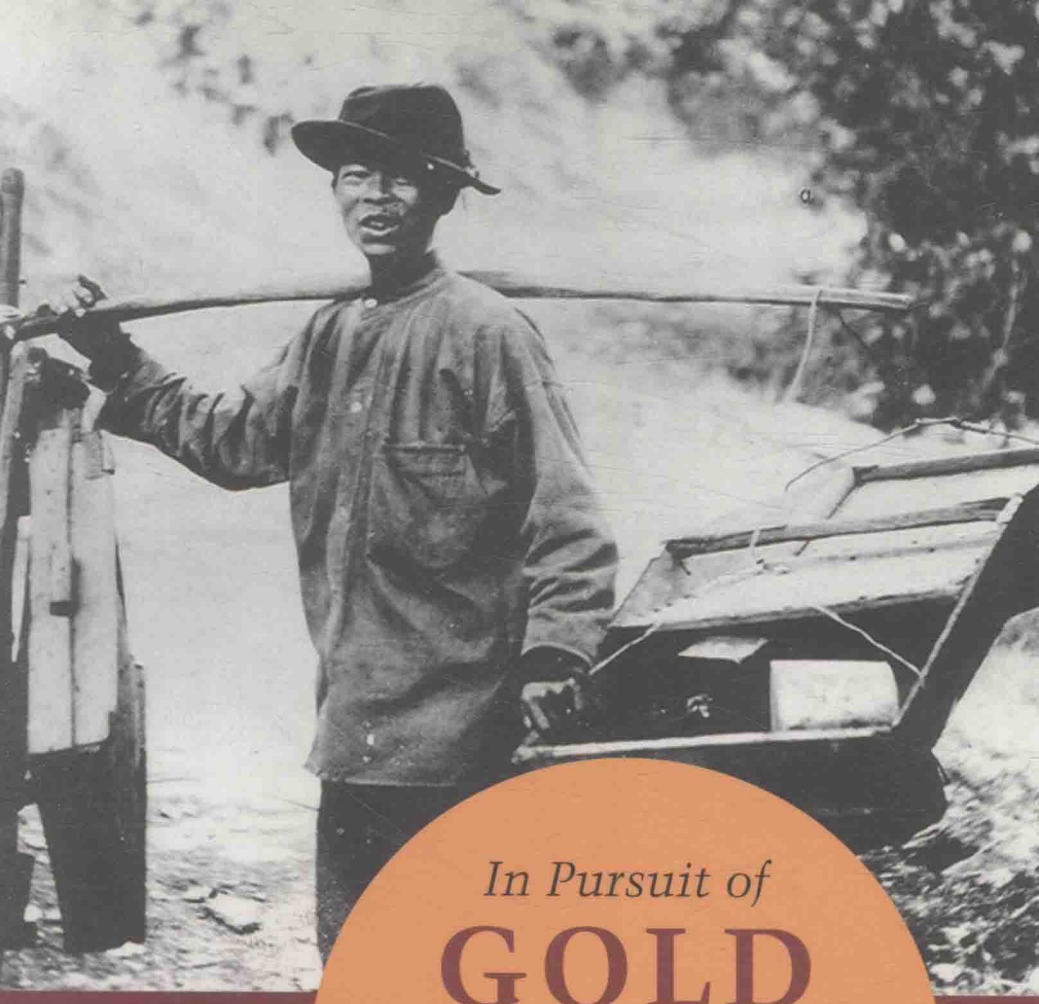

In Pursuit of GOLD

Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West

SUE FAWN CHUNG

IN PURSUIT OF GOLD

Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West

Sue Fawn Chung

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
URBANA, CHICAGO, AND SPRINGFIELD

Manufactured in the United States of America
c 5 4 3 2 1
This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Chung, Sue Fawn
In pursuit of gold : Chinese American miners and
merchants in the American West / Sue Fawn Chung.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-252-03628-6 (acid-free paper)
1. Chinese Americans—Nevada—Elko County—History—
19th century. 2. Gold miners—Nevada—Elko County—
History—19th century. 3. Merchants—Nevada—Elko County—
History—19th century. 4. Mining camps—Nevada—
Elko County—History—19th century. 5. Community life—
Nevada—Elko County—History—19th century. 6. Intercultural
communication—Nevada—Elko County—History—19th century.
7. Elko County (Nev.)—Ethnic relations—History—19th century.
8. Chinese Americans—Oregon—History—19th century.
9. Oregon—Ethnic relations—History—19th century.
10. Chinese Americans—West (U.S.)—History—19th century.
I. Title.
F847.E4C47 2011
979.3'1602—dc22 2010051965

In Pursuit of Gold

THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Series Editor
Roger Daniels

A list of books in the series appears at the end of this book.

This book is dedicated to
Alan, Walter, and Alexander,
and my parents, who have
encouraged my pursuit
of knowledge

Foreword

ROGER DANIELS

NOT SO MANY years ago historians wrote as if whatever economic contribution Chinese workers might have made to the development of the American West ended with the completion of the transcontinental railroads. That myth was demolished by the 1986 publication of Sucheng Chan's *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910,* which transformed the nature of Chinese American history by showing that, in addition to being exploited toilers, Chinese had made important entrepreneurial contributions.

The great virtues of Sue Fawn Chung's fine study of a handful of small mining towns in Eastern Oregon and Nevada are that she shows that here, too, the Chinese economic presence was important and enduring, and the way in which she meticulously depicts small multiethnic communities with a very high level of mutual dependence at a time when Chinese were being persecuted severely in most areas of the American West in which they lived.

Sue Fawn, a former student whose varied contributions to Asian American history and culture I have long admired, is superbly equipped to create this study. In addition to the standard tools of the historian, she has a good command of the Chinese language and has participated in archeological digs and worked with anthropologists and historic preservationists. She is able to use the evidence developed in those disciplines as well as the traditional written and printed sources of the historian to craft detailed histories of vanished and largely ignored communities.

The fact that she has tramped over the relatively isolated and rugged terrain in several of the communities she writes about adds a dimension to her narrative. Her purpose is not antiquarian but historical: she provides a new dimension to the traditional picture of the Chinese in the exclusion era and makes meaningful comparisons between the experiences of the folks that she writes about and the more general experience of other Chinese Americans. Her closing summary puts it well: "In general during this early period [the Chinese of these towns] were not driven out [and] in all of the towns, at least one Chinese resident remained there long after mining declined and could not be considered a sojourner."

Acknowledgments

THIS PROJECT WOULD NOT have been possible without the assistance of many people and organizations. Only some are mentioned below.

My interest in Chinese American history began with the planning and execution of my senior honors thesis under Roger Daniels, who introduced me to the leading scholarship in the field at that time and the methodology and approach that I have used. My Chinese history background under David Farquhar, John King Fairbank, Benjamin Schwartz, John Pelzel, and Ezra Vogel was furthered by Joseph Levenson and Frederic E. Wakeman Jr. James Cahill enhanced my knowledge of Chinese art history and helped me develop an interest in photography and the arts.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Humboldt–Toiyabe National Forest, especially Fred P. Frampton, archaeologist, and Dale Hom, a forest supervisor in the Olympia National Forest, did the initial investigations and sought the funding for the archaeological excavations at Island Mountain that inspired this study. The "Passport in Time" summer volunteer program from 1999 to 2001 provided the workers, including volunteers from the Wing Luke Museum, Seattle, Washington, who were supervised by graduate students working under Donald Hardesty, professor of anthropology, University of Nevada–Reno. Patricia Hunt-Jones, who worked all three summers on the dig, wrote her master's thesis on China Lem's store. Melissa Farnscomb served one summer as the graduate director of the dig and interviewed Della Baker Johns, whose family was close to China Lem. The Johns family kindly sent me photographs of Island Mountain and Gold Creek. Fred Frampton provided me with copies of the Hilda Matthey 1903 photographs. The late Mary and Elmer Rusco of the University of Nevada–Reno, worked on the dig and Mary introduced me to Chinese American historical archaeology. Priscilla Wegars of the University of Idaho–Moscow also served as a consultant on the dig and provided many insights for this project. William Fawcett of the Bureau of Land Management in Elko provided me with Eric Dillingham's report on Tuscarora. Guy Rocha, former Nevada state archivist, and his staff found numerous items on the Chinese in Nevada and solved problems like the records of the payment of poll taxes. The Nevada State Museum staff in Carson City

made the artifacts from Tuscarora and Carson City's Zhigongtang available to me. The staff of the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko opened their archives to me, and Della John's granddaughter assisted in obtaining information and photographs. David Valentine, an archaeologist formerly with the Bureau of Land Management in Winnemucca, Nevada, assisted in numerous ways and read the first rough draft. Maxine Chan of Seattle, Washington, who lectured on Chinese medicine, foods, and customs, provided insights into the daily lives of the late nineteenth-century Chinese. John Fulton, Judge Lem Tuai, and other people too numerous to mention were extremely helpful, and for this I am very grateful.

Neil Thomsen, former head archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), San Bruno, California, helped me locate immigration files, and William Greene and Dan Nealand continued his work for me. Vincent Chin shared his compilations of Chinese partnership records from NARA and Joseph Ellis worked with me at NARA, Washington, D.C., for several years. Roger Daniels introduced me to Marian Smith of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, as it was formerly called. Staff members at NARA in Laguna Nigel, California, and Seattle, Washington, also opened their Chinese immigration files for me.

The staff members of the University of California–Berkeley Bancroft Library and Ethnic Studies Library, and the University of California–San Diego Special Collections that houses the papers from Professor and Mrs. Richard Lingenfelter on mining, were very helpful. Staff members of the recorder's offices in Storey County, Elko County, Washoe County, and Douglas County (all in Nevada) opened their records for me. I also want to thank the staffs at the Family History and Genealogy Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Idaho State Library in Boise for their help.

For my research on Oregon, Leslie Hara Shick, who took me to John Day for several days, the Friends of Kam Wah Chung and Company, the Oregon Historical Society, and staff and directors of the Baker and Grant County Libraries, especially Gary Dielman and Perry Stokes, Oregon State Parks, R. Gregory Nokes, Barbara Sidway, and Oregon's First Lady, Mary Oberst, were invaluable in their enthusiasm and guidance. The University of Nevada–Las Vegas, National Forest Service, Nevada Humanities, Elko County Commissioners, and American Council of Learned Societies provided grants that made the research on the American West and nineteenth-century China possible.

University of Illinois Press editors Laurie Matheson and Tad Ringo were very helpful in editing the manuscript.

I also wish to thank my family, especially my husband Alan, and my sons Walter and Alexander, for their support. Alan drove or accompanied me to many remote locations and participated, like Alexander, in the the archaeological excavations at Island Mountain. Walter furnished much needed encouragement at critical times. I am grateful to them.

Introduction

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF Chinese came to the United States in pursuit of gold in the late nineteenth century. A popular late nineteenth-century Cantonese song described how "the Spirit of Money" graced a miner's home so that "in one blink" he had become a rich young man with gold and silver, no longer facing a desperate financial situation.[1] Few Chinese gold seekers were that fortunate however, and most faced many adversities. By examining the miners and merchants living in three small, relatively isolated, predominantly Chinese mining towns and other contemporary mining camps scattered throughout the American West, some insights into their lives has been possible: what their experiences were and how they compared to other Chinese mining communities, what Chinese traditions and practices they preserved, if and how they were financially successful, and what contributions they made to the development of the American West. Despite discriminatory laws and anti-Chinese movements, some merchants and miners flourished, bought and sold land, businesses, and mining claims, and remained in the United States for many decades.

The miners and merchants in the three towns of John Day, Oregon; Tuscarora, Nevada; and Island Mountain, Nevada, were selected for this study because the Chinese were among the early miners there; during the formative years in the history of the towns, they constituted the majority of the town's residents. The towns were established after the initial gold rush, so some of the Chinese miners and merchants had lived in other American mining towns and were probably familiar with some American ways. The three towns were in relatively isolated, mountainous areas having inhospitable weather: snow and cold in the winter, and heat in the summer. The climate and terrain were very different from the tropical, humid, and hilly southeastern China and adjustments to the environment had to be made quickly. The difficulty in reaching these mountainous places by wagon or foot meant that all of the residents became interdependent upon one another and were not caught up in the whirlwind of anti-Chinese rhetoric that was characteristic of larger EuroAmerican dominated mining towns. The influence of "outsiders" often was limited.

The Chinese helped build the towns and irrigation ditches and made the area productive—at first for mining, and later for agricultural production. They paid taxes and other fees that contributed to the funds of local and state governments. They purchased food products and other items from the local community members, especially EuroAmerican store owners and farmers, and supported the freighters who transported goods to and from the mining towns. In general during this early period between 1850 and 1900 they were not driven out of these three towns and they did not have their homes burned, common occurrences elsewhere.

The leaders of the communities, both EuroAmerican and Chinese, were not hostile toward each other and laid a foundation for a more harmonious atmosphere that was not found in most other mining towns during a time of virulent anti-Chinese sentiment. The limited size of the Chinese population permitted a closer examination of these communities over time through census data, archaeological finds, government records, oral interviews, and newspapers. These Chinese taught the other ethnic groups in the community about Chinese culture, foods, and beliefs, and had the opportunity to learn more about America than some of their fellow countrymen. In at least one town, their relationship with Native Americans involved recreational activities and even some marriages. In all of the towns, at least one Chinese resident remained there long after mining declined and could not be considered a "sojourner." In some ways the merchants and miners in these towns were similar to other gold miners and merchants in the Chinese diaspora but in many cases, as discussed in the conclusion, there were differences—so many previously held generalizations are not valid.

When the California gold fields began to be depleted in the mid-1850s, miners searched for new deposits. The two closest, uncharted territories were Oregon to the north and Nevada to the east. Like the EuroAmerican miners, the Chinese explored these areas and in the mid-1850s a substantial number of them began mining outside of California.

The mining communities in California have been studied and have not been considered in depth in this work because in all of the famous towns, the Chinese represented a minority of the population.[2] At the same time it is important to note that California's mining laws and anti-Chinese movements influenced most of the mining communities in the American West.[3] With the mid-1850s gold decline and completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, the California miners, both Chinese and EuroAmerican, moved to Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, British Columbia, Montana, and elsewhere in search of new sites. EuroAmericans brought with them the prejudice

and racism against the Chinese that had developed in California and that contributed to the violence that the Chinese immigrants often encountered.[4]

The Chinese were not unlike other immigrants in their dreams of instant wealth, new opportunities, and a better life. Until the late nineteenth century when gold mining was primarily taken over by large corporations with expensive machinery, the Chinese were involved in ephemeral placer mining, sometimes with the use of hydraulic equipment, throughout the American West, and sometimes into more capital-intensive quartz mining. A few brought with them some prior knowledge of mining techniques. The Chinese immigrants had a reputation of working hard as individuals or in groups, or for mine owners as wage laborers. Their success at making a profit from abandoned claims became legendary in the gold fields. But few have found answers as to how this was possible.

They faced enormous challenges from hostile miners who wrote anti-Chinese regulations to govern their districts and influenced state and federal legislation. When economic depression and high unemployment affected the EuroAmerican miners, they targeted the Chinese as a major cause of their plight because of the low wages paid them. In the 1870s Chinese miners earned $1.30 to $2 per day, with skilled miners earning $3 per day and foremen getting $4 to $10 dollars per day.[5] Ditch diggers, working ten to twelve hours per day, were paid $2.25 to $3 per day. EuroAmerican miners generally earned twice as much, but to compete with the Chinese they sometimes received only $2.75 without board. The low wages gave the Chinese an image of "cheap" workers, but a closer study of payroll records of the period may indicate otherwise when wages were not averaged but viewed in terms of work classification.

The Chinese presence coincided with a growing "color" consciousness that developed prior to and after the Civil War and the founding of labor unions whose leaders found a common enemy of the working man—the Chinese—that expanded union membership, united the new members, and helped them gain the support of aspiring politicians and many newspaper men. In this period of social Darwinism, a belief in the superiority of the white man, the influx of "different looking" new immigrants from eastern Europe, the growing nonmainstream religious groups such as Jews and Mormons, and the development of nativism and racism led to the Chinese becoming a scapegoat in anti-Chinese campaigns that were part of a larger phenomenon.

The miners' relationship to Chinese merchants played an important role in their lives. Sometimes these merchants left fragmentary records in these or other locations that provide information about what probably occurred. The

merchants, who usually were literate in Chinese (e.g., could read and write) and who knew some English, often were the leaders of the community and interfaced with the EuroAmerican community leaders. They frequently acted as labor brokers, dealt with the "boss headman" of teams of miners who worked for Chinese owners/investors or EuroAmerican mine owners, and provided goods for both independent and company miners. Most also had non-Chinese customers. The merchant's main profits came from the goods sold to the miners and the monthly credit extended at the general store as was done in China. They ordered goods from China and, as in the case of Lem Hong Ng of Island Mountain, sent items used by the Cantonese to China in a continuing trans-Pacific trade. The cost of transporting goods from China to the Pacific Coast towns and cities was very reasonable because the ships carrying heavy loads like lumber to China did not want to return to the United States empty or with light loads, so items like altars and deities for temples and association headquarters, clothing, foodstuffs, dishware, and wooden rocker boxes used by miners were inexpensively shipped to Chinese American stores. Often goods were sold on credit, which had to be paid in full by Chinese New Year, in keeping with Chinese tradition. Many merchants had some rudimentary knowledge of American laws so they could advise the miners and contact the Chinese associations or EuroAmerican lawyers if there was trouble that had to be solved on the larger scale. They also might pay the taxes and other fees on behalf of the miners, an amount deducted from the miners' wages. They updated the miners on changes in the American laws. Some also participated in mining. They played a critical role in the pursuit of gold.

Because the miners themselves left few written records, a variety of sources and approaches, especially historical, archaeological, and sociological, on the topic have been used. Immigration and business records; census manuscripts (also called population schedules); archaeological site reports; newspaper articles; memoirs; oral histories; local, state, and federal records; laws; and summaries of legal judgments provided the foundation for this study. More often than not, examples of the experiences of the Chinese miners and merchants were selected from documents describing the situation in other locations that were probably similar. Although generalizations can be made, the importance of the individual and his accomplishments has been recognized.

The Bureau of the Census provided basic information. Census summaries and census manuscripts were not always accurate but gave an indication of the number of Chinese in any given location. The number of Chinese miners fluctuated between 1860 and 1880. In 1860 California's Chinese population was 34,933 out of a state total of 379,994; some 24,282 of the Chinese were

miners.[6] Miners in Oregon and Nevada were not a significant number until the 1870 census. In 1870 California's Chinese population rose to 49,277 (of which 9,087 were miners) out of a state total of 560,247. Based on tabulations from the census manuscript for 1870 (as opposed to the summaries), economist Ping Chiu counted 14,415 Chinese miners and historian Sucheng Chan tallied a higher figure of 16,000 for California.[7] The count probably did not include the 75 to 150 Chinese who lived and worked in the isolated, mountainous, rich mining community of present-day Hite's Cove, Mariposa County, not far from Yosemite.[8] They were too far away and isolated for the census taker to count. In 1870 Oregon's Chinese population was 3,330 out of a state total of 90,923, of which 1,516 of the Chinese, or 45.5 percent, were miners, mostly concentrated in mountainous eastern Oregon. Oregon's total number of miners was 2,476 so the Chinese represented a large percentage and played a major role in the development of Oregon's early mining history. In 1870 Nevada's Chinese population was 3,123, or 7.3 percent of the total state's population of 42,491, with only 228 Chinese listed as miners. In the 1870s mining was a major occupation for both Oregon and Nevada and continued to be so in the 1880s.

The profile of the overall population changed in between 1880 and 1890, the height of the Chinese population in the American West. California was still the primary place of residence for the Chinese. In 1880 California saw its largest Chinese population growth, an increase from 25,855 (1870) to 75,132.[9] Economic historian Ping Chiu counted 15,055 Chinese as miners.[10] Nevada had a total of 8,241 miners but only 343 Chinese miners (out of a total Chinese population of 5,416 [8.7 percent] of the state's total population of 62,266).[11] The census takers in Nevada were careful about who deserved the coveted title of "miner": a person who worked in a mine, did placer mining, or worked for a mining company full time. Moreover, only one occupation could be listed, so if an individual was only a half-time miner, he was not labeled a miner. If the newspapers and other literature were even somewhat accurate, then these Nevada census figures were far below the actual number of Chinese miners. Just as the Chinese were very visible in Nevada, in 1880 the Chinese population in Oregon grew to 9,510 with 3,965 Chinese miners who worked primarily in eastern Oregon. In comparison, although Idaho had a large Chinese population of 4,274 in 1870, anti-Chinese movements and mining declines saw a substantial drop in the Chinese population from 3,379 to 2,007 between 1880 and 1890. By 1880 the character of the mining industry changed as the majority of miners either worked for EuroAmerican or Chinese mining companies, leaving few of the independent miners of the 1860s and 1870s.

Table 1. Population of Chinese in the United States and the states of California, Oregon, Nevada, and Idaho, 1860–1920*

	United States	California	Oregon	Nevada	Idaho
1860	35,565	34,933	425	23	—
1870	63,199	49,277	3,330	3,162	4,274
1880	105,463	75,132	9,510	5,416	3,379
1890	107,488	72,472	9,540	2,833	2,007
1900	89,863	45,753	10,397	1,352	1,467
1910	71,531	36,248	7,363	927	859
1920	61,639	28,812	3,090	689	585

*United States, Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population* (title varies), 1870–1890, Washington, D.C. (dates vary).

This study utilized the United States Bureau of the census manuscripts for 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 that have been microfilmed by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Service and the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) online database of individuals living in Nevada prior to 1930. The critical 1890 census manuscript for the West was accidentally destroyed in a fire, creating an important gap in information. All scholars have agreed that the census manuscripts provided an inaccurate snapshot of the Chinese individuals in their communities and yet they have been the only indicators of the residents of communities. Census figures differed greatly from the estimates published in the local newspapers and from statistical analyses done by scholars like Sucheng Chan.[12] The 1860 census of Chinese in eastern Washington counted 420 Chinese east of the Cascades while the *Oregonian* (Portland) estimated 1,000 to 1,200 Chinese miners in Oregon, the same general region, in 1857.[13] This kind of difference in figures existed in most locations throughout the American West because it was so difficult to count the Chinese, in part owing to the difficulty in spelling their names or obtaining the other information required for the census. If the census taker could not obtain the data from a Chinese "headman," he often opted not to count the Chinese at all. During the decades before 1880 (and even afterwards in some cases), it was easier to not count them or simply list them as "Chinese" or "Chinaman" with no additional information, as was done, for example, in the case of Nez Perce County, Idaho, in 1870 and the 1875 Nevada state census for Elko County.

The Chinese also were guilty of intentionally avoiding the census taker, who, from their experience in China, was closely allied with or was the same as the tax collector or other government representative. The Chinese had a history of bad experience with poll tax collectors because they could not

always determine who was a legitimate poll tax collector and because of the well-known story of how some tax collectors in California had killed resistant Chinese taxpayers. The county assessor's office sent the poll tax collector around and the tax varied between $3 and $4, depending upon the year. In 1872 approximately three hundred Chinese workers in Washoe County who were working on the Virginia and Truckee Railroad paid $1,200 in poll taxes.[14] The *Nevada State Journal* (May 1, 1884) pointed out that the Chinese passed the poll tax receipt around to avoid paying the tax. This was a common practice used throughout the American West. Since all Chinese looked alike according to most EuroAmericans, the Chinese who paid the tax could sell the receipt for half the price to another who would then show the collector that he had already paid and the tax collector was never the wiser. But, as Randall E. Rohe concluded, "The Chinese paid their share of taxes—miner's taxes, property taxes, poll taxes, and other assessments—and they received none of the service their tax money provided."[15] Because the Chinese sometimes avoided both the tax collectors and the census takers, tracing individual male Chinese has been difficult. Once the poll and other taxes were ruled illegal, many of the records of earlier tax collections were not preserved.

Often the Chinese community leader provided the information to the census taker since many Chinese could not speak English, but he might not be concerned about accuracy. The census revealed other invaluable facts, however: occupation, gender, marital status, wealth of individuals in 1870, the ability to read and/or write, and the households, some of which were integrated. The 1880 census manuscript in Oregon and Idaho even identified the miners with their mining companies. The Chinese population dropped as a result of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1892 Geary Act extending the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and subsequent anti-Chinese immigration acts, culminating in the 1924 Immigration Act that essentially closed the door to Chinese immigrants.

One of the few records that provided the "voice" of Chinese miners and merchants was found in the NARA in San Bruno and Laguna Nigel, California; Seattle, Washington; and Washington, D.C. Records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) have been deposited in these and other NARA locations. San Bruno has Chinese business partnership records, admission and readmission immigration records, duplicate certificates of residence and/or identity, and court records. Laguna Nigel is the depository for Nevada records and has many regional deportation cases. Seattle has files on Chinese individuals in both Oregon and Washington state. Washington,