**THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE U.S. by WEI CHI POON**

**The following is a paper presented by Wei Chi Poon, Asian American Studies Librarian of the Ethnic Studies Library, who recently returned from a conference sponsored by the Center for Chinese Minority Women's Studies of Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, China. She was one of a select group of attendees and she was asked to present a paper. She spoke on her experience as a Chinese woman who immigrated to the United States. Among the presenters, approximately 95% were academics and researchers while the other 5% were from various women's organizations. Presented at the International Symposium on Women's Education and Development in the 21st Century October 10 to 14, 1998, Beijing, China**

THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE U.S BY WEI CHI POON UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY U. S. A.

This is a story of struggle and suffering, but it is also a story of triumph--the triumph of many Chinese immigrant women to overcome injustice and discrimination, and a great deal of obstacles. As early as 1938 Chinese garment workers in San Francisco participated in the first strike against poor working conditions in Chinatown garment shops. They picketed the Chinese-owned National Dollar Stores which was the largest Chinatown sewing factory and which employed many immigrant women. This strike lasted for thirteen weeks and won a union agreement for higher wages and improved benefits. It is an important example of how Chinese women have stood up for themselves throughout their history.

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**Overview of the History of Chinese Immigrant Women**

The first Chinese immigrant woman, Afong Moy, was brought to New York in

1834 as a showpiece to satisfy the curiosity of the American public. From

the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, because of the 1882

Chinese Exclusion Act and much discriminatory legislation, Chinese women

could only emigrate as wives or daughters of merchants and U.S. citizens.

Thus, very few Chinese women came to the United States. Stanford M.

Lyman, in his article "Marriage and the Family Among Chinese Immigrants to

America, 1850-1960" (Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and

Culture, Vol. 29, no. 4, 1968, p. 322) wrote:

"During the entire period of unrestricted immigration (1850-1882) a total

of only 8,848 Chinese women journeyed across the Pacific. Many women

could not withstand the rigors of life in America and died or returned to

China."

During the same period the numbers of Chinese men emigrating from China to

America was much higher. Between 1860 to 1900, the ratio of Chinese males

per 100 females was 1855 in 1860; 1284 in 1870; 2106 in 1880; 2676 in

1890; and 1887 in 1900. The population of Chinese women in the U.S.

slowly increased from 4,522 in 1900 to 20,115 in 1940. Due to the

imbalence in sex and the prohibition of intermarriage, many Chinese women

were lured to America as prostitutes. According to the U.S Census,

between 1870 to 1920, there were 1,184 prostitutes of the total 1,702

females in 1870; 441 of the total 1266 in 1880; 285 of the total 1748 in

1900; 0 of 1278 and 1202 in 1910 and 1920. Judy Yung in her article

"Chinese American Women" in the Asian American Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, 1995,

p. 234) wrote:

"Because of the sex imbalance and laws that forbade interracial marriage,

the majority of Chinese women in 19th century America were prostitutes who

had been kidnapped, lured, or purchased from poor parents in China and

sold to America for high profits."

Because of the Chinese custom that women were supposed to stay home to

care for their husbands and children, and because of their language

handicap, immigrant wives seldom worked outside of their homes. To

subsidize their husbands' low income, they did menial work at home:

sewing, washing, shelling shrimp, rolling cigars, etc. Women living in

remote rural areas had even more difficult lives.

In 1943, the U.S. Congress passed an act to repeal the 1882 Chinese

Exclusion Act. Later came the War Bride Act of 1945, and then Congress

passed a bill enabling wives and children of Chinese American citizens to

apply as non-quota immigrants. During the period of 1944 to 1953, women

composed 80% of Chinese immigrants to America. For the first time, the

numbers of Chinese women and family in the United States noticeably

increased. The male and female ratio dropped from 2.9:1 in 1940 to 1.8:1

in 1950, and further to 1:30 in 1960. In 1965, Congress passed the more

liberal Immigration and Nationality Act by which Chinese could possibly

use up to 20,000 of the annual quota instead of the quota of 105. The

population of Chinese women increased from 40,621 to 204,850 in 1970;

398,496 in 1980 and 827,154 in 1990. The male and female ratio was

finally ballanced in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Chinese American women were definitely affected and influenced by the

1960s civil rights and women's rights movements. On the one hand, the

improved racial climate enabled Chinese American women to pursue higher

education. As Judy Yung wrote in the same article cited above (p. 236):

"While many immigrant women still found themselves trapped in Chinatown

garment factories, increased numbers of Chinese American women began

moving into the technical, sales, and professional fields. Because of

discrimination, however, their earning power was often not commensurate

with their level of education."

On the other hand, the majority of Chinese American women were still

trapped in the "women professions" of teacher, nurse and clerical worker.

Lily Li in her article, "Notable Chinese American Women" (Chinese American

Forum, Vol. 1, no.4, 1985, p.10) wrote:

"Although they are entering in large numbers of professions traditionally

dominated by men, they, like all women, are still relatively concentrated

in a narrow range of occupations. And like all women, Chinese American

women have yet to reach the upper echelons of power."

WHO AM I?

As a Chinese immigrant woman, I belong to a socio-cultural group that has

several important dimensions that make up who I am. They include the

beliefs, values and culture which my parents inculcated in me, reflecting

their wisdom and Chinese culture. I was taught that education was

essential. Monetary reward and fame are not necessary. However,

education was necessary for being a better citizen in society and for

self-fulfillment. Working hard and trying to do your best would be

rewarded, and being humble would keep things in peace and harmony. All

these principles of Chinese culture

played an important role in my life.

What is culture? Shelly Keller, editor of "Harmony in Diversity:

Recommendations for Effective Library Service to Asian Language Speakers"

(California State Library, forthcoming in 1998, p. 10) wrote:

"Culture is, by and large, a survival mechanism, consisting of plans and

recipes for handling the world. Culture can guide how we see and think,

how we relate, what make us laugh or cry, how we eat and dress, as well as

how we are born and how we die. Culture allows the individual to survive

in the strength of the group with whom he or she shares a homeland and

environment."

Having been born, raised and educated in China and having worked in both

China and the United States, I have experienced a mix of eastern and

western values. Prior to immigrating to the United States, I was an

independent career woman. I was one of a few fortunate enough to have a

teaching position in a college after graduation.

I would like to share with you some of my own life experiences in the

United States.

**STRUGGLING**

As soon as I entered the United States in the late 1960s, I found myself

entirely illiterate in English. I could not read, write or speak the

language. I was instantly housebound and penniless. I had witnessed my

parents working from dawn to dusk with limited income, my mother working

at a sewing factory in a basement in Chinatown. Her working conditions

were unbearable. There were no windows; it was dusty, dirty and

overcrowded. She worked 10 to 12 hours a day at below minimum wage (under

$1.00 per hour) and I had to depend on my parents' financial support to

survive. I gave birth to my baby daughter two months after I arrived

alone in the U.S., alone because my husband was not approved to come to

the United States with me. He was still in Hong Kong. That feeling of

helplessness was very painful. Today, most immigrant women without

English skills are still working in sewing factories or restaurants, or in

low paying clerical jobs. The struggle began. I desperately struggled to

survive on my own, instead of depending on my parents. My first job in

the U.S. was at a wholesale dry cleaner factory. I was one of six Chinese

immigrant women who worked as a cluster group to pack military overcoats

in shipment boxes bound for overseas. I was the youngest and the only one

among the six who was able to handle the heavier duties such as moving

around the 100 plus pound boxes for shipment. We worked 10 hours a day at

the minimum wage of $1.99 per hour. At the end of the day, we were

extremely exhausted. This hardship motivated me to seriously think about

my future in the U.S. I often asked myself, besides work as a laborer,

what else could I do?

As a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the numbers of

immigrants increased drastically. In responding to the need for workers in

public libraries and public health departments, and to assist low-income

families, the federal government set up a program to recruit people who

had low-incomes and were heads of households who had a high school

equivalent level of English to help them obtain an associate in arts

degree. This AA degree required two years of junior college in library or

public health fields. The selected trainee would receive a stipend to go

to school half-day and to be trained at the work site another half-day.

With desperate courage, I applied for this training program even though my

only qualification was that I was the low-income person in the family,

since my husband was still in Hong Kong waiting for his visa so he could

come to theU.S. I did not have a high school equivalent level of English.

It was a real surprise to me that I passed both the written and oral

entrance examinations and was selected to be trained in the library

program. The challenge began. To control my own destiny was the

powerful and forceful motivation for me to take any challenges this

training program presented. At the time, I understood approximately 20%

of all class lectures and recognized about 10 to 15% of the vocabularies

from the textbooks and the homework. I had to look up new words one by

one from the dictionary in order for me to comprehend the contents of the

text and to do the homework. It seems my hard work was rewarded, because

after two years, I graduated with honors and I was hired as a library

assistant in a public library.

Graduating with honors and my obvious willingness to work very hard and to

learn caught the attention of the school counselor and my supervisor and

they soon encouraged and assisted me in pursuing a master's degree in

library science. After two years of junior college, my reading definitely

had improved a lot. But it was far from the level I would need for

graduate school. Getting a master's degree in library science seemed

unthinkable and would be the real adventure of my life. By regulation,

one must have a bachelor's degree (BA degree) in order to be accepted to a

graduate school. Although I had a BA degree and two and a half years of

human anatomy and physiology study from a medical school from China

(neither the MA or Ph.D degree was not offered then), there were no

diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China at the time and so my

degree was not accepted by U.S. universities. However, with outstanding

letters of recommendations from the counselor of the junior college, my

supervisor, and the City Librarian , a library school made an exception in

my case and did not require the U.S. bachelor's degree. I was accepted

into a library science master's degree program.

The fear began. I was afraid of failing in library school after having

given up my permanent library assistant job in a public library. Could I

make it? How would I do it? There were many reasons for me to believe

that I might not be able to make it. But I was determined to take this

opportunity and to try my best. Because I had resigned from my library

assistant job I was able to concentrate solely on my studies. I studied

from dawn at 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. to after midnight at around 2:00 or 3:00

a.m. week days as well as weekends for two and a half years. I beat the

odds and made it. I received the master's degree in library science (MLS

degree). But even after graduating from library school, to my dismay I

discovered another barrier: the civil service oral entrance examination

was required to be appointed as a professional librarian. Because of the

Chinese cultural barriers I carried with me--being too humble to let the

members of the interview board know what I had done and how I could

continue to make contributions to the library field--for six years I

failed to pass the entrance examination with a high enough score to be

appointed as a professional librarian. I now suspect that my being

Chinese and an immigrant might have worked against me. I did not qualify

because I did not "look" and "act" like a white American. Perceived as a

foreigner, I did not fit the role of a professional librarian. It was not

until 1979 that I was hired as a professional and head librarian in charge

of the former Asian American Studies Library at the University of

California at Berkeley. I was of course excited but also worried about

whether I could handle it. Again, I was more than willing to take another

risk: I had to give up my permanent library assistant job in order to try

the new one. It was rather ironic that it took me two and a half years to

complete graduate school, but six years to learn to how to be interviewed.

My supervisor and some concerned colleagues rigorously coached me on how

to take the oral examination. At last, I was "americanized" and passed

the entrance examination at University of California at Berkeley which is

one of the most well known universities in the United States as well as in

the world.

Most of my friends have similar cultural and educational backgrounds to

mine. We were the children of Chinese immigrants or U.S. citizens and we

ourselves were well-educated; and we had decent jobs in China prior to

leaving for the United States. In unfamiliar and harsh situations, we

struggled and tried to make a living the best we could. But most of my

friends were not as lucky as I was. Unfortunately, they did not have an

opportunity to learn English and to go back to school. Because they could

speak only a little English, they became beauticians, factory workers in

sewing factories and restaurant workers or restaurant owners, house

maids and other low paid workers.

**SUFFERING**

To achieve my goals, I sacrificed my family and subjected myself to

injustice and discrimination because U.S. universities and society are

still mostly ruled by the "old boy's club" type of decision-making. As

an immigrant woman from China, I was misunderstood and discounted. My

husband sacrificed his career goals to support the family and my studies.

To make ends meet for the family, he took on two jobs. For more than 10

years, he had to work 12 to 14 hours a day. Because of the long working

hours, work stress and the irregular meal times, he developed a severe

gastric ulcer. Work fatigue caused the loss of his concentration and

quick reflexes and he was hit by a car and lost mobility in his right arm.

Due to both of our busy schedules, my children suffered from lack of

attention and lost out on the childhood I wish I could have given them. I

quit my library assistant job when I went to library school and my husband

had to quit one of his jobs in order to take care of our young children.

We lost half of our income. As a family, for nearly 15 years, we almost

never had quality time together nor did we have the money or time to

entertain. Both of us suffered under stress because of the discrimination

and unfair treatment in our jobs. But we knew that life must and will go

on. I always hope that truth will prevail and justice will finally be

served.

**TRIUMPHS**

It was an unbelievable and a great joy when on June 27, 1998, I received

the Distinguished Lifetime Service award from the Association for Asian

American Studies, a national academic organization. With the support of

the Asian American Studies Department and the dedication of the library

staff, we together were able to develop and establish one of the most

comprehensive and unique Asian American Studies Library in the United

States. It is a one -of - a kind collection and a national resource.

Since 1979 the Asian American Studies Library supported the Department's

curriculum, but also hundreds of scholars and graduate students came from

across the country and all over the world to use our resources for their

research, their publications and their dissertations. This honor was

indeed a triumph of all Chinese immigrant women. We have proven

ourselves to be equal to other Americans. Like them we worked

diligently, paid taxes and made contributions to society. Most

importantly, it was the fulfillment of my struggles and a testament to the

goodness of the Chinese values and culture which my parents inculcated in

me. However, I did pay a heavy price. I strongly believe that nothing is

free nor are there shortcuts in life. My hard work was fully rewarded and

I hope my sacrifices were not made in vain.

Success is not measured by wealth and fame alone, but also by how far one

has advanced from her or his situation, regardless of what position they

are in and how much money they make. I consider all of my friends, the

vast majority of which are Chinese immigrant women, successful in their

own way. They had to be willing to face reality and to take jobs far below

their level of education and they had to have the strength to overcome

numerous difficulties in order to survive in a "strange" place. These are

great successes in themselves. We women of color who are also immigrants

usually have to work two or three times as hard as our counterparts and

have to continually prove ourselves worthwhile to be accepted by society.

As early as 1849, the Chinese woman, Ah Toy, immigrated alone to the

United States and later she became a successful courtesan. Whether as

part of the pioneer period or part of the post-1965 era, strong women like

her paved the path for all of us. Later, many new Chinese immigrant women

were educated and able to enter the mainstream job market. They overcame a

great deal of hardship at work and at home. Michele J. Gee in her

dissertation entitled "Chinese American Business Women: Their Impact,

Needs and Cultural Challenges ( The University of San Francisco,

California, 1996, p. 1) wrote:

"Chinese American women encounter a multitude of personal, professional,

cultural, and career challenges within their daily and work lives.

Chinese American women face yet another challenge when they enter the male

dominated field of business. Not only do they struggle with their

cultural family norms at home, but they also confront the discrimination

of being women of color in a field primarily defined by Western

characteristics and work ethics."

I greatly admire and respect my mother, who was a teacher in China and a

sewing factory worker in the United States, my friends who were less

fortunate than me and all Chinese immigrant women for their courage, their

strength and their bravery. They are our real role models.

**CONCLUSION**

I would like to conclude by quoting Chairman Mao, who said that women

truly "hold up half the sky." Being women, people of color and

immigrants, we encounter greater challenges in life. It seems no country

is exempt from injustice and discrimination, particularly where women are

concerned. In fact, injustice and discrimination are still alive and well

in the United States. Knowing and fighting for your rights is crucial for

preventing and dispelling injustice and discrimination. Being aware of

any opportunity available for self-development is vital for getting ahead

in the workplace. Last but not least, remember to not only work hard, but

to work smart. Let's salute all Chinese immigrant women and all the

immigrant women of the world! Enjoy and be happy!

Note: This paper is dedicated to Professor Judy Yung, my colleague and

former supervisor. Without her encouragement and support, I would not

have this story to tell. Thanks to Lillian Castillo-Speed for editing this

paper.