

## The Occupational Effects of Immigration Bans: Evidence from Chinese Exclusion

A growing literature has attempted to measure the socioeconomic impacts of historical immigration restrictions. Many of these studies have focused on how excluding immigrants affects native-born U.S. workers (Clemens, Lewis, and Postel 2018; Lee, Yasenov, and Peri 2022) and larger economic areas (Abramitzky et al 2023). A smaller set of papers have focused on broader social outcomes like innovation (Moser and San 2020) and the spread of disease (Ager et al 2020). Yet very few analyses have attempted to measure the effects of historical immigration policy restrictions on the targeted immigrants themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This paper studies the occupational shifts of a targeted group, namely Chinese immigrants under federal policy Exclusion. Beginning in 1882, the majority of Chinese-born individuals were prohibited from entering the U.S.; the group also faced a high level of prejudice and discrimination within the United States. I link newly digitized archival data on immigration, emigration, and mortality with a matching algorithm designed for Chinese names to directly measure how Chinese immigrants responded to changing immigration policies under Exclusion.

Officially in force until 1953 (effectively until 1965), Exclusion limited the total number of Chinese in the United States and imposed skill-based restrictions. Exclusion barred all Chinese laborers and allowed only those belonging to (higher-status) exempt classes to enter the United States. Though the exempt-class definition evolved slightly over the period, in general only merchants, teachers, students, and diplomats were allowed entry.

The post-Exclusion Chinese immigrant population is distinct from earlier flows in many ways, including in educational and occupational attainment. However, Exclusion has lasting impacts. For example, the Supreme Court recently upheld the federal government's right to ban immigration based on national origin (*Trump v. Hawaii* 965 U.S., 2018). And a disconcerting rise in anti-Asian sentiment during the coronavirus pandemic – including verbal and physical violence – is premised on similar tropes to those used by Exclusion proponents in the past (Lee and Huang 2021).

Evidence on the impacts of Chinese Exclusion is slim. Two studies have investigated Chinese occupational outcomes under Exclusion; both find that despite Exclusion's focus on limiting low-skill migration, Chinese occupational outcomes worsened during the period (Chen 2015; Chen and Xie 2022). However, both studies use cross-sectional data, which could be confounded both by immigrant arrival cohort effects and the selection of return migrants. In other words, it is unclear whether shifts in Chinese occupational choices was driven by occupational downgrading or replacement. Demographic studies of Exclusion have shown a strong role of selective immigration and emigration in maintaining a working-age population (Chew & Liu 2004, Chew et al 2009).

This paper aims to measure Chinese occupational outcomes during Exclusion and disentangle the causal channels leading to labor market shifts. I have digitized immigration, emigration, and mortality records from the US National Archives with the goal of painting a complete picture of changes in the Chinese community from 1880 to 1900. These data consist of more than 150,000 individual arrival records (from California, Oregon, and Washington ports) and approximately 75,000

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<sup>1</sup> Greenwood and Ward (2015) and Ward (2020) are exceptions for their focus on how the 1924 immigration quotas affected return migration and skill selectivity for European immigrants. A related though distinct literature has investigated the effects of backlash and discrimination on immigrant assimilation including labor market choices (Fouka 2019, Saavedra 2021, Ferrara and Fishback 2022). There is a large literature on this topic in the modern era.

departure records.<sup>2</sup> I also have data on approximately 60,000 “return certificates”, or circular migration permits, that were issued between 1882 and 1888. Finally, California mortality statistics record over 15,000 Chinese immigrant deaths from 1880 to 1900.

I conduct record linkage following the approach developed by Postel (2023) specifically for the idiosyncrasies of historical Chinese names. This process triples the match rates for Chinese immigrants compared to other matching approaches, bringing the share of linked Chinese level with that for European immigrant groups. The approach also produces more accurate matches than any other existing linkage approach.

The final dataset links Chinese immigrants present in the US in 1880 to arrival/return records, mortality records, and the 1900 census. These data include a range of demographic and migration information compiled from each data source. My approach is similar to the Early Indicators Project (Costa et al 2018), in that I draw on multiple types of records with the goal of finding a match in any of them. This could mean identifying someone in the 1880 census who died in 1887, or a newly arrived 1896 immigrant in the 1900 census. The linking scheme is shown graphically in Figure 1.

I investigate the skill composition of migrant arrivals and departures, as well as immigrants who remained in the United States. This will help to assess the main channel through which Chinese occupational shifts occurred. For example, if lower occupational prestige is driven by lower-skill arrivals, Exclusion did not achieve its goal of banning this group. I am particularly interested in the ways occupational and geographic shifts are linked. The interaction between labor market choices and local economies has been well-documented (see e.g. Catron 2016); in the Chinese case it seems plausible that immigrants changed both location and occupation to survive Exclusion.

The paper will also investigate Chinese concentration in the laundry and restaurant businesses. Often considered a prototypical example of ethnic enclave employment (see e.g. Ong 1981), some scholars suggest that Chinese immigrants took up laundry work as a “means of survival” in response to anti-Chinese sentiment and labor restrictions (Siu 1987, 54). Paul Siu’s seminal study of Chinese laundries in Chicago shows that the number of hand laundries indeed exploded under Exclusion, growing from 199 in 1883 to 313 in 1893 (ibid). However, evidence on other locations – and for other industries – is scarce. Linking Chinese immigrants across census waves could illustrate whether they started in such ethnic industries immediately upon arrival, or if they were previously employed in other occupations. Where were Chinese immigrants more or less likely to engage typical ethnic employment? As the Chinese population in the United States shrank under Exclusion, what happened to the industries in which they were employed?

Preliminary evidence from the arrival records (Figure 2 below) shows that Chinese laborer entries and that of lower-skilled trades (in blue, including miners, cooks, and laundrymen) fell to almost zero after return migration was cut off in 1888. On the other hand, the number of merchants rose slightly as they were not a restricted class. The rise of “grocers” is an empirical question that arose from the data and has not yet been explored in the existing literature.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Accounting for approximately 95% of total Chinese entries and exits between 1879 and 1890 (U.S. Department of Treasury, multiple years).

<sup>3</sup> Very few grocers are enumerated in the 1900 census, so the designation seems to be unique to the immigration records. An uninformed guess is that merchants dealing in foodstuffs were enumerated as grocers but the puzzle merits more attention.

## Supporting material

Figure 1.

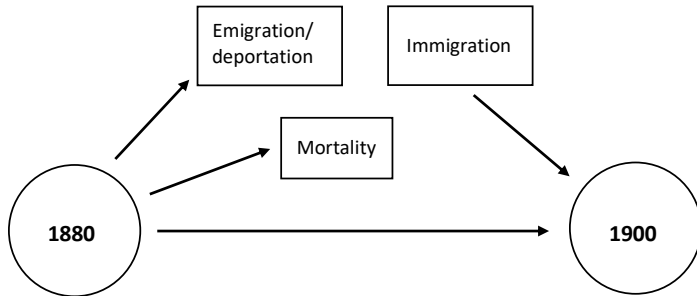
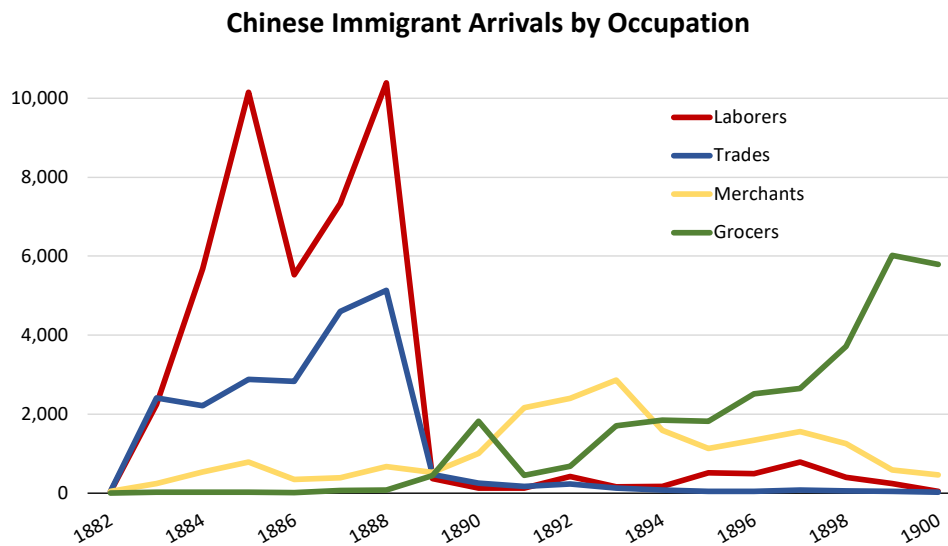


Figure 2.



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