

Name _____ Date _____

What Led to the Chinese Exclusion Act?

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first US law to restrict entry to the country based on nationality. The law put an absolute ban on immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of 10 years. Some Chinese people were technically exempt from the Exclusion Act, like clergy, diplomats, and teachers. But it was difficult to prove that they were not laborers. The reality was that very few Chinese immigrants were able to legally come to the US while the policy was in effect. The act was extended in 1892 and again in 1902, this time without an end date. It was finally repealed in 1943 because China had become an ally to the US in World War II. Even after the Act was repealed, Chinese immigration was extremely restricted. Until 1965, only 105 immigrants from China could enter the US every year.

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2. b'

Let's go back up and take a look at the context in which this act was passed. In the 1850s, large numbers of Chinese immigrants came to the West Coast. They came for different reasons. There were economic and environmental problems in China, and gold had been discovered in California. After the Gold Rush, some Chinese immigrants took jobs in cooking, laundry, and other services in cities. In 1862, there was a high demand for workers to build the Transcontinental Railroad. With many men fighting in the Civil War, there were not enough American laborers available. At first, 50 Chinese workers were hired. They were known to work hard for low wages. Soon, the railroad company was recruiting Chinese workers not just in California, but also in China. By 1865, 12,000 Chinese men were working on the railroad.

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3. b'

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With the completion of the railroad, many men including Chinese men were hired to work in coal mines on the land the railroad had acquired during the construction. The Union Pacific Railroad Company openly favored Chinese workers and gave them preferential working conditions to white workers. Why? Because Chinese workers were not joining unions in large numbers the way White laborers were. Most Chinese immigrants planned to return to China eventually, and the wages they were earning in the US were, in comparison to Chinese wages, high.

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4. b'

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Union Pacific openly favored Chinese miners. At the same time, they punished White miners for striking and did not give into any of their demands. Tensions were high. White laborers blamed Chinese laborers for their difficult economic situation. They resented that they were competing with immigrants for jobs and claimed the Chinese were keeping wages low. In 1885, an angry mob of White people in a Union Pacific mine in Rock Springs, Wyoming, killed 28 Chinese workers and burned and looted their quarters. This event became known as the Rock Springs massacre.

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5. b'

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In California cities, Chinese immigrants were separated from their White neighbors by language, culture, and appearance. As the economy worsened in the 1870s, they became scapegoats for a lack of jobs. California passed laws restricting their rights. These laws prohibited Chinese people from testifying in court against White people and added extra taxes for some Chinese workers. Rallies in San Francisco and Los Angeles turned violent against the Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiment intensified further when the Workingmen's Party of California became a major force in the state legislature. The party had a pro-labor and anti-Chinese stance. Nationwide, Chinese immigrants were a very small percentage of the overall population. Still, the tensions, violence, and political landscape in California made Chinese immigration a national issue. Congress was pressured to act.

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6. b'

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Congress first passed an act restricting Chinese immigration in 1879. However, President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed it because of a treaty then in place with China. A new treaty went into effect in 1880, and in 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act. An immigration processing and detention facility was built on Angel Island. Like the prison on nearby Alcatraz, it was designed to be far from the mainland and escape-proof. At Angel Island, Chinese immigrants could be detained for weeks, months, or even years. Immigration processing included medical exams that were humiliating and disorienting for Asian immigrants unused to Western medical practices. Some Chinese immigrants carved poetry into the walls of the facility describing the experience and their emotions.

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7. b'

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During detainment on Angel Island, Chinese immigrants were asked very specific questions about their family history. Relatives were called in to corroborate the details. A discrepancy could lead to being deported. Some Chinese immigrants bought papers to enter the US. These forged papers stated that they were the sons or, less often, daughters of American citizens. In 1906, an earthquake in San Francisco caused a fire that destroyed municipal records. This created an opportunity for Chinese immigrants to claim they had been born in the US. These immigrants could then falsely provide paperwork for other immigrants to enter the US. People who illegally immigrated this way are called \xe2\x80\x9cpaper sons\xe2\x80\x9d or \xe2\x80\x9cpaper daughters.\xe2\x80\x9d

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