

Review: A new film investigates the time America banned an entire race

Notes & Cues:	Article: <p>“The Chinese Exclusion Act, ” appearing Tuesday as part of PBS’s “American Experience, ” was in the works well before the election of Donald Trump. But it feels as if it were made for a moment when border walls and immigration controls are topics of daily conversation.</p> <p>Directed by the PBS stalwart Ric Burns and his longtime collaborator Li-Shin Yu, the documentary is centered on the 1882 act of the title, the first American law to restrict the immigration of a particular ethnic group and ban its members from citizenship.</p> <p>Throughout the film, the contemporary parallels smack you in the face. Chinese laborers, imported to build the western side of the transcontinental railroad, are seen as a threat when the railroad is finished and the post-Civil War depression of the 1870s drives up white unemployment.</p> <p>The film isn’t only concerned with politics and legislation. There is plenty of social history, of life in Chinatowns and the profound dislocations forced on Chinese-American families, as well as an account of the horrific wave of violence (including mass lynchings) and ethnic purges that struck around 300 cities and towns in the western United States in the years after 1882.</p> <p>There are also heroes in the story, like the American-born Wong Kim Ark, whose victory in the Supreme Court in 1898 established the birthright to citizenship that we’ve taken for granted until recently.</p>
Summary:	