

## **The Divided Consciousness: Chinese Immigrant Women in San Francisco 1860-1920**

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### **Abstract**

During the beginning on the 20th century, the issues surrounding mixing cultures, societal structuring, and racial stereotyping were all clearly seen in the prostitution of Chinese immigrant women in California. There were major differences between the gender structures of the traditional Chinese society and the Victorian society in America. While both patriarchal, women had extremely different roles within the different cultures. Once Chinese women immigrated to America, they were forced into prostitution by the Tongs, a mob-like group of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco's Chinatown, and forced to live out lives of servitude with no real chance of freedom. Because of their strong societal upbringings, they unfortunately accepted their roles and hoped for an eventual escape. With the formation of "rescue" houses along the West coast, single white women who were not a part of the traditional Victorian households, were preaching piety and purity as well as the importance of a good, Christian home. To the immigrant women, this escape was an extremely viable option in order to leave the prostitution rings in Chinatown and start over in America. The "rescue" houses evidently created issues surrounding race and social hierarchy amongst the white and Chinese women. Because the white workers in the rescue houses wanted to promote their ideas of womanhood and help the Chinese women to obtain it, the reform workers looked at the Chinese women as helpless and inferior, without any real way of helping themselves. So while, these "rescue" houses offered aid, domestic training, and some chance at marriage, they also stripped the immigrant women of their cultural beliefs, former identity, religion, and morals and turned them into what the reform workers believed women of time should be. The Victorian women, to them, were the only option of class and successfulness.

**Keywords: Chinese Immigration, San Francisco, Victorian Womanhood**

### **1. Body of Paper**

Chinese immigration in the 19th century rapidly changed the atmosphere of the United States' West Coast. Like most other immigrating foreigners, the Chinese stood as threats to the country's economy, society, and morality. White Americans categorized the Chinese as morally corrupt, sexually deviant, and criminally active, completely othering the immigrants and generalizing the entire race. Because of the abundance of anti-Chinese legislation, Chinese immigrants were predominantly male to begin with. The lack of Chinese women on the West Coast obviously proved itself to be a detriment to family establishment, reproduction, and the creation of society and community. The small number of women who were able to come to cities like San Francisco, were faced with prostitution, criminal activity, reformers, and the struggle to obtain freedom from slavery either in their own community or in the white society. Chinese immigrant women struggled to break the over sexualizing stereotypes being placed on them and gain access to power that did not exist for women in China. While some women were able to find love and legal marriage in the U.S., most Chinese immigrant women constantly battled the threat of prostitution, crime, slavery, racism, and

assimilation efforts of white reformers and missionaries. Gaining access as both a Chinese immigrant and a woman was close to impossible, but women did find ways to obtain power and respectability in predominantly anti-Chinese San Francisco.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese men accounted for more than ninety percent of the immigration population. The ratio of male to female was never lower than 12 to 1 up until 1920.<sup>1</sup> The major difference in the number of men and women was created in 1875, when congress passed the Page Law that prohibited the entry of Chinese women for so called lewd and immoral purposes.<sup>2</sup> Most immigration officials assumed that all Chinese women entering the United States were prostitutes, so even the merchant class who was exempt from the laws, in theory, sometimes could not even bring their wives. A little under ten years later, the Exclusion Act of 1882 denied all entry to Chinese laborers and did not specifically speak on the behalf of Chinese women, allowing the Page Law to continue.<sup>3</sup> Because of the restrictive laws, the gender ratio was extremely stratified along the west coast.

Chinese men were workers and laborers that had become either single or separated from their wives and families back in China. This separation allowed for a new kind of community to be formed in Chinatown, with San Francisco majorly based off of crime, cheap labor, and prostitution for the working class Chinese. In a place where most immigrants were not given power or access, illegal activities and the development of gangs, or societies, became highly profitable. C. N. Reynolds explains that the formation of the "Six Companies", the original clan organization, created a market for illegal opportunities and a chance for Chinese immigrants to gain economic power in San Francisco.<sup>4</sup> Clan organization was created in defense against the power of the general government, mutual aid, and protection in business and the common transactions of life, festive enjoyment, and the maintenance of the worship of the spirits of the dead.<sup>5</sup>

The immensely unequal ratio between men and women immigrants created an interesting social environment in which the family structure was uncommon, and prostitution was on the rise. Well this kind of behavior and society was created by the laws put in place by the United States government, there was still criticism against the Chinese community for straying away from typical American family structures that the white population held so dear. One group who strongly voiced these opinions was the Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, who regarded the Chinese society in Chinatown when they stated, "The Chinese are bad for us, because they come here without their families. Families are the center of all that is elevating in mankind, yet here we have a very large Chinese male population."<sup>6</sup> This is completely hypocritical in regards to the laws put in place the government, restricting Chinese women from immigrating and subjecting them to gain entrance only through illegal prostitution opportunities. The committee used the idea of family and the Chinese's lack of unity with the white community against the immigrants and the society in which they were building.

Prostitution became the main form of access into America for Chinese women immigrant. This form of entering the country only perpetuated the claims that the Special Committee was making towards the Chinese community. Prostitution was heavily linked with the clan, or Tong, organizations of the Six Companies. Human trafficking provided a beneficial economic opportunity in an area that significantly lacked a female presence.<sup>7</sup> Peggy Pascoe explains in her article, *Gender Systems in Conflict: The Marriages of Mission-Educated Chinese American Women, 1874-1939*, that Chinese female prostitutes immigrating into the United States, were sold by their parents into prostitution, with no real hope of leaving it once they entered the U.S..<sup>8</sup> Once in San Francisco, hopes of freedom and economic independence were nearly impossible, further perpetuating the cycle of continual prostitution for these women. Most of the women were smuggled in by one of the Tong clans and then sold to an owner of a brothel or whore house, where they were told that they must work off the expense of bringing them to America.<sup>9</sup>

Escaping prostitution was nearly impossible to do individually, so many Chinese women looked to white middle class women reformers and missionaries that were closely tied to the reformers. With the formation of "rescue" houses along the West coast, single white women who were not a part of the traditional Victorian households, were preaching piety and purity as well as the importance of a good, Christian home.<sup>10</sup> Middle class reformers saw the immigrant women as a group in which they could "rescue" and therefore began to set up rescue houses in Chinese immigrant neighborhoods. The motto of many of these rescue houses became, "The first upwards from heathenism to civilization is the organization of a home on Christian principles."<sup>11</sup> The general consensus amongst reformers was that these women could not possibly function within society properly or morally without Christian and Victorian Values.

To the immigrant women, this escape was an extremely viable option in order to leave the prostitution rings in Chinatown and start over in America.<sup>12</sup> While reform houses did offer a way for Chinese women to escape the restricting life of prostitution, they were forced to adopt the ways of Victorian society and assimilate into Anglo-American culture. The "rescue" houses evidently created issues surrounding race and social hierarchy amongst the white and Chinese women. Because the white workers in the rescue houses wanted to promote their ideas of womanhood and help the Chinese women to obtain it, the reform workers looked at the Chinese women as helpless and inferior, without any real way of helping themselves.<sup>13</sup> So while, these "rescue" houses offered aid, domestic

training, and some chance at marriage, they also stripped the immigrant women of their cultural beliefs, former identity, religion, and morals and turned them into what the reform workers believed women of time should be.<sup>14</sup> White middle class women saw themselves as so called saviors or rescuers of the Chinese immigrant women. So while the allure of Victorian womanhood caught the attention of some of the Chinese immigrant women, some women did not agree with the principles, and strongly rejected the values in order to keep the freedom that they had found within American society.

The wives of merchants were one of the few fortunate women were given full access when it came to immigration. These women began creating the familial structures of the Chinese middle class and combatted the ideas of Victorian white womanhood, while also gaining power and opportunity in the household. Unlike traditional Chinese culture, women that immigrated were able to more easily participate in family decision making.<sup>15</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Chinese women who were allowed to immigrate legally, because of their merchant husbands, began creating split-household political and economic conditions. This meant women began to gain some access in decision making, as well as job opportunities in the community through laundromats, grocery stores, and in-house sewing.<sup>16</sup> Judy Young explains in her book, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese women in San Francisco*, that, “Most immigrant women presented a submissive image in public but ruled at home,” and later asserts that, “Immigrant wives as homemakers, wage earners, and culture bearers made them indispensable partners of their husbands.”<sup>17</sup> This kind of partnership was extremely different than the fate of many other Chinese women who were subjected to lives in servitude and prostitution or assimilate into Victorian womanhood and culture.

While many women in this position were given better opportunities in regards to access in the household and economic liberties, many women entered into marriages with extremely large age gaps, and no opportunity to be involved in the choice of their husband. One of the most pressing issues in marriages in the U.S. was the continuation of the practice of concubinage and polyandry.<sup>18</sup> These practices were perpetuated by the complete lack of Chinese women living in America. Ling describes the bigamous practices as, “More for practical reason, physical sustenance of men and survival of Chinese immigrant communities, than for psychological reasons.”<sup>19</sup> Although logistically this was the choice many immigrants had to make in order to keep growing the immigrant population, it added an extra stress to immigrant women and the sanctity of their marriages. The role as a Chinese women in America was extremely complicated and overly sexualized by both Chinese men, and the white population along the West Coast.

Ultimately, Chinese immigrant women struggled immensely in regards to social structures, access, opportunity, and freedom in the United States. While some women gained access through their merchant husbands, many Chinese women never escaped prostitution and a lives of servitude. Even with the option of using middle class white reformers, most immigrant women were not willing to give up their freedom of choice when it came to social behavior. They therefore rejected the ideas of Victorian womanhood that were linked with “rescue” houses. Because of the extremely strict laws put in place by Congress including the Page Law, the Immigration Act of 1876, and the Chinese Exclusion Act, women were given very few opportunities to enter into American society. With such little access, the limited amount that did immigrate in the late 19th century, were faced with extreme hardship, oversexualization, and were given the responsibility of creating a community in which family life and social structure could flourish in new Chinese communities.

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