

The Research of Chinese Immigrants and Crime

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the historical background of Chinese immigrants in the United States, crime issues, and the impact of socioeconomic factors on Chinese criminal behavior. The article first provides an overview of American immigration and the history of Chinese immigration, then analyzes the general situation of crime problems in the 1850s, with a particular focus on Chinese criminal activities. In the literature review section, this paper thoroughly examines the scale of Chinese criminal activity, crimes targeting Chinese individuals, motives behind these crimes, and the social impacts they bring. Finally, through detailed factual statements, the article elaborates on the rise of Chinese labor migration, post-migration social integration, social discrimination and exclusion, and how these factors contribute to the emergence of criminal behavior.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Immigrants in the United States; Chinese Laborers; Crime Problems; Chinese Crime; Social Discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview of Immigration in the United States

The United States, as the world's largest immigrant nation, had an international immigrant population of 46 million by 2013. Its immigration history can be traced back to the 17th century when European colonizers began arriving in North America. Columbus discovered America in 1492, mistakenly referring to the local inhabitants as "Indians." Subsequently, Spanish colonizers established their rule in the Americas. In 1607, the British founded Jamestown in Virginia, becoming the first permanent British colony in North America. The United States declared independence in 1776. Immigration history is closely linked to the nation's economic, social, and cultural development. Since the colonial period, European and African immigrants have come seeking wealth and religious freedom, with African slaves being forced to provide labor. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century triggered large-scale immigration from Europe, with Irish, German, and Chinese immigrants altering the U.S. workforce structure, but accompanied by xenophobia and discrimination.

1.2. History of Chinese Immigrants in the United States

In the mid-19th century, specifically between 1840 and 1850, large-scale Chinese immigration began to surge. In 1848, gold was discovered in California, sparking the "Gold Rush," which attracted many Chinese people, known as "Gold Seekers," primarily from Guangdong Province, who arrived on the West Coast of the United States by sea. By the 1860s, Chinese immigrants became the main labor force for the construction of the Pacific Railroad, making up about 90% of the workforce,

significantly contributing to the connection between the eastern and western coasts of the United States. From the 1950s to the 1970s, after World War II, a second wave of immigration occurred. The revision of U.S. immigration laws in 1952 and 1965 increased quotas for Asian immigrants, mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. After the 1980s, a third wave of immigration emerged. With the reform and opening-up of the People's Republic of China, diplomatic relations were established with the United States in 1979, leading to an increase in immigrants from Chinese mainland, who tended to settle in suburban areas and use Mandarin and simplified characters.

1.3. Crime-an overview of the 1850s

In the 1850s, crime in the United States intensified due to social changes. The influx of immigrants, westward expansion, and urbanization led to frequent criminal activities. Irish and German immigrants in the ghettos committed crimes out of poverty and unemployment; the legal system in the western frontier was underdeveloped, making violent crimes common. Racial hate crimes, particularly against Chinese people, gradually increased. Although modern police departments were established in cities, their law enforcement capabilities were limited, and corruption and disorder prevailed. Religious groups and social reformers attempted to improve public safety through moral education and the temperance movement. The crime issues of this period reflected the challenges of American social transformation and spurred improvements in the police system and judicial framework.

1.4. Overview of Chinese-American crime in the United States

Since the mid-19th century, a large number of Chinese immigrants have arrived in the United States, primarily engaging in low-paying manual labor such as mining and railway construction. Due to their status as "cheap labor," they faced exclusion and racial discrimination. Some groups in mainstream society stigmatized the Chinese, accusing them of illegal gambling, drug trafficking (such as opium), and prostitution. The Chinese Exclusion Act led to the long-term marginalization of the Chinese under legal protection, exposing them to more severe social discrimination and threats of violence. Many Chinese had to survive in the gray areas of the law. Limited by the law and employment discrimination, many Chinese were forced into informal economic activities, such as operating Chinese restaurants, laundries, and participating in underground casinos and opium trades. Within the Chinese community, organizations like the "Chinatown Gangs" emerged, including secret societies and local groups. The Hung Society, a global secret organization originating from China's Qing Dynasty, had an active branch in Chinatown that involved gambling, smuggling, extortion, and other illegal activities. The Flying Dragon Gang was founded in New York's Chinatown in the 1970s and is a Chinese gang primarily composed of teenagers. This gang mainly operated in New York but also spread to other Chinese communities. They engaged in drug dealing, extortion, illegal gambling, smuggling, and violent conflicts. The Flying Dragon Gang is one of the more well-known organizations among Chinese gangs in the United States, though it is relatively small compared to large international criminal syndicates. The history of Chinese-American organized crime in the United States is closely tied to the social environment of immigrant communities, with concentrations in Chinatown. Although the activities of organized crime groups were significant in the 20th century, their size and influence have been greatly reduced in modern times.

This paper aims to study the issue of immigrant crime in the United States, particularly focusing on Chinese cases. It analyzes social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors such as poverty, education, unemployment, racial discrimination, and family issues to uncover the underlying causes of crime and provide a theoretical foundation for crime prevention. The study examines patterns and trends in criminal behavior with the goal of developing more effective public security strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Scale of Chinese crimes

According to Zhang Weiwei (Zhang, Weiwei) 's research in his book 'Chinese Immigrants and American Society' (2015)^[1], although criminal behavior among Chinese communities has historically been a concern, the scale of crime among Chinese is relatively smaller compared to other ethnic groups. Zhang's study shows that Chinese immigrants are generally seen as law-abiding citizens, with their involvement in crime far lower than that of other groups, such as Latinos and African Americans. He points out: "Overall, the crime rate of Chinese immigrants in most areas of the United States has consistently been below the national average, reflecting their efforts in social integration and legal survival."

Li Yuanming's (2008)^[2] research also indicates that, despite experiencing multiple large-scale immigration waves throughout American history, Chinese immigrants have relatively lower crime rates compared to other ethnic groups. Li points out that from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, Chinese immigrants were mainly concentrated in California and New York City, primarily engaged in low-wage manual labor such as mining, railway construction, and laundries. Although these working conditions were harsh, the crime rate in Chinese communities did not significantly increase. Li believes that this phenomenon is closely related to the close unity of Chinese communities and the "law-abiding" values embedded in their traditional culture.

2.2. Crimes Against Chinese

In his paper "On the Issue of Chinese Crime in America," Zhu Hai^[3] points out that after the enactment of the new immigration law, the proportion of young people among the Chinese community gradually increased. The influx of a large number of new Chinese immigrants objectively led to an increase in the number of Chinese youth joining gangs after 1965. Many street gangs, such as the Huaqing Gang, the Ghost Shadow Gang (Ghosr Shasbows), and the Flying Dragon Gang (Rly Dragons), were established during this period. Initially, these gangs were formed to combat harassment of Chinese youth by other minority groups. After successfully driving out Mexican gang members from Chinatown, some Chinese gangs disbanded on their own, but other street gangs began to extort and collect protection fees from Chinatown for economic gain and survival, colluding with local organizations. For example, the Ghost Shadow Gang served the Xie Sheng Hall, and the Flying Dragon Gang belonged to the An Liang Hall. They provided protection for casinos and brothels operated by these halls and collected debts on behalf of others. At the same time, as gangs vied for territory and interests, mutual killings increased, leading to a sharp rise in Chinese crime rates, which became a persistent problem in the security environment of Chinatown. Taking Los Angeles as an example, between 1969 and 1978, there were 18 murders involving Chinese youth. In May 1973, the leader of the Huaqing Gang, a local Chinese gang in Los Angeles, was shot dead in public in Chinatown. Between 1973 and 1977, there were 27 murders related to Chinese youth gangs. In summary, the phenomenon of Chinese targeting Chinese is essentially the result of multiple factors working together. First, socio-economic factors have intensified resource competition, forcing Chinese immigrants to compete for limited resources, which in turn leads to conflicts and crime within the community. Second, cultural psychological factors cause Chinese immigrants to experience psychological stress and anxiety when facing racial discrimination and social exclusion, leading to criminal behavior. Finally, legal status and community structure result in Chinese immigrants being unable to obtain legitimate legal protection, leaving many to rely on secret societies to protect their interests, further exacerbating internal crime within the community.

2.3. Discussion of the Motives for Committing Crimes (Active and Passive)

According to Linghu Ping's research 'A New Perspective on the Study of Chinese Americans: The Cultural Community Theory'^[4], among Asian immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants have suffered the most severe discrimination and persecution. The braids of Chinese men and the foot binding of Chinese women were seen as symbols of China's backward and peculiar culture. The single male society of Chinese immigrants was viewed as evidence that they were unwilling to assimilate into mainstream society. Since Chinese immigrants were unwilling or "incapable of being assimilated," they were excluded by immigration laws jointly formulated by American nativists, racists, politicians, and white labor unions, becoming the only immigrant group legally excluded by the U.S. government. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, which prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States. This law was repeatedly extended until it was finally repealed in 1943. Additionally, Zhao Min (2007)^[5] further explored the cultural psychological factors behind Chinese criminal behavior in her research. Zhao Min pointed out that while traditional Chinese culture emphasizes "law-abiding" and "harmony," these values often conflict with the real-world environment in American society. She believes that this cultural conflict is one of the key reasons for Chinese criminal behavior. Through a mental health survey of the Chinese community, Zhao Min found that many Chinese immigrants experience psychological stress and anxiety when facing racial discrimination and social exclusion, leading to criminal behavior. These findings indicate that the main causes of Chinese criminal behavior can be summarized as follows: 1. Socioeconomic hardship, 2. Lack of legal status, 3. Cultural and psychological conflicts, 4. Community structure and gang culture, 5. Racial discrimination and social exclusion.

2.4. Analysis of the Impact of the Crime

Wang Xiaoyun (2013)^[6] points out in her study 'The Impact of Chinese Crime on Community Safety' that Chinese crime not only causes direct harm to victims but also negatively affects the sense of security and social trust within the entire Chinese community. Wang emphasizes: "When the Chinese community is stigmatized by stereotypes and criminal labels, its unity and social capital are affected, leading to a decline in trust among community members and weakening their ability to participate in mainstream society." She also notes that when the Chinese community faces such issues, it often results in higher privacy and status defenses, creating a vicious cycle. In summary, although the overall crime rate among Chinese Americans is relatively low, during specific historical periods and social contexts, criminal behavior within the Chinese community has had profound impacts on both the community and society.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. The Rise of Chinese Labor Immigration

In the mid-19th century, American society was undergoing drastic changes. The surge in labor demand due to the California Gold Rush and the vigorous development of domestic infrastructure such as railways collectively formed a powerful driving force for Chinese labor migration. At the same time, Chinese society was beset by internal strife and external threats, with frequent peasant uprisings like the Taiping Rebellion, continuous wars, and social unrest, severely endangering people's lives and property. After the Opium War, the Qing government was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties, leading to the erosion of national sovereignty, severe economic damage, and hardship for the people. Against this backdrop, many chose to emigrate overseas, hoping to escape their predicaments and seek a stable life. Coupled with frequent natural disasters, especially the suffering of people in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, a large number of Chinese sought to survive by crossing the ocean to America.

In 1848, news of the discovery of gold in California quickly spread to the southeastern coastal regions of China. Chinese laborers, harboring dreams of striking it rich, began arriving in the United States one after another. Initially, they were mainly concentrated in the gold mining areas of California, where they relied on their indomitable spirit to seek wealth in harsh conditions. As the Central Pacific Railroad Company sought to address the shortage of labor for railway construction, it began large-scale recruitment of Chinese workers, leading to a sharp increase in the number of Chinese laborers from the 1860s to the 1870s. According to statistics, during the peak period of the Central Pacific Railway construction, Chinese workers accounted for 90% of the total workforce. These Chinese laborers came to America as contract workers, signing contracts that committed them to work for their employers for a specified period in exchange for travel expenses and meager wages.

3.2. Adaptation after Immigration

3.2.1. Working Environment and Treatment

Chinese laborers in the United States were typically assigned to industries with extremely high labor intensity, meager pay, and great danger. In the harsh conditions of gold mining, they not only had to struggle against adverse natural conditions but also endure the exclusion and unfair treatment from white miners. White miners often used various excuses to expel Chinese workers and seize their mining rights. In railway construction, Chinese workers took on the most arduous tasks, such as tunneling through mountains and laying tracks. They worked up to 10 to 12 hours a day, yet earned only two-thirds or even less of what white workers did. In work environments lacking basic safety guarantees, workplace accidents were frequent, leaving countless Chinese workers disabled or even losing their precious lives.

3.2.2. Living Conditions

After Chinese labor immigrants arrived in the United States, they mostly gathered in specific areas of cities, gradually forming Chinatowns. Initially, Chinatowns were places where Chinese people sought refuge and mutual assistance in unfamiliar environments. However, as the number of Chinese immigrants increased, living conditions became extremely poor. Houses were overcrowded, and there was a lack of sanitary facilities. Many families had to squeeze into small apartments or rental units, with per capita living space far below normal standards. The lack of ventilation and hygiene led to widespread diseases, such as cholera and tuberculosis, which frequently broke out in Chinatowns, posing a serious threat to the health and lives of Chinese laborers.

3.2.3. Social Discrimination and Exclusion

Throughout the long history of America, Chinese labor immigrants have faced systematic social discrimination and exclusion. Especially after the enactment and implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the Chinese community suffered severe legal restrictions and threats of violence. From a legal perspective, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 clearly demonstrated discrimination against Chinese people. The act prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States, restricted their employment opportunities, and deprived them of several fundamental rights, such as the prohibition of naturalization, which placed Chinese Americans in a subordinate status within American society. In terms of social life, Chinese Americans also faced widespread discrimination. Throughout American history, Chinese Americans have endured severe discrimination and unfair treatment, such as the restrictions on their employment opportunities, housing choices, and social benefits imposed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. During the pandemic, Asian Americans have also faced exclusion in public places and unequal treatment in employment and housing. The entrenched stereotypes about Chinese Americans in white society view them as "outsiders," believing they have taken jobs away from native American workers, thereby exacerbating social tensions.

3.3. The Ultimate Cause of Crime

3.3.1. Economic Difficulties and Survival Pressure

Long-term discrimination and unequal treatment have severely limited the employment options for Chinese workers in the job market. After the completion of the Pacific Railway, about 15,000 Chinese workers participated in this great project, but upon its completion, these workers faced the challenge of unemployment. Meanwhile, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882 further restricted their employment opportunities, leading to severe economic and social discrimination against Chinese workers in Canada. To survive, some Chinese had to engage in illegal underground economic activities. For example, gambling and opium trading quietly emerged in some Chinatown areas. For those unemployed and struggling Chinese workers, participating in illegal activities became a desperate choice, providing them with meager income to barely sustain their livelihood.

3.3.2. Social Marginalization and Psychological Stress

Long-term social discrimination and exclusion have placed Chinese laborers at the periphery of American society, making it difficult for them to integrate into mainstream society. They lack a sense of belonging and identity in a foreign land, bearing immense psychological pressure. For instance, the history of Chinese laborers in America can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when they were forced to seek new opportunities to escape poverty and hunger, drawn to the United States, which desperately needed cheap labor. They faced severe racial discrimination in American society; Chinese workers with yellow skin and black hair were seen as outsiders in a white-dominated society, facing language barriers, cultural differences, and even basic human rights violations. This psychological pressure can lead some Chinese individuals to lose control and turn to crime. At the same time, there are conflicts and tensions within the Chinese community. Resource scarcity has led to intense competition among the Chinese community in areas such as employment and housing. Some individuals, after failing in these competitions, may resort to illegal means to gain advantages, thereby triggering criminal behavior. Additionally, the emergence of some gang organizations within the Chinese community is closely linked to social marginalization. Initially, these gangs aimed to protect and support each other in difficult circumstances, but over time, they have transformed into criminal groups engaged in illegal activities. Some Chinese laborers, coerced or tempted by these gangs, have strayed onto the path of crime.

3.3.3. Legal and Cultural Differences

Chinese labor immigrants mostly come from traditional Chinese society, where their cultural background and values differ greatly from those of American society. When facing the complex legal system in the United States, many Chinese people struggle to understand and adapt due to language barriers and cultural differences. Some behaviors considered normal in Chinese culture may be deemed criminal under U.S. law. For example, common practices in the Chinese community, such as private lending and dispute resolution, might be seen as illegal activities because they do not conform to American legal procedures. Moreover, when Chinese workers encounter legal issues, they often struggle to seek effective legal assistance due to language barriers and financial difficulties, which also increases their risk of committing crimes to some extent.

4. SUMMARY

In the mid-to-late 19th century, American society underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization, leading to particularly severe crime issues. During this special period, Chinese people became the primary victims of racial hate crimes, forced into underground economic activities due to survival pressures. For example, organizations like the Hung Society formed early on, and adjustments in immigration policies after the 20th century, along with the arrival of new generations of Chinese immigrants and the emergence of youth gangs such as the Flying Dragon Gang and the Chinese Youth

Gang, all highlighted inter-generational conflicts during the process of cultural adaptation. Notably, although the overall crime rate among Chinese Americans was lower than that of other minority groups, internal community crime problems were quite serious, reflecting deeper social structural contradictions.

The historical evolution of Chinese immigrants in the United States reflects the arduous journey of immigrant groups striving for survival and development. Since European colonizers set foot on the North American continent in the 17th century, immigration has been a significant driving force behind American social development. In the mid-19th century, with the discovery of gold in California, the first Chinese laborers arrived in America with the "gold rush dream," becoming a crucial force in developing the American West and undertaking 90% of the arduous work in the construction of the Pacific Railroad. However, these Chinese builders faced countless instances of unfair treatment, and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 further deteriorated their living conditions.

Research has found that the root causes of crime among Chinese people are the result of multiple factors working together. Economic poverty and employment discrimination force some Chinese to take desperate measures; psychological conflicts arising from cultural differences exacerbate difficulties in social adaptation; and the long-term denial of development opportunities for Chinese through the Chinese Exclusion Act has further eroded internal solidarity within the Chinese community and deepened prejudice in mainstream society. Fortunately, after the reform and opening up, new immigrants from mainland China, who have improved their education and social mobility, are gradually changing this situation.

This article analyzes the history of Chinese immigrants in the United States and issues of crime, revealing the deep-seated causes of Chinese criminal behavior, including socioeconomic hardships, lack of legal status, cultural and psychological conflicts, community structure and gang culture, racial discrimination, and social exclusion. Although the overall crime rate among Chinese Americans is relatively low, during specific historical periods and social contexts, criminal activities within Chinese communities have had profound impacts on both the community and society. This three-century migration history offers us profound insights: the issue of immigrant crime is essentially a product of unequal social structures. To truly address this problem, it is necessary to tackle it from an institutional perspective, eliminating systemic discrimination and creating more equitable development opportunities. At the same time, promoting understanding and integration among different cultural groups and building a more inclusive social environment are essential. The experiences of Chinese immigrants demonstrate that only on the foundation of a fair and just society can true harmony and common development among all ethnic groups be achieved. This history not only documents the struggles of the Chinese community in America but also provides valuable lessons for our consideration of governance in immigrant societies.

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