

On the Mere Presumption: The Page Act of 1875 and the Ramifications of Racialized Immigration Policy on Chinese American Women

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ABSTRACT: Over the course of the 19th Century, as China's economic power faded, millions of Chinese sought economic opportunity abroad. However, they were not always met with a warm welcome. By the 1870s, instead of being viewed as a dependable source of labor, Chinese Americans were looked upon with suspicion. While Chinese men were frequently accused of undercutting 'white wages' and engaging in organized crime, the harshest accusations against the community were in the form of hypersexualization of Chinese women. An early result of these unjust accusations was the Page Act of 1875, the first of a series of federal laws aimed at diminishing and eventually obliterating the Chinese-American community. This paper will explore the causes of the Page Act and its modern implications, highlighting how its effects still echo in our society.

KEYWORDS: Xenophobia, Sinophobia, Chinese Exclusion Act, Page Act, Chinese Immigration, Hypersexualization, Ethnic Panic, California Legislature, California Senate, Immigration

Introduction

During the 1800s, domestic crises within China and the allure of Californian Gold led to a rapid influx of Chinese immigrants into America, which provided the nation with a cheap, easy, and exploitable source of labor. In response, a moral panic swept over white, xenophobic Americans. In turn, Congress passed explicitly Sinophobic legislation targeting Chinese women under the guise of halting prostitution and human trafficking. This led to the broader stereotyping of Chinese women as hypersexual. The resulting lack of female Chinese immigrants heightened fears towards Chinese men, whose extended bachelorhood was viewed as a danger to the American nuclear family. The subsequent implementation of the Page Act of 1875 was ultimately due to racialized economic and cultural sentiment, which sought to destroy the Chinese family unit in America. As a result of the policy, it increased the hyper-sexualization of Chinese women.

The Page Act of 1875

The Page Act of 1875 was a piece of Federal immigration law signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant in order to restrict the immigration of Asian women. Though the law was unspecific in limiting all Asian women, it played into antiquated stereotypes of specifically Chinese women, combined with rising fear-mongering towards the "Chinese Problem" (McKeown 1999, 73-110). The law was first introduced by Congressman Horace Page of California, who sought to reduce Chinese immigration to his state due to constituent pressure. White nativists scapegoated Chinese immigrants for disease and crime, and within San Francisco's Chinatowns, which possessed several prostitution rings—known collectively as the Tongs—created the public perception of Chinese women as hypersexual (Grant Site NPS 2021). Even though many poor female European immigrants also worked as prostitutes, because of preconceived stereotypes of Chinese people as being dirty, Chinese women were blamed for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and the temptation of white men, thereby endangering the white nuclear family (Loh-Hagan 2022, 73-78). Thus in the culmination of these different social factors, the Page Act was passed and made it so that "the immigration of any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country, to the United States is free and voluntary" and crucially that it would "be the duty of the consul...of the United States residing at the port...to ascertain whether such immigrant has entered into...the United States, for

lewd and immoral purposes” (Boomer 2023). Though most historians agree that the signage of the Page Act stemmed from racist ideology, the actual impacts on gender imbalances within early Chinese American society are debated.

Dismantling the Chinese-American Family

Many modern historians debate whether or not the implementation of the Page Act resulted in the gender imbalance within Chinese American society. Though specific ratios and estimates on the gender imbalances within Chinese American society cannot be exactly quantified due to illegal immigration practices, within San Francisco after the implementation of the Page Act, the ratio of registered Chinese women to Chinese men dropped from 13:1 to 21:1 in just five years. However, whether or not the Page Act specifically was the cause of this drop in immigration is contested. Adam McKeown, a historian of migration from Northeastern University, argued that although the gendered immigration legislation may have played a slight role in this phenomenon, because immigration varied year by year, it could not be directly causally linked. Furthermore, he articulated that the impact should have been relatively short-lived, however, the gender difference lasted well into the mid-1900s, after the repeal of such legislation. McKeown posits that the cause of the gender imbalance in early Chinese American communities could primarily be attributed to transnational families—a common occurrence amongst many immigrant communities—due to a filial responsibility to their wives and children (McKeown 1999).

Conversely, historian George Peffer argued that cultural arguments—such as the Sojourner myth or the idea that Chinese immigrants were only temporary inhabitants—constructed to explain the gender imbalance did not fully account for the enormous impact of Anti-Chinese Women legislation. He stated that because gendered immigration rulings were simpler to enforce, they achieved higher proportional effectiveness than genderless immigration laws in restricting Chinese labor immigration, resulting in lasting gender imbalances (Peffer 1986, 28-46). Furthermore, Peffer articulated that an additional reason for the outsized impact of the Page Act was the result of the racist views of the United States foreign consuls, whose rigid interrogation and enforcement practices combined with language barriers, completely excluded Chinese women regardless of their autonomy (Peffer 1986, 28-46).

Scapegoating the Chinese-American Worker

The passage of the Page Act of 1875 was caused by heightened racial tensions created by pitting ethnic groups against each other, ultimately scapegoating Chinese immigrants for worsening economic conditions. Similarly to other immigrant groups, the first waves of Chinese Immigration in the 1800s were predominantly made up of men as railroad companies wanted to recruit healthy male laborers for heavy metal work (Wen 2022,189-95). However, because Chinese workers had limited job opportunities as a result of racism, they were forced to undertake highly dangerous and poorly paying jobs, which white labor groups viewed as undercutting their wages and taking their jobs (Grant Site NPS, 2021). Thus, many railway owners took advantage of this truth, and pitted poor Irish and white workers against Chinese workers, stoking resentment between the two groups. Indeed, E. L. Godkin of *The Nation* believed that many of the managerial class would import Chinese labor as to resist white worker’s demands for higher wages, as the Chinese were "ready to work for small wages" (Godkin Editorial 1870). This statement ignored the fact that, due to the widespread discrimination that prevented Chinese people from taking any other jobs, they were forced to essentially work for “small wages” to ensure their survival in America. Companies also utilized these fears to break up labor strikes. For example, testimony from a traveler in 1870 reported that "In the factories of San Francisco they had none but Irish, paying them three dollars a day. Overblown with hope, they struck, and demanded four dollars. Immediately their places, numbering three hundred, were supplied by Chinamen at one dollar a day” (Takaki 1989).

Ironically, this was only possible due to the segregated nature of unions which excluded non-white people, allowing Chinese people to be weaponized as strikebreakers as they did not have the opportunity to participate in the workplace otherwise. (Ong and Kim 2008, 241-70). The lack of solidarity amongst workers meant that instead of affecting the bottom line of the factory owner, the public's boiling populist anger was instead directed towards anti-Asian racism.

Furthermore, these economic tensions and fears of the white population were encapsulated by Horace Page, the Congressman who introduced the Page Act. In a speech, he played into white supremacist sentiment by stating:

“The reward which the Mongolian receives for his labor...small as it is, it all eventually goes to China. Even the small portion of it spent for food and clothing goes into the pockets of Chinese dealers, who, beyond a very few of the necessities of life, purchase all their merchandise in the Celestial land...the 125,000 Chinamen in the country annually send to China the enormous sum of \$45,625,000.” (Zhu 2020)

Even though remittances were historically used by many immigrant groups that developed transnational families, the idea that Chinese people could never assimilate played into the white supremacist fears of Chinese Americans being perpetually foreign. Moreover, though any money remitted would typically go to family expenses, the sense that all money profited in America would directly be benefiting China also threatened the idea of American Exceptionalism—that Chinese immigrants would be disloyal to America (Mckeown 1999, 73-110). Moreover, Page also ignored the fact that Chinese people were categorically denied housing and entry into white neighborhoods which led to the creation of Chinatown as a survival mechanism. This ultimately motivated the passage of the Page Act, which was not as actually concerned about the livelihoods and well-being of Chinese women that faced possible human trafficking but more to eliminate a Chinese population from America. This plays into the innate contradiction that, at once, the American public was concerned about the perpetual alienation of Chinese people but simultaneously passed a policy that made it impossible for Chinese people to develop true family units in America (Zhu 2010).

As a Moral Outcry by the 'White Public'

In addition to economic arguments, much of the Page Act was motivated by the moral outcry of the white public. In Californian Census data, as of 1852, of the 11,794 Chinese immigrants in the United States, only 7 were women, but by 1870, prior to the implementation of the Page Act, the number of women had increased to a ratio of fourteen to one (Takaki 1989). Furthermore, despite the broad notion that all Chinese women were sex workers, almost fifty percent of Chinese women participated in the labor force as laundresses, miners, servants, seamstresses, cooks, or lodging house operators (Zhu 2010). Thus while it was true that many of the Chinese women in America worked as prostitutes, the idea that all Chinese women were in America for the purpose of sex work was simply false. The play, “The Chinese Must Go,” written by Henry Grimm of California, in which two Chinese men create a plot to overthrow their fellow white laborers, states: “White man damn fools; keep wiffee (sic.) and children—cost plent money; Chinaman no wiffee, no children, save plenty money. By and by, no more white workingmen in California; all Chinamen” (Robinson 1878). Though utilizing racist stereotypical imagery, this text reveals white America's fears about Chinese immigration. The idea that Chinese men had “no wiffee, no children, save plenty of money” was viewed as dangerous, because it endangered the heteronormative patriarchal family structure in America. Ironically, despite the Chinese family structure being based upon Confucianism, which similar to Western culture was deeply patriarchal, because of notions of innate foreignness Chinese Americans were viewed as a moral danger (Yung 2000). Additionally, many other European immigrant groups had historically had transnational families but only claimed that the Chinese were specifically antithetical to the American nuclear family structure (Peffer 1996).

Moreover, the public moral outcry had deep intrinsic links to ideas of racial purity and whiteness. President Ulysses S. Grant himself declared that the Chinese women “brought for

shameful purposes, to the disgrace of the communities where [they] settled and to the great demoralization of the young of those localities” (Grant Site NPS 2021). The use of “demoralization” demonstrated that President Grant believed that Chinese women posed a specific moral danger to the public, poisoning the purity of communities. Many of the newspapers of the time also displayed these sentiments, with one column in the New York Tribune in 1854 which stated that “[the Chinese] are uncivilized, unclean and filthy beyond all conception...lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute, and of the basest order” (Zhu 2010). These stereotypes revealed the insidious fear of white men being attracted to Asian women. Many of the clientele of Chinese brothels were multiracial, which went against then-existing anti-miscegenation laws, and laws prohibiting interracial relations (Grant Site NPS 2021). The idea that white men frequented Asian American brothels undermined the idea of white female purity and was viewed as a deviancy that would disrupt white supremacy. Thus, Chinese Women were portrayed as both “Lustful and sensual in dispositions,” redistributing the blame of seduction onto Chinese women while playing into ideas of racial pseudoscience—even though Chinese women were simultaneously considered to also be broadly “unclean and filthy.” Considering that Chinese American women only contributed to a small percentage of prostitution at the time exposes that the hostility that motivated the Page Act was towards the idea of interracial intimacy, and less so their impact on prostitution (Wen 2022, 189-95).

‘Immoral’ Chinese Women as Page Act Targets

The cumulative effect of the Page Act restricted most Chinese women from immigrating to America. Because the searches committed by the immigration officers were highly invasive and typically involved a language barrier, the humiliating process prevented many Chinese women from entering the country at all. Thus, in the waves of Chinese immigration following the Page Act, the number of Chinese women entering the country declined by 68% compared to previous numbers (Peffer 1986). Though merchants were still allowed to bring over their wives, they were generally upper class and were not allowed to interact with the broader community (Yung 2000). Furthermore, the specific loophole for merchants solidified the Page Act’s goal of addressing the xenophobic concerns of laborers, as it, in essence, prevented Chinese American laborers from forming families in America. Because of the lack of Chinese women in America, early Chinatowns became primarily male spaces (Mckneown 1999). In fact, Congressional Representative Fitch described the Chinese as “a race which rears no families...possesses no past and hopes for no future in common with our civilization, and whose members are of their own will perpetual strangers in this land, where they never design to remain” (Zhu 2010). By creating the law that restricted the creation of families and thus permanent generational settlement in the United States, and then creating the broad generalization that the Chinese race is “a race which rears no families” the narrative of Chinese Americans as “perpetually foreign” was weaponized. The creation and ensuing weaponization of stereotypes cemented by law impacted future legislation, resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The specific gendered impacts of the passage of the Page Act were significant. Following the implementation of the Page Act, an article calling for the Chinese Exclusion Act, the *San Francisco Alta* stated that Chinese women were considered a “depraved class.” with their depravity being associated with their physical appearance (Takaki 1998, 387).

The Page Act solidified the equivalence that all Chinese women were prostitutes in public perception, and inherently hypersexual, creating them to be the “depraved class”. Seen as sex objects due to their supposedly biologically “depraved” nature, Chinese Women had a specific place in the white male gaze and thus in society. As John Mosby, a consul responsible for investigating Chinese women for immigration under the Page Act articulated, “It [was] a useless task for me to undertake to investigate the character of Chinese female immigrants...on the mere presumption that every Chinese woman is a prostitute” (Wen 2022). The brazen admittance to the “presumption that every Chinese woman is a prostitute” displayed the true

intentions of the Page Act: to both stigmatize Chinese women as hypersexual and deviant from white femininity, as well as to effectively eliminate Chinese female immigration.

Conclusion: Old Echoes in the Modern World

Though in the past century America has witnessed the repeal of unequivocally racist policies—from the Page Act to the Chinese Exclusion Act—the ramifications of these policies for Asian Americans continue to persist today. The insidious notions of the hypersexualized Asian woman continue in archetypes like the Dragon Lady or the China Doll (Lee 2018). While these two phenomena may seem separate, they are deeply informed and intertwined with America’s history of immigration and how narratives became conveniently shaped to justify transgressions. The hypersexualization of Asian American women still manifests in violence. In the Atlanta massage parlor shootings of 2021, a gunman specifically targeted Asian spa businesses, which he viewed as a sexual temptation (Wadhia and Hu 2022). The implication was made that because the women working in these establishments were Asian, they were inherently prostitutes, instead of licensed massage therapists (Ibid). The murder of these six Asian women demonstrates the enduring nature of the harmful consequences of past policies.

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