

JUDY YUNG

UNBOUND FEET

A SOCIAL

HISTORY OF

CHINESE

WOMEN IN

SAN FRANCISCO



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A Social History of Chinese
Women in San Francisco

Judy Yung

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Unbound Feet

*To my mother and
in memory of my father*

*The world can not move without women's
sharing in the movement. China compressed
the feet of her women and thereby retarded
the steps of her men.*

Frances Ellen Harper

Terminology and Transliterations

For political reasons, I use the term *Asian American* instead of *Oriental* and do not hyphenate *Chinese American* even when used as an adjective. During the 1960s, Chinese and Japanese Americans came to recognize *Oriental* as a derogatory name that connotes exoticism and inferiority. The term *Asian American* became the preferred name in recognition of the group's common history of oppression, geographical origins, and political destiny. The hyphen was eliminated because it inferred that Chinese Americans have split identities, that somehow they are not fully American like everyone else. For the same reason and to be consistent, I do not use the hyphen when referring to any ethnic American group.

I call the first generation to come to the United States *immigrants* and their children who were born in the United States *second generation* or *American-born Chinese*. When referring to both groups, I use either *Chinese in America* or *Chinese Americans*, especially when I need to differentiate them from Chinese people in China. For example, when comparing women in China and Chinese women in America, I use *Chinese women* for the former group and *Chinese American women* for the latter. *Overseas Chinese* is used instead of *Chinese Americans* when the reference point is in China.

In regard to racial and ethnic terms, I use what is generally preferred by the groups themselves: *black*, *Asian American*, *Native American*, and *Chicano*. Depending on the time period under discussion, I use either *Mexican* or *Chicano*; *racial minority* or *Third World*; *minority women* or *women of color*. In a racial context, I generally use *white* instead of *European American*. Otherwise, I try to be ethnic specific in identifying the group by using *Italian American*, *German American*, *Jewish*

American, etc. The term *America* should be understood as an abbreviated form of *United States of America*. To be *Americanized* is to become acculturated but not necessarily assimilated into American life. To avoid the trap of associating the dominant white group with everything that is American, *Western* is preferred over *American* when the reference is to cultural practices; thus, Western dress, not American dress.

Following standard practice, I use the Pinyin romanization system for Chinese proper nouns, except in cases where the names have been commonly spelled in a different romanization system. For common words and phrases in the Cantonese dialect or direct quotes from Cantonese-speaking persons, I use the Cantonese spelling.

When using a person's Chinese name, I follow Chinese practice by giving the surname (family name) first, followed by the given name, without an intervening comma. For example, in the name Tom Yip Jing, Tom is the surname, and Yip Jing, the given name. Without meaning to be disrespectful, I generally use the person's given name instead of his or her last name whenever I refer to that individual more than once in the text. Since many Chinese Americans share the same surname, I adopted this practice to avoid confusion. The appearance of *Shee* in a woman's name indicates that she is married. For example, a woman with the maiden name of Law who married into the Low family would thenceforth be known as Law Shee Low.

Finally, although it is standard practice to indicate spelling and grammatical errors in quoted passages by the use of "[*sic*]," I chose to forgo doing so in many instances in order to remain faithful to the exact wording and style of speech, and to avoid interrupting the flow of the conversation.

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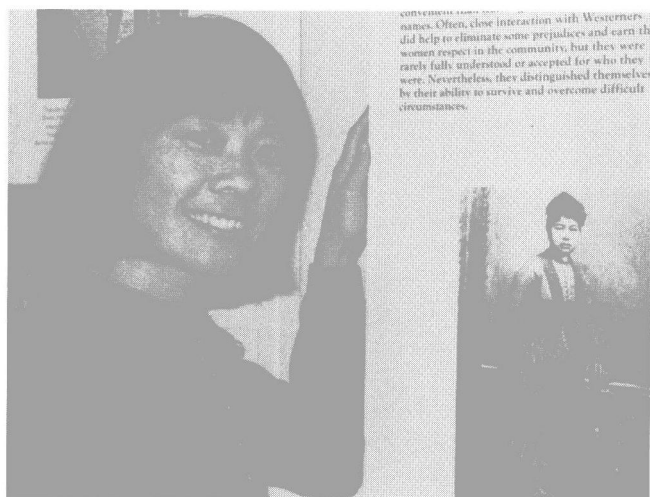
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Introduction

For years I assumed that my parents were among the first generation to come to the United States—my father in 1921, and my mother later, in 1941—and that I was a second-generation Chinese American, born and raised in San Francisco. Only after I began researching Chinese American women's history and my own family history did I discover that I was really the third generation on my father's side and the fourth generation on my mother's side. How this came about is a history lesson in itself, a lesson that I believe offers insights into Chinese immigration patterns and the different experiences of Chinese women from those of men.

Political upheavals and conditions of poverty at home drove many young men from the Pearl River delta in Southeast China to immigrate to the United States after gold was discovered in California. Among them were my maternal great-grandfather, Chin Lung (a.k.a. Chin Hong Dai) and my paternal grandfather, Tom Fat Kwong. Both came alone without their families in search of a better livelihood: Chin Lung in 1882, Tom Fat Kwong in 1911. Because of cultural restrictions, economic considerations, and immigration laws that specifically excluded them, few Chinese women came to the United States on their own or to join their husbands during these years.

Chin Lung immigrated right before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred the further entry of Chinese laborers. He was hardworking and rather resourceful. Within six years he had learned to speak English and saved enough money—sacking rice at the Sing Kee store in San Francisco Chinatown and, later, engaging in tenant farming with fellow villagers in the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta—to go home and marry.¹ In this way, he was luckier than most other Chi-

nese laborers, who never made enough to return home and instead lived a bachelor existence in Chinatown enclaves devoid of traditional family life. There were few Chinese women in America for them to marry, and antimiscegenation laws prohibited intermarriage between whites and Chinese.

In 1888 Great-Grandfather returned to China and married Leong Kum Kew (a.k.a. Leong Shee), but he could not bring her back with him to the United States because the Chinese Exclusion Act also barred wives of Chinese laborers. Only family members of U.S. citizens, merchants, and diplomats were exempt. Upon his return, therefore, Chin Lung invested wisely in the Sing Kee store in order to establish merchant status; he was finally able to send for my great-grandmother in 1893. While he continued to farm in the Sacramento Delta on hundreds of acres of leased land, amassing a fortune growing potatoes with borrowed credit and hired help, Great-Grandmother stayed in San Francisco Chinatown, where she gave birth to five children, two girls and three boys. The oldest child was my grandmother Chin Suey Kum, born in 1894. Even though she had status and the means to live well, Great-Grandmother, who had bound feet, found life in America inconvenient, alienating, and harried. Her domestic life was quite different from her husband's public life. With Chin Lung off pursuing exciting activities such as building a fortune in farming and participating in community politics, she remained sequestered at home, raising their children with the help of a *mui tsai* (domestic slave girl). So unhappy was she in America that in 1904 she packed up and returned to China with all of her children. Chin Lung chose to remain in the United States and make periodic trips home to visit.

Although their five children were all American-born citizens and had the right to return, only the boys were encouraged to do so. Traditional gender roles and the lack of economic and political power on the part of Chinese women denied both daughters that option. It was considered proper that all of the sons return and establish families in the United States while both daughters be married into wealthy families in China. Grandmother was wed to Jew Hing Gwin, a prominent herb doctor. They had seven children, my mother, Jew Law Ying, being the eldest. Unfortunately, the family hit hard times when Grandfather succumbed to opium and lost the entire family fortune. Grandaunt Chin Suey Ngon's situation was equally tragic, for her husband died only a few months after their wedding. Once married, by U.S. law both Grandmother and



Great-Grandfather Chin Lung and family in San Francisco, 1903. *From left to right:* Suey Kum, Suey Ngon, Wing, Leong Shee, Chin Lung, Foo, Wah, and *mui tsai* Ah Kum. (Judy Yung collection)

Grandaunt forfeited the right to return to the United States. Only with the support of her brother and by lying about her marital status was Grandaunt able to return to America in 1920.²

Meanwhile, on the paternal side of my family, Grandfather Tom Fat Kwong had managed to be smuggled across the U.S. border sometime before 1911. He farmed in Redwood City, California, for a few years and served in World War I. This military duty could have allowed him to legalize his status and send for the wife, daughter, and two sons who he had left behind in China. Before he had a chance to do so, though, he was killed by a car while bicycling home one dark night. His sudden death cut off the only viable source of income for his family in China. So my father, being the eldest son, found another way to immigrate to the United States: in 1921, with money borrowed from relatives, he purchased the necessary documents and passage to come as Yung Hin Sen, the “paper son” of Yung Ung, an established merchant in Stockton, California.³ For the next fifteen years he worked hard as a houseboy, gardener, and cook, finally saving enough money to repay his debts and re-

turn to China to marry. He was by then thirty-three years old. The marriage to my mother was arranged by Chin Lung himself, at the suggestion of his eldest daughter-in-law, Wong Shee Chan, who had befriended my father in San Francisco.

My mother told me, “Everyone said coming to Gold Mountain would be like going to heaven.”⁴ But although she was a daughter of a U.S. citizen, immigration as a derivative citizen through the mother was not legally permissible. And so she agreed to marry my father. After they married, my father returned to the United States alone because Chinese laborers still did not have the right to bring their wives into the country. Only after five more years of hard work and saving was he able to buy a few nominal shares in a Chinatown business, establish merchant status, and send for my mother and my eldest sister, Bak Heong, born after he had returned to America.

Just as Great-Grandmother had warned her, however, the promise of Gold Mountain proved elusive for my mother as well. My father remained a laborer all his life, working as a janitor while my mother sewed into the night for garment sweatshops. They had to really struggle to eke out a living and raise us six children. Later, when I compared my mother’s life with that of Chin Lung’s other grandchildren, who were fortunate to have been born and raised in America, I saw how much harsher her life turned out to be because of the racist and sexist restrictions that were placed on Chinese immigrant women. And I wondered how many other Chinese women suffered similar consequences for no fault of their own?

It was in the quest for answers to my own identity as a Chinese American woman—answers that I could not find in any history textbook—that I felt a need to study Chinese American women’s history. How and why did Chinese women come to America? What was their life like in America? How did their experiences compare and contrast to those of Chinese men, European women, and other women of color, and what accounted for the differences? If life in America was as harsh for them as it was for my great-grandmother and mother, how did they cope? What cultural strengths did they draw from, and what strategies did they devise to adapt themselves to this new and often hostile land? Were things easier for their American-born daughters? What difference did their lives make to their families, community, and the larger society?

As I attempted to write a social history of Chinese American women and provide a viable framework by which to understand how gender perceptions, roles, and relationships changed because of these women’s work, family, and political lives in America, it became evident to me that