

The Formula for a Massacre: Growing Stereotypes and Rising Tensions Towards the Chinese  
Community in the Late 1800s

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## Introduction

It all started with two men fighting for possession of a woman. Ya Hit was a young and beautiful woman valued around \$2,500 – the equivalent of \$50,000 today – in the 1870s. Under Yo Hing's ownership, a prominent faction leader among the Chinese community in Los Angeles, Ya Hit brought decent revenue for him until she got kidnapped.<sup>1</sup> Kidnapping Ya Hit was a mistake; Yo Hing was not a man many wanted to mess with during this period. His reputation preceded him, enforcing the idea many already had of Asians, seeing them as these people who have no regard for the law, marriage, or taking matters into their own hands to deal out their punishments and associated habits with Yo Hing.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of these habits, Yo Hing issued a warrant for Ya Hit's arrest claiming that she had stolen expensive jewelry from him and took the matter to court. However, this was a mistake in judgment on his part as Sam Yeun, leader of a rival company against Yo Hing, paid Ya Hit's bail and effectively came into possession of her. Never would Ya Hit have expected to be the spark for what would later be known as one of the bloodiest and racially charged massacres in Los Angeles' history.

The morning of October 23, 1871, as Yo Hing was walking through *Calle de Los Negros*, a man fired at him. Though he survived unharmed, he called for war between him and Sam Yeun. Sensing the tensions around Chinatown, some kind-hearted Asians warned authorities to stay away. Yet, the following day, on October 24, at around 5:30 PM, three officers responded to noises of gunfighting occurring within Chinatown. Officers Bilderrain, Sepulveda, and Sanchez got caught in the crossfire upon arriving. In the outcome, officer Bilderrain got shot in the

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<sup>1</sup> C. P. Dorland, "Chinese Massacre at Los Angeles in 1871," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles* 3, no. 2 (1894): 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

shoulder, a young Hispanic boy got shot in the leg, and an older man, Robert Thompson, was fatally wounded and died an hour later inside a nearby drug store.<sup>3</sup> As news spread of the attack, a mob of white and Hispanic men gathered at Chinatown. Realizing that the Chinese men involved with the initial shootings had confined themselves within the Antonio Coronel adobe, an older building with wooden doors and a sinking wooden roof, they stormed inside.<sup>4</sup> The mob proceeded to drag the Chinese men outside the building, where they were beaten and mangled. As the Chinese men were lynched and strung up, the crowd moved their efforts into attacking other Chinese in the area even if they were uninvolved. Perhaps in a mockery of innocence, witnesses saw a young boy no older than ten screaming for more victims to lynch.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath, a total of nineteen Chinese had passed away, and records reported that ransackers stole nearly \$30,000 to \$70,000 from the Asian community during the subsequent looting across Chinatown.

For some context behind this event and period, Los Angeles was not the bustling city that many recognize today. During the 1800s, more so during the 1870s, Los Angeles was considered a backwater town, most of its landscape for agricultural use rather than urban cities such as New York or San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> It wasn't until the 1850s where Los Angeles had seen its first two Chinese residents, later three in 1857, within its population of 1,610 residents.<sup>7</sup> As the California Gold Rush kicked off in 1848, many American settlers and foreign immigrants had pushed West

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<sup>3</sup> C. P. Dorland, "Chinese Massacre at Los Angeles in 1871," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles* 3, no. 2 (1894): 23.

<sup>4</sup> "Lafayette Hotel stagecoach near the adobes in Calle de Los Negros circa 1870, presently Alameda Street near Union Station and Terminal Annex Building. The old Antonio Coronel abode is in the background," Photograph in *Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871*, Los Angeles Public Library.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Zesch, "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre," *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 140.

<sup>6</sup> "Map of Los Angeles, as it appeared in 1871," Map in *Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871*, Los Angeles Public Library.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 6.

to pursue gold and striking it rich. The Chinese were no different from the rest in pursuit of gold and profit; more so, with the end of the First Opium War in 1842, many wanted to flee the effects of the unequal treaties that took hold of China in search of a better life for themselves and their families. As more Chinese moved to San Francisco, others moved out to search for other job opportunities or the chance to establish their businesses. As more continued to move out of San Francisco or move in from different parts of the United States, the Asian population in Los Angeles increased to twenty-one in 1861 and later to 179 in 1870 out of the remaining 5,728 residents living in Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> However, even as the Asian community within Los Angeles grew, it's essential to understand not many Chinese intended to stay in America permanently. As was a common ideology within certain groups of foreign immigrants arriving in America, many only designed to wait until they had amassed a relatively large amount of wealth and later return home with their savings to live the rest of their lives in luxury.

### **Argument**

There's no denying that the Chinese Massacre of 1871 was one of the worst racially charged attacks against the Asian community in Los Angeles history. Despite how short the massacre lasted, though, it garnered a certain amount of attention from other well-known historians in the past. One of the primary historians of this paper is Scott Zesch, who wrote a journal article back in 2008 and later, in 2012, going further into depth on the attack. In his journal article "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre," Scott Zesch's primary goal was to understand why "a savage mob of Anglos and Latinos [ransacked]

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 7.

Chinatown and indiscriminately murder eighteen Chinese men and boys.”<sup>9</sup> He continues that historians in the past wrote the incident as racially charged, while modern historians attribute the massacre to economic motives. However, Zesch doesn't believe that these were the sole reasons or explanations behind the initial attack. In his following work, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871*, he continues with his previous beliefs, but expands upon the lives of Chinese living within California, beginning his book with a story following Ah Ning and how he came to live in Los Angeles, California.<sup>10</sup>

While Scott Zesch focuses on understanding the reasons behind the massacre, for historians such as David Torres-Rouff, in his article “Men of Tang among *Fanren*: Chinese Self-Representation in Los Angeles, 1860-1895,” much like the title suggest, he shifts the focus from the massacre itself to the Chinese themselves. In other words, he hopes to explain how the Chinese perceived themselves amongst the Anglo-Americans and Hispanics clashing cultures and social identities.<sup>11</sup> For historians such as Alexander Finkelstein, Finkelstein focuses on the economic aspects and situation during the 1860s and 1870s to explain one reason behind the massacre. As Finkelstein explains in his article, Los Angeles' economy was boosted to attract Euro-American family settlers and how it shifted power structures economically, politically, and culturally.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, rather than look at the economic aspects, historian Mark Kanazawa focuses on how Anti-Chinese legislation impacted the Chinese community. Kanazawa uses Anti-

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Zesch, “Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre,” *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 109.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 3.

<sup>11</sup> David Torres-Rouff, “Men of Tang among *Fanren*: Chinese Self-Representation in Los Angeles, 1860-1895,” *California History* 93, no. 1 (2016): 45.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Finkelstein, “Los Angeles's 1863–1876 Boom: A New Order of Economy, Power, and Race.” *Southern California Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (2017): 142.

Chinese legislation to describe the discrimination many Chinese and other foreign immigrants faced while in America.<sup>13</sup>

Historians have different reasons behind the causes of the Chinese Massacre of 1871 and what factors lead up to it. As varying as these causes may have been, one thing behind each that remains consistent is the severity each action had against the Chinese immigrants during the late nineteenth century. It also cannot be denied by historians that the massacre itself was anything but severe and violent. However, there lies something deeper behind these actions. The Chinese Massacre of 1871 was a case of racialized violence targeting Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles; however, there was already a long history of anti-Chinese sentiment in Los Angeles. Witnessed through the racial prejudices and stereotypes that Anglos had towards Asians, resentment over cheap Asian labor, and anti-Chinese conflicts resulting from issues with assimilation and clashing cultures.

### **Racial Prejudices**

No matter what day and age, whenever human beings come across something new, strange, or foreign, there will either be a sense of curiosity intending to understand, or there will be a sense of otherness; the same applies to other human ethnicities as well. With how vast the world is, other people from varying backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities will eventually come across one another. While the meeting of two cultures and ethnicities isn't necessarily bad as it could help form connections and expand or widen economic and political opportunities, history has also shown multiple instances where two different cultures and ethnicities can lead. Whether these negative aspects of two colliding cultures lead to violence, exclusion, or persecution, no

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Kanazawa, "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California," *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (2005): 779.

one can tell until the irreversible occurs. Such was the case with the Chinese community in California.

There are many reasons why the Chinese were so disliked in California, whether in San Francisco or Los Angeles, linked to pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices. Primarily because of the aftermath of the First Opium War in 1839 and the jobs many Chinese men and women took in America. First, the Opium War of 1839 had lasting effects on the Chinese community both within China and America. In the late sixteenth century, European traders had already begun trading tobacco with China. Yet, as tobacco use became more widespread, the consumption of opium became associated as a luxury product.<sup>14</sup> Though the Chinese government tried to halt opium trading, their efforts were futile as over twenty to forty thousand crates of opium were still being smuggled into China in 1838 alone.<sup>15</sup> Not only did opium trading affect China's economy, but addiction and opium dens ran rampant across China. When a man named Lin Zexu was appointed commissioner of China, he immediately strengthened the orders prohibiting opium trading and smuggling. Still, as his orders had little to no effect, he took matters into his own hands. He blockaded the ports where foreign merchants were located, forcing them to surrender any opium they had on hand, and destroyed the opium chests publically.<sup>16</sup> When news reached Britain of the destruction of opium, they demanded compensation at the behest of the illegal traders who were profiting off the trade, but when China refused to do so, Britain went to war with them. It wasn't until 1842, when Britain defeated the Chinese army, that China signed the

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun. "NARCOTIC CULTURE: A Social History of Drug Consumption in China." *The British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 2 (2002): 318.

<sup>15</sup> Shijie Guan. "Chartism and the First Opium War." *History Workshop*, no. 24 (1987): 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

Treaty of Nanjing. The treaty stated that China would repay Britain for the destroyed opium and give Britain some territory in Hong Kong.

So, what are the importance of the Opium War and its aftermath? One of the main reasons has to do with the fact that the use of opium marred the image of the Chinese when they arrived in America. News of the opium dens and issues of addiction reached America and quickly became associated with the Chinese. It most likely did not help that gambling became an essential pastime for the Chinese either. Mainly to do with the fact that after work, some Chinese men would "[congregate] in bare adobe casinos where the air was thick with the blue smoke of opium and flavored tobacco."<sup>17</sup> Though gambling only served as a past-time to destress after a long day at work, the quarrels that broke out often due to these gambles only diminished the Chinese's image. As a result, they were not only seen as addicts, but also as violent, and the issue of these fights became a matter of morality and upholding one's reputation for the Chinese.<sup>18</sup>

Prostitution was another factor towards Chinese stereotypes. Prostitution among the Chinese is not purely unique to them as it occurred with other ethnicities within America as well, yet the Chinese garner special attention in this case. For many Chinese immigrants who immigrated to America during the height of the California Gold Rush, especially the women, prostitution was often the only way to survive in America. Such was the case with Ah Toy. In 1848, Ah Toy and her husband crossed the ocean to come to Gold Mountain, the name many Chinese gave for California. However, her husband died in the middle of the voyage due to an unknown illness that weakened him. Left with little money, she knew she was physically

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<sup>17</sup> Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 28.



appealing and attractive to men that passed by on the street, so with what little money left, she bought a small shanty and held peep-shows for an ounce of gold, or sixteen dollars.<sup>19</sup> Her shows were quite popular as well, with lines of men going around the block just to get a glimpse of her. However, after she took one of her customers to court for paying in brass, the court did not rule in her favor. Taking what remained of her earnings, she instead purchased a building, brought in two girls, and opened up a brothel. Her brothel became widely popular among miners, with rumors that “men in town couldn’t resist the charms of Chinese women, who played up their exotic mystery.”<sup>20</sup> Though many Anglo-Americans disliked the Chinese, it can't be denied that Americans had a particular attraction to the exotic, especially those of oriental origins.

Unfortunately, this attraction towards the exotic did not stop the Chinese from being compared to black communities. As historian Dan Caldwell writes in his article, he compares the term “Celestial John,” referring to the Chinese, to the term “Sambo,” used to describe docile, but loyal plantation slaves who were prone to lying and stealing.<sup>21</sup> In this case, some similarities were bound to arise between the Chinese and black communities as both were seen as servile to the Anglos. Whether the Chinese were seen this way because of the typical jobs they took or because of their customs to bow in respect is not clear, though it could very well be both. As Caldwell explained it, the Chinese were undergoing a negroization of their culture and the stereotypes that followed them. It is mainly evident in how the Chinese were referred to in newspapers depicting the Chinese Massacre of 1871. They weren't just called "Celestial Johns,"

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<sup>19</sup> Noel C. Cilker, “A Little China Leader, a Brothel Owner, and Their Clashing American Dreams in Gold Rush San Francisco.” *Chinese America: History & Perspectives*, January, 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

<sup>21</sup> Dan Caldwell, "The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California," *Southern California Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1971): 126.

but “chinamen,” a derogatory term of their race, multiple times within the *Daily Alta California* and the *Inyo Independent*.<sup>22</sup> The same applies to C. P. Dorland’s journal article, written nearly twenty-three years after the massacre, in which he refers to the Chinese as “chinamen” either to describe them as well-disposed or as terror-stricken men.<sup>23</sup>

One doesn’t even need to look at newspapers to see how the Chinese were viewed in America as illustrations of the Chinese served the same purpose of stereotyping them. An image from *Hutching’s California Magazine* from March 1857 depicts an Asian man and woman walking together. Though innocuous at first, closer inspection reveals otherwise, especially when taking into account the bottom caption introducing the reader to their “acquaintance Celestial John and his lady [...] exhibiting a cringing, abject sense of servility.”<sup>24</sup> An analysis of the image brings to light other aspects of Chinese stereotypes when looking at Celestial John’s face. In the picture, his face, though human, shares characteristics with that of a monkey. The flat and shortened nose, the round and prominent cheekbones, and the long nails on his hand add to this somewhat animalistic appearance. If not apparent in the first image, it was evident in *Thistleton’s Jolly Giant* illustration from February 21, 1874. The picture depicts a monkey walking and changing into a Chinese man who then hunches down and transforms into a pig.<sup>25</sup> The caption underneath the image explains that the illustrator George F. Keller was a believer in Darwinism, wanting to show the evolution of John Chinaman from monkey to Chinese man and

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<sup>22</sup> “Eighteen Chinamen Buried,” *Daily Alta California* 27 October 1871; “Full Details of the Riot,” *Daily Alta California* 26 October 1871; “Riot in Lo. Angeles,” *Inyo Independent* 4 November 1871. Taken from the California Digital Newspaper Collection.

<sup>23</sup> C. P. Dorland, “Chinese Massacre at Los Angeles in 1871,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles* 3, no. 2 (1894): 23 and 24.

<sup>24</sup> “Hutching’s California Magazine, 1 (March 1857), 385.” Illustration in *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

<sup>25</sup> “Thistleton’s Jolly Giant, II (February 21, 1874), I.” Illustration in *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

later into a pig as part of their evolution cycle.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the image could be written off as a stylistic choice on Keller's art style. However, in Keller's earlier illustration from January 1, 1874, he draws the Englishman, German, and Russian in front-facing drawings with attractive features to their faces. Meanwhile, the Chinese man is illustrated with a side profile emphasizing a stern look with slanted eyes and otherwise shifty looking.<sup>27</sup>

So why portray the Chinese as shown in the illustrations? For the same reasons the Native Americans were referred to as "pests" and "savages." To dehumanize them, make them something less than human. Had the Chinese been drawn with standard features, had they been drawn as attractive as many claimed them to be, it would have been hard to associate negative aspects with them. Dehumanizing the Chinese also served another purpose and paved the way to demonizing the Chinese. Apparent in illustrations such as "The Question of the Hour." The drawing shows Uncle Sam lamenting over how he will get the Chinese man back to China. The Asian man himself barely resembles a human. He is represented as a demonic creature with a mischievous glint and menacing smile, lying down on the floor as its wings and tail span across America in the distance.<sup>28</sup> The only device keeping the creature contained is a rope tied around its neck with the words Geary Act on it, the Geary Act, in this case, being the law responsible for extending the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Thistleton's Jolly Giant, II (February 21, 1874), I." Illustration in *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

<sup>27</sup> "Thistleton's Jolly Giant, I (January 1, 1874), 4." Illustration in *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

<sup>28</sup> "THE QUESTION OF THE HOUR: Uncle Sam: -Gosh! I've got this critter lassoed right enough but how in thunder am I going to git him over thar to China?" Illustration in *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly Lytle Hernández, "Not Imprisonment in a Legal Sense," In *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 65.

## Economic Tensions

The nineteenth century was a period of rapid change agriculturally, economically, culturally, and industrially. Though many of these changes benefited America, it was accompanied by negative changes that impacted cities and, most importantly, its people. The Chinese were no exception to this as they would experience a rising account of discrimination and anti-Chinese legislation against them that would span into the twentieth century. These reasons ranged from economic issues due to the Gold Rush and the coolie trade program occurring at the time, foreign minors tax, and the anti-Chinese movement.

First, though it's believed that the Chinese came to America to work on the Transcontinental Railroad, this was not the main reason. Upon hearing of the golden mountains in California and wealth stories, it brought the Chinese and Anglo-Americans into contact with one another.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the Gold Rush itself not only brought the opportunity for wealth, but also the intermingling of various cultures and ethnicities hoping to earn a profit. As news spread of the California Gold Rush, by the 1850s, Chinese gold miners had become a part of the western landscape. Though many Chinese gold miners got pushed away from the prime spots, they took over the leftovers with their industrious nature and managed to find a decent amount of gold for themselves.<sup>31</sup> The Chinese were diligent and methodological with their work ethics, and the success at which they found gold was a boon towards their favorable image.

The coolie trade program also becomes crucial here as thousands of Chinese moved to America during the Gold Rush period and helped construct the transcontinental railroad system.

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<sup>30</sup> Richard V. Francaviglia, "The Far East in the Far West: Chinese and Japanese California," In *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* (University Press of Colorado, 2011): 155.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

The coolie trade system was a program in which Chinese men were hired under contractual labor and often for cheap.<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on cheap labor is crucial for various reasons. One of these reasons concerned the competition for labor and work, as the Chinese could be hired for significantly less than Anglo-Americans. Not to mention, the Chinese were often more willing to take on dangerous and often undesirable jobs such as handling explosives during the construction of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>33</sup> Of course, no one would want to risk being crushed to death by falling rocks and rubble, but there were other factors behind the growing discontent toward the coolie trade program. Namely, because of rising concerns that "coolies" would mess with the social structures of the time and the fact that they disrupted public order with their opium smoking and the feuds that broke out from gambling.<sup>34</sup>

There is no doubt the Gold Rush era brought about a plethora of changes in California's history. California saw changes in mining methods, businesses, organizations, and, most importantly, race and ethnic relations.<sup>35</sup> Though the gold miners were spread out and came into contact with various cultures and ethnicities outside their own, relations remained peaceful for the most part. However, as competition for finding gold rose, American miners grew upset over another group's success, and feelings of nativism began to spread amongst them. They took action and formed local ad hoc associations where they would create "regulations to govern how claims could be made and kept."<sup>36</sup> These regulations were skewed to favor Anglo-Americans and

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret Mih Tillman, "Laboring between Empires: Coolie Solidarity and the Limits of the Chinese Civic Association in Havana, 1872," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 2, no. 2 (2016): 189.

<sup>33</sup> "'Blasting at Chalk Bluffs above Alta. Cut 60 feet deep.' By Alfred A. Hart," Photograph in *Archives, Photography, and Historical Memory: Tracking the Chinese Railroad Worker in North America* By Denise Khor.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Mih Tillman, "Laboring between Empires: Coolie Solidarity and the Limits of the Chinese Civic Association in Havana, 1872," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 2, no. 2 (2016): 191.

<sup>35</sup> Sucheng Chan, "A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush," *California History* 79, no. 2 (2000): 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

any other desirable groups. Though the Chinese were not the only ones targeted, these were the first signs of anti-Chinese sentiments in California. Not only were the Chinese banned from earning claims of their own, but they also faced the brunt of the foreign miners' tax which listed that all "foreign-born miners were required to pay 20\$ per month to obtain a license to mine for gold."<sup>37</sup> Though it was done to decrease foreign competition for gold, the racial connotations behind it still stand.

So, where does Los Angeles come into the picture with the rising anti-Chinese movement? If it were indeed a matter of money and wealth, the Chinese didn't just rely on the Gold Rush to earn money. They were successful entrepreneurs in "areas of shipping, mining, plantation, agriculture, land investment, and commodity trading."<sup>38</sup> Though Los Angeles was a backwater town during the nineteenth century, the Gold Rush had some positive impacts on its economy as more immigrants and settlers left San Francisco for other ventures. Los Angeles was experiencing a boom in its economy during the 1850s. As more buildings went up, land prices rose in value, and Los Angeles went from a "cow-town into a bustling city reaping the rewards."<sup>39</sup> The land itself proved to be extremely valuable to Los Angeles economy. The wide availability of land paved the way for agricultural farming and unique health resorts, which attracted investors and land advertisers.<sup>40</sup> All this in mind, by no means, was Los Angeles's economy struggling to stay afloat at the time the Chinese Massacre of 1871 occurred.

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Kanazawa, "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California," *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (2005): 784.

<sup>38</sup> Shelly Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 112

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Finkelstein, "Los Angeles's 1863–1876 Boom: A New Order of Economy, Power, and Race," *Southern California Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (2017): 148.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 149.

Though economic tensions may have been a factor that led to increased prejudices towards the Chinese, by the time the massacre occurred, it may have been closely linked to the anti-Chinese movement spreading across California. Just to be clear, the anti-Chinese movement did not begin in Los Angeles, but in San Francisco among northern California miners during the Gold Rush. As mentioned previously, Anglo-American workers in the north disliked the Chinese because of how cheaply they could be hired and paid. While nothing is inherently wrong with this, Anglo's became concerned that the low wages bosses could hire the Chinese undervalued white labor; and increase white prostitution to support their families.<sup>41</sup> Of course, one's family members turning to prostitution for survival is not uncalled for as such views persist even in today's world. However, in the face of the anti-Chinese movement, it wouldn't be that far of a stretch if the more significant issue had to do with placing someone of Anglo descent in a position of servile work beneath others.

The anti-Chinese movement focused on negative aspects of the Chinese community and culture and justified some of the actions taken against them. This also meant Anglos placed a lot of emphasis on *Calle de los Negros*, the center point for Chinatown and a street that gained an infamous reputation for its slums, opium dens, and prostitution.<sup>42</sup> These views were only exaggerated in political cartoons from the *Wasp*. To understand, the *Wasp* was created by a Czech immigrant, Korbelt, who established his weekly newspaper to voice his discontent with the government, railroad monopolies, and Chinese immigration, which he frequently attacked.<sup>43</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> William R Locklear, "The Celestials and the Angels: A Study of the Anti-Chinese Movement in Los Angeles to 1882," *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1960): 240.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Sean Hall, "The Wasp's 'Troublesome Children': Culture, Satire, and the Anti-Chinese Movement in the American West," *California History* 90, no. 2 (2013): 42-76.

repeated harmful viewing of the Chinese communities in California, specifically Los Angeles, eventually had lasting effects on the community. It was a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode until the massacre events took place that fateful night of October 24, 1871, ending with nineteen dead and seventeen bodies piled in the corner of an empty jail cell in Los Angeles.<sup>44</sup>

The Chinese immigrants who came to America never intended to be stereotyped or negatively associated with gambling, opium, and prostitution. Many who came to America wanted to stay connected to their places of origin and if this meant smoking opium, then so be it.<sup>45</sup> One's connection and ties to their place of origin helped many with their self-identity and helped them settle down when they arrived in California. Establishing small cultural communities that would later expand would also be crucial in assisting foreign immigrants like the Chinese feel close to home while residing in America. In the face of opposition towards themselves, the Chinese community did not take them standing down. They banded together, using Chinatowns as a defense method, living together with other Asians to minimize contact with different ethnicities who would otherwise persecute them.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, as evidence suggests, the Chinatowns would not stop the most extreme from attacking the Chinese.

## **Conflicts**

The source of conflict might ultimately stem from issues regarding assimilation. For most Chinese immigrants coming to America, many only intended to stay until they had amassed a certain amount of wealth before returning home to China to live out the rest of their days in

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<sup>44</sup> "The bodies of 17 Chinese men and boys lie in the Los Angeles jail yard on October 24, 1871, the results of the Chinese massacre." Photograph in *Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871*, Los Angeles Public Library.

<sup>45</sup> David Torres-Rouff, "Men of Tang among Fanren: Chinese Self-Representation in Los Angeles, 1860–1895," *California History* 93, no. 1 (2016): 52.

<sup>46</sup> R. Scott Baxter, "The Response of California's Chinese Populations to the Anti-Chinese Movement," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 31.



leisure. It wasn't just because Chinese immigrants didn't assimilate, but also because of differences in cultures that made them stand out compared to the cultures of Anglo-Americans. The laws put in place against the Chinese, which made it hard for them to become legalized, or the number of court cases regarding feuds within the Chinese community over reputations and honor.

Differences in culture become apparent during the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Railroad companies in demand or need of a steady labor flow often relied on the coolie program, which provided cheap contracted work from the Chinese. Coming to the United States through the coolie program seemed to isolate Chinese workers from the rest. Though they may have dressed the same as others, their features were vastly different from those of Anglo-Americans; appearing with narrow faces, small eyes, prominent cheekbones, and donning what appears to be a wide-brimmed bamboo straw hat over their heads rather than the felt hats many of the other laborers wore.<sup>47</sup> This sense of otherness by the foreign Chinese laborers was only exasperated by the Chinese's understanding and use of English. Though recorded in some surviving documents that some Chinese workers stated they could read and write in English, the same could not apply to their communication capabilities.<sup>48</sup> Though many Chinese could grasp the English language better the longer they resided within America; their early English skills could best be described as pidgin language.

The work they took on while working on these railroads was not easy either. They were often subjected to working under the sun for hours on end, hammering away at rocks, if not

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<sup>47</sup> *Central Pacific Railroad Workers*. doi:10.2307/community.13917949; *Workers on Transcontinental Railroad*. doi:10.2307/community.13877894.

<sup>48</sup> Scott Alan Carson, "Chinese Sojourn Labor and the American Transcontinental Railroad," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE) / Zeitschrift Für Die Gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 161, no. 1 (2005): 86.

blasting holes into the mountains to make way for tunnels and railroad tracks.<sup>49</sup> Trauma and injury were common in this line of work at the time, both from work-related injury and violence. In a study of two buried individuals from Carlin cemetery, their causes of death were analyzed and compared to one another. The analysis concluded that the first body died due to work-related injury due to the nature of the damage on the body, but not the skull, which was left intact. However, while the second body displayed signs of bodily injury, the addition of trauma to the head proved death was caused by excessive violence.<sup>50</sup> The analysis was only made evident by the severe fractures on the skull and face caused by a blow to the back of the head.

Treating any injuries they acquired during work or any sicknesses they may have contracted also differentiated the Chinese from the rest. One of these treatments involved the use of opium. While opium was considered a luxury item during the First Opium War in China, initially, opium was widely used for its medicinal properties. Opium had many medicinal properties and uses, often used as a substitute for morphine since it could alleviate symptoms of acute pain, as a cough suppressant, and to treat diarrhea.<sup>51</sup> However, considering the negative image associated with opium consumption and the Chinese, rather than see opium as a medicine, Anglo-Americans must have associated it as part of an addiction issue. Another aspect of Chinese medication that Chinese laborers may have used to treat themselves was the consumption of snakes. Aside from being a popular food choice among the Chinese working

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<sup>49</sup> "'Laborers and Rocks, near opening of Summit Tunnel.' By Alfred A. Hart." Photograph in *Archives, Photography, and Historical Memory: Tracking the Chinese Railroad Worker in North America* By Denise Khor.

<sup>50</sup> Ryan P. Harrod, 瑞安·哈罗德, John J. Crandall, and 约翰·克朗尔, "Rails Built of the Ancestors' Bones: The Bioarchaeology of the Overseas Chinese Experience / 祖先白骨建成的铁轨：对海外华人生活经验的生物考古学," *Historical Archaeology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 158.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Christine Heffner, and 莎拉·贺弗那, "Exploring Health-Care Practices of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America / 试论北美中国铁路工人的医疗实践," *Historical Archaeology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 139.

class, snakes were also considered a cure-all in their medicine, used to treat various health issues from colds, sore throat, seizures, and poor vision, among other ailments.<sup>52</sup>

The differences in culture and cultural practices were not the only aspects that set the Chinese apart from assimilating correctly in America. This is apparent in how court cases involving the Chinese were handled and how they were treated when compared to white Americans. A year before the Chinese Massacre of 1871, violence amongst the Chinese themselves was seen on the rise. As a newspaper article states, from 1870, the Chinese were gathered under “banners of rival ‘companies’ [...] and open war was threatened.”<sup>53</sup> Because of these feuds, the perception of Chinese communities took a negative toll. This negative toll was manifested in a newspaper article from July 19, 1871, stating that the Chinese had no business among Americans and that “they must not be suffered to carry out their heathenish customs.”<sup>54</sup>

The Burlingame Treaty may have contributed to the rising tensions the Anglo-Americans had towards the Chinese. In 1880, a man named P. W. Dooner published his book, *The Last Days of the Republic*, where he warns that the Chinese intended to take over the United States after the Burlingame Treaty was signed in 1868.<sup>55</sup> These concerns arose because the Burlingame Treaty promised free and open immigration between China and the United States while also insinuating that Chinese immigrants did not need to assimilate as the treaty mentioned nothing

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<sup>52</sup> Sarah Christine Heffner, and 莎拉·贺弗那, "Exploring Health-Care Practices of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America / 试论北美中国铁路工人的医疗实践," *Historical Archaeology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 142.

<sup>53</sup> "Los Angeles News, Apr. 23, 1870." Newspaper in *Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre* by Scott Zesch.

<sup>54</sup> "Los Angeles News, July 19, 1871." Newspaper in *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre Of 1871* by Scott Zesch.

<sup>55</sup> Paul M. De Falla, "Lantern in the Western Sky," *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1960): 62-63.

about naturalization rights.<sup>56</sup> These feelings were not helped by the fact that there was a widespread belief amongst the Chinese that the law would not help them. Due to these beliefs, the Chinese often handled any conflicts independently, taking vigilante actions to settle these issues. Not only because they didn't trust the courts to help them, but because it involved upholding their family's honor and reputation. This need for honor is apparent when a man was arrested for assault after a crowd of Anglos gathered to watch the man beat his nephew for gambling too much and not working, his family's honor on the line.<sup>57</sup>

Unity among the Chinese handling their affairs becomes obvious the night of December 22, 1870, after news spread of Sing Yu, a famous prostitute, being arrested by police. Hundreds of Chinese rallied together, shouting that Americans should never catch Chinese women. Armed with knives and guns, they followed after the police carriage to get her back. As rare as the occasion may have been, it only emphasizes how inherent the Chinese sought to handle their affairs without outside interference, more so when it involved taking a woman outside of their jurisdiction.<sup>58</sup> Another instance involved the *People v. Wong Chu Shut* case on September 27, 1877. During the murder trial, witness Chin Loey was questioned on the relation between Yo Hing and the See Yup company. However, his responses left the prosecutor confused. Anglo-Americans would have a hard time grasping the intricacies of Chinese social order and hierarchies.<sup>59</sup> Though as confused as the prosecutor may have been from the Chinese witnesses'

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<sup>56</sup> Huping Ling, and Allan W. Austin, "Burlingame Treaty (1686)," *Asian American History and Culture: an Encyclopedi: An Encyclopedia* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010): 134.

<sup>57</sup> "Los Angeles Star, May 13, 1871; Los Angeles News, May 14, 1871," Newspapers in *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre Of 1871* by Scott Zesch.

<sup>58</sup> Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre Of 1871* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 100-101.

<sup>59</sup> "*People v. Wong Chu Shut*, September 27, 1877, 17th Judicial District Court, Richard Courtney Collection, Huntington Library," Court Records in *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre Of 1871* by Scott Zesch.

responses, in some cases, such as *The People versus Hall*, the Chinese weren't even allowed to testify. The court stated that any Black, Native American, or Chinese were prohibited from testifying against or for an Anglo-American.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, this only strengthened the notion that the Chinese had to handle their affairs without relying on the police and courts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the lack of assimilation and clashing cultures lead to anti-Chinese movements. Supported by racial prejudices and stereotypes, the Chinese Massacre of 1871 was both the result of anti-Chinese sentiments and racialized violence. If the pull to avenge the "needless" death of Robert Thompson was indeed the spark that set Anglo and Hispanic mobs into action against the Chinese, it should be stated that Thompson put himself in the line of fire when he shot blindly at three armed Chinese men hiding in a store.<sup>61</sup> He had been warned by Officer Sanchez to be wary, but took no heed to it and ended up with a bullet above his heart. There's no denying the conflict originated amongst the feuding Chinese factions between Yo Hing and Sam Yeun. Yet, with Thompson's death, rumors spread that the Chinese gunmen were killing Americans near *Calle de los Negros*. It didn't matter that people could praise Chinese immigrants for their efforts and contributions to American history with completing the transcontinental railroad; the excitable mob saw nothing to celebrate.<sup>62</sup>

It wasn't about what the Chinese had done for America, but what the mob had seen as done against America. This resentment simmered first from the competition for labor and gold

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<sup>60</sup> "California Reports, No. 4, October 4, 1854, p.399, cited by Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles, 1919), p. 59," In *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California* by Dan Caldwell.

<sup>61</sup> Zesch, Scott. "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre." *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 138.

<sup>62</sup> "Chinese Laying the Last Rail.' By Andrew Russell," Stereoscopic Photograph in *Archives, Photography, and Historical Memory: Tracking the Chinese Railroad Worker in North America* By Denise Khor.

during the Gold Rush and the coolie trade program. Then it festered from jarring evidence the Chinese weren't assimilating, from the use of strange medicine and the other aspects of Chinese culture that made them reliant on their communities rather than the law to settle the trouble. Though the mob may have made their actions against the Chinese seem personal over Thompson's death, this was not the case. The attacks against the Chinese on the night of October 24, 1871 were racialized. If the need for the initial attack were to rid Los Angeles of the evil Chinese gunmen, they would have stopped after killing the men they dragged out from the adobe building, but the extreme delight many took in the brutality afterward says otherwise. It was never about vengeance or getting back at the Chinese community for killing Robert Thompson, but race or they would have listened as a young Chinese man responded to the call for his blood with "Me no fraid, me good, no hurt any man."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Zesch, Scott. "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre." *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 139.

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presently Alameda Street near Union Station and Terminal Annex Building.

The old Antonio Coronel abode is in the background." Photograph in *Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871*, Los Angeles Public Library.

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