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Women in Chinatown

"Life in America, my grandmother found, was indeed rugged and unpredictable."

By Connie Young Yu

Whereas immigration to the United States was liberating for many European women, for Chinese women the experience was often confining, grueling and volatile. Connie Young Yu writes of the experiences of Chinese American women in "The World of Our Grandmothers" from Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women.

Once in San Francisco Grandmother lived a life of confinement, as did her mother-in-law before her. When she went out, even in Chinatown, she was ridiculed for her bound feet. People called out mockingly to her, "Jhat!" meaning bound. She tried to unbind her feet by soaking them every night and putting a heavy weight on each foot. But she was already a grown woman, and her feet were permanently stunted, the arches bent and the toes crippled. It was hard for her to stand for long periods of time, and she frequently had to sit on the floor to do her chores. My mother comments: "Tradition makes life so hard. My father traveled all over the world. There were stamps all over his passport-London, Paris-and stickers all over his suitcases, but his wife could not go into the street by herself."

Their first child was a girl, and on the morning of her month-old "red eggs and ginger party" the earth shook 8.3 on the Richter scale. Everyone in San Francisco, even Chinese women, poured out into the streets. My grandmother, babe in arms, managed to get a ride to Golden Gate Park on a horse-drawn wagon. Two other Chinese women who survived the earthquake recall the shock of suddenly being out in the street milling with thousands of people. The elderly goldsmith in a dimly lit Chinatown store had a twinkle in his eye when I asked him about the scene after the quake. "We all stared at the women because we so seldom saw them in the streets."...

That devastating natural disaster forced some modernity on the San Francisco Chinese community. Women had to adjust to the emergency and makeshift living conditions and had to work right alongside the men. Life in America, my grandmother found, was indeed rugged and unpredictable.

As the city began to rebuild itself, she proceeded to raise a large family, bearing four more children. The only school in San Francisco admitting Chinese was the Oriental school in Chinatown. But her husband felt, as did most men of his class, that the only way his children could get a good education was for the family to return to China. So they lived in China and my grandfather traveled back and forth to the United States for his trade business. Then suddenly, at the age of forty-three, he died of an illness on board a ship returning to China. After a long and painful mourning, Grandmother decided to return to American with her brood of now seven children.

Although the children were quickly admitted to the country as US citizens, Yu's grandmother was held at Angel Island. She had filariasis, a non-contagious, curable ailment that health inspectors often used as an excuse to deport Asian immigrants. Yu writes:

The year my grandmother was detained on Angel Island [1924], a law had just taken effect that forbade all aliens ineligible for citizenship from landing in America. This constituted a virtual ban on the immigration of all Chinese, including Chinese wives of US citizens....

After fifteen months [of letter-writing by the attorney she hired] the case was finally won. Grandmother was easily cured of filariasis and allowed-with nine months probation-to join her children in San Francisco. The legal fees amounted to \$782.50, a fortune in those days.

In 1927 Dr. Frederick Lam in Hawaii, moved by the plight of Chinese families deported from the islands because of the [filiariasis], worked to convince federal health officials that the disease was non-communicable. He used the case of Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey, my grandmother, as a precedent for allowing an immigrant to land with such an ailment and thus succeeded in breaking down a major barrier to Asian immigration.

My most vivid memory of Grandmother Lee is when she was in her seventies and studying for citizenship. She had asked me to test her on the three branches of government and how to pronounce them correctly. I was a sophomore in high school and had entered the "What American Democracy Means to Me" speech contest of the Chinese American

Citizens Alliance. I looked directly at my grandmother in the audience. She didn't smile, and afterwards, didn't comment on my patriotic words. She had never told me about being on Angel Island or about her friends losing their citizenship. It wasn't in the textbooks either. I may have thought she wanted to be a citizen because her sons and sons-in-law had fought for this country, and we lived in a land of freedom and opportunity, but my guess now is that she wanted to avoid any possible confrontation-even at her age-with immigration authorities. The bad laws had been repealed, but she wasn't taking any chances.

From "The World of Our Grandmothers" by Connie Young Yu in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*. Edited by Asian Women United of California. Beacon Press, 1989, 38-39, and 39-41.

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