

The Turning Point of US Policy Towards China During World War II: The Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and Its Impact

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Abstract: During World War II, the U.S. policy towards China underwent significant changes, with the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act (Magnuson Act) serving as an important symbol of this change. This article is based on literature analysis and a multidisciplinary perspective of history and politics, aiming to study the entire process of this decision, with a particular focus on the driving forces. The study finds that the repeal of the Magnuson Act was influenced by three main factors: the Sino-American alliance relationship, Japan's propaganda towards China aimed at sowing discord between China and the United States, and the pushing force from within American society. This event had a profound impact on the status of the Chinese community in the United States, shaped subsequent American policy toward China, and provides valuable historical insight into contemporary U.S. racial policies.

Keywords: U.S. Immigration Policy, Chinese Exclusion Act, Magnuson Act, U.S.-China Relations

1. Introduction

The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1882, was the first immigration law in the history of the United States to explicitly target an ethnic group and the only one that formally legislated the exclusion of Chinese people based solely on their ethnicity. With the outbreak of World War II, especially after the alliance between China and the United States, the U.S. policy towards China underwent a remarkable change, of which the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act became a landmark event of this change.

Scholars have conducted various studies on the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Early studies mostly focused on the impact of the domestic economic and social conditions in the United States on the repeal of the Act, such as changes in the US economic structure affecting the demand for labor, and the growing incompatibility of exclusionary policies with economic development; the development of racial equality concepts has promoted the process of abolishing laws[1][2]. In later years, research gradually shifted to the international context, especially the realistic conditions and demands provided by the relationship between China and the United States during World War II for the passage of the Magnusson Act. In addition, some scholars have begun to focus on the interactions between Chinese communities and social movements in the U.S. and the Magnuson Act, as it provided a favorable public opinion environment for the repeal of the Act[3]. However, most of the existing studies focus on a single perspective and lack comprehensive analyses of domestic and

international factors. Therefore, this study will use a multidisciplinary perspective of history and political science, combined with domestic and foreign academic achievements, to comprehensively explore the background, motivation, and far-reaching impact of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. This study aims to comprehensively examine this issue from a historical perspective, understanding how interactions between countries shape the direction of foreign policy, and thus facilitating the understanding of the development of Sino-US relations, promoting friendly exchanges between the two sides.

2. Historical Review of the Chinese Exclusion Act

2.1. Timeline of the Chinese Exclusion Act from Inception to Repeal

In 1882, the US Congress passed a ten-year Chinese Exclusion Act, which excluded all Chinese laborers from the United States. According to historical records, “in 1882, the number of Chinese entering the United States through customs was 39597, dropped sharply to 8031 in 1883, then to 279 in 1884, then to 22 in 1885, and reached the lowest point of 10 in 1887”[4]. The Scott Act of 1888 extended the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the Chinese from leaving the U.S. and then returning. In 1892, upon the expiration of the original Act, the U.S. passed the Geary Act, which extended the Chinese Exclusion Act for 10 years. In 1902, the Act was extended once again. It was not until 1943 that the U.S. Congress passed the Magnuson Act to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act[5].

The Magnuson Act introduced three key provisions: firstly, it repealed all relevant Chinese Exclusion Acts since 1882 as well as the provisions of other Acts that dealt with Chinese exclusion; secondly, it provided China with a quota of 105 immigrants per year; and thirdly, it permitted Chinese and their descendants to be naturalized as US citizens. However, although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed at that time, many details of the provisions remained in place, for example, California did not repeal the ban on ‘intermarriage between whites and Chinese’ until 1948. It was not until the enactment of the new immigration act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act), which abolished the previous quota system and further relaxed immigration policies, that an unprecedented wave of Chinese immigrants appeared in the United States in the following decades.

2.2. Decision-making Process for the Magnuson Act

The decision to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 was the result of intense debate within American society, with multiple forces influencing the final outcome. Proponents, including politicians, scholars, and the general public, dominated public discourse. Their central argument was that the U.S. needed to win the goodwill and support of the Chinese government and the public through the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, strengthening the alliance between China and the U.S., securing China’s continued support in the war effort, and countering Japanese fascism. Opposition came mainly from trade unions, veterans, Western residents, right-wing nationalists, racists, and xenophobic groups. Their stance was rooted in deep-seated Asian discrimination. They feared that Chinese immigrants would increase job competition, lower wages, and negatively impact American workers’ employment and income. From a racist standpoint, they also believed Chinese immigration would alter U.S. social structure and cultural traditions, threatening national security and stability. Additionally, some political groups worried that repealing the Act might inspire similar demands from other ethnic minorities, increasing social instability[6].

3. Background and motivation of the Magnuson Act

3.1. The situation of World War II and the Interests of the United States in the Far East

The main reason the United States abolished the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 was its practical needs of wartime situations and interests, including responding to Japan's attempts to break up the Chinese alliance through psychological warfare and safeguarding US power in the Far East after the war.

The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act was directly related to the outbreak of the Pacific War. After the Attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States government abandoned its policy of neutrality and declared war on Japan, joining the allies to fight against the fascists. In response, Japan sought to weaken the growing ties between China and the United States while legitimizing its own expansionist ambitions. Therefore, after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan carried out psychological warfare, using the racial discrimination policy of the United States to conduct wartime propaganda, trying to prove that the United States was hostile to Chinese people. Furthermore, Japan advocated that only the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" could bring real equality to the Chinese people[7]. Through various media channels, including newspapers and radio broadcasts, Japan sought to persuade Asian populations that they would never receive fair and equal treatment from Western allies, reinforcing the slogan "Asia for Asians." The existence of the Chinese Exclusion Act contradicted the idea of freedom and equality long preached by the United States, leaving the Japanese with an opportunity to take advantage of it in their war propaganda.

Moreover, China also played a very important role in Roosevelt's post-war program. The United States wanted to establish a new international order after the war that would be in line with its ideals and interests, and China was the ideal place to establish the new American order in Asia. The U.S. hoped to foster a 'pro-American' Chiang Kai-shek government, which would rule China under the leadership of the KMT and be allied with the U.S., thus giving the U.S. a strong ally in the Far East to safeguard U.S. national interests. Therefore, supporting China's emergence as a major power could better fulfill the leadership role of the U.S. in the post-war world and establish a new international order led by the U.S.

3.2. Improvement of China's International Status

The rise of China's international status provided the basic conditions for the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act. During World War II, China, as the main battlefield of the anti-fascist war in the East, undertook most of the tasks in the war against Japan. The Chinese battlefield attracted nearly three-quarters of Japan's army, delaying Japan's attack on Southeast Asia and buying time for the Allies' "Europe-First Strategy". The successful implementation of this strategy was attributed to China's tenacious resistance to the Japanese invaders on the Asian continent, which effectively restrained the main force of the Japanese army and prevented it from moving southward or northward with all its strength, thus breaking Japan's plan of cooperating with the German and Italian Fascists, and winning valuable time for the Allies to prepare for the war. Therefore, as the war progresses, China's international status is increasingly elevated. China and the United States not only established an alliance relationship, but by October 1943, China had also gained the status of one of the four major powers standing alongside the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. China's performance in the war was widely praised by the international community, which, to a certain extent, changed Americans' perception of China and the Chinese people, created a good public opinion environment throughout the country, and facilitated the eventual passage of the Magnuson Act.

3.3. Active Promotion by Members of the Public and Influence of Public Opinion

The Chinese Americans and some organizations sympathetic to China played an indispensable role in pushing for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act by putting pressure on the US Congress and lobbying government officials.

Chinese Americans, who had long suffered from racial discrimination, were eager to see the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act as soon as possible. World War II brought the Chinese the opportunity to prove their value and dignity, and many people with insight realized that this was the perfect time to change the status of the Chinese in the United States, and took action to call for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. For example, the Chinese Club of New York asked Congress to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act, pointing out that the Act was a serious violation of the principle of equality and jeopardized the friendship and cooperation between China and the United States; and in Hawaii, the Chinese community provided financial support for the campaign to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act through fundraising[8].

The voices of the Chinese were strongly supported by the American community. Among them, special mention should be made of the role played by Pearl S. Buck, a Nobel laureate in literature and renowned American author. In 1943, the Pearl S. Buck couple established the Citizens' Committee for Abolishing the Chinese Exclusion Act. They used radio and newspapers to call on the government to change the unfair treatment of Chinese people, and actively contacted various sectors of society to build wider support for the cause[9].

Such advocacy initiatives not only raised public awareness of the discriminatory nature of the Chinese Exclusion Act but also generated substantial political pressure on the U.S. government. The convergence of wartime strategic interests, China's enhanced international standing, and sustained public advocacy ultimately led to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, culminating in the passage of the Magnuson Act.

4. Impact of the repeal of the Magnuson Act

The introduction of the Magnuson Act in 1943 had more symbolic than practical significance. While it marked a formal departure from exclusionary immigration policies, it did not lead to significant immediate policy changes, and racial discrimination persisted in American society. Nevertheless, the act represented a pivotal moment in U.S. immigration policy toward China, setting a precedent for future reforms.

The most direct impact of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act was reflected in the relationship between China and the United States. At that time, the relationship between China and the United States improved greatly as a result of this action. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act at the time released a positive signal to the outside world of a change in the attitude of the United States towards China.

Secondly, this behaviour also affects American society, especially demographics. The status of Chinese Americans in the United States has improved and they have become more integrated into mainstream American society[10]. In *The Creation of Asian America: A History*, Erika Lee states, "World War II was a 'good war' that opened up new opportunities for Chinese to participate in the American economy, military, and society[11]." First, although few immigration quotas were granted, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act confirmed the right of the Chinese to naturalization, marking the elevation of the legal status of the Chinese in the United States. At the same time, the occupational structure of Chinese Americans has become more diversified. After the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese gradually expanded from the traditional laundry and restaurant industries to other professional fields, such as science and technology, education, and medicine. For example, in the San Francisco Bay Area, 15% of all shipyard workers were Chinese in 1943[12]. The

occupational structure of the Chinese has gradually changed, and the overall social status of the Chinese community has been upgraded[13].

Furthermore, the repeal also prompted the United States government to rethink its immigration policy towards other ethnic minority groups, which has contributed to the loosening of relevant immigration policies. For example, the Luce-Celler Act was passed in 1946 to allow Indians to become naturalized, and the Philippines was granted immigration quotas based on the principle of country of birth after its independence in 1946.

This behaviour has also informed global immigration policy. It has contributed to changes in attitudes towards Chinese migrants in other countries, triggering a chain reaction in other countries. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act triggered similar actions in immigrant countries such as Canada, Mexico, New Zealand and Australia. These countries repealed their respective Chinese Exclusion Acts, which has led to a new historical stage for the Chinese community in these countries, and further contributed to improving the legal and social status of Chinese immigrants on a global scale.

Despite its significance, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act was not without limitations. The first is the nature of its wartime policy. The repeal of 1943 functioned as a geopolitical tool: Roosevelt's government emphasized Sino-U.S. military collaboration against Japan while neglecting significant civil rights advances[14]. The implementation of this policy was not entirely based on a conscious awareness of racial equality, but was motivated by strategic needs. The U.S. government neither issued a formal apology for past discrimination nor acknowledged its historical wrongdoing until 2012, when Congress passed a resolution of apology. Secondly, racial discrimination did not disappear following the repeal. Despite the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, racial discrimination still exists in American society. In recent years, the return of white supremacy has led to an increase in incidents of hate and discrimination against people of Chinese and Asian descent. This phenomenon demonstrates that the struggle for racial equality is far from over and requires the concerted efforts of society as a whole to safeguard the rights and interests of ethnic minorities.

5. Conclusion

The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act was an important turning point in the United States' policy towards China and is of landmark significance. The move was not solely based on a self-consciousness of racial equality, but was a strategic adjustment made by the United States more in its own interests against the backdrop of World War II. It elevated the legal status of the Chinese, promoted their occupational diversification, and triggered an improvement in Chinese immigration policies worldwide. However, the study of this historical event remains incomplete. Existing research predominantly relies on historical materials from elite policymakers, often overlooking the perspectives of the general public. Additionally, the long-term social and economic consequences of the repeal require further exploration. Future research should further explore the first-hand historical materials and the real attitudes of the various social classes in the United States, so as to restore the historical scene in a more comprehensive way.

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