

# Excluded From History: *The Page Act of 1875*

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Many people know about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—the restrictive and racist law that severely limited Chinese immigration and spurred anti-Asian reactions. Signed into law by President Chester A. Arthur, this Act was the first federal law that banned immigration on the basis of ethnicity or country of origin. The Chinese Exclusion Act curtailed the rights of Chinese American laborers and prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent laws extended this Act. It wasn't fully repealed until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated immigration bans using race and nationality.<sup>2</sup>

But before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, there was the Page Act of 1875, which was signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant. This Act ended the United States' open immigration policy. It prohibited the entry of "women for the purposes of prostitution."<sup>3</sup> In practice, this Act restricted the immigration of Chinese women, who were all assumed to be prostitutes. When reflecting on the 2021 Atlanta shooting which resulted in the murder of six women of Asian ancestry, we are reminded of the Page Act and the horrible implications of anti-Asian hate and sexism. Yet, not many people know about the Page Act. The Page Act successfully provided the platform—socially, economically, and politically—for the Chinese Exclusion Act, which extended the ban to all Chinese, not just women.

## Historical Background of the Page Act

Poverty and famine pushed many Chinese people to seek opportunities in the United States. At first, Chinese were welcomed. Cheap Chinese



Photo: Arnold Genthe. Library of Congress

Men gathered on a Chinatown corner in San Francisco, 1920. The Page Act restricted the immigration of Chinese women.

labor was used to fulfill the belief in "manifest destiny"<sup>4</sup> held by many white Americans at that time. In fact, there was a law that supported immigration of Chinese workers, who were seen as "more dependable and less demanding than white workers."<sup>5</sup> The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 was an international agreement signed between China and the U.S. that allowed Chinese to freely enter the United States. The main reason for the Burlingame Treaty was to ensure "a sufficient supply of Chinese labor."<sup>6</sup> Chinese men were recruited to work in a variety of jobs. They built railroads, towns, and businesses such as laundries and restaurants. They worked on mines and farms. They also provided domestic services. Their work was essential to the westward expansion. Yet, they received little credit for their efforts and were often the victims of hate crimes and anti-Asian laws.

Many of these early Chinese laborers did not bring their families with them. Originally, their intent was to work, send money home, and eventually return to China. This created a “sojourner mentality.”<sup>7</sup> But many Chinese laborers later decided to settle in the United States; as such, they sought ways to bring their wives and children over. But white citizens saw the Chinese as a threat. Chinese men were accused of stealing their jobs and Chinese women were accused of stealing their morality.

During the 1850s, some Chinese women came to California. Many worked as servants, cooks, babysitters, laundresses, miners, and lodging house operators.<sup>8</sup> And some worked in the only jobs they could find: sex work. Although white European immigrant women also worked as prostitutes, Chinese women were targeted. They were blamed for transmitting sexual diseases. They were also blamed for breaking up white, Christian families, by tempting white men with sex. Starting in the 1860s, San Francisco officials concentrated on efforts to forcefully remove “Chinese women of ill fame” from the city.<sup>9</sup> At this point, all Chinese women were most likely stereotyped as prostitutes.

In 1874, Representative John S. Hager, on behalf of the “the laboring men of the State of California” asked for modifications to the Burlingame Treaty, citing a brothel raid in San Francisco and accusing Chinese men of bringing “females under contracts for purposes too vile ... to mention in this Chamber.”<sup>10</sup> The Chinese were accused of instituting slavery via “coolie” labor and prostitution. President Grant was convinced by this propaganda. In his State of the Union, he mentioned, “few of [the Chinese women were] brought to our shores to pursue honorable or useful occupations.” This all set the stage for the Page Act, named after Representative Horace Page, known for his anti-Chinese positions. Page stated that the purpose of his Act, which passed on March 3, 1875, was to “end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women.”<sup>11</sup>

The Page Act claimed to prevent Chinese prostitutes from entering the United States. But it relied on men employed as port officers, court judges, and law enforcement officers to decide

whether or not the women were prostitutes, which they mostly did based on personal judgments. Subsequently, many Chinese women were labeled prostitutes even though they were not.<sup>12</sup> Chinese officials enforced the Page Act. Port officials in Hong Kong, who were men, forced women to undergo extensive interrogations before allowing them to board a ship for the United States. Many Chinese women were required to produce proof of their “personal morality” by obtaining certificates of character, obtained through questioning before the American consul, the British Harbor Master, and a committee of prominent businessmen.<sup>13</sup> Some women resorted to paying bribes.<sup>14</sup> The Page Act, left up to (mostly white) male officials to interpret and enforce, was greatly abused, resulting in the exclusion and deportation of Chinese women.

Representative Page’s stated intent was to protect California and ensure peace and security. But he did the exact opposite. Mae Ngai, professor of Asian American Studies at Columbia University, said, “...it was not the Chinese but the racism they faced that had proved dangerous to peace and security, bringing worsening violence against Chinese communities.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Consequences and Effects of the Page Act**

The Page Act prohibited the “importation into the United States of women for the purposes of prostitution” and prohibited immigrants from China, Japan, or “any Oriental country” from entering into a contract for “lewd and immoral purposes.” The Act further prohibited the importation of workers from the aforementioned countries “without their free and voluntary consent.”<sup>16</sup> As you have read, the Page Act consisted of several components; however, the ban on Chinese women was the one that was effectively and heavily enforced. Because of the Act, the ratio of Chinese registered female immigrants to male immigrants in the city of San Francisco dropped roughly from 13:1 to 21:1 in just five years.<sup>17</sup> (The exact numbers are not known due to illegal immigration practices.) Because of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, banning Chinese women had the effect of preventing Chinese men from having families.

As a result, “bachelor societies” formed<sup>18</sup> Even married men suffered under the Page Act, as their wives and children were subject to harsh scrutiny. Fathers were separated from their families. The Page Act thwarted both family formation and family reunification.

The national position was to discourage Chinese from settling permanently in the United States. Judge Lorenzo Sawyer, a federal district judge in California, said:

If [Chinese men] would never bring their women here and never multiply and we would never have more than we could make useful, their presence would always be an advantage to the State...so long as the Chinese don't come here to stay...their labor is highly beneficial to the whole community... the difficulty is that they are beginning to get over the idea that they must go back. Then they will begin to multiply here and that is where the danger lies in my opinion....<sup>19</sup>

The Page Act was ground-breaking in that it led to more anti-Asian laws, most notably the Chinese Exclusion Act. But there were many other state and national laws that discriminated against the Chinese and other Asian immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1917 extended the Chinese exclusion laws to people from the Philippines, India, and Japan; an entire “barred Asiatic zone” from the Middle East to Southeast Asia was established. All Asians, despite their various ethnicities and cultures, were lumped together as “Asiatic.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, there were many racist laws that forbade Asians from marrying white people, from attending white schools, from testifying in court against white people, from owning land and property, and from holding commercial and professional licenses. Asian Americans were restricted to certain areas in a city, and were forced to form and live in ethnic enclaves. These laws and policies were meant to uphold white supremacy. The legacy of the Page Act is evident in recent immigration policies that allow for the separation of families.

One of the lasting effects of the Page Act was to stigmatize Asian women. In addition to being racialized, Asian women were and are fetishized and sexualized. This stigma is evident in prevailing images and representations of Asian women as exotic and submissive.<sup>21</sup> Years after the Page Act, its racism and sexism still lingers today. This is evidenced by the 2021 Atlanta shooting, which resulted in the murder of Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng. The police noted that the shooter was seeking to address a “sexual addiction” and was not “racially motivated.”<sup>22</sup> This is offensive. For Asian American women, hate is intersectional—sexism and racism are deeply connected and cannot be detangled. The victims, as spa workers, were unfairly assumed to be prostitutes by the shooter and the media. In fact, there seemed to have been more media attention about their occupation than about the senseless nature of their murders. This shooting cannot be seen in isolation of anti-Asian hate, which was escalating in 2020 due to anti-Asian rhetoric about the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Teaching the Page Act**

We offer several activities (see the sidebars) and three tips for teaching the Page Act. The first tip is to focus on and address the intersectionalities at play. Remember that the Page Act lives in the middle of a Venn diagram of racism and sexism. The second tip is to get more comfortable discussing race and racism. Learn to see things from a critical lens. Remember that different narratives exist. The third tip is to not shy away from discussing issues related to sex. There are three options teachers can pursue. The first is to just talk about how the Page Act excluded Chinese women, without mentioning or by downplaying the issues related to prostitution. The second option is to skip the Page Act and not teach it at all—obviously, this is not the option we want you to pursue. The third option is to accurately represent the Page Act—the good, the bad, and the ugly. If we are uncomfortable with the subject of prostitution, imagine how the women affected by the Page Act felt, especially those wrongly accused. ■

## ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1: Digging Into the Page Act

Have students learn about the Page Act by answering this question: How did the Page Act target and discriminate against Chinese/Asian women coming into the United States?

Have students complete a close reading of the first three sections of the Page Act of 1875. The Page Act can be accessed here: <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1875Immigration%20Act.pdf>

Facilitate a discussion about the reading by asking these comprehension questions:

- What countries are targeted by the Page Act of 1875?
- Which specific communities are targeted by this Act and how?
- Who benefits from this Act and how?

Have students do research about the Page Act. Facilitate a discussion asking the following questions:

- How did the Page Act target immigrants? How and why did it target Chinese women specifically?
- How did the Page Act further propagate negative images of Chinese women? How was the Page Act racist? How was the Page Act sexist?
- How did the Page Act determine/define prostitution?
- How did the Page Act exploit Chinese women? How did it allow others to exploit Chinese women?
- How did the Page Act affect families and/or Chinese men who wanted to start families in the United States?
- What were the short-term and long-term effects of the Page Act?

Have students read this Op-Ed titled, “We are three Asian American women living in fear. Don’t feel sorry for us. Do something.” It can be accessed here: [www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2021-03-25/opinion-asian-american-women-victims-harassment-violence-death](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2021-03-25/opinion-asian-american-women-victims-harassment-violence-death)

- Facilitate a discussion about the article by asking the following questions: What are

the authors’ main points? How does the 2021 Atlanta shooting connect to the Page Act? Why do the authors feel connected to these events?

- Have students write their own Op-Ed addressing anti-Asian hate.

### Activity 2: Learning about the Era of Chinese Exclusion

Implement this lesson plan from the Asian American Education Project to learn more about the Chinese Exclusion Act: <https://asianamericanedu.org/chinese-exclusion-act-exclusion-of-asians.html>. This lesson examines the causes and effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act through analysis of primary and secondary sources. The purpose is to showcase the conditions in the United States that led to a rise in xenophobia, and in turn, race-based policies that defined the Chinese American and Asian American experience in the United States. In this lesson, students engage in critical thinking through research and a class discussion comparing and contrasting the Chinese Exclusion Act and current immigration policies or proposed immigration policies.

Ask these additional discussion questions after implementing the lesson and after learning about the Page Act:

- What were the contributions of Chinese labor in the United States in the mid-1800s? Who benefited from these contributions and how?
- What were the issues and conflicts around Chinese labor? Who had issues and why?
- In what ways did the Page Act set the groundwork for the Chinese Exclusion Act? How is the Chinese Exclusion Act connected to the Page Act?
- How were Chinese men emasculated during the exclusion era? How were Chinese women dehumanized?
- How was the Chinese Exclusion Act racist? How was the Chinese Exclusion Act sexist?
- If the Page Act and Chinese Exclusion Act were not repealed, how would our society be different? Consider all the innovations by Asian Americans. Imagine a world without the contributions of Asian Americans.

The Asian American Education Project has other relevant lesson plans on this topic:

- “The Contributions of the Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/1.2-Transcontinental-Railroad-lesson-plan.html>
- “Chinese Massacre of 1871: Not an Isolated Event”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/chinese-massacre-of-1871-not-an-isolated-event.html>
- “Angel Island & The Chinese Exclusion Act”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/angel-island.html>
- “Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 - Civil Rights Movement Era”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/immigration.html>
- “Perpetual Foreigner - Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/perpetualforeigner.html>
- “AAPI Women Voices: Untold Stories Through Poetry”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/aapi-women-voices-untold-stories-through-poetry.html>

### Activity 3: Building Empathy—Learning about the Effects of the Page Act

Have students read the following interview with Pat Kwoh, whose family was affected by the Page Act:

**Q:** What is your family's immigration story?

**A:** My ancestors were early Chinese immigrants from the Taishan Village and its nearby villages in the Guangdong province of China. My family were farmers. They had a small plot of land. They grew rice, vegetables, peanuts, and taros—only enough to supplement the food the family needed. A good percentage of the people in our village went abroad to earn a living to support the family.

For a better future, my great grandfather applied and came to the U.S. as a merchant in the early 1900s.

He ended up working on farms in California. That started the migration of my family to the U.S. My grandfather came as a “paper son.” Paper sons immigrated by pretending to be related to Chinese living in the U.S.

My grandfather was not able to apply for my father to come until after World War II and the defeat of Japan. (During Japan's invasion of China, all government offices were closed). My father finally immigrated as a single man, leaving his wife and children behind (as his father and grandfather had

done). My father eventually applied for my mother, brother, sister and me to come in the 1960s after thirteen years of separation. Both my grandfather and father worked in Chinese restaurants.

**Q:** In what ways did the Page Act and other immigration laws impact you and your family?

**A:** I grew up in China without my father. The Page Act and the subsequent immigration laws that upheld racial or national quotas that discriminated against the Chinese made my mom into a single mom. She struggled to take care of me and my siblings and my father's grandmother. My father worked in a restaurant so he wasn't able to send over a lot of money. When we were able to join him in the U.S., we all worked. My mom worked in a sewing factory. My siblings and I worked in the restaurant.

**Q:** Who in your family did the Page Act and other immigration laws impact the most?

**A:** My mother. She was married to the love of her life but they were separated for ten years. That's a long separation for husband and wife. It's amazing that they were able to stay together.

**Q:** When did you first learn about the Page Act?

**A:** I went to family functions and realized other Chinese immigrant families had the same experiences. I always wondered why in the early days only Chinese men came to this country and not the women. Chinese men would come to the U.S. as single men. They would go back to China to get married and have children, and then come back alone. Chinese families endured decades of separations. Husbands and wives grew old apart. Children grew up without their fathers. Fathers grew old without their wives and children.

**Q:** How did you feel when you learned about the Page Act and other immigration laws?

**A:** For the longest time, I was so mad at my father. I thought he didn't want to bring us over. I thought he wasn't courageous enough. When I learned about the Page Act and other restrictions on immigration, I realized his hands were tied by the law. I became less angry with my father. I was more understanding. He had a lot of pressures. He was powerless against the law. He didn't make enough money to raise a family. Life was hard for him too.

**Q:** How would you describe the Page Act?

**A:** The Page Act was a very cruel, vicious, and racist law. It aimed to stop families from forming and reuniting.

The United States only wanted the cheap labor of Asian men and then let them die as bachelors. They did not want Asian people to take roots in this country. This law was very mean-spirited.

Facilitate a discussion about the interview by asking these questions:

- How was Pat impacted by the Page Act and other immigration laws?
- What did you learn about Pat's experiences? What did you learn about her feelings?

- How does Pat's experience connect to current immigration policies that allow for families to be separated?

Have students write a diary entry from the perspective of a Chinese man affected by the Page Act. Use the following as writing prompts:

- What would he say about how the Page Act affects him?
- How does he feel about being separated from his family or about not being allowed to have a family?
- How does he feel about the way he is treated as a Chinese man?

## Notes

1. Sara Lyons David, "Suffrage, Activism, and Education in the Era of Chinese Exclusion: Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee," *Social Education* 83, no. 6 (2019), 356–360.
2. D'Vera Cohn, "How U.S. Immigration Laws and Rules Have Changed Through History," Pew Research Center (2015).
3. Page Act of 1875. [<https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1875Immigration%20Act.pdf>]
4. Mae Ngai, "Racism Has Always Been Part of the Asian American Experience," *The Atlantic*, (2021).
5. Yu-Fang Cho, "Domesticating the Aliens Within: Sentimental Benevolence in Late Nineteenth-Century California Magazines," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009), 113–136.
6. Ibid.
7. Lorelei Lee, "The Roots of 'Modern Day Slavery': The Page Act and the Mann Act," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 52, no. 3 (2021), 1199–1239.
8. Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and their Lives* (State University of New York Press, 1998).
9. Lee, "The Roots of 'Modern Day Slavery.'"
10. Ibid.
11. George Anthony Peffer, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration Before Exclusion* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).
12. Ibid.
13. Lorelei Lee, "The Roots of 'Modern Day Slavery.'"
14. Peffer, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here*.
15. Ngai, "Racism Has Always Been Part of the Asian American Experience."
16. Page Act of 1875.
17. Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*.
18. Catherine Lee, "'Where the Danger Lies': Race, Gender,

- and Chinese and Japanese Exclusion in the United States, 1870–1924," *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 2 (2010), 248–271.
19. Lorenzo Sawyer, Letter to H.H. Bancroft, dated September 22, 1886, Bancroft Manuscript, Letters, Bancroft Library (University of California, Berkeley), 4–5.
  20. Ngai, "Racism Has Always Been Part of the Asian American Experience."
  21. Ibid.
  22. Cady Lang, "The Atlanta Shooting Fit Into a Long Legacy of Anti-Asian Violence in America," *Time Magazine* (2021)



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