The Qing dynasty had ruled China for nearly 200 years, but it began to decline after Great Britain defeated China in the First Opium War (1839–1842). Corruption, natural disasters, oppressive taxes, and food shortages caused by overpopulation led to an exodus of people from Guangdong Province in southeast China. Many Chinese went to Southeast Asia. Others decided to journey to America, which they called Gän Saan ("Gold Mountain"), after gold was discovered in California in 1848. By 1852, as many as 25,000 Chinese had come to try their luck in the goldfields. Most of them were men who hoped to make their fortunes and return to their families in China.

At first, the strangers from the Celestial Kingdom (as the popular press referred to China) were welcomed. The newspaper Alta California stated, "These celestials make excellent citizens and we are pleased to notice their daily arrival in large numbers." But as the gold supply began to shrink, the competition for new land claims grew violent. Most of the Chinese began to work claims that white miners had abandoned. With patience and determination, they found gold that the previous miners had missed. Their hard work earned the hatred of the American miners. New taxes aimed directly at the Chinese were passed. Racial slurs and violence against Chinese miners also increased.

As discrimination drove the Chinese from the goldfields, another opportunity opened for them. The Central Pacific Railroad company needed laborers to build the first transcontinental railroad, which would connect the nation from coast to coast. The
Hopes
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Chinese proved that they were excellent workers. They took on the dangerous tasks that other laborers refused to do. But when the railroad was completed in 1869, the Chinese once again found themselves out of work and looking for jobs. Many Chinese turned to fishing and farming, trades they had practiced in their homeland. They established businesses that did not compete with American businesses, such as laundries and restaurants.

But in the 1870s, a recession in the United States caused fierce competition for work. Many people accused the Chinese of taking jobs that they believed should have gone to white workers. California passed several laws aimed directly at the Chinese. Chinese people were taxed or had to obtain licenses to fish, mine, or operate laundries. They were not allowed to testify in court, own land, or marry white people. Chinese children were denied access to public schools. The cry in California, where many Chinese lived, became "The Chinese must go!" Anti-Chinese riots occurred throughout the American West.

The U.S. government took action by passing the first federal laws aimed at excluding a specific immigrant group based on race and nationality. After the Chinese Exclusion Act took effect in 1882, the number of Chinese immigrating to the United States dramatically declined. But faced with high rates of poverty and political turmoil in their villages, many Chinese still chose to risk the long journey and face discrimination in the hope that a better life could be found in America.