

## **19<sup>th</sup> Century Perceptions of Chinese Immigrants and Chinatown through the Principal Chinese Theatre**

In 1869, Joseph Baker spent six weeks accompanying Thomas Knox in San Francisco's Chinatown, creating a 'scoop' on the region's growing Chinese immigrant population. Documentation of their stay was published as a series of travel articles written by Knox, with illustrations by Baker, through *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* from May to July of 1870. Knox and Baker's portrayal of Chinese immigrants were less hostile and stereotypical than other news sources in a time of high racial tension in post-Civil War United States.<sup>1</sup> However, one of Baker's illustrations for Knox's article "The Coming Man"<sup>2</sup> depicting a night at a Chinese theatre, sent conflicting messages about Chinese immigrants to the followers of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*; approaching the highly controversial group with both a seemingly friendly, yet disdainful attitude. Ultimately, the portrayal of a night at the Principal Chinese Theater by Joseph Backer in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*—though not explicitly racist and politically motivated—succeeds in the othering of Chinese immigrants, playing into popular fears that Chinese immigrants are fundamentally different than Americans and that their presence poses a threat to Western culture in America, achieved through the artist's use of contrasting visual elements to portray Chinese immigrants in comparison to White Americans.

Baker's illustration of the Principal Chinese Theatre is not as politically charged nor does it capitalize on popular stereotypes of Chinese immigrants like other news sources in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era was characterized by racial tension and heated debates on the definition of American citizenship. While the country continued to wrestle

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<sup>1</sup> Cronin and Huntzicker, "Popular Chinese Images," 87.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, "The Coming Man," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, May 07, 1870.

with the newly attained status of African Americans in 1869, Chinese immigrants began to seek work outside of the completed Central Pacific Railroad and created ethnic enclaves to protect themselves against racially charged violence.<sup>3</sup> Instability and tension during these times brought about the image of Chinese immigrants as both an economic and cultural threat within the minds of the American collective. While the timing and subject of “The Coming Man” indicated that *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated* had intentions of using the controversy surrounding Chinese immigrants to increase sales, the nature and approach of these articles set them apart from other news sources. Portrayals of ‘the Chinese menace’ was popular among mainstream American newspapers, with popular political cartoons representing immigrants as petulant children, the burden of Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam.<sup>4</sup> In comparison to these images, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper’s* coverage on Chinese immigrants in 1870 is almost flattering, as the illustrations did not show them engaging in “substance abuse, gambling, or other acts considered moral failings”<sup>5</sup> that were typical in other publications. Veering away from the concerns of the American public, Knox and Baker focused on the Chinese perspective and sought to “represent various stages in the career of a migrating Chinese.”<sup>6</sup> Baker’s illustration of a night at the theatre showcased mundane life, appearing as if the primary purpose was to uncover the lifestyle inside San Francisco’s Chinatown for the paper’s audience in New York.

Baker’s illustration, despite its deviation from standard reporting on Chinese immigrants at the time, retains an underlying tone of exoticism and objectification towards Chinese immigrants. The nature of “The Coming Man,” namely the ‘exploration’ of Chinatown and the lives of Chinese immigrants, paints them as foreign novelties to be uncovered. Baker used

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<sup>3</sup> Hall, “The Wasp’s “Troublesome” Children,” 52.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, “The Wasp’s “Troublesome” Children,” 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cronin and Huntzicker, “Popular Chinese Images,” 92.

<sup>6</sup> Knox, “The Coming Man,” 122.

theatre, a source of tradition and pride to immigrants, to sate the curiosity and fascination of mainstream Americans. From the image, one can see that Baker paid special attention to two Chinese women in the audience. These two ladies are centered within the image, placed nearest to the viewer, and the details in which they were rendered stood out from the vague figures of theatre goers that flanked the sides and the middle of the composition. Most the details drawn by Baker is present in the design of the women's intricate collar and sleeves, their sophisticated hairpins, and other features of their outfits. These details match Knox's dedication to the description of women in the audience, noting their flowery ornaments and hairstyles. The complex details given to the women were similarly extended to the actors on stage, whose presence were enhanced through bright lighting in contrast to the mainly darkly colored image. Knox and Baker's special attention to Chinese clothing worn by both the actors and audience is common among the American public, who were fascinated by the advertised "new and beautiful dresses"<sup>7</sup> worn inside the theatres. For the immigrant population of San Francisco, theatre was a multifaceted entity within the enclave, it provided entertainment for the growing population of immigrants, opportunities for performers to migrate, and acted as a symbol for prosperity.<sup>5</sup> For American audiences on the other hand, Chinese theatre was novel and exotic, seen as a chance to observe an alien culture. This sentiment is well expressed in Baker's illustration and its emphasis sets the overall tone of the image.

Baker's illustration further alienates Chinese immigrants through contrasting portrayal of the White audience members against Chinese ones. Within the composition, the majority of the play's audience is shaded, with dark skin and dark clothing. However, towards the left wing of the audience, Baker chose to use lighter shades to illustrate the clothing articles for a handful of

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<sup>7</sup> Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater*, 41.

theater goers. This splash of color in the otherwise dark periphery of the image draws attention to two Caucasian men sitting in the audience, who are further emphasized with their white skin. Baker chose to portray the two men looking towards the stage, in direct contrast to the rest of the Chinese audience, the majority of whom Baker portrays as looking away from the stage and engaging in various social interactions. Baker's drawing directly lines up with Knox's observations in the article, where he mused that the Chinese audience were "not inclined to be particularly quiet" and "[paid] little attention to the performance on stage."<sup>8</sup> However, although Knox noted that there were a few 'American' viewers in the audience, he did not comment on their behavior. Despite this, Baker contrasted the restless behavior of the Chinese spectators to the almost stoic demeanor of the white men. Therefore, the juxtaposition between the two groups' behavior in the same setting has the intention of setting the behaviors of Chinese immigrants apart from what is expected from Americans. Thus, Baker's illustration succeeds in 'othering' Chinese immigrants from American society.

Although Joseph Baker eschewed harsh stereotypes and caricatures in his illustration, the underlying views he expressed towards Chinese immigrants and Chinatown were not uncommon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a part of the rapidly growing city of San Francisco, Chinatown drew a number of tourists from both the West and East coast. Outside of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper's* efforts, many writers and artists throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century were intrigued by the ethnic enclave built by Chinese immigrants, often describing it as an "antimodern" curiosity, while downplaying attractiveness to potential visitors—often through vivid accounts of opium dens, gambling rings, and prostitutes.<sup>9</sup> Though *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper's* "The Coming Man" series eschewed detailing the vices of Chinese immigrants, Baker's illustration

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<sup>8</sup> Knox, "The Coming Man," 122.

<sup>9</sup> Rast, "The Cultural Politics," 36.

paints the Chinese audience as rowdy and chaotic compared to White Americans present in the theater. In the illustration, traditional and intricate clothing was presented as a point of interest yet described as “gaudy” by Knox within his article.<sup>10</sup> This exotification and alienation of Chinese immigrants through the scene inside the Principal Chinese Theatre feeds into the public’s existing feelings towards Chinatown and Chinese immigrants—fascination with their ‘exotic’ culture and disdain for their ‘backwards’ way of life. Though not outright malicious, the combined image of Chinese immigrants as constructed by Knox’s descriptions and Baker’s artwork reinforced popular notions of “Chinese San Franciscans as social “others” who stood at odds with a modernizing world.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the contrast within the composition retains elements of underlying cultural hegemony. Out of the mass of Chinese faces in Baker’s drawings, there are only two ‘American’ men, identifiable through their facial hair and clothing. These two figures, despite being a part of numerous others in the audience, are highlighted through Baker’s coloring of their surrounding environment. There is a clear contrast of brightness on the left wing—where the white men are sitting—and darkness on the left wing of the composition. The lighting of the image almost invokes Manifest Destiny, with the culturally superior Westerners on the left and backwards Chinese immigrants on the right.

The distinction of Chinese immigrants from the standard ‘American,’ combined with American superiority portrayed in Baker’s engraving, touches a deeper, more fundamental fear of immigration within the American consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which festered alongside racial and economic tension. The loss of jobs to Chinese immigrants was a topic of contention

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<sup>10</sup> Knox, “The Coming Man,” 122.

<sup>11</sup>Rast, “The Cultural Politics,” 33.

for Americans on the West Coast, with fierce debates in the political arena about whether Chinese immigrants were helping the state economy with large volumes of cheap labor or stealing jobs from Americans.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the country was still struggling to define what it means to be ‘American’ in the aftermath of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> The new status of African-Americans within the country, as well as the large number of migrant laborers sent to construct America’s industrial projects, challenged the traditional standing of the White American citizen. The large migrations of laborers from China to the West Coast of the United States, and the construction of ethnic enclaves was at odds with the popular belief of Manifest Destiny, “an assumed Anglo-American conquest of the continent.”<sup>14</sup> Chinese immigrants, as presented through Baker’s illustration, continued outward displays of their ‘Oriental’ culture and behaviors which were so fundamentally different from that of the White Americans that it contributed to fear for precarious American dominance of the West. Joseph Baker’s othering of the Chinese audience echoes the threat of the ‘Chinese hoard,’ a subverted belief of Manifest Destiny that involved large swarms of unassimilable Chinese immigrants that would impede on Western progress.<sup>15</sup> This racist sentiment, when coupled with economic instability, casted a shadow on the favorability of Chinese immigration in the eyes of the American public.

The publication of the series “The Coming Man” as a part of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and Joseph Baker’s illustration of a scene within the Principal Chinese Theater in 1870 held significant impact for the future of Chinese immigration within the United States. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* was the first illustrated news magazine in America, second in sales only to *Harper’s Weekly* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “established images as a significant

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<sup>12</sup> Hall, “The Wasp’s “Troublesome” Children,” 52.

<sup>13</sup> Cronin and Huntzicker, “Popular Chinese Images,” 39.

<sup>14</sup> Cronin and Huntzicker, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, “The Wasp’s “Troublesome” Children,” 53.

reporting tool in America.”<sup>16</sup> Although *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* had a reputation of sensationalism, it was widely read on the East Coast, with the accuracy of its illustrations a selling point for many Americans.<sup>17</sup> Because “most Americans had never met Chinese immigrants and learned about them through newspapers and magazines,”<sup>18</sup> the publications on Chinese immigrants coming from the pages of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* carried a large impact on how the American public viewed Chinese immigrants and the country’s policies on Chinese immigration.

Although Baker’s illustration avoided harsh caricatures and vices typically presented in portrayals of Chinese immigrants at the time, his usage of visual effects to highlight the contrast between Chinese immigrants and Americans painted the two groups as fundamentally different and irreconcilable, feeding into the popular fears that Chinese culture threaten American progress in the west. The ‘othering’ of Chinese immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through such images will eventually culminate into a series of laws that stunted the growth of Chinese communities in the West Coast and Chinese immigration until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Asian-Americans today still struggle to be recognized as truly ‘American.’ Even after these discriminatory laws were repealed, the public’s perception is still influenced by centuries of ‘othering’ from the media. However, the contrast between Chinese and Americans is no longer as black and white as the day Baker’s illustrations were printed. Time has passed; the ink has faded, softened, and now serves as a visual reminder of our capacity to see past superficial differences and reconcile between the too often separated East and West.

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<sup>16</sup> Pearson, “Frank Leslie’s Illustrated,” 81-82.

<sup>17</sup> Pearson, 82.

<sup>18</sup> Cronin and Huntzicker, “Popular Chinese Images,” 39.

<sup>19</sup> Rast, “The Cultural Politics,” 34.



"THE COMING MAN."

SCENE IN THE PRINCIPAL CHINESE THEATRE, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, DURING THE PERFORMANCE OF A GREAT HISTORICAL PLAY.

(FROM A SKETCH BY GREGG BECKER.)

SUPPLEMENT GRATIS WITH NO. 793 OF FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER.





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