

Interpreting the Contributions of Chinese Immigrants in Yosemite National Park's History

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Introduction

OVER A CENTURY AGO DURING THE SUMMER OF 1915, in a forest of towering trees, a backcountry chef and his assistant were busy preparing a hearty meal of soup, trout, venison, fried potatoes, string beans, plum pudding, cheese, and coffee. White table cloth overlaid a banquet table; fallen logs and crates served as chairs; and fine china completed this elegant outdoor setting. The next morning, Tie Sing and Eugene would wake up before the crack of dawn, fire up the wood inside a collapsible sheet iron stove, and make breakfast and prepare lunches-to-go for 30 men. After clearing the table and washing the dishes, Tie Sing and Eugene would hitch all the food and supplies onto the backs of mules and set off for the next camping spot to prepare their next sumptuous meal. During this two-week-long trip, Tie Sing was given the nickname “The Wizard” for the magical concoctions he provided in the wilderness for Stephen T. Mather’s Mountain Party trip (Figure 1).

What was the significance of the Mather Mountain Party trip of 1915 and a second one in 1916? Stephen T. Mather had just accepted a job as assistant secretary of interior in early 1915, and his main goal was to increase funding and support from Congress for national parks. To convince as many people as possible that a system of national parks was important, he invited congressmen, business leaders, journalists, and other influential people to join him on a two-week wilderness experience. With their help, in less than two years Mather and his collaborators were able to convince Congress to pass the Organic Act establishing the National Park Service (NPS) in August of 1916.

It is hard to know for certain how much Tie Sing’s cooking influenced these men, but Mather was convinced of the importance of good food when in the outdoors. He said at a conference of park supervisors in the spring of 1915, “Scenery is a splendid thing when it is viewed by a man who is in a contented frame of mind. Give him a poor breakfast after he has had a bad night’s sleep, and he will not care how fine your scenery is. He is not going to enjoy it.”¹

The George Wright Forum, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 299–307 (2017).

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Figure 1. Tie Sing and the Mather Mountain Party of 1915. Photo by Gilbert H. Grosvenor, courtesy of National Geographic Creative.

Tie Sing and Eugene were both Chinese living in the United States during a period of extreme anti-Chinese sentiment. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by Congress to keep Chinese immigrants out of America for fear that they would take away jobs from everyone else here. The act was a travel ban forbidding further immigration of unskilled Chinese laborers. Only merchants and scholars were allowed. Originally passed as a short-term act, it was extended numerous times and was not repealed until 1942, 60 years later. It was the first time in our history that we expressly excluded a group of people from immigrating to this country.²

Yosemite seems like an unlikely place to tell the story of the early Chinese in America. Yet within this park's history, stories come spilling out of a people who lived behind the veil, and their impact is inextricably woven into Yosemite's history.

The early Chinese in America

Yosemite was designated in 1864 for its extraordinary natural and scenic values because there was concern that, without protection, its natural wonders would be destroyed by loggers, hoteliers, cattle grazers, and sheep herders, among others. In the midst of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant, setting aside Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias as a protected area to be managed by the state of California. Twenty-six years later, in 1890, it became America's third national park.

During my first summer working in Yosemite for NPS, I remember learning from my supervisor that Chinese workers built the Tioga Road that passed right through the area known as Tuolumne Meadows.

Many years later, while driving with friends from San Francisco to Yosemite, I passed through a town called Chinese Camp in the Sierra Nevada foothills just west of Yosemite. The town is situated along the same road that eventually becomes the Tioga Road. I wondered about that small town's particular name and if there was any connection to Yosemite's Chinese road workers. I have since learned that a large population of Chinese lived in California from the mid-1800s to early 1900s, and that they contributed significantly to California's history.

The Chinese coming to California in the mid-1800s were fleeing dire natural and social disasters at home. Floods, droughts, typhoons, famines, and war pushed several hundred thousand Chinese, mostly from Guangdong Province, to emigrate abroad. After gold was discovered in California in 1848, many Chinese families pooled resources or borrowed money to send a member of the family on the month-long boat voyage to California. Infused with hope, they named the land across the ocean "Gum Saan," meaning "Gold Mountain."

The Chinese were originally tolerated if not admired for their hard work. One month after the first group of Chinese arrived in San Francisco in 1848, U.S. Consul Tom Larkin received a letter from a friend who wrote, "The Chinese are a sober and industrious people and if a large number could be introduced into California, landed property would increase in value fourfold."³ Mark Twain observed, "They are as industrious as the day is long. A disorderly Chinaman is rare, and a lazy one does not exist."⁴

Despite such praise, as gold became harder to find, restrictive laws targeting Chinese and other foreign miners quickly followed. The Foreign Miners Tax of 1850 placed a \$20 per month state tax on all non-American miners. French miners successfully led the fight against this law and by March 1851 it was repealed. But a new law was passed in 1852 requiring foreign miners to pay \$3 per month. This tax was especially targeted towards Chinese and Mexican miners. Additionally, the Police Tax of 1862 required Chinese laborers to pay \$2.50 per month for performing any work with the few exceptions of sugar, rice, coffee, or tea production. As a result of these two state taxes, most Chinese left mining and found jobs working in the agricultural fields, building irrigation channels, roads and tunnels, and working as cooks and laundrymen.

Beginning in 1863, construction of the Transcontinental Railroad required a large labor force. At first, Irish immigrants comprised the main labor, but many left railroad work due to the allure of new gold and silver mine strikes. As a solution, Chinese workers were hired as replacements. Soon thereafter, the railroad company brought many thousand Chinese from China by ship to keep up with the labor demands. John R. Gillis, assistant engineer of the Central Pacific Railroad said, "They were as steady, hardworking a set of men as could be found. They were paid from \$30 to \$35 in gold a month, finding themselves, while the white men were paid about the same, but with their board thrown in."⁵ The Chinese worked on the hardest section of the Transcontinental Railroad, which included digging 15 tunnels in terrain that climbed 6,000 feet in elevation over 40 miles to the cliffs of Donner Pass.

During the last several years of construction, there were approximately 10,000 Chinese workers among the 14,000 men working in round-the-clock shifts for the Central Pacific Railroad. Work was anything but easy. Many Chinese lost their lives during construction.

After completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, life for the Chinese did not get any easier. With increasing competition for work among both new and old immigrants in this country, the Chinese became a target for an increasing number of discriminatory acts.

The 1860s and 1870s saw an escalation of attacks against Chinese communities. Historian Jean Pfaelzer documents numerous cases in California where Chinese were imprisoned or killed, their homes and businesses looted or burned to the ground.⁶ Mark Twain wrote,

Any white man can swear a Chinaman's life away in the courts, but no Chinaman can testify against a white man. Ours is the 'land of the free'—nobody denies that—nobody challenges it. [Maybe it is because we won't let other people testify.] As I write, news comes that in broad daylight in San Francisco, some boys have stoned an inoffensive Chinaman to death, and that although a large crowd witnessed the shameful deed, no one interfered.⁷

Despite oppressive discrimination, the Chinese excelled wherever they could. Many worked in some of the least desirable, backbreaking jobs: blasting tunnels through hard rock, grading steep roads with hand picks and shovels, building rock walls on ranches, laying railroad tracks, and digging irrigation ditches through California's Central Valley among them.

Road builders in Yosemite

In Yosemite, Chinese immigrants built several of the early stage wagon roads. In the summer of 1874, both the Coulterville Road and Big Oak Flat Road reached the Yosemite Valley. As a result, the Washburn brothers, owners of the Wawona Hotel, decided they needed to build a road from near the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias to Yosemite Valley as quickly as possible. In order to not lose tourist business the following spring, they decided to build the road in the winter. They hired 50 Chinese laborers who began work in December 1874. The crew eventually grew to approximately 300 Chinese laborers. Working through the snowy winter, the workers completed in four and a half months an astonishing 23 miles of road that climbed 3,000 feet in elevation.

The *Mariposa Gazette* reported on January 9, 1875, "The newly projected road leading from the South Fork of the Merced River to the Yo Semite [sic] Valley, is being pushed forward with a determined zeal and energy ... having at this time upwards of one hundred men engaged upon the work."⁸ Their tools consisted of axes, shovels, picks, wheelbarrows, and black powder. A 300-yard gap near Inspiration Point remained until June. While the gap was being completed, workers helped dismantle stage wagons, carried the parts across the gap, and reassembled the wagons. For many tourists, it was the highlight of the trip.

In 1882, the Tioga Road, originally the Great Sierra Wagon Road, was constructed by the Great Sierra Mining Company to help supply equipment to mining towns along the route. Its terminus was at the mining town of Bennettville where the company believed there was the largest silver belt of the entire Sierra Nevada, rivaling the most profitable mines of the day. The *Homer Mining Index*, the local mining area's newspaper, reported on February 18, 1882, that

[t]he embryo town ... is situated in a beautiful valley or cove at the base of Tioga Hill, 9,300 feet above sea level.... Bennett City, being centrally and beautifully situated, will be the principal town of the district, though when the mines are developed they will doubtless support one or two other towns of considerable size.... There is ample room on the gently rolling ground for a city of 50,000 inhabitants, with an abundance of wood and water of the best quality on the ground.⁹

The Tioga Road began at Crocker's Station at 4,200 feet above sea level and ended just beyond Tioga Pass, 9,945 feet above sea level. Approximately 250 Chinese and 90 Euro-American laborers completed the 56-mile road in 130 days in 1882–1883. The Chinese were paid \$1.20 per day and the Euro-Americans \$1.50 per day. Foremen were paid \$2.00 per day. In addition, 100 Chinese were hired to blast through a three-quarter-mile stretch of granite rock along Tenaya Lake. The road was completed on September 4, 1883, but by November 1 the Great Sierra Mining Company ran out of money. It had expended \$62,000 on the road and over \$300,000 on a tunnel through the mountain in search of what was purported to be the largest silver ledge in the Sierra Nevada.

For many years, the wagon road was unmaintained, but was owned by the mining company. Nevertheless, many intrepid travelers and the United States Cavalry who patrolled the park used the road to access Yosemite's high country. In 1915, Stephen T. Mather was able to gather a group of philanthropists to buy the road for \$15,500, and then they sold it to the National Park Service for a few dollars. Today, this road stands as the highest road across the Sierra Nevada and serves as one of the main roads in Yosemite National Park.

Culinary wizards

Many Chinese also gained employment by hotel owners in Yosemite due to their culinary talents and strong work ethic. The Wawona Hotel employed around twenty Chinese to work in the laundry and kitchen, including an exceptional cook named Ah You. Employed as the head chef for 47 years until 1933, he prepared meals for presidents Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft. Born in China in 1848, Ah You came to California in 1869 at age 21. He worked in California in various jobs, including in San Francisco as a cook. He then moved to the San Joaquin Valley, working in hotels and mining camps, and then to Yosemite Valley where his cooking talent became well known. Henry Washburn, owner of the Wawona Hotel, hired him in 1886 to become the head cook. Ah You was especially famous for his pies. At its peak, the dining room served 450 people a night with 26 waitresses. With the exception of Ah You, who would on occasion meet important guests impressed with his cooking, the Chinese staff worked behind the scenes.

When the Washburn's hotel business was taken over by the Yosemite Park and Curry Company in 1932, all of the Chinese cooks and employees were let go. Thereafter, the Washburn family maintained a home in Merced for their former Chinese employees. Wawona Washburn, who spent her entire childhood growing up at the Wawona Hotel, had many fond memories of the hotel's Chinese staff. In Yosemite's archives is a small handwritten note by

her which reads, “Listening to the rise and fall of Chinese voices, the smell of pork and noodle stir-fry wafting out into the haze of the late afternoon heavy-fog laden evening air.” When Ah You passed away, both Wawona Washburn and her father, Clarence Washburn, attended his funeral.

In addition to the Wawona Hotel, many if not all of the hotels in Yosemite’s early years employed Chinese cooks, bakers, and laundry staff. A 1925 map of old Yosemite Village shows the “Chinese Quarters” located on the south side of Yosemite Valley, just east of today’s Sentinel Bridge. Marjorie Cook, daughter of the Sentinel Hotel’s proprietor, Jay Cook, remembers, “Each spring, I eagerly awaited my meeting with the Ah Clan. At an early age, I gratefully accepted a fragile, twenty-two piece green and gold tea set. I loved every dragon. The next spring, the head man, Ah Wong brought a gorgeous Chinese fan nearly half as tall as I.”¹⁰ Ah Wong, Ah Mow, Ah Toy, and several other Chinese returned yearly for the April 1 opening of the Sentinel Hotel. It was quite typical of Yosemite’s workers to have only seasonal employment. Many Chinese worked in urban areas during their off-season.

Finally, another well-known chef was Tie Sing, head chef for the United States Geological Survey (USGS) from 1888 to 1918. Mather requested Tie Sing for his Mather Mountain Party trips, which included National Geographic Society director Gilbert H. Grosvenor and writer Robert Sterling Yard, who wrote in 1916:

To me Tie Sing had assumed apocryphal proportions. The extraordinary recitals of his astonishing culinary exploits had been more than I could quite believe. But I believe them all now, and more. I shall not forget that dinner;—soup, trout, chops, fried potatoes, string beans, fresh bread, hot apple pie, cheese and coffee. It was the first of many equally elaborate, and equally appreciated.¹¹

To honor their beloved chef, the USGS in 1899 named the 10,552-foot mountain peak along Yosemite’s southeastern border Sing Peak.¹²

Interpreting this history for visitors today

In the years leading up to the NPS centennial in 2016, several surveys and reports examined the agency’s many challenges over the past century and set goals for the next. One challenge is the need for national parks to better connect with today’s diverse population.¹³ Many sectors of the public may not see their stories in national parks, and there is concern that without forging a connection between people and parks, parks can become irrelevant to future generations and lose their public support. In light of this, NPS has made a strong commitment to interpret more of these diverse stories and find further ways to connect with people from many different ethnic groups.

As an interpretive park ranger in Yosemite National Park, one of my main roles is to lead natural and cultural history programs with park visitors. Through ranger walks, evening programs, and campfire talks, I present programs on a variety of topics, including the history of the Chinese in Yosemite. I also wrote an article published in *Yosemite* journal and gave public presentations at the Oakland Natural History Museum, California Historical Society,

and other venues.¹⁴ Additionally, I was interviewed by several radio, news, and print media. Through these opportunities to reach a broader audience, people who might not visit Yosemite National Park can still learn about Yosemite's diverse cultural history.

In 2011, I teamed up with Yosemite's park videographer and co-produced a park video on this history. For several summers, the video was shown weekly as part of an evening program series in Yosemite Valley that highlighted several different stories about the park. The video is easily accessible to the public on Yosemite National Park's official website and Yosemite's YouTube video series.¹⁵ A year after the video was posted online, a visitor contacted me about the idea of organizing an annual gathering to honor Tie Sing and the Chinese who contributed to Yosemite's history. With support from NPS and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, we organized the first Yosemite-Sing Peak Pilgrimage event in July 2013. Annual Yosemite-Sing Peak Pilgrimages have occurred since then. Word of this yearly event is now spreading among the Asian American community and to the wider world (Figure 2).

Conclusion

When I first started researching the story of early Chinese immigrants in Yosemite National Park, I felt only distantly connected to the experiences of these people who had come to America a century and a half earlier. Their experiences were different from those of my parents, who immigrated to America many decades ago, and of mine, having been born and raised in Southern California. But I soon realized, no matter when one's family first immigrated to this country, or to any other country for that matter, we all can relate to the human experience of migration. Somewhere in our immediate or distant past, immigration is there. We can understand and empathize with the human motivations to improve one's life and provide for ourselves and our loved ones.

Figure 2. Yosemite-Sing Peak Pilgrimage, 2017. Yenyen Chan and nephew Sean Chan with other members of the pilgrimage. Photo by Christine White Loberg.



The early Chinese pioneers experienced many difficulties and barriers to achieving success when they arrived on Gold Mountain. Yet, due to their efforts from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s in Yosemite and across the western United States, they made important contributions in society, including helping to lay the groundwork for so many roads, railroads, tunnels, and agricultural fields. Their hard work and determination also earned them the trust and respect of many of Yosemite National Park's early entrepreneurs and park leaders. They played an important, if mostly hidden, role in the experiences of early park visitors. Many of the cultural traditions that they brought to this country are embedded in American history.

The story of the Chinese who contributed to Yosemite's history reminds us that national parks provide an important gateway to sharing stories of the multitude of cultural groups who shaped this country's history through their willpower, strength, success, and sacrifice. National parks, designated for their natural and cultural significance, can challenge us to learn hard lessons from the past, as well as inspire us to strive for a better future. These stories are as relevant today as they ever have been.

Endnotes

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