



The Opium Debate

AND CHINESE EXCLUSION LAWS IN THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WEST

DIANA L. AHMAD

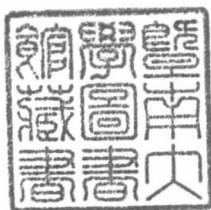
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Preface

ONE NIGHT IN JANUARY 1881, in an attempt to protect the community from a growing problem, a reporter for the *River Press* of Fort Benton, Montana, investigated three opium dens with the hope of exposing the opium business to the public and the authorities. Guided by a man familiar with the resorts, the reporter arrived at the first den, a "long, low log cabin [that] does double duty as an opium den and wash house." After they knocked, a Chinese attendant cracked open the door but denied entry to the two men. Returning an hour later with the guide taking the lead in gaining admission, the two entered the opium resort but discovered that "nothing was visible but a thin haze of smoke, and only the prevalence of the powerful, sickening odor of the drug gave indication of recent occupancy." The journalist surmised that the opium smokers had either left the establishment or had been hidden by the proprietor. Finding no smokers, the investigator and his guide decided to find a more active opium den in an attempt to pursue their appointed mission.

At the second den, again located in a Chinese laundry, the two men encountered a dark apartment with the "same sickening odor" they found earlier. They entered easily this time, and the proprietor brought them to a small side room, "more resembling a tomb than anything else," and asked if they wished to smoke opium. The two assented, and the "attendant produced pipes, small lamps, and the necessary drug, which he proceeded to prepare." After an hour the *River Press* man and his guide left the opium resort. At the third den, the reporter decided he could not vigorously pursue his investigation, due to the effects of the narcotic he had smoked earlier. The reporter's article about the evening's adventure (*Fort Benton River Press*, January 19, 1881) ended with a stern warning to the community about the rising use of the drug in Fort Benton, explaining to his readers

that men, women, and children smoked opium and that the Chinese proprietors were getting rich off the habit.

The *River Press* newsman's experiences, views, and warnings matched those of his fellow reporters in Montana, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Texas, Idaho, Oregon, and California. Little differed in the newspaper columns of the states and territories where opium smoking existed. Newspapers often shared reports about opium because the controversy surrounding the narcotic helped fuel the anti-Chinese debate. In the 1870s and 1880s opium smoking among Anglo-Americans grew, and journalists, bureaucrats, and medical practitioners sought the eradication of the substance and cited its use as strengthening the argument favoring Chinese exclusion. The smoking variety of opium, unlike its medicinal relative, found its way into the United States with the Chinese who arrived at the start of the California gold rush.

Like hundreds of thousands of others from around the world, the Chinese came to the West Coast hoping to strike the mother lode of mineral riches. Thousands of Chinese, primarily men, brought with them numerous skills that they put to use in the mines, for the railroads, and in the enterprises of the Chinatowns they built across the American West. Arriving in San Francisco, the Chinese moved throughout California and then into Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Texas. They established ethnic communities devoted to the needs and desires of the men who built them. In addition to building restaurants, general stores, laundries, and physicians' offices, the Chinese also built opium dens. Only a small minority of the Chinese community was involved in the opium business, but it was a group that caused a stir in the American West. The impact of the drug had a far-reaching effect on the United States, influencing laws, medical studies, and people's attitudes toward the Chinese.

Smoking-opium is distinctly different from the medicinal opium that was often used in the nineteenth-century United States to relieve a patient's pain. Although initially employed as a pain reliever, smoking-opium soon became a recreational drug, first among the Chinese and then among Anglo-Americans. Its use eventually spread throughout much of the United States. The problems associated with smoking-opium, according to elite and middle-class Anglo-Americans, included side effects such as insanity, sexual promiscuity, and nonproductivity.

Physicians, journalists, and bureaucrats, self-appointed monitors of morality in late-nineteenth-century America, expressed deep concern about

the use of the drug. This group possessed high expectations for themselves and for the nation. They considered smoking-opium detrimental to everything they held dear. One of the ways to achieve their goal was to eliminate the immigration of Chinese because many in this group believed the Chinese, who imported the narcotic, were responsible for seducing Americans with it.

On February 21, 1879, another journalist, this time from the *Reno Evening Gazette*, wrote of opium smokers having “glittering eyes and sallow complexions” and smelling of “the fumes of the ‘pipe.’” He editorialized that “the deadly distillation exercises some hideous, baleful spell over the minds of it’s [*sic*] votaries” and that the narcotic was “more subtle and ruinous than the intoxication of the wine cup.” Easily visualized scenes like this encouraged smoking-opium’s opponents to push for the removal of the drug and its purveyors from their communities, their states and territories, and finally, their nation.

The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws yields insight into the impact smoking-opium and its culture had on the demands for Chinese exclusion. Rightly, economic and political reasons have long dominated the literature. More recently, historians have added the issue of Chinese prostitution to the exclusionist argument. The opium debate needs to be included in the discussion of why the United States excluded the Chinese. Based on historical evidence that includes police records, court files, newspaper accounts, diaries, journals, and government records, this work seeks to do just that: include the debate over smoking-opium into the reasons for Chinese exclusion. In doing so, it focuses on Anglo-American perceptions of the Chinese and is not designed to present the Chinese side. Few Chinese involved themselves in the business of the opium dens; however, the white middle and elite classes failed to acknowledge that. They saw both the narcotic and the Chinese as threats to their society and wanted them eliminated as quickly as possible.

The Anglo-Americans brought their cultural and social value system with them to the West. As such, a brief explanation of their value structure and the western communities they lived in puts their demands to eliminate opium into context with the other anti-Chinese issues of labor competition and prostitution. Using physicians’ sources, the work demonstrates that the medical community, members of the middle and elite classes themselves, studied opium smoking and found it a threat to American values and the economic structure of the nation. The work further investi-

gates the development of legislation to abolish smoking-opium and prevent the Chinese from immigrating to the United States.

Journalists, physicians, and ordinary citizens expressed virulent hostility toward the Chinese in their writings. In quoting that material, I eliminated numerous overtly racist epithets; however, when it was necessary to maintain a quote intact, I prefaced it as racist and disturbing.

Since this book is concerned with the “smoking” variety of opium, not the “medicinal” variety, I use “opium” to mean smoking-opium. When a distinction is required, the terms *smoking-opium* and *medicinal-opium* are used.

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Chapter One

THE POPPY PROBLEM COMES TO THE WEST

TO MANY MODERN AMERICANS, opium smoking conjures up visions of dark, secret back-alley rooms in Chinatown filled with men and women lost in drug-induced dreams. Often the visions include a room filled with sweet-smelling opium fumes, long wooden bunks, and the ubiquitous old Chinese man who sells the narcotic and permits only those who know the password to enter the so-called den of iniquity. The image of the opium den has changed little over the one and a half centuries it has existed in the United States.

The Chinese arrived in California during the gold rush. At first accepted by those they met and lived among, the Chinese worked in the mines and mining communities of the region. Soon, however, the Anglo-American community perceived the Chinese as economic and moral threats to the United States and its residents. The Chinese often worked for lower wages than their Anglo-American counterparts, sent a percentage of their earnings home to China, and failed to assimilate into society. When the Chinese were banned from independent prospecting adventures, they became laborers and entrepreneurs in the same communities. Their businessmen concentrated on "service industries," including dry goods stores, restaurants, and laundries. Other Chinese opened brothels and opium dens to service the predominantly male community. It was those operations that some anti-Chinese forces focused on in their efforts to prove that the Chinese were a threat to the country's moral foundation.

With mineral discoveries outside of California, miners and merchants quickly moved to the new locations, hoping to find their bonanzas. The Chinese moved with the rest of the community, taking with them their opium dens and brothels. The regions outside California soon came to have thousands of Chinese and hundreds of "dens of iniquity." This work centers on Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Oregon, Texas, and

California, areas that well illustrate western America's reactions to the Chinese and their vice. Western newspapers, residents, and politicians reflect the consensus of American opinion on smoking-opium; however, because of the constantly changing environment in the western communities, the areas also serve as excellent examples of how western Americans dealt with a demand for local order while taking on a national problem.

These territories and states experienced mineral rushes, railroad building, and population shifts as well as similar experiences with the Chinese and their opium practice. California, the state that contained the largest population of Chinese in the United States and generally served as the starting point for the Chinese in their American adventures, possessed mineral wealth, railroads, harbors, long-established cities and towns, and a large population of Hispanics. As early as the 1850s, Chinese moved into Nevada to work its mines and on its railroads. Because of the discovery of the Comstock Lode, Virginia City contained the largest population of Chinese outside San Francisco, making the community's reaction to the Chinese an important index to the attitudes typical of western Anglo-Americans. Utah and southern Idaho possessed great mineral wealth and railroads; it was also a region heavily influenced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormons may have differed with traditional American religious views, but their response to opium matched the rest of the West in their demands for Chinese exclusion. Physically distant from large centers of Chinese population, yet still rich mineral and railroad centers, Montana and Wyoming contained fewer Chinese but reacted in a similar fashion to areas with large concentrations of East Asians. Oregon, a West Coast area where thousands of Chinese lived and worked, is not as well studied as its southern neighbor. Although not possessing as many Chinese as other territories bordering Mexico, Texas represents the rapidly developing Southwest with its railroads, cattle business, and huge leaps in population and city development. In addition, as in California, the Chinese in Texas competed with a large Hispanic population for economic opportunities.

Despite the difference in the number of Chinese in each state or territory or the span of years that the anti-opium campaign covered, the reactions to the Chinese habit remained the same. The elites in these areas saw the defense of what they defined as Anglo, middle-class culture as crucial to further development, prosperity, morality, and civilization. By coincidence, the Chinese encountered entrenched but apprehensive elites in these states just as opium became more popular with white men and wom-

en. The reasons for this popularity were various and individual; its consequences were harmful and collective.

Many Americans believed that smoking-opium threatened the values of the elite and middle classes. Physicians agreed with the prevailing attitude toward opium and the insidious impact the drug could have on Anglo-American men and women. In order to acquire smoking-opium, a habitué needed to visit Chinatown, whereas with medicinal-opium, a person consulted a private physician for a prescription. Doctors controlled the use and content of medicinal-opium; smoking-opium had no such legitimate constraints.

Westerners were aware that simply declaring opium illegal was insufficient to prevent its use. As a result, they sought the exclusion of the Chinese, the primary dealers of the narcotic in the United States. An exclusion law, in theory, not only prevented opium from entering the country, it also precluded an important source of cheap immigrant labor from entering the nation as well. Economic arguments dominated the calls for Chinese exclusion; however, moral arguments targeting opium use and Chinese prostitution constituted another side of the demands. This work focuses on opium, but a brief look at what preceded the smoking-opium debate will place the opium issue into better context.

Between the 1850s and the 1875 passage of the Page Act, the leading moral complaint against the Chinese was their involvement in prostitution. During those years, Chinese secret societies, such as the Hip Yee Tong, imported over six thousand Chinese prostitutes, or 87 percent of the Chinese women then in the United States. Generating approximately two hundred thousand dollars over a twenty-year period, the members of the Hip Yee Tong brought young women from southeastern China to service the sexual needs of the Chinese men in the United States whose families remained at home. Kidnapped, purchased from poor families, or lured to San Francisco by promises of marriage, the young Chinese women fell into three categories: those who would be sold as concubines to wealthy Chinese merchants, those who were purchased for high-class Chinese brothels that serviced only Chinese patrons, and finally, the women bought to work in lower-class brothels or cribs and service a racially mixed clientele.¹

After the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Chinese women brought into the country for purposes of prostitution signed a contract for their services in an effort to prevent Anglo-Americans from accusing the Chinese of promoting slavery. The young women generally lived their

lives segregated from the rest of American society and had little independence, although occasionally they gained some control over their lives by killing themselves, seeking help from the Chinese diplomats in San Francisco, escaping from their owners, and stealing from their clients. In some cases the women escaped to a "rescue mission" run by Christian missionaries near Chinatown. For those women unable or unwilling to leave prostitution, the money earned for their jobs was low, only twenty-five to fifty cents per customer.²

Around the American West, opinions of Chinese prostitutes differed little from region to region or time to time. Generally, Anglo-Americans considered Chinese prostitutes "strangers to virtue," "utterly shameless," and in harsh, racist language, "rotten, venal carcasses," and a greater threat to American society than Mormons.³ Further, Anglo-American society blamed Chinese prostitutes for spreading syphilis and making young men spend "all their money" in carnal pursuits. Despite the negative views of the women, some Anglo-Americans said that the prostitutes "deserve our pity" because of the dire circumstances that defined their lives. Demands to end or at least regulate Chinese prostitution began at the community and state levels but were not always successful. Then, on March 3, 1875, under the sponsorship of California congressman Horace F. Page, the federal government approved "An Act Supplementary to the Acts in Relation to Immigration." Also known as the Page Act, the law called for a ban on the importation of "coolie labor" and women for the purposes of prostitution.⁴ According to George Peffer, author of *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration before Exclusion*, historians have long ignored the Page Act and its impact on the lives of the Chinese in the United States. Peffer found that the number of Chinese prostitutes declined by 68 percent in the six years between the passage of the Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act when compared with the six years prior to the statute. He found that the number of nonprostitute Chinese women fell as well. The reason for the decline in the number of Chinese women, prostitute and nonprostitute alike, was that American consuls in China and immigration officials at United States port cities made immigrating to the United States difficult, if not impossible, because of the stricter analysis the women now underwent due to the 1875 statute.⁵

The significance of Chinese prostitution in the western United States cannot be denied. It influenced the immigration of Chinese women and the low number of Chinese families, especially after the Page Act's passage.

The continuation of Chinese bachelor communities resulted from the lack of women to marry. Antimiscegenation laws in western states contributed to the loneliness of the Chinese male, especially the laboring class. However, brothels were not the only place these single men sought solace. Opium dens provided an escape from everyday tensions and, like prostitution, became an important reason for Chinese exclusion demands.

Nearly every Chinatown possessed at least one opium resort. Large cities like San Francisco, growing communities like El Paso, Texas, and small towns like Pioche, Nevada, contained opium habitués. By the early 1870s opium had spread to the Anglo-American demimonde, and within a few years to the elite and middle classes in the West who considered the drug a threat to the moral character of the nation. Because the opium habit was not confined to already-established cities, its use must also be considered within the context of community building.

The development of the opium dens in the West coincided with the American acceptance of British nineteenth-century cultural ideology, named for Great Britain's Queen Victoria. In the United States, American Victorians dominated the economic, social, and political institutions. Ever concerned with economic growth, the American middle class planned ahead, believed in American cultural superiority, and were given to self-reproach. Generally Protestant northern Whigs or Republicans, Victorians were not the majority of Americans, yet they came to control the media that allowed them to spread their views of work, family, and society. In particular, they stressed social responsibility and personal morality.⁶

Even though many people in the West were not members of the middle class, they aspired to become members of it. The Victorians acted as a reference group that served as an anchor for the attitudes of those striving to join the middle and elite classes. The lower classes set goals and standards for themselves that reflected those of the middle class, and defined their success or failure based on the beliefs of the same group.⁷ In the American West, members of this influential group included doctors, journalists, and bureaucrats. They helped form American views of the Chinese and decided whether these Asian laborers, merchants, and women were acceptable immigrants for the nation. They also decided whether opium was an acceptable habit.

With confidence in the future of the United States, William B. Daniels, in his first Governor's Message to the Idaho territorial legislature in December 1863, emphatically announced that the child already had been

born who would "see his country more united and powerful than ever before, leading all the nations in the pathway of political civilization, and imparting to all the millions beneath her sway a degree of prosperity and happiness enjoyed by no other people beneath the sun."⁸ Similarly, on April 6, 1876, the *San Francisco Chronicle* asserted that "the aim of our civilization shall be to make better, higher, nobler specimens of the human race." Americans believed that God had pledged himself to the prosperity of the United States and that idlers stood in the way of progress. Herbert Spencer's ideas of social Darwinism strengthened America's attitudes about the role of the United States in the world.⁹ In sum, Americans must not waste time and energy on frivolous actions, because that would direct strength away from the advancement of the country. Visiting opium dens was an example of a misdirected recreational activity.

The clergy, doctors, and moral reformers offered advice on sexual behavior to the elite and middle classes. They advocated male continence and female purity, believing that sex existed for the purpose of procreation, not recreation. They demanded that women be pure, pious, domestic, and submissive and identified women with everything that was "beautiful and holy," according to the historian Barbara Welter.¹⁰ Literature of the late nineteenth century taught women how to perfect their behavior and to turn their homes into havens for their husbands. By contrast, physicians and others considered men foolish, wanton, dissatisfied, malicious, and covetous, according to Ebenezer Sibly's 1810 *A Key to Physic, and the Occult Sciences*. Sibly's ideas carried over into later American beliefs about men, including the notion that self-control built a strong Christian personality. Controlling sexual urges earned men self-respect and indicated their strength, not weakness.¹¹

Americans did not always adhere to the desired ideals, but many of them attempted to incorporate at least some of them into their lives. The task of the middle class, or those who aspired to be middle class, entailed eliminating vice and establishing family communities.¹² With these ideas forming the ideological background of the elite and middle classes, Americans formed opinions of the Chinese based on their own perception of the world. Americans looked at many aspects of Chinese life and judged Chinese customs not on their own merits, but instead on how the Chinese way of doing things fit into American society. Aspects of the Chinese culture, such as opium and prostitution, did not find an easy resting place in nineteenth-century American society.

When the world heard of the mineral strikes in California, thousands hurried to a region already developed by Anglo-Europeans for more than a century. But in the post-Civil War era in regions outside of California, the gold and silver miners and railroad builders encountered mile upon mile of lands devoid of Anglo-American or Anglo-European communities. Instead those who moved to Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Texas, Idaho, and Oregon could set the tone for the social and moral, as well as the economic and political, world in which they wished to live. Many of them brought their anti-Chinese preconceptions with them. Those who had participated in the California gold rush brought the ideas and prejudices learned on the West Coast with them.

The West had been explored by Anglo-Americans since the days of Lewis and Clark. Texas and Oregon were states and Utah was a territory long before other western areas discovered their mineral riches or railroading importance. California became a state largely because of its valuable minerals and the resulting population growth. After the initial gold rush, miners scattered throughout the West in search of the mother lode or to find their fortune in the cattle that fed not only the region's towns and mining camps but, increasingly, the cities back east. Nevada, Montana, and Idaho developed because of their mineral wealth. Wyoming was important for its coal deposits and the railroad lines that connected the two sides of the United States together.

The communities formed in these western states and territories grew fast. Economically, the movement out of California began with the 1859 discovery of rich silver and gold deposits in the Mount Davidson area of the Sierra Nevada. The major vein of the Comstock Lode was found in 1873, bringing vibrant boom times to the vicinity. As miners moved to new discoveries, towns quickly developed. Butte, Montana, Orofino, Idaho, and even post-Civil War Salt Lake City, Utah, thrived because of the new wealth. Communities also came into existence because of the railroads, including the Northern Pacific, Southern Pacific, Union Pacific, and Central Pacific lines. These railroads served as transporters of goods and people and as large-scale employers. Towns like Helena, Montana, Cheyenne, Wyoming, and El Paso, Texas, became important supply centers for their surrounding communities because of these rail lines.¹³

As minerals were discovered and towns were founded, people of varying backgrounds found their way to the West. Some, like Montana territorial governor James M. Ashley, believed "in the adaptibility [*sic*] and non-

adaptability [*sic*] of climate to races, and that in our own country, as well as among the civilized nations of Europe, there are those better adapted to the climate, productions, and wants of Montana, than others."¹⁴ Ashley gave the impression that Chinese immigrants were inappropriate prospective settlers for the territory because they came from the subtropical regions of southeastern China and might experience difficulties adjusting to Montana's cold climate. Other settlers, such as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, moved west to isolate themselves as much as possible but soon took advantage of the growing economy brought on by gold, silver, and the trains. California's diverse population reflected the West more realistically than Montana's or Utah's desires of homogeneity. In 1855 *The Annals of San Francisco* found that "All races were represented," and by 1880 the traveler Benjamin F. Taylor wrote, "to see nations, come to San Francisco!"¹⁵

The towns that developed between the 1840s and the 1890s grew in proportion to the amount of wealth brought into the community. Shortly after the 1859 gold strike in Nevada, Virginia City got its own post office; fourteen years later, the city possessed over one hundred saloons, fifty dry goods stores, four banks, twenty laundries, six churches, several schools, five newspapers, and a railroad with thirty-two arrivals and departures each day. Its markets were supplied with oysters, fish, game, steaks, fresh fruit and vegetables, and fresh bakery products. By 1867 Helena, Montana, had four banks, hundreds of saloons, three schools, and three regular religious congregations and boasted an assessed property value of over two million dollars and a population of approximately five thousand.¹⁶ Other communities around the West experienced growth like Virginia City and Helena as well.

Town development often included vice enterprises such as gambling, saloons, brothels, and opium dens. Vice was so prevalent in Virginia City that even experienced travelers like J. Ross Browne, a whaler, adventurer to the Middle East and Africa, and future U.S. minister to China, described his entrance into Virginia City as if he "had entered the Devil's Gate" and wondered "what had I done to bring me to this? In vain I entered into a retrospection of the various iniquities of my life; but I could hit upon nothing that seemed bad enough to warrant such a fate." Apparently the chaos on the Comstock Lode rivaled his travels to Zanzibar and the mutiny he experienced off the coast of Africa. Alfred Doten, longtime friend and fellow reporter of Dan De Quille on the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*,

frequently described the entertainment available in the community in his diary. He noted that there were “lots of gambling saloons open to the public—crowded—Monte, faro, chuckerluck, rouge et noir &C.” If his diary entries are to be believed, he and De Quille knew the amusements well.

Virginia City’s centers for business and pleasure were located on C and D streets. Mary McNair Mathews, a resident of Virginia City for nearly a decade while searching for the murderer of her brother, claimed that it “always seemed to me that every fourth door was a saloon of either one or the other kind” and “D Street was the condemned part of the city, being a street that no decent person lived on.”¹⁷

Simultaneous to Virginia City’s growth as a mining town, Fort Worth, Texas, became known for the cattle business and, like its Nevada cousin, developed a reputation for vice. On July 4 and 7, 1883, the *Fort Worth Gazette* reported fights in the Third Ward, “Hell’s Half Acre,” that occurred almost hourly and were a “disgrace to any city.” Prostitution was so rampant that men looking for a prostitute accosted innocent women on the streets and entered private homes in search of a bordello. There were demands to stop the violence and vice; however, the local governments did little to end the problem. Even religious Mormon areas in Utah, such as Box Elder County, contained neighborhoods where the residents could visit one of nineteen saloons, two dance halls, or a “rat pit” that featured bull, dog, or cock fighting.¹⁸

Many western towns contained a segregated Chinese community known as Chinatown. The Chinese formed their first significant community in San Francisco, where they established their own lodgings, restaurants, businesses, shops, and vice enterprises. Descriptions of San Francisco’s ethnic enclave commented on the opium odors, dens, and den proprietors almost as often as they referred to the community’s shops, restaurants, and housing. On October 18, 1867, the *New York Times* compared San Francisco’s Chinatown to New York City’s “‘fever-nests’ and centres of crime and poverty” because of the number of “abandoned women, gamblers, opium-sellers and liquor-dealers” that lived in the community. In reality, the majority of the Chinese in California were legitimately employed in a variety of professions, including mining in the early years, farming, fishing, domestic service, and entrepreneurial enterprises.

As the Chinese followed the mineral strikes and employment opportunities, new Chinatowns developed throughout the West. As in San Francisco, these communities within a community contained laundries, busi-