Imperial Divisions of Labor: Chinese Servants and Racial Reproduction in the White Settler Societies of California and the Anglophone Pacific, 1870–1907

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Introduction: “A Plea for Chinese Labor”

“So exaggerated are the democratic ideas instilled into some of our newly-landed foreigners,” Abby Sage Richardson argued in an 1871 article in Scribner’s Monthly, using the generic moniker given to Irish domestic servants in the United States, “Bridget is sometimes surprised that her American mistress is not willing to lend her best shawl to be worn to ‘mass’, and will resent the use of her toothbrush and other toilet materials.” Such behavior was to be expected, Richardson explained, since “[u]nder a government which affirms grandly that all are free and equal, it is difficult to make one class understand that equality does not mean level in wit, good-breeding, and culture.” The solution to white, European-born servants’ internalization of republican attitudes and their transgressions of social boundaries, which in the minds of employers had plagued middle-class residents of the Eastern seaboard since the 1850s, had presented itself in California. There, employers had demonstrated that male Chinese laborers could be trained for domestic service. As Richardson’s title, “A Plea for Chinese Labor,” suggests, Eastern employers were adamant that this new resource not be consigned to only one region.

Although employing a male servant outside of certain household roles such as butlers, chauffeurs, and gardeners struck many nineteenth-century Americans as taboo, middle-class publications urged employers to discard their prejudices. With a sly wink, for instance, Prentice Mulford observed in Lippincott’s Magazine that the male Chinese servant “will not outshine his mistress in attire.” According to Harriet Elizabeth Prescott Spofford, the average mistress “reads that some of these men are strong enough to carry a weight of four hundred pounds among difficult mountain passes for twenty days

together; she thinks that is just the strength which she needs in her kitchen and would not be afraid of overworking.2

Positive accounts of Chinese immigrants, as both a vital workforce for domestic labor and as dedicated practitioners of the various tasks that this work required, were by no means isolated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The novelty that employers attached to male Chinese servants during this period aside, attempts to reconfigure the gendered division of household labor corresponded structurally to American and British imperial expansion into lands that bordered the Pacific Ocean, regions that are referred to collectively as Anglophone Pacific settler societies in this chapter.3 A letter to the editor of the Adelaide-based *Southern Australian Advertiser* in June 1875, for instance, chastised members of the Parliament of South Australia for jeering a colleague who had proposed recruiting Chinese migrants as a way to alleviate local labor shortages. Noting that Chinese servants were valued globally, wherever they were employed, the writer praised them for also being “the most tractable servants,” whose flexibility made them especially valuable in locales where domestic work could require everything from cooking a formal meal to chopping wood. Since it was “evident that the immigrants from Europe shun these occupations if they can find anything else to do,” the author concluded, it was absurd to oppose “the introduction of Chinese.”4


3 My use of the term “white Anglophone Pacific settler societies” (and versions thereof) groups the United States, Canada, and Australia, despite their differing sovereign statuses, as communities where white, English-speaking settlers displaced indigenous peoples from regions abutting the Pacific Ocean, and where white inhabitants collectively became concerned with the significance of Asian immigration as a demographic feature that distinguished these places from their respective metropoles. (My focus in this chapter privileges the California experience with domestic labor, although I identify numerous overlapping experiences that have a global resonance.) On Anglophone settler colonialism, and the capital, population, and trade networks that governed the settlement of lands in North America and Australia, see James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783–1939* (New York, 2009), esp. 49–220. On settler colonialism as a racial and political ideology, which informed white laborers’ definition of eligibility for republican citizenship in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, see Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 176–235, and Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, UK, 2008).

4 G.H. Cossins, “Chinese Immigrants. To the Editor,” *Southern Australian Advertiser*, 10 June 1875. White proponents and opponents of Chinese migration disagreed vehemently on the