

The American Neglect

The Effect of the 1900-1904 Bubonic Plague Outbreak on the San Francisco's Chinese Community

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CALIFORNIA CHINESE HISTORY

During the early 19th century, America had an increasing influx of immigrants into the nation from all over the world and by 1838, the Chinese immigrated over in hopes of escaping the economic crisis in China. With the boom of the California Gold Rush in the 1850's, over 80,000 Chinese immigrated over with the prospect of finding a new life for themselves (Paddison, 2005).

As America progressed with the Industrial Revolution and the growth of mass production and technological advancement, many immigrants, including the Chinese, were considered valuable in terms of cheap labor in order to complete constructions of railroads, dams, and other substantial projects across America.

With the progressive decline of labor following the completion of many successful projects, the Chinese were now seen as a floating community that never fully integrated into Anglo-America (i.e., a reversion back to a negative perception of the minority).

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE

The San Francisco Plague occurred from March 1900 to February 1904 and was relatively localized within the city, especially Chinatown. It led to 121 confirmed cases (119 being fatal) which many of the cases were Chinese. The Plague is caused by rod-shaped bacillus bacteria that are commonly found on rats. When infected, the individual experiences a serious onset of uncontrollable fevers, chills, headaches, and painful swelling of lymph nodes (buboes).

The Plague is endemic to industrialized cities due to the constant population of fleas that are found on rats which aid in transmitting the bacteria to humans. As neither vectors can be completely eradicated from the world, the Plague will persist regardless of technological and scientific advancement (i.e., only the degree of epidemics will vary, not the onset). Therefore, the Plague would be more commonly found in densely populated cities (due to the increased proximity of potential hosts) and in areas with lacking laboratorial supplies and equipment (Stenseth, 2008).



Figure 1: Yersinia pestis bacillus

MEDICAL DISBELIEF

The germ theory was proposed in 1864 by Louis Pasteur but was considered controversial and many were skeptical. Instead, many Anglo-Americans chose to believe in the myths that the Chinese were the bringers of diseases and bad luck (Trauner, 1978).

The Plague had been confirmed by Joseph Kinyoun by March 11th after surgeon Frank Wilson performed the first victim's autopsy on March 6th (Kalisch, 1972). However, California Governor, Henry Gage, continued adamantly denying the existence of the Plague – delaying treatment and prevention in fear of the damage to the city's and state's economy and believing that Kinyoun's results were a mere means for obtaining excess personal funding and attention.



Figure 2: Chinese are full of disease myth

REACTIONS FROM THE CHINESE

The Chinese were subjected to unjust quarantine laws, forcing them to risk high and continuous exposure within Chinatown.

At the same time, the Chinese community were not being properly informed on the outcomes of the Plague, to the point where misunderstandings of the outbreak was deemed artificial to them too. Instead, they believe the segregation was too hastily forced upon their community without proper confirmation and correlation.

With the growing fear from the public on the Chinese community, they had no choice but to oblige or risk debilitating consequences such as removal, punishment, etc. (Risse, 2012).

For those who fell sick, the Chinese were only able to attend one hospital for treatment, leading to the rapid surge of fatal cases within their population.



Figure 3: San Francisco Chinese Newspaper

HISTORY REPEATING?

In light of the recent Asian American and Pacific Islanders hate crimes and the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a reversion to degrading the minority once again. There is a lack of accountability- those who tarnish and endanger others with their actions are not being reprimanded but rather encouraged and spurred on by officials.

Starting in 2020, America faced the environmental crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the first cases manifesting in Wuhan, China, President Donald Trump constantly and blatantly seized the opportunity to slander the Chinese community, referring to the virus as the "Chinese virus" or "Kung Flu".

With just opening any social media or news source, we can see another hate crime has occurred, that nothing has changed. The acceptance of Asian hate arguably has not changed but grown severely and manifested into physical discrimination. Historical monuments are vandalized and attacks on the elderly AAPI community spark outrage even to the point where just in March 16th, 2021, the Atlanta spa shootings took the lives of eight innocent women. Yet, nothing is being done to stop and officially deem these as hate crimes.

History has not changed even over a century later, and the Chinese and AAPI community remain unaccepted in White America.



Figure 4: Trump's Youth Rally in Phoenix, Arizona



Figure 5: Ngoc Pham and Xiao Zhao Xie attacked in San Francisco



Figure 6: San Jose Japanese American National Monument



Figure 7: Atlanta spa shooting memorial

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