EARLY CHINESE IMMIGRANTS AND THE UNITED STATES CENSUS

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ABSTRACT: The United States census is not a completely objective exercise in information gathering. Its categories and emphases may be read as a text of the groups American society considers fundamentally different and perhaps threatening. Chinese immigrants before the law to restrict their immigration in 1882, received inordinate attention from the census because they were perceived as a threat to American progress, particularly in the West. Partly in reaction to this surveillance and partly because of cultural barriers, Chinese were often recorded incorrectly in name or number in the census. When using the census to follow migrational patterns of any immigrant group, one should be careful to note the distortions that may exist because of cultural obstacles.

From the mid 1800s through the early 1900s, Chinese in the United States were a beleaguered minority. Due to combination of racism and intense economic competition, Chinese were the target of discrimination, hostility and ultimately legislated exclusion. In this paper, I want to briefly examine how early Chinese fit into the idea of the census and how, in their precarious social position, some Chinese avoided accurate detection by the census. The goal is two-fold: one, to argue that census design has been strongly influenced by social and political assumptions of normalcy and categorization and, two, to encourage a critical approach when using the census as a tool for research in historical geography. For context, I will first briefly trace the path that led Chinese to this dubious, special position in United States' society.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Chinese immigrants came originally in the 1850s from southern China, particularly rural areas around Canton. While there were merchants among them, most were peasants in the middle or lower economic classes. This source region was within the periphery of the world economic system. It was also an area of bloody conflict in the 1850s and 1860s. But its proximity to Canton and Hong Kong gave those with desire and good fortune the chance to migrate to Gold Rush California, a resource frontier where, for less than a decade after the discovery of gold, wealth was easy to come by.

Xenophobia was also easy to come by in frontier California. In 1850, a foreign miners' tax was instituted aimed primarily at the newcomers from Latin America. By 1852, a similar miners tax was enacted, aimed at Chinese, and it increased to exorbitant levels by (Chiu 1963, 10-18). But when it did, Chinese left the gold districts, and revenue went down, so the tax was lowered. The Chinese then came back to the gold country and provided the state of California with half of its tax revenue through the early 1860s. In 1862, state assemblyman, John Benton, remarked, "There is not a county government in the mining counties that could live but for the taxes paid by Chinese" (Coolidge 1909, 69).

Harassment of Chinese by tax collectors, such as overcharging and violent attacks for non-payment, were often reported. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associated reported

11 Chinese killed by tax collectors in 1862 alone (Kung 1962, 67). These were the first cases of Chinese being sought out by American officials, and the results were not promising for the Chinese.

Although Chinese immigrants were subjected to racism and discrimination from most sectors of the population in the West, they were able to avoid serious conflict in the 1850s and 1860s by working old gold claims and jobs such as railroad building in which few whites were interested. Their meager pay by California standards were still five-to-ten times the wages in the Canton region. The avoidance of conflict among Chinese was often wrongly considered a sign of weakness. In fact, as a small minority, they simply redirected their strength away from futile conflict toward adaptation.

In the 1870s, however, the California economy, linked by rail to the national economy, took a turn for the worse, and the low pay of Chinese was erroneously seen as a major cause of lower wages overall. Anti-Chinese rhetoric and activity increased throughout the West, especially in San Francisco where laws were enacted against such Chinese activities as carrying cargo on a pole. In addition, anti-Chinese riots broke out in cities with significant Chinese populations, including Los Angeles and Eureka, CA. Anti-Chinese politics proved to be effective nationally during the 1870s. It was still the time of Reconstruction and anti-black statements could imply a dangerous secessionist leaning (Saxton 1971, 104). Since Chinese were a small minority, categorized as different, and also denied citizenship and the vote, they were politically powerless. Such impotence made them perfect scapegoats for the very real excess of Capital, to which they appeared subservient. The 1876 national platforms of both major parties included an anti-Chinese plank. In 1882, a federal law excluding all new Chinese laborers was finally enacted, not to be repealed until the height of pro-Chinese foreign policy in World War II.

CHINESE IN THE PUBLISHED CENSUS

How, then, do these early Chinese fit into the idea of the census? Hannah (1988) argued that the positivist thinkers who designed the late 19th century census saw American society as a great social body. This social body was represented by the "average man" who could be distilled from aggregate census responses. Deviations from the average could hinder the inexorable progress an otherwise harmonious American society world enjoy. An example is the introductory section of the 1890 census, entitled "Progress of the Nation." This section implicitly equated numerical growth in population, economy and the area of settled regions with progress and improvement. It also devoted a good deal of space to detailing the magnitude of deviance, comparing the growth of non-white groups with white. Within the white category, it also stressed the rapidly growing number of southern and eastern European immigrants and that, in time, with continued rapid growth, they would overtake those of northern and western European origin.

In late-nineteenth century America, particularly in the West where Chinese were concentrated, no group was accused more of being pathologically different from mainstream America than Chinese immigrants. San Francisco priest, Father James Bouchard, (1873, quoted in Daniels 1988) delivered the following diatribe about Chinese:

> The man or woman who would dismiss a faithful, virtuous servant because the wages were so much higher, to receive into the family one of these immoral creatures (Chinese), because he will work at a lower rate - that would expose the children to be contaminated and ruined by such a wretch, scarcely deserves the name of a human being...(the Chinese) are an idolatrous, vicious, corrupt and pusillanimous race (p. 50).

The linking of white supremacy with a concept of non-white as unfit human beings has been common among racist commentators referring to Native Americans and African American as well as Chinese immigrants. But in the case of Chinese, the issue of social harmony was more than simply the direct influence of their "depravity" on people and places where they lived. A further issue was the potential for violence, justified by many officials, that Chinese might provoke among "red-blooded, two-fisted" white rivals because of the low wages they had little choice to accept, as in this quote from the California Senate (1878):

> Is it not possible that free white labor, unable to compete with these foreign serfs, and perceiving its condition becoming slowly but inevitably more hopelessly abject, may unite in all the horrors of riot and insurrection, and defying the civil power, extirpate with fire and sword those who rob them of their bread, yet yield no tribute to the State? This is a frightful possibility, but we have within a brief period witnessed its portents, and had it not been for the untiring vigilance of the conservative portion of our people, we might have seen not only the Chinese quarters, but our cities, in ashes, and families homeless, and the prosperity and good fame of California shattered and disgraced (p. 64).

This warning of violent vigilante action served to extend the fear of Chinese beyond simple contact and beyond the space of the Chinese quarter or "Chinatown." It inspired visions of entire cities ruined because of the presence of as few as a handful of Chinese. Keeping track of even limited numbers of Chinese, then, was of utmost importance in compiling the census.

REGIONAL PERCEPTION OF CHINESE

Despite early resistance to their presence in California, on the national scale, Chinese were considered simply a regional phenomenon in 1860. Those born in China were listed by all states and territories under "nativities of the free population", but Chinese immigrants were only officially enumerated for California. The perception was that there were not even enough Chinese to count outside California, so the "problem" was theirs. For the rest of the country, Chinese were both out of sight and out of mind.

I believe not coincidentally that as the Chinese population grew in the late 19th century, they (along with American Indians) received an inordinate amount of attention in the published census. Despite their small numbers, Chinese were classified by themselves, separate from white, colored and indian in censuses from 1860 to 1880. Obviously, Chinese were not white, African or Indian, according to accepted American categories. But with their small numbers, particularly in 1860, they could have been easily recorded with asterisks or lower-case letters within white or colored tables as Japanese were recorded within the Chinese category, but the preoccupation of the census designers to classify by skin pigmentation and region of origin overpowered other considerations.

The key information in the census was, of course, not only how many but where. In 1870, the census reported 63,199 Chinese distributed by state as in figure 1. Almost 50,000 or 78% still lived in California, and only 151 were in the Northeastern quadrant. The rest were scattered throughout the western states as railroad workers, miners or laundrymen.

By 1880, the Chinese population had grown by 67% to over 105,000. Moreover, the share for California dropped to only 71% of the total (figure 2). The spatial trend was clearly toward a more evenly distributed Chinese population nationally. The lack of anti-Chinese feeling in the eastern US compared to the West was not the result of acceptance of Chinese as much as the fact that they were not present in the East in large numbers. The 1880 census showed an influx of hundreds of Chinese into major northeastern states. The totals

indicated that the Chinese were no longer simply California's regional "problem."

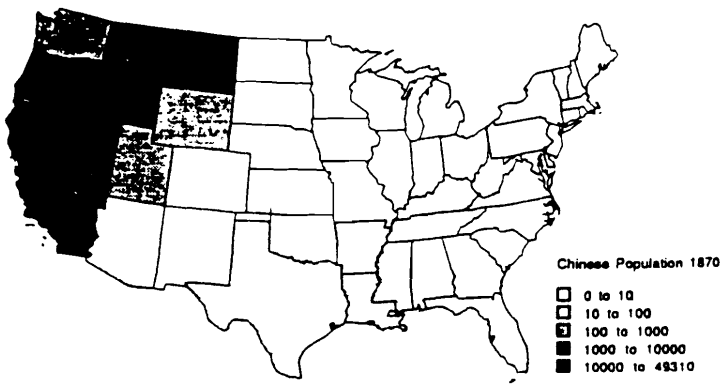

Figure 1

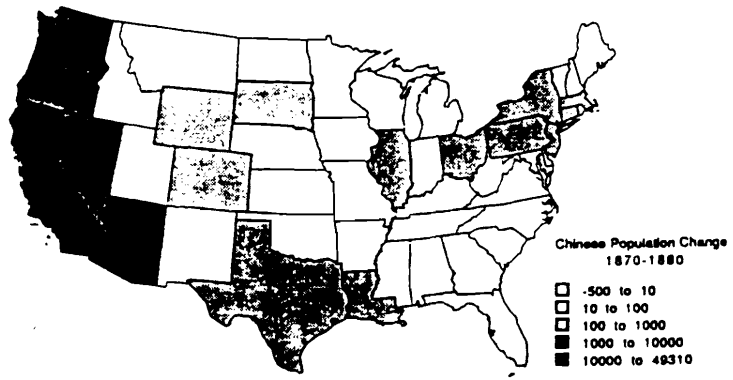

Figure 2

To understand the significance of the attention Chinese were receiving in the census, we should remember the timing of the law excluding Chinese workers. It passed through Congress in April 1882. The initial transmission of the 1880 census was on November 1, 1881. Much of the congressional debate about Chinese during the 5-month period between transmission of the census and passage of the law centered on the census. Western congressmen argued that the Chinese census count was too low, which it likely was, but it is inconceivable that 500,000 Chinese were in the US as some of them argued.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of voting by state on the 1882 Chinese exclusion act in the Senate (Congressional Record 1882, 3412). As early as 1880 the Chinese exclusion act passed Congress but was vetoed. Democrats in the South and any party in the West were solidly behind exclusion from the start, but the Republican Northeast was not. One of the factors in the success of the 1882 bill as opposed to earlier versions was that it picked up key Republican votes that it did not have before November 1881. Just enough of the North and East went for the bill to send a strong national message to the President that with only a 10-year trial duration, the bill should be enacted (earlier bills had called for a 20-year duration of exclusion). Although there were many political factors involved in the passage of this exclusion law, one cannot overlook the effect of the census which showed the spread of Chinese population and the potential for a "yellow wave" soon washing across each Senator's home state.

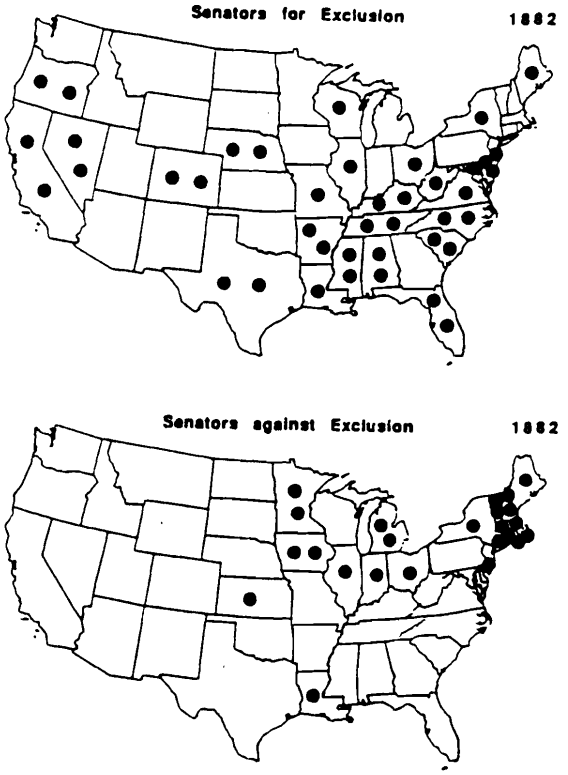

Figure 3 - Senate Voting on Chinese Exclusion, April 1882

In the 1890 census, the now largely-excluded Chinese did not play so prominent a role in the published census. They were listed merely as a subset of "colored." Although 107,488

Chinese were counted in 1890, compared to only 105,465 in 1880, the true peak of early Chinese population in the US was in 1882, shortly before the exclusion law took effect, when their numbers soared to over 130,000 in anticipation of immigration being limited (Coolidge 1909, 498). After 1882, the Chinese population in the US began a decline that would not reverse itself until the 1920s when the combination of a small population and a greater proportion of American-born Chinese women made for an increase through fertility.

INACCURACY IN CENSUS RECORDS OF EARLY CHINESE

Chinese in the US, many of whom had had experience with tax collectors in California and corrupt officials in their own country, were not enthusiastic about census visits, first by assistant US marshals in 1860 and 1870 and later civilian census enumerators. I have found in immigration records from the period of exclusion (1882-1943) examples of Chinese hiding from or misinforming census takers of their names in order to avoid surveillance. This was particularly true after the third restriction law passed in 1893 which required Chinese laborers to register. After this law was enacted, immigration officials became frequent visitors to Chinese establishments, looking for valid registration certificates and deporting those who did not have one. With the language barrier most Chinese experienced, an official at a glance. And although it was not stated policy, it is likely that in order to be good citizens, certain census enumerators asked Chinese to produce their registration certificates.

The Chinese were viewed with extreme suspicion by immigration officials, so much that periodically between national censuses, the immigration department conducted a Chinese census, demanding to see registration certificates. Unfortunately, most Chinese did not keep their papers with them at their laundries, where virtually all of them worked. They feared robbery and kept the certificates with their savings boxes in Chinatown in the rear of Chinese merchants' stores. The low proportion of Chinese who could produce the certificates on demand was a cause for further suspicion.

This is not to suggest that all Chinese immigrants in the Northeast were in the country legally. There is no precise count, but immigration service did report occasional successful raids on illegal routes into the United States. The most common ways in were across Lake Ontario by boat, on freight cars through El Paso, TX or Buffalo, NY or by boat along the gulf coast of Florida. The $20 per month they might earn working in a laundry in the US was enough of an incentive to travel through Canada, which had a high head tax on Chinese, or to the Caribbean, to then take their chances on a dark train or leaky boat to make it to a city like Philadelphia where they would have had some acquaintance or cousin waiting to put them to work. The system worked for both since the laundry owner got cheap, cooperative labor and the new immigrant could support his family better from afar than in China.

It is apparent from the Immigration Department's 1905 Chinese census (Table 1) that whatever the proportion of Chinese in the Northeast illegally, the absolute numbers were small. In fact, the small number of Chinese in the Northeast was a major factor in their avoiding the violent confrontations they experienced in the western United States. It is amusing to picture a bureaucracy fanatically working, sending inspectors to all corners of Pennsylvania and sending memos back and forth to safeguard the "white masses" from a relatively small number of laundrymen, many of whom were becoming so old that they only wanted to return to China if they could afford it.

Table 1: Immigration Service - Chinese Census 1905

	Pennsylvania		New Jersey
With Papers	496		320
No Papers	822		535
No Knowledge	319	From Postmasters	152
Native Born	213		144
Merchants	209		69
Students	4		1
Women	12		3
Children	31		19
Teachers	1		1
	2107		1244

CHINESE IN THE MANUSCRIPT SCHEDULES

The census is more than simply what is published in aggregate. The manuscript schedules, the actual forms filled out by the census enumerator, contain a great deal of information as well. The 1900 and 1910 manuscript schedules listed: address, position in household, sex, race,age, marital status, years of marriage, number of children, place of birth and place of parents' birth, year of immigration, immigration status and occupation, among other data. With such detailed profiles, the manuscript schedules are windows open on the lives of individuals from the past. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps are city plans made between the 1800s and the 1920s which show cities block-by-block, detailing the spatial extent, height and type of each building. These were of great contemporary value in determining fire insurance rates. When Sanborn maps are used now as a base map for manuscript data, the possibilities are exciting for recreating and analyzing the urban historical geography of any immigrant group.

Compiling manuscript data on the Chinese was not as straightforward as a researcher might hope. In addition to conscious efforts by Chinese to sabotage census surveillance, there were also unintentional cultural barriers that stood between Chinese and the census process. For example, immigration documents bearing Chinese characters have revealed instances of the same Chinese surname transliterated as *Jung, Chung* and *Chong*, depending on the pronunciation of the Chinese and the whim of whoever was recording it. Moreover, another surname which was unrelated to the first was also found to be spelled *Jung*. This is only one example of many potential obfuscations. There was no standard method to transliterate Chinese, and census takers often wrote what they believed they heard, particularly if the Chinese could not write English well. The result is that members of the same family or even the same individual at different times could be recorded with different transliterations of their surnames, while members of different families could be recorded with the same transliterations. This potential confusion is particularly critical in tracing the social geography of Chinese because the family was a fundamental part of the economic and power structure of their society (Lyman 1986, 111-116).

The Soundex is an index of names which can be used to accompany the manuscript schedules. Names in the soundex are referenced by first letter, followed by a numeric code in which the remaining consonants in the surname correspond to a number, eg 1=b,p,f,v,c. Once the code is found for a given surname, the researcher can find the surname in the index, look down the list for the correct given name and find the address at which that

person was living at the time of that census. There is obviously great potential for following the migration of individuals at ten-year intervals with the Soundex, but with the transliteration difficulties of the Chinese, following them is a much greater challenge. Each Chinese surname may correspond to three or four transliterations in the Soundex. Also, because of the relatively small number of common Chinese surnames, finding the same name is not a guarantee that one has found the same person as at a previous census.

Beyond the scope of the census, language was the medium for much of the discrimination against Chinese in the United States in the late-1800s and early-1900s. In everyday language, generic, demeaning names like "John Chinaman" or "Ah Sing" were substituted for individual Chinese' names because of the supposed difficulties of Chinese pronunciation. Such terms not only eliminated the need to pronounce Chinese names; they were also a way to avoid acknowledging Chinese on an individual basis. It is not difficult to stereotype and discriminate against faceless foreigners who are not known on an individual basis.

CONCLUSION

Although today's paper has focused on Chinese, I would hope that some of the ideas about resistance and cultural barriers would be applicable to other minority and immigrant groups as well. There is more than meets the eye both in the concept of the census and in the collection of census data. I have found the census to be more informative when I use other materials to supplement it. Information is only as good as the weakest link in the chain that created it, from the first notion of how to collect it through to the final product. Cross-referencing different data sources and critically approaching supposedly objective sources like the census may take time, but it will add greatly to the quality of our work.

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