

## 25.5 Chinese Immigrants

As you read in earlier chapters, the first Chinese immigrants came to the United States to seek gold in California. Later, many helped to build the first transcontinental railroad. Some of these immigrants returned to China with money they had made in America. Their good fortune inspired Lee Chew to leave his poor village for the United States in 1882.

**Traveling to California** Lee paid 50 dollars for a bunk on a crowded steamship making the month-long voyage to San Francisco. On the ship,

he got his first taste of foreign food and marveled at machinery he had never seen before. “The engines that moved the ship were wonderful monsters,” he wrote, “strong enough to lift mountains.”

Lee arrived just in time. In the United States, anti-Chinese sentiment (feeling) had been building ever since whites had pushed Chinese off their mining claims. As the number of Chinese immigrants increased, labor leaders warned of hordes of Chinese workers who would work for less pay than whites and take away their jobs. In 1882, Congress passed an Exclusion Act that banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. The law also denied Chinese immigrants the right to become citizens.

As a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese immigration slowed to almost nothing. Then, in 1906, an earthquake and fire destroyed much of San Francisco, including most birth records. Suddenly, many Chinese men could claim to be native-born citizens. As citizens, they were allowed to bring their wives and children to the United States.

Chinese claiming American birth started arranging for people in China to immigrate to the United States as their relatives. On the long ship voyage, the newcomers studied hundreds of pages describing their “families.” When they reached San Francisco Bay, they threw the papers overboard.

These “paper relatives” landed at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Government immigration officials “locked us up like criminals in compart-

Before being allowed to leave the island, each immigrant faced detailed questioning by suspicious officials. “How many steps are there in your house?” “Where do you sleep in your house?” “Who lives next door?” Then they asked a “family” witness from San Francisco the same questions. If the answers didn’t match, officials could deport the newcomer. Nearly one in ten Chinese who came to America was sent back to China.

**Chinese Life in the United States** When Lee Chew arrived, he worked first as a servant, and then set up his own laundry. Many Chinese started laundries because, as Lee explained, “It requires little capital [money] and is one of the few opportunities that are open. Men of other nationalities who are jealous of the Chinese...have shut him out of working on farms or in factories or building railroads.”

Like Lee, most Chinese settled in city neighborhoods like San Francisco’s bustling Chinatown. Here, they could find work at Chinese laundries, restaurants, and stores. Chinese newspapers, herbal medicines, foods, and festivals provided comfort and support.

For many years, most Chinese immigrants were men. In 1900, only about 1 in 20 Chinese on the United States mainland was female. With so few women and families, the Chinese population in America began to decline. In 1880, about 105,000 Chinese lived in the United States. By 1920, just 61,600 remained.

Gradually, more women and children arrived, especially in San Francisco. Housing was closed to Chinese in most areas, so Chinatown became more and more crowded.

For white Americans, Chinatown became a tourist attraction, a “mysterious” place to see “strange faces” and eat new foods. To most Chinese immigrants, however, Chinatown was home.

Chinese immigrants settled in Chinatowns like this one in San Francisco. There they preserved the culture they had left behind.



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