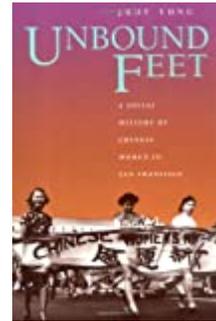




Judy Yung. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xiv + 395 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08866-5; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08867-2.



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Wang Ah So and Her Daughters

“Women in this community are keeping pace with the quick changes of the modern world. The shy Chinese maidens in bound feet are forever gone, making place for active and intelligent young women.” –Jane Kwong Lee, San Francisco Chinatown YWCA, 1938.

A major concern in Asian American studies is the dearth of historical literature about women, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Judy Yung’s new book makes a major contribution toward filling that gap. *Unbound Feet* is a social history of Chinese American women in San Francisco during the first half of the twentieth century. Yung, a long-time community historian and now assistant professor of American Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz, has combined oral histories and autobiographies, analysis of census data, and archival research from various San Francisco Chinatown institutions to produce an important work. *Unbound Feet* is a vivid and textured portrait of immigrant and American-born women shaping and reshaping their gender roles amid the social changes taking place in Chinatown, the United States, and China.

Through Yung’s elegant prose and an impressive collection of photographs, we meet dozens of women, and if we have come to understand that “woman” is not a unitary identity, Yung assures us that there is also no unitary “Chinese American woman.” The immigrants of the early twentieth century include Wong Ah So, a young bride sold into prostitution; Ah Kum, an indentured servant girl; Law Shee Low, a working-class wife; and Ng Poon Chew, a Presbyterian minister’s wife who founded the Chinatown YWCA. We also meet women of the second generation who struggled with racial and gender oppression in diverse ways, like Flora Belle Jan, a flapper; Alice Fong Yu, the first Chinese American school teacher in San Francisco; Sue Ko Lee, a union activist in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; Lai Yee Guey How, a community volunteer in the support movement for China’s war of resistance against Japan; and Jessie Lee Yip, who served as a WAC during World War II.

Yung maintains a high level of respect for her subjects and celebrates all their achievements. But *Unbound Feet* is more than compensatory history. Yung positions her study as a response to the inadequacies of ethnic stud-

ies, which tend to privilege race over gender and class analyses, and of feminist theories, which place gender in the foreground while often obscuring race and class distinctions. Like Jacqueline Jones, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and Evelyn Glenn Nakano, Yung believes that the experience of women of color must be approached by “integrating race, gender, and class as equally important categories of historical analysis” (p. 5). At the same time, the questions she asks are familiar to women’s history: Did Chinese women’s experience in America oppress or liberate them? Did the segregation of paid and unpaid (domestic) labor reinforce women’s subordinate role in the family? What was the extent of gender conflict and class and generational differences within the Chinese American community (p. 5)?

Yung answers these questions in ways that are both predictable and compelling. Chinese American women during the first half of the twentieth century, she states, gradually gained a measure of independence and social mobility as a result of increased economic opportunities. More interesting is Yung’s argument that Chinese American women’s perceptions of their gender roles were influenced by three ideological trends: the nationalism of the Chinese republic, Christianity and its missionary reform movements, and mainstream American culture (pp. 5-6). Yung follows the lives of women from diverse class backgrounds over the decades as they intertwine with these trends and the ideas they produced.

The metaphor of footbinding organizes the narrative. Footbinding was perhaps the ultimate expression of Chinese women’s oppression. From the twelfth to the early twentieth century, many Chinese families bound the feet of their daughters to increase their worth in marriage. Footbinding was excruciatingly painful. A girl’s feet were tightly wrapped in bandages until the arches broke and toes bent under, creating tiny feet, only inches long. Bound feet were symbolic of gentility, beauty, and, by literally keeping women from “wandering,” chastity (p. 6). Yung uses the unbinding of feet as a metaphor as she traces the process of women’s efforts to unbind themselves from sexism within patriarchal Chinese culture and racism in American society.

Chinese immigrant women in late-nineteenth-century San Francisco occupied a very small space at the margins of society. Prostitutes, *mui tsai* (indentured servant girls), and the wives of both merchants and laborers were confined to the domestic sphere and subordinated to men, with few opportunities to maneuver against the constraints imposed by racism and sexism. Things begin

to change with the advent of Chinese nationalism in the early 1900s. The call for “new women”—educated mothers and productive citizens—was an integral component of modern Chinese nationalism (pp. 98-99).

Simultaneously, the Progressive Era in America encouraged women’s participation in church, civic, and reform activities. Middle-class Chinese women—frequently the literate wives of ministers—were part of the broad women’s club movement sweeping America (pp. 93-97). Moreover, Chinese nationalists and Protestant reformers both organized against prostitution and contributed to its decline in the early twentieth century. Missionaries in Chinatown like Donalinda Cameron rescued scores of young Chinese women from prostitution and domestic abuse. Wong Ah So, for example, came to America in 1922 only to find out that her “husband” had been paid \$500 by a Chinese madam to procure her as a prostitute. The madam then sold her to another madam in Fresno for \$2,500. Rescued by workers from the San Francisco Presbyterian Mission House and placed under Cameron’s care for a year, Wong learned to read Chinese and to speak English and became a Christian. She then married a Chinese merchant in Boise, Idaho, and raised five children; she insisted that her daughters be educated (pp. 69-72).

If the first generation of immigrant women struggled just to survive, their daughters, the second generation of American-born Chinese who came of age during the 1920s, yearned for and took the “first steps” toward realizing a “different American dream.” According to Yung, these young women experienced a “cultural dilemma” as “U.S. citizens [who] wanted and expected to fulfill their potential in all aspects of their lives—in education and work, in social and political activities; but [who were] prevented from doing so by sexism at home and racism in the larger society” (p. 107). Census data indicate that most Chinese women in 1900 and 1910 worked as either prostitutes or seamstresses, whereas the 1920 census shows that Chinese women had moved into new occupations—clerical, waitressing, and sales, as well as school teaching and nursing. However, their employment opportunities were generally limited to Chinatown; Chinese American women did not enjoy the same degree of upward occupational and social mobility as did their European American counterparts (pp. 135-36).

But Chinese American women were no longer confined to the domestic sphere. Young women in Chinatown participated in activities sponsored by their churches and the YWCA and formed civic groups like the

Square and Circle Club. The latter smashed convention in 1924 by sponsoring an American-style jazz dance to raise funds for flood and famine relief in China. According to a local press account, the “hop” featured “American jazz by Chinese orchestra and American dancing by Chinese girls in American party frocks and high heels” (p. 153).

During the Depression, according to Yung, Chinese American women ironically made “long strides” in their economic and social position. Though Chinatown was not untouched by the Depression, Chinese American women occupied occupational niches that were relatively safe from the threat of unemployment. Many took advantage of new opportunities in such diverse fields as social work and nightclub entertainment (pp. 198-201). Others joined the labor movement, building a local of the Ladies Garment Workers Union in Chinatown and waging a 105-day strike against the National Dollar Stores in 1938 (pp. 209-19).

World War II, Yung tells us, afforded Chinese American women “unprecedented” opportunities to “expand their gender roles and fall in step with the rest of the country” (pp. 222-23). Working-class and middle-class women both actively participated in the community’s efforts to support China’s war of resistance against Japan. When the United States entered the war, Chinese American women contributed in various ways, from working in shipyards and offices to enlisting in the armed forces.

Although the experiences of Chinese women varied according to class and generation, Yung sees a commonality in their response to racial and gender oppression. Their outlook and actions were often characterized by a pragmatic accommodation to the limitations imposed on them by racism and sexism. Yung’s women “make do” with harsh conditions and discrimination not because they are necessarily quiescent, but as a survival strategy (p. 108). She finds the relegation of immigrant women to the domestic sphere not entirely oppressive, because women contributed to the family’s economic survival and were “culture carriers” (p. 82). The second generation pushed their aspirations to become full citizens to the limits of possibility.

Yung’s analysis may not sit well with the cultural nationalist trend in Asian American studies, which is militantly anti-assimilationist. But Yung wisely refrains from moralizing at her subjects. She even redeems Jade Snow Wong, whose autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), is criticized by some Asian Americanists as assimilationist or “fake”—that is, evincing a “false consciousness” based on the oppressor’s construction of the

othered self (see, for example, Frank Chin, et al., eds., *Aiiieeeee!* [NY: Mentor, 1991, 1973], p. xx). Yung sees Wong’s construction of a bicultural identity as part of the historical experience of the second generation. Moreover, she recognizes within Wong a democratic impulse and a desire for female independence.

Yung’s argument carries the powerful suggestion that our understanding of the politics and culture of ethnicity (and such concepts as assimilation, acculturation, and identity) necessarily changes when gender is incorporated into our field of vision. Still, Yung’s use of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as historical evidence is somewhat compromised because she reads it entirely at face value, without acknowledging or analyzing the complex mediated nature of that text. In fact, Wong’s publishers played an active role in shaping and editing the book, seeing it as a promotion of American cultural values.

At another level, I am uncomfortable with Yung’s somewhat teleological view that participation in the paid labor market and civic society inevitably leads to women’s independence. It is of course true that the second generation’s social and economic status advanced beyond that of the first. But new generations of working-class immigrants since World War II have faced oppression sometimes as severe as that endured by their forebears. Today Chinatown is shamed at the revived trade in illegal immigration that binds young women to three or more years of servitude in massage parlors.

I also wish Yung had pursued the cultural and ideological dimensions of this history by probing further the meanings and consequences of Chinese nationalism, Protestant reformism, and mass consumer culture and their intersections with gender constructions. Women are not simply “influenced” by “external” ideologies. Gendered meanings are part of nationalism and reformism; moreover, as social actors, women participate in the constituting of those discourses. For example, Yung considers the display of one hundred Chinese American women in *cheong sam* (the national dress) carrying a huge, outstretched Chinese flag in parades during the Sino-Japanese war a “merging of nationalism and feminism” (p. 240). But it seems more accurate to view the women flagbearers as a feminized representation of the nation as the “motherland.”

Although Yung is quite right that modernity liberated Chinese women from traditional practices like footbinding and concubinage, I fear she overstates her case by imputing an “inherent feminist ideology” to nationalism (p. 51). Republican Chinese leaders urged women to partici-

pate in building the nation, but in roles still defined by an essentialized view of womanhood: the new woman was the nurturing mother of good citizens. Yung has raised some provocative ideas; I hope that *Unbound Feet* will encourage more discussion on the meanings of feminism as well as the gendered dimensions of nationalist and reform discourses.

Unbound Feet will be especially welcome in the college classroom. With its oral histories and extensive documentation it will undoubtedly become a standard text in Asian American history and Asian American women's courses. It should also be a valuable addition to syllabi in women's, immigration, and social history classes, either as a whole or in selected chapters. Chapter Two, for example, on early-twentieth-century immigrant women

and reform efforts in San Francisco's Chinatown, adds another dimension to our understanding of Progressive Era reform activity.

Judy Yung has combined impressive research with deep feeling and respect for her subjects. She has done a remarkable job of unsilencing an important part of our community and our history and in doing so has made a major contribution to our knowledge of ourselves.

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