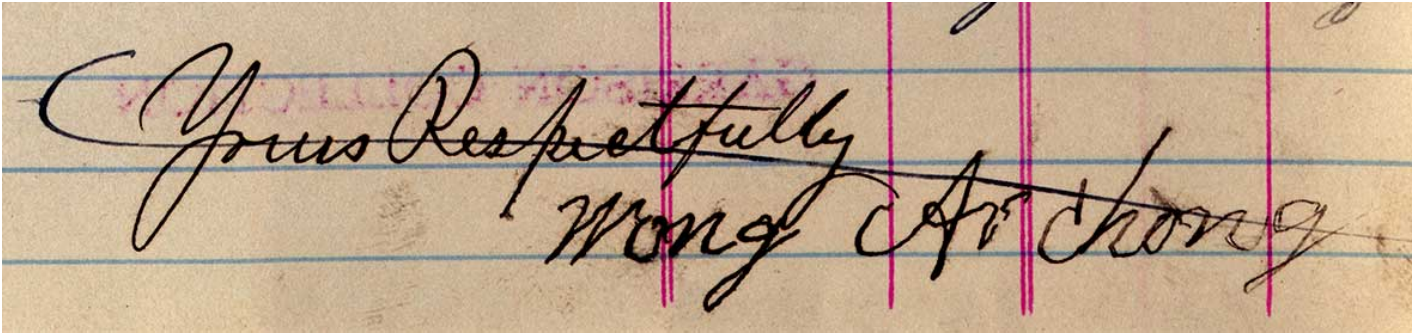


# NOW

## Live from the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center

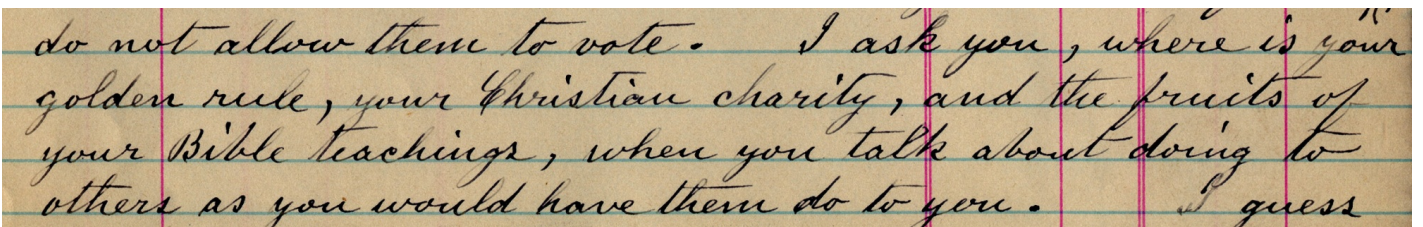
Rediscovered: An Eloquent Chinese Voice Against Exclusion

A photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive on lined paper. The signature reads "Yours Respectfully Wong Ar Chong". The paper has blue horizontal lines and three vertical red lines. There are some faint pinkish marks above the signature.

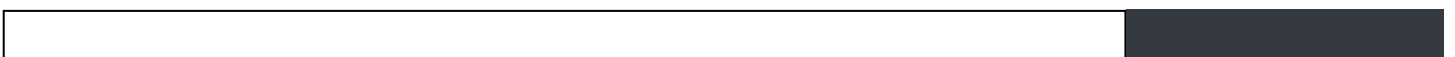
Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Chinese-American voices were rarely heard during the national debate over Chinese exclusion that swept the United States in the 1870s and early 1880s. It was mostly a conversation among white men arrayed on both sides of the issue. But occasionally Chinese did weigh in, and one otherwise unremarkable Boston tea merchant did so particularly persuasively in 1879.

He did it in a letter to the great abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. Although ill with kidney disease, the old lion had continued to speak out on civil rights for blacks and for women until his death in that year, and was keenly interested in the national dialogue over continued immigration of Chinese laborers.

A photograph of a handwritten text snippet in cursive on lined paper. The text reads: "do not allow them to vote. I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings, when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you. I guess". The paper has blue horizontal lines and three vertical red lines.

Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.



I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you?

*Wong Ar Chong, 1879*

Prior to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, there were several attempts in Congress to restrict the flow of Chinese into the U.S. One bill, introduced early in 1879, proposed to forbid the entry of any vessel carrying more than 15 Chinese, whether visitors or immigrants. Despite the fact that, if enacted, it would have violated the then-current treaty between China and the United States, the measure passed the House of Representatives in January and seemed destined for Senate approval as well.

Senator James G. Blaine (R-ME), the bill's most prominent sponsor, was at the time the leading contender for the 1880 Republican presidential nomination. Mindful of the fact that exclusion was popular in California, and with that state's crucial electoral votes squarely in his sights, he delivered an impassioned speech on the Senate floor laced with anti-Chinese racism. "The choice must be made between Anglo-Saxon laborers and Mongolian serfs," he declared, and continued in kind, accusing the Chinese of being "swarming coolies" and "political and social pariahs."

Garrison, his eloquence undimmed by age and illness, issued a stinging rebuttal that was widely circulated. But a letter written to him by a Chinese



*Elation of the "heathen Chinese" over a recent event in San Francisco [caricature of a Chinese man pointing and laughing at Denis Kearney in a San Francisco jail]. Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper, vol. 50 (1880 April 3), p. 80. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



shopkeeper a few days later is perhaps more remarkable. The writer, Wong Ar Chong, was an undistinguished, 39 year-old Chinese immigrant who ran a small store on Washington Street in Boston. And although English was his second language, he offered a cogent and persuasive dissection of Blaine's arguments that was as articulate and on point as anything that survives from a contemporary native speaker.

### Some excerpts:

Fri Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 1879

In your Declaration of Independence it is asserted that all men are born free and equal, and it is understood by the civilized world that the United States of America is a free country, but I fear there is a backward step being taken by the government.

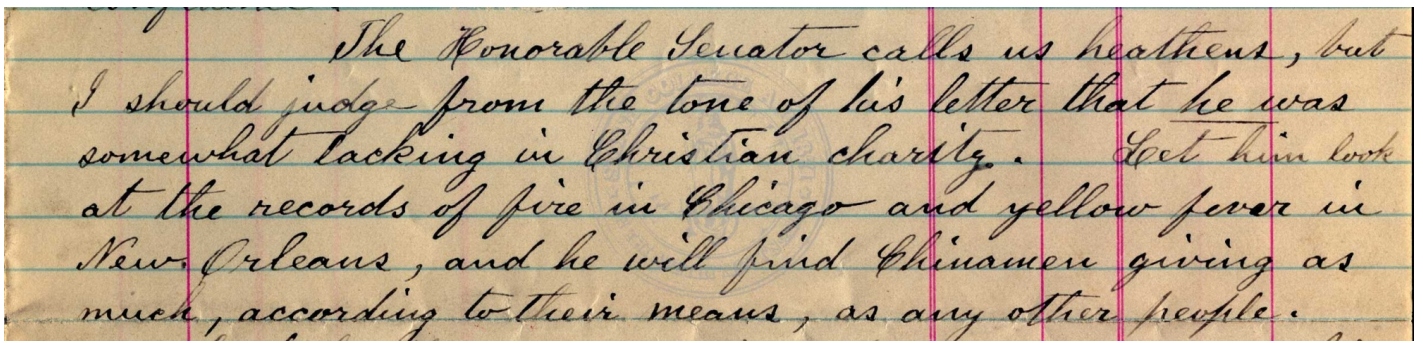
"In your Declaration of Independence it is asserted that *all men* are born free and equal, and it is understood by the civilized world that the United States of America is a free country, but I fear there is a backward step being taken by the government." Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

The able Senator from Maine, in aping that selfish stump speaker, Dennis Kearney, says the Chinese must go, and gives his reasons. Many things he says I agree to, a great many more I do not. I think he takes a wrong way to rectify the difficulty. I claim for my countrymen the right to come to this country as long as other foreigners do. If they make themselves a nuisance, establish proper health laws and enforce them, and if they don't like them let them go back home again, but they must conform to American ideas of law and order if they wish to stay. That is my idea, but you cannot

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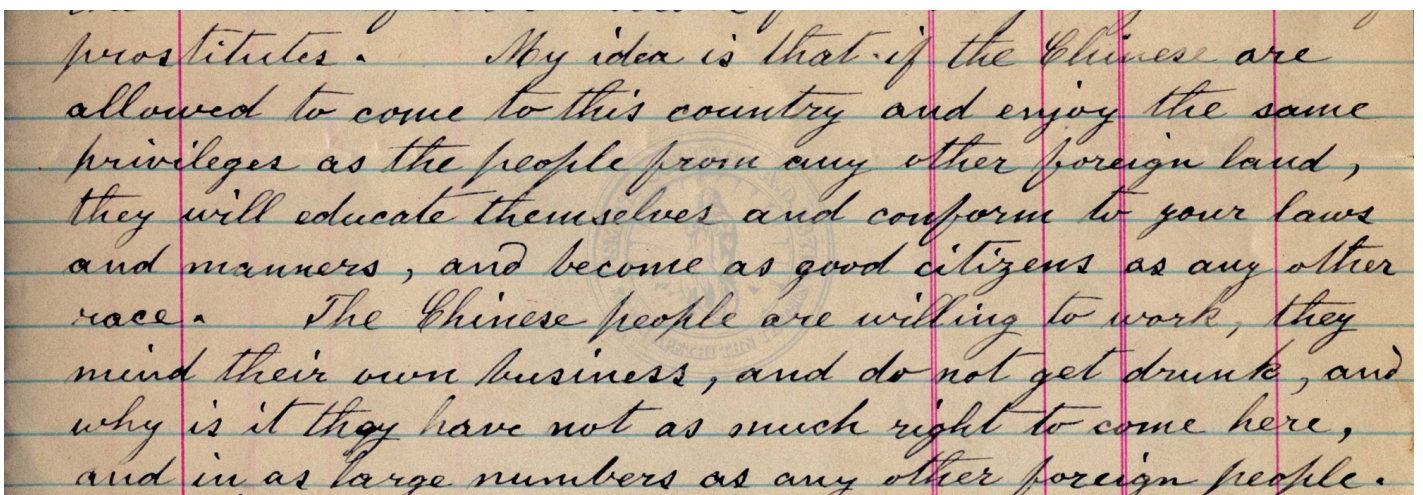


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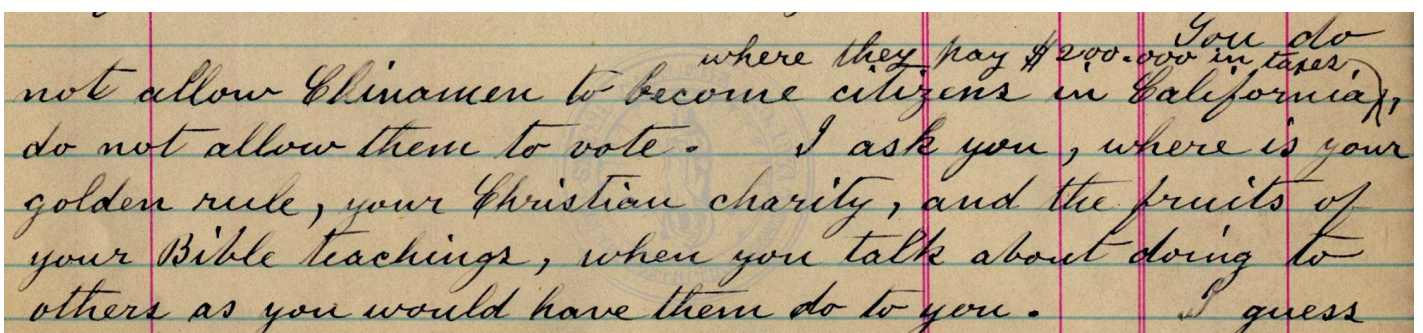
The Honorable Senator calls us heathens, but I should judge from the tone of his letter that he was somewhat lacking in Christian charity. Let him look at the records of fire in Chicago and yellow fever in New Orleans, and he will find Chinamen giving as much, according to their means, as any other people.

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prostitutes. My idea is that if the Chinese are allowed to come to this country and enjoy the same privileges as the people from any other foreign land, they will educate themselves and conform to your laws and manners, and become as good citizens as any other race. The Chinese people are willing to work, they mind their own business, and do not get drunk, and why is it they have not as much right to come here, and in as large numbers as any other foreign people.

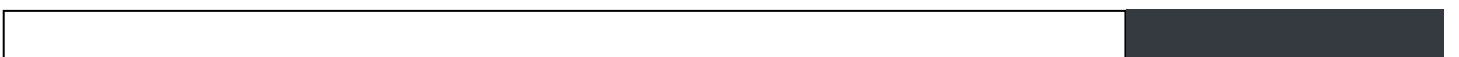
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not allow Chinamen to become citizens in California, <sup>where they pay \$200,000 in taxes.</sup> You do not allow them to vote. I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings, when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you. I guess

"You do not allow Chinamen to become citizens in California, where they pay \$200,000 in taxes, do not allow them to vote. I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you?" Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Wong's stirring arguments notwithstanding, the bill passed the Senate, although it was vetoed by President Rutherford B. Hayes, who did not wish to abrogate the China treaty unilaterally. Still, three years later it would all be moot; the Chinese Exclusion Act, which would bar Chinese laborers and deny American citizenship to all Chinese, would become the law of the land, and it would remain so for more than 60 years, until it was finally repealed in 1943.





Fri Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 1879

conflict with Christian charity and principle.

where they pay \$200.00 <sup>you do</sup> in their, do not allow them to vote. I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings, when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you. I guess Senator Blaine, by his argument, wants to tell people what to do, but don't want people to do as he does.

His information must be very limited when he says the trade between this country and China only amounts to a few hundred dollars yearly, when it is known to reach several millions every year. I guess he does not know what he is talking about.

I don't know who are opposed to the Chinese, whether they are Americans or foreigners, but I think they are as much foreigners as the Chinese themselves. I think so because I have travelled in America, North, South, East, and West, and have never found native Americans so much opposed to Chinese as foreigners are.

The Chinese must not be blamed because other men have no work, it is not their fault. If merchants carried on business according to their means, with their own capital, and paid 10¢ on the dollar instead of going through bankruptcy, then laboring men would have plenty of steady work. The failure of one firm involves others connected with it, which also fail and throw many men out of employment.

As it stands now, it is 5000 Goussians to 1 Mongolian, yet you charge the Chinamen with robbing you of work. I ask God to forbid that Senator Blaine should fear the odds of 1 to 5000. If the letter he wrote to Mr Garrison contains his sentiments, I think he is no better than the great California blower, Dennis Kearney, and like him, cares little for the country, but likes to hear his own noise.

He wants, in a very polite way, to send a message to the Chinese Empire to ask them to change the Burlingame treaty, but why don't he go and make a new treaty himself. He is trying to imitate General Butler, but has not the brains to do it successfully. His grapes are too high for him to reach. He tries to climb, the vine gives way, and he doesn't know where he is.

(Note)

When a vessel is built and ready to sea, there are plenty of Captains to take command, but when you ask one of the Captains to build a vessel, he don't know how. That is the way with Blaine and the Burlingame treaty.

Yours Respectfully  
Wong Ar Chong

In your Declaration of Independence it is asserted that all men are born free and equal, and it is understood by the civilized world that the United States of America is a free country, but I fear there is a backward step being taken by the government.

The able Senator from Maine, in acting that selfish stump speaker, Dennis Kearney, says the Chinese must go, and gives his reasons. Many things he says I agree to, a great many more I do not. I think he takes a wrong way to rectify the difficulty. I claim for my countrymen the right to come to this country as long as other foreigners do. If they make themselves a nuisance, establish proper health laws and enforce them, and if they don't like them let them go back home again, but they must conform to American ideas of law and order if they wish to stay. That is my idea, but you cannot bring it about by such a law as is now awaiting the President's signature. You must do to others as you would have them do to you if you wish to gain their confidence.

The Honorable Senator calls us heathens, but I should judge from the tone of his letter that he was somewhat lacking in Christian charity. Let him look at the records of fire in Chicago and yellow fever in New Orleans, and he will find Chinamen giving as much, according to their means, as any other people.

Such heathens cannot be so bad after all. Also he gives all Chinamen the name of Coolies. If Senator Blaine has education, why don't he use it to find out what the word Coolie means. A Coolie is a laboring man, a man who works by the day at anything he can get to do, that is what Chinamen mean by Coolies.

He says that China people pay no taxes in this country, but I think if he will take the pains to look into the matter he will find that they pay as much taxes in California as any other foreigners, say about \$200,000.

He says that China people are not healthy, do not keep their places of habitation as clean as other people, that they smell badly, &c., &c. I could mention several other nationalities, each having its own particular smell. Also that no decent China women come here, that they are mostly prostitutes, but do not the women of other nationalities furnish a goodly number of prostitutes. My idea is that if the Chinese are allowed to come to this country and enjoy the same privileges as the people from any other foreign land, they will educate themselves and conform to your laws and manners, and become as good citizens as any other race. The Chinese people are willing to work, they mind their own business, and do not get drunk, and why is it they have not as much right to come here, and in as large numbers as any other foreign people.

If you do not allow it you go against the principles of George Washington, the father of his country, and contrary to the principles of your government.

You go against the principles of George Washington, you go against the American flag, and you act in