

**Life Under Shadow - Chinese Immigrant Women in Nineteenth-Century America**

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(ABSTRACT)

Racism and sexism pervaded American society during the nineteenth century, creating unusual disadvantaged conditions for Chinese immigrant women. As a weak minority in an alien and often hostile environment and as a subordinate sex in a sexist society, Chinese women suffered from double oppression of racism and sexism. In addition, the Chinese cultural values of women's passivity and submission existed within Chinese communities in America, and affected the lives of these immigrant women. This work uses government document, historical statistics, accounts from newspapers and literature to examine the life experiences of Chinese immigrant women and American attitudes towards them, and to analyze the roots of the oppression of racism and sexism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of Chinese American women is a closed book to the public. These unknown females, despite the fact that they have been in the United States since the middle of the nineteenth century, remain invisible in American history. In recent months of research, though having searched energetically for relevant materials, I could not find a single book-length study of this subject. Sketchy discussions appear only in books and journals dealing with broader themes such as Chinese immigration to the United States, the problems of assimilation, and the history of Chinese women (mainly in China). Added to this difficulty is the lack of first-hand materials from these women. Most of them were illiterate, and, moreover, their culture discouraged them from expressing themselves.

However, information about them could be found in some documents, newspapers, journals and literature of the last century. From these fragmentary materials, I see a gloomy picture of Chinese women in nineteenth-century America. Coming from the feudal society of old China, Chinese women began life as the victims of feudal traditions; once settled in America, they faced a hard struggle as a weak minority in an alien and often hostile environment, and as women in a sexist society. Their bitter experience in this

country was a story of the double oppression of racism and sexism, a story of struggle and groans , of blood and tears.

When Chinese women first appeared on the streets of American cities, they aroused much attention. Who were they? How did they come from the far shore of the Pacific? What kind of life did they live in this foreign land? The first part of this work gives a detailed description that reveals their identity, background and experience. These women, though they belonged to different classes, all suffered from similar oppression due to their race and gender. The second part of the work explores the American attitude towards Chinese women who were first regarded as exotic mysteries but later as unfavorable and even dangerous creatures. Here the views of the public, officials and missionaries are discussed. In the third part, I trace the roots of the double oppression of race and gender by analyzing the situations of Chinese immigrants as a humiliated race and women as a subordinate sex in nineteenth-century America. Unfortunately, Chinese women carried the dual stigma of being both --- yellow and female. Compared with both male Chinese immigrants and also white women, they bore an even heavier burden. In addition, it should be remembered that, though in America, they could hardly escape the feudal bondage of the Chinese society

from which they came. The Chinese cultural values of women's passivity and submission existed within Chinese communities in America, and affected the lives of these immigrant women. All these factors contributed to their suffering and composed the painful pages in their history.



## CHAPTER ONE -- THE LIFE OF CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN

War, poverty and natural disaster in China, the attraction of the Gold Rush in California, together with the image of America as a country of wealth and opportunity, helped bring a tide of Chinese immigrants from the south coast of China to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Among these earliest comers, there were very few women.

According to the traditional Chinese custom, women occupied a subordinate position to men in both family and society. They were expected to obey their fathers when young, their husbands after marriage, to perform household duties, to raise children, and to serve their parents-in-law. They were usually not allowed to follow their husbands away from home. For many years, the wives of male immigrants endured their loneliness with the hope that their men would return with a great deal of money or possibly send for them to settle in Gold Mountain. A nineteenth-century southern Chinese folk song expressed the tremendous sadness and tragedy of these broken families:

Flowers shall be my headdress once again

For my dear husband will soon return from a distant  
land.

Ten long years did I wait

Trying hard to remember his face

As I toiled at my spinning wheel each lonely night.(1)

Before the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the American Congress, few Chinese women came to the United States because of these traditional cultural taboos and also because of limited financial resources. After the Act, it became illegal for all but merchants' wives to immigrate. As a result, the sex ratio of the Chinese population was highly abnormal for many decades.

Let us compare Chinese population in the United States with the entire American population by sex from 1860 to 1900:

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1. Shien Woo Kung, Chinese In American Life ( Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962 ), 12.

TABLE ONE (2)

CHINESE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES BY SEX

(1860---1900)

census year	total	male	female	male per 100 female
1860	34,933	33,149	1,784	5.1%
1870	63,199	58,633	4,566	7.2%
1880	105,465	100,684	4,779	4.5%
1890	107,488	103,620	3,868	3.6%
1900	89,863	85,341	4,522	5.0%

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2. Historical Statistics of the United States. U.S. Department of Commerce,  
Bureau of the census.

TABLE TWO (3)

ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES BY SEX

( 1860----1900 )

census year	total	male	female	male per 100 female
1860	31,443,321	16,085,204	15,358,117	104
1870	38,558,371	19,493,565	19,064,806	102
1880	50,155,783	25,518,820	24,636,963	103
1890	62,622,250	32,067,880	30,554,370	105
1900	75,994,575	38,816,448	37,178,127	104

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3. Ibid.

The United States was said to be a land of promise, freedom and equality, with arms opened to welcome people from all nations. Among those few Chinese women \lucky enough to set foot on this soil, some were wives of successful Chinese businessmen, expecting a life of great comfort and wealth. Some were laboring women, searching for freedom from the bondage of feudal society, hoping to make their fortune and fulfill their dream in Gold Mountain. But contrary to their expectation, they did not receive fair treatment. Other women were brought to America involuntarily, forced to sell their labor and their bodies. Their lives were miserable in the extreme. Many bitter stories, woven into the fabric of the history of Chinese Americans, recount the tribulations of these early female immigrants.

#### LADIES IN MERCHANT FAMILIES

The early Chinese immigrants lived and worked in different parts of cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. But as the number of Chinese increased and anti-Chinese sentiments developed, they were driven to Chinatown ghettos in these urban areas, which became centers of their social and business activities. Chinatown merchants, who soon became the ruling elite, controlled district associations, dispensed jobs and opportunities, and governed the settlements. Their wives, however, were shackled to the house, not allowed to

participate in any community affairs.

Most of these women came from middle or upper-class families in south China. They were brought up with bound feet\* and lived in comfortable seclusion.(4) These ladies' quarters, always upstairs from their husbands' places of business, were furnished with Chinese articles and decorated with Chinese ornaments. Since well-to-do families always hired house servants, the hostesses' daily schedule did not include cooking, laundering or cleaning. Needlework, therefore, usually filled their leisure time. The brocades they made could be used as ornaments for their husbands and children, or presents for their relatives. They seldom appeared on the streets, except on rare occasions when they were invited by relations. Then, they would walk a block or two to reach their destination. In most cases, if they went out they sat in a carriage covered with cloth, for nothing displeased them more than having crowds of people staring at them. Now and then they visited one another, talking about their families, neighbours and food, or examining one another's new clothes and

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\* Feet binding was a feudal custom in old China. It began in the tenth century and was abolished at the end of the nineteenth century. When still young, women had their feet tightly bound to the size of about three inches, which was considered a symbol of gentility. This cruel practice made women suffer pain and physical inconvenience.

4. Otis Gibson, The Chinese In America ( Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden Co., 1877 ), 131.

hairdresses.(5) Sometimes, they went to church or received the missionaries who paid calls upon them and taught them the Bible and English.(6) A favorite entertainment was the Chinese classical opera performed in a Chinatown theater, where they spent evenings in boxes apart from men. Rarely were they found in company with their husbands and children in public places like the park or the fair.(7) One missionary woman writing in 1880 reported that a woman in San Francisco "had never crossed the threshold since her arrival from China seven years before".(8) Another reporter described the situation of a merchant's wife who had lived in San Francisco for six years and never seen the streets of the city. One day she begged her carriage driver to give her a chance, only one chance, to see the city outside of the carriage(9).

The quiet life of these wealthy wives, however, was sometimes affected by the racial prejudice of the larger

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5. Sui Seen Far, "The Chinese Women In America" , The Land Of Sunshine Vol.6 (1897): 60-64.

6. Judy Yung, Chinese Women In America---A Pictorial History (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 30.

7. Limin Chu, The Image Of China And The Chinese In The Overland Monthly 1868-1875 ( San Francisco: Duk University Press,1965 ), 72.

8. Cathy Luchetti in collaboration with Carol Lowell, Women Of The West ( Antelope Island Press, 1982 ), 52.

9. Ibid.

Society. As the number of Chinese immigrants increased, overcrowding became a problem in Chinatowns. The San Francisco Municipal Report for the years 1884-1885 listed a total population of 30,360 in Chinatown's twelve square blocks.(10) Most of the living quarters were above stores or converted structures, which once housed a predominantly male population. The rooms were badly ventilated, and essential sanitary facilities were lacking. Throughout the crowded Chinatown in San Francisco, not a single detached home could be found.(11) Some well-to-do families preferred to live outside of Chinatown, but they could not get quarters elsewhere at any price. A family of successful businessman attempted to move out of the ghetto four times but in vain because all the white neighborhoods refused to allow a Chinese family in their midst.(12)

Restricted by the traditional male-centered values, Chinese women rarely received any education. Their lack of knowledge and talent was regarded as a virtue. The standards for a good woman only lay in her obedience, seclusion and ability to manage a home. A Chinese businessman in New York, when anxious to have a wife of his

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10. Ibid., 33.

11. Wu Shang Ying, The History Of Chinese In America (in Chinese) ( Hong Kong: Hong Kong Press, 1954 ), 91, 94.

12. Mary Roberts Coolidge, Chinese Immigration (New York: Henry Holt Company, 1909 ), 438-39.



own nationality, sent a letter to an agent in Hong Kong, which read: "I want a wife. She must be a maiden under twenty years of age, and must not have left her father's house. She must also have never read a book ..." (13) When a Chinese father in San Francisco was asked if his eleven-year-old daughter could attend the mission school, he just simply said no. "I educate my son, but not my daughter", he replied, "because it makes a girl so mean to be educated. You let her go to school and learn to read and write, then she will get very free, and not like to stay at home". (14)

Racial discrimination also deprived Chinese women of rights to an education. Race hatred toward the Chinese was so deep that the school community inevitably reflected the anti-Chinese sentiment. In 1858, the San Francisco Board of Education barred Chinese from the public schools. The stated reason was that if "Chinese were admitted, it would drive many other students away". (15) The San Francisco Evening Bulletin of February 24, 1858, responded to the school board's decision: "Let us keep our public school free from the intrusion of the inferior races. Let us preserve our Caucasian blood pure. We want no mongrel race

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13. Editor, "A Letter Of Chinese", Woman's Missionary Advocate Vol.3 (1882): 7.

14. Luchetti, Women Of The West 54.

15. Victor Low, The Unimpressible Race ( San Francisco: East / West Publishing Company, 1982 ), 7.

of moral and mental hybrids to people the mountains and valleys of California."(16)

In 1884, a Chinese girl named Mamie Tape was denied entry into a public school near her home. Her mother, Mary Tape, who was brought up in a mission house and had married an American businessman, took the Board of Education to court after writing them an angry letter --- "Will you please tell me!" she protested, "Is it a disgrace to be born a Chinese?!" As a result of her lawsuit, a segregated school for Chinese students was established in Chinatown in 1885.(17)

#### WOMEN LABORERS

Wealthy ladies, in fact, made up only a small proportion of female Chinese-Americans. Many other women married poor laborers, and their lives were quite different from that of the merchant families. Coming from peasant or boatman families in South China, most of them had large feet that marked their status as laboring women. Attracted by the beautiful story of Gold Mountain, they joined their husbands or relations or followed their villagers to this country before 1882, in pursuit of a better life.(18) However, their dream faded soon when they were faced with

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16. Ibid., 8.

17. Ibid., 62-70.

18. Wu, The History of Chinese in America 91.

harsh working and living conditions in their new home. Day after day, year after year, they had to bear hard work, long hours and little pay in order to help with the family maintenance. Due to racial and cultural prejudice and language barriers, they could only find the least-esteemed and lowest-paid occupations.

Besides prostitution, sewing and housekeeping were the two major urban pursuits of Chinese women from 1860 to 1880.(19) The Chinatown garment industry in San Francisco began in the 1860's, and included embroidering, lacemaking, shirtmaking, clothing, sweatshops and take-home piecework. Factories were usually open from 7 A.M. to 10 P.M., and sometimes went until midnight.(20) Women, serving as cheap labor, worked from twelve to sixteen hours a day and six or even seven days a week. Those who worked in the factories were often single. Married seamstresses were usually widows or women whose husbands worked in similar lines of business like tailoring. Receiving materials through Chinese subcontractors, they tended to work at home so that they could care for the household at the same time. According to the California State Bureau of Labor Statistics, Chinese

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19. See Table Three.

20. Dean Lan, "The Chinatown Sweatshops" in Ameriasian No. 1 (1972): 43-45.

seamstresses had wages as low as fifty cents per day.(21)

Margret Lowe was an immigrant wife who joined her husband in America in her twenties. But a few years later she became a widow and the family's sole provider. It was an arduous struggle for her to raise three children on her own. She recalled the hard times when she worked in the San Francisco garment industry:

I worked the whole weeks. I always brought home work --- embroidered flowers to make money. I never go to somebody's house. I hadn't got time. Sometimes the next door neighbors came over to my house to talk a little bit. Sunday? Same work at home. I be mother, I be father. I had to make money and take care of children. I sewed evening gowns and wedding dresses. (sewing a \$50 dress for 50c) I worked day and night. I worked my whole life.(22)

Housekeeping was another common way Chinese women could earn a living. They served both white and wealthy Chinese families. Some married women worked together with their husbands in white families as "live-in couple servants". The husband was often the cook, while the wife was responsible for washing, cleaning and caring for children. Since the employees provided them with food and lodging,

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21. Lucie Cheng Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women in Nineteenth-century California", in Women of America ed. Carol Berkin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 225-26.

22. Ginger Chih, A Place Called Chinese America (New York: World Publishing Co., 1982), 68.

they received no or very low cash payments.(23)

Other servants were widows or former prostitutes in their late 40's and 50's. Some, especially in Chinese families, were single and in their early teens, referred to as "mui jai" (little sister). These girls were orphans or had been bought from China and held for some years by the owners. When they came of age, they could be sold to another owner or a brothel as commodities.(24) According to a missionary record of "the children of darkness" in January 1894, a girl named Tien Fook was sold in Canton at the age of five to settle her father's gambling debts. Then she followed the dealer to San Francisco. When she was ten, she was resold to a mistress who treated her very cruelly. She had to work every day from morning to night, cooking, washing and cleaning with the owner's baby strapped to her back. When she was slow, the mistress would pinch and twist her on the face, or sometimes even burn her with candle.(25)

From the 1850's on, some Chinese moved from San Francisco to California mining counties in search of gold. Later, in an attempt to escape anti-Chinese hostilities in

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23. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 240.

James A. Michener, Hawaii (New York: Random House Inc., 1959), 427.

24. Gibson, Chinese in America 220-21.

25. Midred C. Martin, Chinatown's Angry Angel (Palo Alto: Pacific Books Publishers, 1977), 46.

cities, more settled in remote rural areas of Oregon, Nevada, Washington, Idaho and Montana. Female laborers, in small number, accompanied men and worked just as energetically. Though most Chinese women in the mining and rural areas were prostitutes, according to the 1860, 1870 and 1880 population censuses, some were listed as miners, railroad workers, housekeepers and laundresses. Female miners and railroad laborers, between the ages of 24 and 40, performed the same back-breaking work as their male counterparts. (26) Besides keeping their own household, some helped their husbands in small laundries and restaurants, cut and dried fruit in orchards, or tended livestock in ranches. The fishermen's womenfolk helped haul in the boat and unload the catch, or they dried fish and shrimp. (27)

For a long time, the life of such women was a continuous hard struggle for survival. These women, often called "China Mary", were not fully understood or accepted by their white neighbors because of cultural prejudice and language barriers. As the years went by, they lived in segregated Chinese communities where they kept a life style in the traditional Chinese way and had infrequent contacts with the larger society. (28)

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26. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 239.

27. Chu, The Image Of China And Chinese 71.

28. Yung, Chinese Women 24-25.

TABLE THREE (29)

OCCUPATION OF CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN

(in the order of frequency)

1860	1870	1880
prostitute	prostitute	housekeeper
laundress	housekeeper	prostitute
miner and railroad worker	laundress	seamstress
seamstress	seamstress	laundress
housekeeper	miner and railroad worker	cook
cook	fisherman	entertainer (actress and theatrical performer)
gardener	cook	miner and railroad worker

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29. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 236.

## PROSTITUTION

Prostitution was the single largest occupation for women in the early decades of Chinese immigration. An estimated 85 percent of the Chinese women in San Francisco were prostitutes in 1860, 71 percent in 1870 and 21 percent in 1880.(30) Most of them came from Hong Kong, Canton and the surrounding areas. Except for the very few women who came on their own in search of higher incomes, the majority came under a contract system or as the victims of luring and kidnapping.

Why did prostitution become such a flourishing business in Chinatown? The shortage of Chinese women, their economic difficulty and occupational restriction were some obvious reasons. Chinese secret societies (known as "Tong"), however took advantage of the situation and made Chinatown prostitution a lucrative trade. In the mid 1850's, Chinese prostitution became a highly organized institution under the control of a network from San Francisco to South China. The victims were purchased, enticed or kidnapped by procurers in China, brought to America by importers, and sold to brothel owners who paid Chinese highbinders, white immigration officials and policemen to protect the business.(31) A

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30. Hirata, "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutions In Nineteenth-century America", Sign No.5 (1979): 24.

31. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 226-27.



girl bought in China for \$70 to \$150 had a market value in San Francisco ranging from \$500 to \$1,500, and sometimes the price even reached \$3,000.(32) The Hip Yee Tong, a secret society that reportedly engaged in the traffic, imported about 6,000 women and netted \$200,000 from this illegal trade between 1852 and 1873.(33)

The first Chinese prostitute was a pretty 20-year-old woman, whose name was Ah-toy. Landing in San Francisco among a group of immigrants from Hong Kong in 1849, she soon became famous as the earliest Chinese courtesan in the city. For more than ten years, she continued that business in Chinatown. Later, she moved to a small county near San Francisco with her husband and became a peddler selling clams to visitors.(34)

The self-employed prostitutes like Ah-toy were few. From the mid 1850s, tongs began to control the institutions. Contractual arrangements then became a common system. The contracts were usually made by procurers and the victims' families, not the girls themselves. The terms of the contracts usually included free passage to America, an advance payment of \$400-500 and a period of service of

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32. Charles F. Holder, "Chinese Slavery in America", North America Review No. 165 (1897): 289.

33. Gibson, Chinese in America 144-45.

34. Yung, Chinese Women 14-15.

about four to five years. Few girls could read the contracts but they had to obey their families and sign with thumbprints. The following is a translation of one such contract:

An agreement to assist a young girl named Loi Yau. Because she became indebted to her mistress for passage, food and etc., and has nothing to pay, she makes her body over to the woman Sep Sam, to serve as a prostitute to make out the sum of \$503. The money shall draw no interest, and Loi Yau shall receive no wages. Loi Yau shall serve four and a half years. On this day of agreement Loi Yau receives the sum of \$503 in her own hands. When the time is out Loi Yau may be her own master, and no man shall trouble her. If she runs away before the time is out and any expense is incurred in catching, then Loi Yau must pay the expense. If she shall be sick at any time for more than ten days she shall make up by an extra month of service for any ten day's illness. If Sep Sam should go back to China, then Loi Yau shall serve another party the owner arranges until her time is out. For proof of this agreements, this paper.

(Sign. Thumbprint of Loi Yau) (35)

In another case, a girl was sold in China for \$40 and brought to San Francisco. Within nine years, she had four different owners. The longest time with one owner was four years while the shortest was only four months, each treating her badly. (36)

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35. Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration 44th Congress, 2nd session. Senate Report No. 689, February 27, 1877.

36. Joyce M. Wong, "Prostitution: San Francisco Chinatown", Bridge Vol.6 (1978): 23-24.

Luring was another method of procurement. Agents who did the luring were usually returned emigrants from a community. They made false promises of money, marriage or jobs to the victims and then brought them to the shipping port.(37) The autobiographic account of a prostitute, Wong Ah-so, was typical:

I was 19 when this man came to my mother and said that in America there was a great deal of gold. Even if I just peeled potatoes there, he told my mother, I would earn seven or eight dollars a day, and if I was willing to do any work at all I would earn lots of money. He was a laundryman, but said he earned plenty of money. He was very nice to me, and my mother liked him, so my mother was glad to have me go with him as his wife.

I thought that I was his wife, and was very grateful that he was taking me to such a grand and free country, where everyone was rich and happy.(38)

Upon her arrival in San Francisco, Wong Ah-so discovered that her "husband" had been given money by a brothel owner to buy her for prostitution. Only two weeks later, her "husband" transferred her to a Chinatown brothel.(39) A 15-year-old girl, Toy Gum, was promised a theatrical career by a procurer but later sold into slavery for \$2,000.(40) Such experiences were rather common among

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37. Holer, "Chinese Slavery", 293-94.

38. Paul Jacobs and Paul Landan, To Serve the Devil Vol. 2: Colonials and Sojourners (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 151.

40. Richard H. Dillon, The Hatchet Men (New York: Coward McCann Inc., 1962), 226.

chinese prostitutes.

When tongs did not get enough females to meet the demand for prostitutes, they kidnapped women in China as well as in San Francisco. Sometimes the victims were invited to see the big American steamer anchored at the docks, and while they were enjoying the tour, the ship sailed to San Francisco.(41) More often, kidnapping was carried out by force. Occasionally the victims were the daughters of wealthy families.(42)

Usually, before the women were allowed to board a steamer, they had to pass the examination of the American consulate in Hong Kong. There officials stamped the first mark on the women's arms and sent them to the harbor master, who would made the second.(43) After the women landed in San Francisco, they were transported to Chinatown and housed in temporary quarters known as "barracoons". There they were on display, waiting for distribution. Some well-to-do Chinese purchased the pretty and lucky ones as concubines or mistresses, and the remainders were sent to brothels of various grades.(44)

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41. C. Shepherd, "Chinese Girl Slavery in America", Missionary Review No. 46 (1923): 95-98.

42. Dillon, The Hatchet Men 237.

43. Hirata, "Chinese Prostitutes", 10.

44. C. Dobie, San Francisco's Chinatown (New York: Appliton-century Publishers, 1936), 69.

While the attractive women went into higher-class brothels reserved only for middle and upper-class Chinese, the rest were sold to inferior dens of prostitution which served poor laborers, sailors, teenage boys and drunkards. They were confined in rooms no larger than four-by-six-feet, receiving customers who paid the low fee of 25 to 50 cents each. (45)

The owners as well as the customers often treated them harshly. A few brothel owners, for example, occasionally beat some of them to death. (46) According to the records of a missionary house in San Francisco in May of 1892, a Chinese slave girl was badly beaten --- two cuts from a hatchet were visible on her head. Her face, hands were badly swollen from punishment she had received from her cruel mistress. (47)

The ending of these females was frequently a tragedy. A folk song from San Francisco's Chinatown expressed their sorrows:

A word of advice for you, dear singsong girl:  
Best to find a good man and get hitched to him.  
You want respect and happiness, don't you?

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- 45. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 232-34.
- 46. Ibid., 61.
- 47. Martin, Chinatown 44.

In a blink, a flower will wither and then no man will  
care;  
who in this world wants to pluck a wilted plum  
branch?!(48)

However, not all these girls were lucky enough to find  
a good man. Only some fortunate prostitutes were to be  
redeemed and married. Their families could hardly redeem  
them because of the exorbitant repurchase price.  
Occasionally a customer fell in love with a brothel inmate  
and married her after he paid the owner with his savings.  
When these women were able to escape prostitution, they  
usually entered working-class society as a housekeeper,  
laundress, or seamstress.

The average life expectancy of these prostitutes was  
short. In most of the brothels, they were not allowed to  
refuse a customer, even if he was obviously diseased. After  
years of service, some were hopelessly ill. They were left  
alone to die in the "hospital", a dismal and dark room, or  
were discarded in the streets.(49) The Alta California  
reported in 1870 that bodies of Chinese women were found on  
the streets of Chinatown in San Francisco.(50) Some

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48. Marlon K. Hom, Song of Gold Mountain (University of  
California Press, 1987), 218.

49. Dobie, San Francisco's Chinatown 189-91.

50. Alta California October 9, 1870.

desperate women committed suicide by swallowing raw opium or drowning themselves in the bay.(51) In Virginia City, Nevada, six Chinese prostitutes committed suicide to escape the cruel treatment.(52)

Some prostitutes tried to find their way out of misery. They attempted to escape at a tremendous risk, but only a few succeeded. Usually, the women ran away to a mission, the police station, or their lovers, but they eventually could not escape the pursuit of their owners and the tongs. The tongs often kidnapped escaped women or even used court to get them back by filing a charge of theft. Sometimes they placed public announcements on Chinatown walls, warning others who might assist escapees and offering rewards for their capture. These tong networks reached even into rural communities. One prostitute tried to run away from her owner and hid in the Nevada hills. By the time she was found, both her feet had frozen and had to be amputated, and later she died by refusing to take medicine and food.(53)

For decades these women were victims of racism, economic deprivation and sexual exploitation. The Chinese

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51. Ibid., July 6, 1876.

52. Yung, Chinese Women 19.

53. Stanford M. Lyman, Chinese America (New York: New School for Social Research, 1974), 90-94.

Exclusion Act of 1882 greatly reduced the number of Chinese prostitutes because it make their importation harder than before. As a result, prostitution was rapidly declining after the 1880s.(54)

The life experiences of these women were somewhat different. Among them, some were merchants' wives, whose primary responsibility was to bear children and raise the family. Though they remained indoors and sheltered from the outside world, racism and sexism still affected their lives. In the struggle of survival, some women had to seek a living as cheap labor, doing the least-esteemed and lowest-paid jobs. Others were forced to sell their labor and their bodies, living in cruel and inhuman conditions. From their different experiences, however, we find one point in common --- the opportunities for Chinese immigrant women in the United States during the nineteenth century were severely limited by racial and sexual discrimination in American society and by the tradition-bound culture from which they came. They suffered the similar oppression due to their race and gender. When we discuss American attitudes towards Chinese immigrant women in the next chapter, we can see more clearly that such racial and sexual discrimination did exist in American society.

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54. Hirata, "Chinese Prostitutions", 24.



## CHAPTER TWO -- AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHINESE WOMEN

The American view of Chinese women in the nineteenth century resembled that of Chinese immigrants as a whole. In the beginning, the Chinese , as representatives of an old and respected civilization, were welcome additions to the melting pot. The initial American response to them was favorable. But soon after their arrival, racial prejudice began to appear and then snowballed into a cruel anti-Chinese movement in the last quarter of the century. Similarly, American attitudes towards Chinese women altered from quite favorable to highly unfavorable.

When the first Chinese women arrived in New York in the 1830s and in San Francisco in the 1840s, they offered many attractions. Everything they did was perceived as unusual --- they dressed in peculiar clothes, had bound feet and strange hairstyles, spoke a different language, used chopsticks and played Chinese musical instruments. All these practices gave rise to the first image of Chinese women as an exotic mystery and pleasant curios. They were welcome guests in this foreign land.(1)

The first Chinese women who came to the United States were brought by American traders to the East coast.

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1. Yung, "Chinese Women", 17.

Capitalizing on the public curiosity for chinoiserie, some American businessmen imported Chinese women as showpieces in the early half of the nineteenth century.

As early as 1834, a picture of "Chinese Lady" started appearing in New York theater advertisements and newspapers. According to the New York Commercial Advertiser, this woman was shown at the American Museum at the corner of Broadway and Anthony street. Exhibited as a Chinese lady in native costume, Afong Moy was showing "New York belles how different ladies look in widely separated regions". In the following years, the New York Firm of Risso and Brown, published a lithograph of Afong Moy, titled "The Chinese Lady", seated with a backdrop of chinoiserie.(2)

In February 1839, another Chinese museum was established in Philadelphia "as a business venture". According to Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection at Philadelphia in 1839, all the curiosities were brought "from the empire" and they showed "a fairly complete exhibit of the manners, dress, costumes and life of the Chinese".(3) Later that same year, a similar museum was reported in Boston.(4)

Finding that a profit-making business, P. T. Barnum, a

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2. Lore W. Fessler, Chinese In America Stereotyped Past, Changing Present (New York: Vantage Press, 1983), 6.

3. Ibid., 6-8.

4. Ibid., 12.

New York trader, ran his Chinese museum for three decades from the 1840s. He constantly changed the items on exhibit and gave great publicity to "whatever he thought would appeal". On April 21, 1850, the New York Sunday Dispatch made an announcement that "a celebrated Chinese belle" of seventeen years old would be present with her servants in Barnum's Chinese Museum.(5) The New York Times praised Barnum, "the restless and aspiring", (6) and reported that

He had imported a genuine Chinese lady and her attendants, to preside over his temple of curiosities. This Celestial houri, who rejoices in the euphonic name of Pwan Yekoo, is now prepared to exhibit her charming self, her curious retinue, and her fairy feet (only two and a half inches long) to an admiring and novelty-loving public. Miss Pwan is a regular Chinese aristocrat, and is accompanied in her tour among the outside barbarians by a suite of celestials, such as has never before honored Christendom with a visit.(7)

On the day of the opening, The New York Express described this living showpiece "so pretty, so arch, so lively and so graceful".(8) Another paper, The New York Courier and Enquirer had this account:

It must be admitted that the Chinese beauty and her suite of attendants are the greatest attraction of the day. It is next to impossible to catch even a glimpse of a lady

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5. New York Sunday Dispatch, April 21, 1850.

6. New York Times, April 21, 1850.

7. Ibid.

8. New York Express, April 22, 1850.

of distinction in China itself. Miss Pwan Yekoo is naturally, therefore, the great sought-after by the curious in New York. Her tiny feet, her polished manners, her distinguished air, her pretty face and charming vivacity, interest all who behold her. Her Chinese maid servant, her music master and his two pretty children, en costume, add materially to the fascinations of this exhibit of China and the Chinese.(9)

Pwan Yekoo stayed at New York's Chinese Museum for some weeks and then was sent to London where Barnum's agent exhibited her in the World's Fair, for "all the nobility there were dying to see her".(10) It was estimated that, in the first decade of its opening, at least six million Americans visited the museum and got some ideas about China and Chinese people from these shows.(11)

This kind of exhibition never existed in the West. Nevertheless, American curiosity was still high. The first Chinese female landing on the Western shore in 1848 was a servant of an American businessman. The next year came the second woman, Ah-toy, who soon became known as the earliest and most successful Chinese courtesan in San Francisco. According to the descriptions in many books, Ah-toy was very famous in her day. Whenever a boat docked, the guests "would break into a run for Ah-toy's shack". Men, Chinese and American alike, always lined up a

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9. New York Courier And Enquirer, April 22, 1850.

10. Fessler, Chinese In America, 13.

11. Ibid., 15.

block long outside her house and sometimes even pistols were used to keep order. They paid an ounce of gold (sixteen dollars) to "gaze upon the countenance of the charming Ah-toy".(12) She became such a legendary figure that nearly every traveler's book mentioned her.(13) Even many years after her disappearance from the San Francisco scene, she was not forgotten. "Speaking of Chinese", one Argonaut recalled in 1877, "brings to memory Ah-toy, the first Chinese woman --- a curiosity of us then." Another remembered "the strangely alluring Ah-toy, with her slender body and laughing eyes".(14)

The honeymoon, however, did not last long as the number of Chinese increased and more women came to the West coast. In the early 1850s, there were about 25,000 Chinese in California, and a sizable city within the city of San Francisco emerged. From that time, an anti-Chinese feeling among Americans began to grow. The "fallen women", no longer a novelty, then became a major target of bitter

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12. Jack Chen, The Chinese Of America, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 63.

Yung, Chinese Women, 14.

Curt Gentry, The Madams Of San Francisco, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 50-52.

13. Ibid., 51.

14. Ibid., 58-59.

criticism.(15)

The American press played a major role in forming a negative image of Chinese women for the public. The stories of Chinese seemed the most colorful topic of the day. Editors and contributors, with a critical and hostile eye, joined in the popular attack on these poor female victims. Many of their stories were full of exaggeration and described the Chinese women as unfavorable and even dangerous creatures.

The first California census in 1850 revealed that women made up less than 10 per cent of the whole population. The majority of these Westerners were young men in their twenties.(16) Naturally, this overwhelmingly male society provided an open market for the "oldest profession". In the early years of the development of the west, prostitution became the single largest occupation for women, and it flourished in large cities as well as the mining areas.(17) In Chinese communities, the sex ratio was even higher.(18) The superfluity of males and the inaccessibility of native women had the inevitable consequence of the establishment of prostitution.

Although the Chinese were by no means the only race

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16. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 224.

17. Luchetti, Women of the West 33.

18. See Table One in Chapter one.

engaged in the business, they received all the blame for its presence. Reading the California press and literature during the latter half of the century, one could get the impression that prostitution was a Chinese "monopoly", and that the immigration of Chinese women should be restricted or prohibited in order to protect innocent American men from the evil. In The Annals of San Francisco published in 1854, writer Frank Soule wrote that, while the foreign population of the city in 1851 was generally orderly, obedient, and useful, "the Chinese might but little save with their own people. They were now beginning to arrive in considerable numbers, bringing with them a number of their women, who are among the filthiest and most abandoned of their sex..."(19) Chinese immigrants were said to be very harmful to the moral development of the country, to the spread of the white race and to the healthfulness of the city. But when one looks back upon the history of immigration in San Francisco, one would find such accusations ill-founded. By the end of 1851, the total number of Chinese women in the city was only seven while the prostitutes of other races were over a thousand.(20)

From 1852, the number of Chinese immigrant women gradually increased. With their arrival, news reports,

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19. Gentry, The Madams of San Francisco 55.

20. Ibid., 55-56.

articles and journals about them were printed. In California and before long elsewhere, it was believed that Chinese women came to America only for immoral purposes. Writer T. J. Vibian claimed that "there are thousands of Chinese women in San Francisco and on the Pacific Coast, but they are all slaves, all prostitutes." (21) Another writer, Mary Mathews, pointed out that no respectable Chinese women came to America. (22) In his book The Chinaman As We See Him, I. M. Condit showed his contempt for Chinese women. He considered that "the great majority of them are immoral", "of whom the large proportion are of bad character". (23) While talking about the white prostitution, the editor of The annals of San Francisco complained that "it is far exceeded by the disgusting practices of the tawny-visaged creatures". (24)

The press, finding the anti-Chinese stance popular, published sensational stories under the headline "Chinese Must Go". "Yellow Slavery" became a frequent theme in newspapers and journals. Such reports often appeared in

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21. Fessler, Chinese in America 132.

22. Gerge Blackburn, "The Prostitutes and Gamblers of Virginia city, Nevada: 1870", Pacific Historical Review Vol. 48 (1979): 243.

23. I. M. Condit, The Chinaman as We See Him (New York: F. H. Revell Co., 1900), 136.

24. Dillon, The Hatchet Men 39.



daily news:

At the instigation of the Chinese companies in San Francisco, forty-three girls were imported for vile purposes on the steamer China today.(25)

The Pacific mail steamer Colorado has brought a large addition to the Chinese population this week, and we learn by dispatches from Portland that an additional batch of coolies destined, according to the Chinese customs, to slavery, formed a portion of the Colorado's passengers, but the vigilance of the police who took charge of them immediately upon the arrival of the vessel and removed them to St. Mary's Hospital may succeed in spoiling the plans of their supposed masters.(26)

With these sensationalized reports, the penny press gained more readers with each edition. Very often, the readers were fed a detailed account of the Chinese girls who made desperate attempts at suicide in order to escape their miserable lives, or a shocking description of a bloody fight over the ownership to a Chinese woman. After a tong war for the control of a prostitute in October 1871, the San Francisco Bulletin's report called that one of the most horrible tragedies that ever disgraced any civilized community".(27) Writer Vivian even concluded: "Not a day passes but such violent deeds disturb the simplicity of  
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25. New York Times June 33, 1868.

26. Luchetti, Women of the West 53.

27. Fessler, Chinese in America 123.

Chinatown" because of the evils of Chinese women whores.(28) By and by, the enslavement of Chinese women became common knowledge in the West, and the public was no longer shocked by the colorful stories. A newspaper article reporting the kidnapping of a prostitute urged readers to treat it lightly, noting that among Chinese women-stealing was comparable to horse-stealing among Americans. It was a serious crime against someone's property, but not a grave offense to someone's woman.(29)

Some news reports added fuel to the fire by announcing that Chinese prostitutes spread infectious diseases that endangered the health and safety of American society. Chinatown was described as "the spot in which were congregated most of the Chinese women, who, it seems, had made it a duty to keep the hospitals always filled with syphilitics".(30) Under a huge headline "white lepers in San Francisco --- A Pest Brought from China", an article in the New York Herald terrified the public with the news that a white sailor caught leprosy in a "Chinese den while on a spree".(31) San Francisco's Board of Health issued a  
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28. Ibid., 132.

29. Territorial Enterprise June 9, 1878.

30. Gentry, The Madams of San Francisco 55.

31. Stuart Miller, The Unwelcome Immigrant (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 164.

statement entitled, "Chinatown Declared a Nuisance", in which Chinese women were charged with violation of the Health Ordinance.(32)

The fear that "the nation's bloodstream was being poisoned by Chinese prostitutes" caused an investigation of the problem by the American Medical Association in 1875. The president of the AMA warned of the "moral and physical pestilence" that Chinese women bred and urged the government to terminate Chinese immigration which was a "risk to the national health". Contrary to the propaganda, however, the report of the AMA's investigation revealed nothing beyond the conclusion that "the diseases among the Chinese were transmitted in much the same manner as they were among whites".(33)

More influential in convincing the American public that Chinese women were a constant menace to American society were the official speeches and the anti-Chinese laws passed by state legislatures and Congress. For several decades, Chinese prostitution was used by politicians as a reason why all Chinese should be prohibited from entering the United States. Various legislative groups also directed anti-prostitution laws specifically at the Chinese. It was  
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32. Wong, "Chinese Prostitution", 27.

33. Miller, The Unwelcome Immigrant 163.

through the prostitution issue that politicians sought to create an atmosphere in which Chinese immigrants would be seen in an unfavorable light.

As early as 1851, San Francisco's first Committee of Vigilance was organized, and a special patrol investigated Chinese brothels. The Chinese females at that time only numbered seven. As a result of the first investigation, two of them were deported, leaving merely five Chinese women in the city.(34) In 1854, the city's first anti-prostitution law was passed, but it was used almost exclusively against the Chinese, Mexicans and Chileans.(35)

The 1860s witnessed a severe campaign against "the houses of ill fame" in San Francisco. When the Mayor loudly condemned Chinese prostitution, the president of a Chinese company remarked pointedly to him: "Yes, yes. Chinese prostitution is bad. But what do you think of German prostitution, French prostitution and American prostitution? Do you think them very good?"(36) Though we get no reply from the mayor, we do find from the annual reports of the city's vigilance police an odd view of their activities --- it was racial rather than righteous. From 1861 to 1865, only seven prostitutes were arrested, all  
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34. Gentry, The Madams of San Francisco 55.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Dillon, The Hatchet Men 231.

white. In 1865-66, the number suddenly jumped to 137, and all were Chinese.(37) The city set up a "house" called the Little Jail, which was special for Oriental prostitutes.(38)

During the next thirty-five years, the inforcement of anti-prostitution laws ebbed and flowed, depending largely upon the degree of anti-Chinese sentiment. The arrests for prostitutes ran from as low as one to as high as 839.(39) On March 31, 1866, an act for the Suppression of Chinese Homes of Ill Fame was approved, which declared that "all houses of ill fame, kept, managed, inhabited or used by Chinese women for the purpose of common prostitution, are hereby declared to be public nuisances".(40)

In 1870, the California legislature enacted another law, and this one aimed at "stopping the kidnapping and importation of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese females for criminal and demoralizing purposes". This law was enacted because "the business of importing into this state, Chinese women for criminal and demoralizing purposes has been carried on extensively during the past years, to the scandal and injury of the people of this state, and in

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37. Ibid., 229.

38. Gentry, The Madams of San Francisco 149-50.

39. Ibid., 150.

40. Wong, "Chinese Prostitution", 27.

defiance of public decency...".(41) After this law was passed, Chinese women entering the United States were restricted and required to produce evidence of good character.

Between 1866 and 1905, at least eight California codes were passed, all aimed at restricting the importation of Chinese women for prostitution and suppressing Chinese brothels.(42) However, similar laws were not enacted against white prostitution. Nor were white prostitutes charged with corrupting the morals of white youth or infecting them with contagious and ruinous diseases.

When Reverend Otis Gibson translated and published a slave-girl's contract in 1874, the anti-Chinese sentiment mounted in the West and soon spread throughout the whole country. The problem of Chinese prostitution became a national issue and even aroused the attention of President Grant who mentioned it in his annual address of 1874:

I call the attention of Congress to a generally conceded fact that the great proportion of the Chinese immigrants who come to our shores do not come voluntarily, to make their homes with us and their labor productive of general prosperity, but come under contracts with headmen who own them almost absolutely. In a worse form does this apply to Chinese women.

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41. Ibid., 27-28.

42. Hirata, "Chinese Prostitutes", 27.

Hardly a perceptible percentage of them perform any honorable labor, but they are bought for shameful purposes, to the great demoralization of the youth of these localities. If this evil practice can be legislated against, it will be my pleasure as well as my duty to enforce any regulation to secure so desirable an end.(43)

By 1876 hostility towards Chinese had become so widespread that anti-Chinese activities took on an open and legal form in the West. Meetings were held and organizations were set up against Chinese. A California Senate Resolution in 1876 appointed a committee of investigation of Chinese immigration. In October 1876 a joint committee of the two houses of Congress was set up in San Francisco to investigate "the Chinese problem".(44) In their report to Congress, the committee claimed that "The Pacific States and territories are suffering under a terrible scourge" and "the problem is too important to be treated with indifference".(45) The committee held a series of mass meetings during that year and an eighteen-day hearing in November. After the "investigation", they produced thousands of pages of statements on the topic, a large proportion of which dealt with the problem of Chinese prostitution.(46) The purpose of both the mass meeting and

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43. Miller, Unwelcome Immigrant, 154.

44. Fessler, Chinese In America, 132.

45. Report Of The Joint Special Committee.

46. Ibid.

the Congressional investigation was to pressure Congress to take legislative action to restrict or prohibit Chinese immigration.

Japanese immigrants to the United States saw the warning of the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the American Congress in 1882, and in May 1891, the Greater Japanese Association "petitioned the Foreign Ministry to curtail the departure of prostitutes from Japan". The petition read in part "...The reasons for the ban on Chinese immigration and the call for expulsion of the Chinese were many and varied, but the main one was that Chinese women were prostitutes...".(47)

Among the few American groups who raised voices to protest the anti-Chinese movement were churches. Some Christians, on the one hand, were outraged at the inhuman system of slave traffic; on the other hand, they felt great sympathy for the unfortunate victims and viewed it as their duty to rescue the helpless Chinese females.(48)

The Reverend Wilbur Choy, the first Asian American bishop in San Francisco, pointed out that the church played a significant role during this intensely anti-Chinese period:

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47. Yuji Ichioka, "Japanese Prostitutes In Nineteenth-century America", Ameriasia Journal, 4:1 (1977): 11.

48. Laurene McClain, "Donaldina Cameron: A Reappraisal", Pacific Historian, No.3 (1983): 24-31.



The churches of that period were very much interested in missionary work... . They felt that they needed to be the ones to speak up for and stand up for the Chinese who had been mistreated here. When the criticism of the Chinese was that they didn't understand English, that they spoke a foreign tongue, it was the churches that established English classes for them. When they were called heathens and idol worshipers, the churches not only had English classes but Bible classes as part of their evangelistic effort to convert Chinese to Christianity.

At the time when anti-Chinese feelings were strongest, when there were all kinds of anti-Chinese legislation, almost the only ones to speak up in congressional committee for Chinese were the American missionaries. Among the Methodists who spoke up very strongly against that kind of legislation was Otis Gibson in San Francisco, our Methodist missionary, and his counterparts in the Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church and other groups of that kind.(49)

Long before the Chinese immigration to the United States began, there were some American Protestant missionaries in China.(50) They witnessed the feudal system in Chinese society and brought back to America the image of poor Chinese women, along with their sympathy and enthusiasm for rescuing them. In their missionary periodicals such as Missionary Review and Missionary Herald, some articles strongly condemned infanticide, violent crimes and harsh treatment of women in China, and some criticized the evils of Chinese girl slavery. According to the reports of missionaries, the Celestial

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49. Chih, A Place Called Chinese America, 42-43.

50. Miller, The Unwelcom Immigrant, 57.

females lived in "perpetual humiliation and wretchedness".(51)

In 1857, missionaries in San Francisco were alarmed by the news that two Chinese girls threw themselves into a well to escape their lives of slavery. Mrs. H. C. Cole then became the first who showed her concern for the Chinese women's plight, and set up the Methodist Mission as a refuge for the helpless. But the matron did not have many customers in the first decade.(52) In 1874, the Women's Occidental Board established another house, the Presbyterian Mission Home. Its directors, Margeret Culbertson and Donaldina Cameron, successfully conducted numerous rescue raids and freed hundreds of victims from bondage.(53) These women were zealous in their self-righteousness as showed in an except from a poem written by one of the mission workers:

Go out in the streets and the lanes of the city,  
And raise up the fallen o'erwhelmed in their sin;  
Oh, give of thy love, thy forgiveness, and pity;  
Go out in the by-ways and gather them in.(54)

Because of the tales of torture and brutality in

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51. Missionary Herald, (1860): 42.

52. Dillon, The Hatchet Men, 232.

53. Yung, Chinese Women, 19.

54. Wong, "Chinese Prostitution", 41.

missions spread by the tongs and brothel owners, many prostitutes dared not enter the houses in the early years of the mission's campaign. It was not until the 1890s that the Christian crusade finally turned the tide against the tongs. Missionary Donaldina Cameron was the most famous and successful one among the crusaders. She was more energetic and daring than her predecessors and had the reputation of being the "Carrie Nation" of Chinatown. With the help of the police and some Chinese men, she attacked Chinatown brothels and rescued many prostitutes.(55) In the last two decades of the century, almost one thousand Chinese women were housed and educated at the mission home. Some chose to return to China later, and others stayed in America and married Chinese Christians.(56)

There were also some missionaries who spoke for Chinese and joined in the crusade for the freedom of Chinese slave-girls. William Speer was a highly regarded Presbyterian minister who had spent years in Chinatown. He witnessed the unfair treatment of the Chinese and showed great sympathy for them. During the years of anti-Chinese movement, he showed an unusual attitude towards the Chinese: "It is a strange thing that we Americans have acquired the fashion of speaking of the Chinese with contempt and dislike. It is

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55. Dillon, The Hatchet Men, 235-39.

56. Yung, Chinese Women, 19.

a fashion --- and it should be changed."(57) The Reverend Otis Gibson, was quite well-known as a sympathizer and friend of the Chinese in the 1870s. He translated and published the contracts of slave-girls and wrote a book The Chinese in America which recounted the situation of Chinese immigrants and aroused the concern of the public. He also helped establish the mission houses in San Francisco and on several occasions spoke in court for the Chinese women who tried to escape their owners and tongs.(58) In November 1876 after a congressional hearing where Gibson testified, the mob burned him in effigy in San Francisco.(59)

The attitudes of these missionaries made a sharp contrast to the anti-Chinese sentiments in nineteenth-century America. They spoke for the Chinese and did help many Chinese women escape their miserable lives. However, they were only a small group and unable to protect Chinese from the cruel persecution in the severe anti-Chinese movement.

Negative perceptions of Chinese immigrant women were  
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57. William Speer, The Oldest and Newest Empire: China and the United States (Hartford, CT: S. Stanton & Co., 1870), 4.

58. Dillon, The Hatchet Men 232-35.

Gibson, The Chinese in America 140-46.

59. Chih, A Place Called Chinese America 43.

formed during the anti-Chinese period in America. These women were repeatedly accused of being public nuisances and disease carriers, and became the frequent targets of legislation. American society victimized and blamed Chinese females for social evil and immorality even more than their male counterparts. A look at these attitudes reveals a combination of racism and sexism. In the following chapter, we will go further into a discussion about the roots of this racial and sexual discrimination.

### CHAPTER THREE -- THE OPPRESSION OF RACISM AND SEXISM

When tracing the fundamental causes of the racial and sexual oppression of Chinese women, we find that the sources of oppression were rooted in the social conditions of nineteenth-century America. By analyzing the situations of Chinese immigrants as a humiliated race and women as a subordinate sex in American society, we can understand the social background that shaped the Chinese women into the entity they became and the reason for their unfair treatment in the white, male-oriented world. The following discussion will reflect their particular circumstances of being yellow and female simultaneously and help us find the roots of the twin oppression.

"The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable strangers but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment." President George Washington declared these principles of democracy and liberty in 1783. It is a coincidence and irony of history that, exactly one century later in 1882, the American Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act --- the land of freedom and opportunity refused the comers from the East.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the news of gold mountain in the West and the need for labor there spread through south China. Many Chinese men were attracted by the glowing story and hoped to make a fortune there. Circulars like this one, issued in the Chinese language, appeared on the streets of Canton:

Americans are very rich people. They want the Chinaman to come and will make him welcome. There will be big pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description. It is a nice country, without mandarines and soldiers. All alike; big man no larger than little man. And it will not be a strange country. China God is there. Never fear, and you will be lucky...(1)

When Chinese came to California in large numbers, however, their hopes and joys in savoring immediate fortune soon fled. Before long they came to learn that the unbounded opportunity in the Golden West did not exist for them, because their different color and appearance, their different culture and manners, set them apart from the majority of American society. Their experiences were summed up by John F. Swift, one of the members of the Congressional Investigating Committee on Chinese Immigration in 1877: "Before 1852, the Chinese were allowed to turn out and celebrate the Fourth of July, and it was considered a happy thing. In 1862 they would have been

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1. John W. Caughey, Gold is the Cornerstone , (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 321.

mobbed. In 1872 they would have been burned at the stake."(2) And in 1882, they were barred from the country.

From the first decade of their arrival, Chinese immigrants were deprived of political and legal rights. The most brutal instance of legal discrimination against the Chinese was established in 1854 by the Supreme Court of the State of California. In the case of People v. George W. Hall, a white man convicted of murder on the testimony of a Chinese witness appealed to the Supreme Court. The judge held that Chinese belonged to the category of Negro, mulatto, and Indian, who were not allowed by law to give evidence in favor of, or against, a white man. He further explained that the Chinese, Negroes, and Indians were, respectively, "a race of people whom nature has marked as inferior, and who are incapable of progress or intellectual development..." He warned that, " If we would admit them to testify, we would admit them to all the equal rights of citizenship, and we might soon see them at the polls, in the jury box, upon the bench, and in our legislative halls."(3)

The result of this decision was disastrous for the Chinese as it opened the way for almost every sort of discrimination. In the following decades of anti-Chinese  
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2. George F. Seward, Chinese Immigration: Its Social and Economical Aspects, ( New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1881 ), 250

3. Paul Jacobs, To Serve the Devil 129-130.  
Cheng-Tsu Wu, Chink! 36-43.



feeling, many Chinese were assaulted, robbed and murdered by whites who knew that they were immune from prosecution for their crimes. In 1863 and 1871, the exclusion of Chinese witnesses was reaffirmed by the County Court of the City and County of San Francisco.(4)

In the 1870s, when many American individuals, firms and corporations in California hired "special police" officers for the protection of persons and property, the state legislature passed an act to prevent special police officers being appointed from " that portion of the city or county known as the Chinese quarter ".(5)

Chinese were even denied naturalization and immigration. For a long time in the nineteenth century, American naturalization was restricted to "free white persons" only. A federal district court judge in California, in a case involving a Chinese, ruled that "free white persons" referred to the Caucasian race only.(6) As early as 1858 and 1862, the state legislature passed acts to discourage the immigration of Chinese into California.(7) As the anti-Chinese movement became widespread, in 1882, the United

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4. Ibid. 13.

5. William L. Tung, The Chinese in America 1820-1973: A chronology & Fact Book, (New York: Oceana Publications Inc. 1974), 53-56.

6. Cheng-Tsu Wu, Chink! 14.

7. Ibid., 61.

States Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act which banned the immigration of Chinese laborers into America for ten years and prohibited the naturalization of Chinese. It was emphatically stated that " no state court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship."(8) In the next two decades, thirteen similar federal acts were passed, each creating further hardships for the Chinese living in the United States and placed harsh obstacles in the way of immigration and naturalization.(9) In 1896, the California press even seriously questioned the Constitutional provision which allowed American-born Chinese to claim United States citizenship.(10)

Besides the political and legal restrictions, Chinese immigrants also met economic discrimination. The first special tax imposed on Chinese was the foreign miner's license tax in 1853, requiring four dollars per month for each license. This, of course, was chiefly aimed at the Chinese, since they formed a large group of foreign miners in California. The Chinese payment amounted to about 85 percent of the total of this tax and was the largest single source of state revenue.(11) As the Chinese gradually  
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8. Ibid., 17-19.

9. Ibid., 20-25.

10. Richard Thompson, Yellow Peril, (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 206.

11. Jack Chen, Chinese American, 47-48.

diversifies to other occupations later, special taxes followed them. For instance, Chinese engaged in fishing were also required to pay a license tax of four dollars per month.(12) More absurd was the Laundry Ordinance. It required that every laundry employing a horse-drawn vehicle pay \$2 per quarter, those with two vehicles \$4 per quarter, and those with no vehicles, \$15 per quarter. Most Chinese laundries were in the third category.(13) In order to restrict Chinese immigration to California, the State law charged fifty dollars for each passenger who arrived in San Francisco but was "incompetent to become a citizen". In addition, a peculiar " Chinese Police Tax " applied to the Chinese over eighteen years of age who were not engaged in mining or some other industries.(14)

One of the severe objections to the Chinese laborers was that they had taken jobs from whites and degraded the living standard of Americans. The press spread propaganda in this way: because the Chinese replaced their jobs, " the pure women who would work must starve or sin; young people who would labor have no alternative but to steal; the mechanic who cannot compete with Chinese labor may emigrate or endure the shame and poverty that idleness

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12. Ibid., 100.

13. Chih, A Place called Chinese America, 33.

14. Cheng-tsu Wu, Chink! 26.

brings".(15) In fact, however, Chinese laborers were discriminated against in occupational opportunities. They were initially brought into the country to meet the serious labor shortages in the economic growth of California. From the beginning of their arrival, they were limited to the kind of strenuous and menial jobs that were considered " unfit for whites ", and they received lower wages than white people. At first, many Chinese concentrated in the worked-out mines that white owners abandoned. Later, a large proportion transferred to railways. They received only \$1.00 - 1.25 per day while white laborers demanded \$3.00 - 4.00.(16) According to George Seward, there were sixty industries in San Francisco into which the Chinese could not enter.(17) As a result, many Chinese turned to making a living in small hand-laundry shops or entered domestic service.

In 1879, the new Constitution of California declared that Mongolians were forbidden employment on public works. Soon after the Constitution was ratified, the legislature passed a law providing that " any officer, director,  
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15. M.B. Starr, The Coming Struggle (San Francisco: Excelsior Office, Bacon & Company, 1873), 90.

16. Rodman W. Paul, California Gold, ( Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967 ), 351-52.

Mary Coolidge, Chinese Immigration, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909 ), 342-42.

17. Seward, Chinese Immigration, 182-84.

manager, member, stockholder, clerk, agent, servant, attorney, employee, assignee, of contractor of any corporation who shall employ in any manner or capacity any Chinese or Mongolian is guilty of a misdemeanor..."(18) So frustrating was the condition of the Chinese that " a Chinaman's chance " came to be a figure of speech in the West for referring to a person's hopeless situation.

The difference of appearance and culture, the handicap of language, along with the racial prejudice of the whites, set the Chinese apart from the mainstream of American society. From the beginning, their exotic appearance, strange clothes and "ridiculous pigtailed" made them a standing joke. The cultural difference between the East and the West seemed so great that many Americans believed the Chinese would never assimilate with the people of this country and become a part of the nation. They were driven to Chinatown ghettos which became centers of their social and economic activities. For many decades, they remained strangers, standing aloof from the larger society. But even so, the inoffensive Chinese were still vilified as "dangerous", "deceitful and vicious", and "inferior from a mental and moral point of view".(19) Their customs and manners aroused concern, interference and contempt, and -----

18. Wu, Chick! 67-69.

19. Ibid., 19.

numerous local and state laws attacked them even on such minor details as:

Sidewalk Ordinance, 1870: Prohibited persons from walking on sidewalks while using poles to carry goods.(20) ( It was the custom of Chinese laborers to carry goods with pole.)

Cubic Air Ordinance, 1870: Required every lodging house to have no less than 500 cubic feet of air space for each lodger.(21) ( Overcrowding was a problem in Chinatown spaces but the Chinese found no place to move to. Many people failed to pay the fines and went to jail.)

Queue Ordinance, 1873: Stated that every Chinese prisoner in jail should have his hair cut to one inch in length.(22) ( In China, all China men had to wear their hair in queues to demonstrate their submission to Manchu rule. Without their queues, immigrants would not be able to return home.)

As William Speer remarked, " It was the saddest feature of the terrible trials of the Chinese that so many of them were inflicted in the name of the law ".(23) Indeed, numerous legal restrictions were enacted to prohibit them

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20. Chih, A Place Called Chinese America 33.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Seward, Chinese Immigration 40.

from exercising their rights as free persons. On the contrary, however, when thousands of Chinese became the victims of robbery, mob violence and murder during the anti-Chinese movement, there was not a single law to protect them and punish the offenders.

That was the "fair play" in this land of democracy, equality and justice! When we trace the causes of the suffering of Chinese, we find that it is just because they were non-white. Incredible and unreasonable as it is, it is the fact. In 1876, Senator Oliver Morton, the chairman of the Congressional Investigating Committee on Chinese Immigration, mentioned the cause of the anti-Chinese movement: " If the Chinese in California were white people, being in all other respects what they are, I do not believe the complaints and warfare made against them would have existed to any considerable extent."(24)

When the second Chinese Exclusion Act was going to expire in the early 1900s, another wave of severe propaganda against the Chinese occurred. In the North American Review, a special column was started for a discussion under the title of " Why The Chinese Should Be Excluded? " Politicians, writers, merchants and labor leaders joined the campaign. They appealed to Congress for the renewal of the Exclusion Acts. James D. Phelan, Mayor of San

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24. Wu, Chink! 9.

Francisco, claimed that " the gates of America were thrown open to the oppressed and liberty-loving peoples of the world," but " it is well understood that the invitation of the new Republic was to the people of Europe, and that the Mongolians were not included in it."(25)

Within white America, there existed the belief that white people were superior to any other people of color, and Western civilization was higher than that of any other race. Chinese were inferior because they were of a different race. This "race philosophy" was so popular that it penetrated deep into the minds of the public and affected the whole society. The following is the testimony at a Congressional Hearing on the Exclusion Law:

Question. Why is the Italian immigration preferable to the Chinese?

Answer. They are of a different race. The Italians are of the same stock that we are, and have come to their present ditch by a slow course of development for thousands of years.

Q. They are a higher civilization?

A. Undoubtedly.

Q. Do you think the same objection would apply to any lower civilization as to the Chinese?

A. Undoubtedly. (26)

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25. James D. Phelan, "Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded?" The North American Review 169 (1901): 673.

26. Wu, Chink! 123.



In other testimony, Chinese were cursed as " inferior to any race God ever made." A California attorney-general showed his contempt: "I believe that the Chinese have no souls to save, and if they have, that they are not worth the saving."(27)

Based on the belief in the superiority of white people, many Americans considered that the coming of the Chinese posed a threat and an obstacle to the building of a "true and pure American state". One author in 1893 warned the people that, as the "lower race" improved their position and came into contact with the "higher race", the latter would tend to lower their own moral and mental standards. He further explained that when higher and lower races met on terms of equality, the vices of the lower group were bound to be particularly injurious to the higher.(28) On the basis of this spirit, Americans saw it as "an obligation" to exclude the Chinese "on the ground of self-preservation".(29) "Chinese Must Go!" became a slogan on the Pacific coast in the late nineteenth century. M. B. Starr, a writer, appealed to the white people to prevent the Chinese "invasion":

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27. Ibid., 3.

28. Thompson, Yellow Peril 205-06.

29. Phelan, "Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded?" 674.

...We regard this continent as ours; God's, but for us. As we love our family better than strangers, we have a right to love our race better than an alien one.

As we would preserve this continent for ourselves, we would exclude the Chinese from our soil.

As we are content with our civilization, we would invite for it no encounter with a Pagan one.

As we are content with our religion, our language and our laws, we would keep far from us this conflict of race...(30)

As mentioned previously, this strong race prejudice became a functional institution that exerted a great influence on the political policy, economic system and social structure in nineteenth-century America. As an "inferior race", Chinese immigrants became the victims of racism and met all forms of discrimination from the white majority. Attacked by law, defamed by the public, and battered by mobs, they suffered nearly all the injustice that a racist society could impose.

Chinese immigrant women lived within the same environment of racial oppression as their countrymen. However, while struggling in the hostile white world, their conditions were even worse than that of their male counterparts, because they belonged to another "inferior category" --- female, and suffered from the oppression of sexism at the same time.

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30. Starr, The Coming Struggle 90-91.

"...Now, in view of the entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation --- in view of the unjust laws, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States." In the middle of the nineteenth century, a group of angry women in New York issued this Declaration of Sentiments and protested against the sexual oppression in American society.(31) When we look back in history, we find that in every area of American women's experience, discrimination did exist.

First of all, American women enjoyed less political and legal power than men. They were considered inferior beings, and denied the right of suffrage. Though they were American citizens, the overwhelming majority of women were barred from the polls. In some states, women could vote in local school board elections and in municipal elections, but only in a few Western states could women vote in general state and federal elections. In the case of Minor v. Happersett in 1875, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that voting was not coextensive with citizenship and that

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31. Anne Firor Scott, The American Women (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 5-10.

states could withhold the right to vote from women as they did from criminals and mental defectives.(32)

Though as legal beings, women had no right in the laws. According to some state laws, a married women could not make a will, sell property, or request a divorce. Some states even decreed that women could not enter into business partnerships without the consent of their husbands; that husbands had the right to decide where the family would live.(33) For many decades American women struggled hard for equality of political and legal rights, but they still failed to achieve their goals in the nineteenth century.

In the economic sphere, women were treated unequally with regard to occupation, pay and promotion. By the last the century, about 20 percent of women of working age were regularly employed away from their home for wages. Most of these women did not choose to work, they had to. Among them, 60 percent were engaged in domstic service. ( The majority of them were new immigrants or the daughters of immigrants ). Some worked fourteen hours a day for the miserable wage of \$13 a month.(34) The second most common  
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32. Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America --- A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanvich, Inc., 1974), 3.

33. Ibid.

34. Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979),120

employment was manufacturing work. In almost every industry, there was significant discrimination against working women. They always performed unskilled and lower-paid tasks. For example, in the garment industry, where the largest group of factory women concentrated, men were cutters and pressers, with positions of higher authority and pay, while women did the sewing and finishing or worked on inferior materials. In the printing industry, all females were excluded from apprenticeship. Doing unskilled jobs with the lowest wage scales, women were usually paid much less than men. When the male cutter earned \$16 a week, the female sewer \$6 - \$7. Master bakers received as much as \$100 a month, and the female packager as little as \$22.(35)

In cities, better jobs were always available to men but not to women. For a long time, the whole realm of commerce and the white-collar side of industry remained male preserves. In the late nineteenth century, women were beginning to pour into stores and offices. However, men and women were rarely hired for the same kind of work. Females worked as cashier, stock clerk, and saleswomen while almost all supervisors were male.(36) Moreover, most employers

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35. Ibid., 121-22.

36. Robert W. Smuts, Women and Work in America (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 21-22.

offered women little opportunity for training leading to promotion. The training programs were often restricted to men.(37) The system was so unfair that women frequently received less than men even when they performed comparable work. According to one estimate in 1890, the average salary for male teachers was \$33 a week but only \$13 for their female colleagues.(38)

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the higher professions like law, medicine and college teaching were carried on solely by men. For a long period, they remained totally beyond the reach of women. The main reason was that women lacked the necessary educational background. At the beginning of the century, education was primarily for boys, and higher education entirely so. In many areas of the country, public schools were restricted to male students or allowed girls to attend only in the summer when boys were needed to work on farms, and classrooms were vacant.(39) No colleges accepted female students at that time.

By the end of the century, the situation had changed. Many girls graduated from high school and some gained opportunities in higher education.(40) However, the

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37. Ibid., 105-06.

38. Ibid., 91.

39. Banner, Women in Modern America, 3.

40. Ibid.,3-4.

professions were still a man's world, in which women counted only a very small number.(41)

Behind the prejudice against women in political and legal rights, economic treatment, employment and education lay sexism in nineteenth-century America. As the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration held, " The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward women, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." People usually believed that men were the superior sex and the masters of the world, and women were created to be subordinated --- they were physically and mentally inferior. This "gender philosophy" was historically rooted in the society, affecting every facet of women's lives.

Many people thought that all women were naturally suited to be housewives; their duty was to take care of family and enhance men's lives, not to share any activities in society. Any steps outside of the domestic role were seen as "unwomanly". For a long time in history, men controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and kept women in a subordinate position. However, the nineteenth century witnessed the development of the women's movement. American women began making a concerted effort to secure the right of suffrage,  
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41. Smuts, Women and Work in America, 21.

occupational opportunities and better education. For many decades, they were fighting for full equality in the American society.

The movement was led largely by white middle-class women whose problems were somewhat different from those of Chinese women. Though they shared the same experiences as the subordinate sex in the man's world, Chinese women, due to their position of an ethnic minority, had the added burden of racial oppression. The interaction of racism and sexism produced even further disadvantages for them than for their countrymen as well as for their white sisters.

When American women fought for the equality with the opposite sex and the recognition from society, Chinese women were struggling for rights as human beings. Throughout their lives, Chinese women were considered creatures of little worth but chattels of men. They not only faced sexism in this society, but also faced sexism as found in the cultures of their particular ethnic group.

Feudal ethics were the mainstay of China's social order for centuries, and the Chinese cultural values of women's passivity and submission were still widely accepted in the nineteenth century. Different treatment of the two sexes began even at birth. The Chinese saying, "A boy is born facing in; a girl is born facing out", meant that sons would carry on the family lineage, while daughters would eventually leave home and be of benefit to the family into



which they married. Therefore, daughters were always considered to be more a burden than an asset of the family.(42) To survive in hard times, parents were compelled to mortgage, abandon or sell children, and the daughters were usually the first victims.(43)

The sexism of Chinese society also contributed to the establishment of prostitution in Chinatowns. The girls abandoned or sold by their families became the frequent sources of prostitution. Like commodities, they were bought and sold, transported from China to America , and transferred from one brothel to another at the will of their owners. They had no rights to their own bodies, not to mention other life opportunities.

As for the married women, they were considered shadows, chattels or adjuncts to their menfolk. Once entered their husbands' family, they became the private property of the family. They were expected to bear male children and tend to domestic affairs. They held no important positions in family as well as in society. Recalling her own life, one Chinese woman said: " We knew nothing but to comb our hair and bind our feet and wait at home for our men."(44)

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42. Chih, A Place Called Chinese America, 61.

43. Hirata, "Chinese Immigrant Women", 228-29.

44. Ida Pruitt, A Daughter Of Han: The Autobiography Of A Chinese Working Woman, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 55.

This lower status and the view of women being submissive had their roots in China but were transported to the Chinese communities in this country by immigrants. Though in America, Chinese women could still hardly escape the feudal bondage from which they were from. They remained subordinate to their male counterparts. From their arrival on the American soil, they were treated as commodities in the overwhelmingly male world. Moreover, in the anti-Chinese movement, they tended to become an easier target of the bitter criticism from the larger society, receiving all the racial and sexual harassment without any protection and protest. In short, they lived under the most harsh environment where survival seemed almost impossible.

The combination of racial and sexual discrimination pushed Chinese working women into the lowest-paid and most menial labor. They received only about half of white women's income. Though working in garment industry as the same with white women, they earned \$3 - \$4 a week but the white counterparts \$6 - \$7.(45) They were rarely involved in the occupation of white-collar industries the white women entered. Most of them concentrated in domestic service, manufacturing and prostitution. ( See Table 3 in Chapter I ). When comparing the two lists we can easily find their difference:

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45. Hirata, " Chinese Immigrant Women ", 239.

Ryan, Womanhood in America, 120.

TABLE FOUR (46)

OCCUPATIONS OF AMERICAN WHITE WOMEN 1880-1900

( in the order of frequency )

1. domestic service (large proportion were immigrants)
2. factory employment
3. schoolteacher
4. nurse
5. saleswomen
6. clerk

It is difficult to determine the number of white prostitutes in the late nineteenth century. Since the occupation was illegal, few women would reveal their participation. But we still find some information from newspaper and literature. Even in this "lowest order" of occupation, Chinese women suffered more than their white sisters. Most of the Chinese prostitutes were forced to enter brothels under contracts. They had no personal freedom, received low or no wages, and were ill-treated by their owners and customers. White prostitutes were comparatively independent. Most of them were forced to join the occupation by economic need. Some considered it "a

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46. Smuts, Women And Work In America, 17-24.

Ryan, Womenhood In America, 119-32.

shortcut" to earn money. When they did achieve some economic success, they might leave for other jobs. In a word, their lives were not so miserable as the Chinese girls.(47)

Racism and sexism pervaded American culture during the nineteenth century, creating unusually disadvantaged conditions for Chinese immigrant women. In this society, the people's rights, jobs and life opportunities were determined on the basis of race and sex. For many decades, Chinese immigrant women suffered from discrimination due to their race, sex and cultural background. Their lives were shaped by this particular status which carried with them the double oppression.

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47. Ibid., 131.

George Blackburn, " The Prostitutes and Gamblers in Virginia City, Nevada: 1870". Pacific Historical Review, Vol.48, (1979): 239-50.

Ryan, Womanhood in America, 131.

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