

California Dreams and Nightmares

Alexandra Michaličková

ABSTRACT

Ever since the discovery of gold in 1848, people have been coming to California in belief that they would be rewarded generously for their hard work and talents. California was thus perceived as the promised land of opportunity and fulfilled dreams. However, for many the dream did not come true. The paper analyses California's most prominent groups of immigrants arriving to California during the Gold Rush and afterwards paying attention to their initial expectations and reasons for coming and contrasts them with conditions they encountered.

KEYWORDS

California, Immigration, California Gold Rush, California Dream, Mexicans in California, Chinese immigration to California, Japanese immigration to California

As described by the author H.W. Brands in his book *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (2003), the American Dream promises adequate rewards for hard work and determination. The main aspect of the California Dream, however, is that this change happens instantly, meaning that any individual can become successful immediately, for example achieving fame, wealth and celebrity almost overnight. In closer examination the real California Dream expands much further beyond these stereotypes towards a darker past, beginning with the California Gold Rush of 1848.

The discovery of gold on 24th January at Sutter's Mill in Coloma in the Mexican territory of Alta was the first spark that lit a beacon for California's success and it is possible to say that the event served as a catalyst to all future development in the region. We often encounter simplified ideas of what the Gold Rush was. The famous forty-niners are deeply embedded in the minds of the general public, with therefore a typical image from the period showing a group of bearded miners, predominantly male, but almost certainly white. Nevertheless, not only Anglo-American newcomers, but many groups participated in the series of events that followed, including the local native Mexicans, Latin Americans, Asians as well as other European immigrants, particularly from German and Scandinavian nations. The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of this California Dream as experienced by the Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans. The article will identify reasons these groups initially came to California as well as their early experiences and significant events that followed.

A short overview of California history can aid in understanding the situation, for it was the earliest years of the European occupation which laid ground for the formation of the California Dream. These historical facts are closely related to relationships between European settlers and the regions ethnic minorities.

As a new part of the United States, though not yet a state, California was one of the last frontiers. Far away, hard to reach, with only a vague promise of industrial success, the land we now call California was of little interest to the European settlers, at least when compared to lands more promising and, most importantly, far more

accessible.¹ At the time when the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, California was still a wilderness, largely occupied by its Native American inhabitants, perhaps some 300,000 of them.² However, at around the same time, the coast was just becoming dotted by a total of twenty one Missions, settlements established by the Spanish Conquistadors who gave California her name, the name of a mythical island from a Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo novel of 1510.

In 1821, California became a province of Mexico after the Mexican War of Independence from Spain. Mere days after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848 the territory was ceded to The United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a result of the Mexican-American War. At the time, with no telephones or telegraphs to carry the message, the Mexicans could not know about the official change of status of the region. In fact, it took six weeks for the news to reach San Francisco and a whole nine months to reach the Eastern States.³ Although it took time to communicate the initial changes over long distances, the speed at which California was subsequently granted statehood on 9 September 1850 – two years after the initial discovery of gold – was remarkable.

This informational and legislative limbo is the key to understanding the unique quality of the California Gold Rush. Naturally, gold had been found in many places around the world before. But for the first time in history, the gold was free to take: there was no king to claim it and no real government to regulate the mining activities. In those early days in the mines, social and racial differences had little effect on the exploitation of the resources. Any of the recently-arrived immigrants was just as likely to strike it rich as any other. Crime was unknown, as the supply of gold was collectively believed to be inexhaustible.⁴ This was the message about California that was initially sent out to the world, carried on cargo ships not only to South America and Europe, but also as far as Asia. The first Asians to greatly contribute to California's demographics were the Chinese.

The Chinese

In considering Chinese immigration in California, it is necessary to describe the situation in China in the 1850s. At the time when news of the Gold Rush began spreading all around the world, China was still ruled by the imperial Qing dynasty. The country had recently suffered from a series of natural disasters and a vast array of economic hardships, largely due to Western influence. First, the Chinese were defeated by the British in the First Opium War. Then, the subsequent Taiping Rebellion became one of the deadliest military conflicts in history, bringing about famine and plagues.⁵ Under these circumstances, it is not hard to imagine why millions of common Chinese civilians suffered from extreme poverty. In fact, the average daily income was no more than 20 cents a day.^{6,7} It would therefore be inappropriate to romanticize the decision of the thousands of Chinese to come to California, as has become so often the case with

1 Starr, *Americans and the California Dream*, 5.

2 Gerson and Christensen, *California Politics and Government*, 2.

3 Guinn, "California Politics and Government," 72.

4 Parkinson, "Memories of Early Wisconsin and the Gold Mines," 134-135.

5 Dinnerstein and Reimers, *Ethnic Americans*, 25.

6 Perkins, "Reasons for Continued Chinese Exclusion," 20.

7 Shay, *Chinese Immigration*, 7, 27.

European immigration. For many whites, the Gold Rush was an opportunity go from peasant to lord, to earn a fortune and live a comfortable life. But many of the poorest Chinese travelled to California because it was the most reasonable thing to do, a way to avoid poverty and starvation.

In comparison with their meagre existence in their homeland, according to some sources in California the average daily wage of a Chinese person was from about 50 cents to one dollar.⁸ In pure numbers, that means their wage not just doubled but perhaps even quadrupled in some cases. It was this prospect that gave many of the Chinese the courage to leave the home country and the reason California received the nickname “Gam Saan” – Gold Mountain. But the real situation was far from this fairytale-like image.

First of all, most Chinese could not afford to travel to California. To pay for the voyage, which was very dangerous itself, they signed a contract with what later became known as the Six Companies, becoming indentured servants in all but name. This meant they were obliged to pay back about a hundred dollars to the company while also earning money for their families. An average Chinese man would spend three years in California before he was able to return the debt, earn enough for himself and his family, and return home, which most greatly desired.⁹ Their families, homes, culture, and their responsibilities were all back in China. Therefore, these first Chinese immigrants had little interest in staying in California, unlike some of their European counterparts who arrived in California to stay and to make the country their own. In fact the thought of becoming Americans could hardly cross a Chinese person’s mind, as the society and culture from which they came hardly allowed them to openly pursue a higher social status. For example, the typical single-braid hairstyle with shaved scalp, called the queue, was compulsory in China until 1910, the year which marked the end of the Qing dynasty. Therefore even in America the Chinese could not greatly change their overall appearance, since this would prevent them from returning home to their families.¹⁰ Such details contributed greatly to racial discrimination and hardships the Chinese experienced in California, as white people viewed the Chinese as unassimilative.

By the mid-1850s, with the Taiping Rebellion already raging, Chinese were flooding into California, twenty thousand of them arriving in the year 1852 alone, representing a total fifth of the mining population. But as gold was by that time no longer in abundance, the dominant white population wanted to drive the competition out; the government of California passed a law which required all Chinese miners to pay a tax of four dollars every month. This was quite obviously a very large sum for most of them and many chose to abandon the mines, instead, finding jobs in the cities. Some opened laundries and restaurants, or even medicine shops.¹¹ Another huge portion worked as railroad builders during the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. They were referred to as coolies, cheap laborers “imported” in large numbers by the construction company.¹² The immigrants worked ten to twelve hours a day in terrible, life-threatening conditions, e.g. *The Sacramento Reporter* of June 30, 1870, mentions a train passing through the city carrying the accumulated bones of 1,200 Chinese workers.

8 Shay, *Chinese Immigration*, 50.

9 Shay, *Chinese Immigration*, 30-31, 66, 121, 151.

10 Godley, “The End of the Queue.” Accessed August 1, 2014. http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=027_queue.inc&issue=027.)

11 *The Gold Rush*. PBS Home Video, 2006. DVD.

12 The etymological origin of the now dated and offensive term *coolie* is disputed, with several languages on the Indian subcontinent being associated with its roots.

The resentment of whites towards the Chinese started to grow rapidly, not only because they were now taking up free job positions, but also because they were always willing to work for lower wages. This meant the whites could not demand to be paid more because the employer could simply replace them with much cheaper laborer.¹³ And as the Chinese started settling in California for longer periods, since many of them now were proprietors of their own shops, businesses and communities, this animosity only grew further. By 1870s, the white population was raging, also blaming the Chinese for the decreased overall wages resulting from the American Civil War. Thus in 1882 the US government passed The Chinese Exclusion Act, banning all Chinese immigration. Those already in the US were heavily taxed and had to obey a number of prohibitive laws.¹⁴ In addition, the Naturalization Act of 1870 prevented the Chinese from obtaining American citizenship, while the California Constitution of 1879 also prohibited them from owning land, voting or working for state or local government.¹⁵ The message was clearly communicated that the California Dream was not to be shared with some selected groups of "outsiders." Under these circumstances, the number of Chinese living in the state of California at the time began to rapidly decrease.

The Japanese

In the second half of the 19th century, Japan underwent the Meiji Restoration, which signaled the emergence of Japan as a modernized nation in the early twentieth century. Contact with the Western World played an important part in this reform, establishing trade and diplomatic relations between the two worlds. However, industrialization and the rise of a new Westernized military class brought about cultural and political changes as well as economic hardships for various classes of the population. This instability is one of the primary reasons the Japanese were willing to abandon their ancient homeland for California.

In America, the departure of the Chinese laborers had left California with thousands of vacant working positions. And with the state's agricultural land now spanning over almost 28 million acres, California was in desperate need of new workers.¹⁶ Yet, these low paying agricultural jobs were not overly attractive for the white population and so at first, the newly-arrived Japanese were quite welcome. By in mid-1850s the Japanese landed in Hawaii to work on the sugar plantations as part of an international agreement between Japan and Hawaii. With the annexation of Hawaii in 1900, the number of Japanese in the USA quadrupled. Similarly to the Chinese situation thirty years earlier, the small numbers of Japanese immigrants soon turned into a flood. By 1900, some twenty-five thousand of them were already living in the USA, with many as twelve thousand have been admitted into the country that year alone.¹⁷

But the Japanese experience was quite different from that of the Chinese. The newcomers to California seized the opportunity with full force. As skilled farmers, they created many innovations such as irrigation systems and even the first hothouses (a type of greenhouse).¹⁸ The Japanese were very efficient and hard-working, quickly establishing

13 Kanazawa, „Immigration, Exclusion, And Taxation,” 780.

14 MacArthur, „Review of Exclusion History,” 39-40.

15 Gerson and Christensen, *California Politics and Government*, 4.

16 Olmstead and Rhode, *The Evolution of California Agriculture, 1850-2000*, 4.

17 Stoddard, „The Japanese Question in California,” 44.

18 Gerston, *Not So Golden After All*, 70.

their own farms both large and small, even employing white workers. By 1913, a farmer called George Shima controlled twenty-eight thousand acres, an achievement which earned him the nickname "potato king." Others were similarly successful. Unlike the Chinese before them, the proud Japanese would not become servants of the white population. To protect their interests, they formed various associations made up solely of their own countrymen.¹⁹

Just as it had been with the Chinese some decades earlier, however, their rising numbers soon began to be seen as a threat to the white population, especially the land owners. The local farmers despised the Japanese because they were able to produce more, even on less fertile lands and for lower wages. A special correspondence article from 1905 quotes San Francisco's Labor Mayor, Eugene E. Schmitz:

The Japanese are far more dangerous to us than the Chinese [...] primarily because of the cheapness of their labor [...] Where a Chinese will work upon a farm at starvation wages, a Japanese has the ability to acquire the property itself [...] The Chinese are dangerous enough, but the Japanese would drive all competition out of business.

And while in 1910, only one out of forty-four children in California were born to Japanese parents; in 1919, it was one out of thirteen. This was possible because the Japanese population no longer consisted of just male laborers. Being economically successful, they could afford to settle and expand their families. Many Japanese men of the decade married so-called picture brides, for the first time bringing Asian women to the USA in larger numbers.²⁰ This changed the overall structure of Japanese-American culture in the region – the Japanese community could no longer simply be considered temporary workers anymore, their sheer numbers alone guaranteed them more rights and privileges. This difference is imperative, as that is something the Chinese before them could not achieve not only for economic reasons but also for cultural reasons. When the Chinese had started coming to California some fifty years earlier, their homeland was still governed by a feudal system which limited their rights and possibilities. This was not the case for the Japanese who came to California just as their country was undergoing Westernization, thus was able to compete greater with the Western World on its own terms.

The white population was once again quick to respond to this challenge. The informal Gentleman's Agreement of 1908 between the United States and Japan ensured that no more laborers from Japan would be allowed to enter the country. In 1913, the California Alien Land Law, also known as the Webb-Haney Act, prohibited the original Japanese immigrants, who were ineligible from citizenship, from owning land. These acts proved to be inefficient since the clever Japanese passed the ownership of their property on to their children who, being born in the US, were in fact eligible for citizenship. Therefore, in 1920, to maintain positive diplomatic relationships with the USA, Japan agreed to issue no more passports to the so-called picture brides. This act left thousands of Japanese bachelors with no way to marry. The final blow was the Immigration Act of 1924 which banned Japanese immigration to the United States altogether.

But the Japanese immigrants who had already started a family, the first generation or Issei, and their children, the second generation or Nisei, faced not only open racism, but other hardships as well. While the first generation was gravely

19 Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, 59.

20 Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, 60.

disappointed by the way the “Dai On Jin” (land of the great friendly people) treated them, the second generation was eagerly trying to become a part of the American society, creating a gap between the parents and their children. There was no going back, as the Japan of their youth no longer existed, yet their future in the USA seemed to be going downhill as well. The Nisei, despite being American by birth and citizenship, were pushed out of the society, rejected and victimized, just like their Issei parents.²¹ This becomes further apparent during the Second World War period. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the US government stripped Japanese-Americans of their land and relocated them to internment camps, branding them as potential spies and traitors. The humiliation these people had to endure, many of them born and raised in the USA, could hardly be compensated for by financial reparations, which themselves did not occur until more than four decades later in 1988.²² No doubt, these events left a permanent mark on the Japanese California Dream.

The Mexicans

Unlike the Asians before them, the Mexicans did not need to cross oceans to arrive in the area – the territory itself had been theirs from 1821 to 1848, when California was a province of Mexico. Ever since, the Mexican presence has been relatively constant, but what events pushed Mexicans from the center of the society into the immigrant category?

Already as early as 1860s, Mexicans were often labelled as bandits, embodied in the figure of Joaquín Murieta. And although this person truly existed, Murieta himself became a universal scapegoat for just about any unlawful action in the area, sometimes on two opposite ends of the country at the same time. From the point of view of the Mexicans, this persona can be compared to figures such as the famous English Robin Hood.²³ Gradually, this clichéd perception of a “bandito” created a long-term stain on Mexican reputation, one that contributed to the general distrust and animosity towards the Mexicans in later decades, influencing their general treatment and limiting their opportunities.

After the Mexican revolution began in 1910, citizens of Mexico had two options, hide or flee the country. Similarly to other non-whites, large numbers of these people chose California as their destination, where because of their lack of formal education and the larger society’s racism they worked in menial positions with low pay and little opportunity for advancement. Despite this, in the early 1920s, their numbers started rapidly swelling, mainly because Mexican immigration was exempted from the limitations enforced by the Immigration Act of 1924, which had been aimed primarily at the Japanese. Positions that had previously been occupied by the Asian immigrants (for the most part agricultural jobs) now became opportunities for the Mexicans. And so between 1920 and 1930 the number of Mexican-American population in Los Angeles tripled from thirty-three thousand to about ninety-seven thousand.²⁴ A portion worked in factories, specializing in mechanics or food production, with the advantage of such positions being that they were also available in winter; these jobs were obviously in high demand. Others opted to work in California part-time, arriving in the early months of the gathering season to harvest cantaloupes in the Imperial Valley, then move up the

21 Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, 62.

22 Gerston, *Not So Golden After All*, 71, 77.

23 “Bandits of the Early Fifties,” 12.

24 Starr, *Material Dreams*, 147.

country to leave in late autumn when there were no more crops to be harvested. The next year, they repeated the cycle.²⁵

Sadly, the Golden State was not as generous as many might expect from the land of opportunity and quick wealth. In California, a typical Mexican laborer earned some three dollars a day for nine hours of back-breaking labor. In the year 1927, that was sometimes as much as one dollar less than white workers in the same position. From these earnings, the Mexican worker had to pay his own expenses and also support his family back in Mexico, which often had as many as five children. Further, the earnings from the picking had to support the family during winter as well, when job opportunities in both California and Mexico were extremely scarce. Those who chose to reside in California permanently were forced to find new homes in poor city areas known as *barrios*.²⁶

This difficult situation was already strained enough for many when the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl migration brought about endless crowds of impoverished farmers from the Great Plains and the Southwest. By summer of 1934, there were 142 agricultural workers in California for every hundred jobs. Wages dropped by as much as fifty percent already in 1933. For example, in 1935, a pea picker earned no more than 1.40 dollars a day.²⁷

Another decade later, when many of the white workers left to fight in the War, the USA established the "bracero program," importing part-time workers to fill more of the empty job positions. These people were often forced to work for unfair piece rates instead of hourly wages, but still many were struggling to be considered for the program at all since the number of applicants was far too high. Bribery was a common practice. Then, once in California in fear of losing the job completely the workers could hardly complain. Still, since the average yearly income in their Mexican homeland was no more than 40 dollars, it is not hard to understand why they were willing to endure these harsh conditions.²⁸

Soon enough the braceros represented seventy-five percent of the total agricultural labor force. Those Mexican immigrants who had already resided in California before the bracero program were once again threatened by a new wave of laborers who, while also perhaps Mexican in origin, were yet not the same. While the Mexican-Americans had already established a system of their own and were maintaining a more satisfying standard of living, the braceros were willing to work faster, harder, and longer to be able to earn more money. They would get up early and pick the best yielding crops, or accept jobs for lower wages, which eventually lowered the wages in the whole area. The lack of solidarity between the two groups often led to violence, not only concerning labor, but social issues as well. The local Mexican-American women who got involved with braceros sometimes ended up losing the man when he was forced to return to Mexico. Such relationships, especially when the woman was left alone with children, were also accompanied by a level of social stigma. Some had no other choice but to become prostitutes, leaving a mark of immorality on any Mexican-American women who dared to be seen publicly with a Mexican national at their side.²⁹ In this vicious circle, the braceros had virtually no possibility of becoming part of the

25 Gerston, *Not So Golden After All*, 72, 81.

26 Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 65.

27 Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, 67.

28 Garcia, „Intraethnic Conflict and the Bracero Program during World War II," 399-400.

29 Garcia, „Intraethnic Conflict and the Bracero Program during World War II," 401-404.

society, rejected by even their own ethnic community. To this day, gang wars between the various generations of Mexican immigrants (e.g. between the Norteños and Sureños, gangs from Northern and Southern California) are still very common.

As the Second World War broke out, a new type of racial conflict occurred in Los Angeles between Anglo-American Marines and the local Mexican-American youth. The conflict began with the criminal case known as the Sleepy Lagoon murder. Convicted for the murder of José Gallardo Diaz was a group of young Mexican-Americans, from a community in which the extravagant characteristic mode of dress, the zoot suit, almost instantly became the epitome of criminal behavior. By June 1943, fighting between the Marines and the Mexican pachucos occurred on a daily basis, and the soldiers now targeted everyone who wore these flashy garments.³⁰ In response, zoot suits were banned from public, with wearing one punishable by thirty days in prison. As minor as the issue may sound, it was in fact a ban on the Mexican-American identity, a stain on the very same America that promises equality and freedom. And as brief as this conflict was, it contributed to the overall picture of the Mexican-Americans. Assisted by segregation laws and nation-wide animosity, the immigrants from Mexico were gradually pushed even further away from the society.

By the time the bracero program formally ended in 1964, farm owners had already found another source of cheap labor – undocumented immigration from Latin America, mainly Mexico.³¹ However, this time the farm workers would not endure the unfair treatment quietly. Cesar Chavez, a farm worker himself, became a leading figure of their cause, co-founding the NFWA (National Farm Workers Association), later known as UFW (United Farm Workers). Their efforts, together with the support of the general public, such as the famous Delano grape strike, began a long battle for fair wages and better working conditions, a battle that continues to this day.

Conclusion

The California Dream of the ethnic minorities was not the same Dream we encounter from the Western point of view. The ethnic minorities suffered unnecessary cruelty and unfair treatment on numerous occasions, far more often than their white counterparts. Cleverly bending the legislation, various interest groups often gained the upper hand, creating obstacles that denied the minorities the very same rights that the Dream promised to each person equally, regardless of their origin or ethnic identity.

It seems that the Chinese, who were the first Asians to largely populate the Western Coast, were from the very beginning seen as only temporary construction aid, never as valid candidates for American citizenship. Once they fulfilled their purpose, a large portion of them was forced out of the country, denied any form of recognition or gratitude. The Japanese, so very successful at first, were also excluded from the Dream, despite their apparent attempt to fit the American ideals. Some, especially those who acted quickly enough, were able to start families before the immigration ban, securing a future for the next generation. However, all their achievements were later forced from their hands anyway, during the Second World War. Erasing forty years family legacy, they were not seen as Americans, but as a foreign threat to the dominant white population. But the whites were not the only ones to deny rights to the immigrants. As

30 Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, 96-109.

31 Garcia, „Intraethnic Conflict and the Bracero Program during World War II,” 407.

discussed earlier in the paper, in the case of the Mexicans, it was the Mexican-Americans themselves who refused to have any more Mexican Nationals allowed into the country.

In conclusion, it seems the California Dream was rather a nightmare for the ethnic minorities. But there are still Chinese-Americans in California today, Japanese-Americans, and even more Mexican-Americans. This demonstrates that many prevailed despite the hardships, leaving their mark on Californian history, which is just as much a history of Asian and Mexican Americans as it is a history of the Europeans. Nowadays, California continues to struggle with immigration and there are as many pro arguments as there are arguments against it. It is impossible to predict all future development, but it is perhaps possible to say that the California Dream will probably continue attracting "dreamers" from all around the world for many more years.

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Alexandra Michaličková has graduated from the University of Ostrava this year (Master's degree in Translation) and currently works as a real estate agent in Prague.