Family and Marriage of Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Chinese Immigrant Women

HUPING LING

This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away. . . . I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. . . . In China I never even had to hang up my own clothes. I shouldn't have left, but your father couldn't have supported you without me. I'm the one with the big muscles.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior.

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES in a new country could very likely result in changes in family life and marriage for immigrant women. Once in a different environment and a completely new culture, the female exodus found that the relationship between them and their husbands and children were altered. Like women in other immigrant groups, Chinese immigrant women also experienced changes in their families and marriages.

SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH ON CHINESE AMERICAN FAMILIES AND MARRIAGES

Sociologists pioneered many early studies of Chinese American families and marriages. In 1947, Rose Hum Lee in her dissertation entitled “The Growth and Decline of Chinese Communities in the Rocky Mountain Region” found that thirteen Chinese families resided in Butte, Montana by 1870 and the average size of these families tended to be large, usually seven people.¹ Lee observed that Chinese women were subjected not only to their husbands’ authority but also to clan and family associations.² Despite the patriarchal control, Lee also noted, Chinese women in Butte occasionally challenged male predominance by running away from unhappy marriages.³ Two decades later another sociologist,
Stanford Lyman, examined the social life of Chinese immigrants in the United States and spearheaded the discussion on polygamous practice among early Chinese immigrants. Not simply proclaiming the practice as evidence of the inferiority of Chinese, Lyman rather interpreted polyandry as a form of marriage among Chinese immigrants due to the shortage of women.4

Despite the above works, the studies of family and marriage of Chinese immigrant women have evolved slowly. Most works on Chinese communities in America have either overlooked this aspect of family life or treated it in very terse text, with the discussions of family and marriage of Chinese immigrants only emerging sporadically and briefly. This situation continued until the publication of specialized studies on Chinese families in America in the 1980s. Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s essay “Split Household, Small Producer and Dual Wage Earner: An Analysis of Chinese-American Family Strategies” was one of the recent significant studies in the field.5 Glenn claimed that there were three distinct immigrant family types which emerged in different periods in response to particular political and economic conditions: split household (1850–1920), small producer (1920–1960), and dual-wage worker (1960–1980). “The existence of these distinct types,” Glenn stated, “suggested that characteristics often interpreted as products of Chinese culture actually represented strategies for dealing with conditions of life in the United States.”6

While Glenn’s work theoretically analyzes different forms of Chinese immigrant families in the United States, the following more recent studies provide evidence for the existence of Chinese families in different regions during early immigration. Sandy Lydon’s Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region examines the various Chinese communities in this part of California. He found that as early as the 1850s, there had been fishing families in the Monterey Bay region, contrary to the stereotypical Chinese laborers in California who generally left their families behind and worked in gold mines and railroads. As a family venture, fishing required the fisherman and his wife working jointly. While some Chinese wives went fishing with their husbands, others worked at home processing fish. Several couples even formed a fishing company, making fishing a profitable industry.7

Families not only existed in fishing villages, but were also found in agricultural areas. Sucheng Chan in This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910 discusses the presence of families among Chinese farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in 1900
and notes the age difference between married couples as being a notable feature of these families.8 Chan also noticed the polyandrous practice among some Chinese miners and laborers in northern rural California in 1900.9 Sylvia Sun Minnick’s Samfow: The San Joaquin Chinese Legacy also discovered seventeen Chinese marriages recorded between 1857 and 1880 from the San Joaquin County marriage records. Chinese families became more apparent after 1900 as forty-three Chinese marriages were recorded from 1900 to 1924.10 Along the same line, Laura Wang in her study on the Chinese community in Vallejo, Solano County, California claimed that between 1910 and 1940 there was a family-oriented Chinese community in Vallejo.11

Similarly, David Beesley challenged the notion that no family existed among the early Chinese immigrant laborers in his article “From Chinese to Chinese American: Chinese Women and Families in a Sierra Nevada Town.”12 From census and other data, Beesley gathered evidence indicating that some of the Chinese laborers in a Sierra Nevada town with regular income had wives or women with them.13

In addition to California and the mountain region, Chinese families also appeared in the Midwest. Sarah R. Mason’s case study of Liang May Seen, an early Chinese immigrant woman in Minneapolis between the 1890s and 1940s, indicates that Liang May Seen played a vital role in her family’s survival, prosperity and cultural assimilation to American society.14

Recently, more specialized studies on families of Chinese immigrant women in America have emerged. Judy Yung’s Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco examines the families of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese immigrant wives in San Francisco. Yung observes that most immigrant women “presented a submissive image in public but ruled at home.”15 Yung further asserts that immigrant wives “as homemakers, wage earners, and culture bearers made them indispensable partners of their husbands.”16

The above studies have confirmed the existence of family life among the early Chinese immigrants and greatly contributed to our knowledge of family and marriage of Chinese immigrant women in the United States. However, such questions as whether women’s roles in Chinese immigrant families had changed, how the changes occurred, and what characterized marriages among Chinese immigrants of the period still remain understudied.

Attempting to address the above issues, this study claims that immigration had changed Chinese women’s roles in most Chinese immigrant
families. Immigration freed women from the dominance of their parents-in-law, and they became joint heads of the households as they left the extended families behind and came to America to join their husbands. The necessity of survival in the New World also made these women providers for their families. In performing the above roles, women also participated in decision-making in family affairs.

Immigration also affected Chinese immigrant women’s marriages. Marriages of Chinese immigrants during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries bore the following characterizations—a wide age gap between husband and wife, sporadic polygamous practice, the small number of interracial marriages for Chinese male immigrants, and the (almost) absence of outmarrying among Chinese females. First, the wide age gap between married Chinese couples, primarily caused by restrictive immigration laws, had been the dominant feature of many marriages. Second, the restriction on Chinese women’s entry to the United States resulted in polygynous practice among some Chinese men who were not able to bring their wives from China and remarried in America. The severe shortage of women also contributed to polyandrous practice among some early Chinese immigrants. Finally, the extreme sex disparity produced some interracial marriages among early Chinese immigrant males regardless of anti-miscegenation laws. However, the scarcity of women resulted in the near absence of interracial marriages among Chinese females of the same time period. These characterizations therefore were more products of restrictive American immigration policies than Chinese patriarchal culture, and they reflected Chinese immigrants’ natural response to the gender imbalanced immigrant life at the time in order to sustain the survival of themselves and their communities.

**WOMEN’S CHANGING ROLE IN THE FAMILY**

Immigration to America had changed women’s role in their families. First, Chinese women became joint heads of their households, a clear promotion from their previous position in China. The traditional and predominant Chinese family type was an extended family in which several generations lived together under the same roof and was ruled by the patriarchal familial authority. Once married, a Chinese woman—the daughter-in-law of her husband’s family—had to serve and please every family member, especially the parents-in-law, in order to conform to the social norms of filial daughter-in-law, submissive wife, and nurturing mother.17
This predominant family pattern of three or more generations in one household, however, was not transplanted to America, and Chinese immigrant families were mostly nuclear ones. Having suffered the pain of leaving a familiar surrounding, seasickness for months, and prolonged interrogation and detention at the American immigration station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, Chinese immigrant women, and young wives especially, found that they were no longer subjected to the authority of their mothers-in-law and for the first time they were the female heads of their families.18 “It’s better to be a woman in America,” Helen Hong Wong of San Francisco, California said. “At least you can work here and rule the family along with your husband. In China it’s considered a disgrace for a woman to work and it’s the mother-in-law who rules.”19

Chinese immigrant women also found that they had become providers for their families. Although most Chinese women had woven at home in northern China and tilled in the fields in southern China to supplement family income, Chinese immigrant women’s participation in family economic activities or wage-earning work was more essential and indispensable for the survival of their families in the United States.20

In urban communities, as wives of laundrymen, restaurant owners, grocers, cooks, and laborers, the majority of married Chinese women had to work side by side with their husbands, in addition to their daily household duties. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the laundering business had been a predominant occupation of the Chinese in the United States. The Chinese laundry shop, according to Paul Chan Pang Siu’s study, was not merely a place of work, but also a place for sleeping and cooking.21 For a wife of a laundryman, life was not easier than that of her husband. Her home was in the back of the laundry, where she slept, cooked, and tended her children. The living quarters were humid and dim in all seasons. When she was not busy with her domestic chores, she was expected to help with the laundry work. Her daily life was characterized as long hours, drudgery, and intense loneliness. The only people she saw were customers who brought in their parcels and reclaimed them when they were finished. The wives of laundrymen were easily worn out from hard work and suffered physical weariness and emotional stress.22

Like laundries, restaurants were another type of important business for the Chinese in the United States. In the 1890s, Chinese restaurants emerged in the United States in many places.23 Most small Chinese restaurants were run as husband-wife businesses; the husband served as cook and dishwasher in the kitchen, while the wife worked as waitress,
barmaid, and cashier in the front. Some Chinese American women even became successful proprietors despite the harsh environment. Gue Gim Wah, a pioneer Chinese woman in Prince, Nevada, helped her husband run a boarding house for Chinese miners in the area in 1930. After she accumulated enough capital and experience, she opened her own restaurant in 1942, which became a big success.24

The grocery business ranked as a distant third occupation for Chinese immigrants before the 1940s. While the larger firms seemed to have pooled capital and manpower together, with each member having well-defined responsibilities and receiving a regular salary between $45 to $75 a month, many smaller Chinese stores were run as family businesses with unpaid family members meeting the demand for labor.25 As wives of grocers, the women worked along with their husbands, packing, stocking, and selling goods. As indicated in Connie Young Yu’s family history, Chin Shee, Yu’s great-grandmother, arrived in San Francisco in 1867 to join her husband, a successful merchant of a Chinese dryfood store. She lived in the rear of the store where she bore six children. She not only took care of her children, but also helped her husband’s business. All the hard work and responsibilities, Yu has noted, made her face appear “careworn” in her middle-age.26

Apart from the laundry, restaurant, and grocery businesses, the garment business proved to be a vital profession for early Chinese immigrant women. This profession started as family sewing. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, married Chinese immigrant women sewed or mended clothes at home for Chinese bachelors to supplement their family income. The immigration documents from the Office of the Collector of Customs at San Francisco Port revealed that sewing was a common occupation for Chinese women of this period. Low How See, one of the earliest Chinese women in San Francisco, worked as a seamstress. “I worked in my room,” she told the immigration official when she was called to the office of the Collector of Customs as witness for the entry of a Chinese woman on 26 March 1896. “My friend who know me well bring me work to do to my room.”27 Other married Chinese women such as Chun Shee, Jow Shee, and Tai See also indicated that they were seamstresses when asked about their occupations.28 Money earned from sewing was significant to these women’s family economy.

While the Chinese immigrant women in urban communities engaged in the above work, their counterparts in rural areas shared farming and other productive activities with their husbands in addition to their do-
mestic chores. They gardened and tended livestock. Some of the Chi-
nese farmers’ wives took jobs as farm laborers. In Georgiana, Califor-
nia, a farm family was headed by Gee Chom, aged thirty-seven. The
family included his wife Kee, aged twenty-three, who had been in the
United States since she was five years old and was one of the few
women working as a farm laborer in 1900. This expansion of women’s
labor was more common and noticeable in Hawaii. Unlike the mainland
immigrant laborers, Chinese laborers in Hawaii were encouraged to bring
their wives, who were paid to work in rice plantations.

In this sense, Chinese immigrant women’s new role could be seen as
co-providers for the families, though they were not necessarily making
50 percent of the family income. To most of these women, the focus of
their lives was survival through hard work. Their work was vital for the
family economy. Their wage-earning and non-wage-earning work made
survival possible for their families in a strange land. As historian Roger
Daniels stated, the fact that many married Chinese women worked “il-
lustrates an important and often unnoticed factor in Asian American
economic success: that is, the contribution made by Asian American
married women at a time most married women in this country were not
in the labor force.” Therefore, Chinese immigrant women were not
only producers of children but also providers of a bowl of rice.

These new roles reinforced Chinese women’s position in families,
and they began to share decision-making with their husbands. When
working jointly with their spouses, immigrant women generally had
more input in family affairs and decision-making, as was the case with
Irish immigrant women. Historians have found that Irish immigrant men
generally experienced a decline in status and power within their families
as a result of migration, which pushed women into more authoritative
roles than they had experienced in Ireland. The comparatively open
range of economic options for many young Irish women made them
more influential in family and community. Similar changes were also
evident among Chinese immigrant women. For most Chinese immi-
grants, a family was a basic productive unit, in which husband and wife
formed a work-team and they were indispensable to each other. The
equal sharing of responsibilities enabled the wife to have a greater voice
in family decision-making.

In the same light, it is instructive to draw parallels between white
frontier women and Chinese immigrant women. For both white frontier
women and Chinese immigrant women, survival in a harsh and alienat-
ing environment required involvement of all members of the family.
Unpredictable weather, expenses of farming, shortage of cash, and isolated environment forced the frontier husband and wife to work together as a team in order to survive. While the husband worked in newly opened fields, the wife had to cook, clean, take care of children, garden, tend livestock, can food, slaughter and cure meat, chop wood, make soap and candles, and take in boarders.\textsuperscript{33} As a result of this work sharing, historian Julie Roy Jeffrey believes, the line dividing the actual activities of men and women blurred and, in some cases, disappeared. When women were both practically and emotionally involved in the family economy, their power in the families increased. Therefore, the activities of these self-reliant frontier women defied a number of nineteenth-century stereotypes about women.\textsuperscript{34}

Similarly, when Chinese immigrants came to the New World, they faced a strange and hostile environment in which they were discriminated against and excluded from the mainstream labor market. They consequently had to work in trades that white laborers were unwilling to embrace such as hand laundries, restaurants, and grocery stores, or work as common laborers and farm laborers. The necessity of survival required all Chinese family members, especially the wives, to participate in productive activities. The majority of early Chinese immigrant women, as discussed earlier, whether they lived in urban communities or rural areas, had to raise families and help with husbands’ businesses or work in the fields and tend gardens and livestock. Moreover, Chinese immigrant families in urban areas often lived in the back of their family businesses. As in the cases of Gue Gim Wah, Chin Shee, and many other urban Chinese immigrant families, many small Chinese entrepreneurs had converted the rear part of their stores into family quarters.\textsuperscript{35} The overlapping of family life and work life made a wife’s involvement in family business inevitable. Meanwhile the expansion of the female sphere enhanced Chinese immigrant women’s sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. They consequently became more comfortable in sharing family decision-making with their husbands.

At the same time, the new environment, though unfriendly and alienating, had fewer cultural restraints than their old societies. The white frontier women were less concerned with nineteenth-century domestic social theory than economic survival.\textsuperscript{36} Likewise, Chinese immigrant women were free from dominance of their mother-in-laws in the United States. Therefore, both internal migration and external emigration provided women with a favorable climate for expansion of the female sphere.
During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries most Chinese immigrant women, however, were still careful to pay homage to ideas of male authority. Although immigration elevated a woman’s position in her family as she became a joint family head and co-provider, moving from China to America did not shake her belief in family solidarity that could only be maintained when a wife was subordinate and compromising. As one Chinese girl in Hawaii noted, her father “was the dominating head of the family,” even though her mother played an important role in her family life. This conservative attitude toward family order was not uncommon among many immigrant groups in the United States. The similar cultural behavior was also found over half a century later among Vietnamese immigrant women. Nazli Kibria’s study of Vietnamese American women reveals that these women continue to expect men to be the breadwinners and view men’s economic obligation to their families as an important aspect of family order.

WOMEN IN MARRIAGE

Immigration had not only changed Chinese women’s role in their families, but also affected their marriages. Marriages of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese immigrants were often characterized by a wide age gap between husband and wife. In many Chinese immigrant families the husband was usually older than his wife. David Beesley’s investigation, involving twenty-seven married Chinese couples in a Sierra Nevada town, for example, has indicated that the average age of the women was twenty-two, while the average age of the men was thirty-one. Sucheng Chan’s study has also noted that among Chinese families in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in the early-twentieth century, some farm laborers were twice or even almost three times as old as their wives. Documents from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and oral history interviews also suggest that the age gap between a married couple was a common feature of many Chinese immigrant families.

This wide age gap can be easily attributed to patriarchal Chinese culture. Chinese culture dictated that marriage was often a social and economic arrangement between the families of the bride and groom rather than a romantic union between two individuals. One such marriage arrangement, for instance, involved a fourteen-year-old second-generation Chinese girl in San Francisco in the early 1910s who was to be married according to her parents’ plan. She had to choose between
two men, neither of whom she had seen in person, only their photographs. Therefore she took her parents' advice. They told her: "This man is young, about twenty, he has his way to make, and he has a large family of brothers and sisters. You would be a sort of slave to all of them. This other man is fifty years old, but can give you everything, he has no family. 'Better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave.'" They told her, too, that a young man would not be content. He would be running around with other women; it was far safer to take an older man, who would settle down. Following her parents' advice, she married the older man, a cook in a lumber camp at Wood, Oregon. The marriage turned out to be an unhappy one.\(^41\)

Another case of arranged marriage involved Gue Gim Wah. At the age of fifteen, Gue Gim married Tom Fook Wah, a forty-three-year-old Chinese restaurant owner in Prince, Nevada who was her father's old friend. Tom Fook Wah was born in the mining town of Marysville, California in 1871. Because his parents died after his birth, he was taken back and raised in China by his aunt. He was readmitted to America in 1892 at the age of twenty-one. After first working as a cook for an American family in Marysville, he opened a boarding house in Prince, Nevada. Tom began to settle down and wanted to find a wife by 1915. While visiting his friend Ng Louie Der in San Francisco, he noticed Gue Gim going in and out of their family store and decided to propose marriage to Gue Gim. Tom asked Der if he could marry his daughter and Der, "noticing that the time of marriage had come for Gue Gim and that Tom was a good prospect, agreed". Tom and Gue Gim were married in 1916.\(^42\)

The patriarchal nature of Chinese culture certainly contributed to the age gap of Chinese couples. However, the wide age gap between husband and wife was more noticeable among Chinese immigrants than those who remained in China. Obviously, immigration to America had something to do with this age gap. American immigration policies before 1943 were mostly responsible for the age gap between Chinese couples. These policies effectively reinforced the sexual imbalance among Chinese immigrants by restricting the entry of Chinese women. The Page Law of 1875 forbade the entry of Chinese, Japanese, and "Mongolian" contract laborers, and prohibited the entry of women for the purpose of prostitution. It also imposed fines and punishment on those convicted for transporting women interstate for the purpose of prostitution. Although the Page Law applied to women of any race and nationality engaged in prostitution, it was executed with the Chinese women
in mind. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 effectively banned the entry of Chinese laborers and the wives of Chinese laborers who were already in the United States. As a result, from 1906 to 1924, only an average of 150 Chinese women per year were legally admitted. The Immigration Act of 26 May 1924, based on the ruling of the Supreme Court in the case of Chang Chan et al v. John D. Nagle on 25 May 1924, excluded Chinese alien wives of American citizens of Chinese ancestry. Consequently, no Chinese women were admitted from 1924 to 1930. In 1930, an act relaxed this ban by allowing the entry of alien Chinese wives as long as the marriage was legally effective before 26 May 1924. Under this provision, about sixty Chinese women were admitted each year between 1931 and 1941. The records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service indicate that the majority of the Chinese women entering the United States between 1882 and 1943 were wives and daughters of Chinese merchants who were exempted from the exclusion laws due to the nature of class prejudice in American immigration policy and the United States trade with China. Consequently, American-born daughters of Chinese families were in demand as prospective brides.

The second reason for the age gap was the enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws in many states, which prevented Chinese men from marrying women outside their own ethnic group. Anti-miscegenation laws evolved as a reaction of white society toward possible racially mixed marriages between whites and blacks. In 1661, Maryland passed the first anti-miscegenation law to prohibit marriages involving white females and black males. Following Maryland, thirty-eight states in the Union passed similar legislation. In 1850, California lawmakers adopted a miscegenation statute to prohibit black-white marriages, which was later included in Section 60 of the new Civil Code in 1872. A drastic evolution of anti-miscegenation laws in California in 1880 also outlawed Chinese-Caucasian marriages along with black-white marriages. In the same year, the California legislature introduced Section 69 of the Civil Code, which restricted the issuance of marriage licenses to unions between a white and a “Negro, Mulatto, or Mongolian.” Although the generic term “Mongolian” refers to Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and many other ethnic groups in Asia, the law was designed to target Chinese, echoing the anti-Chinese cry on the West Coast then. In 1905, to make Sections 60 and 69 consistent and to deal with the fear of the Japanese, the California legislature amended Section 60 to make marriages between whites and Mongolians “illegal and void.” The above
anti-miscegenation laws were in force until 1967, when they were finally declared unconstitutional. Prohibited from marrying women of other racial groups, Chinese immigrant males could only look for mates from a very limited supply, most likely American-born Chinese girls, who in terms of age could have been their daughters. This situation is also best illustrated in the two cases discussed earlier in this section.

Third, the noticeable age difference between Chinese husbands and wives was also due to the financial disability of Chinese men. Many of them worked for almost their entire lifetime to save enough money for a marriage. Mrs. C, a second-generation Chinese American woman from Boston in her seventies, recalled her family history in which her parents' marriage was exemplary. "My father spent many years to save money for his marriage. So when he had enough money to support a family, he was already a middle-aged man. He went to Guangdong, China, to marry my mother when she was sixteen."52

The age difference produced unhappiness in many Chinese immigrant families. Being in almost different generations, both partners in the marriage had different attitudes, habits, and values of life. Usually, these young Chinese girls grew up in America and attained some education in American public schools; consequently they were more Americanized than their ill-educated China-born husbands.

In the case of the fourteen-year-old Chinese girl from San Francisco, she was very attractive and had a good disposition, while her husband was suspicious, jealous, and had a horrible temper. American ways influenced her even though she only attended public school for two years, while he was very traditional and resented all her American behavior. As a result, this Chinese girl's life was a long tragedy with him.53

In addition to the age gap between married couples, polygamy was another problem that plagued the Chinese immigrant family life. Some Chinese merchants, according to Peggy Pascoe's study, had more than one wife. In these cases, the households were contaminated by "the dark coils of that hydra-headed monster polygamy" and threatened by the explosive undercurrent of jealousy, which was the inevitable outcome of polygamous marriage.54 Even with such accounts, polygyny has remained largely unnoticed in Asian-American studies. The reasons for this void were complex. The most obvious, however, has been the absence of documents. The practice was illegal, and consequently no one would admit committing polygyny.

The most common form of polygyny was concubinage, which was a natural product of patriarchal society in traditional China and some
other cultures. The origin of concubinage in China is obscure, but it certainly was related to the patriarchal nature of the society, in which only a male heir could secure a family’s name to be passed down, keep its fortune intact, and have its social and economic status in the community unchallenged. Confucian teachings systematized the patriarchal beliefs and formalized them into cultural institutions that ruled Chinese society and individuals. According to the Confucian idea, “a man without a son was not a dutiful son.” A man therefore could legitimately have a concubine or concubines if his wife failed to produce a male heir. The institution of concubinage was further strengthened and developed during the Song dynasty when urban development and economic prosperity reduced the significance of women’s participation in economic activities, and enabled wealthy Chinese gentry-landowners and merchants to enjoy a more leisurely lifestyle. Together with other valuable possessions, concubines signified a man’s social status and economic power. Many wealthy Chinese men therefore acquired concubines not only to satisfy their sexual appetite, but also to display their fortune and power. In one of China’s most famous twentieth-century novels, The Family (originally published in 1933), Ba Jin (Pa Chin) vividly portrayed a typical feudal patriarchal wealthy Chinese family, the Gao family, modeled after his own family. Grandfather Gao, the patriarchal family head, and his wealthy friends all possessed concubines.

Although this centuries-long feudal practice of polygyny had been challenged several times in Chinese history such as during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and the May Fourth Movement of 1919, it was not outlawed until 1950 when the government of the People’s Republic of China issued the Marriage Law that legally prohibited bigamy and concubinage.

Although polygyny had been practiced in China historically, the polygynous conditions among Chinese immigrants in the United States were more likely ramifications of immigration than Chinese cultural habits. Before the repeal of Chinese exclusion laws in 1943, most Chinese immigrant men had left their families in China due to their financial difficulties, American immigration restrictions, and Chinese patriarchy which dictated that women stay in China to take care of children and parents-in-law, and to secure remittances from men abroad. A few fortunate ones were eventually able to arrange for their families to come to America. Many others managed to return to native villages in China to see their families periodically. The passage of the Scott Act in 1888, which barred the re-entry of Chinese laborers to America even if they
left the country only temporarily, however, made the latter practice impossible. Unable to bring their wives to America or go to China to see their wives, some successful Chinese laborers, such as farmers, employed laborers, service workers, and even gamblers, purchased women from brothels or married those who successfully escaped servitude, while still legally married to their first wives in China.  

Furthermore, polygyny among Chinese immigrant males during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries took a different form from the practice in China: most men had first wives in China, and remarried or lived with women under the common law marriage in America without divorcing their first wives; they generally did not live with multiple women in the same household at the same time as polygynous marriage suggested. Therefore, these marriages were more bigamous than polygynous. Moreover, the bigamous practices among Chinese immigrants in America were more for practical reason—physical sustenance of the men and survival of Chinese immigrant communities—than for psychological reasons—display of one’s wealth through possession of concubines, as was the case for many wealthy Chinese in China.

Polyandry, another form of polygamy, was a direct product of restrictive American immigration policies that caused extreme shortages of Chinese women. Along with prostitution, the scarcity of women also resulted in the sharing of women by several Chinese men in one household. Contemporary observers noticed the polyandrous practice among some Chinese immigrants. Henry Sienkiwicz commented in 1880: “when among ten Chinese occupying a dwelling there is but one woman, they all live together with her. I encountered such examples of polyandry quite frequently, particularly in the country.” Historian Sucheng Chan also found polyandrous conditions among some Chinese miners and laborers in northern rural California in 1900.

In some cases the married couples were not only involved in polygamy, but also entangled in slave smuggling because of the shortage of money. In 1920, Lum Quong, a Chinese-American man from San Francisco, returned to China for a visit. He agreed to bring back a Chinese slave girl for a San Francisco dealer, a woman who paid him in advance. In fact, he was looking for a Chinese wife, and married a woman in her native village. The marriage was not a success, and he therefore left his wife and went to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong he saw Sing Choy at her foster father’s store, and proposed marriage through a matchmaker. He concealed the fact that he was commissioned and paid to buy a slave. After six months in Hong Kong, the couple prepared to
return to America. Lum Quong’s sister-in-law then appeared, asking Sing Choy to send money to her husband’s first wife. Shocked and distressed, Sing Choy told her parents about Lum Quong’s deception and they questioned him. “He promised,” the girl told the court later, “that I was to live respectably in America as his wife.” The couple finally sailed to America. After arriving in America, Lum Quong wept when he informed his wife of his promise to buy a slave. He said that he could not repay the money he had received, and that he was being harassed as a result. He tried to borrow money from a kinsman but failed. After they had lived in San Francisco for only three months, Lum Quong surrendered Sing Choy to the dealer. The woman was forced into prostitution, and bound to work for three years to repay the money her husband had received.66

Despite anti-miscegenation laws, a small number of interracial marriages existed among Chinese immigrants. For those Chinese men who married non-Chinese women, the intermarriage usually occurred among small entrepreneurs or laborers. The racial and ethnic background of their wives varied from region to region.67

In the South, most Chinese men were laborers from California or Cuba recruited to the South by railroad companies or sugar plantations. They found wives among black women, and Irish or French immigrant women. The 1880 census for Louisiana indicated that among the 489 Chinese in the state, 35 were married, widowed, or divorced. Of the married Chinese men, only four had a Chinese wife. The remaining Chinese men married non-Chinese women, among whom four had married mulatto women, twelve black women, and eight white women, including six of Irish or French immigrant background.68

In the Midwest, interracial marriages occurred among Chinese small entrepreneurs and laborers. In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, there were at least six interracically married Chinese men in the early twentieth century. They were laundry and restaurant owners and cooks. The women they married were often Irish and Polish women, who worked as vegetable washers in Twin Cities restaurants.69

In New York City, census and contemporary newspapers revealed an interracial marriage pattern of Chinese men and Irish women consistent through the last decades of the nineteenth century. Harper’s Weekly and other magazines and newspapers frequently featured stories of “Chinamen” and “Hibernian” women in which Irish women praised their Chinese husbands.70

Hum Bing’s marriage was representative of the interracial marriages
among Chinese men. Hum Bing emigrated from Taishan in Guangdong Province in 1880 and settled in Wilmar, Minnesota, a railroad center west of Minneapolis. He operated laundries and a hotel in Wilmar and Minneapolis. He married an Irish woman from Canada who had previously been married to his closest friend. His friend was a fellow Chinese railroad worker in Montana who had been killed in an accident. Partly due to his desire to assimilate and partly due to the influence of his non-Chinese wife, Hum was remarkably acculturated.71

Compared to Chinese men, few Chinese women of this period married men outside of their racial group largely due to the imbalanced sex ratio among Chinese immigrants caused by discriminatory American immigration laws and their enforcement. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the sex ratio of Chinese in America was roughly twenty men to one woman. This ratio declined to fourteen to one in the early twentieth century.72 The great disparity of the Chinese population in America consequently forced Chinese men to look for partners in other ethnic groups wherever possible. Whereas, Chinese women had a large pool of mates to choose from within Chinese communities, and therefore intermarriage made little sense to them as indicated in the case of Mrs. S later in this section.

The rarity of interracial marriages among early Chinese women was also due to racial and cultural prejudices from white American society and the cultural concerns of Chinese immigrant communities. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Chinese in America had been generally viewed negatively as ignorant coolies and strike breakers, or evil and seductive prostitutes. Legal restrictions and popular practices barred the Chinese from mainstream labor markets and excluded them from mainstream social and cultural life. Meanwhile, as a discriminated small minority, Chinese immigrant society subconsciously objected to interracial marriages between Chinese women and non-Chinese men in order to preserve its population since Chinese generally regarded married women as members of their husbands’ clan, or race in this case. This situation was exemplified in Suey Sin’s story and Mrs. S’s family history.

Suey Sin (meaning “water lily” in Chinese) was a beautiful Chinese girl working in the film industry in Los Angeles in the 1920s. There she played minor roles in movies and met a handsome white actor. Their relationship started in the casual studio way and soon developed into a romance. However, the actor’s mother and sister objected to the relationship, and the actor never had the courage to stand against his family’s
will. In contrast to Suey Sin, Mrs. S had never dated Caucasian men because intermarriage was considered unacceptable in her community at the time. Born into a Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco in 1917, Mrs. S was an obedient daughter. Like most of her peers in Chinatown, she attended public school and Chinese language school, and learned sewing from her mother at home. She did not date until she met her future husband, Mr. S, then a language technician for the Office of War Information in San Francisco. They got married in 1946. “Most of us,” Mrs. S reminisced, “married Chinese. Intermarriage was not popular [in the Chinese community then], since you have a big Chinese population there [in San Francisco].”

The size of most Chinese families was large, though it varied according to the class status of the male head of the household. Many well-to-do Chinese men wanted to raise a big family to financially secure their future and emotionally alleviate their loneliness as immigrants. Mrs. C’s family history was exemplary. As the daughter of an affluent Chinese merchant in Boston, Mrs. C recalled, “there are nine children in my family. My father knew that he was alone in this country. He did not have any relative here. So he wanted to have many children as security in his old age.” Similarly, Mrs. S’s merchant family from San Francisco consisted of seven children, including four boys and three girls. Like Chinese merchants on the mainland, some Chinese farming families in Hawaii also tended to be large in size. Lily Chan, a farmer’s daughter in Honolulu, wrote, “our family was a very large one, comprising of five brothers and four sisters, so my father had quite a hard job feeding and clothing us.” It was a hard job too for her mother to keep such a big family. Cooking, cleaning, and child rais ing was drudgery for these early Chinese immigrant women.

CONCLUSION

This article finds that immigration had an enormous impact upon Chinese women’s families and marriages. The new environment altered family and marriage structures; as a result new variations of family and marriage emerged. The necessity of survival in a foreign land and the frequent overlapping and oftentimes lack of distinction between family life and business affairs inevitably caused the transformation of the Chinese immigrant family, in which a woman changed her role from primarily a breeder and care-giver to a joint family head and co-provider. The transformation of women’s roles in families and the alteration of
family structure could only be made possible within the context of immigration, a process which produced a distinct cultural institution—the Chinese American family, unique from its counterpart in China. Immigration was certainly meaningful to Chinese women in this regard. Immigration also contributed to the complexity of marriages among Chinese immigrant women. Marriages of Chinese immigrants of the period were characterized by a wide age gap between the couples, polygamous conditions in some areas, and a small number of interracial marriages among Chinese males and the near absence of outmarrying among Chinese females. These characterizations were ramifications of restrictive American immigration policies rather than products of patriarchal Chinese culture. To cope with the gender imbalanced immigrant life in America, Chinese immigrants naturally and subconsciously developed different strategies to sustain the survival and continuation of their communities. These strategies, on the one hand, indicate the adaptability and resourcefulness of Chinese immigrants in surviving in America. On the other hand, these poignant practices reveal, in a subtle manner, the destructive nature of human migration in general and immigration to America in particular.

NOTES

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8. Ibid., 391–395.


13. Ibid.


16. Ibid., p. 77.


25. Cases 16135/5-11, 19938/4-11, 12017/36900, 33610/7-1, RG 85, National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, Calif.


27. Case 9514/536, RG 85, National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, San Francisco, Calif.

28. Cases 9514/537, 9514/538, and 9509/37, RG 85, National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, Calif.

29. Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil*, p. 397.


33. For works on frontier women’s contribution to their families’ economic survival, see, for example, Sheryll Patterson-Black, “Women Homesteaders on the Great Plains Frontier,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (Spring 1976): 72,


37. "Life History," William Carlson Smith Documents, MK-12, Special Collections, Main Library, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.


42. See Chung, "Gue Gim Wah," pp. 45–79.


44. Daniels, *Asian America*, p. 96.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., pp. 96–97.


52. In order to protect interviewees’ privacy, I quote only the first letters of the interviewees’ last names and cite the interviews by number. Interview 7.


55. Confucius: Lunyu [Conversations].
57. See Ba Jin, Family (Garden City, N.Y., 1972).
59. For examples of financial difficulties of Chinese immigrant men, see Case 19571/18-5, RG 85, National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, Calif.; “Survey of Race Relations,” document 251, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace archives; and Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountain, pp. 25–26. For examples of Chinese patriarchal control, see Cases 19571/18-5, 14284/4-4, RG 85, National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, Calif.; Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountain, pp. 26–27; and Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans, p. 104.
63. Chan, This Bittersweet Soil, p. 390.
65. Chan, This Bittersweet Soil, p. 390.
68. Tenth Census, 1880, New Orleans, Louisiana, population schedules, as cited in Cohen, Chinese in Post-Civil War South, p. 147.
74. Interview 9.
76. Interview 7.
77. Interview 9.