passaic Steam Laundry, the largest commercial laundry in the country.[72] Having witnessed the successful introduction of Chinese labor in North Adams, Hervey was willing to pay $125 for each Chinese worker brought from San Francisco, believing that he could get more out of the Chinese men for the same low wages already paid to the Irish women he employed. In line with the provisions of the North Adams labor contract, Hervey gave the Chinese men sleeping rooms with bedsteads and mattresses, which they discarded in favor of sleeping on mats on wooden bunks.[73]

The third and final significant use of contracted Chinese labor in northern industry began in early 1872, when the management of the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company decided to bring in Chinese workers as a more "industrious, reliable, docile, and cheap" source of labor than the White workers of British, Irish, or German descent already employed. The company was struggling to compete with foreign goods flooding the US market, and the White workers refused to take a pay cut, so company treasurer John Reeves headed west in April 1872 to recruit three hundred Chinese workers. Though he could not initially get the Chinese he sought in San Francisco, he

landed on a contract for about a hundred Chinese plantation workers from Donaldsonville, Louisiana, who traveled to Beaver Falls by steamboat and train. Chinese labor contractor Ah Chuck then arranged for two subsequent contingents of approximately hundred workers each to arrive from California in late December of that year and the following summer.[74]

At all three sites, the Chinese arrivals entered with a set wage structure and provisions outlined in a legally binding contract. They proved capable of learning new skills, from shoemaking and laundering to cutlery work, and maintained production quality at a level at least equivalent to that of White peers, if not better. To fascinated observers elsewhere in the country in the early 1870s, the initial successes of the labor experiment had the potential for replication far beyond North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls. Newspapers across the country prophesied that the introduction of Chinese workers was "merely the beginning of a great labor movement and convulsion" that would pose the North as much trouble as the question of slavery had plagued the South.[75] Would displaced European immigrants and native-born White workers simply go on to higher management levels or better pursuits, leaving only unwanted labor to the Chinese, or would the Chinese directly compete with White labor?

The labor experiment failed to expand further. The most conventional explanation points to racism, arguing that prejudice and White violence against the Chinese foreigners became so rampant as to reduce the appeal of hiring Chinese workers. Though White hostility indeed characterized much of the negative reaction to the Chinese in the Northeast, this article explores several other factors that lend more agency to the Chinese themselves, which also contributed to the decline in interest for contracting Chinese workers after the early 1870s. Many of the Chinese arrivals stayed true to their intention of sojourning to earn money and returning home to their families in China as soon as their savings were sufficient, which White employers failed to understand when they constructed their idea of a steady Chinese labor supply. Additionally, the Chinese often respected their own worth more than White employers and labor organizers expected, bargaining for better conditions and acting less subservient than popular stereotypes of meek "coolies" depicted. The Chinese, as northern Whites soon learned, were not the easily controlled mass of cheap labor they had desired. Though the threat of the "great labor movement and convulsion" never quite materialized, fears of the "yellow peril" overtaking the United States still propelled public opinion and racial anxieties towards the exclusionary legislation of the 1880s and beyond.

white reactions to the labor experiment

Hostility directed at the Chinese in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls undoubtedly complicated their introduction. Though White violence did not prevent the Chinese from working, it nonetheless surrounded the experience of the Chinese workers in their new places of employment and challenged the effectiveness of using Chinese labor as a tactic for increased economic savings. Displaced White workers went a step further to stoke racial myths and fears when violence could not derail the introduction of Chinese labor, shifting public perception against the Chinese when it became clear that they were capable of doing the requisite work when hired.

A major driver of opposition to the Chinese workers in North Adams came from the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin. Also known as the Knights of Crispin or simply as Crispins, the shoemakers' union was established in Wisconsin in 1867. Over the next three years, the Crispins expanded rapidly throughout the Northeast and Midwest, with eighty-five active lodges in Massachusetts alone and over fifty thousand individual members across the United States.[76]

On a national level, the primary objective of the Crispins was to protect members from novice competition. White shoemakers wanted to protect their skilled craft from unskilled "greenhands," who were increasingly employed in factories to operate new machinery. The allocation of strike funds reflected this objective—the Crispin constitution only provided support to local lodges "in resistance to greenhands or in defense of the order." Massachusetts lodges in particular likely also cared about their wages and the growing movement for an eight-hour workday, but the national organization saw those fights for higher pay and shorter hours as purely local problems.[77] The main struggle was to keep inexperienced "greenhands" out.

However, public opinion was already varied on the White trade unions in the Northeast, particularly among observers and publications who saw the Crispins as troublesome and were sympathetic to employers. The *Lowell Daily Citizen* took a relatively anti-union stance characterizing the Crispins' frequent striking as "oppressive, tyrannical action," while the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* relayed an article that blamed European immigrants for introducing the "vices" of English unions to their counterparts in the United States.[78] The anti-union, pro-employer paper the *Hide and Leather Interest* ran an editorial that noted the "ramifications" of the union stretching from Chicago and San Francisco to Massachusetts and called for employers to

import foreigners like the Chinese as strikebreakers.[79] Whether influenced by the *Hide and Leather Interest*'s suggestion or not, Calvin T. Sampson finally resorted to Chinese labor when tensions were at an all-time high between the management, who sought to cut costs, and the Crispins, who kept convincing new European immigrants to join their strikes and wanted to ultimately put an end to cheap novice labor.[80]

Massachusetts factory owners had experience with violent labor agitation, typically receiving the protection of the state police and hiring their own private detectives armed "with muskets and kept in constant readiness to repel assaults."[81] Sampson was thus prepared when the Crispins reacted violently to the arrival of seventy-five Chinese workers in North Adams on the evening of June 15, 1870. The White shoemakers pelted the newcomers with verbal assaults and "missiles," and at least one sign threatened the presence of a "Yankee 'Ku-Klux'" in the area. Crispins threatened to blow up the Chinese living quarters, and police arrested several White men in the crowd.[82]

Under the employer's protection, the Chinese men nevertheless made it to their lodging and began training in the following days, quickly mastering the pegging machines and taking on even the "most delicate work of making ladies' fashionable shoes."[83] The *Boston Post* reported a month after their arrival that "the Chinamen are surprising everybody with their quiet industry and progress in the art of making shoes."[84] With reduced wages paid to his highly efficient Chinese employees, Sampson was able to set his prices low and still benefit from selling quality shoes—manufacturers across the country observed that "such goods cost 20 cents more anywhere else, and yet Mr. Sampson makes a profit."[85]

Pleased with the early success of the Chinese workers, non-Crispin White residents within the greater North Adams community embraced and respected the Chinese.[86] A special dispatch in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported that the "better class of residents unanimously approve Mr. Sampson's movement as made necessary by the outrageous conduct of the Crispins." Their jobs now filled, many North Adams Crispins gave up on fighting the Chinese and lived off the union allowance of ten dollars a week or returned to work and left the union altogether.[87] Some White townspeople felt that the imported Chinese workers would eventually harmonize with New England communities, with little trouble integrating into society going forward (Figure 3).

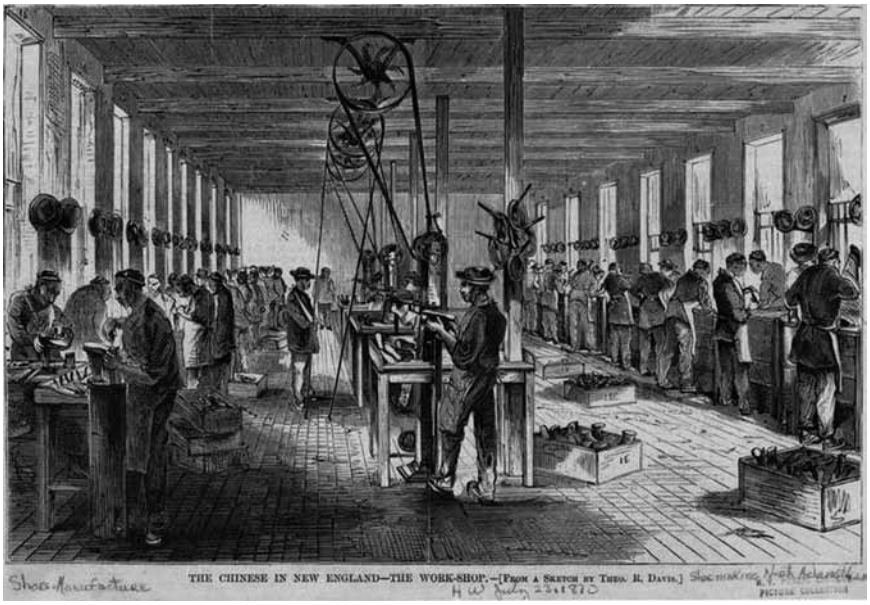

figure 3. Sketches of the North Adams Chinese workers' kitchen and dormitories by Theodore R. Davis in *Harper's Weekly*, June 23, 1870. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-3335-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

During the summer of 1870, the Chinese labor experiment seemed promising—at least from the employer's point of view. The Chinese were rapidly acquiring the skills to operate the factory machines. They produced a faster output of high-quality shoes for two dollars cheaper per case than the Crispins, saving Sampson $840 a week in production costs.[88] Debates over a "Chinese invasion" still raged in newspapers across the country, but for the time being, the town of North Adams was more peaceful and productive than it had been when the Crispins were employed. As one observer noted, "Mr. Sampson's success with his celestial help is likely to encourage others to make a similar experiment when in similar need"[89] (Figure 4).

The "great national flurry" concerning the "hordes of Mongolia" in North Adams soon found a new focus. Likely inspired by Sampson's success in bringing Chinese workers to his shoe factory, retired sea captain James Hervey sought the Chinese as a source of labor for his Passaic Steam Laundry in Belleville, New Jersey. The large commercial laundry already

FIGURE 4. A February 18, 1871, *Harper's Weekly* Thomas Nast cartoon titled "The Chinese Question." The figure of Columbia defends a Chinese man from an armed White gang, saying "Hands off, Gentlemen! America means Fair Play for All Men." The background lists various slurs and stereotypes. https://immigrants.harpweek.com/chineseamericans/Illustrations/029TheChineseQuestionMain.htm

employed primarily young Irish women, stereotypically called "Bridgets" in popular culture, but Hervey figured that the "docile" Chinese men would be of a more "trustworthy, constant, and economical character" than the "irascible Celt." For only twenty dollars in gold per month, he believed that the Chinese men would work more efficiently than the young "Irish girls," whom he found ill-mannered and quick to leave work as soon as they got married.[90]

Catholic Irish immigrant women, not quite considered White, were already "cheap labor" to employers like Hervey, willing to work for lower wages and considered less civilized than American-born women. By hiring Chinese men, Hervey was substituting one form of cheap labor for another, testing the validity of the stereotypes of Chinese servility. The difference of gender between Irish women and Chinese men was blurred, as stereotypes of both groups fell outside of White middle-class gender roles; nineteenth-century authors and cartoonists characterized Irish women as having "crude qualities, savage disposition, and masculine physique," while Chinese men were said to belong to a "third sex" and to lack typical masculine sexual desires.[91] It was thus less significant that the newcomers were male, because neither the Irish women nor the Chinese men were seen as true representations of their genders according to White middle-class expectations.

Though not unionized, the Irish women in Belleville regarded the introduction of sixty-eight contracted Chinese men in September 1870 as an encroachment on the labor over which they had an "undisputed monopoly." Though they lacked the same resources as the Crispins to strike or find other work, the Irish women nonetheless voiced their displeasure; a newspaper colorfully reported that the "superseded clothes-wringers gnash their teeth at the sight of those sixty-eight pig-tails oscillating over the familiar suds."[92] Sixteen women left the laundry in protest when the Chinese arrived. Hervey received an anonymous "threatening letter," and male Irish laborers, reported as "railroad navvies working in the vicinity," tried to intimidate the Chinese arrivals as well. A "large number of the dissatisfied" called a Belleville town meeting to "denounce the coolie movement."[93] But again, similar to the North Adams instance, the Chinese men quickly picked up new skills, and threats of violence did not derail their introduction to the commercial laundry work. Initially hostile reactions to the Chinese newcomers died down. With few alternatives to earn money, most of the dissatisfied Irish women returned to the laundry to teach and work alongside the Chinese. The "temporary peace" provided Hervey with the large workforce he desired, boding

well for the future of his company, and his laundry reported savings of about $1,500 per month.[94]

The first two sites of the Chinese labor experiment happened in rapid succession, but the interest in using Chinese contract workers to solve local labor troubles persisted for several more years. In 1872, the Reeves brothers, at the helm of western Pennsylvania's Beaver Falls Cutlery Company, decided to hire the third large contingent of Chinese workers in the Northeast. Their existing workforce, composed largely of first- and second-generation European immigrants, often struck for higher wages. With few alternatives and orders coming in rapidly, the company would be forced to concede without much of a fight, locked into a pattern of strikes and readjustments.[95] The company superintendent also felt that they drank and skipped work too much, thus becoming too expensive and difficult to employ. Seeing Sampson factory's success in using Chinese workers to handle similar employment difficulties with the North Adams Crispins, the Reeves brothers brought the experiment to their company.[96]

Following the same path taken by Calvin Sampson and James Hervey, John Reeves went west to San Francisco to bargain with a Chinese intermediary for a few hundred workers. He toured several places including a "large woolen factory" and a "file works where none but Chinese were employed" but could not land a contract there.[97] Chinese labor agent Ah Chuck helped Reeves arrange instead for an initial batch of a hundred workers to arrive from Louisiana in June 1872, with two more one-hundred-person contingents from California arriving in the coming months. The exact origin of the Chinese workers did not matter, because the employers perceived the Chinese men as a uniform supply of labor.[98]

Once again, mirroring the reception of the Chinese in North Adams and Belleville, the existing workers at the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company strongly objected to the Chinese newcomers. White workers "saluted" the Chinese arrivals with "brickbats and hootings," beating several of them. The company built a high fence around their living quarters to protect them against the "white workmen's aggressiveness."[99]

Company leadership assured their White employees that the Chinese would only do "such work as no white man would perform," but much like the protesting Irish women in Belleville, the White cutlery workers suspected that the Chinese might one day replace them. Their fears were realized through the summer months as the company began replacing some White workers with lower-paid Chinese counterparts. The company fired skilled

White workers who refused to take Chinese apprentices and moved Chinese workers into more desirable spaces, like the forge room, as they gained experience. Mass meetings and petitions from "citizen mechanics" to get rid of the "coolies" were unsuccessful, as the company claimed that they could only financially survive with cheaper Chinese replacements.[100] It appeared by the end of summer that the future of the cutlery company would have to include the new influx of Chinese workers; it made more money than ever before, and a "treaty of peace and amity" surrounded the foreigners in Beaver Falls, "heartily sustained" by "nearly every person holding property or having any stake in the prosperity of Beaver Falls."[101]

As the Chinese workers entered Sampson's shoe factory, Hervey's steam laundry, and the Reeves' cutlery company in the period between 1870 and 1872, they proved themselves capable of picking up skilled work in northern industries. Contracts held them to set wages and provisions, whether paid directly to the workers or through an agent, and the employers felt confident that they would reap sizable financial benefits from the labor experiment. Violence from their White workers had calmed down, and at all three sites, many displeased White employees were already returning to work out of necessity for income, even as they saw the Chinese as a threat to replace them.

Though violence did not derail the employers' introduction of Chinese workers to their companies in any of the three instances, a fourth site of the labor experiment never came to fruition. There were clearly factors at play other than the claim that backlash from displaced Whites was strong enough to convince employers to stop bringing in Chinese workers, because widespread interest in hiring contracted Chinese men continued among employers through the 1870s. For instance, shoe manufacturers in Chicago also floated the idea of hiring the Chinese when their workers went on strike. One manufacturer told a reporter, "I do not see why we should not bring the Chinamen here, and make shoes just as cheap as Sampson, and make his profits as well as the one we now make by buying of him."[102]

The interest in Chinese labor only began to decline when the threat of a "yellow peril" expanded beyond the conflict over low-paying jobs. Initially, the economic threat of a Chinese influx stealing industrial jobs from poor Whites had been an issue confined to the working class, since wealthier segments of White society already tended to look down upon unions and poor European immigrants—as seen in North Adams, the Crispins had a rather unfavorable reputation of being troublesome. However,

to effectively turn public opinion in the Northeast against the Chinese, displaced employees and White working-class observers increasingly stoked racial fears and stereotypes, adapting many of those which already existed in some form in California. "Trade-union orators" made incendiary speeches that led to "much wild talk."[103]

One racial fear that observers sensationalized was the threat of miscegenation. Almost all of the Chinese arrivals were men, either unmarried or with wives left at home in China—an interpreter's wife in Beaver Falls was reportedly "the first and only female Chinese yet brought to this part of the country."[104] With different appearances and customs than the White towns in which they lived, the Chinese men piqued the curiosity of local residents. Young White women from well-regarded families seemed especially interested, sometimes romantically, and often volunteered to serve as tutors to teach the men English and Christianity.[105]

As it became clear that the Chinese would be staying for several years, White men began to view the workers as a sexual threat to White women, even though stereotypes also depicted them as deviant and difficult to fit within gender expectations with their "womanly" hands and long queues. One Mississippi newspaper speculated on the question of "John Chinaman and the Puritan Maiden" in Massachusetts, reporting rumors that the Chinese were engaging in "surreptitious love-making" with the excited "village maidens." The Chinese men, "great admirers of the fairer sex," were "making eyes at the Mercys, Priscillas, and Prudences" and possibly scheming to "each take one of the eleven thousand virgins of North Adams to wife."[106]

Similar controversy also arose surrounding interracial relationships in Beaver Falls, where the young, unmarried women of the town taught English to small groups of Chinese men in evening and Sabbath school classes. Rumors suggested that several of these female volunteers were "desirous" of an "erring pagan" named Joe Che Oh, described as both the "Apollo of the band" and as a "yellow Antinöus." Nicknamed "Pretty Joe," he "captured" one confessed sweetheart, a blonde teenage girl from a locally esteemed family, and reportedly became engaged to her. Her family objected strongly and sent her away, but the highly publicized affair confirmed widespread fears that the Chinese men were a menace to White womanhood.[107] Upper-class White men worried that the Chinese men would prey upon their daughters and sisters, pursuing them as Pretty Joe had. Framing opposition to Chinese workers as a defense of White women evidently played a role in swaying public opinion against the labor experiment.

Newspaper reporters and displaced workers also fixated on the stereotype that the Chinese were not consumers in order to argue against the introduction of Chinese workers. As the stereotype held, they would not only steal jobs but also refuse to spend money in the United States, making only "meager purchases" and instead taking all their earnings back to China. This stereotype built upon racist claims from California's gold mining industry, where Whites protested that Chinese miners would simply excavate gold and take the wealth out of the country.[108] Though many of the Chinese workers indeed sent remittances to China and saved money for the journey home to their families, they also spent a considerable amount of money in the local economies where they were employed. In Beaver Falls, the Chinese cutlery workers even spent far more than "white men in the same occupation and station of life" on lavish feasts, with "fish, ducks, chickens, rice, and vegetables in quantities sufficient to satisfy good livers." In total, the Beaver Falls Chinese spent about seventy percent of their wages in the local economy, only saving a smaller amount for later, but irrational onlookers nonetheless spread the idea that the Chinese were draining the American economy.[109]

Clearly, violence and White fears turned public opinion against the use of Chinese workers, perhaps making employers less drawn to using Chinese labor. However, White reactions alone did not put an end to the employment of Chinese workers in the Northeast and other urban centers of industry. The will of the Chinese workers and their objectives also contributed to the failure of this labor experiment to spread more widely. As the employers became more familiar with the new recruits, they soon realized that the Chinese were not the docile mass of cheap labor they had envisioned. The Chinese hired through contracts in the Northeast maintained their values and often stood up for themselves to an extent that their White employers did not expect.

Chinese Agency in the Labor Experiment

The Chinese workers themselves actively played a part in dismantling expectations for the Chinese labor experiment. They subverted stereotypes of docility, asserted their goals for employment in the United States, and adapted to their new jobs in ways that deviated from their employers' assumptions. As they settled into their work in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls, their agency became a variable that employers failed to consider within the bounds of the labor experiment.

The idea that male Chinese workers were meek and obedient began long before their arrival in the Northeast, likely derived from impressions of "coolies." Based on reports of Chinese labor on Caribbean and South American plantations, anti-Chinese advocates had constructed a false equivalence between powerless "coolies" under conditions similar to slavery, forced into harsh labor contracts, and any other Chinese workers. White opponents to Chinese labor leaned on racist caricatures and argued that the "lousy Chinese" were simpleminded and would "labor for a pint of rice and a full-grown rat per day," if brought to the United States, where they would ruin American institutions.[110] According to these stereotypes, the Chinese men would be easily managed, willing to go anywhere, and tolerant of abuse, with low standards for their treatment.

These stereotypes were evident in newspapers across the country when Calvin Sampson decided to introduce Chinese labor in his shoe factory. One editorial suggested that "John Chinaman" would cause no trouble in North Adams, looking with "the most serene indifference upon all side issues" and confining himself entirely to "makee shoe," an imitation of the pidgin English the Chinese workers spoke. "John" would not guard his knowledge or skill, being "only too pleased to impart all the information he possesses to anyone" and not caring "a cobbler's peg whether his boss takes in one or six dozen apprentices."[111]

In Belleville, James Hervey bought into the same stereotypes, assuming the Chinese men would be docile, hard-working, and complacent without any demands of their own. One article even included an anecdote from Hervey's son:

> I taught one of the youngest of the Chinese," said Mr. Hervey's son, "to mash the food for the hogs. I was much surprised, when we had finished the first lessons, to observe him, without hint or instruction, carefully gather the twenty or thirty kernels of corn which had wasted to the ground during the process of feeding, and add them to the mash. I should have thoughtlessly trampled them in the ground; he saved them, just as thoughtlessly, perhaps, from old habits of economy.[112]

The Reeves brothers and other leaders of the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company shared Hervey's belief that the Chinese were inherently "economical" and tidy, deciding to employ Chinese workers because they were "reputedly

industrious, reliable, docile, and cheap."[113] Clearly, the employers involved in the Chinese labor experiment were confident that these laborers were predictable and easily controlled.

The Chinese workers, however, repeatedly proved stereotypes wrong. From their initial signing of labor contracts, they demonstrated clear motives behind the decision to move for work in the Northeast. They also showed evidence that they were picky about what kind of work they would do, in stark contrast to the stereotype that they were a meek mass of cheap labor willing to perform any work. As individuals, the Chinese men engaged with and sometimes assimilated to White communities in different ways, which conflicted with the notion that the Chinese were a uniform "other." When their contracts were up, the Chinese men did not necessarily follow the wishes of their White employers, but rather made decisions based on their own desires. Some continued to work, others set up competing shops, and a large number moved to other American cities or back home to China.

The Chinese workers recruited to the Northeast were already living and working in the United States, either in the San Francisco area or around Louisiana. They did not come directly from China and thus had some familiarity with American wage labor.[114] As Calvin Sampson found, the Chinese labor contractors were "very particular where they send their men, and mean to be sure that their people will get their pay and be treated well."[115] When trying to recruit workers in California, James Hervey found the Chinese "close and careful at making a contract, minutely scrutinizing and deliberating upon the provisions which are to bind them for several years."[116] The effort to recruit workers to Beaver Falls demonstrates the Chinese workers' agency most clearly; the Reeves' initial effort to round up workers in San Francisco failed because the Chinese men he approached were satisfied with their jobs. John Reeves learned that few Chinese were eager to leave California. The labor agent Ah Chuck then insisted on personally traveling to western Pennsylvania to see the cutlery company before proposing a deal to hire Chinese workers from Louisiana.[117] The employers had not expected the Chinese laborers to be picky about work, and early complications with arranging contracts foreshadowed the unanticipated difficulties of the labor experiment to come.

Many of the Chinese workers who did sign contracts to work in the Northeast were likely sojourning abroad to earn money, with the ultimate goal of returning to China. They wrote such traditional Chinese beliefs into their contracts, stipulating that their employers would cover their return

fare and would ship their remains home to China if they unexpectedly passed away.[118] Given the goal of sojourning, the dominant intention of the Chinese was likely not to permanently enter into a new type of labor through strikebreaking, as some Black workers did to broaden their access to jobs; the opportunity for wages in the Northeast may have simply appealed to those who wanted to make more money and return home faster. As one writer hypothesized, "[the Chinese] came here to get *money; that* door they have thrown open—all others remain shut against anything but the most powerful efforts."[119]

The contracted Chinese also rejected proposals to organize alongside the White workers, suggesting that they stuck to their objective of earning money quickly and returning home. S. P. Cummings, the secretary of the Massachusetts Grand Lodge of the Order of St. Crispin and chairman of the executive committee of the International Labor Union, led an effort to establish a Chinese lodge of the Crispins soon after their arrival, hoping "to make the Chinese know that their labor was worth at least two dollars per day, and to oblige Mr. Sampson to pay them what they were worth." The Chinese, however, rejected the effort, perhaps finding involvement in a White union incompatible with their goals.[120] Neither the employers nor the unionists could force the Chinese workers to acquiesce to White demands.

Another way in which the Chinese workers acted differently than expected was through their individuality—some maintained their customs and wore traditional dress, while others adopted Western fashion. Many continued to worship their own deities, and one converted Chinese Christian even claimed that it would be "practically impossible" to convert others to Christianity, but some nonetheless converted after attending the volunteer-run Sunday schools.[121] The Chinese men, often called "pigtailed" in reference to the traditional queue hairstyle, reacted in varied ways to White attempts to either assimilate them into American norms or to other them as uniformly alien, making it difficult for White observers to label them neatly within society.

For example, Pretty Joe, the attractive young man who courted White women in Beaver Falls, got himself a "gold watch, a massive chain, and a pair of patent-leather shoes" in Western style, cutting off his queue in rejection of Chinese tradition; however, he also rejected Christianity, claiming "a bird in the cage is worth a flock in the woods, and I shall hold on to Confucius until I am sure of a better; which I don't think possible." Another conversation showed that Joe also believed in gods of the winds, sun, stars, and so on, regarding Confucius as "the Unitarian

regards Christ or as the Ancient Greek did Socrates" to the confusion of his White interviewers.[122] Elsewhere, however, Chinese men assimilated through not only dress, but also in religion and behavior. A Chinese overseer at the Sampson shoe factory named Charley Sing embraced Christianity and married a White woman named Ida Kilburn, "the prettiest girl in North Adams," sparking outrage from rejected suitors who saw the marriage as yet another reason to swear that "the Chinese must go."[123] The individual choices of the Chinese in the Northeast made it difficult for their employers to regulate or treat them as a uniform entity, as some responded to certain attractions and opportunities while others did not.

The Chinese laborers also asserted demands for justice and fair compensation in their own ways, even if not through the White unionists' tactics of labor organizing. In September of 1873, during their fourth year working at Sampson's North Adams shoe factory, Chinese workers accused overseer Charley Sing of cheating them with unfairly high prices for food and other supplies. Sing had reportedly been charging a hundred dollars for rice that cost fifty and collecting fifty cents for mail postage that cost him nothing.[124] To "further prejudice the others against [Sing's] management and their employers," dissatisfied Chinese employees forged a letter from a group of recently discharged workers, to whom Sing had provided tickets from Sampson for the trip back to California, saying that the tickets were worthless and Sing had swindled them once again.[125] A large group of Chinese workers began accusing Sing of not only overcharging for goods and providing faulty tickets, but also accepting "handsome presents and commission from the merchants of whom he purchased their supplies," and the "din and uproar of the malcontents" grew so loud that people in the street heard the noise and alerted Sampson.[126] When Sampson identified and tried to fire the author of the forged letter and his seven collaborators, the "eight troublesome ones" incited their peers to leave their benches and confront Sing through a sort of strike. A worker named Ah Coon brandished a pistol that police confiscated, causing more of the Chinese employees to "pile out of the window" in an angry uproar. They soon returned to work, but Sampson was shaken by the unexpected labor disturbances among a workforce he had expected to be docile.[127]

The Chinese workers also staged labor disputes in Beaver Falls as well. One paper's observation that "when [the Chinese] have learned a trade, they are as ready to demand full wages as the free American from Berlin and Cork"

rang true when some Chinese workers staged an 1873 strike at the cutlery.[128] The second contracted group to arrive had realized they were paid lower wages than the first group, and one article quoted the "slighted" Chinese workers saying "me wantee more payee or no workee" in pidgin English.[129] Though the exact outcome of the strike was unclear, both the first and second groups of Chinese workers allegedly joined together in solidarity to get the "highest maximum pay" for all, and the discontented Chinese workers eventually reached a compromise with the company.[130]

Employers may have hired hundreds of Chinese workers under the assumption that they would be easily manageable and content with any wages, but the Chinese utilized tactics of labor agitation to get the compensation they deemed just. The "meek, almond-eyed strangers," once willing to work for "little or nothing," began demanding the highest wages once they learned the trade. Furthermore, one report from North Adams suggests that when the Chinese workers' demands were refused, they set up shop next door, stealing customers and undercutting prices. In Belleville, dissatisfied workers simply deserted, racking up considerable bills with local shopkeepers and then leaving without paying their debts. Hervey soon realized that the Chinese he believed to be uniformly "trustworthy, constant, and economical" were people with their own motives, willing to leave if they desired and as susceptible as any White employee to vices like smoking, laziness, and taking frequent holidays.[131] His assumptions that the Chinese workers would save him money in the long term proved incorrect, as he admitted "they do not work as rapidly as girls."[132]

Last, the Chinese workers who stayed through the end of their contracts often chose to leave, heading to other cities or retiring home to China with their savings instead of becoming a reliable long-term source of labor for the companies that had trained and employed them in the Northeast. Although an 1880 letter from North Adams claimed that Sampson intentionally dispatched his Chinese workers in order to fill their places with White men, it also acknowledged that the Chinese had become "skilled workmen" who could "earn wages as large as their fairer competitors," suggesting that the Chinese may have instead left of their own volition.[133] On his way to San Francisco to catch a ship home to China in 1881, a former North Adams employee named Foo Wung told a *Davenport Democrat* reporter in Iowa that the Chinese had scattered throughout the Northeast after their contracts expired, setting up laundries and undertaking domestic service work in Hartford, New Haven, Albany, Troy, New York, and other cities. Through

their years of work at the shoe factory and elsewhere, even the poorest man of the group had been able to save $3,000, enough to be "independent and without want" in China, "looked up to as rich men." The men were thus returning home, "same as you Americans do," Wung told the reporter, "you gather money enough to retire on, and then you quit hard work and take life easy; that is just what we intend doing."[134] The employers in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls knew that their workers' contracts had expiration dates, but the desire of many Chinese workers to leave after saving a sufficient amount of money or explore other areas of the country in search of new opportunity also played a part in ending the labor experiment.

The actions of the contracted Chinese workers themselves also contributed to the failure of the labor experiment to spread across the country. Far from "meek" or "subservient," the hired Chinese men scrutinized their labor contracts and asserted their expectations, made individual choices to reject or assimilate to their new communities in ways that the employers did not anticipate, and decided when they wanted to leave, sometimes even breaking the terms of their contracts. As susceptible to human vices and pleasures as White Americans, Chinese men who chose to smoke and take holidays deviated from the common stereotypes of Chinese men as inherently uncomplaining and industrious, which differed from the assumptions of their White employers. In part due to the Chinese workers' own agency, the working-class White fear of cheap "Mongolian" labor invading the nation (seemingly confirmed when Sampson's shoe factory, Hervey's laundry, and the Reeves' cutlery company hired cheaper Chinese workers) never actually became the reality of the American labor landscape. Interest in the labor experiment peaked in the early 1870s and declined before the exclusion legislation of the 1880s and beyond even came into play.

conclusion

The Chinese labor experiment that Sampson's shoe factory, the Passaic Steam Laundry, and the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company conducted in the 1870s built upon stereotypes of Chinese men's obedience and willingness to work for cheap wages, testing out Chinese laborers as an alternative to working-class Whites. Many White Americans believed that Chinese were docile "coolies," conflating the Chinese workers living in the United States with the status of indentured or nearly enslaved plantation workers laboring in the Caribbean

and South America, and employers across the country became interested in potentially hiring groups of the Chinese as strikebreakers or simply as supplemental workers to quell labor troubles among their White employees. Though North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls were the only locations where the experiment actually occurred, these three sites were not the only places that considered the possibility of introducing Chinese labor.

As this research has demonstrated, both White reactions to the workers and the actions of the laborers themselves played significant roles in reducing the appeal of hiring Chinese labor through the late 1870s, causing the decline of the experiment. Violence from White workers did not change the minds of employers who were convinced that newly hired Chinese employees would help them produce more goods and save more money. Escalating racial fears surrounding miscegenation and the fallacy that the Chinese would drain money from the economy also contributed to turning public opinion against their hiring. However, the ways that the workers subverted the employers' stereotypes and expectations dealt the largest blow to the labor experiment. Anticipating a subservient, uniform mass of labor when they signed contracts with Chinese recruits, the employers instead got groups of individuals who were picky about the labor they would perform, assertive enough to demand more compensation for their skills, and willing to do as they pleased when faced with pressures from White Americans to change their habits and behaviors.

As the Chinese labor experiment in the Northeast unfolded, anti-Chinese hostility across the country was growing and increasingly codified into law. In October of 1871, when the Chinese were already working in North Adams and Belleville, a racially motivated mob massacred eighteen Chinese men and boys thousands of miles away in Los Angeles.[135] In 1872, shortly after the Chinese arrived in Beaver Falls, California prohibited the Chinese from owning real estate or securing business licenses. The 1875 Page Act barred "convicts and prostitutes" from coming to the United States, becoming the first national law excluding the admission of certain aliens, and Sinophobic attacks continued through the rest of the decade.[136]

Though Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and Chester A. Arthur had both previously vetoed more comprehensive bans on Chinese laborers, the pressure mounted. Racial and economic anxieties continued to spread, and the 1881 convention of the American Federation of Labor strongly urged Congress to prohibit Chinese immigration. Finally, the landmark "Act to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to the Chinese," better known

as the Chinese Exclusion Act, came into effect in 1882, excluding all Chinese laborers regardless of skill level for ten years and denying naturalization to the Chinese already in the United States. Other discriminatory restrictions through the remainder of the nineteenth century prolonged Chinese exclusion for decades to come.[137] Although interest in the Chinese labor experiment was already declining years before mandated Chinese exclusion, the introduction of Chinese workers to the Northeast in the early 1870s increased national attention paid to the "yellow peril" and made exclusion a political rallying cry for not only Californians, but other White workingmen throughout the country as well.

The stereotypes associated with the Chinese in the years of the labor experiment persisted long after being repeatedly disproven, even through to the present day. The perception of nineteenth-century Chinese workers as uniformly obedient planted the seeds for the twentieth-century growth of the "model minority" myth, which continues to characterize Asians as a "polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourselves-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving." The modern stereotype of Chinese immigrants and other Asian groups as "perpetual foreigners" also began with racial othering in the nineteenth century. The characterization of Chinese men as "womanly," and somehow sexually deviant continues today with stereotypes that Asian American males are inherently "effeminate, asexual, and passive."[138]

In 2017, the town of Belleville raised a ceremonial Ming Dynasty flag to celebrate the hidden history of the Chinese laundry workers in New Jersey. A few years later, the 2019 identification of the thread-bound copy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in Beaver Falls reinvigorated public interest in the story of the Chinese laborers in western Pennsylvania, drawing enough awareness that the state's Historical and Museum Commission unveiled a roadside marker in October 2021 to commemorate the "Chinese Workers in Beaver Falls" (Figure 5). The newfound attention to Chinese labor in the Northeast, however, has largely come at the cost of historical nuance, as the components of the story are simplified and cherry-picked for public consumption. The narrative told in Belleville today is that the Chinese were welcomed with open arms, unlike anywhere else in the country. According to Michael Perrone, president of the Belleville Historical Society, "The Chinese workers were not threatening the workers in Belleville. They were filling vacancies at a laundry. The way they arrived and the way they got their foot in the

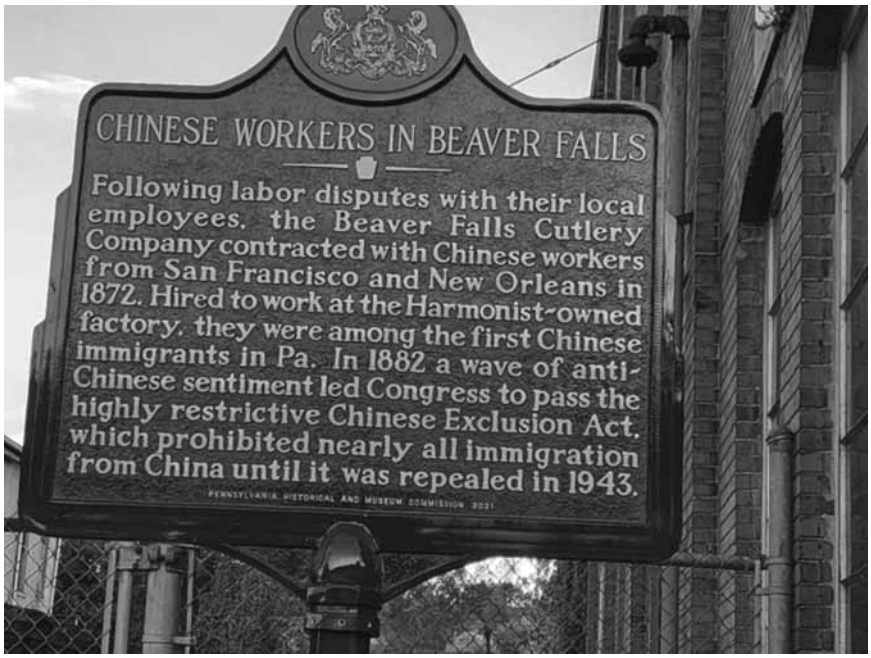

FIGURE 5. The state historical marker unveiled in Beaver Falls on October 9, 2021. Courtesy: Beaver Falls Historical Society and Museum Archives.

door was very smooth."[139] These claims ignore the hostility the workers faced and the evidence of their dissatisfaction with the work, overlooking the Irish women who left in protest and the Chinese who deserted their contracts. In Beaver Falls, the story is similarly condensed to be more palatable; the tale of the Chinese is no more than a last-ditch effort of a failing cutlery factory to turn a profit, and their existence in Western Pennsylvania is merely a blip in the historical record. The North Adams company even served as the setting for a feel-good 1993 children's book about a fictional girl, the daughter of the factory owner, who befriends a young Chinese worker despite the differences between them.[140] Though the growing interest in early Chinese American history is promising, the stories of the contract workers are told in a way that fails to see the sites of labor as part of a larger trend in the 1870s, wherein employers became interested in using stereotypically subservient Chinese workers to subdue labor troubles.

Studying the history of Chinese Americans and other Asian immigrant groups is vital today, especially as the population of Asian Americans

has grown substantially in recent years. From 2000 to 2019, the Asian population in the United States grew 81 percent to a record 18.9 million people. Though demographics have changed, and Asian American families have settled down in the United States, the continued stereotyping and Sinophobia that many face share similarities with the anti-Chinese hostility of the nineteenth century. Reports of anti-Asian hate crimes have risen since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, with numerous isolated attacks and the fatal shooting of six Asian women and two others in the Atlanta area in March 2021.[141] The media's relentless scapegoating of Asians and Asian Americans for everything from the spread of disease to economic troubles is reminiscent of the claims circulated in the nineteenth century that viewed the arrival of Chinese workers as a "yellow peril" threatening to destabilize society.

Academic interest in Asian American history is on the rise, though only about thirty-two universities in the United States offer distinct Asian American Studies programs.[142] Historian Mae Ngai's 2021 book *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* examines Chinese miners in California, South Africa, and Australia and recently won the prestigious Bancroft Prize. Moreover, countless future avenues for research exist in the field.

Future projects could explore other early instances of Chinese workers in unexpected places—for example, evidence points to the existence of ten Chinese workers brought to an iron foundry in Kentucky in 1860, though little more is known about them.[143] A closer look at the workers' transnational ties could reveal more about the ways in which the sojourners maintained connections with their families back in China through mail systems and word of mouth. The societal response to interracial relationships between Chinese men and White women also deserves further analysis, especially when considering the efforts to Americanize and Christianize the Chinese. The period of Chinese exclusion between 1882 and 1943 is rife with research potential, whether to investigate the stories of Chinese American activists mounting legal challenges or to interrogate the effects of anti-Chinese legislation on other Asian immigrant groups.

Further comparative analyses of Chinese and African American experiences would also benefit contemporary understandings of race relations, examining the roots of the Asian "model minority" characterization to dismantle this pervasive myth that relies on stereotypes to pit Asians against African Americans and other non-White minority groups. James Loewen's study on

Chinese workers brought to Mississippi in the 1870s found that "before the first Chinese even set foot in the Delta, his position was intricately tied to the continuing and unequal struggle between Whites and Negroes in the state" due to the ways that White supremacists used the importation of the Chinese as a political weapon against the Black population. Since the earliest arrivals of Chinese workers through the present day, people of Asian descent have occupied a complicated place within racially structured American society, "between Black and white."[144]

This history, though entangled with interracial conflict stoked by White supremacy, also contains optimism for the future of coalition-building and solidarity. Additional research in this area might uncover more examples like Frederick Douglass' 1869 speech in support of Chinese immigration, which advocates for the following:

> I want a home here not only for the negro, the mulatto and the Latin races; but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours. Right wrongs no man. If respect is had to majorities, the fact that only one fifth of the population of the globe is white, the other four fifths are colored, ought to have some weight and influence in disposing of this and similar questions. It would be a sad reflection upon the laws of nature and upon the idea of justice, to say nothing of a common Creator, if four fifths of mankind were deprived of the rights of migration to make room for the one fifth.[145]

The story of the Chinese labor experiment as it played out in North Adams, Belleville, and Beaver Falls is a small piece of the larger history of the Chinese in America, revealing that Chinese workers in fact subverted many stereotypes and contributed to the end of the labor experiment even prior to Chinese exclusion. Understanding this complex history serves to broaden modern conceptions of race relations, acknowledging Asian Americans as important actors in the story of the United States.

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NOTES

Editor's Note: Jacqueline Wu of Carnegie Mellon University is the 2022 recipient of the Pennsylvania Historical Association's William A. Pencak Award. Wu was a senior at CMU when she wrote this paper for an Honor's Thesis. Her history professor, Dr. Joe William Trotter Jr., nominated her. The 2022 Pencak Review Panel felt it merited the award as "she showed us a Pennsylvania-specific story but also made clear that Pennsylvania was part of a broader history of Chinese labor/laborers in the late nineteenth-century." The Pencak Award carries a cash prize and recognition in this journal. Ms. Wu now attends Yale University. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

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