A Slave To Yellow Peril The 1886 Chinese Ouster Attempt In Wichita, Kansas

Julie Courtwright
University of Arkansas, jcourtw@iastate.edu

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A SLAVE TO YELLOW PERIL
THE 1886 CHINESE OUSTER ATTEMPT IN WICHITA, KANSAS

JULIE COURTWRIGHT

Wichita's war on the Chinese began in 1886. Although a small war in comparison to other anti-Chinese outbursts in the American West, the persecution and violence against the city's small Asian population was nonetheless terrifying and significant to those who were the focus of the racist demonstrations. In an attempt to follow the national anti-Chinese trend of the late nineteenth century, which the Chinese called the "driving out time," groups such as the local assemblies of the Knights of Labor and the Women's Industrial League in Wichita, Kansas, organized a boycott against Chinese businesses. Citizens attacked the "yellow peril" on the streets while the Wichita Beacon condemned them in black and white.

Kansas in the nineteenth century, including Wichita, was considered a social barometer for the United States on issues such as women's rights, prohibition, populism, and innovative industry. The conflict between labor and Chinese Americans, however, was an issue in which the state was less progressive. Although violence against immigrants was not as severe as in other states because of lower Asian population densities and a conspicuous absence of significant economic competition, the people of Wichita nevertheless played a part in the widening hostility of the 1880s. The nineteenth-century anti-Chinese sentiment and ouster attempt in Wichita is not only a reflection of local racist sentiment in the city, but a dark example of the influence of national trends on the normally progressive and individualistic "Peerless Princess of the Plains." Labor groups and city leaders decided to employ a preemptory strike against the small and unobtrusive Chinese population in the city. The infiltration of Asian

KEY WORDS: Chinese Americans, immigrants, Kansas, racial conflict, Wichita, "yellow peril"

Julie Courtwright is a doctoral student in American history at the University of Arkansas. Her research interests include Kansas history and western history. Her recent publications include, "Want to Build a Miracle City?: War Housing in Wichita," appearing in Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains (Winter, 2000-2001).

[GPQ 22 (Winter 2002): 23-33]
labor and influence so prominent elsewhere, argued the Wichitans, would not occur in their city. Therefore, they had to strike against the few Chinese already inhabiting Wichita before the city became yet another mecca for migrating Asians in the American West. In effect, the city of Wichita, which was exposed to extensive and influential national newspaper coverage of anti-Chinese activities, became a “slave” to the influences of widespread yellow peril.

At first, white Americans identified the Chinese as simply another group set apart from themselves, similar to American Indians and African Americans. Whites assigned innate characteristics to Chinese men similar to those imposed upon black men. They were thought to be heathens, morally inferior, childlike, lustful, sensual, and a sexual threat to white women. Unlike black men, however, the Chinese were also viewed as intelligent, quiet, and peaceful. After the emancipation of the slaves, many whites believed that Chinese agricultural workers should be used as “models of discipline” to help reform black laborers “spoiled” by freedom. Others, however, despaired at the thought of giving the South and West over to the Chinese after the Indians had finally been contained on reservations. Some even talked of establishing similar reserves for the Asian immigrants.3

Ultimately, however, according to historian Ronald Takaki, the Chinese became a different threat in the minds of white Americans than had African Americans or Indians. Because the Chinese were thought to be more intelligent and competitive than other races, they could, whites reasoned, usurp the positions of white laborers and “suck the blood from Uncle Sam.” Furthermore, whereas whites saw Indians and black people as part of the past, “in the white imagination,” noted Takaki, the Chinese and the majority of their immigration numbers “were located in the future.”4 In fact, the great number of potential immigrants living in China and the possibility they would take over the labor force in the United States, maintained David Palumbo-Liu, is largely what gave rise to “yellow peril.”5

The belief that Chinese immigrants could not be assimilated into American culture exacerbated fears. According to John Kuo Wei Tchen, author of New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882, white perceptions of the Chinese changed drastically between the founding of the country and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In the Revolutionary period “China was an imagined place of fabulous luxuries, an advanced civilization” that the founders emulated. Chinese goods were respected and valued.6 But as immigration continued, whites feared that sojourner Chinese men would decide to permanently settle in the country. The Asian culture, once admired from afar, became a threat to whites when Chinese families wanted to make their homes in their adopted country.

By the late 1800s, white Americans walked a tightrope of fear regarding the Chinese. They were, on one hand, cheap and useful labor in the West and South after the emancipation of the slaves. Chinese men usually came to the United States without their wives and therefore could work for low wages and live in inexpensive barracks. In 1875 officials passed the Page Law, which ostensibly prohibited the immigration of “immoral” Chinese women. In actuality, however, the law was used to exclude almost all Asian women, thereby preserving the Chinese men’s willingness to live in sparse conditions and work for minimal wages. “The addition of unemployed women and children,” noted George Anthony Peffer, “would have forced male immigrants to press for higher wages, upsetting their employers’ payroll structures.”7 But although Chinese labor was useful, whites feared that once allowed in, the Chinese would take over the entire labor system. As conflict between labor and capital escalated at the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese labor became more and more of a threat to disgruntled white workers.

The city of Wichita hosted a small group of Chinese residents in the racially explosive
1880s, despite its landlocked status and considerable distance from California, where the majority of Chinese settled. We can speculate on the reasons for relocation to Kansas using the national situation as a guide. In California, the Chinese worked in crowded, unhealthy sweatshops and factories making items such as shoes, clothes, blankets, brooms, and other household goods. As anti-Chinese mania increased, however, many workers were driven out of manufacturing in western cities, where boycotts made Chinese goods virtually unmarketable.

The resulting job search led many men to the profession of laundering, which was in high demand and was a fairly sure and quick way to make money. Although not a traditional occupation for men in China, laundry work became common among male Chinese in the United States, in part because of the scarcity of Chinese women to labor in the profession. Prominent in California, the laundry business, according to historian Sucheng Chan, was even more important in other states because the demand for the profession allowed it to be a “pioneering” job that Chinese men were able to fall back on after relocation, and it required only between $75 and $200 for initial establishment. As boycotts and violence became more debilitating, the laundry business, because it filled a universal need, required little equipment or initial capital, and was a profession deemed “feminine” enough for the “heathen Chinese,” facilitated the migratory moves eastward of many Chinese men.8

The laundrymen in Wichita were likely trying to escape omnipresent racism in other areas of the country where Asian population densities were much higher, making the Chinese immigrants more of a “problem” than in Kansas.9

Although lower population densities doubtless eased some tensions, Chinese immigrants in Kansas, as in other areas of the United States, were still more discriminated against than members of any other race. As historian John Higham noted in Strangers in the Land, Americans never believed that every European was a fundamental threat to American society.10 They could, however, maintain that belief about the Chinese. In some cases, foreign-born whites led anti-Chinese action, which began in earnest as early as the 1870s. In Los Angeles, for example, twenty-two Chinese were killed during a two-day riot in 1871. Later, in 1876, an anti-Chinese meeting of the Sacramento Order of Caucasians attracted 4,000 participants.11

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, however, violence and discrimination greatly accelerated. When President Chester Arthur signed the act on 6 May, many sinophobes saw the new law as an affirmation of anti-Chinese sentiment and were encouraged to act on their feelings. According to Asian American historian Andrew Gyory, “the Chinese Exclusion Act set the precedent for . . . broader exclusion laws and fostered an atmosphere of hostility toward foreigners that would endure for generations.” The law itself actually “legitimized racism as foreign policy.”12

The vehicle for this perceived policy was, in large part, the Order of the Knights of Labor. The organization was founded in 1869 with a broad vision to form a group based on the solidarity, ironically, of all the nation’s workers “without regard to sex, creed, or color.”13 Power and participation of the laborers grew until, in 1886, the Knights reached the zenith of their influence, which corresponded with the height of Chinese persecution. The crux of labor’s complaint about the Chinese was, according to Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly, that “the practice of importing cheap men had grown until it became recognized as a menace to the welfare of the American worker.” The Knights cited cases such as a shoe manufacturer in Massachusetts who imported seventy Chinese to work in his factory for one dollar per day when the original workers worked for three dollars per day. When he realized the benefit of the arrangement, the shoe manufacturer imported sixty more Chinese and released his other workers. In addition to economic discontent, more abstract and simply racist feelings...
dictated the Knights' behavior. Noted Powderly:

During their stay in this country the Chinese never associate with other people, never adapt themselves to our habits, modes of dress or our educational system; they carry their pagan idolatry into every walk in life; never pay heed to the sanctity of an oath; see no difference between right and wrong; and live in the same fashion in California as their ancestors did in China twenty-five hundred years ago.\(^{14}\)

The Knights, whose "chivalric" name implied a noble group jousting with evil capitalists, chose to express the idea of sanctioned racism through riots and boycotts.\(^{15}\) The strike had been used as an effective tool for several years prior to the major anti-Chinese outbreaks. In fact, the success of the 1885 strike against railroad magnet Jay Gould served as an effective recruiting agent in Kansas and across the nation for the Knights, whose membership increased significantly, to over 700,000, in 1886. More local assemblies were formed that year than in the previous sixteen years, despite the fact that the general policy of Powderly and other traditional leaders was to avoid strikes and boycotts whenever possible in favor of organization and political action.\(^{16}\)

Despite this policy, riots and boycotts occurred all over the western United States and, like strikes, fostered greater union support within the Knights' assemblies. Violence and forced Chinese ousters from jobs and cities occurred in Denver, Colorado; Seattle and Tacoma, Washington Territory; Portland, Oregon; Sacramento, California, and many other locations in that state. The most famous riot, however, occurred in Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, on 2 September 1885. In the altercation, twenty-eight Chinese miners were killed and fifteen wounded when the Chinese refused to cooperate with white workers in an intended strike against the Union Pacific Coal Department. No one was prosecuted for the deaths or for the $147,000 of property destroyed. Many people involved in the massacre investigation, including the officers and a justice of the peace, were members of the Knights of Labor.\(^{17}\) Terence Powderly wrote four years later in his *Thirty Years of Labor*:

Had steps been taken to observe the law, and had the Chinese been as rigidly excluded as they should have been, the workmen at Rock Springs would not have steeped their hands in the blood of a people whose very presence in this country is contamination, whose influence is wholly bad, and whose effect upon the morals of whatever community they inhabit tends to degrade and brutalize all with whom they come in contact.\(^{18}\)

Powderly placed dominant blame for the outrages against the Chinese not only on the victims themselves, who theoretically demeaned society through their presence, but also on the government, who, in the Grand Master's estimation, had not done everything possible to exclude the immigrants. The "inexcusable" behavior of the rioters and murderers was thus qualified with excuses and explanation.

The boycott was another form of "persuasion" used by the local Knights that was not officially sanctioned by the national organization. In fact, the Order of the Knights of Labor was the most successful at boycotting of any labor group in American labor history, with hundreds of protests arranged each year by local leaders. Boycotts had distinct advantages over strikes because they were less expensive to finance, easy to organize, and usually less violent. Hardship on non-Asian workers was indirect, hidden, and therefore convenient. Because the Knights formed a large segment of the population in many towns and could not only perpetrate but participate in the boycotts, they were frequently highly successful. But Powderly warned that the practice, by the mid-1880s, was getting out of hand. "To declare a boycott for every trifling thing is not only foolish but dangerous," he said. "The
boycott is a two-edged sword and should receive as careful consideration as the strike before being resorted to."19

Newspaper coverage of anti-Chinese activities brought the national conflict, and the resulting local boycott, to Wichita. Beginning with the Civil War, noted Hazel Dicken-Garcia in her book *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America*, the newspaper press established itself as part of the daily lives of Americans: “The insatiable demand for news created thousands of new newspaper readers and established reading habits and reliance on newspapers that would not readily lapse after the war.” Also because of the war, national events took center stage, news items became more standardized, and people believed that the press had great powers of persuasion.20

In 1870 a poem by Bret Harte containing the phrase “the Heathen Chinee” was reprinted in many newspapers across the country. The poem’s debut corresponded with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and the resulting influx of unemployed Chinese men into the cities, thereby heightening racial tensions. “Until 1870,” observed Ronald Takaki, “the Chinese had been mainly a ‘California problem.’” But that year a mob of North Adams, Massachusetts, residents hurled stones to greet the arrival of seventy-five Chinese workers to town. Three months later Harte’s poem “on the ‘heathen Chinee’ helped to crystallize and focus anti-Chinese anxieties and paranoia.”21 And the press gradually helped move the Chinese issue into the national arena.

As anti-Chinese violence in the West began to snowball in the fall of 1885, sensationalistic newspaper stories assisted in promoting and quickening the anti-Chinese movement.22 The headline for the *Wichita Beacon*’s initial coverage of the Rock Springs massacre on 4 September 1885, for example, read “War of Races, Wyoming Short-Crops vs. Chinese Pig-Tails.” The paper, always Wichita’s greatest literary supporter of the labor interest, continued similar stories throughout the remainder of 1885, keeping the national issue in the forefront until it turned local. Violence in Seattle and Portland and the creation of an anti-Chinese association in California were carefully reported, and on 5 November 1885 the paper told of a shocking incident in Los Angeles where sixty Chinese attacked a ranch foreman with fists and pistols. In contrast, the *Beacon* proudly praised the Wyoming rioters for bravely eliminating the “heathen” Chinese and suggested that a well-placed yearly massacre would “enable the large bulk of our people to attend and witness the annual round-up and killing.”23

Although the riots and boycotts proved contagious, spreading from city to city in the West, little evidence exists to support the theory that labor competition was the source of conflict in Sedgwick County, Kansas, as it was in other locations. Wichita in 1886 was experiencing her greatest boom. Early that year there were between twenty and thirty transfers of real estate a day in the city and the value of property sold reached $1,000,000 a month. The boom peaked in June 1887 when Wichita ranked third in the nation in absolute volume of real estate sales regardless of population. Although New York City, which was first in sales volume, grew by 30 percent that year, Wichita increased 500 percent. Therefore, at the time of the anti-Chinese outbreak, most jobs were plentiful and spirits were high. Although some laborers and mechanics who flocked to Wichita for the building boom were sometimes temporarily unemployed because of an abundance of workers, all evidence suggests that the Chinese were solely involved in the laundry business and not associated with construction.24 Also, so few Chinese immigrants resided within the city that any economic competition was marginal, except possibly to the five Caucasian laundries within the city and the independent white laundrywomen.25 Before the Chinese achieved national prominence, however, the white laundries received little attention from the soon-to-be vitally interested Knights of Labor. Therefore, national and local newspaper coverage of Chinese activity,
and communication between assemblies of the Knights were, in all probability, the sparks that started the anti-Chinese "fire" in the Plains city. Although real economic competition was not present in Wichita, a perception of its existence was created by the newspaper coverage of the western incidents, and the resulting "yellow peril" fear of future Chinese domination in the "Peerless Princess" spurred local outcries.

The Chinese population in 1880s Wichita was a small but growing part of the city. Pioneering residents such as twenty-seven-year-old Charlie Sing and his wife, eighteen-year-old Gung Sing, were living and working in a Wichita laundry as early as 1880. Of course, inaccuracies concerning the Chinese in Wichita no doubt exist, as is typical in other cities. Although the 1880 census lists Charlie Sing's age as twenty-seven years, for example, the 1885 Kansas census records it as nineteen. Various sources spell his name either "Charlie" or "Charley," and Chinese names in general, although normally consisting of three parts, are usually listed with only two in the early American censuses. Also uncertain is the true status of Charlie Sing's "wife." The appropriate mark in the "married" column of the census form, the ages listed, and her occupation as "laundrywoman" indicated that Gung and Charlie were legally married. Other speculations, however, based on similar situations nationwide and the mysterious disappearance of Gung from a later census, are that she was a second "unofficial" wife or a prostitute. Names and relationships recorded in the census are probably highly inaccurate due to loss during translation, bias, and the lack of adequate training for census workers.

As the decade progressed and Wichita's population increased, so did the number of Chinese immigrants. Three years after the census, Wichita's city directory listed two Chinese laundries near the central district of town. The perpetual location of Chinese laundries near the center of Wichita's thriving business community is somewhat unusual in comparison to other US cities. Chinese businesses were usually relegated to the less prosperous periphery, which can be seen as an indicator of the level of early acceptance, or at least tolerance, experienced by the Wichita Chinese. In 1884 at least four Chinese laundries were open for business in Wichita. Patrons could choose between three laundries on Main Street, two near First or Second Streets and one farther north, or an establishment on Douglas Avenue near Mead. The state of Kansas claimed ninety-six male and seventy-seven female Chinese residents in 1885, while in Wichita, and in fact all of Sedgwick County, there were seven Chinese men but no women on the eve of the anti-Chinese outbreak. The men were all laundry workers, ranging in age from nineteen to twenty-seven years. One man was married, but his wife was not listed in the Wichita census. Neither was Gung Sing, who disappeared from the census in 1885 and was apparently the only Chinese Wichita woman of the 1880s. Her husband, Charlie Sing, whose origin the city directory gave as Canton, China, was a laundry proprietor at 525 East Douglas Avenue. All of the other six men came to the United States from China, but when they relocated to Wichita, four came to Kansas from California and two traveled from New York.

Newspaper coverage of the local Chinese began in 1885. In July the Wichita Eagle reported an altercation between "Sambo and John Chinaman," otherwise known as an unidentified African American barber and Charlie Sing. The article demonstrates that although overt segregation did not materialize in Wichita until the 1890s, racism against all minorities was nevertheless present. The reporter noted that Charlie Sing had many men he called relatives helping him with his laundry business, but no women. His relatives believed that Charlie was a "big man among the Americans" and did exactly what he told them. The black man, stated the Eagle, disliked his Chinese neighbors and threw water all over their clean laundry at "Chinese head-
quarters.” Understandably, the Chinese were angry because “if there is anything in this world that would make a Chinaman mad it would be an attack of this kind by a lone nigger on the combined rights of seven Chinamen.” The group, therefore, attacked the black man with “Chinese implements of warfare” and overtook him. Two days later the heretofore quiet and peaceful Charlie Sing mysteriously went on a “rampage” at a competing Chinese “washee” business to maintain his first and exclusive laundry rights in the city. The style of the second report of Sing’s violence is an indicator that the Wichita Eagle had begun participating in the “Chinese vengeance”-style reporting that was becoming typical across the nation. Newspaper articles such as these contributed to the budding Chinese racism in town that would culminate in 1886 during the activities of the Knights of Labor.

The local assemblies of the Knights of Labor greatly increased membership in 1885-86, following the national trend. Although two assemblies were organized in 1883-84, four more were added in 1886 alone, with a final assembly forming in 1888. An advertised meeting of the Knights on 9 January 1886 attracted over 200 people. The Wichita Beacon, a Democratic “blue collar” publication, differed from its Republican “white collar” rival when it stated that “these Wichita laborers are certainly a fine and intelligent looking class of men, and from their appearance do not deserve the imputation of dolts and tools so gratuitously thrown out against them by the Eagle not long since.” After defiantly stating that their sole purpose was to protect the workingman, Knight leaders continued with the main order of business for the meeting, the ongoing boycott against the Chinese. The Wichita Knights of Labor boycott resolution made headlines in the general Kansas press, including the Leavenworth Times, the Commonwealth, the Union, and the Valley Center News, and spurred further investigative articles about the Chinese by the city’s own citizens to protect them from competition from the pig tailed opium eaters whose mode of living and filthy habits are an insult and a disgrace to American labor. Too long have the people of the Pacific coast meekly held themselves in obedience to the powers of government, hoping against hope as it were, that relief would come to them through remedial legislation. . . . We in the east are threatened with the same evil that our countrymen west of the Rocky mountains are making an organized effort to get rid of. Let us, therefore, fellow-citizens, be warned in time and aid in preventing an evil which, if allowed to grow, may lead to sterner measures that men will use, rather than witness the same results which have followed everywhere the curse of Chinese labor. Preventive boycotting to drive the Chinese out of town, therefore, was the key to stopping the immigrants from dominating Wichita as they had started to do farther west.

At their 9 January meeting, the labor group pledged continued support for their boycott, in conjunction with the Women’s Industrial League. A resolution passed without a dissenting vote and a collection was taken to help support the action. One member asked A. D. Stryker, a Knight leader, how a boycott worked, and he was told that it was a simple procedure where participants induced the people to stop patronizing Chinese laundries so that the proprietors would leave the city. The Beacon reporter noted that the Knights of Labor were rapidly growing in influence. “The order did not depend on violence to accomplish its ends, but it never lacked the means of attaining them.”

The Wichita Knights of Labor boycott resolution made headlines in the general Kansas press, including the Leavenworth Times, the Commonwealth, the Union, and the Valley Center News, and spurred further investigative articles about the Chinese by the city’s own
On 6 January 1886, in an article titled “The Chinese Residents of Wichita,” the *Eagle* reported that there were thirteen Chinese in the city. Two days later, readers were given a “revised” count of thirty or thirty-five “Celestials” in Wichita. The article continued with a report on opposition to Chinese labor in California and the motivation for the men coming to Wichita. They were here, the reporter was told, because the “Chinese who got away from the big companies that make the contracts for the labor of their subjects generally went away to some distant place for self-protection, and necessarily had to fall out with the authorities who brought them over and claimed tribute, or a percentage of their wages.” Although California was mentioned in the report, the reporter did not explore the possibility that the Chinese were actually seeking protection from the state’s anti-Chinese riots.

Remarkably, self-protection was also what the local Knights of Labor were seeking through their boycott. They wanted to convince the people of Wichita to “withhold from them [the Chinese] the patronage that rightfully belongs to the residents of the city, who are a part of our body politic and from their residence, nativity and Christianity are brothers and countrymen,” thereby maintaining labor rights for the citizens of Wichita. While the newspapers reassured the public that the Chinese were assuredly sojourners and did not intend to remain in the community, the Knights of Labor worked to speed the ouster process along through antiviolent means. In a letter to the editor of the *Beacon*, the Knights reported that

> The Chinese boycott is bearing fruit. Six of the almond-eyed have packed up and shaken the dust of our city from their feet. If our citizens will only lend their aid-refuse to patronize them-the time is not far distant when the last vestige of the plague will be removed. Remember friends, that the Women’s Industrial League is pleading for their removal, not only in behalf of those in our midst who depend upon the wash tub for their living, but also in the interest of decency and morality. Stick to the boycott.

Despite claims of a peaceful boycott, some violence and intimidation did occur against the Chinese. The 3 January 1886 *Eagle*, in an article titled “War on the Chinese in Wichita,” reported that a group of men surrounded Charlie Sing and hit him several times. Another incident occurred when a crowd went into a Main Street laundry and told the proprietors to leave Wichita and close their business. Although the police insisted they would be protected, the Chinese men were understandably concerned. Finally, a mob surrounded a wash house and threw bricks into the building, prompting Marshall Murdock to editorialize in the *Eagle* that “any emigration to this state of any considerable number of Chinese would be deplored, but the few that do come here ought to be treated humanely and allowed to enjoy the rights of any other aliens who may sojourn in this country. To that end it behooves the authorities to see that no outrages be perpetrated on them, and that while they observe the law they may pursue their occupations in peace.”

The *Beacon*’s editor did not know what to suggest as a cure for the Chinese “problem.” Mob violence was not desired, of course, but there was no legal way for the Knights of Labor to compel the heathens to “move on.” Therefore, the editor decided, it was left to “all Caucasians who think the race capable with the assistance of its colored allies of washing its own ‘dirty linen’ [to] unite in a formal petition to the Chinese to go away, and maybe they will do so.” The editor even supported allying blacks and whites to drive off the hated Chinese.

At first glance, Wichita’s outbreak of Chinese violence seems inexplicable and out of place in local historical context. Because of low Asian population densities and the booming economy, Wichita, Kansas, in 1886 seems an unlikely location and time for anti-Chinese sentiments to flare as they had in other
western US cities. A newspaper-induced mania, however, resulted in a heightened and incorrect perception of imminent economic competition and led to displays of what historian Gary Y. Okihiro, in his book *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, calls "yellow peril," or irrational fears of Chinese domination. The yellow peril concept existed inside the European mind as long ago as the fifth century B.C. In 1275 Marco Polo, on a trip to Cathay, described a Mongol army whose members were better able to withstand extreme difficulties than other races, had great patience, were unalterably loyal to chiefs, and supported themselves at extremely small expense. They are, Polo reported, "fitted to subdue the world."47 It was this fear of subjugation and the need for white supremacy that led to anti-Chinese actions. According to Okihiro, author Pierton W. Dooner, in his 1880 publication *Last Days of the Republic*, maintained that the Chinese were traditionally a servile people, but the prejudice in California changed them and led them to scheme for control of the entire human race. Their plan, Dooner said, was to make the United States dependent on their cheap labor, take over political offices, and finally stage an open insurrection with an army. Like Marco Polo, Dooner observed that the Chinese could live frugally and endure much, and were simply biding their time until they took over the country.48

As Wichitans watched the yellow peril drama unfold in other western cities through the news, they were determined not to let the Chinese domination plan succeed in Wichita. As 1880s newspaper editor Charles Dana wrote, “[T]he press's power was great: it took people when their information was incomplete, their reasoning not yet worked out, their opinions not fixed, and it suggested, intimidated and insinuated opinion and judgment that readers often accepted as 'established and concluded' unless they had 'great intelligence and force of character.'”49 After reading about the Chinese trouble in the *Eagle* and *Beacon*, citizens noticed the frugal lifestyle of their own Chinese neighbors, a supposed preliminary step to subjugation, and envisioned that as the Asian population of Wichita increased, so would the competition that would lead to a Chinese takeover of their “all-American” town. Something had to be done to protect her.

The city's history is full of incidents in which citizens, through sheer will and determination, did whatever was necessary to make Wichita successful. In the 1870s, when the cattle trade was in danger, Wichitans used any means available, including bribery, to convince the herders to return to the city. Later, in the depression of the 1930s, a few determined individuals refused to let the airplane industry die an easy death, only to see it make Wichita the “Air Capital” in World War II.50 These examples were, in the end, positive outcomes for Wichita's success, but the anti-Chinese outbreak, although a similar attempt to protect the city from destructive danger, was, unfortunately, a misguided effort. As the Knights of Labor plea in the 26 December 1885 issue of the *Wichita Beacon* shows, racism and the fear of yellow peril drove Wichita’s citizens to uncharacteristically imitate other western cities and to view the presence of the Chinese as a threat to the success of their city.

The Chinese of Wichita, no matter how much of a perceived threat, did not “go away.” The number of Chinese laundries actually increased to twelve in the 1887 city directory listings following the boycott and intimidation attempts.51 Ten years later, in 1896, another anti-Chinese episode occurred in the city. Although the later incidents occurred amid a different atmosphere of economic collapse and concern over the Chinese drug trade, the yellow peril fear was no doubt still a factor in the second ouster attempt, and minority segregation in general was prominent in Wichita by the 1890s.52 Although the nineteenth-century Knights of Labor and citizenry of Wichita strove to align with a national trend of hatred and racism against the Chinese, as is evident by the boycott and sporadic violence, the immigrants remained and continued to
prosper. The 1880s anti-Chinese outbreak in Wichita, Kansas, slowly faded into history, but as the problems of racial relations and discrimination continue to evolve and change, it still serves as a reminder of the city's past and of how far the citizens of the “Peerless Princess” truly have come in their treatment of Chinese American Wichitans.

NOTES


4. Ibid., pp. 221-22.


9. In 1900 Kansas had only forty-three Asian residents, fewer than any other Great Plains state except for Oklahoma Territory, in which thirty-seven Chinese and Japanese people lived. Texas, which had an Asian population of 849, was the only Great Plains state to have more than 200 Asian residents at that time. See Frederick Luebke, Ethnicity on the Great Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. xxiii.


27. Ibid., 1885, Microfilm Reel 123-24.


34. Miner, Magic City (note 24 above), pp. 96-97.
The Women’s Industrial League is thus far an unknown in Wichita history. It was possibly a local women’s group associated with the Knights of Labor which was open to women members and women’s assemblies.
44. Untitled, Wichita Beacon, 12 January 1886.
48. Ibid., pp. 131-32.
50. Miner, Magic City (note 24 above), pp. 19, 178.
51. Wichita City Directory, 1887, p. 478.