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Imagining and Why Immigration Restriction Took So
Long"**

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“CHINA AND THE PURSUIT OF AMERICA’S DESTINY

*Nineteenth-Century Imagining and Why
Immigration Restriction Took So Long*”

gordon h. chang

The completion of the Pacific road, the opening trade with the East, and the vast emigration from China, are the grand events which follow our terrible war, and reveal something of our great destiny.

—Jurist Edwards Pierrepont at a banquet honoring Anson Burlingame and the U.S.-China Treaty of 1868 that bears his name, New York City, June 23, 1868¹

The day will soon come when we shall be the east and China the west . . . and the western passage—the long-lost hope and desire of the ancient navigators—shall be accomplished.

—Boston mayor Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, at a banquet honoring Burlingame, Boston, August 21, 1868²

A FAMILIAR NARRATIVE GOES SOMETHING like this: Chinese immigrants to the United States faced considerable hostility from the moment they arrived in large numbers in the early 1850s. Racial prejudice, a common feature of nineteenth-century America, white labor fears of unfree Chinese competition, and popular dread of Chinese heathenism, immorality, and foreignness combined to produce powerful anti-Chinese sentiment among whites that led ultimately to the passage of the Chinese Restriction Act of 1882 (only later did it become known as the Exclusion Act) and even more stringent subsequent legislation.³ Few voices opposed this reactionary movement, which appeared to be consistent with other nineteenth-century white supremacist and nativist ideologies and movements. Hence, it was

relatively easy for demagogues such as Denis Kearney and ambitious presidential aspirants such as James G. Blaine to overwhelm the voices of those like Charles Crocker, who championed the economic benefits of Chinese labor, or Charles Sumner after the Civil War, who defended their political rights. According to this narrative, Chinese exclusion was a foregone conclusion, an inevitability.

There is considerable evidence that sustains this narrative, so much so that the narrative seems clear and without challenge.⁴ But let me offer a question that shakes its stability. Why did it take *so long* for Washington to pass anti-Chinese immigration legislation?

Thirty years passed between the arrival of more than 20,000 Chinese in the single year of 1852 and the passage of the Restriction Act in 1882. Some 300,000 Chinese landed in America during these three decades, though some anti-Chinese agitators believed many more had actually arrived. Most of the Chinese did not stay, but 100,000 did. Certainly, national political leaders had a lot on their plates at the time—the sectional crisis, slavery, civil war, and reconstruction—but we know that anti-Chinese sentiment, especially on the West Coast, soared in these years supported by white southern forces. We can ask, why did Chinese immigration restriction, as embodied in the 1882 legislation, fail to become law sooner than it did?

This is not the place to offer a full counterexplanation to the dominant narrative. Factors one would have to consider include the preoccupations before the nation mentioned above, the confusion between the states and the federal government over who and what was responsible for immigration law, and the weak political position of the West, where anti-Chinese sentiment was strongest, among other matters, but here I want to focus on one particular arena of social thought that can help explain why the restriction legislation was actually late in passage. Many at the time had agitated for years to rid the country of Chinese and stop their further arrival. Bills in Congress to end the importation of alleged involuntary labor did pass, but efforts to stop the entry of Chinese altogether repeatedly failed in the 1870s and early 1880s, and even the 1882 act was denounced by ardent exclusionists at the time as inadequate. Another decade passed before the United States actually effectively barred most Chinese from the country.⁵

I suggest that the strength and pervasiveness of thinking among many Americans about the central importance of China for America's future

was critical in encouraging a positive reception of Chinese immigrants to America through much of the nineteenth century. Access to China, and Pacific commerce more generally, free Chinese immigration, and America's future welfare formed one integrated vision in the minds of important Americans—business, political, and religious leaders among them—through much of the nineteenth century. This vision inspired their powerful opposition to immigration restriction and frustrated exclusionists until altered national and international diplomatic landscapes created the conditions for successful exclusion. The two epigraphs that begin this essay are emblematic of this positive vision of Chinese immigration and the entwined imagined destinies of the two nations.

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America's early contacts with China and Chinese immigration are intimately linked to a chapter of American history that has occupied a grand place in the telling of the American pageant—the story of discovery, westward expansion, and the realization of "Manifest Destiny." Leading figures in the early republic held audacious, bold visions about a continental empire that spanned North America. From the beginning of the republic, Americans believed that the defense of their treasured political independence required economic well-being. Their vision of national greatness required economic self-sufficiency, and they pursued every possible opportunity for commercial advantage. The subsequent realization of "Manifest Destiny" became national myth. The rapid and seemingly irresistible westward expansion of the United States from east to west, to go past the Alleghenies and then the Missouri and Mississippi Valleys, to cross the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, and then to reach the Pacific, became the national epic immortalized in countless cultural forms, from music, drama, and literature to the textbooks read by every school student for the past 150 years. Plentiful land, adventure and discovery, and boundless resources are said to have been the attractions for the restless and ambitious Euro-Americans. Often overlooked in the mythologizing of the westward movement however is the lure that lay beyond the continent and the Pacific Coast—China, the object of national desire.

For many Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, China, and the Far East more generally, was *the* reason to go to the Far West. The Far West was not an end, but a means. Seeking a waterway through the continent was a prime reason that the English even settled in America. The 1607 Jamestown, Virginia, colonists were to enrich London backers and locate a passage that would link the Atlantic to the Pacific and thus open the way to the markets of the East. Early Americans and Europeans took the existence of such a route as a matter of literal faith. None believed that the Holy Father would have created the New World as an impassable barrier to their capacious ambitions to reach the Far East. English, Spanish, and French explorers all were convinced that such a route existed, and they incessantly sought to locate it. After independence, the dream of the passage to the East, through the West, continued to inspire Americans to explore the continent, to covet the expansive Oregon Country, to help justify the war with Mexico, and then to annex golden California with its vital harbors. Spanning the continent was America's given fate, and controlling the West would bring America closer to the East. When the eminent historian and articulator of American nationalism Frederick Jackson Turner declared that the westward movement had been *the* "fundamental process" in American life, he also said that Americans were people of the Pacific who shared a "common destiny" with those across the great ocean.⁶

The lure of the Pacific in great part inspired the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, whose acquisition in turn further encouraged Americans to think about their future as irresistibly linked to Asia and China. Early Americans, among them Thomas Jefferson, dreamed of a continental empire. Such an immense territory would not only embrace vast lands and natural wealth but also physically and territorially link the world's vast oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific, giving America an insurmountable commercial advantage over the Old World, constrained by the unruly Atlantic. Within weeks after finalizing the purchase of Louisiana from France, Jefferson received congressional support for what would become known as the Lewis and Clark expedition, whose primary objective was to locate a water route across the continent. "The object of your mission," Jefferson instructed Meriwether Lewis, "is to ex-

plore the Missouri River and such principal streams of it as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean may offer the most direct and practical water communication across the continent for the purpose of commerce.”⁷

After obtaining much of the central territory of the continent, American leaders turned their attention to the Far West and what it might mean to the young country. They frequently invoked the importance of China to America in the public debates and discussions about the occupation of Oregon and California as early as the 1820s. One of the most vocal of these expansionists was Congressman John Floyd of Virginia, whose cousin had been with Lewis and Clark. Floyd later became Virginia's governor and a presidential contender, but in the 1820s he distinguished himself as the first in Congress to urge that the United States occupy the Oregon Country, an immense swatch of land that reached from what is today's northern California to southern Alaska and east into Wyoming. Its ownership was in dispute, he maintained, and America should seize control of the Northwest to enable it to exploit the great trading potential of Asia. Asia, he declared, was the goal “which the West has been seeking ever since Solomon sent out his ships in search of the gold of Ophir.” He conjured the prospect of an American Tyre, the fabled Phoenician trading city that commanded the wealth of the ancient world at the mouth of the Columbia River that could supply China's millions with American flour, cotton, and tobacco. His biblical and Old World references emphasized the grandeur of the possibility.⁸ Political figures from the southerner John C. Calhoun to New Englander Daniel Webster in the antebellum years similarly trumpeted the importance of the China trade for America. Ardent expansionist Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri envisioned the Columbia River Valley becoming the granary of Asia. Others declared that American tobacco could replace British opium in China and that American wheat would replace Chinese rice. The possibilities were limitless in their imaginations. Asa Whitney, the first booster for the construction of the transcontinental railway, dismissed the Atlantic as “a petty and petulant sea” compared to the vast commercial potential of the inviting Pacific.⁹

The desire to acquire the port of San Francisco and control the Pacific Coast more generally inspired expansionists such as President James K.

Polk to wage the predatory war on Mexico and seize its northern territories. Midway through the Mexican-American War of 1846–48, Polk spoke to Congress to rally support for the plan to annex what is now called California. The region, said the president, would soon be settled by Americans, and San Francisco Bay and other ports along the coast would harbor an American navy, whalers, and other “merchant vessels,” and these ports would soon “become the marts of an extensive and profitable commerce with China and other countries of the East.” In other addresses, Polk repeatedly spoke about the importance of California and the China trade for America.¹⁰

These ideas linking continental expansion, Manifest Destiny, and the China trade came together in the fertile and ambitious imagination of Asa Whitney. Whitney came from a comfortable New England family (he was distantly related to the inventor of the cotton gin) and had made a fortune in the China trade around the time of the 1839–1842 Opium War. During his two years of living in China, he studied the economies and societies of China, the rest of Asia, and the Pacific Islands and concluded that America was singularly positioned between “Europe, with a starving, destitute population of 250,000,000” and Asia with a population of “700,000,000 of souls still more destitute.” This position placed an immense responsibility (and opportunity) upon America, he believed, a responsibility that required the construction of the transcontinental link. Convinced that “vast commercial, moral, and political results” resided in the project, he returned to America from China resolved, as he said, “to devote my life to the work which I believed promised so much good to all mankind.” As he immodestly but piously claimed, “nature’s God” had made absolutely clear that the rail route he proposed across the continent was “the grand highway, to civilize and Christianize all mankind.” Whitney rejected the idea he would personally gain from the proposal, declaring he was willing to risk his very life and fortune for his historic vision. As with many other Americans when they thought about their country’s future welfare, Whitney presented arguments of commercial advantage, control of the continent and seas, and divine moral purpose that seamlessly reinforced one another.¹¹

For much of the rest of his life, Whitney lobbied for government support for his vision, repeatedly memorializing Congress and the president

with his idea. Whitney's plan combined exacting detail with epic vision. He calculated ocean and land distances, defined the best overland routes, consulted business and political leaders across the country, and argued that a rail link from the shores of Lake Michigan to the Pacific Northwest or San Francisco was not only feasible but essential to advance the transcendent goal of bringing the East and the West (America and Europe) together. The rail line would open "an unlimited market for our cotton, rice, tobacco, hemp, corn, flour, beef, pork, manufactured goods, and all our various and vast products." But more importantly, it was America's own singular, historic purpose to construct this link that would bring together human history, natural geography, practical economics, military security, and providential design.

Whitney anticipated challenges to his audacious proposal. What of a canal through the Panama Isthmus, another approach to linking the two great oceans that some favored? Whitney argued that a canal had huge logistical and political problems and would require a much longer ocean run from the north Atlantic and then through the Pacific to China than transporting goods and people from the East Coast ports along a rail line to the West Coast ports. But what or who would populate the great western reaches of the United States? Whitney believed the poor masses of Europe would flock to America with its plentiful land now within reach because of the rail line. And as for the peopling of the Pacific? Why, "millions of Chinese would emigrate" and it would be American ships that would move them. "What a field, then, would there not be here opened for industry and enterprise—for the humane, for the missionary, and for the philanthropist!"

Whitney's most powerful argument drew not from economics but from a dramatic, historical imagination that bordered on the millenarian. Echoing the sentiments of the Virginian Floyd, Whitney declared,

The change of the route for the commerce with Asia has, since before the time of Solomon even, changed the destinies of Empires and States. It has, and does to this day control the world. Its march has always been westward, and can never go back to its old routes. . . . Through us must be the route to Asia, and the change to our continent will be the last, the final change.

We see the commerce of Asia, with civilization, has marched west. Each nation, from the Phoenicians to proud England, when supplanted, or forced to relinquish it, has declined, and dwindled into almost nothingness, and a new nation, west, risen up, with vigor and life, to control all. When this road shall have been completed, that commerce, with civilization, will have encircled the globe. It can go no further. Here, then would be the consummation of all things; and here it would be as fixed, as fast, as time and earth itself. Here we should stand forever, reaching out one hand to all Asia and the other to all Europe . . . seeking not to subjugate any; but all, the entire, the whole, tributary, and at our will, subject to us.¹²

Whitney received wide support for his visionary but compelling proposal. State legislatures and many in Congress enthusiastically endorsed his effort, though he failed to obtain full federal backing. That went, ultimately, to another, much more powerful and better positioned group a decade later. Leland Stanford and the other “Big Four,” who controlled the Central Pacific Railroad that employed Chinese railway workers, also played, of course, an important role in the story of Chinese immigration. Whitney, however, had succeeded not only in popularizing the idea of binding America’s newly acquired lands with iron but also of linking continental expansion with American connections with the Pacific and Asia beyond.

And in the minds of some, America’s “Manifest Destiny” was not limited to a contiguous land mass, but to an even grander destinarian imagination. As *DeBow’s Review*, an influential businessman’s periodical from New Orleans, declared in a long, elaborate article, published not long after the United States had realized its Northern American *continental* expansion, China and the Indies were to be “Our ‘Manifest Destiny’ in the East.” China had special significance for America, the journal pointed out. It was “more important to us than to Europe; and more important to Europe than all Southern Asia besides.” It was therefore essential for America to control that area of the world for commercial advantage, for security, and for its general well-being. The Far West had moved to the Far East.¹³

The lure of Asia went far beyond mere words and ambitious dreams, for the China trade had produced immense, real profits since the mid-eighteenth century. American merchants had brought goods from China in huge amounts and sold them in England and America, amassing some of the largest early fortunes in the colonies. The port cities of Salem, Bos-

ton, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore all depended on the lucrative China trade, and the American commercial elite—the Cabots, Lowells, Browns, Perkins, Delanos, Astors, and Forbes, among others—all thrived from the tea, furs, textiles, ceramics, housewares, and other goods that the Yankee traders plied across the seas. Trade in African slaves and that in Chinese goods were the pillars of the early American economy. It was not a coincidence that the first, or at least one of the first, ships to fly the new Stars and Stripes after the of winning independence was the *Empress of China*, a three-mast sailing ship outfitted by Robert Morris, “the financier of the American revolution” and one of the wealthiest men in America. It departed New York harbor on February 22, 1784, George Washington’s birthday, bound for China with a hold full of American ginseng that was to appeal to the Chinese male market.

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Destinarian thinking was not limited to territorial or commercial expansionists. Evangelical Americans, numerous and influential in nineteenth-century America, also looked beyond the shores of the country for the release of their pious energies. China was a land of commercial opportunity, but it was also a place that desperately needed Christian salvation. China, for tens of thousands of Americans, became the location where they, devout Americans, would find their own salvation in helping others find theirs. American Protestant missionaries began to travel to distant and mysterious China in the early years of the nineteenth century.

What inspired them to face a life of hardship, even possible mortal sacrifice, in that faraway land? For Peter Parker, one of the prominent early missionaries, the attraction of China ran parallel to what the merchants and territorial expansionists felt: the belief that China would play an especially important role in the future not just of America but of the entire world. For Parker, though, it would be China’s salvation through Christianity, not commerce, that would be transformative. In 1832, just before he made his way to China, Parker confided in his diary,

But O Lord by what process have I come to the preference of China as the destined field of my labor? Is it not because there are these millions on millions who are perishing for want of the Gospel and the faithful

heralds of salvation, forerunners of the Holy Spirit, which other fields have but thousands or perhaps hundreds? The Celestial Empire shall become Christian, will not her influence on the civilization of the remainder of the Earth be greater.¹⁴

After returning from two years in China, David Abeel, another of the early American missionaries to China, wrote about his experiences to enlighten fellow Americans about the importance of the missionary's task in China. The elevation of his vision surpassed the ambition of the merchant. The conversion of China, he wrote, was of a historic immensity that could hardly be fathomed: "[H]ow infinitely vast, how worthy of all sacrifice—all hazard, all experiment—does the moral elevation of this nation appear, when viewed in its connection with the Redeemer's glory. Here is a triumph and a trophy for His victorious grace, a gem, the purest and brightest which earth can offer, to deck His mediatorial crown!" Abeel called forth missionaries to go to every possible place in China: "[T]he coasts should be invaded, and the sea-ports entered . . . every opening should be searched out, every tenable post occupied." "Look where we may, beneath the wide expanse of the heavens, we can find no distinct enterprise so laudable, so imperious, so inconceivable in its results, as the conversion of China."¹⁵ Pious churchgoers at home could not help but be inspired by the glorious challenge before the self-sacrificing, visionary, and militant missionary.

What explained this zeal? In part, it was the identification of their *own* salvation, and the moral regeneration of America itself, with the effort to win China, and other heathen lands, to Christianity. The missionaries understood their sacrifice in China as a response to God's calling and as an integral part of the recovery of a genuinely moral America. Even more, toward the end of the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, millenarian thought surged again and was embraced by many American evangelicals. They concluded that the coming of the millennium—the second advent of Jesus Christ on earth—was imminent, but only on the condition that the gospel was spread through all the lands of the world. Christ's appearance would inaugurate a thousand-year reign of his peace on earth and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. This belief emphasized the foreign missionary enterprise as an urgent, if not the foremost, duty of the church, and spreading the Word to the vast masses of China, the hundreds of millions of them, became one of the central

concerns of American Christians for decades. The spiritual revival at home, therefore, became dependent on the propagation of the Word abroad and would help realize transcendent American purposes. As the Reverend J. H. Barlow, secretary of the American Board of Foreign Missions, pungently declared in an effort to gain support for American missionaries in China later in the century, "Wherever on pagan shores the voice of the American missionary and teacher is heard, there is fulfilled the manifest destiny of the Christian Republic." Thousands of ministers, their families, and many more volunteer church workers and lay evangelicals made their way to China through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, making it the largest American missionary effort in the world. Sherwood Eddy, the commanding leader of the YMCA, described China in the early twentieth century as "the goal, the lodestar, the great magnet that drew us all."¹⁶ The mystery of China beckoned, certainly, and even more compelling was the magnitude of the challenge. As the Reverend Charles Ernest Scott, an American missionary in Qingtao filled with "apostolic enthusiasm," declared in a lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1914,

Verily the vastest prize on this planet for continued mastery over which Satan contends is China. And verily the most stupendous single task that faces the Christian Church till Christ shall come again is the bringing of the knowledge of the True and Living God to China.¹⁷

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Many Americans through much of the nineteenth century assumed that opening China to American commerce and the Bible required the reciprocal American reception of Chinese here. Many believed that the mingling of Chinese with others on North American soil was a historic inevitability and, in the minds of some, the actual culmination of a human drama that began in the earliest moments of human civilization. This was not about real immigrants so much as it was about an idealized vision of migration and heavenly intentions. In the thinking of many prominent Americans in the early nineteenth century, the white and yellow "races," separated in the distant past, were destined to meet again and amalgamate in America.

The idea that the native people of North America originated in Asia was already popular among the first English settlers in North America.

Columbus, of course, never surrendered his belief that he had successfully navigated to Asia and the people he encountered in the Caribbean were Asian. They were misnamed “Indians,” and the name continued to link New World native peoples to Asia, at least etymologically. (A curious side note: a nineteenth-century missionary to China and Sinophile once claimed that, in actual fact, “Columbus meant *Chinese*,” but called the people he encountered “Indians” only because Europeans in the fifteenth century commonly called all Eastern Asia the “Indies.” Only the “mere use of a general for a particular appellation,” according to the minister, prevented “our Indians from being called by us ‘Chinese.’” The minister was right in his characterization of Europe’s old naming practice, but why he assumed that Columbus meant Chinese, as opposed to, say, Japanese, is unclear.) English settlers in Jamestown in the early seventeenth century believed that the “Indians” they met either were descendents from ancient migrants who had come from Asia or were somehow recently closely connected to traders from China.¹⁸

The Spanish and British brought small numbers of people from China as they colonized North America. Chinese settlements appeared in Mexico in the late sixteenth century. American explorers to the Pacific Northwest in the late eighteenth century found Chinese “carpenters” brought by the British. Other Chinese arrived in America as deckhands on ships and were seen in the port cities along the Atlantic. Some stayed and even formed unions with white women and had families as early as the 1820s. Merchants who returned from China sometimes brought back their servants to New York or Philadelphia, and missionaries facilitated the travel of a score of young Chinese to America for education beginning as early as 1818.¹⁹

In their exhortations to have Americans move across the continent, expansionists in the early nineteenth century often argued that Chinese settlers could help populate the regions of the Far West, distant from the eastern centers of population. John Floyd, who advocated seizing the Oregon Country, predicted that Chinese would immigrate to the region and help settle the wild land. The Chinese, he maintained in his widely circulated 1821 report to Congress on Oregon, “would willingly, nay, gladly, embrace the opportunity of a home in America, where they have no prejudice, no fears, no restraint in opinion, labor, or religion.” Floyd

may have been misinformed or simply naïve, but he clearly believed that the prospect of Chinese immigration was a positive one and would help win public support for his controversial proposal. The public response to his proposal was wildly supportive.²⁰

Thomas Hart Benton also welcomed the possibility of large-scale Asian immigration to the western part of the country. Anticipating doubters who thought the idea of taking distant Oregon was an expensive and unrealistic ambition, Benton argued that Americans could transform the Columbia Valley into a great granary and sell the bounty, with good profit, to the vast markets of Asia. The Oregon Country, Benton forecast, would also become an outlet for Asia's "imprisoned and exuberant population," presumably providing the agricultural labor needed to farm the granary.²¹

Benton's expansionism was also intimately linked to his version of grand history where race determined and explained all great human developments. By many decades, he anticipated the white supremacist arguments of the race theorists at the end of the nineteenth century. In Benton's version, in the ancient, dimly seen human past, the "Caucasian race (the Celtic-Anglo-Saxon division)" "alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth." This "race" started from western Asia (presumably the Caucasus), followed the sun and went west, left "the Mongolians" behind, and eventually inhabited the shores of the Atlantic, where it lit the lights of science, religion, and arts. In time, "in obedience to the great command," the white race, he wrote, "arrived in the New World, and found new lands to subdue and replenish." It then arrived on the Pacific, "the sea which washes the shore of eastern Asia." On the other side of the ocean was "the Mongolian," or "Yellow race," "once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization, but torpid and stationary for thousands of years." Though "far below the White," the Yellow was "far above" "the Black," "the Malay, or Brown," and "Red," and inevitably the white would uplift eastern Asia. "The sun of civilization," Benton pronounced, "must shine across the sea" and the white and yellow "must intermix." The two races would once again unite. And in what must have shocked many of his fellow senators, he declared, "They must talk together, and trade together and marry together. Commerce is a great civilizer—social intercourse as great—and marriage greater. The White

and Yellow races can marry together, as well as eat and trade together.” There was no doubt in Benton’s mind that the result would be salutary for the world: the advanced white race would help rejuvenate the stagnant yellow. “The moral and intellectual superiority of the White race will do the rest: and thus the youngest people, and the newest land, will become the reviver and the regenerator of the oldest.” Benton’s words conjured a stupendous human drama, if not divine plan.²²

Other leading Americans shared Benton’s vision of the West as the meeting ground of grand racial history. William H. Seward, U.S. senator from New York in the 1840s and 1850s and later secretary of state for Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, was also a passionate expansionist and saw the Pacific as the natural center of American interests. Controlling the China trade was essential for America’s future, as would be the acquisition of islands and strategic points all along the Pacific. His lead later as secretary of state in acquiring Alaska in 1867 was just the most audacious expression of this ambition. But he too believed that human flows attended what he saw as the inexorable shift of power toward the Pacific. In 1852, he declared from the floor of the Senate, “[T]he commercial, social, political movements of the world, are now in the direction of California,” and in turn California was the gateway to the grand Pacific. Da Gama, Columbus, Americus, Cabot, Hudson, and even the discovery of the entire New World and its settlement, he believed, “were but conditional, preliminary, and ancillary to the more sublime result, now in the act of consummation—the reunion of the two civilizations, which, having parted on the plains of Asia four thousand years ago, and having travelled ever afterward in opposite directions around the world, now meet again on the coasts and islands of the Pacific Ocean. Certainly, no mere human event of equal dignity and importance has ever occurred upon the earth.”²³

Benton and Seward’s largely secular visions of the mission of America drew from the religious, complementing those of the missionary. In a curious twist, religious figures presented views similar to Benton’s but drew from the secular to support the biblical. The most prominent of these was Reverend William Spear (1822–1904), who lived from 1846 to 1851 in Guangzhou, China, as a medical missionary and became one of the most famous of the returned missionaries in America in the nineteenth century. His young wife and child died of ill health while in China, and

he had to return to America to recover his own strength. He decided, however, to spend his time with the Chinese here. He lived for six years among the Chinese migrants in San Francisco and founded what is now known as the Chinatown Presbyterian Church, which claims today to be the oldest Asian Christian church in North America. In San Francisco, he also founded the first Chinese-language newspaper in the country, *The Oriental*, and a school and dispensary for the local Chinese. He devoted himself to evangelical work throughout the country afterward and served as an officer for the Presbyterian Board of Education for many years. He wrote several books, the most important being the highly regarded and influential 700-page study, *The Oldest and the Newest Empire: China and the United States*, published in 1870.

Unlike other missionaries who disdained the Chinese for their heathenism, Speer was an unabashed Sinophile. He admired China’s long civilization and culture, praising China the way Voltaire and other Enlightenment figures did in eighteenth-century Europe. He devoted much of his life to what he called the regeneration of the great Chinese people, who had slipped into backwardness, with Christianity and modern knowledge. The Chinese needed Jesus, certainly, but they deserved none of the prejudice heaped upon them—the Romans, he argued, were a “far more depraved and cruel people than the Chinese,” and yet they were routinely praised in the West. According to Speer, there was no more urgent task before the Christian church and the American nation than the rejuvenation of “the Oldest Empire” by the new, as such “consummating work” had to be performed “to prepare the earth for the Kingdom of the Messiah.”²⁴

Much like Benton, Speer believed Americans, as representatives of the great white race, and the Chinese were destined to be reunited after many centuries of separation. Speer drew from his study of scriptures and ancient history to argue that the Chinese may very well have been one of the tribes from the Ark who dispersed after the great flood. Historical evidence and sacred literature suggested that it was actually Noah, Speer wrote, who founded the colony along the Yellow River that became the core of the country of China. Speer was convinced that the contact of Americans and Chinese on the shores of the Pacific was therefore bringing history full circle, the “termination of that westward course of empire which began in the first period of the history of man.” It was nothing less than

“the completion of one great cycle of the Divine government on earth,” according to Speer, and “the commencement of another—the glorious and golden age of mankind.” Grandly, he declared, “[T]he coming of the Chinese to America is excelled in importance by no other event since the discovery of the New World.”²⁵

Beyond the metahistorical, Speer highlighted other evidence to support his conviction. For instance, the Americans and Chinese, though very different in respects, were much alike, which suggested something more than mere accident. Indeed, their countries resembled each other more than any others on earth: they both enjoyed great stretches of land of similar size, geographies, and climates; their national personalities had much in common (both peoples were “naturally thoughtful, earnest, acquisitive and enterprising”); and they were analogous even politically, with neither ruled by a nobility (Speer must have been thinking of the Chinese administration staffed by those who passed the imperial examination system) and each country “now in the travail of a change from old bondage and febleness to new power, light and influence” (Speer might have been thinking about the aftermaths of the Civil War and Taiping Rebellion). All in all, Speer predicted that a wonderful day was coming “when many millions of Chinese will be dispersed over the Pacific coast, the Mississippi Valley,” Mexico, Central America, South America, and all the islands of the Pacific. He pointed out that Americans needed to learn from the tragic experience with the African, which eventuated in a “stupendous and calamitous civil war,” and embrace “the race whom He is now bringing to our shores.” The Chinese, Speer warned, are “so incomparably greater than the negro in numbers, in civilization, in capacity to bestow immense benefits on our land or to inflict upon it evils which may end in its ruin.” He hoped his book would help prepare his audience for this new racial group—God’s divine plan would bring great changes to America, to the rest of Asia, to the islands of the Pacific, and to all the peoples of the whole New World. Their “destiny,” he wrote “is to be decided by the influences that shall proceed from the United States and China.”²⁶

Speer devoted most of his book to recounting China’s long history, its arts, habits, and ways, drawing from existing scholarship and his own ethnographic investigation and personal experiences, but the emotional

and intellectual heart of his work was a sympathetic discussion of the actual arrival of the Chinese in America. He conceded that much was unfortunate and tragic in that history, and he maintained that the Chinese, for whom he clearly had affection and respect, deserved none of the brutal mistreatment and political approbation heaped upon them by white Americans. Their behavior was unchristian, un-American, and, in Speer's view, likely to be harmful ultimately to America itself. The Chinese would accept only so much abuse before they would rise to correct the injustice, he wrote. Speer reminded his readers that Napoleon Bonaparte himself warned of such a development, if the West continued to mistreat the Chinese. "In the course of time," Napoleon once declared, the Chinese will take up the battle and "defeat you." But the heart of Speer's effort to win favor for the Chinese immigrant was his argument, which he reiterated throughout his book, that the arrival of the Chinese to America must be seen as the working of God's will. The Chinese appearance was actually their *return* to the North American continent, which their ancestors, in God's plan, had settled in the distant eons. They had been sent "to occupy the New World until the appointed time" when "the Protestant Christian nations" came to transform the continent. Now the Chinese immigrant signaled the great reunion of the "two great streams of civilization" that had separated long ago when one went west and the other east. The "peculiar glory," "the great Ruler of nations," had made America the place where the unification of humankind would occur!²⁷

Speer's support of the Chinese immigrant had the support of many of his fellow church leaders who wanted as much access as possible to the Chinese, be they in China or in America, to further their evangelical mission. They possessed a confidence from their ensured belief that the Chinese could be as Christianized and elevated as other Americans as long as they had access to the Word. It seemed that God was physically bringing Chinese to Christian America for their conversion and through them would effect the transformation of their homeland and verily the rest of the world.

The ideas of commerce, evangelism, power, moral purpose, and immigration all came together in the fertile thinking of William H. Seward. After retiring as secretary of state in 1869, Seward left for a grand tour around the globe. Notably, he traveled westward from the East overland to the Pacific Coast, as he wanted to see America's Far West himself before he traveled to the Far East. He visited Japan and China and then stayed in Hong Kong from late December 1870 to mid-January 1871. He offered fascinating comments about American-Chinese relations at the U.S. consulate that are worthwhile reproducing here at length.

At the time, Seward was one of America's most senior and respected political figures. He had been an early, firm abolitionist, had opposed slavery and racial prejudice on moral and ethical grounds, and had himself nearly been martyred in a vicious attempt on his life in his own home that was part of the plot against President Lincoln. Seward favored free Chinese immigration and was the actual, secret author of the 1868 Burlingame Treaty, the most equitable and favorable treaty China concluded with any Western nation in the nineteenth century. (See the epigraphs that begin this essay.) Free immigration was one of the central elements of the treaty but was eviscerated by the legislation of the 1880s.²⁸ His comments in Hong Kong focused on the great importance of the Pacific for America, with particular reference to the place of China in America's future, and were substantially reproduced by the *New York Times* back in the States:

I do not undervalue missionary laborers in China, but I look for the practical advancement of civilization in China chiefly to commerce—commerce across the Pacific Ocean, commerce by steam across the American Continent and across the Atlantic Ocean. . . . Say what they may the whole world cannot prevent the commerce from regenerating China and Japan. There is no measure to its expansion and enlargement, because a trade that is firmly established must be destined to great increase. The free emigration of the Chinese to the American and other foreign continents will tend to increase the wealth and strength of all Western nations; while, at the same time, the removal of the surplus population of China will tend much to take away the obstructions which now impede the introduction into China of art, science, morality, religion. . . . [The policy of the United States has been] the practice of equal and exact justice toward China and the Chinese. When that shall have been completed and we are able to show ourselves willing

to render justice, it will be in our right to make increased demands for an extension of commercial facilities. The railroads, a telegraph, a free Press, all may be attained by foreign nations who are just to China, and who leave mankind to decide.²⁹

Seward and many other powerful, elite Americans who shared his vision opposed restricting Chinese immigration to America. Restriction was unjust *and* self-destructive. Immigration restriction, in the view of Seward and others, would damage American ambitions in Asia. Indeed, U.S. efforts to advance its interests in Asia were on the ascendancy.³⁰ Many capitalists, traders, entrepreneurs, boosters of westward expansion and Pacific commerce, and religious leaders, like Seward, accepted, and even promoted, Chinese entry into America. It was all part of America's destiny in Asia, at least in their view. In 1876, William W. Hollister, one of California's wealthiest men, represented this commercial viewpoint. Before a state commission investigating Chinese immigration, he openly declared, "I say, fully, freely, and emphatically, that the Chinese should be allowed to come" to California without restriction if the state was to enjoy prosperity!³¹

Throughout the 1870s, proponents of Chinese immigration at the local and regional levels, led by powerful employers and landowners such as Hollister, repeatedly thwarted the efforts of anti-Chinese forces, but then in the late 1870s, widespread social unrest and political disaffection in the West fueled the belief that the Chinese were labor competitors and louder demands for federal efforts to control their entry into the country. But even then, exclusionist efforts were still repeatedly frustrated. In 1879, a coalition of politicians from western and southern states succeeded in passing the so-called Fifteen Passenger Bill to limit the number of Chinese passengers an American ship would be permitted to carry to the United States, but President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed the bill, maintaining that the unilateral action on the part of the United States would contradict the provisions of the Burlingame Treaty and could harm Americans, "merchants or missionaries," who were then in China. Hayes pointedly reminded the public that the existing relationship with China was one of "peace and amity" and of "growing commerce and prosperity."³²

In early 1882, Congress again passed an anti-Chinese immigration bill, but President Chester Arthur also vetoed it, using language even stron-

ger than that of Hayes. In the public explanation for his action, Arthur emphasized the importance of upholding the country's treaty obligations with China but also reminded the nation that Chinese labor had brought great benefit to the country. The Chinese "were largely instrumental in constructing the railways which connect the Atlantic with the Pacific," he wrote in his long veto message. The tremendous growth of the states on the Pacific slope was further evidence of the importance of the Chinese to the American domestic economy, he declared, and limiting their numbers might harm regions of the country where the Chinese could still be "advantageously employed." And more, "Experience has shown," Arthur lectured, "the trade of the East is the key to national wealth and influence," and it was the American West that had gained the most from that trade. "San Francisco has before it an incalculable future if our friendly and amicable relations with Asia remain undisturbed." Arthur warned that imprudent legislation against Chinese immigration could drive Asia's "trade and commerce" away from America and toward others more friendly to the Chinese. Proponents of the anti-Chinese measures could not muster enough support to override the veto.³³

Arthur's reasoning closely followed that of George F. Seward, William Seward's nephew, who had spent twenty years as a representative of the United States in China. In 1881, he also publicly condemned the anti-Chinese sentiment that was growing in the West. George Seward, like his uncle, was passionately antirestrictionist, and in 1881 he published one of the longest and most reasoned rebuttals against the restriction movement. In his more than 400-page study, he argued, "Is it not time then, in view of the qualities exhibited by Chinamen on our own soil, in view of the illiberality which has characterized our treatment of them, in view of the progress which China is herself making, and in view of our common humanity, to drop this cry that the Chinese do not assimilate, and to devote ourselves to a policy which will be more just at the moment and which will conduce to build up relations of enduring respect and profit between the two great nations of the opposite coasts of the Pacific?"³⁴

Sympathy for the points of view of William and George Seward had helped defeat repeated efforts to pass anti-Chinese legislation. But changing political conditions in the country were tipping the scales against those

who favored continued open immigration from China. The Compromise of 1877 ending federal Reconstruction marked the resurrection of racist politics nationally, represented largely by the Democratic Party and the return of a white South to national prominence. The anti-black South was becoming a powerful political ally of the anti-Chinese elements in the West—West-South coalitions formed the heart of restriction efforts in Congress.³⁵ The Democrats would actually take the White House in 1884—the previous presidential victory of the Democratic Party had been way back in 1856. Economic depression and white labor unrest also swept the country in the late 1870s. Paradoxically, it was the fulfillment of the dreams of Manifest Destiny boosters and developers that created conditions that anti-Chinese agitators exploited. Chinese had begun to populate the West; the railroads, built with Chinese labor, enabled whites to populate the Far West; and the very growth of the West, which had been encouraged by the lure of the Far East and trade, enhanced the domestic political importance of California, Oregon, and the Washington Territory. Now that section could not be ignored by the eastern establishment, which had formed the bulwark of sentiment supporting open immigration.

And importantly, the predatory ambitions of European nations and Japan, which were then actually seizing Chinese territory and eroding regional prerogatives, heightened the security concerns of the Chinese elite. Beijing believed America's goodwill was needed to counterbalance the other aggressive foreign powers. Worried that the rising sentiment against Chinese laborers, whose welfare was of little concern to the imperial court, might jeopardize American friendship, Beijing signaled its willingness to accept immigration restriction. This new attitude was expressed in the Angell Treaty of 1880, in which Beijing expressed it might accept moderate immigration limitations while keeping its own doors open to American traders and missionaries. The issues of immigration to America and pursuit of trade began to decouple, and in May 1882 President Arthur finally signed revised legislation that *suspended* the entry of Chinese laborers into the country for the next ten years. The bill also had other provisions acknowledging the rights of reentry of Chinese already in the country, exempting ten "classes" of other Chinese, such as merchants, teachers, and travelers, from exclusion, and explicitly recognizing other

allowances and important protections for the Chinese. The bill was seen as a compromise between diplomacy and domestic political sentiment, but it still failed to mollify the exclusionists. For more than the next two decades, they agitated for more stringent restrictions against the continued entry of Chinese into the country. Washington did take further efforts in 1884, 1888, 1893, 1894, 1902, and 1904, the number of efforts as much an indication of the persistence of the exclusionists as of the difficulty in getting what they wanted. Actual Chinese exclusion was constructed over a long period of time and was far from ever being a foregone conclusion, let alone an inevitability.³⁶

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Notes

1. *Banquet to His Excellency Anson Burlingame and His Associates of the Chinese Embassy by the Citizens of New York on Tuesday, June 23, 1868* (New York: Sun Book and Job Printing House, 1868), 47.
2. *Reception and Entertainment of the Chinese Embassy by the City of Boston* (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1868), 19.
3. The 1882 act is officially titled the Act to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese and was first known commonly as the Chinese Restriction Act. Only later was it called the Exclusion Act. See Beth Lew-Williams, “The Chinese Must Go: Immigration, Deportation and Violence in the 19th Century Pacific Northwest” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2011); Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 147–49; and Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1939), 96–108.
4. The literature on Chinese exclusion includes Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gates: Race, Politics and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca,

- N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); Erika Lee, *At America's Gate: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868–1911* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1983).
5. See Moon Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 33–38.
 6. Karen Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 152–59; Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West and American Ideals," commencement address, University of Washington, June 17, 1914, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 290–310.
 7. Thomas Jefferson, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1892–1899)8:194. On Jefferson's global vision, see Alan Taylor, "Jefferson's Pacific: The Science of Distant Empire, 1768–1811," in *Across the Continent: Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and the Making of America*, ed. Douglas Seefeldt, Jeffrey L. Hantman, and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 16–44.
 8. Foster Rhea Dulles, *China and America: The Story of Their Relations since 1784* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946), 32; Charles H. Ambler, *The Life and Diary of John Floyd: Governor of Virginia, an Apostle of Secession, and the Father of the Oregon Country* (Richmond, Va.: Richmond Press, 1918), 65–75.
 9. Robert Russel, *Improvement of Communication with the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1948), 11; and Foster Stockwell, *Westerners in China: A History of Exploration and Trade, Ancient Times through the Present* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003); Dulles, *China and America*, 33–34.
 10. James K. Polk, "Third Annual Address," December 7, 1847; Michael P. Riccards, *The Presidency and Middle Kingdom: China, the United States, and Executive Leadership* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000), 18.
 11. Asa Whitney, *Project for a Railroad to the Pacific* (New York: George W. Wood, 1849).
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. "China and the Indies—Our 'Manifest Destiny' in the East," *DeBow's Review* 15, no. 6 (December 1853): 541–71.
 14. Peter Parker, Diary, box 4, journal 5, April 1, 1832, Peter Parker Collection, Yale University.
 15. David Abeel, *Journal of a Residence in China and the Neighboring Countries* (New York: J. Abeel Williamson, 1836), 141–43.
 16. Clifton J. Phillips, "The Student Volunteer Movement and Its Role in China Missions, 1886–1920," in *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*,

- ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 91–109; Barlow and Eddy quotes from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “Missionary Enterprise and Imperialism,” in Fairbank, *Missionary Enterprise*, 356.
17. Charles Ernest Scott, *China from Within: Impressions and Experiences* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1917), 10, 90.
 18. Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 156, 312; William Speer, *The Oldest and the Newest Empire: China and the United States* (Hartford, Conn.: S.S. Scranton, 1870), 24.
 19. Jack Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 76–79; James R. Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 51–52; and Karen Eppler-Sanchez, “Copying and Conversion: A Connecticut Friendship Album from ‘a Chinese Youth,’” *American Quarterly* 59 (June 2007): 301–39.
 20. Quoted in John H. Schroeder, “Rep. John Floyd, 1817–1829: Harbinger of Oregon Territory,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 1969): 341.
 21. Dulles, *China and America*, 33.
 22. *Congressional Globe* 29, no. 1 (1846): 917–18.
 23. “Survey of the Arctic and Pacific Oceans,” July 29, 1852, in *The Works of William H. Seward, 1801–1872* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 1:236–53.
 24. Speer, *Oldest and Newest Empire*, 3–6.
 25. *Ibid.*, 25–26, 36–41.
 26. *Ibid.*, 28–31.
 27. *Ibid.*, 437–92, 638, 664.
 28. The Burlingame Treaty is named for Anson Burlingame, the leader of the first Chinese diplomatic mission to Washington, D.C. President Lincoln had appointed Burlingame as American minister to China, but the Qing court so appreciated his respectful and helpful attitude that, after he retired as the U.S. representative, it appointed Burlingame as its “envoy extraordinaire and minister plenipotentiary” to represent China to the United States and European nations. Burlingame and Seward were close personally and professionally, and Seward actually drafted the treaty that Burlingame presented to the Grant administration and to the Qing court.
 29. “Hon. William H. Seward: His Departure from Hong-Kong—Reception and Speech at the American Consulate,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1871, 2.
 30. Gordon H. Chang, “Whose ‘Barbarism’? Whose ‘Treachery’?: Race and Civilization in the Unknown United States-Korea War of 1871,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (March 2003): 1331–65.
 31. Hollister quote from Tsai, *Chinese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 58.
 32. Tsai, *Chinese Experience in America*, 57–58; Hayes, Veto Message, March 1, 1879, HeinOnline, 9 Comp. Messages & Papers Pres. n.s. 4466 1897. Hayes

received much support for the veto. The well-known missionary/diplomat S. Wells Williams had the entire faculty of Yale College sign his petition to Hayes that condemned the passenger bill. Hayes's veto message reproduced several of the arguments Williams advanced. "The needlessness, the unwisdom, the ridiculousness, and the dishonor of the Bill are all about equal," Williams believed. "It is all a bid for votes from the lowest strata on the Pacific coast." See Frederick Wells Williams, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams* (New York: Putnam, 1889), 427–31.

33. Veto Message, April 4, 1882, HeinOnline, 11 Comp. Messages & Papers Pres. 4699 1897.
34. George F. Seward, *Chinese Immigration in Its Social and Economic Aspects* (New York: Scribner, 1881), 260.
35. Milton R. Konvitz, *The Alien and the Asiatic in American Law* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1946), 10–12.
36. Gyory, *Closing the Gates*, 215–16, 248–59; Lew-Williams, "Chinese Must Go," 44–47; Delber L. McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900–1906* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 15–27.