# Chinese and Irish Immigrants in Frontier California, 1860-1900

*Ken Chew <chew@uci.edu>*
*Department of Planning, Policy, and Design*
*University of California at Irvine*[1]

As the treasure in California's hills quickly played out in the decade following the 1849 Gold Rush, the vast army of disappointed prospectors turned its attention to other means of living. Although Chinese American labor entered agriculture, fishing, crafts, and manufacturing in significant numbers, it became more conspicuous for its primary role in creating the state's vast infrastructure. For example, catastrophic failure of the New Orleans levee system in 2005 revived interest in the Chinese-built Sacramento River Delta levees, a keystone in the productivity of the nation's richest agricultural region and the ultimate source for much of the water that sustains urban Southern California. In 1880, Chinese Americans comprised the State's second largest racial group and nearly one out of five California workers (NAPP 2004). Although some of this population's unique demographic characteristics, particularly its constitution as a "bachelor society," are widely known, recent analyses have only begun to shed light on the its underlying dynamics (Chew and Liu 2004; Chew, Leach, and Liu (under review)). Also missing is the demographic context supplied by California's frontier status, and by growth and change among other migrant groups. Such context is necessary for moving beyond the specifics of Chinese Americans and toward a greater understanding of transnational migration systems and the interactions of migrant groups in developing economies. This paper is an attempt to sketch out that context.

The analysis exploits historical decennial census microdata for the U.S., from 1860 through 1900. This period straddles, by two decades on either side, the 1882 imposition of Chinese Exclusion, which with minor exception, brought Chinese immigration to a standstill. This period was also pivotal for California and the Nation as a whole, encompassing the industrial maturation of the northeastern and north central U.S., the exhaustion of California's gold fields and,

[1] Prospectus for PAA'07--New York City, submitted 22 September 2006.

with the subsequent completion of the transcontinental railroad, the State's integration into the mainstream economy. We focus primarily on the census of 1880, the last census before Exclusion and, because it is the only complete count available for the 19th century, the one permitting the most detailed analysis of smaller subpopulations. The 1880 data were extracted from the North Atlantic Population Project (NAPP 2004); otherwise, data were extracted from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS), comprising 1% samples (Ruggles et. al. 2004).

Subpopulations at three levels of aggregation will be analyzed. At the most inclusive level, a comparison of Massachusetts and California will be used to establish a basic contrast between industrial and frontier populations. At an intermediate level, a comparison between Chinese and white inhabitants of California will be used to establish general racial differences within the frontier context. At the most detailed level, finally, we shall compare Chinese Californians with their Irish counterparts.

Why the Irish? The Chinese and Irish in California shared demographic, historical, and symbolic commonalities. Besides the common pull of the 1849 Gold Rush, both groups fled strife in their countries of origin. Each supplied the labor for building the first transcontinental railroad, the Chinese battling eastward through the Sierra Nevada and, in Promontory, Utah, meeting the Irish who had been pushing westward. In 1880, on the eve of Chinese Exclusion, the California population of Irish immigrants and their children stood at 158,266, 18% of the State's inhabitants or about twice the proportion of Chinese (author's computations using NAPP 2004)[2]. Taking into account an almost complete absence of Chinese women and children, however, the number of laboring Chinese and Irish was roughly comparable. Because both (largely immigrant) groups occupied the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder, moreover, many Irish viewed the Chinese as bitter economic rivals and made the Chinese a scapegoat for their own economic difficulties. Irish labor organizer Denis

[2] In this study, Irish include all white inhabitants of households in which at least one householder (the head or spouse) was born in Ireland. Preliminary counts indicate that 80% of households extracted under this definition include heads and spouses both born in Ireland.

Kearney and his Workingman's Party were conspicuous among those exerting the political pressure that resulted in Chinese Exclusion (Rawls and Bean 1998). To what extent were the Irish and Chinese actually in direct competition? And directly analogous to contemporary discourse, to what extent did the one immigrant group (the Chinese) take jobs from another more deserving group (the white, if still largely immigrant) Irish?

The following parameters will be analyzed in successive cross-sections, 1860-1900: (1) age, sex, and family composition; (2) industrial and occupational distributions; (3) nativity and place of birth; and (4) living arrangements, with special scrutiny of households or other quarters comprising both Chinese and non-Chinese.

## SOURCES

Chew, K., and J. M. Liu 2004. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Global Labor Force Exchange in the Chinese American Population, 1880-1940." Population and Development Review 30(1): 57-78.

Chew, K., M. Leach, and J. M. Liu (under review) "The Revolving Door to Gold Mountain: How Chinese Immigrants Got Around U.S. Exclusion and Replenished the Chinese American Labor Force, 1900-1910."

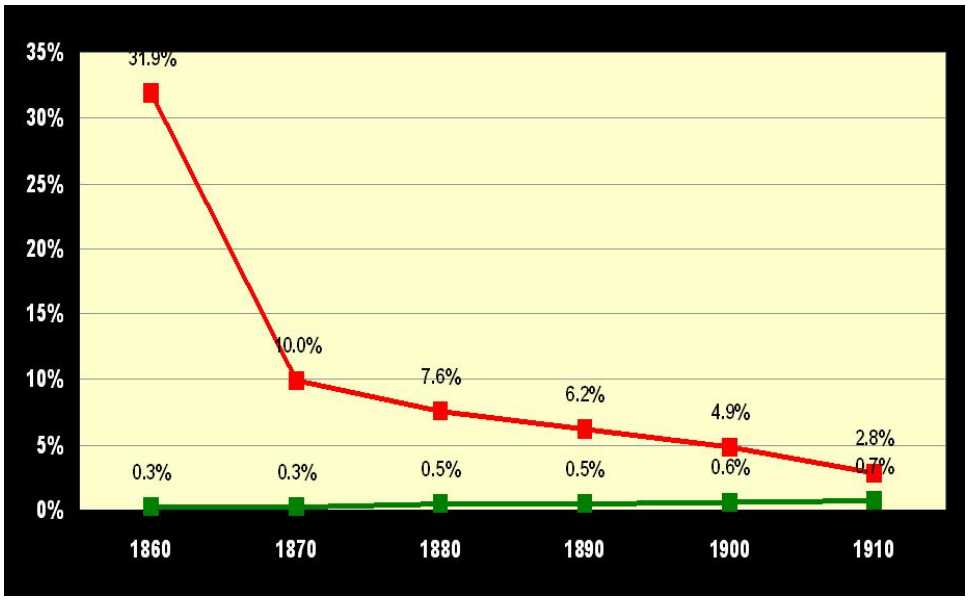
Rawls, J. and F. W. Bean 1998. California: An Interpretive History. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander 2004. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0 [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center, http://www.ipums.org.

NAPP (North Atlantic Population Project and Minnesota Population Center) 2004. NAPP: Complete Count Microdata. Preliminary Version NAPP 0.2 [computer files]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center, http://www.nappdata.org.

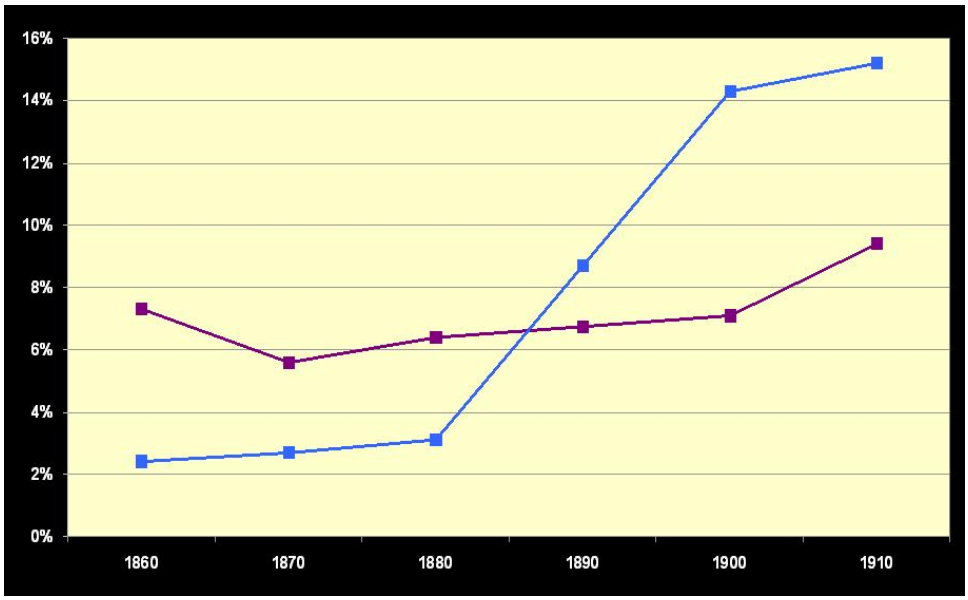
PRETTY PICTURES

Figure 1. Percent of the Labor Force in Mining Occupations, Massachusetts (green lower line) and California (red upper line), 1860-1910




California's exodus from gold prospecting
Source: IPUMS 2004. Graph by David Newell.

Figure 2. Percent of Chinese (45-degree teal line) and Whites Working as Managers, Proprietors, or Officials, California, 1860-1910




Flight of the Chinese into the laundry and restaurant business?
Source: IPUMS 2004. Graph by David Newell.