

Silenced and Stereotyped: The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Exclusion in Chinese
Immigrant Narratives

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The mid-to-late 19th century was a period of transformative migration to the United States, yet for Chinese immigrants, it marked an era defined by exclusion and dehumanization. Chinese women, in particular, were vilified as carriers of disease and immoral influences, creating a dangerous narrative that legitimized their exclusion under the guise of public health and morality. The Page Act of 1875 exemplified this institutionalized discrimination, as it weaponized these stereotypes to restrict Chinese women from immigrating, effectively dismantling the familial structures of Chinese immigrant communities. This portrayal of Chinese women as morally corrupt and sexually deviant not only marginalized them but also emasculated Chinese men, who were stripped of familial ties and reduced to expendable laborers. Together, these narratives reinforced racial hierarchies and perpetuated systemic exclusion, shaping both public perception and policy in ways that deeply impacted the Chinese American experience. This paper will explore how these racialized and gendered stereotypes intersected to create enduring legacies of inequality for Chinese immigrants.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 by James W. Marshall and John Sutter spurred a massive influx of speculators, merchants, and laborers from the eastern United States, creating booming mining economies. For Chinese immigrants, the economic hardships caused by the Opium War, overpopulation, peasant rebellions, and joblessness made the promise of gold mines in America a beacon of hope. By 1852, approximately 20,000 Chinese immigrants, predominantly from impoverished regions such as Donggnan, Xiangshan, and Siyi, arrived in California. However, their presence was met with hostility, as white Americans stereotyped them as uneducated and unsanitary. Accusations of Chinese and Mexican miners stealing the “white man’s gold” fueled racial animosity. Many Chinese immigrants faced vigilantism and lynching

over job competition, with some being forced to relinquish their mining claims to white workers.

¹ Scholars have observed that “the Gold Rush was also why California led the nation in mob violence during the 1850s,” establishing a pattern of immigrant-targeted violence.²

Displaced from mining, Chinese immigrants adapted by establishing businesses such as restaurants, laundries, and produce markets. Yet, these successes were met with further stigma. San Francisco restaurant owner Norman Asing publicly defended his community in response to Governor Bigler’s racist rhetoric, writing, “I am a Chinaman, a republican, and a lover of free institutions...We came here amongst you as mechanics and traders.”³ Despite these efforts, racial hostility persisted. The 1855 California legislature denied naturalized citizenship to Chinese migrants, with some white miners openly advocating for their eradication. Historian Youcheng Qin noted that politicians weaponized race to suppress Chinese economic mobility, portraying them as undeserving of success.⁴ By the 1870s, economic depression further intensified anti-Chinese sentiment. While Chinese merchants like Macondray & Company generated annual profits of \$500,000 to \$600,000, their financial success drew resentment from struggling white Americans.⁵ National newspapers perpetuated stereotypes, with the *New York Star* labeling Chinese immigrants as “unnatural and filthy” and the *Cincinnati Gazette* calling them “a dependent, ignorant animal machine.”⁶ The violent culmination of this prejudice included mob

¹ Robert Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom: U.S. Government Exclusion of Chinese Migrants, 1848-1882,” In University of Hawaii at Hilo Press, (2016): 71.

² Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 71.

³ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 71.

⁴ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 71.

⁵ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 72.

⁶ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 72.

attacks, such as the theft of \$30,000 in gold dust from Chinese miners by white vigilantes, symbolizing the systematic targeting of Chinese laborers.⁷

The widespread perception of Chinese immigrants as unassimilable outsiders led to a series of exclusionary legal policies. Supreme Court justices echoed these sentiments, warning that continued Chinese immigration would threaten “republican institutions and constitutional liberties.”⁸ These biases resulted in legislation such as the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1888. Local ordinances, such as the San Francisco queue laws targeting traditional Chinese hairstyles, further marginalized Chinese immigrants by criminalizing cultural practices. Cases like *Ho Ah Kow v. Nunan* and *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* challenged these laws but underscored the racial discrimination embedded in public policy.⁹ The 1888 amendment to the Chinese Exclusion Act symbolized the peak of exclusionary policies. Chinese laborers, such as Chae Chan Ping, were barred from reentering the United States despite holding valid documentation. The Supreme Court upheld this restriction in *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, denying Chinese immigrants’ rights to return and reinforcing their status as perpetual outsiders.¹⁰ This legal framework effectively dismantled Chinese families, as male laborers were prevented from bringing their families to America.

The Page Act of 1875 specifically targeted Chinese women under the pretext of preventing prostitution, but its broader intent was to curb Chinese immigration altogether. The law denied entry to those deemed “physically disabled, prostitutes, communists, mentally ill,” or

⁷ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 72.

⁸ Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943* (Temple University Press, 1994), 4.

⁹ Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943*, 8.

¹⁰ Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943*, 17.

engaging in “lewd and immoral purposes.”¹¹ This policy reflected deeply ingrained racism and misogyny, portraying Chinese immigrants as inherently undesirable. The subsequent Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended Chinese labor immigration for ten years, while the 1888 amendment nullified previously issued return certificates, ensuring no Chinese laborers could return to the U.S.¹² These exclusionary policies marked a dramatic step toward the systemic erasure of Chinese immigrants. The label “laborers” was insufficient to legitimize their stay in America, as racial hostility overshadowed their contributions to society. By 1888, exclusion laws solidified a political climate that vilified an entire immigrant group on the basis of race, disregarding the hard work and resilience of Chinese laborers.¹³

Chinese women in 19th-century America were often depicted as prostitutes and carriers of disease, reinforcing their dehumanization and cementing racial stereotypes. From as early as the 1850s, complaints about the crowded and unsanitary living conditions in San Francisco’s Chinatown reflected not genuine public health concerns but racial hostility.¹⁴ Chinese women, in particular, were portrayed as embodying disease and immorality. Shah explores how public health officials weaponized these fears, framing Chinese women as “mercenary prostitutes infecting white boys with syphilis” or as uneducated merchant wives incapable of advancing their families (Shah, 105).¹⁵ This dichotomy marginalized Chinese women by excluding them from prevailing gender norms, which idealized white middle-class domesticity.

¹¹ Villanueva, “Gilded Freedom,” 72.

¹² Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943*, 31 and 47.

¹³ Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943*, 47.

¹⁴ Chan, *Entry Denied : Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America 1882-1943*, 8.

¹⁵ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Univ of California Press, 2001), 105.

The rhetoric surrounding Chinese women's supposed threat to public health was exemplified by figures like Dr. Mary Sawtelle, who described them as "vicious prostitutes" conspiring to "inoculate American families with syphilis."¹⁶ Sawtelle and others attributed a syphilis epidemic on the Pacific Coast to Chinese women, ignoring other nationalities involved in prostitution (Shah, 107).¹⁷ They vilified Chinese women as willfully spreading "germs of death" to the "better race" while absolving white men of responsibility for their infidelity, casting them instead as "young and innocent" victims.¹⁸ Sawtelle even sensationalized this narrative, claiming that "thousands nightly" flocked to the "dens of Chinese women" for debauched encounters, further dehumanizing Chinese women and inflaming public fears.¹⁹ On the other hand, Chinese women who were not involved in prostitution faced pressures to conform to white middle-class values. Missionaries regarded these women as instruments of social reform, aiming to transform Chinatown society by instilling domesticity and respectable womanhood.²⁰ Christian philanthropic efforts sought to create "proper nuclear families" by encouraging women to adopt middle-class American cultural markers such as clothing, home decor, and food preparation.²¹ Yet, even this forced assimilation did not absolve Chinese women from racialized scorn, as they remained excluded from the idealized roles of American womanhood. Moreover, Pun Chi's *Remonstrance* reflects the internalized stigma within the Chinese community itself, as leaders sought to distance themselves from the tarnished image of Chinese women. They expressed fears that Chinese women's reputations as prostitutes would disgrace the community,

¹⁶ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 105.

¹⁷ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 107.

¹⁸ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 109.

¹⁹ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 109.

²⁰ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 110-111.

²¹ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 113.

stating their desire to “be rid of this spreading poison and be relieved of this disgrace.”²² This reveals how Euro-American ideologies weaponized stereotypes to fracture and undermine the cohesion of Chinese immigrant communities.

Public health fears were deeply intertwined with moral anxieties about Chinese women, shaping exclusionary laws like the Page Act of 1875. This federal policy specifically barred Chinese women from entering the United States under the pretext of preventing prostitution but was, in reality, a tool for racial exclusion.²³ Yung’s work reveals that many Chinese women were forced into sex trafficking rings operated by Americans. Women were often coached to bypass immigration restrictions by posing as U.S. citizens or wives of citizens, using forged documents such as “red certificates” to evade scrutiny.²⁴ The conflation of public health crises with Chinese women’s supposed immorality persisted into the early 20th century. Reformers decried prostitution as a moral and social vice, but their efforts were galvanized only when white women became victims of trafficking. Yung notes that “melodramatic stories of innocent white women” tricked into prostitution spurred legislative changes like the 1910 White Slave Traffic Act, while Chinese women received no such sympathy.²⁵ This double standard underscores how deeply entrenched racism shaped public and legal responses to prostitution. Shah also highlights how public health officials proposed aggressive measures targeting Chinese women, such as deploying health police to track and quarantine syphilis cases. These efforts reflected eugenic

²² Chi Pun, “A Remonstrance from the Chinese in California to the Congress of the United States,” In *The Oldest and the Newest Empire*, ed. William Speer, (1870), 6.

²³ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 110.

²⁴ Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet : A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (University of California Press, 2000), 73.

²⁵ Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 76.

ideologies, aiming to prevent the reproduction of supposedly “degenerate” populations.²⁶ The narrative of racial hygiene bridged 19th-century anxieties about race degeneration with 20th-century eugenic programs, demonstrating the enduring impact of these stereotypes.²⁷

Despite these stereotypes, Chinese women played vital roles in sustaining their families and preserving their culture. Contrary to prevailing narratives, many women worked tirelessly alongside their husbands, contributing to family businesses. Espiritu notes that Chinese women often performed manual labor such as ironing, folding laundry, preparing food, and stocking merchandise, balancing these tasks with household responsibilities.²⁸ For instance, Wong Loy, who emigrated in 1927, spent “15 to 16 hours a day ironing in her husband’s laundry” while caring for her child. She worked so strenuously that she required Chinese folk remedies to alleviate her pain.²⁹ These contributions challenged the demeaning portrayals of Chinese women as either disease-ridden prostitutes or subservient wives. Yung emphasizes that Chinese women’s resilience and labor were crucial to the economic survival of their families and communities, even as they faced systemic barriers and cultural erasure.³⁰ By maintaining cultural practices while adapting to American society, Chinese women demonstrated agency in a society determined to marginalize them.

The exclusion of Chinese women from immigration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries significantly contributed to the isolation and dehumanization of Chinese men. This exclusion, driven by stereotypes about Chinese women, reinforced perceptions of Chinese men

²⁶ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 110.

²⁷ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 110

²⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men* (Sage Publications, 1997), 37.

²⁹ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 37.

³⁰ Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 78.

as weak and subordinate.³¹ The U.S. preference for “male workers but not their families” reduced Chinese men to laboring bodies, dehumanized as tools for economic exploitation without familial or social stability.³² While this undermined some patriarchal values Chinese men might have brought from China, it also left many men stigmatized as “nonproductive” by American society and forced them to endure life without the dignity of family connections.³³

The Page Law of 1875, with its anti prostitution clause, exacerbated this situation, creating communities with skewed sex ratios. By 1882, the ratio of men to women in Chinese immigrant communities had already reached 27 to 1.³⁴ This imbalance fueled racist narratives portraying Chinese men as incapable of “keeping” their women from prostitution, further emasculating them in public perception. Propaganda at the time depicted Chinese men as small, weak, and subservient laborers, often with queues, tirelessly working manual jobs. Historians note that these portrayals denied Chinese men conjugal family lives until well into the 20th century, leading to dehumanizing conditions that left them isolated and mentally burdened.³⁵ Chinese historian Alfred Wang remarked, “No other racial group has been subjected to worse legalized sexual deprivation than Chinese male immigrants between 1868 and 1952.”³⁶ This deprivation was deeply ironic, as it stemmed from the hypersexualization of Chinese women, who were vilified as disease-ridden and exploited as commodities. This systematic exclusion and stigma contributed to what Espiritu terms the “desexualization” of Asian men.³⁷ Donald

³¹ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 23.

³² Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 17.

³³ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 17.

³⁴ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 19.

³⁵ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 19.

³⁶ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 19.

³⁷ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 19.

Goellnicht further argues that the targeted exclusion of Chinese women was a deliberate agenda by mainstream culture “to prevent any increase in the Chinese American population and to undermine the virility of Chinese and Chinese American men.”³⁸

This dehumanization had gendered implications within Chinese immigrant communities. Some men, deprived of stability and subjected to racial humiliation, turned their frustrations inward, directing patriarchal oppression toward Asian women. Espiritu observes that immigrant men often reasserted lost patriarchal power by denigrating women.³⁹ Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* illustrates this dynamic through the story of an immigrant father, forced into feminized labor roles, who became abusive toward women, projecting his emasculation onto them.⁴⁰ This behavior, traced to feelings of inadequacy in a racist society, highlights how systemic oppression fractured community bonds and perpetuated internalized misogyny. These tensions between Asian men and women persisted for generations, fueled by exaggerated Western representations of both groups. Espiritu notes that these “controlling images” created lasting resentment and disunity within Asian American communities.⁴¹ For many Chinese men, this period was marked by loneliness, degradation, and a lack of purpose. In San Francisco, Chinese laborers often spent Sundays idly on the streets because they had “nothing to do, and nowhere to go,” with one bitterly stating, “Life didn’t mean too much to us.”⁴² The exclusionary laws that barred women from immigrating, coupled with the racist stigmatization of Chinese men as unworthy of family life, left lasting scars on the Chinese American experience.

³⁸ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 19.

³⁹ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 36.

⁴⁰ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 36.

⁴¹ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 97.

⁴² Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 22.

The exclusion of Chinese women served as both a cause and a consequence of the marginalization of Chinese men. While Chinese women were hypersexualized and stigmatized as carriers of disease, Chinese men were desexualized and dehumanized, reduced to expendable laborers. This dynamic entrenched the bachelor society among Chinese immigrants and left men socially isolated and emotionally strained. The dual stigmatization of both genders created a cycle of exclusion, reinforcing stereotypes and preventing the formation of stable family networks. The exclusionary policies that shaped Chinese men's experiences also had economic implications. Ling argues that Chinese prostitution, while vilified in public discourse, played a vital role in maintaining bachelor societies and providing a convenient source of cheap labor for American capital.⁴³ While healthcare scares and missionary reform efforts sought to portray Chinese women as victims of sexual oppression, they were often exploited as commodities for economic and class gain.⁴⁴ This exploitation underscores the systemic racism and hypocrisy that defined the treatment of Chinese immigrants during this period.

The portrayal of Chinese women as morally corrupt and sexually deviant, institutionalized through policies like the Page Act of 1875, not only dehumanized these women but also disrupted Chinese immigrant communities by emasculating Chinese men and reinforcing racial hierarchies. These narratives reduced Chinese immigrants to expendable laborers and cultural outsiders, justifying systemic exclusion that shaped both public perceptions and legislative frameworks. The intersections of race, gender, and policy in this era reveal how deeply ingrained biases can erode foundational ideals of equality and inclusion. This history

⁴³ Huping Ling, "Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A Review of Sources about Chinese American Women," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 4 (1993): 463.

⁴⁴ Ling, "Surviving on the Gold Mountain", 463.

prompts us to ask critical and unsettling questions: How do the stereotypes created in the 19th century continue to inform the way society views immigrant communities today? Are policies that marginalize certain groups still operating under the guise of morality or public health? What would it take to confront and dismantle these legacies in a way that creates real systemic change? By engaging with these questions, we not only recognize the weight of historical injustices but also consider how to build a more inclusive and equitable society.

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