

The second installment in the *Ancestors in the Americas* series focuses on the Chinese in the history of the development of the American West, especially in California. Acknowledging that there is a marked lack of a Chinese presence in much of the recorded history of the region, the narrator ponders, "What is history when the recorder does not record and the camera does not see? Find our history and tell it." Thus, Loni Ding sets out to restore Chinese to the history of the American West.

Through pictures and interviews with historians, the American West is seen as multiracial and multicultural, with many people and their attendant cultures coming into contact with each other, many for the first time. The Chinese were vital players in the history of California, and throughout the film they are depicted as strong, intelligent, and determined to build lives in America. They were among the early miners during the Gold Rush, and later went on to become pioneers in the agricultural and fishing industries. By 1870, three-quarters of the laborers in California's agricultural fields were Chinese; and it was the Chinese who first fished for abalone, sea urchins, and other sea-life, helping to establish one of the West's most lucrative industries. In addition, Chinese were instrumental in manning the fish canneries on the West Coast, and they were also engaged in light industry, manufacturing cigars, shoes, and other items.

However, the Chinese arrival in the United States coincided with the national debate over slavery. Perceived as a racial Other, akin to enslaved Africans, Chinese were seen as competition to free white labor and racially inferior. Therefore, they suffered extreme discrimination

Chinese in the Frontier West

An American Story

Part II of *Ancestors in Americas* film series

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY LONI DING

1998, 60 MINUTES



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and oppression at the hands of white Americans and European immigrants. The targets of physical violence, Chinese were at a distinct disadvantage because they were not allowed to testify for or against a white man in a court of law, nor were they eligible for American citizenship. Chinese women, suspected of being likely to become prostitutes, were discouraged from immigrating through the Page Law of 1875. This created a situation where most Chinese men were without the means to raise a family, since Chinese were not allowed to marry whites in most Western states. Thus there developed a "bachelor society" of single Chinese men (many with wives and families in China) separated from their families for years, sometimes forever.

Despite these restrictions, Chinese immigrants and their offspring sought ways to resist this oppression. Often accused of being docile and unassimilable, Chinese proved they understood the American judicial system very well. According to one scholar interviewed in the film, it would be hard to find a discriminatory law aimed at the Chinese that they didn't challenge. From

the 1850s on, the Chinese sought justice in the courts, bringing over 170 cases to the United States Supreme Court. Although they often lost, when they won, they established precedents in American civil rights law, rights that would benefit all Americans.

Herein lies one of the important messages of this film series. The Asian presence in America has been long, complex, and vital to the development of modern American society. These films are insightful, informative, and at times, very moving. They are to be recommended to anyone interested in Asian American history and how that history fits into the larger global history of migration and settlement. ■

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