Tiger Women: Analyzing the Chinese American Women Experience in Western United States from 1850-1885

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Chinese American women encountered sexism and racism as they immigrated to the United States in the middle to late 1800s. To overcome these challenges, this group of women utilized church resources and relationships to better understand and assimilate into American culture in order to lessen the burdens of racist laws and cultural norms. Today, much literature on Chinese immigration heavily emphasizes the male perspective. Historians who do write about Chinese women usually focus on either immigration policies or Chinese prostitution. This thesis contends that Chinese American women encountered equally damaging restrictions from both the white culture and their own Chinese communities. My essay also discusses the actions taken by these women to enhance their circumstances. Studying the difficulties faced by Chinese American women in early American history can also help reveal some of the contexts that contributed to the rise in anti-Chinese attitudes brought on by the coronavirus outbreak. To construct a narrative of the experience of Chinese women who immigrated to the United States, this article draws from a number of primary sources, including newspapers, internet archives, and secondary materials.

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I would like to thank Dr. James Connolly and Dr. Mellisa Holtzman for their guidance in my prior research fellowships, which greatly helped me learn the techniques for writing my thesis and provided me with background knowledge on my area of study.

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Process Analysis Statement

My topic was heavily influenced by the two Honors fellowships I completed the previous year with Dr. James Connolly and Dr. Mellisa Holtzman over Asian American adoption cases. Initially, I had planned to write my thesis on Chinese adoption trends and history. After consulting with Dr. Stephan over the summer, I realized I would need to change my paper to fit within the Civil War era. I modified my thesis to focus on Chinese American women's immigration and experiences between 1850 and 1885. This allowed me to work within Dr. Stephan's area of study while still centering on my original topic and interests.

When working on my thesis, I have improved and developed new skills that translate well to help me with my future endeavors. Before working on my thesis, I would easily get swept away by all the materials and broad concepts. After writing my paper, my ability to focus on what is important and narrow down my themes over the semester has dramatically increased. Additionally, I can better comprehend the value of case studies and human narratives. If I attend graduate school, I will benefit from learning how to analyze primary and secondary sources, as well as developing central arguments.

During the process of writing a major research paper, I faced a variety of challenges. Shifting my focus was the most difficult thing I had to do when writing my thesis. I had initially intended to write about how discrimination against Chinese immigrants led to the development of anti-immigration legislation. After analyzing different sources, my thesis shifted its focus to Chinese women.

When reflecting on my paper, there are aspects of my paper that can still be improved. One thing I wish I could change is its organization and expand further into the missionary work

and resources that Asian American women used. Finally, if I were to continue my research, I would focus further on Chinese American women's relationship with prostitution and its influence and effect on communities within the United States.

Introduction

One of the most noticeable aspects of the California Gold Rush was the large influx of Chinese immigrants. During the mid to late 1800s, many immigrants came to the United States with the goal of generating income to support their families. When immigrating to the United States, Chinese American women faced double barriers of racism and sexism but combatted these obstacles by utilizing relationships and church resources to better understand and assimilate into American culture to alleviate the challenges that came with racist legislation and cultural burdens.

Although their immigration story held its own challenges, European American women received a much warmer welcome to the United States than Chinese American women. From their strong attachments to their native country to the gender imbalance that came with their migration, the Chinese American women's immigration story differed on multiple accounts. By 1855, Chinese women comprised just two percent of the total number of Chinese immigrants.[1] One of the most significant impacts of the Chinese migration came in the form of the first immigration exclusionary acts starting with the Page Act of 1875, which was then followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

When looking at discrimination targeted specifically at Chinese American women in San Francisco, the root of American hostility toward Chinese women centered on the perception that these women functioned as prostitutes rather than as sisters and mothers, creating strong and stable families that would allow later generations to assimilate.[2] Although Chinese American women in New York faced less hostility from locals than their counterparts in San Francisco, these women were by no means treated as equals. While Chinese American women in San

Francisco were viewed as being "bred into a life of shame and infamy" due to their connection with prostitution, their counterparts in New York were viewed as being exotic or an oddity.[3] In New York City in 1850, it was not uncommon for men to attend attractions centered around a Chinese woman performing acts consisting of chopsticks or speaking Mandarin.[4]

Many white Americans viewed assimilation as an imperative goal for *all* immigrants because of the threats they brought to the established culture such as disrupting family norms. Because Chinese Americans rarely came with the initial intent of assimilation and had cultural tolerance to prostitution, the American public harshly viewed Chinese American women, making it even more difficult for these women to integrate into American culture. This spurred widespread racial discrimination among West Coast communities, later leading to anti-immigration legislation passing.

In addition to receiving white societal pressures, Chinese men also pressured Chinese women to fulfill filial piety responsibilities. The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," a set of etiquette rules found in the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial*, stated that women were obligated to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons.[5] Because of cultural etiquettes such as these, there were many stories about Chinese American women who partook in prostitution on the orders of their husbands or family. In other cases, white society mistook Chinese American wives as prostitutes or slaves because of the cultural tradition where husbands paid a bride price, a form of monetary exchange, to the bride's family to be married.

The differing cultural norms bewildered outsiders looking in which further spread the negative belief of ill-treatment towards Chinese American women by their own countrymen. These perceptions prompted religious organizations to create programs to rescue Chinese women

physically and spiritually. Churches on the West Coast actively worked with Chinese communities in hopes of converting Chinese American women to Christianity. Despite their endeavor occurring in the United States, churches viewed these efforts as a form of mission work. This illustrated how detached they viewed Chinese women were from American society because they thought their work would function similarly to how foreign mission trips operated. The churches anticipated that after Chinese women converted to Christianity, they would return to their home country and spread Christian teachings to their communities.[6]

While scholars have written extensively on the legacies of the Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act in shaping immigration laws and popular attitudes in the U.S. after 1885, far fewer studies examine the origins of these legislations in California or the efforts by Chinese women to contest its cultural assumptions and aims. By centering research on Chinese women between 1850-1885, this paper will highlight an area of American history often lost to the large shadow of a significant event that occurred during the same period, the Civil War. Additionally, it will analyze the role prostitution played as one of the key challenges Chinese American women faced and their efforts to overcome it. While other historians touch upon either immigration legislation or Chinese prostitution, this paper argues that Chinese American women faced equally harmful barriers from both white-American culture and from their own Chinese communities.

The paper follows a topical approach with three main sections. The first section will cover the sentiments and challenges Chinese women faced from the white-American public. These issues ranged from outright racism to discriminatory laws such as the California legislation, "An Act to Prevent the Kidnapping and Importation of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese Females for Criminal or Demoralizing Purposes," passed in 1870, which allowed Chinese women to be deported easily. Focusing primarily on prostitution, the second section will

cover Chinese women's challenges in their communities. The final section will cover how Chinese women utilized missionary outreach programs and romantic relationships to overcome these barriers.

Examining a mixture of primary and secondary sources, this paper pulls heavily from newspaper articles, senate hearings, the statutes of California, missionary records, and published works. Most of these sources come from the U.S. Library of Congress' online archives and the online archives of California's "Guide to the Chinese in California Virtual Collection." Although these sources provided valuable insight into the public sentiments toward Chinese American women, most fail to truly showcase the actual perspective of these women within the specified period, 1850-1885.

In order to better understand the actual experiences of these women, the paper pulls from secondary sources such as scholarly articles and books. Two significant articles examined are "Every Element of Womanhood with Which to make life a curse or blessing," by Barbara Voss and "The Exclusion of Chinese Women," by Sucheng Chan. Voss's paper covers the records of missionary efforts with Chinese American women in California pre-exclusion and Chan's essay focuses on the exclusion of Chinese women from American society. Voss's article excels at showcasing the perspective and goals of the missionary work in Chinatown but fails to fully illustrate the full characters and lives of the Chinese women that the missionary work impacted. On the other hand, Chan's article heavily shares the personalities of the Chinese women it mentions, albeit from an observer's point of view. She also dives into numerous early immigration restrictions placed on Chinese American women and the legal actions they took to combat them. One area that Chan could improve upon is the significance of the case he mentions

in a larger context, such as explaining how the results of a case impacted future legislation and court hearings.

In addition, this article pulls from Lucie Cheng Hirata's essay, "Chinese Immigration Women in Nineteenth-Century California " and Judy Yung's book, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History.* Hirata's essay centers on Chinese prostitution in the nineteenth century. Although the paper excels at explaining the extent to which prostitution operated in Chinese communities, she only briefly touched upon possible actions Chinese American women had to escape their situation. In Yung's book, her central goal is to highlight Chinese women, whom she claims "suffered harsh living conditions and discrimination because of their race and sex."[7] One core claim Yung makes is how Chinese American women are naturally a marginalized group because they could neither fall within the traditional Chinese women's role nor the mainstream American women's role. Yung does an excellent job of showcasing Chinese American women's isolation by using over 274 oral histories and 135 photographs to bring the stories of Chinese women into the public sphere.This is an incredibly significant accomplishment because of the scarcity of photos of this group of women.

The Foundations of Exclusion

In the mid-1800s, Chinese American women were the smallest immigrant population, with their male counterparts outnumbering women 1:12.[8] Although most immigrant groups tend to have a disproportionate number of male immigrants in the first decade or two, this acute sex imbalance among Chinese immigrants lasted for a century.[9] European ratios of male-to-female immigrants to the U.S. in the nineteenth century ran 60% for men and 40% for women.[10] In 1870, only 7.2% of the total Chinese population were women.[11] The low rate of Chinese female

immigrants stemmed partly from an emphasis on women's filial piety duties to their parents-in-law, which trumped their obligations to accompany their husbands abroad.

In the 1920s, the "Survey of Race Relations" project conducted a dozen interviews with Chinese American immigrants about their immigration experiences from the 1880s to the 1920s.[12] In the interviews, the men shared the common reluctance to bring their wives over because of the high costs tied with traveling and living in the United States:

> I could not support my wife in this country, so I leave her in China.[13]
>
> Not enough money to bring her over here. I would bring her if I had enough money. She wants to come very bad.[14]

Many men who had come to California to work arrived with the mindset of staying temporarily and laboring to support their families.[15] The women and girls who had left home to immigrate to the United States also came to earn a wage and then send it back to their families. Typically, these women would come to work as a servant or as a prostitute. Because of the imbalance in the sex ratio, there was a high demand for prostitutes among Chinese communities. This form of immigration generated friction among white communities who felt threatened by Chinese immigrants. Additionally, other common complaints against Chinese immigrants were their refusal to pay taxes, lack of respect for the laws, and their disinterest in learning English.[16]

In 1854, after the San Francisco Municipal Committee visited neighborhoods in San Francisco, they found that most of the Chinese women were prostitutes. Later, this connection between Chinese women and prostitution became one of the most critical accusations against this group. It became widely assumed that most Chinese American women worked as prostitutes, either willingly or enslaved.[17] Much of the early anti-immigration legislation in California was

aimed at Chinese women because of their close ties to prostitution. In his paper, Sucheng Chan argued that immigration became more restrictive towards Chinese women from the 1870s and onward.[18] In one case, before the1875 Page Law passed, the California legislature passed a series of laws, including "An Act for the Suppression of Chinese House of ill Fame" on March 21, 1866.[19] This law specifically targeted Chinese American women and allowed officials to close, arrest, and fine brothels and Chinese prostitutes. If found guilty, parties involved would be charged with a misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of six months in jail or a $500 fine.[20]

Although this act addressed the act of prostitution within communities and cities in the United States, it did not solve the problem of importing prostitutes and sex slaves. This problem was addressed in a later state legislature on March 18, 1870, called "An Act to Prevent the Kidnapping and Importation of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese Females for Criminal or Demoralizing Purposes," later codified as Title VII, Chapter I, of the 1872 Political Code of California.[21] This act essentially made it illegal "to bring, or land from any ship, boat or vessel, into this state" and required Asian women to provide proof of voluntarily choosing to immigrate to the United States and were of "correct habits and good character."[22] Ship captains would be charged with a misdemeanor and have to pay fines between $1,000 to $5,000 or be imprisoned for two to twelve months if found guilty of importing passengers of ill characters or were: [23]

> Lunatic, idiot, deaf, dumb, blind, cripple or infirm person not members of families, or who are likely to become permanently a public charge, or who have been paupers in any other country, or who from sickness or disease… are a public charge, or likely soon to become so.[24]

Because of a generous incentivization program where the California state commissioner of immigration could "retain 20 percent of all fees and commissions he collected," this new law was liberally enforced. Later in 1874, the implementation and validity of the Title VII sanction were questioned in court by the Chinese American immigrants it affected. The case that challenged the law was centered around the arrest of twenty-two Chinese American women who arrived in San Francisco in late August of 1874.[25] The women were accused by the assistant state commissioner of immigration, E. B. Vreeland, of coming with "immoral purposes." The women were all detained after their ship, Pacific Mail Steamship company, refused to pay the $500 fine per woman. These types of arrests were so common that a well-experienced Chinese man, Ah Lung, quickly stepped in to file writs of habeas corpus, arguing that they were "being illegally deprived of their liberty."[26] The case ended up reaching favorable results for Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Circuit Court after the first two trials were ruled in favor of Vreeland. In one of the proceedings, one associate on the bench compared Vreeland's role as the assistant state commissioner of immigration to that of a health care officer.[27] One critical point Chan makes in his paper is that Chinese American women were viewed similarly as a contagious disease that could endanger and infect the rest of the state. This case does an excellent job of illustrating the general sentiments that the American public held toward Chinese American women and the actions that were taken in defense of these women. Although some of the defensive actions done in favor of Chinese women were done out of a sense of justice, it's crucial to recognize many of the defenders had their own personal agendas as well. For steamship companies, Title VII sanction provided a tremendous financial risk because of the expensive fines they were required to pay for each patron the state loosely deemed as illegal. Additionally, those who did bring women over solely for the purpose of prostitution did so because of its extremely lucrative

nature. For these reasons, striking down the Title VII sanction and other similar laws stood to benefit the parties involved.

Hardships on the Home Front

Although Chinese American women faced harsh discrimination from the American public, it can be argued they faced even greater hardships from their own Chinese communities. During the nineteenth century, the Chinese women who came to America were pioneers. Although each woman came over for their own reasons, almost all of them were influenced by a male figure, whether that be her parents, betrothed, or employer. While some women came over with their husbands, others came due to false promises or slavery. In San Francisco, it was estimated that 85% of Chinese women were prostitutes in the 1860s.[28] Most of these young Chinese women entered prostitution because they were either sold by their families to brothels, tricked by the men who brought them to the U.S. through false marriage promises, or outright kidnapped. Either way, prostitution proved to be incredibly lucrative for the parties involved, netting roughly $200,000 between 1852 and 1873.[29]

Illegal prostitution in San Francisco during the mid-to-late-nineteenth century operated similarly to the slave trade in the Southern states. One of the most common stories for how Chinese women entered prostitution was because they owed an absorbent sum to individuals after signing an incredibly predatory contract that they failed to read. These young women were typically between 16 and 25 and would be delivered to their owners or stripped down for inspection to be sold to the highest bidder.[30]

One example is Ah Ho, who came to the U.S. in 1873 and served as a prostitute to pay off her passage of $630. Ho was contracted to serve four years with no wages, which were

extended by a month for every ten days of illness. One important thing to note is that pregnancy and menstrual period absences were considered illnesses.[31] Often, these girls could not pay off their debt or die before their contract was up due to the physical abuse they experienced.

Surprisingly, racism and discrimination remained present no matter where Chinese American women went. Although these women would primarily serve in Chinese opium dens, they were also present in white brothels. While their white customers regarded them as "prostitutes of the lowest order," Chinese men viewed a Chinese prostitute serving a white male as more demeaning than with their own country folk.[32] The horrors that Chinese prostitutes faced were so extreme that it was considered "fortunate" if a woman was sold to a wealthy Chinese man to work as a mistress or as a concubine. The less fortunate women were considered as a lower grade and worked in "cribs," which were equivalent to prison cells. There they would serve "poor laborers, teenage boys, sailors, and drunkards" for roughly twenty-five cents.[33] The worst fate for a Chinese prostitute was to be sent to mining camps. Here, these women led very short lives that were harsher and more primitive than in the cities. At the mines, Chinese women served more racially mixed customers and were more likely to contract a disease.

Most of these women could not escape their situation and so turned to suicide or even opium. Many opium dens that had prostitutes working would push opium to Chinese women in hopes of getting them addicted, which would significantly increase their reliance on their enslavers. On the other hand, some escaped by either running away or attracting a wealthy client. In some unique cases, Chinese American women could escape their situation and thrive. One such case was China Annie. As an enslaved prostitute in Idaho, she fled to her lover in Boise. The company that owned her, Yeong Wo Company, charged her with grand larceny "for stealing herself," and she was taken to court. Fortunately, the judge on her case sympathized with her and

dismissed her case. In another case, Polly Bemis, a prostitute in a mining camp, gained her freedom in a poker game after her husband won.[34]

Prostitution was not only reserved for vulnerable women who were tricked, bought, or kidnapped. In some cases, the distinction between wife and prostitute was thin and blurred.[35] In Voss's article, she shares a case where a husband pressured his wife to partake in prostitution to generate a second income for the family.[36] In addition to the pressures of entering prostitution by their husband, it was also customary for Chinese men to purchase women as wives, concubines, or servants through "bride price, wife sale, indentured servitude, and outright purchase."[37] Although it was culturally normal in China for these transactions to happen, to an American looking in, it became confusing to identify who was a prostitute and who was a legitimate wife.

When looking at the roles and essential significance of Chinese American women in the nineteenth century, one must examine their role in prostitution. Due to the vast disparity in the numbers of Chinese men and women coming to California, prostitution was an incredibly lucrative business. It is difficult to separate the two because prostitution and the threat of it loomed large over Chinese women's lives in America. Many families lived in such constant fear that they would board up their windows and limit the travel of females between cities and even within their own towns.[38] If a woman had not entered the prostitution industry through their own interests or from the pressure of their husband, they were most likely kidnapped, bought, or tricked into it.[39] To an extent, it is understandable why white society wished to pass legislation to stop prostitution. The problem with the legislation passed is that it focused on freeing Chinese women trapped within the system instead of curbing the number of women entering the country. For example, instead of raiding and targeting ships, officials should have redirected their efforts and raided brothels and opium dens.

Leveraging Relationships and Religion

Chinese American women faced a multitude of obstacles when settling in the United States. From experiencing racial discrimination within American society to being objectified and subdued by their Chinese male counterparts, Chinese women relied on creating tactful relationships and connections within their community to escape or improve their situation. These tactics ranged from utilizing the United States's legal system, "running" away with their lovers and relying on help from religious mission groups often led by white women. Although each tactic tapped into a different segment of the community, they all had the common denominator of relying on outside help. This shows how even though Chinese American women could pursue these alternative solutions (sometimes at great risk to themselves for fear of being captured, beaten, or killed if escaping from a brothel), they were only able to with luck and help from outsiders.[40]

For Chinese American women working as prostitutes in brothels, their options for escape were narrow. A few options they had to escape were to run away from their captors by going to the police, to a mission, or with their lover.[41] One risk with going to the police was that their captors' would report the women for thievery of a lost item, such as one report in the *Nevada Democrats* where "three Chinese were arrested" for grand larceny by "one of their countrymen…in order to get possession of the women."[42]

The captors would pay for the woman's bail and then, through the assistance of their white lawyers, have her returned to the brothel.[43] When that tactic didn't work, the captors would resort to placing a bounty on the runaway in hopes the community would bring her back.[44]

If the Chinese woman ran away with her lover, who was typically a Chinese laborer because Chinese men viewed female prostitutes as having filial piety and following the wishes of their family rather than as a "fallen woman," then these bounty posters would sometimes include him.[45] Sometimes the rewards were paid by the lover, which freed the couple to live how they pleased. Most times, though, the bounty asked for an exorbitant price, and so the couple would have to leave the city altogether and move to a new part of the United States.[46] The *San Francisco Bulletin* wrote about how couples would go to the extent of disguising themselves or hiding in wooden boxes to escape the woman's captors.[47]

The third option Chinese American women could pursue when escaping a brothel was to seek shelter with a missionary. Typically, this option was less desirable because some missionary churches had the reputation of also exploiting the women they claimed to help.[48] Missionaries would strictly regulate the activities of their charges by training them in "motherhood and industrial skills" and sometimes, even send Chinese American women to nearby farms to do hard labor.[49] At the missionary run by the Victorian ladies in San Francisco, the mission had connections to fruit growers and would contract twenty to thirty of their charges to work on the farm for four to eight weeks.[50] For this reason, many runaway prostitutes were reluctant to turn to a mission home for help, and why many would later "escape from their saviors."[51]

Putting aside the exploitation of some missionaries, to a greater extent, religious missionary groups did play a large role in assisting in helping Chinese American women. Chinese women would turn to missions to seek assistance with home life or to tap into resources to help navigate American society. Because of their delicate situation, many white-religious women saw it as an opportunity to "rescue" these "yellow slaves" from prostitution and into the

church of God, with the assumption that all Chinese American females were in need of being saved in one manner or another.[52]

In the playwright "A New Life for Ling Wang," Bertha M. Stephenson shares the general public sentiment that Chinese American women needed to be rescued from their own people. The play features a young girl, Ling Wang, who is enslaved and beaten often by her owner, Mrs. Loy. Later in the play, Ling is rescued by a Deaconess with the help of a judge. The play ends with her being dropped off at a home for Chinese girls and becoming a good Christian girl. Three key parts from the play illustrate the United States' sentiments toward Chinese Americans. First is the idea that Chinese Americans were cruel and poorly treated one another to the point of needing outside influences to step in. This is shown in the depiction of Mrs. Loy, who often punishes Ling with a hot iron and forces her to take care of all of the domestic duties.[53] The second is the portrayal of the Deaconess, who serves as the story's religious hero by stepping in to rescue Ling from her situation. With the judge character playing a supporting role, the Deaconess can shine as the most important character, which shows the importance of religion *over the law* when dealing with the "Chinese Problem."[54] One key aspect of this scene is how easily the Deaconess could dismiss Mrs. Loy, which demonstrates the stark power imbalance between Chinese and White Americans.[55] The third important point of the play is the strong emphasis on how "love and sympathy in a Christian atmosphere" had the power to revolutionize and change the lives of girls and women who sought refuge at mission homes.[56]

To a certain extent, missionary homes changed the trajectory of Chinese American women's lives. Many women who went to the mission home run by Victorian Ladies in San Francisco became wives and lived "normal family lives." [57]

Although many missionary groups prided themselves in rescuing Chinese girls, missionary groups also helped empower Chinese American women with resources to help them better navigate American culture, such as hosting English courses.

One example of such a group was the First Methodist Episcopal Church women in San Jose, who had a two-pronged tactic for rescuing and indoctrinating Chinese American women fully into Christian American society. First, they planned to hold at-home visitations where they would work with mothers and children within San Jose's Chinatown.[58] The second tactic was to hold "rescue missions" and help pull Chinese women from prostitution. [59] Although the second plan was mostly neglected, the first plan was widely practiced. By the end of the church's effort, they had maintained a 17-year-long relationship with families within Chinatown and hosted weekly visits two times a week. One of the church's main goals was to convert the Chinese women in hopes that when they returned to their home country, they would spread the teachings of God as native ministers.[60] The Presbyterian women viewed the Chinese American women as so far removed from the United States that they called this form of evangelism "foreign" missionary work done within the comforts of home.[61] This draws similarity to the evangelicalism occurring during the Civil war, where they were drawn to helping and converting groups that had experienced trauma. In both cases, missionaries were drawn to vulnerable groups to help provide aid and assistance but had the ultimate goal of conversion.

Although the Presbyterian's original goal of converting Chinese women to Christianity remained largely unsuccessful, the church was able to create a meaningful cross-culture relationship that helped improve Chinese women's situation in the United States. One of the most impactful programs the Presbyterians put on was teaching the Chinese communities how to read and speak English. Contrary to the outside perception of Chinese Americans' lack of

interest in learning English, many Chinese women were willing and eager to learn.[62] The Presbyterian women originally taught in classrooms, but only a few women would attend these, so they tried a different tactic of teaching within the home.[63] This angle was much more successful as it allowed the women and children to learn from the comforts within their homes. The lessons were intriguing enough that they attracted passerby men or those within the family to come by and sit in on a few lessons.[64] This contradicts the assumption that Chinese immigrants had little interest in learning English.

One reason outsiders may have interpreted Chinese females' disinterest in learning English is their hesitation to learn when men were around.[65] One cause for this discomfort stemmed from the fear of being mocked or made fun of by the men in their lives. [66] In other cases, though, men were the ones who would initiate the lessons by approaching the Presbyterian women and requesting that they teach their wives and kids.[67] Many Chinese immigrants recognized the power of understanding the spoken language and hoped to use it as a tool to navigate American society. Chinese American women understood that learning and using American culture was the best way to protect themselves long-term when living in the United States.

Conclusion

When looking at the experience of immigrants arriving in the United States, one commonly overlooked and forgotten group is Chinese American women. Although the immigration of Chinese American women is one of the smallest groups in U.S. history, their experience is also one of the most unique. When integrating into the United States, Chinese American women faced discrimination on two different levels, the rush of anti-Chinese

sentiments that flooded the country and from their own Chinese communities. Like their fellow compatriots, Chinese American women experienced racism and the effects of anti-Chinese immigration laws such as the Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act. In addition to the legal barriers, Chinese American women were burdened with the assumption of partaking in prostitution. Whether forced or volunteering, it created a negative assumption that they were degrading the morals within white communities.

From within Chinatown, Chinese American women were subjected to subservient roles by their fellow Chinese male counterparts, resulting in forced prostitution. To navigate these two challenges, Chinese American women turned to the meager resources available to them in the form of the legal system, relying on a male support figure or accepting help from missionary groups. It was from missionary groups where Chinese American women found the most assistance while in the United States. By utilizing the religious women's "white-savior" complex and religious zeal, Chinese American women found an, although often condescending, ally.

Too often, the experiences of American women in the United States during the mid-to late-nineteenth century get overshadowed by the American Civil War. Analyzing the rise in anti-Chinese sentiments in the 1850s helps reveal the events at play that ultimately led to the nation's first set of anti-immigration laws. Additionally, much of the research on Chinese immigration focuses on the male experience and neglects the experiences of the women involved. Furthermore, examining the challenges that Chinese American women faced in early American history help reveal some of the contexts behind the rise in anti-Chinese sentiments incited by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

Notes

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