

The Issue of Chinese Immigration

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The current number of the Forum contains an article by Thomas Magee of San Francisco, entitled "China's Menace to the World," which brings together some striking facts with regard to the industrial and commercial ability of the Chinese. Mr. Magee tells of a Chinaman in San Francisco who paid \$75 rent for two and a quarter acres of ground, and yet made money; of two Chinamen in Melbourne who kept themselves and a horse from the produce of a quarter of an acre, paid a high rent and sent \$100 a year home; of Chinese who rent 50,000 acres of fruit and bottom land within a hundred miles of San Francisco, paying from four to ten times what white men could afford to give; of the high rents they pay for houses in the Chinese quarters of California towns, and the still higher rents they get from their countrymen. He also tells how the Chinese employers are displacing white employers in the manufacturing businesses in which Chinese labor has obtained a foothold in California, and how in the same way Chinese business houses and Chinese capitalists are displacing Europeans on the Chinese coast, how the iron industry is at last beginning to be developed in China, and railroads are beginning to be built.

All this, though interesting, is not new to those who know anything of the Chinese. But here is an important statement which I have not seen before:

The Chinese have recently secured a foothold in Lower California, sixty miles below the California state line, on a grant 125 miles square. No use was made of this land till some speculators at San Diego, while debating[?] everything on paper there, transferred it to a joint stock company. The shares had only a nominal value until a very sharp Chinaman appeared. He and his Chinese associates demanded and received a little more than half of the shares, in order that the control should be in Chinese hands. All of the shares will finally be owned by them. The Chinese guarantee to build a canal seventy-five miles long, the water of which is to be used for placer gold washing and for irrigation. But much more important, than that is a twenty years' concession, already granted to a San Franciscan, of the sole right to fish in the waters of the Gulf of California. He has turned this right over to the Chinese. When the Chinese thus purchase territories, or get long leases of them, they pay but a trifle of money down. Payment of the great bulk of the purchase price is deferred until the amount can be taken out of the country, through profits from agriculture, mining and fishing, made by the laborers, who will be imported from China. One of the parties interested in the scheme has gone to China to import 8,000 Chinese into that part of Mexico."

In its August number the North American Review published a most interesting article entitled "American Influence in China," from the pen of our ex-minister,

John Russell Young, the man who of all living Americans has come into the closest and warmest relations with the leading men of the imperial government of China, and knows best their disposition. Mr. Young says, in effect, that all talk about Chinese retaliation on account of our exclusion law is idle; that there could be no official retaliation that did not begin with the suspension of diplomatic relations; that the Chinese detest war and look upon the trade of fighting with contempt, and that "the shrewdest of all merchants" will make money out of American trade if it is to be made, without regard to the diplomatic emotions in Washington or Peking.

Mr. Young believes, and believed long ere he went to China as our minister, in the rigid exclusion of Chinese immigration, for he sees that free emigration would under present conditions mean the Chinazation of any part of the world on which the tide of Chinese emigration set. But he tells us that the Chinese government make no objection to our exclusion of its people, and that, on the contrary, it is in accordance with its fixed, traditional policy:

It cannot be said with too much emphasis that no question as to emigration ever existed between China and the United States. Nothing is more wearisome than the endless declaration about the poor Chinese trying to unload their people on our shores. In 1884 acting under the orders of the government and in public service, I visited every port in China. I could not learn, nor do I think the records of the Peking legation will show, that a Chinese laborer ever emigrated from a Chinese port to the United States, or that the Chinese government ever contemplated such emigration except to prevent it.

Whence, then, does this immigration come, and what interest is served in its maintenance and growth? It comes from a British colony and is a British commercial interest—the most valuable incident in England's Chinese commerce except the monopoly in opium.

The island of Hong Kong, ceded to Great Britain as one of the perquisites of the ignominious opium war—an area of about thirty square miles—is separated from China by a narrow strait, and within a few hours by river of Canton, the capital of the Kwangtung and Hainan provinces, where reside a population of thirty millions. Canton itself is, I think, the largest of the Chinese cities. Hong Kong holds the same geographical relation to Canton that New York does to Albany, and has a population, say, perhaps of 100 000, of whom all but 10,000 are Chinese. From this population, constantly recruited by river emigration from Canton, we have Chinese emigration to all parts of the world. The emigrants sail under the British flag and to British gain. China has no more to do with Hong Kong than with Dublin or Cardiff. As a traffic none has paid so well as the coolie business since the slave trade. When we think of steamers crowded with Chinamen, going from Hong Kong to San Francisco, say, from a thousand to twelve hundred laborers, each laborer paying fifty dollars for a passage, the net cost of transportation not more than ten, the gains can be appreciated. We can see

how those who control so rich a trade defend it. The clamor that reaches the United States in regard to Chinese emigration; the ingeniously- continued articles in foreign newspapers; telegraphic dispatches expressing the indignation of Li Hung Chang; indignation meetings in Canton; emotion among the Chinese as to their exclusion from America—all this literature of invective and remonstrance comes from English sources, comes as an expression of disappointment at the threatened suppression of a valuable trade.

I should regret if I failed to make this conviction clear to American readers, because it lies at the very root of this vexed question. It has been, as I have said, my privilege to have lived in terms of intimacy for years with the statesmen who govern China, to hold, as I do, many of them in terms of cherished and grateful friendship, to converse with them on many subjects—the problems of their own quaint and venerable civilization, the still greater problems involved in the push and go of the mighty west impending upon them from year to year, and disturbing the wisdom, the traditions, the piety, of ages. I can recall but one occasion when the question of emigration was ever mentioned by any minister. The premier one day broached it in a spirit of half-remonstrance, as an offset or a demur to some claim I may have advanced on behalf of the United States. The tenor of my reply was that, as I knew neither his Excellency nor his government had any interest in the emigration question, as they had more immediate concerns than the commerce of Great Britain, any discussion of the theme would be a waste of time. There was a smile of assent. The subject dropped, never to be mentioned again.”

But Mr. Young says that while there was nothing in our exclusion of Chinese immigration to offend the Chinese government, we have in the manner of it gone out of our way to wantonly offend a nation with whom we were on terms of peculiar friendship, and to weaken our influence with it., This influence, Mr. Young says, was not the work of a day, but had been built up by a succession of able diplomatic representatives, beginning with Caleb Cushing, and of American merchants who from the days of Astor and Girard, developed the China trade, and was strengthened by General Grant , who met the Chinese statesmen on familiar terms and rendered a substantial service in bringing about the treaty which prevented war between China and Japan. He says:

We could have no quarrel with China; no purposes of territorial aggrandizement. We had no long continuous frontier like Russia; no policy of an ever-extending empire like Great Britain; no emotional impulses toward colonial expansion, which so often have found pathetic expression in the seafaring adventures of France; no sudden awakening to the imperial dreams of Alexander, which disturbed Prince Bismarck, or the policy of the later rulers of Germany. We were the friends of China, nearer by sea than New York to Liverpool twenty years ago. We had been engaged in no impious opium war. It was our policy, I may say the law of the commercial existence of our Pacific empire, that the autonomy of China and Japan should be maintained; that the sphere of English influence in Asia should cease at Singapore; that even our traditional friendship with Russia would not win our assent to the closing up to American enterprise of the markets

of China, which would come with the advance of Russian dominion to Peking or Hankow. Therefore China, as was shown during her war with France, arising out of the melancholy French experiments in Tonquin, leaned upon the United States, and took her guidance even in matters leading to peace or war.”

There was no justification, says Mr. Young, for the rushing through of the exclusion bill of 1888, except the fancied political necessity of one party bidding against the other for the anti-Chinese vote of the Pacific coast. A treaty providing for the exclusion had come from China, tendered to us by the Chinese government, and had passed the senate "with some indifferent amendments which might as well have been omitted for the good or evil they did." Having been thus amended, it was necessary that the treaty should go back to Peking, but its ratification in due course was but a matter of form. Under pressure of the political rivalry, however, our minister was instructed to demand an answer within forty-eight hours, under penalty of the assumption that it had been rejected. Such a demand of a European power, Mr. Young says, would have brought our minister his passports, and "even the meek, indifferent government of China could not respond to so rude a summons," and so on the assumed ground that China would not ratify the treaty the exclusion bill was rushed through.

Fully conscious of the necessity of excluding Chinese immigration, Mr. Young sees no reason in this why our bearing toward China should not be respectful, considerate and honorable. And while he sees no menace to the world in China's industrial development, and evidently believes that we could carry on the fullest, freest trade with China to mutual advantage, it is probable, though he says nothing of it in this article, that no one sees more clearly than he how China may some day menace the European world in another way, should she ever become a consolidated aggressive power so far imbued with western teachings as to believe successful war a glory.

(...)

But there are those who may say: "If the true rule of political action be to treat others as we would be treated, how can the exclusion of the Chinese be justified?" This is another form of the question, "If all men have equal rights to land, must he not admit the equal right of the Chinese to American land?"

Perhaps the best answer is that we have not carried out the principle of equal liberty far enough among ourselves to permit the coming among us of such a people as the Chinese without injurious, if not fatal, consequences.

For, so long as the denial to our own people of the first of natural rights leaves wages to be fixed by the competition of the disinherited with the disinherited, the

presence of the Chinese among us in numbers must give rise to bitter prejudices and strong passions, while their lower standard of comfort will enable them to absolutely displace our own people. But with the natural liberty to employ themselves assured to our own people, and with wages raised to their true standard, this danger would cease to exist. But in the meantime, if we cannot throw open our doors to the ingress of Chinese we can at least throw open our ports to their trade, and in all our national relations with them treat them with that courtesy and respect for which ex-Minister Young contends.