

Chinese Immigration

in the 1850s

What is it like to live through war in your own country? What is it like to always be hungry? Would you leave your country to look for work in a new land? This is what many young Chinese people did in the 1850s. They left China and traveled to America. They hoped to earn money to send to their families.

Background on China

China is a large country in East Asia. In the mid 1800s, China had terrible weather problems. People could not grow enough food to eat.

There were also many poor people living in China. They did not earn enough money to feed their families. The poor people did not like the way China's rulers were running the country.

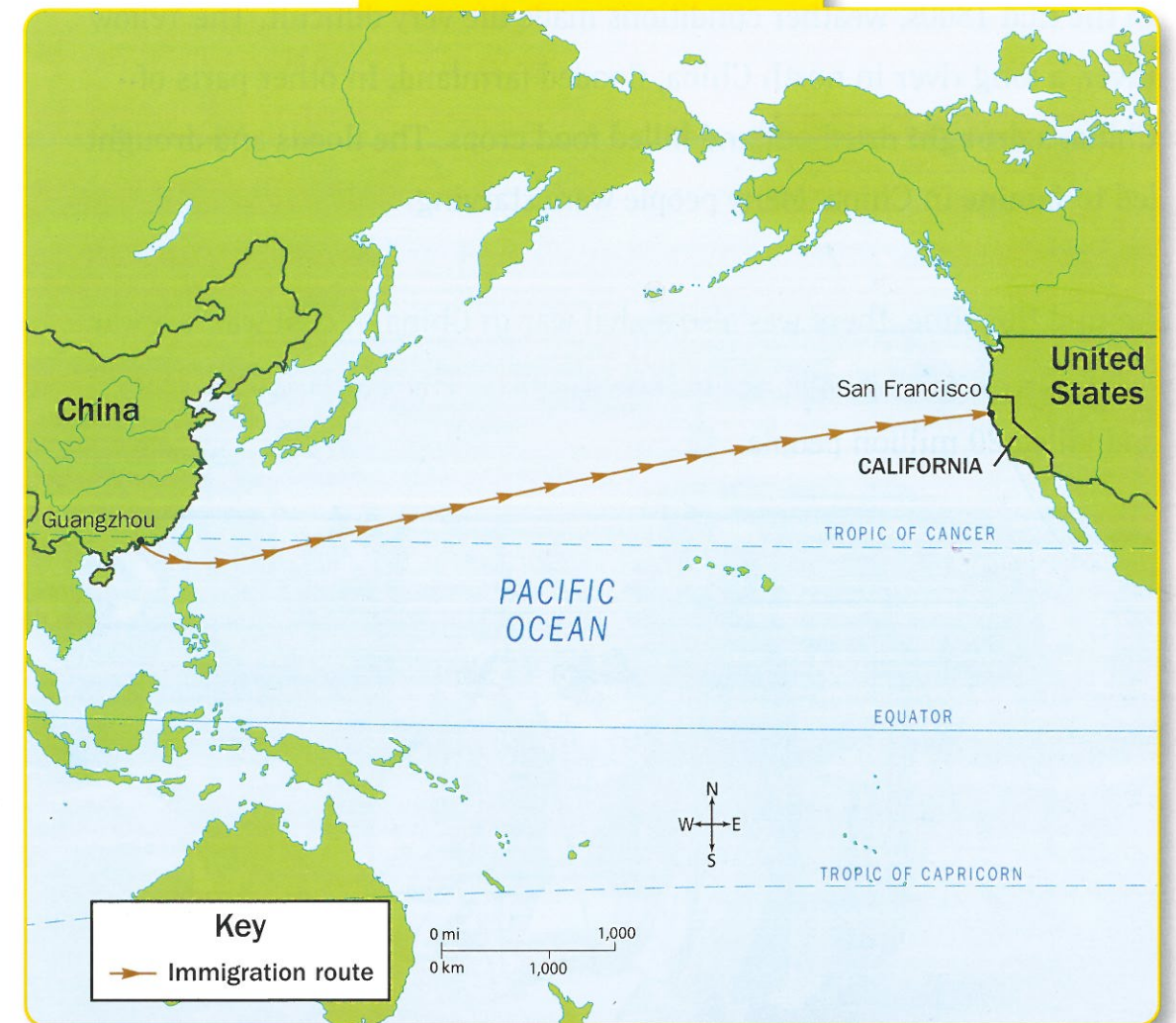


Poor Chinese in the 1800s, plowing and sowing a field

In 1848 gold was found in California. Many Chinese, most of them young men, sailed across the Pacific Ocean to the United States. These young men wanted to make their fortunes. They wanted to find gold or a job in the United States.

Look at the map below. It shows the route the people had to travel from southeast China to California.

Chinese Immigration Route





Key Concept 1 People choose to immigrate for many different reasons.

Leaving China for Peace and a Better Life

Chinese people had many reasons to leave China and **immigrate** in the nineteenth century. The main reason was that life in China was so hard.

immigrate

to come to a new country to live



In the mid 1800s, weather conditions made life very difficult. The Yellow River, a long river in north China, flooded farmland. In other parts of China, a **drought** dried out and killed food crops. The floods and drought led to **famine** in China. Many people were starving.

Around this time, there was also a civil war in China. A civil war is a war between groups of people in the same country. The war lasted 14 years and killed 20 million people.

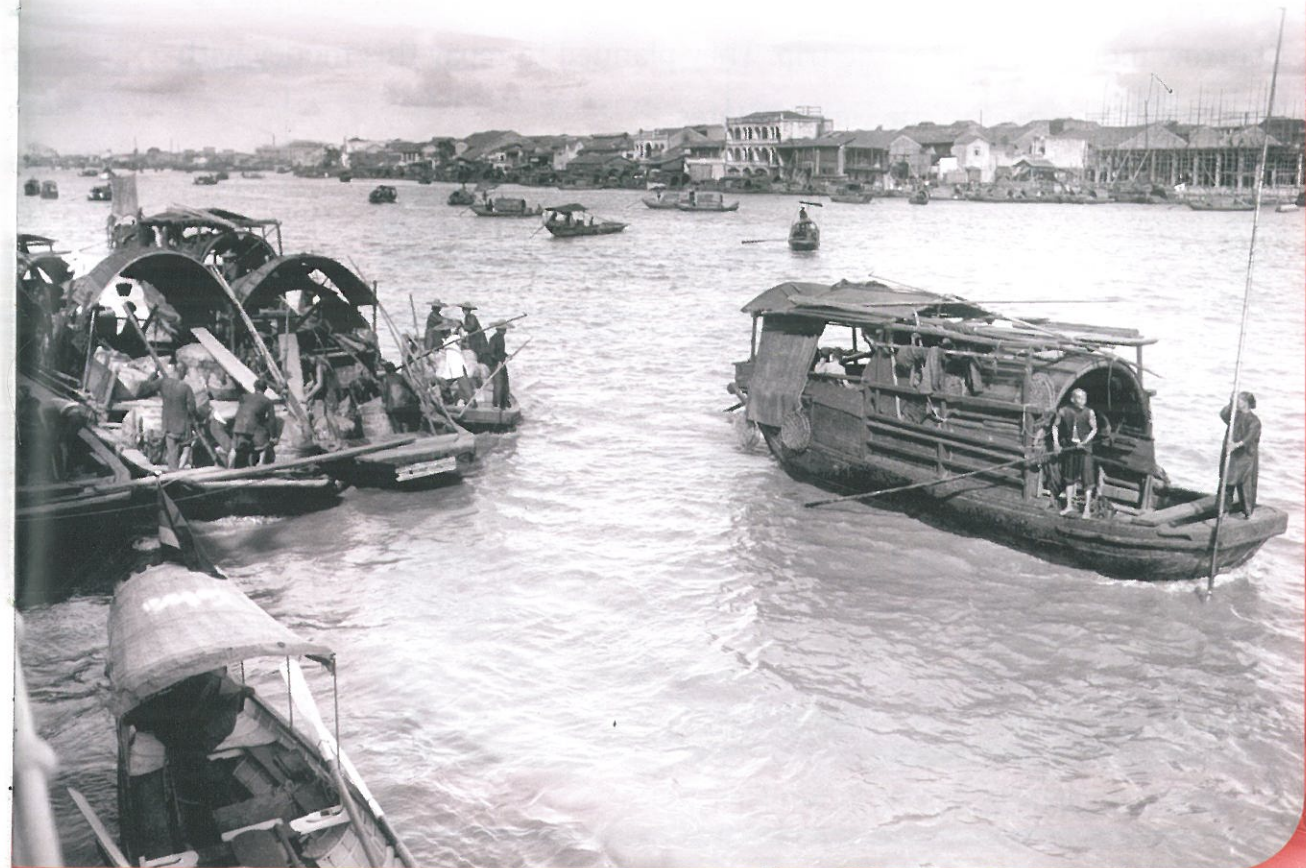


Chinese chiefs and soldiers during the civil war

Flooding, drought, and war had badly damaged the countryside. There was a shortage of land for growing food. One area of southeast China, the Pearl River Delta area, still had good land for growing food. Many people went there. Soon the Pearl River Delta area became overcrowded. People then decided to leave China.

The stories about gold in California also made people want to leave China. Many **peasant** farmers from the Pearl River region decided to go to the United States. They saw the United States as a place of **prosperity**.

The Pearl River in China



 **Key Concept 2** People who immigrate face many challenges.

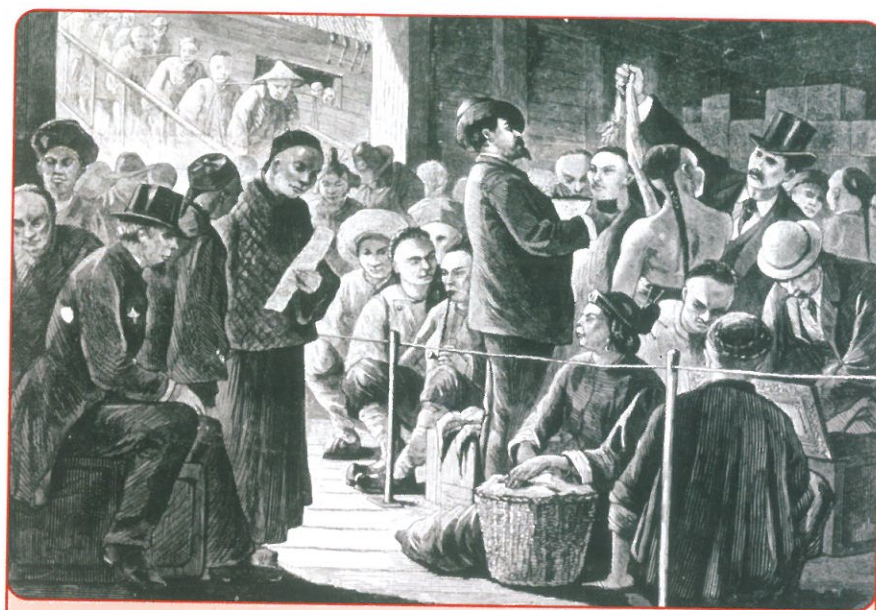
The Challenge of Immigration

It is never easy to immigrate to a new land. The Chinese faced many **challenges** traveling to the United States. They faced more challenges when they arrived.

challenges
things that make
life more difficult

The Journey from China

When gold was discovered in California, Chinese shipowners saw a chance to make money. The shipowners spread news about the gold in California. They offered tickets for the journey from China to the United States. Many Chinese wanting to go to California were poor. Most had to borrow money to pay for the trip. They planned to repay this money with money they earned in the United States.



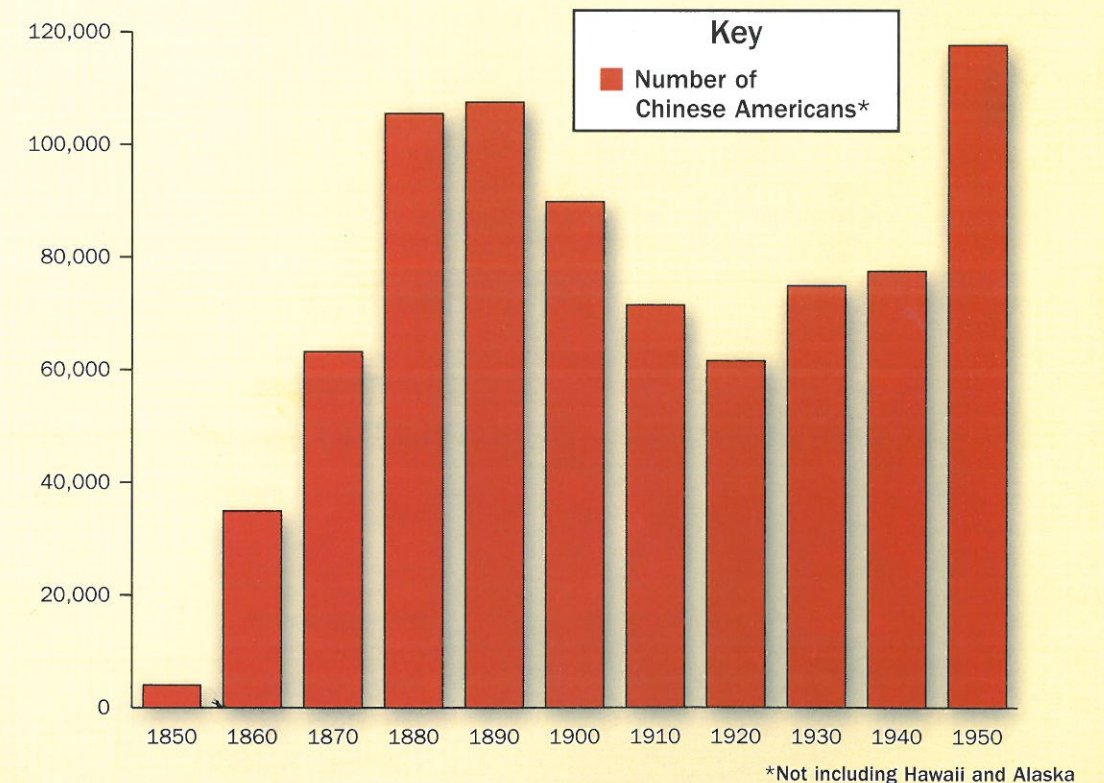
Chinese immigrants arriving in San Francisco

Challenges in a New Land

The Chinese faced many challenges in the United States. They spoke a foreign language. They also looked different from many Americans. As a result, they were not always accepted by American people.

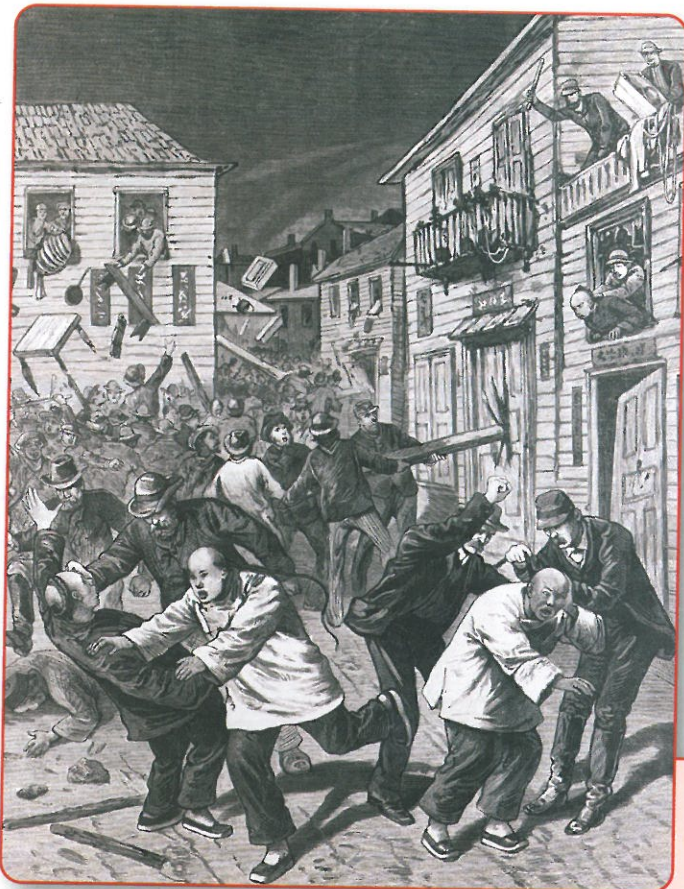
Many Chinese people went to work in the gold mines. They worked in mines that others had given up on. By working long hours, the Chinese miners often managed to find gold in these mines. American miners started to become jealous of the success of the Chinese miners. At several mines, they attacked Chinese miners and drove them away.

Chinese Population in the United States (1850–1950)



The Chinese also found other jobs in the United States. They worked as cooks, servants, carpenters, and laborers. By the mid-1850s, the gold had almost run out. Miners returned from the mines to go back to their old jobs. When they could not find work, they blamed the Chinese for taking the jobs. Soon, people began to blame the Chinese for anything that went wrong.

The Chinese were now met with strong dislike. At this time non-whites had no rights in a court of law. They could not give evidence against white people. Thousands of immigrants had no protection under the law. There were violent riots against the Chinese.



This illustration shows an anti-Chinese crowd attacking Chinese in 1880.

In the late 1800s the United States decided to stop Chinese people from coming to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 **banned** new Chinese immigrant laborers from entering the country for ten years. Other laws continued this **discrimination** against the Chinese.

Few Chinese were allowed to enter the United States for the next 60 years. These laws were not changed until 1943. Then Chinese people living in the United States could become United States citizens.

GREAT
ANTI-CHINESE
Mass Meeting!
WEDNESDAY EVENING, JUNE 3rd, 1885,
8 O'CLOCK P. M.
AT ALPHA OPERA HOUSE.

ABLE SPEAKERS

Will address the citizens of Tacoma on the Chinese question. Also the Committee on the habits and modes of living of the Chinese will make a full report of their labor, and submit a plan of organization for the action of the citizens.

The time has come for action. Delay is weakness, unpardonable sin against our lives, our families, society and mankind. Action, decided action, redemption, salvation. Therefore come all, come everyone, and protest against this life and soul-destroying curse. This will be the people's meeting, who should not be fiddling while Rome is burning.

By order of the
Anti-Chinese Committee.

Ludlow Street, 10th Print.

A poster advertising an anti-Chinese meeting in 1885



Key Concept 3 People who immigrate contribute to the life and culture of the society they join.

Joining American Society

The United States is a country made up of immigrants. As with all immigrant groups, the Chinese have helped American **society**.

society

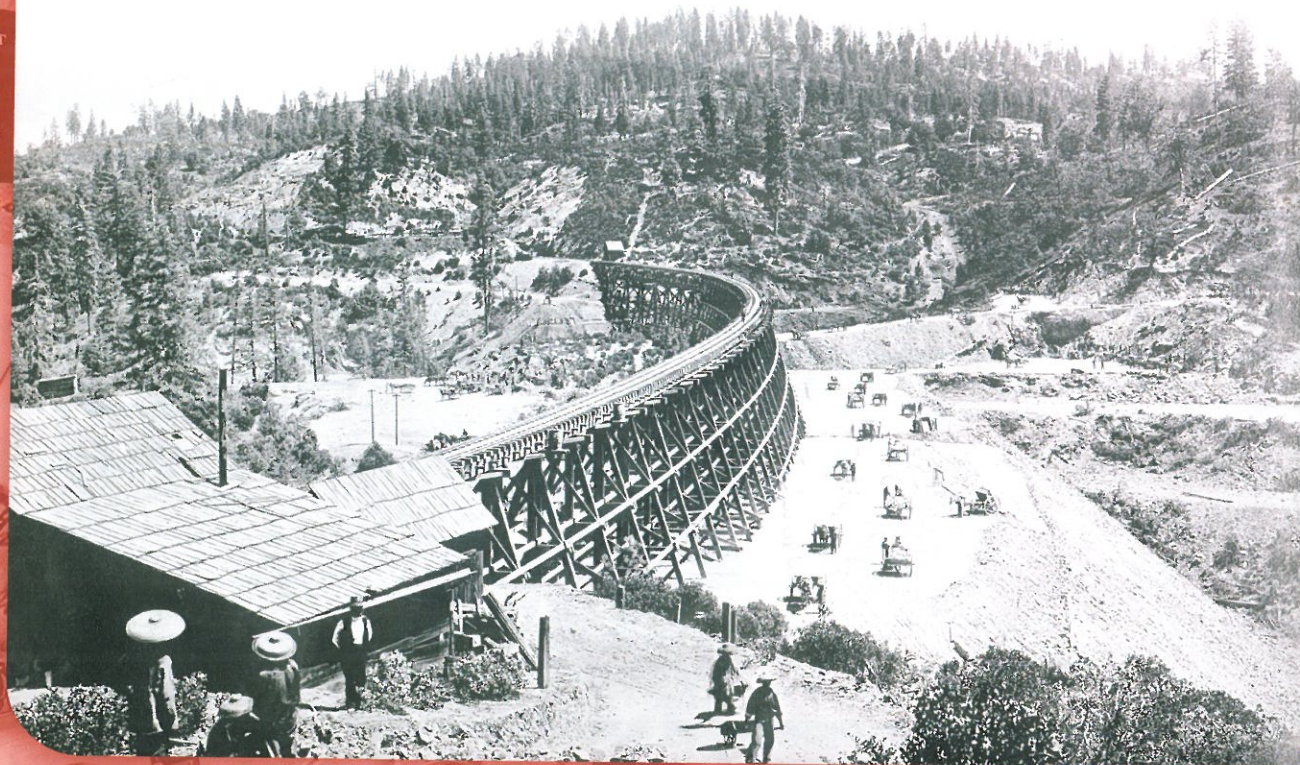
people living together in a group or nation



Chinese in the Workforce

One way the Chinese helped American society was through hard work. Chinese workers helped build the transcontinental railroad. This railroad linked the east and west coasts of the United States. The work was dangerous, and the pay was poor. Without the Chinese workers, the railroad would have taken years longer to complete.

Chinese laborers filling in land for the transcontinental railroad



Many Chinese farmers became farmers in the United States. They brought their knowledge of growing fruits and vegetables. Other Chinese had knowledge of fishing. They worked on fishing boats or in fish canning factories.

Chinese Culture in the United States

The Chinese also brought their **culture** to the United States. Chinese New Year is the most important time of the year for Chinese. Celebrations begin between January 21 and February 20. Many Chinese-American communities have festivals and fireworks at Chinese New Year. The celebrations end with a parade. The festivals also include American-style marching bands and floats.

culture

the traditions, language, dress, ceremonies, and other ways of life that a group of people share



A Chinese dragon dance at Chinese New Year celebrations in Hawaii

The Chinese Contribution

Over the years, many Chinese Americans have been very successful. Amy Chow competed in gymnastics for the United States. She helped her team win a gold medal at the 1996 Olympic Games. Her parents are Chinese immigrants, and she was born in California. Gary Locke, whose father came from China as a teenager, was first elected governor of Washington in 1996. He is the first Chinese-American governor in United States history.

Since 1940 many Chinese have come to the United States to live. Chinese Americans are now one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States. About 2.8 million Americans today claim **descent** from Chinese immigrants.



Governor Gary Locke of Washington State



Gymnast Amy Chow



Think About the **Key Concepts**

Think about what you read. Think about the pictures and the graph. Use these to answer the questions. Share what you think with others.

1. Why did the immigrants discussed in this book leave their country?
2. What were some challenges the immigrants faced when they arrived in the United States?
3. How did the immigrants overcome the challenges they faced?
4. How did the immigrants contribute to the culture of the United States?