
In her book, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, Erika Lee explores the complex idioms of ideology and policy that surrounded the Chinese Exclusion Act and its sixty-year span. Looking at the complicated and often fluid ways in which legislature and culture came together to exclude and expel Chinese immigrants, Lee understands the Exclusion era as the first moment in U.S. political history in which the country became a “gatekeeping nation.” Drawing on a wide array of sources – from identity documents to poems to oral histories to court records – Lee vividly brings alive the ways in which legislature functioned to control and define “Chinese-ness.” She uses the concept of gatekeeping to re-situate the Chinese Exclusion Act within a national scope, asking “What effects do immigration policies have at America’s Gates and within the nation itself? (20). Framing exclusion as a starting point rather than an isolated event, she thus argues for using Chinese exclusion as a representative lens through which to better understand our long history of exclusionary immigration ideology and how it has formed contemporary immigration policy and the “illegal” immigrant identity. While there are some gaps in her arguments – and at times the national focus may be a bit too narrow in not fully exploring the international context – she is largely successful in her project of examining and exposing the many different ways in which the period of Chinese exclusion has formed our political and cultural vocabulary on immigration.

The United States utilized Chinese laborers to construct a gatekeeping ideology by evaluating incoming immigrants on class and both allowing and forbidding the entry of laborers as deemed necessary. The Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited laborers but not merchants, marks the first time in American history that immigrants were legally barred due to race and class (4). Thus, built into the very essence of exclusion was an inherent hierarchy which allowed privileged Chinese, but not laborers (87), which still very much functions in contemporary
immigration policy through visa quotas that favor professionals. Whereas merchants were perceived as unthreatening gentlemen (87), laborers were demonized for both their race and class; they were considered a threat to both American workers and society as a whole. Chinese laborers were then forced to circumnavigate national policy by transforming their identity -- often simply through dress and travelling in a first class cabin. When that did not work, Chinese were forced to immigrate illegally, which still serves as the last option for laborers coming from Mexico and Central America. Lee points out, however, the policy of Chinese exclusion did not reflect the labor needs of the country. US industrialization and capitalism expansion increased the need for labor and employer were willing to hire Chinese immigrants despite the law (113). Likewise, Chinese immigrants themselves were willing to ignore US law due to worsening economic conditions in China (111). The California state labor commissioner admitted the Chinese labor shortage was indeed a severe blow to the agricultural economy (113). And despite the restrictions placed upon them, farming and laboring classes made up the bulk of Chinese immigration. Much like today, the push and pull factors of immigration were not addressed, and the policy emphasis was placed upon the legal consequences of immigrants in the country who had broken the law.

Lee also understands the construction of racialized immigrant identities as deeply connected to the polity of exclusion; as she argues, “immigration laws have shaped the very meanings of race and racial identities” (21). We see in her exploration the malleability of race within frontier ideology: deep anxieties about the disruption of white supremacy and the Edenic vision of the West allowed groups who had previously been raced “black” or “other” (such as Irish, Catholic, Eastern Europeans, etc.) to be allowed a stake in whiteness; thus the “nation of immigrants” fantasy was able to be maintained on the terms of whiteness while Chinese
immigrants could be, as a whole, excluded from any form of American citizenship. And since “‘Chineseness’ was determined mostly by socially defined markers of race,” this identity could be easily reordered and redetermined to meet the social and political needs of its crafters (79). We can see this rhetoric continuing today in fears of the reconquista as a way to racialize and demonize Mexican immigrant laborers. This racialization of immigrants as developed from the exclusion era was thus deeply tied to a classed identity and a threat; as Lee demonstrates, “Immigrant laborers who were considered a threat to American white working men were summarily excluded on the basis of class” (20). We thus see the complex push and pull between the reliance upon foreign laborers on the one hand, and the deep fear of contamination and threat to a tenuous American whiteness on the other. Locating the roots of the implementation of legal enforcement of these economic, political, and cultural fears and anxieties in the Chinese Exclusion Act helps to understand our contemporary moment of border walls and wars as a continuation of a deeply racialized immigrant laborer identity.

Lee notes several important features of the enforcement apparatus that persist to this day. It relied on a large, “expert” bureaucracy, developed detailed interrogation methods, relied on detention of immigrants, and created a documentation regime in which official records—birth and marriage certificates, “passport” photographs, body measurements, and others—were meant to exert U.S. power over immigrant bodies and identities. The historical and contemporary power of these mechanisms cannot be overstated, and their early presence in immigration policy has shaped enforcement in the nearly 150 years since the Exclusion Act was passed. As Lee argues, the explicit anti-Chinese sentiments of many early immigration officials, later professionalization of the immigration apparatus and standardization of methods, and fixation on ontology demanding “knowing” Chinese immigrants in order to control their movement. Legal challenges
to enforcement, while important and successful in some cases, tended to reinforce the citizen/non-citizen divide, for example, in decisions that upheld the right to stay for native-born citizens—*Wong Kim Ark v. United States* (1898)—and the vulnerability of “aliens” to illegal searches and seizures—*Li Sing v. U.S.* (1901). Lee notes that the eventual turn away from legal challenges of exclusion itself and towards policy reforms highlighted a class divide among Chinese immigrants, with merchants wanting to assert their difference from laboring classes. Still, despite these various enforcement strategies and the growing and increasingly institutionalized bureaucracy and enforcement mechanisms, Chinese immigrants—much like immigrants today—asserted their will to move through various strategies, including deception of officials, bribery, and entering outside of ports of entry.

Writing in response to other social historians, Lee sets out to supplement the discourse on transnational identity formation by recentering the national processes specific to the American context. While the nation-centered analysis is the central guide to her thesis, the lack of inclusion of border-transcendent epistemological currents gives the reader an impression the United States context is unique and isolated. This framing is inherently problematic as it de-contextualizes the migrant experience from the meta-narratives which reinforce nativist sentiment across racial contexts, which in turn hinders understanding of one’s own positionality. Even though Lee juxtaposes the American federal response with the migrant welcoming Mexican state at the time, her analysis of the impact of the chinese exclusion on contemporary immigration policy would be enriched if it engaged with the ways border transcendent ideologies such as white supremacy, linear conceptions of progress or even citizenship as an institution was promoted abroad by the American state.

Erika Lee demonstrates that the period of Chinese Exclusion in the United States set the
precedent for both immigration policies, and the ideology of who is welcome or unwelcome to immigrate to the United States. The book includes an afterword describing the effects of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 from the vantage of 2003. The suspicion of all Middle Eastern potential immigrants to be potential terrorists echoes the treatment of all Asian people to be potential deviants, and currently Latin Americans as potential contraband smugglers. The closing words of *At America’s Gates* are: “[It] is certain that in America’s “new war” against terrorism, American gatekeeping and immigration policy will undoubtedly remain central issues facing not only the United States but the world in the twenty-first century” (255). According to the Migration Policy Institute, the start of the Department of Homeland Security in March, 2003 was the largest restructuring of the government since World War II, and the rapid growth in the budget and manpower of the Border Patrol is unprecedented in enforcement history in the United States (Middlestadt et al. 2011). Lee’s book is prophetic in a way, and vitally important for understanding the United States as a gatekeeping nation.