

An examination of two ethnic groups in early america creative writing examples

[Sociology](#), [Immigration](#)



Throughout American history, different ethnic groups have faced different challenges. The Native Americans obviously were treated very differently than the Irish, for example, and the Chinese were particularly singled out for treatment which included banning them from attaining citizenship at all in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. African Americans obviously also suffered greatly, not only during slavery but also after its abolishment, and with even greater difficulties being accepted by white society even to this day given their appearance and a complexion that was impossible to hide. Yet other groups attained wide acceptance, including Germans, English, and Scots. Andrew Carnegie, for example, a Scotsman, was able to build a corporate empire despite low social beginnings and became the epitome of the rags-to-riches story in America. Yet for many groups, this would have been entirely impossible. While Carnegie was a success and yet an outlier, he certainly owed much of it to the origin of his birth. A Chinese Andrew Carnegie in his time would have been virtually unthinkable.

In this paper, we will look at two groups in particular that had very different outcomes in terms of their treatment in America pre-1870. The first is the German-Americans, and the second is Chinese Americans- if they can even be called that, as they were basically fully excluded from American society itself.

German-American immigration did not hit its heyday until the 1880s, when there was an explosion in immigration from the German states (there was no unified German nation until 1871, after the Franco-Prussian War). For our purposes in this paper, we will consider all German-speaking peoples as “German”, since before 1871 there was no Germany itself, rather a collection

of up to hundreds of smaller state-entities existing in the German-speaking areas, and certainly, there was always an on-going debate throughout the period within the German-speaking territories themselves as to what constituted “ Germanness” (the Grossdeutschland vs. Kleindeutschland debate, in other words, should Austrian territories not speaking primarily German be considered a part of a Germany should it unify, underscores this debate quite well). For simplicity, particularly once German speakers were in America, we will consider all German-speaking immigrants prior to 1871 as German in this paper.

While German-Americans today are largely Americanized, 17. 1% of the nation considers themselves of German ancestry, making this the largest ethnic group in America today. While most German immigration occurred following 1870, though, there were still a sizeable number of immigrants prior to that. One reason for the boom in immigration was that some German states did not even allow immigration until after the failed, but still somewhat effective, German Revolution of 1848.

American states themselves desired German immigrants, because they saw them as similar to white Americans, as a hardworking group, and as a desirable class of immigrants to have. The states themselves would send recruiters to German states to promote immigration. Many Germans also left for political reasons following the failed 1848 revolution. The Turners, for example, an organization which views healthy politics and healthy living as one and the same, came over in droves after 1848 and founded chapters of their organization across the country. In states like Wisconsin, where there was a large German-speaking proportion of the population, they formed the

backbone of many communities and sponsored many social events. The organization is still alive and well in America to this day.

German-Americans overall were viewed as a beneficial contribution to the country, and they formed many communities. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was in particular an urban environment that was shaped by Germans. They produced German-language newspapers, reproduced German architecture in Milwaukee's iconic City Hall, provided German-speaking soldiers during the American Civil War, and Milwaukee was known as the "German Athens" of the United States in the late 1800s. They developed a thriving community that remained intact until the pressures of the two world wars finally brought it down and made integration into Anglo-American culture a necessity.

Indeed, many aspects of German-American culture became inseparable with Anglo-American culture today; these contributions include the Christmas tree and the hot dog. Germans, largely, were seen as beneficial immigrants.

The Chinese, on the other hand, suffered a very different treatment. Due to similar population and political troubles that were occurring in China at the same time, as well as improved ocean transport options, many Chinese were lured to the United States starting in the 1850s for mainly economic reasons.

They were, at first, generally able to secure gainful employment in the American West working on the railroads. 90% of the Central Pacific Railroad's workforce was Chinese. Once the railroads were finished, though, many whites no longer saw any wisdom in keeping them around. They had been the "bottom of the barrel" workers, who would do the work no one else wanted to do. Yet other ethnic groups had difficulty understanding their culture. There was also a large amount of "Sinophobia", a fear of people

from China, existing in America at the time, and stereotypes of Chinese people abounded though few in most parts of the country had ever met one. It must be noted that, at the time, many people subscribed to pseudo-scientific theories of racial lineages which allowed them to consider some groups “ sub-human”. Some of these ideas were also used as reasoning for continuing the practice of slavery of African-Americans or exclusion of the Irish from certain work, for example.

These attitudes ultimately led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, possibly one of the most racist pieces of legislation passed by the United States Congress. It prohibited Chinese-Americans from becoming citizens of the United States for 10 years, and was extended several times. Only in 1943, during World War II, while China was an ally of the United States, was large-scale immigration of Chinese persons once again possible. This law clearly was underpinned by racism, and was also a slap in the face at the Chinese workers who had worked so hard in the United States to build up the needed infrastructure. The problems the Chinese immigrants faced were compounded by the fact that the vast majority of the immigrants were poor young men who had left their wives and children behind in China. This led to the formation of Chinese brothels, which gave white Americans further reason to look down on the Chinese laborers for moral reasons. They also were very obviously different in appearance from whites, and so could be singled out easily, in the same way that African-Americans could.

The difference in treatment of Chinese and German immigrants is an interesting one. It is notable that, in the 1850s and 1860s, many were leaving both areas due to political strife. In German-speaking areas, Prussia

and Austria engaged in a war in 1866, for example, which spurred immigration out of a desire to avoid the perils of war, for example. In China, throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the Taiping Rebellion caused death and violence on a massive scale and also led directly to immigration. In both areas, as well, there was massive pressure on the land due to overpopulation. In the United States, overpopulation was far from a problem. Essentially, it was the same factors that pushed both of these groups from their homelands to come to America.

Yet the two groups were treated entirely differently. While Germans may not have received the warmest welcome possible, they were still treated light-years better than even most other European groups of immigrants, such as the Irish or the Italians, both of which faced considerable discrimination even in finding basic work. They had a thriving community that was tolerated alongside the Anglo-American one. They published their own newspapers, set up their own shops, started their own schools, maintained their own societies, and were even elected to public office (The Governor of Wisconsin during part of the American Civil War, for example, Edward Salomon, was German by birth). Chinese Americans, on the other hand, despite the reasons for immigration being roughly the same, were excluded from society and looked down upon, even by other ethnic groups such as the Irish, who were looked down upon themselves by other ethnic groups. By looking at the two groups, of course, we see one major feature that distinguishes them: Germans look like Anglo-Americans; Chinese do not. Ultimately, the main difference in their treatment boils down to the fact that racism was quite prevalent at that time.

Of course, things did not remain as they were in 1970. Today, German is rare as a heritage language in the United States. Most German-American communities were decimated linguistically during the World Wars, when teaching of German and German culture was strongly discouraged due to social pressure and some legislation and Germans were put under considerable pressure to assimilate, which they mostly did with ease. Chinese Americans today are largely accepted as a valuable part of America. In more and more small towns across the nation, Chinese restaurants are popping up, and first-generation Chinese families are sending their children to American public schools. At universities across the country, Chinese students are enrolling in droves and contributing to campus life and making academic accomplishments. According to a 2011 report in the Washington Post, there were at that time 157, 558 students from China studying in the U. S., a jump of 23% from the prior year, and 43% for undergraduates only (Johnson 2011). Meanwhile, in Chinatowns across the United States, ranging from New York to San Francisco, many Chinese-Americans do not even need to speak English. The LA Times, for example, ran an article called “ Not at Home with English” back in 2007 that extensively featured a man named Michael Yang who has been living in the San Gabriel Valley since 1984 and has not yet needed to learn English. It might surprise many Anglo-Americans that this is even possible, but Yang would seem to be thriving- in much the same way as German-American immigrants in the 19th Century, in lieu of persecution, were able to develop thriving German-speaking communities without needing to learn English themselves, either.

It would seem, then, that the problem for both groups was acceptance. The

Chinese were not accepted in the 19th Century, yet today, by and large, they are, and have built many Chinese-speaking communities across the nation in the 20th Century, now that they have attained a degree of acceptance by the Anglo-American community. The Germans, on the other hand, were accepted in the 19th Century, and built up their German-speaking communities back then. Were it not for the World Wars, one might speculate that they would be alive and well today. But the pressure placed on those communities to assimilate during the wars ultimately led to their near-complete demise and to the virtually complete assimilation into generic “Americana”.

We can look at the histories of these two groups in America and see a total dichotomy. One was accepted and one was persecuted. One assimilated and one remains distinct. Or, we can look at assimilation as a cycle, one which, given the circumstances that happened to the Germans during the war, could also some day perhaps happen to the Chinese. It is of utmost importance, though, that we recognize that racism played a major factor in the difference in treatment between the two groups, and do our best going forward to mitigate the role that racism plays in the lives of Americans in order to prevent such unjust treatment and second-class citizen status. We must take steps to ensure equality for all, regardless of national origin or social status. Those are the foundations upon which this country was ostensibly built, although certainly not the ones on which it has consistently sat over the past century and a half. It is our duty now, in the 21st century, to change that and to atone for the wrongs already done to many, many people, including the Chinese Americans in the 19th Century.

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