

On gold mountain



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On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family written by Lisa See is an inspirational narrative depicting her Chinese families experiences and struggles immigrating to the west coast of America during the 19th and 20th century. The author was effective in telling her families story. There were similarities and differences between the Fong family's experiences and the Chinese community's immigration experiences as a whole.

Immigration to America was a phenomenon for Chinese people in the late 19th century in search of "Gold Mountain". This was a term in Chinese culture to describe economic opportunity in the state of California after gold was found. The title of the book is a very appropriate metaphor for expressing Fong See's determination and success in America in the sense of him conquering Gold Mountain. This paper will compare Fong See's family's immigrant experiences to that of the Chinese immigrant community collectively.

Of focus will be the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the significance of Chinese ethnic enclaves, the treatment and role of Chinese women within American culture, the difficulties that the Chinese immigrants had with assimilating to American culture, and the negative attitudes towards the Chinese on all levels in America. Analyzing Chinese assimilation and the negative attitudes towards the group will be done in the same section because of the similarities between the two themes.

All of these themes will be compared to the experience of Fong See and his family in America. The California gold rush of 1848 brought huge economic

attention to the west coast of America and this attracted thousands of immigrants from all over the world. The state's population increased from 15, 000 to 250, 000 in the four year period after gold was discovered. Chinese immigrants were seen as the most worthy of the newly adopted citizens by the Governor of California due to their strong work ethic and low compensation demands.

Chinese workers were treated fairly and with respect however discrimination towards the group accelerated when the supply of the state's golden resource began to deplete. Racial discrimination became so severe that the United States federal government intervened with their resolution. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 symbolized the first time that one group has been labelled undesirable by the United States government when they stopped nationalizing Chinese citizens and intended on banning Chinese immigration for a period of 10 years.

The act did not apply to Chinese abourers already in America as of November 17, 1880. The act also set up an identification system where if one of these legitimate immigrants were to leave the United States, they needed to acquire a return certificate in order to re-enter the country. When they returned, their certificate would be compared with the government's permanent identification records and if it matched then the certificate holder was allowed on the mainland. If the two did not match then they were not allowed in the country. The act did not limit the immigration rights of merchants, diplomats, and other non-labourers.

These people were members of the exempt class. To ensure that immigrants who fell into this category were who they claimed to be, the Chinese government was forced to issue descriptive certificates in English saying the status of the immigrant. This was the most important piece of evidence for the individual to enter the country. The Exclusion Act was very effective as proved in On Gold Mountain. In the year 1882, nearly 40, 000 Chinese came to California and this plummeted to a mere 26 six years later once immigration tightened.

Throughout the story of Fong See and his family's lives, they struggled with the issues of Chinese immigration and exclusion. On Gold Mountain provides evidence of how difficult it was for Chinese immigrants to travel and re-enter the country because of the restrictions placed on them. The tight restrictions from the American government forced the Chinese to fake merchant documents in order to remain in America. Fong See's family was no different as he formed partnerships with 10 men in his family in order for them to claim status as "merchants".

He changed his business name to the "Fong Sue On" to Americanize the name and to show that the Fong family had been merchants for two decades. Doing this still did not guarantee that his family could smoothly immigrate. In 1902, when Fong See and his family arrived back to San Francisco from China, he easily passed immigration as he had established his own two ladies undergarment businesses and ran an auction business. He was married to a white American woman and had three children. It was quite evident that he was a wealthy and successful merchant.

However, his two brothers who had received “ merchant” status from Fong See were not as lucky. They were detained, interrogated, and humiliated. Fong Quong was held for 54 days before he was finally released. This shows how difficult it was for Chinese men to enter to the United States even if they had documents. This struggle in Fong See’s family displays how strict the Exclusion Act was and how serious the American government was with the enforcement of the law. The mass of Chinese immigrants to a common ground in California paved the way for the emergence of Chinese enclaves referred to as Chinatowns.

Early 20th century Chinatowns were associated with filth, depravity, and violence by American society. Chinatowns became very tight knit and isolated communities. This was a huge factor in the lack of assimilation to American culture by the Chinese during this period. The San Francisco Chinatown became a notorious place for gambling establishments and by 1885 it became home to nearly 70 brothels. These aspects of Chinatown gave it a bad reputation throughout American culture. In retrospect, Chinatowns became an area of economic opportunity for immigrants.

The key insights from an analysis of small business entrepreneurship in migrant communities, such as Chinatowns, suggest that ethnic ventures have prospered because they have been able to capitalize on the strength of pre-existing cultural and socioeconomic ties. In communities where the Chinese reached a critical mass, their clan associations appropriated the most lucrative economic niches, such as the laundry or restaurant business. On Gold Mountain provides examples of how American politicians portrayed Chinatowns in a negative manner.

Politicians and city officials constantly complained that Chinatowns were filthy and hazardous. They also said that, “ the Chinese were dirty, drank too much, and lived on too little money”. During the time of the Exclusion Act, these anti-Chinese attitudes were very prevalent and obvious within American media as well. The continuity and consistency of these attitudes even convinced Fong See and his family that moving back into a Chinatown would be a step backward. Being a successful merchant, Fong See did not want to be associated with a place that was viewed in this manner.

Although he and his family had lived in a Chinatown earlier on in their life, he chose not to move into a Chinatown in Los Angeles. What was being said about Chinese areas was even enough to make Fong See not want to live in one, so one could imagine the magnitude of negativity towards these areas. Newspapers often made outright false acquisitions about Chinatowns in California. “ When the Grass Value National wrote that any Chinatown in California was “ but a synonym for a row of brothels, a collection of stinks, and the dwelling places of thieves and prostitutes,” it failed to note that he same was true about any California town at the time. ” Both whites and Chinese were guilty of smoking opium, visiting brothels, and gambling in all California towns. Yet the media continually choose to report of these activities in just Chinatowns. This is proof of the negative attitude towards Chinese culture. Like few other immigrants, Fong See was able to recognize the activities that were going on within Chinatown and capitalize on this by with his business savvy. He was able to see economic opportunity within Chinese culture.

He did not do so by strictly catering to his own group of people with the traditional chop suey joint, grocery store, or butcher shop. He saw that prostitution in brothels was a common practice in the Chinese, and even some white communities, and with this he began to manufacture women's undergarments designed specifically for prostitutes. During the late 19th and early 20th century, many of the women that came to California were either kidnapped or sold to merchants for prostitution in brothels. Approximately 61% of Chinese women in California during this period were prostitutes.

Far fewer Chinese women traveled to the United States during this period compared to men. Gendered assumptions about Chinese women arose as they were neither labourers nor merchants and thus irrelevant. With all the animosity towards Chinese men in the labour market, one could only imagine the hostile environment surrounding Chinese women. " There are from 1, 200 to 2, 000 Chinese women in the city of San Francisco, and they are all prostitutes or concubines, or second wives. Out of the four or five thousand Chinese females in California there are not six who pre-tend to be good women...

Chinese women come raised for prostitution in China... Their women are imported as slaves and are brought here and held here as slaves". These comments, which are on file in the Congressional Records of California, were made by a Senator. This shows the difficulties that Chinese women faced due to the attitudes at the top of the political hierarchy. Fong See also understood the role of Chinese women in America. He saw how these women were living in their communities when he moved to Sacramento. Some were high class prostitutes who were fed and clothed in silk, satin, and lace.

They lived in healthy conditions as beautiful houses were made available to them. Others were treated as sex slaves and were only given the bare essentials. They wore peasant's clothing and were rarely fed properly. Most were unhealthy and many were diseased. Regardless of what type of prostitute these women were, the fact remains that nine out of ten Chinese women were prostitutes at the time. Very few aspired to be anything more than this as it was unreasonable to expect otherwise. This was reality for Chinese women and Fong See understood this.

It was because of this reality that Fong See was able to start his business. Without these Chinese women, Fong See would never have been able to start a family and be as successful as he turned out to be. The emergence of Chinatowns allowed the Chinese to avoid assimilation to American culture. Without intimate social relations assimilation is impossible. Assimilation of the two races is the coming together of the individual members of these two races in such intimate association that there ceases to be any race separation between them.

This was necessary to become blended into one nation. Asian American intermarriage represented the culmination of the assimilation process that often subsumes acculturation. Marriage was the answer. However, this was rare during this period because of the negatives towards the Chinese group in comparison to other immigrant groups. The Chinese differed from Americans by fundamental differences in language, social habits, customs, and dress code. The groups differed in more ways than any other two races. This made the Chinese an easy target in the media, judicial system, and in politics.

They were often at the centre of caricatures in newspapers portraying the group as substandard human beings. Not only was the general American public being exposed to the supposed inferiority of the Chinese, the discrimination was leaking into the political community. “ Along with most white Californians- including most of the lawyers representing the Chinese and the other federal judges serving the far western United States-... favoured restricting Chinese immigration and regarded them as racial inferiors”.

Fong See’s immigrant experience did differ greatly from that of most other Chinese immigrants with respect to assimilation. While most Chinese immigrants were low wage labourers, they had little motivation to assimilate with the American lifestyle as their culture was maintained within Chinatowns. The fact that large numbers of Chinese were coming to America with their contrasting cultural values, taking jobs that American workers believed were theirs, and not conforming to American culture, created the tensions that led to the Exclusion Act and violence against Chinese communities.

Fong See was not like most Chinese immigrants. He fully embraced the American lifestyle and understood that he had a better chance of success if he blended in. He tried to learn and use English often and he wore American style clothing. He was not afraid to meet and speak with white American men and women when he did business. He even married a white American woman, Lettie Pruett, which was extremely uncommon. Although Fong See still held onto his Chinese values, he essentially allowed himself to become assimilated into American culture.

It was this assimilation that enabled him to open a successful business and stay in America, while other Chinese labourers were sent home and restricted from immigration. This proves that Americans were not accepting of Chinese culture and it would be impossible for a Chinese man to live a successful life without understanding this. Against all odds, Fong See was able to overcome adversity and overachieve in America in comparison to other Chinese immigrants. He was truly an exceptional success story in the Chinese American community.

Certain aspects of his family's experiences were similar to the experiences of other Chinese immigrants coming to the United States during this period when coping with the exclusion laws, the negative attitudes towards Chinatowns, and the treatment of women. However, he did differ from other Chinese immigrants with his willingness to assimilate by his bravery in developing social relationships with the American people, his financial success, and his marriage to a white woman. Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain* was effective in showing how her family and the whole Chinese community dealt with the problems they faced when coming to America.