

As Chinese Exclusion Act Turns 135, Experts Point To Parallels Today

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Kat Chow - NPR

A Chinese man [stands on a pedestal](#) surrounded by a harbor as a cartoon imitation of the Statue of Liberty. His clothes are tattered, his hair is in a long, thin tail, his eyes squint. The words "diseases," "filth," "immorality," and "ruin to white labor" float around his head.

This man is the center of an iconic image from 1881 called "[A Statue for Our Harbor](#)," made by the cartoonist George Frederick Keller. The image reflects the widespread anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant sentiment of the time, and was used to drum up support for the passage of the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#), which turns 135 on Saturday. The law limited Chinese immigration and barred them from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens.

Experts point to the parallels between the political climate of the exclusion era and today: a close and contentious presidential election that stirred anti-immigrant sentiment; the growing economic anxiety of white Americans; and policies that would drastically shape the country's immigration laws.

On Saturday, a group of Asian American activists are organizing a rally in San Francisco to acknowledge the anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act and to "learn from our past and prevent it from repeating," according to Cynthia Choi, who works with Chinese For Affirmative Action, one of the groups organizing the event.

"This is important for the Chinese American and broader Asian American community, to stand up against the new targets to this new form of exclusion, for us to say it was wrong 135 years ago and it's wrong today," Choi said. "We're in a unique period where... accurate information is not as easily attained, so there are a number of people who are on the fence, who are confused about the policies, who — more dangerously — feel as though this doesn't affect them."

Then And Now: Race And Class

"Beginning in 1882, the United States stopped being a nation of immigrants that welcomed foreigners without restrictions, borders or gates. Instead, it became a ... gatekeeping nation," Erika Lee, a professor at the University of Minnesota, wrote in her book *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During The Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*. "In the process, the very definition of what it meant to be an 'American' became even more exclusionary."

The Chinese exclusion law was the very first time in American history that immigrants were barred because of their race and class. In 1882, when Congress passed the law, there were 39,600 men and women from China who arrived in the U.S. Just three years later, there were only 22, according to early records that Lee came across in her research.

The 1876 presidential race between Rutherford Hayes and Samuel Tilden was a major turning point in the country's stance on immigration. Leading up to the election, the race was so close and electoral votes were so coveted, it brought California's ongoing fight to push out Chinese immigrants to the national stage, Lee said. Many Californians worried that Chinese laborers would take their jobs, and that they were sexually lecherous threats to society.

Lee said that anti-immigrant measures in the 1880s — and today — were driven by both working class people and elites, as well as those who had a "vested economic interest in border walls and detention centers." The Chinese Exclusion Act set the groundwork for immigrant detention centers and the country's first large-scale deportation of a single immigrant group. Specifically, the exclusion era brought an expansion of the federal government in terms of hiring more immigrant inspectors, whose responsibilities included working as interpreters and at the detention facilities.

As for today's parallel? Lee points to [companies that are vying to build a U.S.-Mexico border wall](#), and the question of whether there will be [more privately-owned immigrant detention centers](#) under President Trump.

Lee says that today's equivalent is the proposed so-called "Muslim ban," because it singles out specific groups of people for discrimination. "The fact that we don't explicitly name Muslims [in the executive order] is more of a reflection of how our racial sensibilities have changed over the past 135 years, in terms of being more polite in our racism."

And, Lee says, like the proposed ban — which Trump says will be in place until vetting procedures are strengthened — the Chinese Exclusion Act was also originally proposed as a temporary law. The exclusion act was meant to be law for a decade but lasted 61 years. It was repealed in 1943 with the Magnuson Act, when the U.S. wanted to foster an alliance with China in the war against Japan. In 2012, Congress [passed a resolution formally expressing regret](#) to Chinese Americans for the exclusion law and other discriminatory measures.

But while there are many links between the exclusion era and today, there are also important differences. Trump's immigration orders have created "one of the most divisive eras around immigration" in history, Lee told NPR. And his policies have had wide-reaching consequences for immigrants that have been met with protests across the country.

"I cannot think of another time or a set of laws that has the promise to transform immigration so dramatically at every level," Lee said. Trump's policies have included banning refugees, increasing border security and interior enforcement, expanding deportation and expedited removal, [reforming the H1-B visa program](#) and attempting to enact a travel ban. Still, Lee said, what's different is the nationwide grassroots efforts and legal challenges that have sprung up against Trump's immigration policies. "There were no protests in support of Chinese immigrants [during the exclusion era in the U.S.]," Lee said.

But it's unclear if some immigrants today draw a link between the historical exclusions and Trump's various immigration restrictions, according to Janelle Wong, the director of the Asian American studies program at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"On the one hand, more than 60 percent of Asian-American registered voters oppose a 'Muslim Ban.' This is pretty consistent across groups," Wong wrote in an email, citing her work on the [National Asian American Survey](#). "On the other hand, the survey also shows that about 20 percent of Chinese Americans, and Asian-American registered voters as a whole, support such a ban. This, despite the fact that Chinese were the first in U.S. history to be excluded according to these kinds of ascriptive characteristics." Choi, the rally organizer, said she feels that while the Chinese Americans who support the ban are a minority, "they're a vocal one." Choi said that many of the rally's speeches will be translated into Cantonese and Mandarin, which she hopes will draw in people who might only speak Chinese.

In 1885, a student named Saum Song Bo wrote a scathing open letter in a New York newspaper. He was struck by the irony that the U.S. was erecting the Statue Of Liberty three years after passing the Chinese Exclusion Act:

"That statue represents Liberty holding a torch which lights the passage of those of all nations who come into this country. But are the Chinese allowed to come? As for the Chinese who are here, are they allowed to enjoy liberty as men of all other nationalities enjoy it? Are they allowed to go about everywhere free from the insults, abuse, assaults, wrongs and injuries from which men of other nationalities are free?"

Liberty, for Bo and many other immigrants in that era, felt out of reach.



Enlarge this image

A Statue for Our Harbor was published in 1881. It expressed the fear of Chinese immigrants, which led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act 135 years ago.

[George Frederick Keller/Historical Society of Pennsylvania](#)