

Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans in Advertising
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Chinese and Japanese Americans were depicted in a variety of ways during the late 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries, ranging from unwanted aliens to model minority geeks to affluent consumers. These representations mirror various immigration trends, entries into local economies, US military alliances, and policy. Early representations depicted Chinese Americans as curious and beyond understanding, but were not altogether negative.



In this advertisement for Keystone, the iconic Chinese man can be seen in the lower center of the image, with a round hat, long mustache, and single braid in the back.

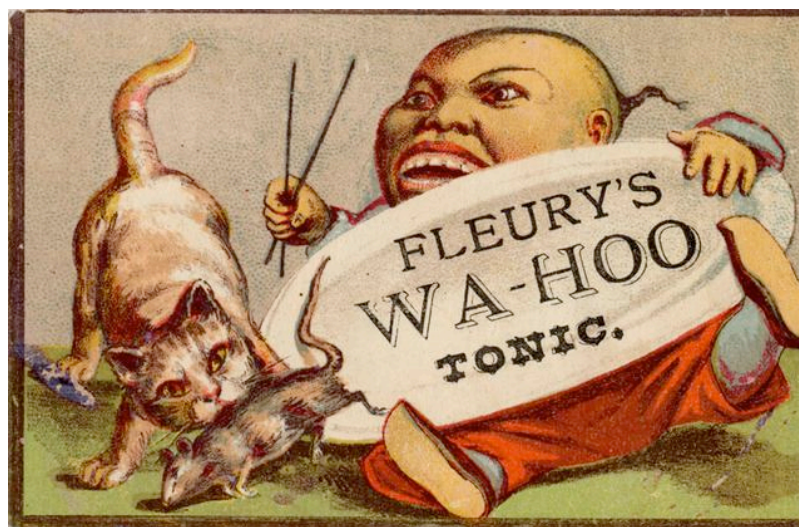


In this advertisement for Libby, McNeill & Libby's Cooked Corned Beef, Chinese men are depicted as happy, simple dancing people.



Here too, in this ad for the Berry Brothers, a Chinese man is conceived of as part of the world, along with a Middle Eastern man wearing a Fez, among others.

The majority of Chinese immigration occurred in two waves, dating back to the start of the 19th century. The first wave consisted of unskilled laborers who worked on railroads, most notably the Central Pacific Railroad and the Transcontinental railroad. They also found labor opportunities in mining as well as menial labor jobs. Industrialists were pleased with the cheap labor source but the white American public quickly expressed resentment at the encroachment on their jobs the willingness to accept lower wages for the same work. Prejudice against Chinese crystalized in a sentiment termed "yellow peril," signaling the popular phenotypic ascription of Chinese and other east Asians as "yellow."



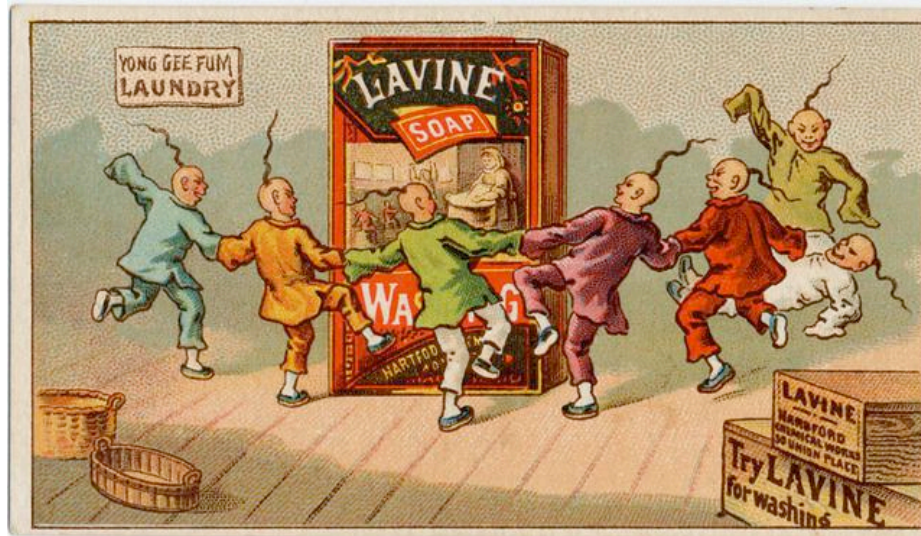
In this ad for Fluery's Wa-Hoo Tonic, the Chinese American man is depicted as an infantile savage with red eyes, a vicious gaping mouth, and chopsticks poised to make a meal of a nearby cat.



Others depicted Chinese Americans as inherently unlikable, either as slender, short men wearing traditional clothes with rat-like facial expressions and long braids resembling thick, hairy rat tails; or as fat, sinister men with more elaborate facial hair and shorter braids. Their speech, commonly transliterated in this way, emphasizes their inability to linguistically as well as culturally assimilate. Terms such as “Chinaman,” the suffix “ee” to English words, the “j” for “r” substitution, and “Melican” for American all signal a lack of assimilation and generally low status.

Equal treatment of Chinese Americans was sought through the Burlingame Treaty, but these immigrants were nonetheless regarded as aliens and eventually prevented from becoming naturalized citizens through the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882. By 1924, all Asian immigration to the US (except the Phillipines, which had been annexed by the US) was halted and Asian Americans were denied citizenship and land rights, and various anti-miscegenation laws prohibited them from marrying whites. Effectively barring further immigration from China also prevented family reunification for thousands of Chinese men who had left wives and children. The widespread racism and discrimination against Chinese Americans during this period was openly reported in newspapers and in communities, and resulted in Chinese men being shut out of industries in which they previously worked.

As a result, they began to take on what was widely considered women's work—laundry—as a way to maintain lives and livelihoods in the US from the late 19th century until World War II. Many early advertisements were in the form of “trade cards” and featured yellow peril imagery of Chinese Americans in laundry settings. The work of washing and ironing, regarded as low status, feminized labor, is reflected in both the imagery of the ads as well as the language used to depict the speech of Chinese Americans.



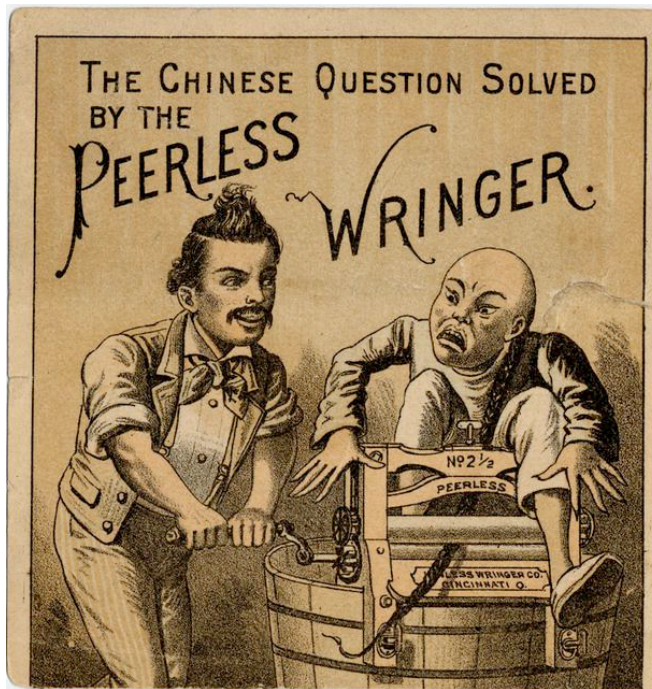
Here a group of Chinese laundrymen dance around a box of Lavine soap, a product that will presumably make their work easier.



Of particular fascination were , representations of words that were alleged to be in common use, such as “washee washee,” which appears frequently in ads.



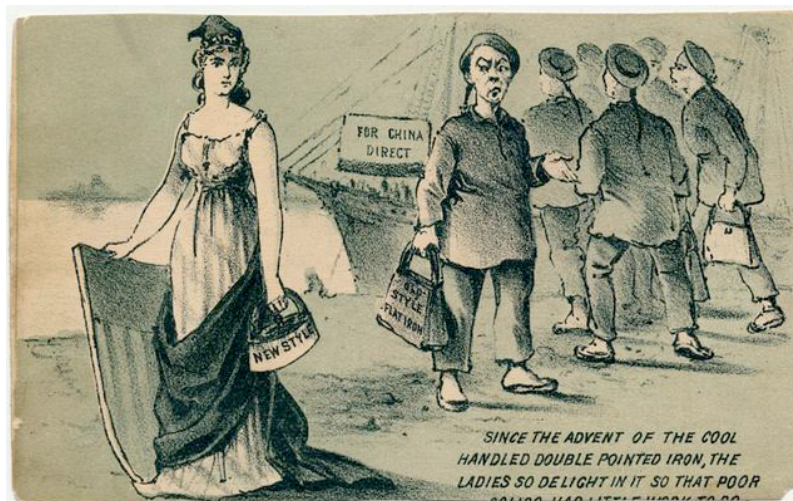
Long grueling hours, low pay, and poor work conditions made this work challenging and with little reward, but still rendered the Chinese American stingy in the American imagination.



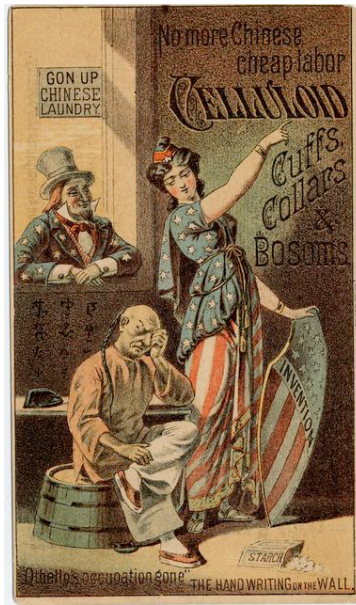
Moreover, it perfectly positioned Chinese Americans as ready targets against which to posit modern innovations that would make their work obsolete and drive them out of business.



With numerous innovations signaling “no more washee washee,” “Off to China” was the message for Chinese Americans.



Indeed, they were so reviled that many of ads feature them boarding boats to China in response to technological innovations that promised to return the work of laundry to white housewives.



Openly announcing the resentment about cheap labor, ads such as this one for celluloid collar are blatantly jingoistic, signaling the widespread, open prejudice of the time.

In the 1880s, when further Chinese immigration was banned, first generation or “Issei” immigrants from Japan as well as Hawaii began to migrate to the Pacific Northwest. By the turn of the century, they comprised a prominent portion of the nation’s railroad labor force while they also began to take agricultural jobs. Pacific Northwest cities such as Seattle and Portland became major arrival centers for Japanese immigrants, with some moving on to jobs beyond this region to Utah, Idaho, primarily for farm, railroad, and contract work such as building and irrigation projects. Unlike Chinese who established laundries, Japanese looked to buy or lease land and cultivate crops such as sugar beets.



During this early period, Japanese Americans were initially depicted in a more favorable light than Chinese Americans.



The most commonly featured image was the geisha, the traditional Japanese female hostess and entertainer.



Clothing, affect, and tea ceremonies became quite popular with white American women during the prewar period.



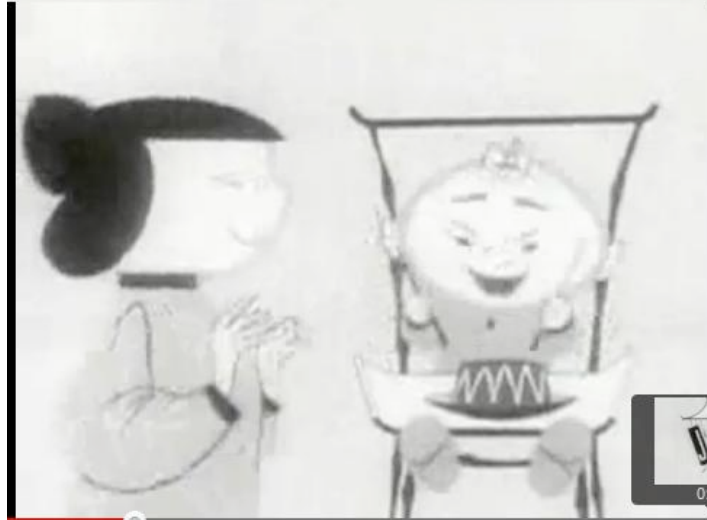
Similar to xenophobic sentiment that had developed against the Chinese, the Japanese too were subject to various acts of discrimination and even mob violence, forcing them out of particular cities in which they had peacefully contributed for decades. Unlike the Chinese situation, however, the US agreed to allow the wives and brides of earlier male immigrants, enabling this immigrant community to reproduce across generations. Although this cultural and linguistic transition was difficult for Japanese American women, they continued to farm and run businesses in the Northwestern US and Canada. They were also subject to the National Origins Act of 1924 that limited immigration from Asia, and faced a series of discriminatory actions about their land holdings and agricultural work for the interwar period.

As the Chinese image began to improve in the American imagination pre-World War II, Japanese Americans began to fall on especially hard times. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, in 1942 Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which called for the internment of Japanese Americans. Although the majority were citizens, they were forced to leave their homes and businesses United States interned about 110,000 Japanese Americans. During WWII, representations of Japanese in advertisements frame them as an enemy, and are accordingly hostile.



Although the US lifted restrictions against Chinese immigration during World War II, it was only after 1965, when the US passed the Hart-Cellar Act that large-scale immigration to the US began. Unlike the unskilled labor welcomed to the US for manual work, these immigrants were solicited for their professional training as doctors, engineers, and other highly skilled workers. In a move that seemingly positioned them far from the decades of discrimination they faced as launderers and perceived enemies of the state, they received the seemingly favorable label of being a “model minority.” This assessment, generated in the popular media by the New York Times and US News and World Report, was widely adopted by popular media and Asian Americans themselves, in many cases, although academics and critics alike have critiqued the stereotype for glossing over important differences of class status and education background, as well as disregarding important differences between these self-selected immigrants and those that came as refugees or seeking asylum. In advertising, this shift is evident both in the relative absence of Chinese Americans in advertisements, and their portrayals as “forever foreigners” when they did appear.

These unassimilated, culturally unaware characters furthered the broken English of past depictions but instead of laundry workers, were now simply unfashionable nerds who were out of touch with current popular culture. For instance, this early Jell-O Commercial still uses the same broken English as ads from the turn of the century.



Here a Chinese mother tries to feed her infant the “great western delicacy” of Jell-O, only to find that she also needs to give her the “great western invention” of spoon, in order to enjoy it.



An early 1970s commercial for “Calgon” water softener features Mr. Lee, a laundry owner, who inscrutably announces in Chinese accented English to his white patron that he uses an “ancient Chinese secret.” His wife, speaking American accented English, reveals his secret to the customer and viewer, thereby offering a new version of technology upending the Chinese Laundromat.



Finally, this ad for Hoover once again presents the familiar theme of Chinese Americans being edged out of the laundry business by American technology. These ads suggest that past anti-Asian racisms still persist in the modern era.

General market advertising in the past three decades has featured a number of ads feature themes of martial arts popularized by actors such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and films such as the Karate Kid franchise.



Tie-ins to hip-hop add further dimensions of signification that suggest the ways in which Chinese and Japanese themes have become a routine part of American advertising and popular culture.



Others adopt “ancient secrets” for ads and films such as *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, such as this one from Geico, in which characters glide through the air gravity-defying ways not generally linked to insurance agents.

Those that feature Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans have drawn a more mixed set of responses.



A 2012 TV spot for “Ultrabooks” called “House of Flying Laptops” features two women engaging in a martial arts battle in a tea house, over what turns out to be a battle over battery life.



In another controversial campaign for Six Flags amusement parts, a talking Asian head appears in a corner to offer ratings about how much fun a particular activity may be, compared to a six flags ride.



Finally, in an ad feminist and Asian American activist groups protested, this ad for Chinese Laundry restaurant in Providence, RI, features a provocatively labeled Asian body with the phrase “See what you’ve been missing.” These campaigns drew the ire of viewers and critics alike.



Other ads, through few and far between, have shown East Asian Americans living everyday American lives, such as this Target ad, and others for Best Buy, McDonalds, and other brands.

Since the mid-1980s, a new niche has emerged in the advertising industry, one that caters specifically to Chinese Americans as consumers. These ads, created by those familiar with Chinese language and culture, are made “in-language” (in Chinese or Mandarin) and “in-culture” in ways that counter stereotypical images.



These ads are a notable break from prior ones both because they appeal to Chinese Americans as consumers, and because they employ representations and language use of everyday Chinese American life, rather than broken English and yellow peril.

target outside a few areas. Because many are third and fourth generation, they are also considered to be too culturally and linguistically assimilated to respond favorably to niche advertising.



They are, however, included in ads that air regionally, such as this McDonalds ad for a Hawaiian style big hamburger. Overall, these ads show some shifts and transformations in the representation of Chinese and Japanese Americans, in ways that will hopefully continue toward the better.