

Primary and Literary Sources on Chinese Americans

Directions: Have the Researcher read these primary and literary sources about Chinese Americans aloud to your group. These quotations, along with your textbook and any other source you find, will give you ideas for creating your mini-drama. You may include some of the quotations in your script.

The Chinese first came to California during the gold rush in 1849. Overcrowded living conditions and civil war in China brought miners and merchants hoping to strike it rich in the “mountains of gold.” Using techniques known in their own country for centuries, they were quite successful in mining even claims that had already been abandoned by “yankee” miners, and made up nearly twenty-five percent of the mining population by 1860. Chinese merchants made a living selling supplies to miners. In 1865 a group of Chinese men were hired to work on the completion of the transcontinental railroad, difficult and very dangerous work. The bosses were so impressed with their work that they sent out the word to “hire more Chinese.” By 1870 there were close to 50,000 Chinese in California, and many went on to business and farming or to other states to build the railroads. The success of the Chinese in all these fields caused jealousy and hatred on the part of not-so-successful “yankees” who saw the Chinese as a threat. Their willingness to work for low wages under poor conditions created intense prejudice that eventually resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

“Were it not for the Chinese, we might have starved the first year.” —A yankee miner (F)

“By the use of the Chinese water wheel . . . the Chinese drained the river to retrieve the gold from the river bottoms, while the yankee miners merely panned gold dust from the fast-flowing rivers. . . . they successfully reworked claims given up as worthless by others, and this led to jealousy and hatred . . . yankee miners often stole claims that the Chinese had worked successfully. . . .” (F, p. 116)

“All through the dark and dingy garrets and cellars, steaming with air breathed over and over, and filled with the fumes of opium, we groped our way with candle in hand hanging on to our noses until we found a door or a window. . . . Rooms, which would be considered close quarters for a single white man were occupied by shelves a foot and a half wide in which from 20 to 40 chinamen are stowed away to sleep. . . . in many of the lodging houses the filth has accumulated to the depth of several inches. . . . here they burn oil lamps and cook their food. . . .” —Health Inspector’s report on a Chinatown lodging house in 1870 (AMIC)

“When cliffs, sheer drops under impossible overhangs, ended the railroad, the workers filled the ravines or built bridges over them. They climbed above the sight for tunnel or bridge and lowered one another down in wicker baskets. . . . Ah Goong got to be a basketman because he was thin and light. . . . swinging near the cliff, Ah Goong stood up and grabbed it by a twig. He dug holes, then inserted gunpowder and fuses. . . . He struck match after match and

dropped the burnt matches over the sides. At last his fuse caught; he waved, and the men above pulled hand over hand hauling him up. . . . 'Hurry, hurry,' he said. Ah Goong ran up the ledge road they'd cleared and watched the explosions, echoes booming like war. . . ."
(*Chinamen*, p. 130)

"This time two men were blown up. One knocked out or killed by the explosion fell silently, the other screaming, his arms and legs struggling. . . . across a valley, a chain of men working on the next mountain fell, but it was very far away . . . he watched men whose faces he could not see and whose screams he did not hear roll and bounce and slide like a handful of sprinkled gravel. . . . After a fall, the buzzards circled the spot and reminded the workers for days that a dead man was down there. . . ." (*Chinamen*, p. 131)

"The days became nights when the crews tunneled inside the mountain, which sheltered them from the wind, but also hid the light and the sky. Ah Goong pickaxed the mountain, the dirt filling his nostrils through a cowboy bandana. He shoveled dirt into a cart and pushed it to a place that was tall enough for a mule, which hauled it the rest of the way out."
(*Chinamen*, p. 133)

"The demons in boss suits came into the tunnel occasionally, measured with a yardstick, and shook their heads. 'Faster,' they said. 'Faster. Chinamen too slow. Too slow.'"
(*Chinamen*, p. 134)

"The demons invented games for working faster, gold coins for miles of track laid, for the heaviest rock, a grand prize for the first team to break through a tunnel. . . . Chinamen always won because of good teamwork, smart thinking and a need for the money."
(*Chinamen*, p. 139)

"The China Men decided to go on strike and demand forty-five dollars a month and the eight hour shift. They risked going to jail and the Central Pacific keeping the pay it was banking for them. . . . the men wrapped barley and beans in ti leaves. . . . one of the literate men slipped in a piece of paper with the strike plan. . . . when the strike began the men who were working walked out of the tunnels and away from the tracks. . . . The fourth day the strikers heard that the U.S. cavalry was coming up the tracks to shoot them. But the troops did not come. Instead the cowardly demons blockaded the food wagons. . . . the strike ended on the ninth day . . . they got thirty-five dollars a month and the eight-hour shift."
(*Chinamen*, pp. 139–144)

"When the transcontinental railroad was finished . . . the white demon officials gave speeches. . . . 'The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind,' they said. 'Only Americans could have done it. . . .' A white demon in a top hat tap-tapped on the gold spike, and pulled it out. Then one China Man held the real spike, the steel one, and another hammered it in."
(*Chinamen*, p. 145)