# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grandaunt forfeited the right to return to the United States. Only with the support of her brother and by lying about her marital status was Grandaunt able to return to America in 1920.[2]

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

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

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

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

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

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

current race and feminist theories were inadequate for this purpose, since they generally fail to integrate race, gender, and class as equally important categories of historical analysis. Race theorists tend to explain the Asian American experience in light of race and class oppression, but overlook gender; feminist scholars tend to examine women's subordination in terms of gender and, at times, class, but ignore differences among women based on race.[5] The growing scholarship on women of color is beginning to correct these incomplete approaches by looking simultaneously at race, class, and gender in explaining women's oppression and diverse life histories, but these studies often focus strictly on black-white race relations, ignoring other racial groups such as Asian American women.[6] Only Evelyn Nakano Glenn includes Asian American women in any significant way in her analysis of the triple oppression faced by women of color in the labor force.[7]

Nevertheless, the questions that these studies on women of color raise are applicable to my study of Chinese American women: Did immigration, work, and family life in America oppress Chinese women or liberate them? How were Chinese women affected by the racial and sexual division of labor under capitalism? Did the segregation of their paid and unpaid labor to the private (domestic) sphere reinforce their economic dependency on men and consequently their subordinate role within the family? And, in keeping with current scholarship that challenges the notion of homogeneous womanhood,[8] how did women respond differently to their allotted role in life? What was the extent of gender conflict within the Chinese American community, and of class and generational differences among Chinese women themselves? By addressing these same questions, I explore the intersection of race, class, and gender in the lives of Chinese American women, but only within a socioeconomic context. As a historian, I need to also ask: What sociohistorical forces were at play that can explain social change for Chinese American women in the first half of the twentieth century?

Analyzing the life stories of Chinese women has led me to conclude that their experiences have been as much a response to economic, social, and political developments in China as in the United States. Faced with discriminatory exclusion from American life throughout most of their history, Chinese Americans remained attached to homeland politics and highly influenced by developments there—including women's emancipation—until the 1940s, when Chinese exclusion ended and diplomatic relations between the United States and China broke off. Without doubt, economic opportunities outside the home, albeit lim-

ited, during the period under study did give Chinese women, both immigrant and American-born, some economic leverage as well as broadening their social and political consciousness. As they took on jobs in garment factories, sales and clerical work, and defense industries during World War II, they gained a degree of economic independence and social mobility. But of equal importance—and this was particularly true for a significant number of educated, middle-class women—their views on gender roles and relations changed owing to the influences of Chinese nationalism, Christianity, and acculturation into American life. The former two factors had a greater impact on immigrant women. Chinese nationalists who saw modernization as the answer to resisting Western imperialism advocated women's emancipation from footbinding, ignorance, and confinement within the domestic sphere. Protestant missionary women, intent on reforming urban society and "rescuing" female victims of male abuse, advocated the same in Chinatown. The third factor, acculturation, had more of a bearing on American-born women. Through church, school, and the popular media, the second generation was encouraged to challenge traditional gender roles at home and discrimination outside, to shape a new cultural identity and lifestyle for themselves. As will be shown, all three factors, to some degree, influenced Chinese American women to reevaluate their gender roles and relationships, to move into the public sphere and become more involved in labor, social, and political issues in their community. But it was not until World War II, with its labor shortages and China's changing relationship to the United States as an ally, that racial and gender barriers were lowered to allow Chinese American women a degree of socioeconomic and political mobility.

To lend symbolic significance to this study, I have chosen to organize it around the theme of footbinding. Widely practiced in China from the twelfth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, footbinding involved tightly wrapping the feet of young girls with bandages until the arches were broken, the toes permanently bent under toward the heel, and the whole foot compressed to a few inches in length. Despite the excruciating pain that it caused, parents continued to subject their daughters to this crippling custom because bound feet were considered an asset in the marriage market, a sign of gentility and beauty. So difficult was it to walk far unassisted that it also kept women from "wandering," thus reinforcing their cloistered existence and ensuring their chastity.[9] Although footbinding was not widely practiced in America (only merchant wives who immigrated before 1911, when the new gov-

ernment in China outlawed footbinding, had bound feet), it is still applicable to this study as a symbol of women's subjugation and subordination.[10]

Thus, as applied in Chapter 1, "Bound Feet: Chinese Women in the Nineteenth Century," footbinding represents the cloistered lives of most Chinese women in nineteenth-century San Francisco. Whether prostitute, *mui tsai*, or wife, they were doubly bound by patriarchal control in Chinatown and racism outside. Confined to the domestic sphere and kept subordinate to men, these women led lives in America that were more inhibiting than liberating. In Chapter 2, "Unbound Feet: Chinese Immigrant Women, 1902–1929," the metaphor is further extended as a measure of social change for Chinese American women. Here we look at Chinese immigrant women's efforts to take advantage of their new circumstances in America to reshape gender roles and relationships—in essence, to unbind their socially restricted lives with the support of Chinese nationalist reformers and Protestant missionary women. Chapter 3, "First Steps: The Second Generation, 1920s," explores attempts by American-born Chinese women to take the first steps toward challenging traditional gender roles at home and racial discrimination in the larger society. While some openly rebelled as flappers, most accommodated the limitations imposed on them by creating their own bicultural identity and lifestyle, although within the parameters of a segregated social existence, and waited for better opportunities. In Chapter 4, "Long Strides: The Great Depression, 1930s," we see how both generations of Chinese women in San Francisco stood more to gain than lose by the depressed economy. Ironically, because of past discrimination, they were able to take long strides toward improving their socioeconomic status, contributing to the sustenance of their families, tackling community issues, and joining the labor movement. Finally, Chapter 5, "In Step: The War Years, 1931–1945," delineates how Chinese women—by joining the armed services, working alongside other Americans in the defense factories, and giving generously of their time, money, and energies to the war effort in both China and the United States—came to fall in step with the rest of their community as well as the larger society.

This outline of the progression of social changes in the lives of Chinese American women is not to suggest that their status moved only in a linear direction, because they did experience setbacks along the way; rather, it suggests that their lives were constantly changing in response to conditions within a specific sociohistorical context. Moreover, although Chinese nationalism, Christianity, and acculturation encouraged

resistance to multiple forms of oppression, they also extracted a heavy price from Chinese women, calling on them to put aside feminist concerns for the sake of national unity and to go against their cultural heritage in favor of Western values. In response, Chinese women took the pragmatic course, shifting their behavior as needed to adapt and survive in America. The well-being of their families, community, and country always came first, but that did not mean passing up opportunities along the way to improve their own situation as well. Nor did women easily give up their traditional modes of thought and behavior. Like other immigrant women, mothers chose to continue or change their traditional ways according to what suited their new lives in modern America, while daughters chose to fuse selective aspects of both cultures into a new bicultural identity and lifestyle.[11]

I chose San Francisco, known as Dai Fow (the Big City) to Chinese Americans, as the focal point of this study because it has served as the port of entry for most Chinese immigrants throughout their history. As such, the city has the oldest, and until recently the largest, Chinese population in the United States (now exceeded by New York), as well as the richest depository of archival materials on Chinese American women. It also provides a diverse range of women to interview, many of whom can still recall life for themselves and their mothers in San Francisco during the early 1900s. Their experiences, of course, are not representative of all Chinese American women, many of whom led very different lives in other urban centers and rural communities during this same time period. But because of San Francisco's significance as an economic, political, and cultural center in Chinese American history, it is an important and logical place to start in documenting the social history of Chinese American women. I hope, though, that this study will inspire further research on Chinese women in other parts of the country where they have also settled.

I settled on the years from 1902 to 1945 as the pivotal period of social change for Chinese women in San Francisco for a number of reasons. The year 1902 marks the first time that the issue of women's emancipation was publicly aired in San Francisco Chinatown. This was done by Sieh King King, an eighteen-year-old student from China and an ardent reformer, who, in a historic speech before a large Chinatown crowd, denounced footbinding and advocated equality between the sexes. The year 1945 marks the end of World War II and the turning point for Chinese American women in terms of improved racial and gender relations and increased socioeconomic opportunities. In between these benchmark

years, both immigrant and American-born Chinese women learned to challenge and accommodate race, class, and gender oppression in their lives, to make the most of the socioeconomic opportunities and historical circumstances of this time period, and to define their ethnic identity and broaden their gender role as Chinese American women.

Uncovering and piecing together the history of Chinese American women has not been an easy task. There are few written records to begin with, and what little material does exist on the subject is full of inaccuracies and distortions. Thus, I have had to draw from a unique but rich variety of primary sources: government documents and census data, the archives of Christian and Chinese women's organizations, Chinese- and English-language newspapers, oral histories, personal memoirs, and photographs. Taken together, these sources, I believe, provide an alternative and more accurate view of Chinese American women than has existed before, for they show definitively that these women were not passive victims but active agents in the making of their own history. At the same time, I am well aware that these sources are biased, telling us more about the experiences of educated, middle-class women than of illiterate, working-class women; of the American-born than of the immigrant woman; of the exceptional achiever than of the ordinary homemaker. Mindful of this skewed representation, I have tried to compensate by qualifying my descriptions of Chinese women's lives and using oral histories of common, everyday women whenever available.

Government reports and census data, although often biased and inaccurate, provided important quantitative data with which to measure the socioeconomic progress of Chinese American women throughout the period under study. For example, the 1900, 1910, and 1920 unpublished manuscript censuses for San Francisco—which list Chinese women as household members, giving their age, marital status, country of birth, year of immigration, literacy, and occupation—helped to create a comparative picture of family structure, the prostitution trade, Chinese women's ability to read and write, and their occupational concentrations. The published census reports for 1940 and 1950, together with local survey reports by the Community Chest of San Francisco and the California State Relief Administration, provided additional important socioeconomic data for the 1930s and 1940s. The immigration files at the National Archives were invaluable in helping me trace the immigration experience of my own family as well as that of Chinese immigrant women in general.

Missionary journals and case files from the Presbyterian and Methodist

mission homes told harrowing stories about the plight of prostitutes, *mui tsai*, and abused women who sought the help of Protestant missionaries. On the whole, they gave a general, though oftentimes sensationalized, picture of the oppressed lives of these women as recorded from the perspective of missionaries seeking to rescue and "civilize" them. But individual cases, such as Wong Ah So's story in Chapter 2, also described the socioeconomic conditions in China and Chinatown that led to the enslavement and mistreatment of Chinese women, as well as the process by which they were rescued and then "rehabilitated." These records also revealed a spirit of resilience, resistance, and autonomy among those who chose to seek or accept the help and services of the mission homes. In addition, articles written by American-born Chinese women in Christian publications provided insights into the cultural dilemma faced by women of that period.

Digging into the archives of Chinese women's organizations, such as the Chinese YWCA and Square and Circle Club (both of which are still active in San Francisco today), yielded written records of social conditions, activities, and perspectives of Chinese immigrant and American-born women. Founded in 1916, the Chinese YWCA was created solely to serve Chinese women in San Francisco. Its records and scrapbooks offered substantial evidence of the extent to which women benefited from the organization's educational programs, social clubs, social services, and community projects. The Square and Circle Club was organized in 1924 by seven American-born Chinese women committed to community service. Its scrapbooks revealed the influence of acculturation on the lives of the second generation. Still another important scrapbook, this one belonging to Sue Ko Lee, a member of the former Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, provided the workers' view of the first labor strike in which Chinese women participated in large numbers.

San Francisco newspapers, in English as well as Chinese, were crucial sources because they chronicled the activities and documented the views of Chinese American women. From the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* came numerous articles about the changing role of Chinese American women, including ones on Sieh King King's famous speech dealing with women's rights; on Tye Leung Schulze, the first Chinese woman to vote; and on the active participation of women in Chinese nationalist causes. Of the four Chinese daily newspapers in San Francisco during the period under study, the *Chung Sai Yat Po* (literally, "Chinese American daily newspaper") provided the best coverage on

Chinese immigrant women. Its inclusion of women's issues, activities, and occasional writings—untapped until now—provided a rare insider's view of the lives of Chinese American women. In terms of periodicals that addressed the second generation, both the *Chinese Digest* and the *Chinese Press* were extremely useful in documenting the views and activities of Chinese women during the Depression and World War II years.

Oral histories, despite the drawbacks of faulty or selective memory and retrospective interpretations, added life and credence to this study, allowing women from the bottom up to tell their own history. Indeed, in the absence of writings by Chinese women, life history narratives offer us the only access to their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. I was fortunate to have at my disposal over 350 interviews of Chinese American women from the following collections: Chinese Women of America Research Project, Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco; History of Chinese Detained on Angel Island Project, Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco; Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles; and historian Him Mark Lai's private collection. Another rich source of first-hand accounts was the Survey of Race Relations, an oral history project that includes interviews with over 200 Chinese Americans conducted in the 1920s. These voices ring with an immediacy and truth not found in retrospective interviews.

In addition, I personally contacted and interviewed twenty-six elderly Chinese women and six men, all of whom had lived most of their lives in San Francisco. I wanted to learn from the women themselves what life was like for them in San Francisco during the first half of the twentieth century. From the men I wanted to hear their recollections of family and community life, particularly during the Great Depression and World War II years. Many of the women were related either to me or to acquaintances of mine. Some I had come to know through my job as a public librarian, my previous research for the book *Chinese Women of America*, and my involvement in the Chinese Historical Society of America. Their ages ranged from sixty to one hundred years old, with the majority in their seventies and eighties at the time of the interviews. Six of the women were first generation; twenty-one were American-born. Among them were seamstresses, clerks, waitresses, housewives, and professionals (teachers, nurses, and politicians). My status as an insider (as a second-generation Chinese American woman born and raised in San Francisco Chinatown) and local historian and writer with a proven track record facilitated access to their life stories. I interviewed most of the

women alone in their homes, usually for two hours at a stretch. A few of the interviews required repeated sessions and as much as six hours to complete; five were conducted in the Cantonese dialect. Once trust and rapport had been established and the women understood I was trying to write their history for the next generation as well as to set the historical record straight, I found them quite willing to discuss in detail their life histories and views on race, class, and gender issues. Regardless of their educational background, they were articulate, opinionated, and forthright in their responses to my questions, which I asked in a quasi-chronological and topological order. In my line of questioning, transcription, translation, editing, and selection of passages to include in this book, I have tried to stay true to the spirit and content of their stories as told to me. When necessary, I have corroborated questionable details in their stories against information from other interviews and whatever documentary evidence was at my disposal. As used in this book, oral histories served as one important source of evidence, attesting to the hopes, fears, struggles, and triumphs of women when faced with limitations as well as opportunities.

Though aware of the illiteracy and silence imposed on most Chinese women, I had still hoped to find primary writings or personal memoirs by Chinese American women. For the 1902–45 period, the only such published work is Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, an autobiography about the cultural conflicts of a second-generation Chinese woman growing up in San Francisco Chinatown.[12] In the process of interviewing my subjects, however, I uncovered the following unpublished writings: two autobiographical essays, one by Lilly King Gee Won about her family's involvement in Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement, the other by Tye Leung Schulze about her escape from an arranged marriage and subsequent marriage to a German American immigration inspector; a manuscript by Dr. Margaret Chung about her life as a physician and volunteer in World War II; an unpublished autobiography by Jane Kwong Lee about her immigration to the United States in 1922 and her subsequent involvement as a community worker in San Francisco Chinatown; and the private letters of Flora Belle Jan, a Chinese American flapper and writer. Together, they represent a significant contribution to the scarce published writings by Chinese American women in the pre–World War II period. It is my intention to have a selection of them published in the near future, along with immigration documents, journalistic articles, and oral histories conducted in conjunction with this book.

To further embellish the text, I have included photographs from a number of public archives and private collections. Photographs add a rich, visual dimension to this study and provide us with further insight into the hopes and aspirations, immigration and acculturation patterns, family and work life, and social activism of Chinese American women. Moreover, depending on who the photographer was and the circumstances in which the photographs were taken, they also reveal how Chinese American women were viewed by outsiders as opposed to insiders. As a series of images for comparison and contrast, photographs taken at different time periods can also serve as effective markers of social change.

Considering the myriad influential factors at play, my belated discovery of my true generational status and family history should not be surprising. For decades, anti-Chinese immigration laws discouraged the immigration of Chinese women and retarded the development of family life. Because of anti-Chinese sentiment, life under exclusion in America necessitated a pact of silence among Chinese immigrants about their past. And until recently, racial minorities and women were generally excluded from written American history. Only since the civil rights movement, the establishment of ethnic studies programs on college campuses, and the current interest in cultural diversity have studies such as this one been possible.

As the only in-depth study so far on Chinese American women, *Unbound Feet* fills the information void and restores Chinese women's rightful place in ethnic, women's, and American history, acknowledging their indomitable spirit and significant contributions. More important, by showing how Chinese American women were able to move from bound lives in the nineteenth century to unbound lives by the end of World War II despite the multiple forms of oppression they faced, this study adds to the growing scholarship on women of color and the ongoing debate about the workings and eradication of race, gender, and class oppression. Although Chinese American women have still not achieved full equality, the important strides they made during a period of great social change warrant careful study. It is my hope that *Unbound Feet* will contribute to a more accurate and inclusive view of women's history, and to a more complex synthesis of our collective past.