Chinese-American voices were rarely heard during the national debate over Chinese exclusion that swept the United States in the 1870s and early 1880s. It was mostly a conversation among white men arrayed on both sides of the issue. But occasionally Chinese did weigh in, and one otherwise unremarkable Boston tea merchant did so particularly persuasively in 1879.

He did it in a letter to the great abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. Although ill with kidney disease, the old lion had continued to speak out on civil rights for blacks and for women until his death in that year, and was keenly interested in the national dialogue over continued immigration of Chinese laborers.
I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you?

_Wong Ar Chong, 1879_

Prior to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, there were several attempts in Congress to restrict the flow of Chinese into the U.S. One bill, introduced early in 1879, proposed to forbid the entry of any vessel carrying more than 15 Chinese, whether visitors or immigrants. Despite the fact that, if enacted, it would have violated the then-current treaty between China and the United States, the measure passed the House of Representatives in January and seemed destined for Senate approval as well.

Senator James G. Blaine (R-ME), the bill’s most prominent sponsor, was at the time the leading contender for the 1880 Republican presidential nomination. Mindful of the fact that exclusion was popular in California, and with that state’s crucial electoral votes squarely in his sights, he delivered an impassioned speech on the Senate floor laced with anti-Chinese racism. “The choice must be made between Anglo-Saxon laborers and Mongolian serfs,” he declared, and continued in kind, accusing the Chinese of being “swarming coolies” and “political and social pariahs.”

Garrison, his eloquence undimmed by age and illness, issued a stinging rebuttal that was widely circulated. But a letter written to him by a Chinese
shopkeeper a few days later is perhaps more remarkable. The writer, Wong Ar Chong, was an undistinguished, 39 year-old Chinese immigrant who ran a small store on Washington Street in Boston. And although English was his second language, he offered a cogent and persuasive dissection of Blaine's arguments that was as articulate and on point as anything that survives from a contemporary native speaker.

Some excerpts:

“In your Declaration of Independence it is asserted that all men are born free and equal, and it is understood by the civilized world that the United States of America is a free country, but I fear there is a backward step being taken by the government.” Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

“The able senator from Maine, in aping that selfish stump speaker, Dennis [sic] Kearney, says the Chinese must go, and gives his reasons. Many things he says I agree to, a great many more I do not. I think he takes a wrong way to rectify the difficulty. I claim for my countrymen the right to come to this country as long as other foreigners do. If they make themselves a nuisance, establish proper health laws and enforce them, and if they don't like them let them go back home again, but they must conform to American ideas of law and order if they wish to stay. That is my idea, but you cannot
come to this country as long as other foreigners do. If they make themselves a nuisance, establish proper health laws and enforce them, and if they don't like them let them go back home again, but they must conform to American ideas of law and order if they wish to stay." Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

“The Honorable Senator calls us heathens, but I should judge from the tone of his letter that he was somewhat lacking in Christian charity. Let him look at the records of fire in Chicago and yellow fever in New Orleans and he will find Chinamen giving as much, according to their means, as any other people.” Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

“My idea is that if the Chinese are allowed to come to this country and enjoy the same privileges as the people from any other foreign land, they will educate themselves and conform to your laws and manners, and become as good citizens as any other race. The Chinese people are willing to work, they mind their own business, and do not get drunk, and why is it they have not as much right to come here, and in as large numbers as any other foreign people?” Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

“You do not allow Chinamen to become citizens in California, where they pay $200,000 in taxes, do not allow them to vote. I ask you, where is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the fruits of your Bible teachings when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you?” Letter from Wong Ar Chong to William Lloyd Garrison, February 28, 1879. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
Wong’s stirring arguments notwithstanding, the bill passed the Senate, although it was vetoed by President Rutherford B. Hayes, who did not wish to abrogate the China treaty unilaterally. Still, three years later it would all be moot; the Chinese Exclusion Act, which would bar Chinese laborers and deny American citizenship to all Chinese, would become the law of the land, and it would remain so for more than 60 years, until it was finally repealed in 1943.
conflict with Christian charity and principles. When they say you, Sir, do not allow Chinese to become citizens in California, do not allow them to vote. I ask you, what is your golden rule, your Christian charity, and the justice of your Bible teachings, when you talk about doing to others as you would have them do to you. I guess Christian charity, by your argument, would set the people what they do, but don’t want people to do as he does. The issue between this country and China, only amounts to a few hundred dollars yearly, when it is known to reach millions every year. I feel he does not know what he is talking about.

I don’t know who are opposed to the Chinese, whether they are Americans or foreigners. So I think they are as much foreigners as the Chinese themselves. I think so because I have handled in mining, in the health, sail and coal, and have never found any justice toward or much opposed to Chinese as foreigners are.

The Chinese must not be blamed because other men are so weak, I do not fear fault. If you think I am too severe according to their name, those that are on it, paid 250 for the dollar instead of 25, then they must have plenty of money. The power of one from among others connected with it, which also fast and them many new out of employment. It is 1870, the Chinese, to 1 American, for this Chinese will nothing you work, I ask God to forget that Chinese should fear the gods of 1870. If the idea is wrong to this day, that contains all sentiments, I think he is no better than the great California stumps, trees standing, and the trees, care little for the country, but little to have his own meat.

He works in a very bold way, he sends a message to the Chinese Empire to ask how to change the Burlingame treaty, but why don’t he go and make a treaty himself. It is trying to simulate General Butler, but not the damage to do it successfully. The treaty is now right, the treaty is, and the Burlingame treaty, when he does not know where he is in.