

## Introduction

How fitting it was that hail came thundering down that June. Instead of the soft, early summer breeze that normally flows over the Taconic and Hoosac ranges, caressing the slopes of Mount Greylock, big ice balls flew this way and that, thudding seemingly everywhere. Some were so unusually large—measuring a foot in circumference—that the landscape throughout the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley seemed invaded by a foreign matter. The Knowlton brothers, two photographers from nearby Northampton, rode up and down the hills looking for especially large and photogenic stones, the enormous white balls easy to spot on the dark green fields. The brothers had to work with speed. Almost as suddenly as it came on, the storm passed, the sky cleared, the stones began melting, and the day returned to a typically warm June morning. But all the same, a ferocious summer hailstorm was a phenomenon never before seen in town. For some townsfolk it must have seemed a fitting conclusion to a week of anomalies.

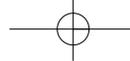


On the morning of June 13, 1870, an enormous crowd began assembling at the local train station. Reports tell us that men and women were elbow-to-elbow, lined the railroad tracks, and overflowed onto the streets outside the station. The people massed northward from the station for a quarter mile, on either side of Marshall Street, one of the main north-south thoroughfares of town. Thousands had turned out. Given that the census for that year counted about twelve thousand residents in and around town, at least a fifth of the locals, possibly a quarter, had gathered. Many were angry and primed for confrontation. All the region's papers

put reporters on site; even the Boston papers, normally uninterested in the western half of the state, sent men to cover the events. A local shoe manufacturer, Calvin T. Sampson, was importing seventy-five strikebreakers to fill the workstations left empty by the local shoemakers' union, the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin. Although able-bodied men were available throughout New England, including many who were not formally associated with the Crispins and possessed considerable skills at shoemaking, strikebreakers were being brought on a two-week train journey from San Francisco and scheduled to arrive that day. What's more, they were Chinese.

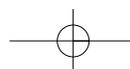
Sampson later described being notified by the Crispins that "if the Chinamen stepped their feet into North Adams they would be shot, and that if I showed my head I should meet the same fate."<sup>1</sup> Some in the crowd had brought rifles, others stones and clubs. A few were drunk, "spirited with whiskey" in anticipation of a brawl.<sup>2</sup> Sampson prepared by meeting the train ahead of time at Eagle Bridge north of Troy, just the other side of the state line, and personally riding with the Chinese on the last brief leg. He armed himself with six pistols, summoned the state police, and arranged to have seven of his own men deputized and armed. He planned a quick march, military style, from the station to his factory but also knew how much resistance he might face, given that the entire route was clogged with ornery townspeople and the road nearly impassable. As the doors to the emigrant cars opened and the Chinese emerged, the hoots and hollers began. Pugnacious, arrogant, and in no mood for delay, Sampson "thrust open his coat, shoved his hand threateningly toward the pistol inside, clapped his free hand on the shoulder of the nearest man, and looking him squarely in the eye, growled, 'Make way there. Stand aside!'"<sup>3</sup> Two former workers at the shoemaker's factory threw stones and were quickly handcuffed and led away. But that only diminished the number of guards to make the dash to the factory. Blood was about to be spilled.

But then events took a most remarkable turn. As the Chinese men, two by two, shoulder to shoulder, set foot on the planks, a general paralysis seemed to descend on the enormous crowd. Perhaps it



was brought on by Sampson's bravado, perhaps by the appearance of armed guards. But more likely, it was the result of a simple curiosity that took hold of those assembled. The men and women gawked as the young men spilled out of the train. Most in the crowd had probably never seen a Chinese man before. "I was disappointed in their appearance," a reporter for the *Berkshire County Eagle* wrote, "for as they marched along they looked neat, smart and intelligent. Most of them are young, and had a merry twinkle with their eyes."<sup>4</sup> It must have come as some surprise that, in contrast to the image of degraded, dull-witted, heathen coolies, to which the caricaturists gave shape and against which the labor unions so fulminated, these Chinese in the flesh seemed so compellingly strange, so tidy, alert, and lively. The townspeople were rapt in their attention. A local preacher-turned-social activist, Washington Gladden, declared that "the curiosity of the crowd was so acute that its brutality was held in check. These pig-tailed, calico-frocked, wooden-shod invaders made a spectacle which nobody wanted to miss even long enough to stoop for a brickbat."<sup>5</sup> With pistol in hand, Sampson was dumb-struck. "There was every chance for the execution of threats," he recalled with wonder at his good fortune (and perhaps with a bit of lament that he did not have a chance to shoot someone).<sup>6</sup>

The crowd parted like the proverbial Red Sea, and the Chinese, with Sampson and his top assistant, George Chase, at their lead, made their way to the factory.<sup>7</sup> If anyone cared to recall the images that had appeared in the national magazines in the previous months, they might have been struck by the irony of the situation. As the last spike was being driven at Promontory Point, Utah, just a year earlier, connecting the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads, and at last providing a transcontinental rail route, the illustrators began portending the huge influx of Chinese heading east (fig. I.1). They were most often pictured as a long line of men, single file or, as in North Adams, two by two, snaking through river and valley, unperturbed by obstacles, even miraculously walking across water where bridges had not yet been built. In their relentless length, they were like the winding new rail system itself. Where the Chinese had previously been arranged primarily in California, the new cross-country connection meant they would



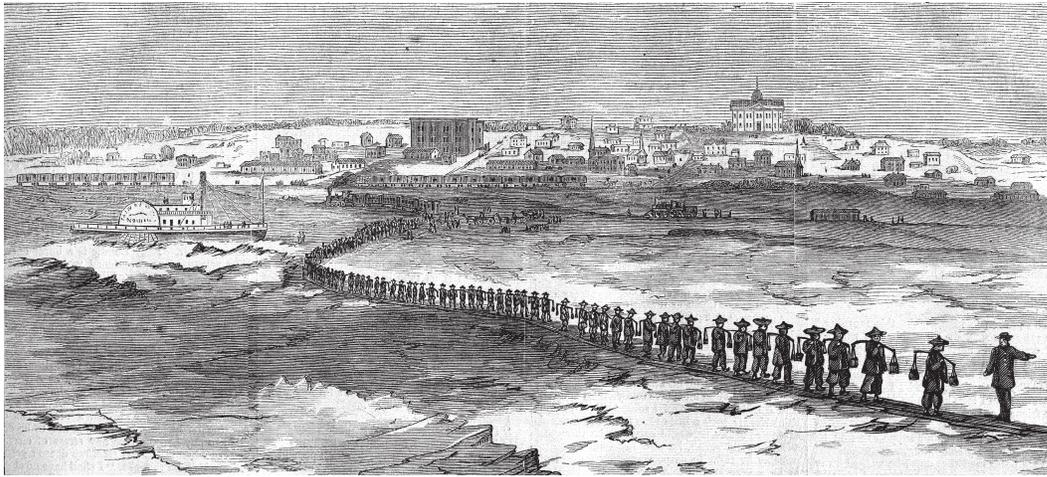


FIGURE I.1  
Leavitt Burnham,  
*Chinese Coolies Crossing  
the Missouri River, 1870*

spread quickly across the land.<sup>8</sup> Or take a cartoon by Thomas Nast, where the Chinese assume the shape of a comet dashing across the sky (fig. I.2). Although picketers have come ready to agitate, the crowd can do nothing but point and look. The ladies bring their toddlers out in strollers, men in top hats are out for an evening's air, ready to witness the astral phenomenon. Cheap labor, like comets or hailstones, flies past, with hardly a demonstration by the crowd. And so it was in North Adams, Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup>

With the men safely in the factory and the crowd stunned and slowly dispersing, events took yet another remarkable, unpredictable turn. Before the men had a chance to change out of those frocks and shoes or settle into their new environs, Sampson ordered them back outside, spread them across the south wall of his factory, and ordered a picture of them (see frontispiece). In the days before the portable Kodak, taking such a photograph was no spontaneous act. A photographer had been called well ahead of time. He had lugged his big glass plate camera and heavy tripod to the south lawn, set up his viewfinder, and found just the right distance to position his lens so as to accommodate the lateral spread of so many men. He most likely brought his portable darkroom, the chemicals, trays, and plates piled into a covered wagon, and the whole thing hitched to a horse or mule. In addition, he brought a stereo camera—two plate cameras positioned on a single mount—anticipating that the scene



FIGURE I.2  
Thomas Nast, *The New Comet—A Phenomenon Now Visible in All Parts of the United States*, 1870

would be useful as a stereoview and, in that format, find its way onto the growing lists of local views and be distributed widely. Among other things, the photograph of the Chinese was going to be a commercial venture, and it required proper orchestration.

Anticipating an angry, violent crowd, arming himself and his men like a military convoy, and almost ludicrously preparing for a bloody fight with, literally, thousands, the pugnacious shoe manufacturer had thought to arrange for a photograph. Was he mad? What could he possibly have had in mind?



A closer look (fig. I.3) might give us some insight into what the local North Adams crowd found so riveting. The men are young and clean-shaven, slim and decently fed. In contrast to the unemployed Crispins, many of whom were men with families, the Chinese look like teenagers. In fact, most were. Of the seventy-five, sixty-eight of them were under twenty years old. The youngest

FIGURE I.3  
Unknown  
photographer,  
untitled photograph,  
detail, 1870.  
(Courtesy of the  
North Adams Public  
Library.)



was fourteen, most fell between sixteen and eighteen. Their foreman, known as Charlie Sing, was all of twenty-two.<sup>10</sup> They were disarmingly more like boys than men. “Neat, smart, and intelligent,” as the *Berkshire County Eagle* reporter described them, seems plausible. “Calico-frocked” and “wood-shod,” as Gladden remembered the Chinese, does not. His characterizations were more like the clichés found in guidebooks and travel accounts in China, where such fashions were generally gleaned from the highly ornate decorative dress of upper-class Mandarins. As the photograph declares, these Chinese are decidedly peasants. Most wear simple cotton jackets with big baggy sleeves and scooped necklines; lightweight, loose-fitting cotton trousers; and soft slippers with soft, white soles. They are outfitted in typical traveling clothes. Some of them have taken to wearing the flat-brimmed hat, once common among nineteenth-century peasant Chinese travelers in America. Others have kept the skullcap more characteristic of traditional costume. Without exception, the men sport the cropped hair and long queues characteristic of Chinese living under Qing rule. The grooming that was required to maintain the crop and queue was a weekly chore, which all Chinese men, young and old, knew well; it is clear they have kept up the habit during the two-week journey. Among other things, the photograph is evidence that these men adhere to the strict social code. One is tempted to say that two of the men in figure I.3, in the back row towards the right and left of center, have deliberately taken off their hats to reveal their appropriately coifed heads, offering visible evidence of their humility and their observance of decorum. The “merry twinkle” in their eyes discerned by the local journalist does not seem in evidence in



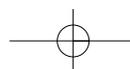
the photograph. Instead, although one man, nearly at dead center and in the back row, breaks into a smile and another, at bottom left, begins to grin, the Chinese are mostly poker-faced and appear before the lens with neither anger nor malevolence but, seemingly, seriousness and solemnity. “These are the strikebreakers?” we can imagine the North Adams citizenry asking in puzzlement.

On the one hand, the men’s seriousness—their tight-lipped, unyielding expressions—is typical of the conventions of early photographic portraiture. Depending on available light, the glass plate’s exposure time could be long, and men and women seated before the camera learned to keep still for uncomfortable stretches if they wanted crisp images of themselves. On the other hand, the men had been boxed for two weeks in railcars, sleeping on wooden benches and eating rice and crackers day and night, the kind of journey to make men ornery.<sup>11</sup> Emigrant cars were decidedly the poor man’s option, as passengers shared space with bags of mail and smelly farm animals. Sampson later told state officials that at the stops along the way the men were mostly kept in the cars, only a few minutes to stretch here and there and, occasionally, a quick dash to the stations to buy bologna sausages.<sup>12</sup> In North Adams, they had just been met with something less than a warm greeting. Tired, confused, not speaking English, perhaps a bit defensive, the men could not have viewed standing against the hot brick wall, the June sun high overhead, as a welcome respite.

Or did they? Amidst a crowd carrying clubs and rifles, what did they think the photograph was for? How should they comport themselves before the lens? What understanding—of themselves, of the shoe manufacturer whose wall they stood before, of the shoemakers they displaced, of the photographer whose gaze they met—informed their appearance?



This book is about the large forces, understandings, and personalities that brought the famous photograph of the Chinese into being. In addition, it follows the discussions, events, and images that the photograph put into motion. It is concerned, therefore, with the industrialization of a New England craft at one of its key historical



moments; the tumultuous and often violent debates about labor, race, class, and citizenship during the decade and a half after the Civil War, when such debates were on everyone's anxious lips; the rise of photography as a profession and, related to that, the enormous popularity and widespread use of the *carte de visite* and stereoview; and the ambitions and experiences of immigrants, of all sorts, as they tried to find places for themselves in Reconstruction America. It tells all of those stories by attending to photographs, especially the voracious imagery surrounding the picture taken that June day. Pictures are not incidental to the story but central, not merely illustrative of events but objects of key historical meanings. Telling this history would be impossible without them.

The reasons to attend so carefully to pictures are many. Apart from the fact that images, like texts, are complex carriers of meanings and provide histories and understandings that in the thickness of time would otherwise be lost, in the late 1860s and 1870s these many photographs and other related images formed a remarkable, momentarily discrete, and analyzable visual culture. From the point of view of their makers, sitters, and early viewers, they were not inert objects, tucked into albums or stuffed into drawers and soon forgotten, but instead deserved high attention and careful, sometimes urgent interpretation. The many viewers, however, never seemed to agree on what the pictures meant, especially that central photograph of the Chinese against Sampson's factory wall. The shoe manufacturer saw one thing, the photographers another, the Crispins yet another, and the Chinese still more. Perhaps because of that lack of consensus and perhaps because the many constituencies were not merely passive but astonishingly active observers, they each turned to making even more images to press their points of view. The Crispins, for example, returned Sampson's favor by assembling together and having a photograph made of themselves, too (fig. I.4). They made clear that they had a stake not only in the arrival of the strikebreaking Chinese but also in the representation of that arrival.

All of this arguing in front of the camera ended up creating a large body of photographs that was vital and plentiful but also plural, conflicting, and often incommensurate. Indeed, although all of major actors in our story looked at photographs and resorted to



FIGURE I.4  
Unknown  
photographer, *The  
Crispins of the  
Co-operative*, 1870

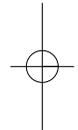
yet more pictures as a way to express themselves and meditate on their experiences, no one ever agreed on much of anything, photographically or otherwise. In the pictures, we can sometimes still feel the heat of their disagreements. In their hands, the photographs were not merely illustrations but sites of historical struggle. That is to say, the social struggles among North Adams's constituencies became a struggle in and of representation.

Rather than see the visual culture in North Adams as single and whole, developments in that town—where immigrants and migrants came and went and individuals from far-flung places were brought suddenly together—encourage us to see it as multiple and fluid. It might be best, therefore, to understand the many pictures as bound to the complicated social relationships among the different actors in this story. Although the Chinese strikebreakers, the French Canadian Crispins, the ambitious photographers, or the Yankee shoe manufacturers did not belong to a single “culture,” they had

relations with each other. In that sense, the photographs and other kinds of pictures were important deposits or briefs of those relations. The photographs, that is, were social relations momentarily hardened into images. How we untangle and understand those relations through pictures, in a remarkable place and time, is what this book is about. Or to put it another way, how we view our visual archives critically—how we value and interpret the photographs remaining from our past—is also what this book is about.



Although the story is richly local—we will spend a good deal of time sniffing around Sampson’s factory, inside the Crispin lodge, in the photographer’s studio, in the Chinese residence—it was also national, even international, in scope. The big papers and journals certainly knew something huge was brewing. Days after the Chinese men arrived, *Scribner’s Monthly*, *Harper’s Weekly*, *Frank Leslie’s*, the *New York Herald*, the *New York Tribune*, the *New York Globe*, *The Nation*, among many others, sent reporters. Suddenly having its authority on local matters superseded, the local paper was both dismayed and oddly pleased by so many national journalists’ conspicuous presence around town. “This private business step has thus become a public event of the widest notoriety and discussion,” it observed of their many reports. With so much attention, strike-breaking with foreign labor “promises to become the cause of important business and perhaps political results.”<sup>13</sup> The national reporters were more direct. “Should he succeed in his venture,” the journalist for *Frank Leslie’s* wrote of Sampson, “hundreds of employers engaged in the shoe business, and the companies running spindles and looms at Lowell and elsewhere in New England, will contract for large companies of Chinamen.”<sup>14</sup> The prognosis sent a shiver through labor’s spine. The labor movement began holding national meetings, developed a political platform regarding immigration, and put candidates up for office. Ultimately, the Chinese appearance in North Adams and the anxious discussions it engendered had much to do with leading Congress in 1882 to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, the most trenchant American policy surrounding immigration of its kind, which simply forbade further





entry of the Chinese and attempted to strangle the population already in the country.<sup>15</sup> The act is one of the photograph's most bitter legacies.

But for a moment, let us try to keep the wholesale exclusion at bay. In June 1870, change, not to mention hail, was in the air, and the picture of the Chinese seemed to mark it. The wondrous aspect of that early photograph was not only its unprecedented quality and its portending something new, but also its putting into relief the difficult and fraught questions about community and belonging among immigrants, migrants, and townspeople, its palpable pressure on the region's many constituencies who were affected in all kinds of ways by the large and growing presence of a post-Civil War, postslavery, factory-based industry. Complex histories lay behind these many actors, and equally complex arguments, actions, and picturings lay ahead. We would do well to understand the many important issues surrounding a country in the throes of a massive historical transformation by attending to one of its key examples, and by attending not to the sad, end result of exclusion but to the place and time when those different histories met and intertwined, and to those nerve-wracking, pregnant moments when the Chinese came.

