# Introduction

As a second-generation Chinese American woman from San Francisco Chinatown, I grew up in the 1950s with very little understanding of my own historical background. My parents, who were immigrants from Doumen District in Guangdong Province, refused to answer any of my questions about our family history, so afraid were they of having their illegal immigration status exposed. Although the elementary school I attended was almost all Chinese, we were taught a very Eurocentric male version of American history. There was no mention of African Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, or women for that matter. Every day after "American" school I attended St. Mary's Chinese Language School, where I was taught the Chinese classics, history, patriotic heroes such as Sun Yat-sen and Yue Fei, and made to feel proud of my cultural heritage. The only famous women who were mentioned were beauties like Yang Guifei, who was blamed for the downfall of the empire. Looking back at my upbringing and education, I now see why I knew so little about my own history as a Chinese American woman.

Upon graduation from college I entered the female-dominated profession of librarianship and was assigned to the Chinatown Branch Library, where I went as a child to read. I would have been content to stay there until I retired except that I became politically aware of the omission of Chinese American and women's history in the public record. After park ranger Alexander Weiss discovered Chinese poetry carved into

the barrack walls of the abandoned Angel Island Immigration Station in 1970, I was drawn into my first research project, translating these poems and interviewing Chinese immigrants about what happened to them at Angel Island. Historian Him Mark Lai, poet Genny Lim, and I ended up self-publishing *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940,* since no publisher at the time believed the subject important enough to be marketable. Inspired by the civil rights and women's liberation movements, I turned my attention to recovering Chinese American women's history after *Island* was published. With a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Women's Educational Equity Act), Genny Lim, Vincente Tang, and I embarked on the Chinese Women of America Research Project, which resulted in a traveling exhibit and my next book, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History.* Given the absence of written accounts by Chinese American women themselves and the availability of only stereotypical works by missionaries and journalists, we looked for women's stories in primary sources such as immigration documents, Chinese-language newspapers, and the records of women's organizations. We also conducted oral history interviews with 274 women of diverse backgrounds in different parts of the United States.

My enthusiasm for researching and writing Chinese American history soared as a result of these two book projects. I decided to leave librarianship and return to graduate school to improve my skills as a historian and scholar. While pursuing a Ph.D. in ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, I made Chinese American women's history the focus of my dissertation. I wanted to move beyond descriptive history and to delve deeper into the hows and whys of Chinese women's lives in a specific location during a period of great social ferment. I decided to look at social change for Chinese women in San Francisco from 1902 to 1945. The result was *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco.* By then I had accumulated a vast amount of primary materials on Chinese American women, crammed into sixteen vertical file drawers in my study. Although I had quoted extensively from these sources in my published works, I felt that my selective use of them had not done them justice. The full range of the women's voices deserved to be heard.

*Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* thus complements my earlier work, *Unbound Feet,* in that it lets Chinese women tell their own stories about how they made a home for themselves and their families in San Francisco from the gold rush years

through World War II. Without interruption, we hear their testimonies as they were interrogated by immigration officials at Angel Island; their laments at being abandoned in China by Gold Mountain (U.S.) husbands; their sorrow over being sold into servitude and duped into prostitution; their dreams, struggles, and rewards as hardworking wives and mothers in America; the stories of their daughters in confronting cultural conflicts and racial discrimination; the myriad ways women coped with the Great Depression; and their contributions to the causes of women's emancipation, Chinese nationalism, workers' rights, and World War II. By itself, *Unbound Voices* can also be used and read as a collection of primary sources, an educational tool for researching and reclaiming women's history, as well as a feminist lesson on how one group of women overcame the legacy of bound feet and bound lives in America.

The symphony of voices presented here lends immediacy, urgency, and reality to the lives of Chinese American women. Contrary to popular stereotypes of Chinese women as exotic curios, sexual slaves, drudges, or passive victims, this anthology allows a diverse group of women to express themselves as active agents in the making of their own history. Despite attempts by Chinese patriarchy and the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in America to silence them, Chinese women did manage to leave behind a written and oral record of their lives, thoughts, and feelings. For example, I found full transcripts of my great-grandmother's and mother's immigration interrogations at the National Archives. My painstaking search through Chinese-language and English-language microfilmed newspapers yielded such gems as a speech in 1901 by Mai Zhouyi, a merchant's wife, condemning the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants detained in the "wooden shed," and numerous articles by feminists and reformers such as Sieh King King and Jane Kwong Lee on Chinese nationalism, women's issues, and the war effort. In the meticulous records kept by the Presbyterian Mission Home I found the testimony and letters of Wong Ah So, who was unwillingly sold into prostitution and later rescued by missionary worker Donaldina Cameron. Oral history interviews that I conducted with Chinese women of different generations and socioeconomic backgrounds, aside from providing personal recollections and stories, led me to private letters, unpublished autobiographies, scrapbooks of news clippings and memorabilia, and family photo albums. (For a fuller discussion of my oral history methodology, see the appendix, "Giving Voice to Chinese American Women.")

From this rich array of primary materials I selected for inclusion in *Unbound Voices* a representative sampling of government documents per-

tinent to the immigration experiences of Chinese women; unpublished or relatively unknown writings by Chinese American women, including poems, letters, essays, autobiographical accounts, speeches, and editorials; and oral history interviews conducted by staff of the Survey of Race Relations research project in the 1920s, the Chinese Historical Society of America in the 1970s, the Chinese Women of America Research Project in the early 1980s, and more recently by myself for *Unbound Feet.* The main criteria for inclusion in this volume were that the entry had to be a primary source related to the history of Chinese American women and cited in *Unbound Feet.* Taken together, the selections in *Unbound Voices* provide readers with an intimate understanding of a diverse range of women-centered experiences and perspectives. We hear the voices of prostitutes and *mui tsai* (domestic slavegirls), immigrant wives of merchants and laborers, American-born daughters of working-class background as well as those with education and professional training, Christians and pagans, homemakers and social activists alike. Thus, while the stories stem from singular experiences, they are at the same time representative of the lived experiences of Chinese women in San Francisco from 1850 to 1945.

In keeping with *Unbound Feet,* I chose to arrange the selections in the same chronological and topical order, which allows us to see how social change occurred for Chinese American women when their individual personalities intersected with historical moments and socioeconomic circumstances. As I tried to show in *Unbound Feet,* Chinese women in San Francisco came to unbind their feet (figuratively) and their socially restricted lives (literally) in the first half of the twentieth century because of (1) Chinese nationalism and the women's emancipation movement in China, which raised the political and social consciousness of Chinese women in America; (2) Protestant missionary women in the Progressive era who helped to eradicate Chinese prostitution and provide a safe space in the public arena for Chinese American women; (3) economic opportunities that opened up for Chinese women outside the home in the 1920s and through the Great Depression, and then outside Chinatown during World War II; (4) the effects of acculturation on American-born daughters through public school, church, social organizations, and popular culture; and (5) a more favorable attitude toward Chinese Americans during World War II because of labor shortages and China's allied relationship to the United States. These same points are reinforced in the introductions to each of the six sections in *Unbound Voices* in an effort to lend organization, continuity, interpretation, and historical context to the women's voices without essentializing their history or interrupting their stories. For

the same reasons, I strategically placed historical references, biographical information, cultural explanations, and any critique of the sources in the introductions and footnotes whenever helpful.

Also in keeping with *Unbound Feet,* I employed footbinding as a symbol of women's subjugation and subordination to organize the selections into six sections, beginning with my mother's immigration history as an introduction to my work ("Lessons from My Mother's Past"), then moving from the nineteenth century ("Bound Feet") to immigrant women ("Unbound Feet") and the second generation ("First Steps") in the early twentieth century, to the Great Depression ("Long Strides"), and finally to the advances made during World War II ("In Step"). Thus, I begin the book with my search for the "truth" in my mother's family history, which ultimately led me to research the history of Chinese American women.

In Part I, "Lessons from My Mother's Past: Researching Chinese Immigrant Women's History," I show how complicated the immigration process was for Chinese immigrants like my mother because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers and their families for over sixty years. During this exclusion period, Chinese immigrants had to be inventive and resourceful in circumventing the restrictive policies. By comparing the official testimonies given by my great-grandparents and parents to immigration officials against the coaching book used by my mother in preparation for the immigration interrogation as well as oral history interviews I conducted with my mother, I tried to figure out how and why Chinese immigrants such as my mother had to lie in order to immigrate to this country. In the process, I came to understand the problems involved in using immigration documents to reclaim Chinese American women's and family history.

The selections in Part II, "Bound Feet: Chinese Women in the Nineteenth Century," confirm that most Chinese women led socially restricted lives in San Francisco. Sexist Chinese proverbs, the laments of a wife left behind in China, and the stories of prostitutes, *mui tsai,* and immigrant wives in America shed light on how women's lives were triply bound by racism and sexism in the larger society and by the patriarchal social structure within Chinatown. But even as these women appeared to comply with gender norms and expectations, they were engaged in strategies and activities that actually challenged these same norms. For example, while faithfully waiting for her Gold Mountain husband to return home, Kwong King You pursued an education and became a midwife in order to support herself and her children through the Sino-Japanese War years.

Most of the testimonies by Chinese prostitutes, as told through white missionary women who befriended them, speak of the horrible conditions of indentured prostitution, but also of the women's coping mechanisms and hope for escape from their misery. As reported in a San Francisco newspaper, Huey Sin, a madam and owner of seven slavegirls, decided to free all of them, but it is not clear whether she did this out of rebellion, compassion, or because of her recent conversion to Christianity. One thing is for sure, Mary Tape stands out as an outspoken woman when she publicly condemns the San Francisco Board of Education for stopping her daughter Mamie from attending school with white children.

In contrast, the selections in Part III, "Unbound Feet: Chinese Immigrant Women, 1902–1929," illustrate how women immigrating during a progressive era—in both China and the United States—found new opportunities to bring about social change in their lives. Chinese newspapers were full of speeches and articles by women denouncing the practice of footbinding and advocating women's rights and education, some of which are reprinted here. By profiling the stories of a Chinese prostitute, a hardworking wife and mother, and a foreign student who becomes a community worker, I try to compare the diverse work, family, and social lives of Chinese immigrant women and show how each in her own way accommodated race, class, and gender oppression. During this period Chinese immigrant women, encouraged by Chinese nationalist thoughts on women's emancipation and American progressive ideals of freedom and equality, began to unbind their lives by moving from the domestic sphere into the public arena, as exemplified by Jane Kwong Lee's story and the founding of the Chinese Women's Self-Reliance Association (1913) and the Chinese YWCA (1916).

The stories and writings in Part IV, "First Steps: The Second Generation, 1920s," are the richest of all because of the literacy and acculturation level of American-born Chinese women under the influences of public schooling, Christianity, and popular culture. Coming of age in the 1920s, many daughters found themselves caught in a cultural dilemma: How could they exercise their rights as freethinking individuals while at the same time playing the role of obedient and subservient daughters at home? As U.S. citizens with political rights, how should they deal with racism and sexism in the larger society? There is a wide range of responses. Some like Esther Wong acquiesced in an attempt to please their parents. Others like Rose Yuen Ow and Flora Belle Jan openly rebelled by becoming a cabaret dancer and pursuing a career in writing. The majority, however, accommodated the boundaries of race, class, and gen-

der by creating a new bicultural niche for themselves. They held on to their cultural heritage even as they became modernized in their outlook, appearance, and lifestyle, albeit in a segregated setting, as they strove to overcome discrimination.

The Chinese in San Francisco experienced the Great Depression differently than the rest of the country. As the voices in Part V, "Long Strides: The Great Depression, 1930s," make clear, Chinese American women in particular stood to gain more than lose by the hard economic times and liberal politics. Immigrant women such as Wong See Chan and Law Shee Low talk about how they became the chief breadwinners after their husbands lost their jobs and about how they found ways to make ends meet. The changing political climate encouraged second-generation women, who were less affected by unemployment, to become social activists by advocating for and providing public assistance to the less fortunate in the community. With the New Deal in place, Chinese garment workers like Sue Ko Lee took the initiative to form the first Chinese chapter of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and to stage and sustain one of the longest strikes in Chinese American history. Thanks to Sue Ko Lee's diligence in keeping a scrapbook of the strike and her willingness to be interviewed, we hear for the first time the workers' perspective on the 1938 strike against Joe Shoong's National Dollar Stores.

China's war of resistance against Japan and the United States' entry into World War II provided Chinese American women with unprecedented opportunities to improve their socioeconomic status and move into the public arena as they worked on behalf of the war effort. In Part VI, "In Step: The War Years, 1931–1945," we hear about the gathering of forces and about Chinese women falling in step with others in their community and the country to fight for the twin causes of Chinese nationalism and American democracy. Stories of women's important role in the war effort were well represented in the periodicals of the day. Included in this section are the editorials of Chinese women's organizations rousing women to action; autobiographical accounts by Jane Kwong Lee and Dr. Margaret Chung, two exemplary female commandos on the home front; and interviews with May Lew Gee, a shipyard worker, Corporal Ruth Chan Jang of the Women's Air Corps, and Lorena How, whose mother was active in the war effort. Inspired by Chinese nationalism, American patriotism, and Chinese American feminism, women gave according to their means and in so doing fell in step with the rest of the country, earning both the satisfaction of serving their country and the respect of fellow Americans.

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