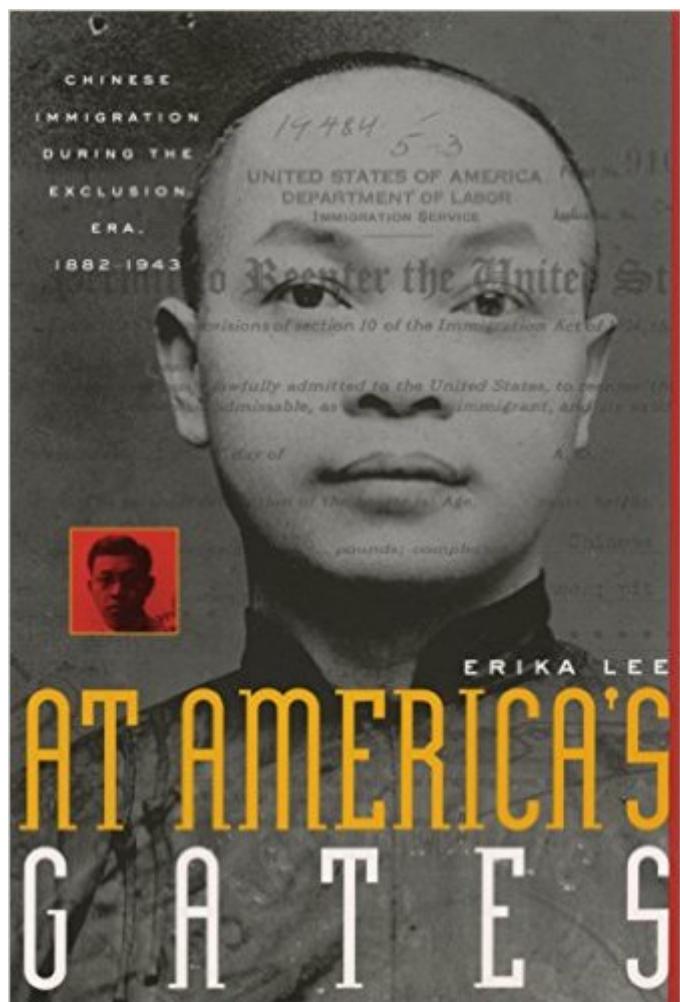


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# At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During The Exclusion Era, 1882-1943



## **Synopsis**

With the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese laborers became the first group in American history to be excluded from the United States on the basis of their race and class. This landmark law changed the course of U.S. immigration history, but we know little about its consequences for the Chinese in America or for the United States as a nation of immigrants. *At America's Gates* is the first book devoted entirely to both Chinese immigrants and the American immigration officials who sought to keep them out. Erika Lee explores how Chinese exclusion laws not only transformed Chinese American lives, immigration patterns, identities, and families but also recast the United States into a "gatekeeping nation." Immigrant identification, border enforcement, surveillance, and deportation policies were extended far beyond any controls that had existed in the United States before. Drawing on a rich trove of historical sources--including recently released immigration records, oral histories, interviews, and letters--Lee brings alive the forgotten journeys, secrets, hardships, and triumphs of Chinese immigrants. Her timely book exposes the legacy of Chinese exclusion in current American immigration control and race relations.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Erika Lee argued that the American implementation of exclusion policies towards Chinese played a significant role in transforming the United States from a nation of immigrants to a 'gatekeeping nation'. Her book is divided into four parts: Part one deals with the events leading up to the eventual Exclusion Act of 1882 by addressing the public paranoia of invading Chinese 'hordes' as well as the

attitudes of Immigration Officials towards Chinese; Part two discusses the restrictive nature of the exclusion policies that specifically targeted Chinese as well as how Chinese circumvented these oppressive laws with the aids of lawyers, judges, non-Chinese (that is, European) friends and various others; Part three examines the inefficiency of the exclusion policies as the policies failed to sufficiently curb amount of Chinese entering the United States but rather resulted in corrupt Immigration Officials as well as smugglers creating a 'black market' for immigration and thus labelling Chinese as one of the first 'illegal' immigrants in the process; Part four analyses the immediate consequences of the Exclusion Act of 1882 by explaining that the exclusion policies resulted in Chinese illegally entering the United States which caused Government Officials to raid Chinese residence and places of business at anytime as well as construing that the vigilant surveillance of Chinese by Government Officials, indeed the general public, created an ambience of fear for Chinese communities. Furthermore, Erika Lee's extensive use of both primary and secondary sources made this book especially compelling. Lee cited hundreds of primary and secondary sources which she integrated beautifully in her book. Overall, I believe her argument to be just and well formulated.

Erika Lee is a very angry woman. Her diatribe on American immigration policy equates anyone who is concerned about porous borders, the enforcement of laws in a nation of laws, and containment of disease as being a racist. It's hardly fair. And it detracts from her history of immigration legislation and enforcement. Yes, the Chinese Exclusion Act was reprehensible. Yes, we were and are a nation filled with racial prejudices and hatreds. Immigration restrictions on other ethnic groups, according to Lee, were reflections of a racist policy towards Asians. She admits that the numbers of Asian immigrants was historically small and generally confined to the west coast. She then invests California, and San Francisco in particular, with an enormous amount of political power which was used to restrict immigration throughout the country. Lee is not convincing in her contention that the immigration issue was driven purely by an irrational racist beliefs and concerns over invading Asian hordes. She did not fully explain how the United States Congress, 3,000 miles distant, and generally unaffected by Asian immigration would develop a policy arising out of racism towards a group of which they were barely aware. Exclusion based upon race is wrong. Looking different, having different cultural traditions, and not speaking the dominant language of English were and are roadblocks for all immigrants, not just the Chinese. Lee is a constant apologist for behaving as an outsider while expecting to be treated as an insider. Blaming national policy decisions on racial attitudes is too simplistic. Lee could have made an argument which addressed the nativistic

xenophobia that was prevalent in the Gilded Age which was partly due to the arrival of masses of southern and eastern European immigrants.

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