

1870–1943

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One of the most noticeable characteristics of the Chinese population residing in the United States before World War II was a pronounced shortage of women. The United States censuses of population taken during the second half of the nineteenth century indicate that the number of Chinese females fluctuated between 3.6 percent (in 1890) and 7.2 percent (in 1870) of the total Chinese population. The percentage rose slowly during the twentieth century, but most of the increase was due to the birth of girls on American soil, not to immigration. In 1920, females comprised 12.6 percent of the U.S. Chinese population; by 1940, that figure stood at 30.0 percent. The history of other immigrant groups shows that a dearth of women in the first phase of their settlement in a new land is normal, so this shortage among the Chinese in the United States is a matter of degree rather than a difference in kind. Where the Chinese pattern deviates from the norm is that the imbalance in the sex ratio lasted for more than a century rather than for just a few decades.

Various explanations have been given for why so few Chinese women immigrated to the United States. Some scholars have claimed that because Chinese society was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, the only acceptable

roles for married women were bearing children and serving their husbands and parents-in-law. Given the central importance of filial piety in traditional Chinese culture, the moral duty of wives to remain in China to wait on their parents-in-law was greater than their obligation to accompany their husbands abroad. Consequently, only girls from poor families left their homes to earn a living elsewhere as prostitutes or as servants. These working women sent remittances home to help sustain their families and, by so doing, buttressed the very patriarchal order that relegated them to its lowest rung.¹

Other writers have argued that since the majority of the Chinese who came to the United States were sojourners there was no reason to bring their wives with them. The main aim of sojourners being to earn money, it was cheaper to send savings home to sustain their families in China—where the cost of living was considerably lower—than to have them reside in America. Prostitutes were imported to take care of the sexual needs of the men.² A third reason offered is that restrictive immigration laws kept Chinese women out, but to date only one study has been published on the legal constraints on Chinese female immigration.³

There is no question that patriarchal cultural values, a sojourning mentality, differentials in the cost of living, and hazardous conditions in the American West—where thousands of Chinese men earned a living as migrant laborers and where intense anti-Chinese hostility existed during the latter half of the nineteenth century—all worked in tandem to limit the number of Chinese female immigrants during the early decades of the Chinese influx. But, as I shall argue, from the early 1870s onward, efforts by various levels of American government to restrict the immigration of Chinese women became the more significant factor. In this chapter, I shall chronicle how different groups of Chinese women were denied entry. Contrary to the common belief that laborers were the target of the first exclusion act, the effort to bar another group of Chinese—prostitutes—preceded the prohibition against laborers. Given the widely held view that all Chinese women were prostitutes, laws against the latter affected other groups of Chinese women who sought admission into the country as well.

That a multiplicity of factors served to keep the number of Chinese females low is revealed in several dozen interviews conducted in the mid 1920s along the Pacific Coast by researchers from the Survey of Race Relations project. The main reasons given by the Chinese interviewees for