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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION
OF CHINESE NAMES

In transliterating names from Chinese to English, there are two distinct spelling systems: Wade-Giles and pinyin. Historically, Euro-Americans used the Wade-Giles system for all Chinese names in both official documents and scholarly writings. The standardized pinyin system, first endorsed by the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s, has become more acceptable and prevalent in most parts of the world. For example, in pinyin the word \textit{Peking} is \textit{Beijing}. Now pinyin has become the standard for spelling Chinese names in all academic publications.

The conversion from one system to the other does not make it easy for historians, who have no choice but to move continually back forth between the two. Since all Chinese names appearing in historical documents are transliterated under the old system, each scholar must come up with a practical solution for handling those names. In this work, I have chosen to use the pinyin system for all Chinese names and other terms. The original spellings that appeared in archives are kept intact only if no Chinese character for a particular name can be found. Otherwise, names of persons and places have been updated into pinyin, followed by Chinese characters whenever possible. In such a case, the name \textit{Li Hung Chang} should properly appear as \textit{Li Hongzhang} 李鸿章. To avoid any confusion, the original spellings of people’s and places’ names are included in the notes or in parentheses.

According to Chinese tradition, a person’s family name always comes before his or her given name. All historical names in this work are presented in their original format and order.
THE ROAD TO
CHINESE EXCLUSION
Sectional conflict is a dominant theme in American history. Since its founding, the United States frequently has had to deal with the balance of political power among its different regions. The continual struggle over the national ideal of equality and the hypocrisy of privilege produced many significant and fateful events in the burgeoning nation. On a few occasions, such sectional crises even threatened the survival of the republic. Most often these threats to the Union were settled by compromises, the most egregious allowing the perpetuation of the “peculiar institution” of slavery, which eventually led to a murderous civil war. These historic and pervasive sectional compromises were characterized by complexity. Any changes in political boundaries, regional population, economic structure, and cultural orientation could easily trigger a round of clashes among competing regions. Political parties and politicians regularly enflamed sectional differences by manipulating the public with sensationalized, self-serving rhetoric. Each historical period has featured glaring issues that have led to memorable episodes centered on sectional conflict in the United States.

During the first hundred years after independence, almost all of the sectional conflicts occurred between the states—North versus South—of the Atlantic Coast. Two major issues crucial to each region’s existence—the tariff and slavery—relentlessly drove the principals into fierce political battles. These two central concerns fueled the Three-fifths Compromise, Alexander Hamilton’s economic programs, the Missouri Compromise, the Tariff Controversy, the Bank War, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the founding of the Republican Party, Bleeding Kansas, and eventually the Civil War itself. The westward expansion of the United States, another important aspect of the country’s development that was central to these and other national issues, added a new dimension to this North-South struggle. Whether in support of free states or of slave states, each side anxiously looked westward for political allies. As Frederick Jackson Turner, a great American historian and the father of the sectional thesis, in 1925 percep-
tively stated, “Each Atlantic section was, in truth, engaged in a struggle for power; and power was to be gained by drawing upon the growing West.” In other words, victory in sectional conflicts often depended on winning Western allies. By the mid-nineteenth century the North had done extremely well in this endeavor, gaining sectional partners from the Midwest to the Pacific Coast. The drastic and violent solution to this sectional conflict, the Civil War, although it was a resounding victory of the North over the South, caused great suffering in the young republic. Significantly, this Northern triumph and the subsequent Reconstruction era marked the end of the first period of American sectionalism.

When the nation entered its second century, sectionalism was fundamentally transformed from a two-way rivalry between the North and the South into a three-way competition that now included the rising West. With its rapidly increasing population and economic growth, the West began to demand more political power and national recognition as it strove to free itself from colonial status under Eastern economic and political domination. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the West rose steadily to national political prominence through a series of political campaigns and events such as the anti-Chinese crusade, the Indian policy, the farmers’ protest, the People’s Party, the women’s suffrage campaign, and the statehood movement. By the early twentieth century, the West clearly had achieved political equality with the other two regions. Frederick Jackson Turner acknowledged this seismic shift at the fiftieth anniversary of the end of Reconstruction: “In the political history of the United States since 1876, the West has played a leading role.” Walter Prescott Webb, another famous historian of the West, concurred in his book Divided We Stand (1937): “The admission of New Mexico and Arizona in 1912 marked the end of the [North’s] political domination.” The rise of the West is arguably the most important feature in the second phase in the history of American sectional conflicts.

Because scholars and officials have applied different criteria and concepts in defining the nation’s regions, there is no consensus on the location of the eastern boundary of the American West. Most regionalists choose either the Mississippi River or the 98th meridian as the distinctive marker where the West begins. However, regional boundaries changed over time. In this study, I roughly divide the late-nineteenth-century United States into three main regions: the North, the South, and the West (see Map 1). The South includes all the slave states in the lead-up to the Civil War. The West
covers all the territory between the Pacific Coast and an eastern boundary composed of the tier states from North Dakota to Oklahoma. All the rest I place in the North. In the late 1870s and the early 1880s, the North and the South each contained sixteen states and the West six, with ten more to come. This definition of the three sections is very similar to the one Webb proposed: “These dividing lines . . . nearly follow the country’s social, economic, and political history and its climatic and topographic lines.” Despite the subjective nature of these regional boundaries, this sectional map is designed to provide a necessary mental framework for a discussion of sectionalism in the late nineteenth century.4

During the rise of the American West, the effort to restrict Chinese immigration unexpectedly emerged as one of the first major political issues to unite the region. Anti-Chinese sentiment offered Westerners a convenient common political cause that targeted a relatively small group of newcomers who were intent on taking advantage of the thriving nation’s economic opportunities. California’s gold rush in the mid–nineteenth century had attracted tens of thousands of prospectors, including Chinese, from all over the world. Their initial success in the mining fields quickly established a beachhead for future immigrants. Investors and politicians immediately realized that the development of the American West demanded a large, afford-
able labor force. In response, many poverty-stricken Chinese, eager to escape from misery at home, decided to venture to America, offering the region a readily available “cheap” labor pool and an easily targeted group of foreign nationals who were more willing to work hard for less pay than many others coming to the region. In the following three decades, the Chinese eagerly branched out from California, reaching every corner of the West. They played a major role in building the region as key participants in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, in the mining of gold, in offering laundering and other services in the major cities, and in introducing unique cultural features that to this day help to define the West. Despite these salient contributions, their sudden appearance along with other immigrants caused ethnic and racial tensions in the host communities. As the Chinese population steadily grew in the West, this ethnic group’s distinctive physical appearance and exotic culture made it stand out in the Anglo-dominated society. As soon as the Chinese arrived at the Golden Gate, in fact, Anglo-Americans, out of fear of economic competition or because of political ambitions, began to call for the expulsion of these Asian strangers. With this nativist response, California quickly took up the mantle of the anti-Chinese crusade.

The admission into the union of the Golden State as a “free” state had placed it at the heart of the sectional fight over race-based slavery and the impending Civil War. As early as the 1850s, however, local politicians in the state discovered another racial issue centered on Chinese immigrants. Using their local police power, state legislators and county and municipal officials passed discriminatory anti-Chinese statutes and ordinances. Others targeted the Chinese with illegal vigilante actions and spontaneous mob violence in a concerted effort to affect ethnic subjugation. As it turns out, California was setting an example for other Western states and territories, which soon enacted similar anti-Chinese legislation and supported analogous ethnic violence. However, despite widespread anti-Chinese rhetoric and actions in the West, there was initially no coordinated political campaign to prohibit Asian immigrants from coming to America. For almost a quarter century, California stood alone in the call for national legislation on Chinese exclusion, which gained little political traction in the country due to the lack of Western consensus on the subject. Not until the mid-1870s, when Westerners finally rallied behind anti-Chinese sentiment due to the growing labor protest, was the so-called Chinese question thrust into the national limelight.
More than anything, post–Civil War politics helped to transform the anti-Chinese movement from a regionalized sandlot scrap into a national brawl. The main reason for this transformation centered on evolving national politics, especially the evolution of the Republican Party. Founded as a sectional political organization, the Republican Party in the 1850s operated only in the North and the West. During the Civil War, however, Lincoln’s party, backed by U.S. troops, triumphantly expanded into the “solid” South, becoming a national party at the expense of its chief rival: the Democratic Party. But Republican control of nationwide politics did not last long. During Reconstruction, “Southern Redeemers” quickly and effectively drove the Republicans to near extinction in the region. Reduced to a sectional party again by the mid-1870s, the Republicans had no choice but to return to a traditional winning formula based on a North-West alliance. To solidify this alliance in order to maintain their national dominance, the Republicans in the 1870s desperately used the “bloody-shirt” strategy, reminding Americans that the Democrats had started the Civil War and tried to destroy the Union. Such Democrat-bashing rhetoric served the Republican Party well in some elections. But the emerging Chinese question immediately jeopardized this hasty but effective plan, fomenting divisions within the Republican ranks along ideological and sectional lines.

Equal rights for all races had been one of the hallmarks of the Republican ideology. During the years of Reconstruction, the Radical Republican leaders, mainly from the Northeast, fervently pushed this agenda to new heights with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Initially, Radical Republicans even tried to include the Chinese in the Fifteenth Amendment. On the West Coast, however, a strong public outcry against Chinese immigration and the growing strength of the Democratic Party forced the Republican Party to come up with a victory plan. To court labor votes, which were crucial in every election, many Republican candidates and officials willingly endorsed the fledgling anti-Chinese campaign, voicing their support for any discriminatory measure against this minority group. It was clear that anti-Chinese rhetoric would cost a politician nothing, not even through his own conscience. Because of the Republican retreat from equal-rights ideology, Westerners quickly formed a united front in the anti-Chinese campaign and demanded national legislation to restrict the influx of these “undesirable” immigrants. Anti-Chinese rhetoric in local politics still contradicted the idea of universal equality especially embraced by the national Republican Party. For the first time, these un-
scrupulous and opportunistic Western renegades began to challenge the party’s Eastern domination as well as its long-standing values based on equal rights and equal protection by pushing a sectional agenda to restrict Chinese immigration.

The election of 1876 had a tremendous impact on the nationalization of the Chinese question. As the final part of this controversial presidential contest, the Compromise of 1877 officially ended Reconstruction, calling for a temporary truce between the North and the South. Colorado, a newly admitted Western state, timely cast its three decisive votes in support of another four years of Republican occupation of the White House. Possessing unprecedented political strength, Westerners suddenly felt more confident about their role in the upcoming years as power brokers in national politics. A voting bloc of Western states would give the region even greater recognition. In her classic *Chinese Immigration*, published a century ago, Mary R. Coolidge, the mother of Chinese American history, pointed out that Western representatives from both parties “soon found it necessary, in order to make any impression in Congress, to stand together in all issues involving the states west of the Rocky Mountains.” Because of a bipartisan agreement to restrict Chinese immigration to the West Coast, anti-Chinese sentiments were handily used for the purpose of uniting the whole region. In the late 1870s, in fact, Westerners unapologetically unified under the anti-Chinese banner, making a huge push on Capitol Hill to stop the “influx of Chinese coolies and criminals.” Many national leaders, however, saw through the ruse and realized the true intentions of this Western demand. Coolidge wrote, “The Eastern Senators were very critical of the motives behind the anti-Chinese movement; one said the Pacific Slope was trying to see which party would bid highest for its vote in the Presidential election.” Thus, the next contest would give the West another opportunity to demonstrate its growing political strength.  

The presidential election of 1880 is not well known in political history because previous scholars have claimed that it lacked drama and broader national significance. Both candidates—General Winfield S. Hancock of Pennsylvania, the Democrat, and Congressman James A. Garfield of Ohio, the Republican—were lackluster. Initially each party actually struggled to find compelling campaign issues. The Democrats focused on the Grant administration’s corruption cases, and the Republicans continued to wave the “bloody shirt.” About two weeks before the election, however, the nation was hit by a true “October surprise.” Plotted by the Democratic National Com-
mittee, a fabricated letter supposed to have been written by Garfield to Henry Morey of Connecticut appeared in the New York Truth, a small newspaper. In the so-called Morey letter, Garfield expressed his opinion in favor of the free importation of cheap Chinese labor by capitalists. A facsimile of the Morey letter was immediately published in newspapers across the country. Even though the letter was instantly exposed as a fake, the political damage to Garfield and the Republican Party had been done. Using the issue of Chinese immigration, the Democratic Party intended to rouse the working class everywhere and in particular to steal the Pacific Coast from the Republicans. Suddenly the whole country was embattled over the Chinese question, and the election seemed to be up for grabs.

In Colorado, the Rocky Mountain News, a staunchly Democratic newspaper, had been using the Chinese issue in the local campaign for many weeks. Now, armed with new ammunition, the newspaper viciously attacked the Republican Party, whipping up anti-Chinese feelings among the general public. In the meantime, thousands of fraudulent Democratic repeat voters from the neighboring Wyoming and New Mexico Territories had flooded into Denver, eagerly waiting for November 2 to cast their ballots. On October 31, two days before the election, a minor quarrel between two Chinese and some whites in a local saloon rapidly grew into an uncontrollable riot, which quickly spread to the entire downtown area. Thousands of angry rioters indiscriminately attacked any Chinese person they could find and simultaneously destroyed the Chinese quarter. It took the city police eight hours to quell the main riot. Sporadic violence in various parts of the town continued for two more days. Over the three-day disturbance, the police had to put more than 200 Chinese in jail for their own protection. In the end, one Chinese man was killed, several dozen others were severely injured, and all Chinese residences and stores were destroyed. The total losses of property and personal belongings exceeded $100,000 (which would have amounted to $2.2 million in 2012).

The riot created a diplomatic crisis between China and the United States. After the bloody incident, the Chinese consul in San Francisco immediately made a fact-finding trip to Denver, where he interviewed several government officials, some white witnesses, and many Chinese victims. Upon receiving a report from the consul, the Chinese minister to Washington sent a formal request of indemnity to the U.S. State Department and demanded federal action in punishing the culprits. Giving their own interpretation of international laws and treaties, U.S. officials flatly rejected the Chinese re-
quest and never compensated any victim. Despite this arrogant American position, the Chinese legation continued to pursue the matter for more than a year. The intense diplomatic exchanges generated more ill feelings between the two countries.

The Denver Anti-Chinese Riot of 1880 had grave political consequences at home. Although the Morey letter and the Denver Riot failed to alter the general political map of Colorado and the Republicans retained their majority in Colorado after the election, the letter did win California, Nevada, and New Jersey for the Democrats. In New York, Garfield barely won with a 30,000-vote margin; without New York, Hancock would have won the presidency. The election result shocked Republican leaders. For the first time since 1856, California and Nevada had favored the Democratic presidential candidate. The Denver Riot signaled that the Chinese question was no longer just a West Coast issue. The anti-Chinese movement was spreading to the greater American West. Colorado could well be the next state to fall into Democratic hands. No Republican leader dared to imagine such a scenario.

With the Morey letter, the Denver Riot, and the West Coast vote, the election of 1880 became a turning point in the anti-Chinese movement. The restriction of Chinese immigration was becoming a national imperative because it might influence national elections, and passage of an exclusion act appeared imminent. The Republican Party now considered Chinese exclusion essential for its own survival and, like the concessions it had made for the Compromise of 1877, gave its support to an act limiting the rights of Chinese immigrants to solve its own internal political problems once and for all.

After the election, the campaign for Chinese-exclusion legislation immediately gained traction in the nation’s capital. Garfield’s inauguration and subsequent shocking assassination in July 1881 delayed the legislation, but as soon as the nation recovered from the tragedy, Congress moved quickly. Increasingly cognizant of the political price for defending the Chinese, pragmatic Republicans in the North began to show their willingness to compromise their egalitarian principles in favor of a political alliance with their Western colleagues by withdrawing their stiff resistance to Chinese-exclusion legislation. Still, this reversal was not an easy transition because most of the delegates from New England adhered to the sacred principle of equal rights. Consequently, the real fight in Congress over the Chinese question occurred among the Republicans themselves—those of the West against those of the Northeast. Receiving near-unanimous support from the Democrats, the Western Republicans easily prevailed in the vote to pass the Chi-
Titled “‘Every Dog’ (No Distinction of Color) ‘Has His Day,’” this nineteenth-century illustration captures the essence of anti-Chinese sentiment as a part of broad American nativism and racial subjugation. The original caption reads, “Red gentleman to yellow gentleman, ‘Pale face ‘fraid you crowd him out, as he did me.” (Harper’s Weekly, February 8, 1879)

Chinese Exclusion Act in the spring of 1882. When President Chester Arthur signed the new law, it marked a watershed in American political history. For the first time, the nation abandoned its acclaimed tradition of free immigration for all peoples, setting up a precedent for future race-based immigration legislation. The Republicans could no longer universally champion the idea of equal rights and collectively deserted the Chinese, just as they had
abandoned black Americans five years earlier with the Compromise of 1877. Jimmy Crow had found a new home in the American West. As the historian Andrew Gyory declared, the Chinese Exclusion Act “both symbolized and facilitated the transition from Reconstruction to the Gilded Age, making discrimination more acceptable, more apparent, and more prevalent throughout the nation.” The Chinese simply became the latest victim of tenacious American nativism and racial subjugation. As a great sectional as well as ideological compromise, this legislation also gave the West its first major victory in national politics.7

This book is the first detailed account of the Denver Anti-Chinese Riot. The significance of the event has been little recognized previously because it has been considered merely an example of localized ethnic violence. However, the riot was clearly a key event in fueling nationwide anti-Chinese nativism, in transforming Republican racial policy, and in creating a sectional balance of power in the Gilded Age. The immense scale and unique setting of this violence in Colorado clearly demonstrated that the anti-Chinese movement had spread from the Pacific Coast to the Rocky Mountains. Like the familiar war cry for killing Indians, this Western shriek against Chinese immigration sent another strong message across the continent. To pursue its common interest, a powerful, united West was prepared to fight anyone who stood in its way. Still the weakest region in the nation, the West knew how to maximize its influence by playing power broker between the Republican-dominant North and the Democrat-solid South. The successful campaign for federal Chinese exclusion created an important milestone in the West’s imminent long march to national political prominence. As the Connecticut Courant instantaneously acknowledged, “The solid Pacific coast has thrust itself aggressively and successfully into national legislation.” Serving as a political catalyst, the Denver Anti-Chinese Riot significantly helped to accelerate the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the nation’s abandonment of equal rights. Certainly this once-overlooked historical event deserves much greater recognition in the study of American sectionalism, political ideology, race relations, and immigration policy in the Gilded Age.8

A historian should always be aware of the danger of overemphasizing the importance of a single historical episode or individual. Few persons, for example, are so naive as to believe that John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry directly caused the Civil War. Thus, I am not arguing that the riot alone caused all that happened afterward. Along with the Denver Riot, a number of things, including the Compromise of 1877, the Morey letter, and the politics
of the 1880 election and its result, collectively influenced Americans in their subsequent decisions. However, the timing and location of the Denver Riot give it great significance. Occurring only two days before the 1880 presidential election, this politically motivated riot gave unprecedented sensationalized attention to the Chinese question at a critical moment. It also played a pivotal role in transforming a mundane national election into a dramatic and climactic moment in American political history. The anti-Chinese movement was just one of many events that propelled the West to regional, political equality.  

Nevertheless, an explicit sectional theme does not prevent this book from telling a complex story of race, class, immigration, politics, and sectionalism in the late-nineteenth-century United States. For a hundred years, scholars have come up with various explanations of the causes of the anti-Chinese movement. The main arguments have centered on economic grievances, an egalitarian ideology, racial prejudice, the question of slavery, and perceived cultural threats. I neither disregard nor contradict previous scholarly contributions. Rather, I look at later developments of the anti-Chinese movement, from 1870 to 1882. I see anti-Chinese political activism as a key to understanding sectionalism as a political force in the late nineteenth century. I also include social and cultural aspects of the Chinese as well as the broader American community in order to comprehend the rise of anti-Chinese nativism. With so many different dimensions of ethnicity, class, culture, ideology, politics, and diplomacy, the Denver Anti-Chinese Riot, rather than being just an isolated local episode, provides a great window into Gilded Age America at all levels: local, state or territorial, and national. My goal is to show the role of many forces and elements that shaped the course of history and in particular to clarify the meaning of the Denver riot in the study of American racial and sectional politics.