

# The sordid economy: Gender and disease in nineteenth century labor struggles

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**Damning exposés of disease, degeneracy, and filth bubbling forth from the borders of Chinatown populate the pages of California books and newspapers from the 1850s-1900s. Anti-Chinese writers frequently portrayed the immigrants as a spreading cancer, a destructive force, or a poison. Moral arguments, political arguments, and economic arguments formed the three main pillars of anti-Chinese causes, while labor advocacy groups, such as the Workingman's Party of California and the Knights of Labor formed some of the strongest anti-Chinese critics. However, while hysteria about physical force and rape dominated discourse surrounding African Americans – the other major group unable to access “whiteness” well into the 1900s – disease became the driving force in defining Chinese threats and difference. How and why did this characterization develop? This paper will argue that white men built off the 1800s' gendered conceptions of race and nation to understand and construct Chinese men as effeminate, and then used this gendered portrayal to demonize Chinese labor as a vessel for perversion and disease. This formed the foundation of white men's attempts to protect their own economic interests.**

## The Feminization of Chinese Men

“To the Caucasian race, with its varied types, has been assigned the supremacy in elevation of the mind and beauty of form over all mankind.”<sup>1</sup> With these words published in 1862, Dr. Arthur Stout displayed the Social Darwinist ideals that human races, like animals, evolved according to the dictates of survival of the fittest. Granting white males the highest rung on the evolutionary ladder, Dr. Stout and other Social Darwinists bolstered the confidence of an American manhood shaken by shifting economic environments, endowing it with the responsibility of leading the international system and the glory of taking the first steps toward racial perfection. Naturally appealing to a nation struggling with immigration and Western expansion, many Social Darwinist thinkers used Darwin's ideals to justify exploitive capitalism and colonization on the basis of the supposed weakness of non-whites.<sup>2</sup>

In America, theories of manliness came to imbue the Social Darwinist hierarchy with gendered characteristics – visions of races developing into higher races over time morphed into metaphors for the way boys grew into men over time. As the most highly developed of all the races, white men illustrated “the achievement of a per-

fect man, just as civilization of a perfect race.”<sup>3</sup> Lower races, on the other hand, had not yet completed the boy-man development track, thereby supporting an inability to ever become true men in one lifetime. As one 19th century anthropologist stated, “The intellect – the mental strength – the moral beauty, all...harmonize perfectly with the growth of the beard, and when that has reached its full development, it is both the signal and the proof of mature manhood... The Caucasian,” he emphasized, “is the only bearded race.”<sup>4</sup> Such rhetoric illustrated the belief that “savage men were emotional and lacked a man's ability to restrain their passions...Savage men even dressed like women.”<sup>5</sup> By focusing on the blurring of genders in other races and the effeminate habits of non-white men, white men could emphasize the continuation of their own manliness.

Extending gendered notion of race, nations as a whole became associated with their populations so strongly that America as a whole earned masculine traits in comparison to the feminine characters of other countries. America's perceived position of world caretaker cemented this vision, seen strongly in cartoons such as “The White Man's Burden” that portrayed a strong American male lifting a skirt- and jewelry-wearing non-white man toward

civilization.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, political cartoons generally illustrated nations as people and America as Uncle Sam or another man, cementing the idea of nations as single bodies and of the American body as a masculine one.

While America became a masculine figure in such bodies, China became a feminine one. Political cartoonists drew Chinese men as weak, bent, twisted, and sleazy, in comparison to the straight, upright figure of the American male.<sup>7</sup> Even across the sea, several Chinese thinkers posited the “yellow” race and the “white” race in similar terms. Adapting Western ideas of Social Darwinism in their own way, writers such as Yi Nai, in his 1898 essay, “China Should Take Its Weakness for Strength,” applied a male-female binary to the international trans-Pacific discourse. Feminine China, graceful and soft, provided a natural counterpart to the strength and aggressiveness of America in his vision.<sup>8</sup> While Nai's rhetoric used such differences to display interdependence rather than the insurmountable barrier to assimilation that many Americans saw, his work displays the strength that gendered races – specifically the feminine Chinese perception – held in the late 19th century.

## The Labor of Chinese Men

In the fight against Chinese immigration, fears of Chinese male labor rose to the forefront, as anti-immigration activists painted Chinese laborers as a contagion that would undermine the integrity of American workers and the health of the nation itself. Rhetoric turned the contest between Chinese and American laborers into a battle between the two nations, pitting the races' supposed values, ideals, and living standards against each other. America's economic troubles of the late 1800s, therefore, became the source of much of the anti-Chinese sentiment of the period, as racialized and feminized portrayals of Chinese men rose as weapons in the fight for white employment.

When the first large wave of Chinese male immigrants arrived on US shores in the 1840s, they were welcomed as cheap labor, a supposedly more docile alternative to black slaves in the South and a new, affordable labor force for the sparsely settled West.<sup>9</sup> “Ingenious, industrious and submissive,” Chinese men accepted low wages, menial jobs, and low living standards.<sup>10</sup> Employers perceived them as docile and diligent, and best of all, they sent much

of their money back to China, seemingly showing no desire to settle in America permanently.<sup>11</sup> Labor-scarce California especially looked toward Chinese immigrants as an important force in mining and building railroads; however, when Australian gold discoveries in 1853 caused California mining to collapse, the recent influx of Chinese miners became an immediate and visible scapegoat. As a 1924 textbook explained, “to these unemployed men, the presence of thousands of Chinese, thrifty, industrious, cheap, and above all, un-American, was obviously the cause of their plight.”<sup>12</sup> The Panic of 1873, in which an agricultural drought, the burst of a speculation bubble, and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad combined to topple Californian employment rates, only threw more kindling on the anti-Chinese-labor fire.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout this series of recessions, the stereotypes that had previously formed the strongest selling points for Chinese labor transformed into its fiercest condemnations. Chinese men’s acceptance of low wages turned into a symptom of slimy servility, their thriftiness in living came to reveal their base nature – all traits rhetoricians used to paint them as unfit to work aside Americans. In 1870, well-known editorial writer John Swinton proclaimed, “We may look on the industrial contest between the Chinese and American races as a contest of the bunk against the bed, the roast rat against the roast beef – the baser side of life against the better.”<sup>14</sup> As the “roast rat against roast beef” image became iconic in the anti-Chinese labor struggle, Chinese men were painted as the antithesis of the time’s manly ideals. They ate and slept in packed communal areas, seemingly as animals, and had no visible families to support. Employers did all of America a disservice by hiring these Chinese laborers, such rhetoric implied, as the Chinese would eventually erode living conditions for all workers in America. The battle against Chinese laborers, therefore, became shaped as a battle to defend Americans’ standards of living as men, not as beasts.

Just as anti-Chinese groups argued that Chinese laborers would weaken the standards of the entire labor market in America, they attempted to show Chinamen as using their labor as a treacherous way to gain Americans’ trust before a grand betrayal. Rather than fighting upright like a true man, Chinese men would act in a cravenly, treacherous, and more feminine way to harm the American nation. Doc-

tor Arthur B. Stout vividly decried what he saw as this underhanded method of attack: “Better would it be for our country that the hordes of Genghis Khan should overflow the land, and with armed hostility devastate our vallies with the sabre and the fire-brand, than that these more pernicious hosts, in the garb of friends, should insidiously poison the well-springs of life, and spreading far and wide, gradually undermine and corrode the vitals of our strength and prosperity.”<sup>15</sup> Brought to America to contribute to the economy, Stout believed the Chinese would slowly eat away at the nation’s prosperity from the inside. The act of an obedient laborer here becomes a mere ploy to gain access to America, showing employers the betrayal they commit to the entire future of their nation by hiring Chinamen.

Even the most anti-Chinese groups rarely portrayed the immigrants as instigators of direct aggression. The Wasp, a fiercely anti-Chinese San Franciscan publication, consistently caricatured the Chinese as deceitful parasites dependent on others’ foolish trust. The Wasp’s 1877 cartoon “The Modern ‘Old Man and the Sea’” presents an excerpt from “Sinbad the Sailor” about a man who tricked Sinbad into carrying him by acting old and crippled, and creates a comparison to the Chinese by drawing a Chinaman atop the shoulders of Lady Eureka, a symbol of California.<sup>16</sup> In this image, not only must the Chinaman resort to trickery to gain his life’s support from others’ strength, he has made himself dependent on a woman – a gender reversal strengthening the line between weak Chinese men and ideal white men who are strong enough to support others. Another satire, an 1879 play entitled “The Chinese Must Go,” connected these themes more explicitly to the labor market. After equating money to blood, as money buys food that, once digested, becomes blood, the main character asks, “What would you think of a man who would allow a lot of parasites to suck every day a certain quantity of blood out of his body... And suppose these Chinese parasites should suck as much blood out of every State in the Union, destroying Uncle Sam’s sinews and muscles, how many years do you think it would take to put him in his grave?”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in the face of Chinese labor, the white race is not killed outright, but rather slowly bled out, weakened until it can stand no longer.

Through these threats to labor, the themes of feminization previously ex-

plored by this paper appear as a method by which to emphasize the danger and treachery inherent in Chinese labor. Anti-Chinese labor pamphlets continuously focused on the stereotypically feminine jobs that Chinese men took on – due to their position in the gendered racial hierarchy Chinese males taking on feminine work was both expected, and seen as suspect. This emphasis further serves to illustrate how “against an emergent heterosexual and dimorphic order, Oriental sexuality was constructed as ambiguous, inscrutable, and hermaphroditic,”<sup>18</sup> while enflaming deeper labor fears. In songs such as “Irish Widdy Woman” (1868) and stories such as “Poor Ah Toy,” Chinese men replaced Irish women in domestic-quality jobs, while a Wasp cartoon drove home the consequences of such employment thievery: a line of desperate women snaking from an unemployment office door, a Chinese servant snickering at their despair.<sup>18</sup> These labor groups expressed that not only did Chinese men lower the wages and living standards of American men to that of animals, they shamelessly stooped to scoop up women’s work.

Beyond exploring the women who lost their jobs to Chinese men, anti-Chinese labor groups continued to use the perversity and weakness they saw as inherent in Chinese men to render horrifying tales of the treachery posed by Chinese houseboys. In an 1879 narrative by the anti-Chinese Workingman’s Party of California (WPC), the Chinese servant abandons his manhood in order to steal jobs from true Americans that have “sex, and shame, and sense of propriety,” and then to worm his way into white families’ trust. “He is so perfectly compliant and neutral that Madam and the children come to regard him as a thing, as a dog or a monkey,” the pamphlet explains.<sup>19</sup> As middle-class white men labored to solidify their own image of masculinity, fear surrounded these seemingly inscrutable creatures, these seeming not-men who were willing to take on tasks from washing dishes to cleaning bathrooms. The mistress of the house will soon become too complacent around her seemingly passion-less aid, says the pamphlet, and then, insidiously, “the manners of the harem are introduced. The lady is taught all the luxuries of the East. She is now a pupil, and John her teacher... Thus our dames are acquiring strange, outlandish ways. Thus the luxury and debauchery of the Orient are brought into the houses of the rich.”<sup>20</sup> This rheto-

ric concurrently shapes Chinese men into a silent yet lurking presence and echoes themes of manhood's reservation for the most highly evolved species. Too weak to fight the white race head-on as men, Chinese men must enter as Trojan horses into white homes, to take the cravenly route of subversion of women rather than upright confrontation.

Deepening California's recessionary mire by replacing American men at lower wage levels, sacrificing their dignity and sexuality to live in squalor and perform women's work, and using labor as a tool through which to undermine social values, the Chinaman, as portrayed by California labor groups, was a fearsome beast indeed. At the same time, by continuing to emphasize the weakness and cowardly tactics of the Chinese, such rhetoric showed that only when Americans voluntarily allowed Chinese entry, could they do the social order any harm. This idea encouraged white employers to present a united front against Chinese labor's seduction, discouraging such hiring by laying the responsibility on Americans to keep their nation pure and strong.

### Chinese Labor and Disease

Beyond explaining explicit economic threats and the social perversion that Chinese men brought to America, anti-Chinese rhetoric decried the threat they posed to American bodies, and therefore to the nation itself. Just as bodies and bodily ideals grew in importance for manliness in the late 1800s, so did ideas of protecting the body of American superiority. When "white" becomes a synonym for "superior" and "race" becomes a synonym for "nation," an attack on any one of these aspects becomes an attack on all of them. Dr. Stout connected the circle between national sickness and bodily sickness in the late 1800s, writing that "The abuse of the human system, insidiously gnaws into each individual body, undermines the strength and beauty of God's noblest work, and thence penetrates, cancer-like, into the social, religious, and political system."<sup>21</sup> In this view, each body is a building block of the societal pyramid – on which, of course, white civilization rests at the top. The physical strength of white manhood protects the superiority of white society, while the feminine sickness of Chinese immigrants threatens it.

Associating syphilis and leprosy specifically with Chinese immigrants magnified the type of degeneration that Chinese

lifestyles and habits would cause in America. Many people in the 1890s considered these diseases hereditary, a point that emphasized the unalterable difference of the Chinese race and an internal inability to assimilate. According to Shah, "By equating leprosy's disfiguration, disintegration, and dehumanization of the body with Chineseness, medical discourse could recalibrate notions of incommensurate racial difference."<sup>22</sup> Pamphlets and "tour guides" of Chinatown, provided the public of sensationalistic accounts of "forms of vice, which in other countries are barely named, are, in China so common that they excite no comment among the natives."<sup>23</sup> These "Chinese paradise[s] of filth" bred diseases and physical degeneracy that sat lurking inside every Chinese body.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, diseases such as syphilis could sit dormant within bodies for years, evoking an image of Chinese-caused decay slowly eating America from the inside out – an image that echoes the treachery and betrayal seen in Chinamen. Portrayals of Chinese diseases as more virulent than those among whites, as seen in the segregation of lepers and smallpox patients by race<sup>25</sup> and in testimony to the Special Committee on Chinese Immigration in 1877-78<sup>26</sup> maintained unbreakable lines between Chinese people and their Chinatown backgrounds, and these backgrounds and disease.

Due to the equation of Chinese people as a single intrusion onto the American national body, the rhetoric of quarantine arose as the only way to keep the white race safe. Every American that hired a Chinese laborer opened a pore in the national body through which contagion could easily slide. The Anti-Chinese Council wrote that as Chinamen gained work among whites, "a perfect network of contagion and infection is created, a veritable octopus of disease, having its seat in Chinatown and its infectious arms thrust into every house of the city."<sup>27</sup> Labor groups railed at the idea that Americans might hire "diseased Chinamen" to "manufacture cigars in underground localities in an atmosphere that reeks with deadly vapors," or to wash American clothes amidst slime.<sup>28</sup> Slowly gaining Americans' trust, Chinese men entered the labor market only to penetrate white homes and thrust into white bodies incurable disease.

With their twisted gender performance, having achieved access to Americans' most intimate moments, Chinese houseboys carried their inherent connec-

tion to Chinatown diseases into the bodies of the children in their care. The WPC pamphlet emphasizes the physical, bodily threat of Chinese men as a tool to urge readers to never forget their houseboys' true nature: "But we say to the housekeepers themselves: Follow your Chinese servant to his abiding place in Chinatown... There he lies down with five or six others... Can he be a safe companion who has slept with the leper, and in the infectious breath of syphilis and small pox? Bah!"<sup>29</sup> Here, the way Chinamen use their daytime docility to induce their employers into forgetting their roots serves to underscore their deceitful ways. The connection to gender remains, disease being characterized by the deceitfulness of a false man rather than the visibility of a fair fight, while warning Americans against letting Chinese laborers anywhere near their homes.

Chinese habits outside of their labor, furthermore, seduced white men into anti-capitalist activities that threatened America's health in the eyes of anti-Chinese activists. Despite the unity the white race required to prevent Chinese disease, opium's lure was strong enough to induce white men and women to enter Chinatown of their own accord, and the act of its smoking implied all the sexual and moral transgressions that middle-class manliness worked so hard to repress. While smoking opium, men passed pipes from mouth to mouth, thereby accepting the threat of physical contagion in their partaking of the Chinese social vice. The Anti-Chinese Council wrote that leprosy "is infused into our healthy race by the using, the sucking of opium-pipes, which have been handled by those already afflicted."<sup>30</sup> Consistently reminding readers of the physical disease smokers accepted into their mouths along with the drug, the Council created a tight knot between social downfall and physical degeneration.

While the smoking of opium itself, in the dizziness, paleness, and weight loss it often caused, brought men farther and farther from the manly physical ideal of bulky strength, the feminine mental state it created seemed just as sickly. The emphasis on sucking sets the white men in dependency to the Chinese providers of the drug, creating a reversal of the racial power hierarchy. Furthermore, due to the whites as masculine, Asians as feminine gender binary, this power reversal implies an even more unsettling inversion of gender roles. Viewers emphasized the economic effects

of this decline, warning it brought “idleness, debauchery, poverty.” Weakening the American workforce, luring them to spend their hard-earned money in unproductive, degenerating ways, the Chinese habit of opium developed into yet another alarm anti-Chinese activists could ring in visualizing Chinamen’s debilitating effect on economic progress.

### Conclusion

Enflaming the population with the rhetorical tactics of disease and economic decay, the WPC and other anti-Chinese labor groups spearheaded efforts through the 1870s that led to riots, lynchings of Chinese immigrants, and ultimately anti-Chinese legislation. By seemingly stealing jobs out from underneath white men’s feet during the difficult economic times in which they needed them most, Chinese men threatened the authority to which white men felt Social Darwinism had granted them the right. Therefore, while increasingly pursuing an athletic physical ideal and high moral values themselves throughout this period, white men cast inherent sickness into the Chinese body at the same time it feminized its portrayal. Chinese men transmitted their threat in feminine ways, through bowing and scraping to enter white families’ good graces; through the mental seduction of mothers in the home and men in the opium den; through the voluntary adoption of feminine work; through deceit, sneakiness, and sleaze. The one way Chinese men never threatened white men was through a solid, upright fight. By intertwining the factors of gender, race, and illness, American anti-Chinese rhetoric attempted to separate Chinese men permanently from the ability to contribute productively to the American workforce, and, therefore, from the healthy American body as a whole.

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