Thematic Report on Chinese American Contributions:
Civil Rights, Public Service and Politics
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Civil rights are an essential component of American democracy, guaranteeing equal social opportunities and protection under the law, regardless of race, religion or other personal characteristics. As a nation born from a struggle to overthrow autocratic rule, the history of fighting for civil rights in the US is as old as the country itself. Chinese Americans have been an integral part of civil rights movements since the earliest generation of Chinese immigrants sought legal protection of their civil rights in the 1880s.

As a result, alongside civil rights organizers and leaders of many different races, ethnicities and backgrounds, Chinese Americans have played an important role—perhaps more than most Americans realize—in shaping American democracy, and social and political fabrics. Moreover, with changes in immigration law and social and political shifts in the 1940-60s opening up opportunities to enter public service and politics, Chinese Americans have increasingly found avenues through which to provide public services and advocate for political values.
Overview

Chinese Americans play a significant role in both public service and the political system. As of 2018, approximately 102,000 Chinese Americans work in local, state and federal government around the country, accounting for 1.2% of government employees—equivalent to their share in the US population. They have outsized representation in all but one major function and play a particularly important role in the administration of public finance, environmental quality and housing, and human resource programs (Figure 1).\(^{3,4}\) Eleven out of 871 federal judges (1.3%) are Chinese American, including three appellate judges and eight district court judges.\(^{5}\)

Meanwhile, Chinese American politicians are active in both the Democratic and Republican parties. There are currently four US House Representatives and one Senator of Chinese descent, making up roughly 1% of the total US Congress members.\(^{6}\) Most recently, Andrew Yang, a Chinese American entrepreneur, ran as a candidate in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries.

![Chinese Americans’ Representation by Public Administration Functions, 2018](image)

Sources: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey one-year estimates, public use microdata sample (PUMS); The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.

Chinese Americans have come a long way to break into the domain of civil service and politics. Under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a discriminatory statute that remained law until 1943, Chinese immigrants—even those who had been in the US for decades—were banned from becoming US citizens and were thus deprived of civil rights such as the right to vote.\(^{7,8}\) In addition to facing legal obstacles, Chinese Americans faced various types of formal racial segregation and informal bigotry that limited their access to job opportunities, including those with governments. For example, in 1879 California established a new Constitution that barred Chinese workers from employment by state, county or municipal governments, as well as by corporations.\(^{9}\)
As a result of this widespread discrimination, early generations of Chinese immigrants were effectively shut out of civil service and politics. Not until 1959 did Chinese Americans finally see representation in US Congress (in the form of Hiram Fong, a Republican senator from Hawaii), more than a century after the first Chinese Americans arrived in the Gold Rush. It then took nearly another 40 years before Gary Locke, a Democrat from the state of Washington, was elected as the first Chinese American governor in 1996. Three years later, Elaine Chao became the first Chinese American to be appointed to a president’s cabinet. Younger generations of Chinese Americans have become more politically active in the past few decades and continue to actively participate in public administration and politics.

Even before their official entry into government and politics, Chinese Americans had made significant contributions to American democracy. In response to widespread racial discrimination in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Chinese immigrants sought justice by going to court to defend their civil rights. Since the 1960s they have become more integrated into broader civil rights and social movements.

Seeking judicial justice to defend civil rights (1880s-1940s)

Throughout the first century of Chinese American history, immigrants from China endured prevalent racial prejudice and legal limitations set by discriminatory legislation, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Chinese immigrants turned to the judicial system to defend their civil rights and fight against systemic racism and discrimination. During this period, several landmark immigration cases brought by Chinese immigrants set important legal precedents for equal protection under the Constitution, which would help to establish civil rights for immigrants and non-white Americans for years to come.

One of the best-known early court cases involving a Chinese American was United States v. Wong Kim Ark, which established the concept of birthright citizenship in the US. For centuries, racist lawmakers attempted to limit citizenship to white or European people; racial or ethnic minorities, even those who were born on American soil, had to fight to be granted US citizenship. In this environment of racial exclusion and white supremacy, Wong Kim Ark, a San Francisco-born Chinese American, was barred from entering the US upon returning from China in 1895, on the grounds that he was not a US citizen under the Chinese Exclusion Act. Eventually, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Mr. Wong, stating that children born in the US to non-citizen parents are automatically granted citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The decision established birthright citizenship—one of the cornerstones of American identity—having an untold impact on immigrant families of all backgrounds and ethnicities, including the many generations of Americans descended from English, Scotch, Irish, German, and other European immigrants. As Lucy Salyer, a legal historian at the University of New
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Hampshire holds, had the Supreme Court rejected Mr Wong’s claim to citizenship, rather than defining itself as a nation of citizens descended from immigrants, America might have instead become the uneasy home to “colonies of foreigners.”

Another case, *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, resulted in another landmark Supreme Court ruling in favor of a Chinese American, this time advocating for equal protection under the law for all US residents, irrespective of race or nationality. *Yick Wo* was a laundry facility owned by Lee Yick, a Chinese immigrant in California. Mr Lee sued for a writ of habeas corpus after he was imprisoned for having refused to pay a fine for allegedly violating an ordinance that was discriminatory to Chinese-owned laundries. In 1886, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of *Yick Wo*, ruling that it was unconstitutional to discriminate against a group of people in passage or enforcement of legislation.

The case was the first to use the “equal protection” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the decision opened the doors for immigrant integration into American society and established an important precedent for subsequent related cases. By the 1950s, the Supreme Court had used the principle established in *Yick Wo* to strike down several attempts by states and municipalities in the Deep South to limit the political rights of Black Americans. As proof of its centrality to American civil liberty and discrimination litigation, the *Yick Wo* case has been cited over 150 times in civil rights proceedings since the original decision.

Contributing to the civil rights and social justice movements (1960s-present)

While early Chinese immigrants primarily fought for the right to be legally accepted as Americans, since the second half of the 20th century, younger generations of Chinese Americans have focused on wider civil rights battles affecting not only themselves but also other minorities and disadvantaged groups.
The civil rights movement led by Black Americans in the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to dramatic social changes that overhauled how Americans perceive racial relations and politics. The movement led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a monumental piece of legislation that ended segregation in public places and prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.21

Building off the work of the civil rights movement and Black civil rights leaders was the passing of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The Act eliminated an earlier immigration quota system based on national origin (which limited the number of Chinese immigrants to 105) and established a new immigration policy giving preference to family reunification and skilled labor. As a result, the demographic makeup of the US population has greatly diversified, with an increasing number of immigrants entering the country from Asia, Africa and Latin America, as opposed to Europe.22

Witnessing and benefiting from these significant changes, younger Chinese Americans, including many whose families had been in the US for two or three generations, began to speak out against racial discrimination and social injustice against all minority groups.

Increased involvement of Chinese American people in wider efforts to campaign for social justice culminated in the early 1980s, when Chinese American and other Asian American groups joined forces to file a lawsuit and organize a civil rights movement seeking justice for Vincent Chin. Mr Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American from Michigan, was beaten and killed by two white autoworkers who blamed Asians for the loss of automobile manufacturing jobs to Japan. Although the murderers of Mr Chin were never held accountable by the American judicial system, the movement raised the consciousness of racially motivated hate crimes and helped to prompt more inclusive federal protections of various classifications, including perceived gender, sexual orientation, and disability.23

Today, Chinese Americans activists and non-profit organizations remain devoted to seeking and defending civil rights and social justice. Helen Zia, a journalist who acted as the organizer and spokesperson in the campaign for justice for Vincent Chin, has become a leading activist for Asian American and LGBTQ rights.24 Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Los Angeles (Advancing Justice-LA, previously known as the Asian Pacific American Legal Center), which was founded by a Chinese American lawyer, Stewart Kwoh, in 1983, counselled in the Vincent Chin case.

Advancing Justice-LA is now the largest legal and civil rights organization for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the US, serving more than 15,000 individuals and organizations every year.25 Mr Kwoh also founded the organization’s Leadership Development in Interethnic Relations program, which has trained more than 1,000 community leaders and activists in the past decade.26 Through this initiative, the organization works to empower individuals, schools and organizations by equipping them with the leadership skills necessary to foster positive and sustainable intergroup relations for social change.27
A significant number of Chinese American-led civil rights organizations and non-profits continue to work to dismantle systemic racism and remove barriers to inclusion of Chinese Americans and underrepresented groups in American social and civic life. For example, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, founded in 1895, is deeply engaged in the fight against racial discrimination, defending civil rights and opposing anti-immigration movements. Another example is Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), founded in 1969 to protect the civil and political rights of Chinese Americans and to advance multiracial democracy in the US. Today, CAA is a progressive voice in and on behalf of the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander community, advocating for systemic change that protects immigrant rights, promotes language diversity, and remedies racial and social injustice.

Over time, the Chinese American community’s experience of discrimination has also fostered solidarity with other minority groups. Escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass denounced the Chinese Exclusion Act in the late 1800s, for instance, and Chinese American activist Grace Lee Boggs emerged as an advocate for Black social justice in the mid-1900s (she was described as “probably Afro-Chinese” in her FBI files). Chinese and Jewish civil rights groups have also forged ties. For example, Chinese American organizations condemned the shooting at the Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue in 2018 and the rise in anti-Semitic attacks during 2019. Jewish groups, in turn, have extended their support for Chinese American communities amid the rise of scapegoating and xenophobia directed at Chinese and Asian Americans amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
Breaking into public services and politics (1960s-present)

The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and a series of immigration policy and legislative changes in the 1950s and 1960s helped to level the playing field for Chinese Americans and opened up broad new opportunities. As a result, Chinese Americans gained access to a variety of professions and domains previously limited to white Americans, including civil service and politics.

By the end of the 1950s Hiram Fong had become the first Chinese American US senator (he would go on to run for the Republican nomination for president in 1964). During his tenure as a senator, Mr Fong supported the expansion of civil rights programs, voted to establish refugee aid programs and raise the minimum wage, and advocated for the liberalization of US immigration policy. He also contributed substantially to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, writing an amendment providing for poll watchers to guarantee the safety and fairness of elections.

Despite such advances, the number of Chinese Americans in civil service and politics remained relatively small until younger generations of Chinese Americans, who tended to show greater interest in public issues than their parents, entered the labor force in the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly after the 1990s, as they advanced in their careers, high-profile figures started to emerge across different areas. For example, of the 11 Chinese Americans who have been elected to the Senate and House of Representatives so far, eight were elected in the past two decades.
In 1997 Gary Locke, elected as the governor of Washington state, became the first Chinese American governor in US history. During his tenure as governor from 1997 to 2005, Mr Locke achieved bipartisan welfare reform and oversaw the creation of 280,000 private-sector jobs, despite two national recessions. He also established the most diverse cabinet in state history. In 2002, Debra Wong Yang became the first Asian American woman to serve as a US Attorney, leading the Attorney’s Office of the Central District of California, serving a region of approximately 18m people. Prior to doing so, Ms Yang had been known for prosecuting one of the first computer hacking cases when serving as an Assistant United States Attorney, alongside a number of high-profile cases, covering violent crimes, white collar crimes, arson and computer crimes.

Inspired by role models such as Mr Locke and Ms Yang, an increasing number of Chinese Americans have entered civil service and politics and will play a greater role in shaping public policy and political systems in future. Between 2009 and 2018, the number of Chinese American employees working in public administration grew by 68%, outpacing both the growth of the Chinese American population (46%) and the growth of the overall public administration workforce (9%).

At the same time, younger Chinese American politicians have emerged at state and local levels, including in regions that do not traditionally have a significant demographic of Chinese or Asian Americans. In 2016 Theresa Mah became the first Asian American elected to the Illinois General Assembly. More recently, in 2018 Mike Yin was elected into the Wyoming House of Representatives, becoming the first Chinese American legislator in a state where Chinese Americans account for less than 0.1% of the total population. Figures like Ms Mah and Mr Yin demonstrate that political leaders should not be limited to serving only constituents of their same race, gender, or identity, but rather, as Americans, can and should represent all American citizens at every level of government.

Conclusion

The contribution of Chinese Americans to American democracy and the shaping of its social and political fabric has been a self-reinforced process that benefits minority groups of all ethnicities and backgrounds, and broader American society. Alongside other historically disadvantaged groups, activists for myriad causes and grassroots civil rights organizations, Chinese Americans’ endeavors to pursue racial, social and political justice and defend civil rights have driven positive shifts in US immigration policy, the domestic political climate and wider social perceptions.

2 US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, public use microdata sample (PUMS), The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.

3 The only exception is justice, public order and safety activities.

4 US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, PUMS, The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.


7 The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was initially intended to last 10 years and was extended twice before being made indefinite in 1904. The Congress repealed the Act in 1943.


18 Sen Hu and Jelin Dong, eds., The Rocky Road to Liberty: A Documented History of Chinese Immigration and Exclusion (Chinese American Society, 2010).

19 "Historic Supreme Court Cases: Yick Wo v Hopkins."


33 For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in education, employment and public facilities on the basis of race or sex.


36 “Fong, Hiram Leong.”

37 Expert interviews conducted by The Economist Intelligence Unit.


41 “Debra Wong Yang.”

42 US Census Bureau, 2009 and 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, PUMS; The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.


44 US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, PUMS; The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.
