



Chinese labor helped to build the American West, particularly the transcontinental railroad. Although their hard work contributed to opening “The West” for migration from “The East,” Chinese workers were not always well-treated in the U.S.

In this political cartoon by Thomas Nast—which was published in *Harper’s Weekly* (Vol. 13) on the 7th of August, 1869—we can readily understand the artist’s point-of-view: Americans were not very receptive of Chinese immigrants. That belief explains the title of this illustration:

Pacific Chivalry. Encouragement to Chinese Immigration

In addition to the obvious, where a supervisor is ready to whip a weeping Chinese worker—using a whip resembling a cat-o-nine (used during the slave-trading years)—we see several distinctively Chinese items and characteristics being abused.

- Chinese men, working in America, had a distinctive hairstyle referred to as a “queue.” Where (and when) did this originate?

Starting with the Manchurian takeover of China’s Ming Dynasty, Chinese men were ordered to shave their heads except for the back where their hair had to grow long. That long hair was worn as a ponytail, often braided, which helped to distinguish Manchu warriors from their enemies. So important was this decree that if a Chinese man defied it, he could be executed.

When Chinese workers immigrated to America, many of them still wore their hair as their ancestors did before them. That characteristic was the source of much ridicule.

- Chinese workers usually wore a sun hat, known as a *douli*, which the character in this illustration also wears. His *douli*, however, is on the ground as he attempts to flee the impending punishment.

By clicking on the image, to enlarge it, we see that the supervisor’s hat identifies him as “California.” That tells us Nast’s criticism is not just directed toward people but also toward government. And it isn’t just government, in general, which has angered the artist. Even the courts do not provide justice for Chinese laborers. Notice the words on the side of the building:

Courts of Justice Closed to Chinese. Extra Taxes to Yellow Jack.

What did Nast mean by this? He was upset with all the laws negatively impacting Chinese workers in America. By 1882, those laws had escalated to a “Chinese Exclusion Act” which banned Chinese laborers (skilled and unskilled) from entry to America for a ten-year period. The law also prevented many Chinese people from becoming U.S. citizens.

Ten years later, when the exclusion law was set to expire, another law—called The Geary Act—extended the original law for another ten years. And ... as part of the law ... if Chinese nationals had not registered with the U.S. federal government, to obtain their requisite identity papers, they could be arrested (then deported).

Knowing these additional facts, we can reach a conclusion about Nast’s political cartoon. It did little to change either the law or the culture when it came to fair treatment of Chinese workers in the 19th century.

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Unjust Treatment of Chinese Workers - Pacific Chivalry

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