



# **Chinese Laborers and The California Gold Rush**

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# Key terms

**Gender Roles:** Beliefs about how men and boys or women and girls should act or do.

*Example:* Men work while women take care of housework and children.

# Key terms

**Masculinity (being manly):** Characteristics, behaviors, and roles that boys and men are expected to have.

*Example:* Men or boys should have short hair. Men or boys should be good at sports.

**Femininity (being ladylike):** Characteristics, behaviors, and roles that women and girls are expected to have.

*Example:* Women or girls should dress girly. Women or girls should not be bossy.

# Key terms

**Stereotypes:** An unfair and untrue belief that many people have about a group of people with certain qualities (such as race or gender).

*Example:* Poor people are lazy.

**Gender stereotypes:** A commonly, culturally held belief about a specific gender.

*Example:* Boys or men do not cry. Women or girls are not strong.

# The California Gold Rush

Chinese workers, or *laborers*, moved to the United States in the 1850s during the California gold rush.

In China, California was known as *gam saan*, meaning "gold mountain."

## **Dictionary:**

Laborers: person who does physical work like construction.

Fortune: 1: A large amount of money.

2: The success of a person over a period of time or because of doing a certain activity.



Chinese workers on the Central Pacific Railroad. From the Amon Carter Museum of American Art Archives, Fort Worth, Texas

However, many Chinese laborers had to work in “leftover” mines that American workers didn't want to work at.

There were also many laws and special taxes that were made to exclude Chinese workers from American society.

**Dictionary:**

Exclude: To leave out on purpose.

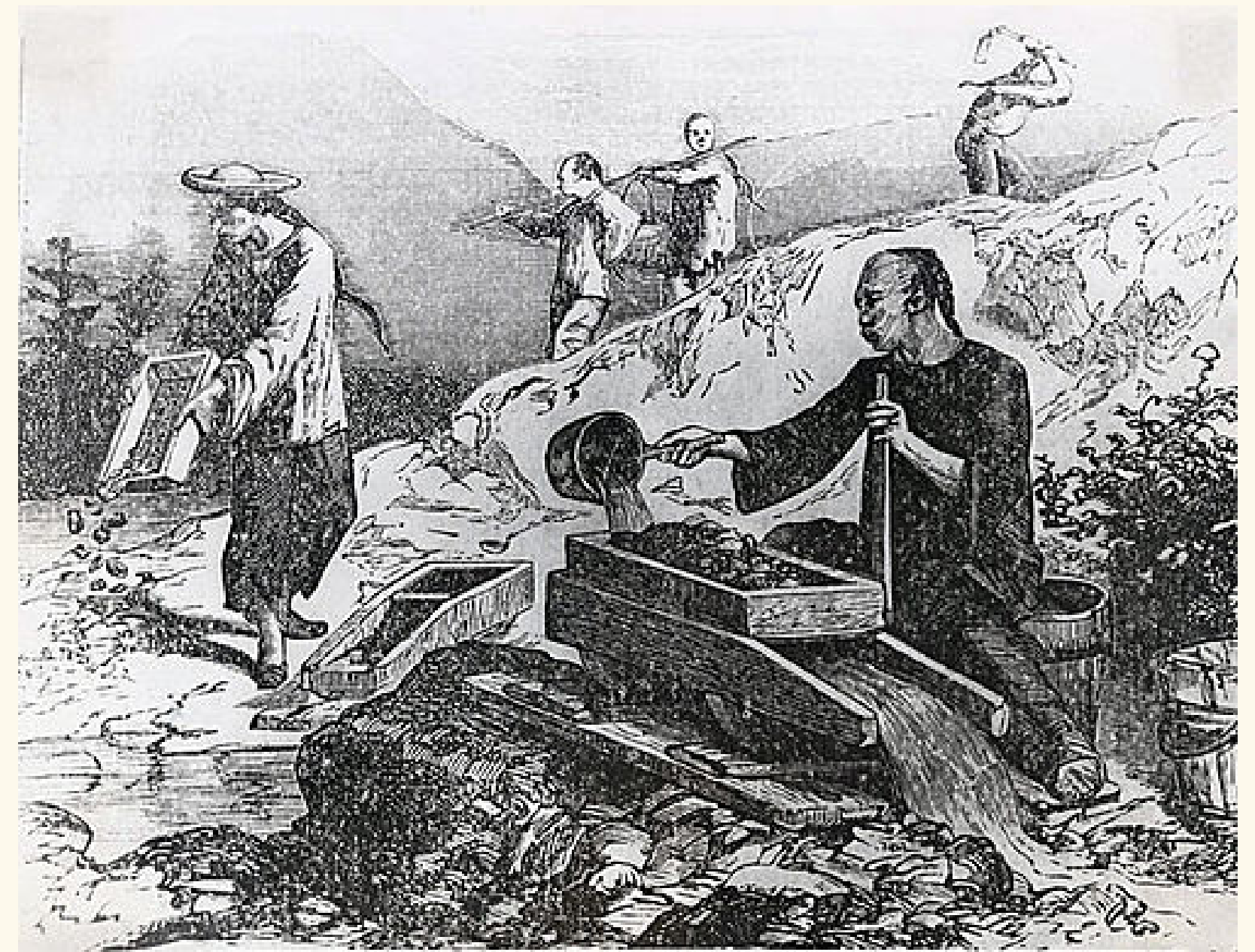
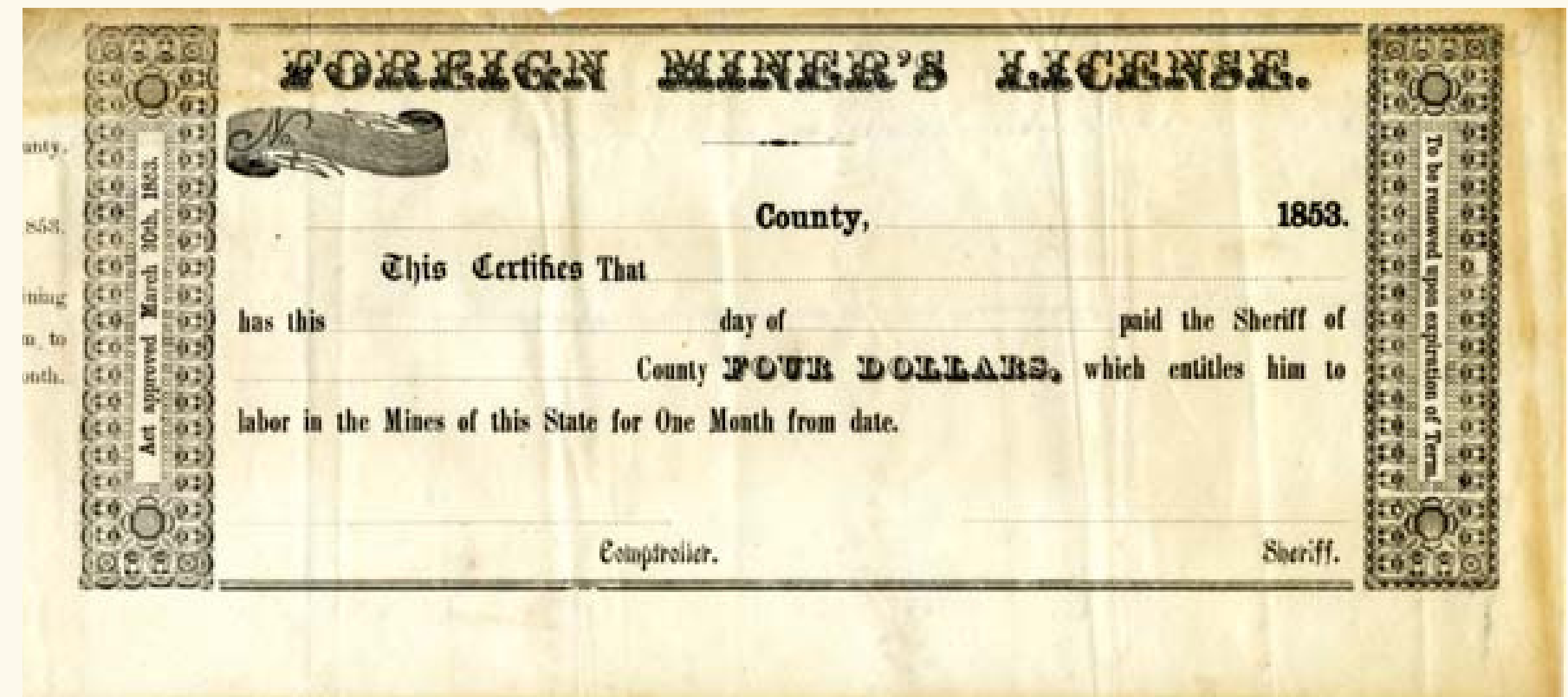


Illustration of Chinese laborers mining for gold, 19th century. From Roy D. Graves pictorial collection

An example is the Foreign Miners' Tax passed in 1850. Chinese laborers had to pay the government every month to have the right to mine.

**Dictionary:**

Foreign: Someone from a different country.



Blank Foreign Miner's License, 1853, California State Archives.



# Chinese exclusion from U.S society



*Laborers lay track along the Ten Mile Canyon stretch of the Transcontinental Railroad. Retrieved from Stanford University Libraries.*

Chinese laborers provided cheap, productive labor. Because of Chinese laborers, the transcontinental railroad was able to be completed.

However, they were increasingly seen as threats for "taking" American jobs.

## **Dictionary:**

Exclusion: To leave someone out on purpose.

Productive: being able to do a lot in a short time.

Threat: Someone or something that might cause trouble.





*Chinese laborers doing laundry in the the Palace hotel , San Francisco. 19th Century*

Because Chinese laborers were being pushed out of mining, they had to start looking for other work.

This included laundry, tailoring, and working in hotels and homes.

# Chinese Masculinity in the U.S

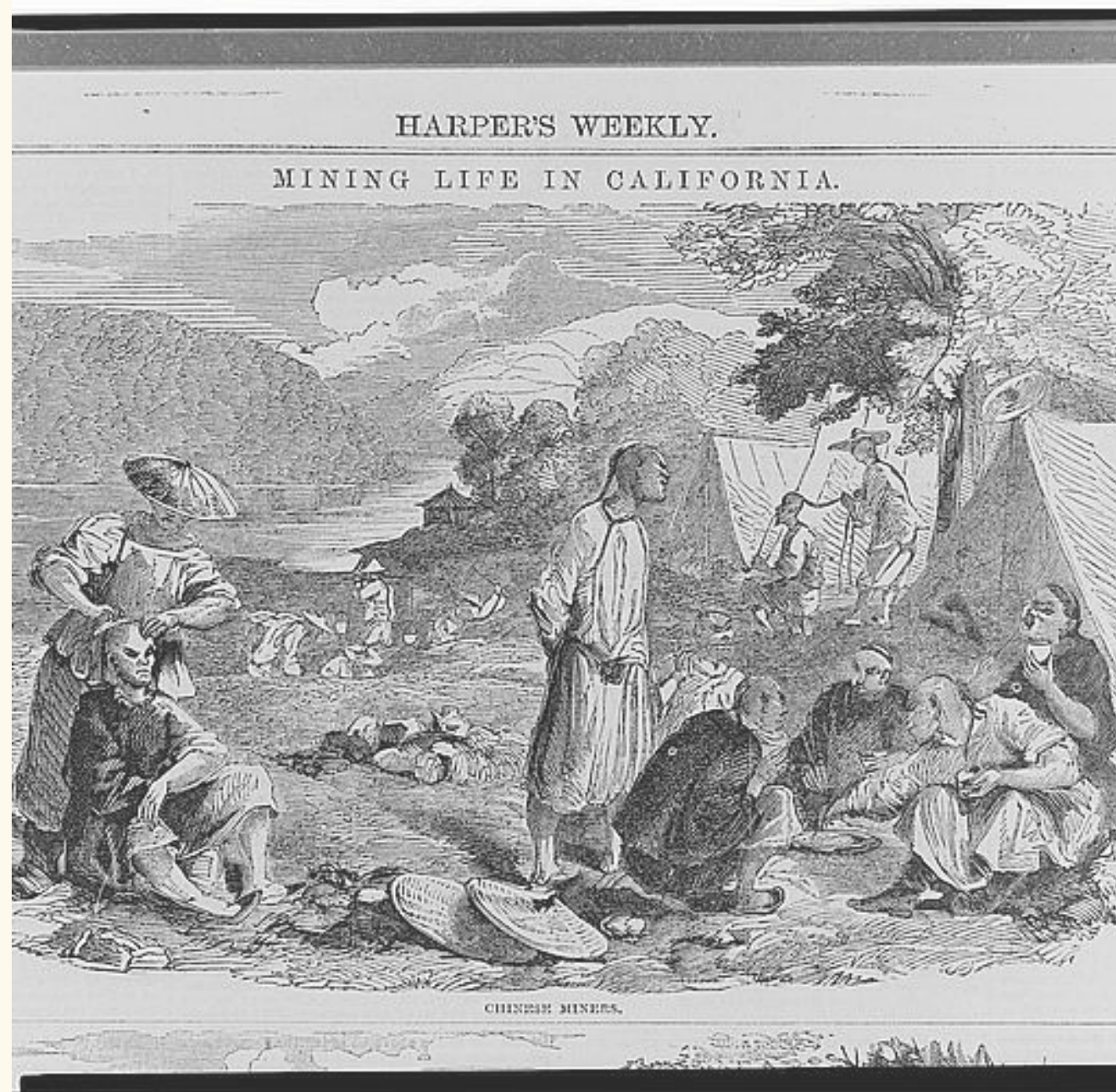


**Portrait of a Chinese man (1853)**  
**Collection of Oakland Museum of California.**

Because Chinese laborers began doing work like laundry, Chinese men were not seen as "masculine" because they took on "women's work".

They were also seen as more feminine because of their traditional hair and clothing, although this was not true for *all* Chinese laborers.





*Mining life in California—Chinese miners. Harper's Weekly 1857. Library of Congress.*

Although Chinese laborers came from a culture with similar expectations of men, they were not seen as masculine or "manly" enough in the U.S.

**Question:** What are some masculine traits of men that you can think of?

**What do you think a "man" looks like?**

# Traditional Gender Roles in China



*Solo miner in the Sierra Nevada, 1850s. Retrieved from the Nevada Historical Society in Reno.*

Men in Chinese culture were expected to take care of their family. They are seen as the head of the family.

As head of the household, they had to make money to send back home to support their families.

## **Dictionary:**

Expectations: a strong belief that someone should do a certain task.



# Traditional Gender Roles in China

Wives of Chinese laborers were expected to stay back and take care of their husband's family. They were expected to do housework.

Cultural ideas against women traveling abroad, the harsh living conditions in the West, as well as special laws in the U.S also stopped Chinese women from joining their husbands.

**Dictionary:**

Abroad: To go to another country.

Harsh: uncomfortable or unpleasant.



# Class Discussion

**What are some  
gender roles you can  
think of?**

Are there different expectations for being a girl or boy?

# Class Discussion

A series of four blue lines of varying lengths and orientations, starting from a point on the left and extending towards the right, creating a sense of motion or a list.

**Are these expectations different from the traditional gender roles we just learned about from China?**

What are some similarities or differences?





*Political cartoon by Thomas Nast.*

These political cartoons show how visual or physical traits were used to connect someone's race to their gender.

In this case, Chinese men were **not** seen as "manly" because of their long hair, lack of facial hair, and clothing.

**What are some differences you see between the two men?**





*Anti-Chinese Race Riot in Denver, 1880. Library of Congress.*



*Political cartoon by Thomas Nast, Harper's Weekly, 1869.*

You can see how Americans treated Chinese laborers in these pictures.  
What questions or thoughts come to you when you look at these pictures?



# So how did race and gender affect Chinese laborers?

Many Chinese laborers worked in railroad construction, mining, and farming, which are often seen as “manly” jobs.

However, they were not respected for this labor.

Instead, they were judged on doing “women's work” like laundry or working in homes.



Chinese laborers were also treated as outsiders because of their race. They were seen as foreigners, and not part of American society.

One way to prove that white American workers were better was by attacking Chinese laborers' race and masculinity.

# CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT OF 1882

These angry feelings eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

This law limited the immigration of Chinese people into the United States.



1886 advertisement. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.






The dark history of the Chinese Exclusion Act - Robert Chang




# THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT



Watch on  YouTube



# Questions



Discuss these questions in groups. Be ready to share with the class!

→ **GROUP 1**

What do you think are the effects of stereotypes?

→ **GROUP 2**

What are some stereotypes about race or gender today? Do you see them in our community?

→ **GROUP 3**

What are some stereotypes you've seen in movies, shows, books, or videogames?

→ **GROUP 4**

How have gender stereotypes affected people of different races or cultures? Do you see this in our school?

# Sources

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