

On gold mountain:
the one hundred year
odyssey of my
chinese american
family



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Today, immigration ranks as one of the most discussed topics in the US and other parts across the world; specifically, in the US, the campaign and election of President Donald Trump revolved around this topic in detail. However, while some might see Trump's policies on immigration and the relationship between the US and the rest of the world as controversial, issues surrounding immigration in the America have been rife since the 19th century. As America recovered from internal wars and gradually stabilized under the national and state governments, immigration increasingly became one of the sensitive subjects. As the Chinese migrated to America in the 1850s after the world had received news that North America was a land of opportunity for everyone, nationalists gradually became skeptical of the consequences of their migration. In her best-selling book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese American Family*, Lisa See narrates her family history by exploring her great grandfather's journey from china to America and his rise to one of the richest men in china town in the late 19th century. Within her eloquent description of her great grandfather's journey, it is evident that her picture of the immigrant experience in America covers the motivations and troubles that immigrants face today, as they did in the 19th century.

In the early chapters of *On the Gold Mountain*, Lisa See narrates the motivations that sparked her great grandfather's journey to the Gold Mountain, which was the old Chinese name for America. In china and other parts of the world, people referred to America as Gold Mountain because they had heard stories about the land where one would literally pick gold from the ground and keep it. In the 19th century, China suffered under <https://assignbuster.com/on-gold-mountain-the-one-hundred-year-odyssey-of-my-chinese-american-family/>

different regimes and colonization, which left many poor; with the growing population, many soon found it hard to secure stable employment. For those that sought to own businesses, the economic conditions of the poor meant that returns were at an all-time low (See, 1995). One of the common jobs included working in shipyards, which paid little; however, water was the main mode of international transport and ship making was a constant job for many. For peasants that lived and worked in their farms, harsh weather meant that they would be unable to feed their families.

Coming from this background, Fong See, Lisa See's great grandfather, had seen enough destruction to try his luck in America. Lisa writes that many men had wished to migrate to America and other regions for better opportunities but they often fell victim to familial attachment. However, some had refrained from attempting to move abroad due to the threats of decapitation for leaving china from the Dowager Empress (See, 1995).

Despite these deterrence Fong See appeared to be decided on his future; he was a driven man and understood that he had to make sacrifices in order to make a living. What is more, he had heard that there was work in building railroads for anyone that was willing to work; coming from the poorest family in Dimtao, his village, Fong See saw no distractions in his way to the gold mountain (See, 1995). Collectively, these motivations were enough for Fong See; which is true for many immigrants in the 19th century and today. Many left their homes in search for opportunities after they realized that the poverty in their country was inescapable; America offered jobs and the prospect of business. While some immigrants today might have different

motivations for their migration, most would agree that they are moved by the hope that they will earn a better living in the US.

In the annals of California history, many people travelled to the state after they got news of the gold rush that made people instantly rich, while Lisa See does not claim it, Fong See and his friends had heard of such stories and saw a better future for themselves and their families. By the time the gold rush ended in the late 1800s, California had seen an influx of Chinese immigrants, who were now a source of cheap labor (See, 1995). Men like Fong See had left china to work in any industry, as long as they made some money, which they could not do in their country. Some of the common jobs at the time included laundry workers, gardeners, farmhands, domestics, and railroad workers. Working on the railroad was common for Chinese men, and in the 1860s, they were the majority of workers on the Transcontinental Railroad. Gradually, the Chinese American population had grown and more Chinese worked in jobs that kept increasing as the California economy grew. However, in the mid to late 1870s, the country faced an economic depression that crippled most businesses and work soon became scarce. Naturally, the local population began blaming the Chinese, who were now easy to find in different industries; eventually, people grew more hostile towards Chinese Americans. Soon, work became scarce for Chinese Americans too, and immigrants such as Fong See had to improvise.

Before coming to America, Fong See had seen how colonialists had plundered his country and how his country had paid the British millions in currency to have their land back (See, 1995). He understood that he had to make the best of his chance in America; he had tried his hand at his herbs <https://assignbuster.com/on-gold-mountain-the-one-hundred-year-odyssey-of-my-chinese-american-family/>

business in china and this proved that he could do business if he wanted to. Despite the difficult times, Fong See managed to establish himself as a trusted businessman in China town (See, 1995). To him, the gold mountain dream had become a reality, although he had not come across any gold in the literal sense; he had made enough money and wealth to be considered among the richest man in china town. In this sense, it is fair to infer that Fong See and many other Chinese, helped build the California economy; businesses grew and more people were employed, especially when the government relaxed some of the tough legislation against Chinese immigrants.

Ultimately, Lisa See's *On the Gold Mountain* explores the different motivations and troubles that seem to be inherent with many immigrant stories. Against the odds, Fong See migrated from his home to seek a better future for his family and defied the strong familial bonds shared by many in China. His time in America was punctuated by both good and tough economic times that changed his worldview and motivated him to chase success at in different ways. Fong See's journey speaks to the Chinese contributions to California history and its economy to date, which shows that immigrants input on different aspects of American life cannot be ignored.

References

- See, L. (1995). *On Gold Mountain: the one-hundred-year odyssey of my Chinese-American family*. Vintage.