



Title	Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century San Francisco (review)
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Despite the fragmented presentation and the constant reiteration, the author has a sharp eye for the niceties of Chinese painting. This ranges from noticing in one painting that two figures meant to be depicted as walking down a path are facing the wrong direction and are really striding directly into the solid wall of an adjacent hill, thus disclosing an incompetent hand, to a careful analysis of how a devoted collector of Chinese painting and calligraphy lovingly affixes his seals in careful pressings so that they are properly aligned vertically and horizontally and not just haphazardly stamped on. Her descriptions of paintings and brushwork are models of clarity and aptness of word. Unfortunately, the author also has a sharp tongue, and her diatribes against the contemporary collector of Chinese painting (both private and public) and the supporting American academic community are couched in blunt terms certain to offend if not antagonize. There is much that is controversial in this book, but there is also much of value, and it should be read by all serious scholars, beginning or established, in the field.

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Benson Tong. *Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century San Francisco*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. xix, 203 pp. Hardcover \$24.95, ISBN 0-8061-2653-1.

A small but significant body of academic and literary works is emerging that is dedicated to giving a "voice" to the Asian women who immigrated to the United States and to successive generations of Asian American women. Recent examples include the much noted novel *Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan, the collection of social science and literary essays in *Making Waves*, by Asian Women United of California, and the historical discussion on "*The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943*," by Sucheng Chan.¹ One common thread among these works is the woman's perspective, which is meant to dispel the old but still popular characterizations of the exotic, submissive, and obliging "China doll," and to demonstrate the ways in which women have adapted or actively resisted the Asian traditions of patriarchal oppression and the hostile, sometimes violent, racism in the United States.

Tong's historical analysis of the lives of Chinese immigrant prostitutes fits within this genre, and represents an important contribution to the study of gender, power, and the Chinese in the United States. Given the proportion of Chi-

nese male sojourners in the United States at that time and what can be found in the available historical records, it is not surprising that most studies have focused largely on reconstructing the lives and struggles of the male *gum saan haak* (travelers to the Gold Mountain). This book, however, creatively draws from a wide range of sources and is among the few works that is devoted to looking specifically at the experiences of Chinese women during the second half of the nineteenth century.²

As the title of his book suggests, Tong is concerned with uncovering and demystifying the stereotyped portrayals of early Chinese immigrant women, particularly those who were typically indentured workers forced into prostitution in the frontier areas of the American West. In the Introduction, he specifically questions common assumptions about these women's passive acceptance of their circumstances and their victimization, and their ready acquiescence to the "rule of their master." Instead, he argues, "they were actors in the chaotic world of prostitution" (p. xviii), and, survived and adapted to their oppressive environment in different ways, depending on available resources and choices. Accordingly, this is a study on the "interaction of women's oppression and women's power" (p. xix).

The six chapters of the book are devoted to developing this thesis. In chapter 1, Tong sets the stage for understanding these women's lives by examining the gender disparities among Chinese who immigrated to the West, and the isolation of prostitutes due in large part to the Victorian climate that pervaded American society. He draws from census data, newspaper articles, and numerous secondary sources to trace the demographic and geographical patterns of Chinese male and female immigration to the West from 1849 up until 1882, the year of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The gender ratio was quite clearly unbalanced: the 1852 state census reports nineteen Chinese women living in San Francisco compared to 2,954 men, or a ratio of 1:155. Because most Chinese men envisioned returning to China, their wives and families remained in their native land. Consequently, the absence of female companionship combined with forced segregation led these men to seek "intimacy" from prostitutes.

The few Chinese women who did immigrate during the middle of the century were overwhelmingly prostitutes. A small number of them initially started as independent entrepreneurs in the early 1850s, as in the case of the infamous Ah Toy, recognized as the first Chinese prostitute in America, who set foot in *Dai Fow* (San Francisco) in the late 1840s. She started a small business in her home, and by 1852 had expanded operations to two "boardinghouses," and became a "much romanticized . . . figure" of that period (p. 7). This pattern of independence quickly changed within a few years, when the Tongs organized and started importing women for prostitution. Despite Ah Toy's attempts to protect her business from the Tongs, she was eventually forced to close her houses. From this point on, the Tongs dominated the vice rackets in the Chinese community, and

arranged for large numbers of women to be brought over to America. As the mining and railroad industry moved farther east, Tong traces a corresponding movement of Chinese male workers seeking economic opportunities in other parts of California and in other states (Nevada, Oregon, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and Arizona). Chinese prostitutes followed the men, but were fewer in number and more dispersed throughout the mining posts and emerging towns.

Like Chinese male laborers, the prostitutes were also segregated from the larger society. For the prostitutes, however, it was a double-edged sword. The prevailing Victorian morality dictated that while men were “naturally bestial creatures,” women were expected to be pure and virtuous (p. 27). Hence, although Chinese prostitutes served the “needs” of hard-laboring men, they were, as Tong succinctly described, “believed to exhibit qualities associated with male sexuality: grossness, animalism, and lechery” (p. 28). The Victorian abhorrence of Chinese prostitutes, along with the reformist spirit to develop a moral consciousness among the Chinese, was further realized in the forced segregation of the prostitutes within Chinatown itself. The women’s isolation was marked further by the contradictory views of Chinese men. While some males were indifferent, others saw them as “necessary,” and still others celebrated the sexual conquering and exploitation of these women.

Chapter 2 moves farther back in time to track the path by which these women were enslaved into prostitution. During the Ch’ing dynasty (1644–1911), dramatic social changes occurred, particularly in southern China. The land struggles resulting from tremendous population growth combined with economic imperialism, political uprisings, devastating natural disasters, and taxation burdens led many Chinese to seek immediate economic solutions. While many males sought their fortune by journeying to *gum saan*, girls and young women were sometimes sold by desperate peasant families who unwittingly believed that their daughters would become indentured domestic help, not prostitutes. According to Tong, most daughters were not bitter toward their families but viewed their circumstances as part of their familial obligation. Young women were also lured into prostitution through false marriage promises and kidnapping. Although the British and American governments developed a number of policies to curb the importation of Chinese prostitutes, the laws did little to stem the trafficking of women for prostitution.

Tong follows the prostitutes’ arrival in America in chapter 3. Upon arrival, the women typically followed their chaperons’ instructions on the appropriate responses for clearing immigration, for fear of being imprisoned in the “devil’s prison.” Some who were aware of what lay ahead, however, tried to overcome their circumstances by committing suicide, by seeking help from Chinese officials, or by talking their way out of their involuntary travel. Although the data are sketchy, Tong did find some cases in which these young women successfully broke free from their captors and returned to China. The Chinese Six Companies, bent

on protecting the image of the Chinese community, took an active role in trying to stop prostitution, and offered women passage home. Ironically, the Tongs resorted to the legal system to secure their investments, namely the women.

Once the women cleared immigration, they faced public humiliation as they paraded naked on a stage for potential buyers and as whites and even some Chinese men jeered at them. Victorian outcries resulted in the movement of sales to other places in Chinatown. While some women were sold as domestic servants, others became concubines to wealthy Chinese men. The majority, however, were bought by brothel owners. Despite popular images, some women resisted their enslavement, escaped, and sought shelter in missionary homes.

The next two chapters explore the prostitutes' place and adjustment to life in America, with chapter 5 focusing specifically on violence. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Chinese women, especially prostitutes, lived on the economic and social margins of American society. The proportion of Chinese women involved in prostitution peaked at 85 percent in 1860, and fell from 62 percent in 1870 to 17 percent in 1880. This decline, however, may well be attributed to a decline in the total number of Chinese women in these decades and to the movement of some Chinese women into the newly developing manufacturing industries. Most prostitutes' earnings were controlled by their owners, and they lived in poverty and isolation, as evidenced by their low income (as measured by census reports on the "value of personal estate" and "value of real estate") and geographical segregation in alleys and back streets. Chapter 4 also includes an excellent comparison of the differential treatment of Chinese and non-Chinese prostitutes, particularly by the police.

Violent acts against Chinese prostitutes as well as other Chinese women by whites did occur, and were rooted in racial, nativistic, economic, and deviant stereotypes (e.g., association with venereal disease and moral degeneracy). As one *San Francisco Chronicle* commentary noted, "It was not just a question of money; it is a question of life and money" (p. 130). Still, Tong's review of police reports and newspaper accounts indicates that a great deal of the violence was committed by dissatisfied owners and customers. Prostitutes were sometimes able to break free from assaults, and occasionally exacted justice by testifying in court.³

In chapter 6, Tong follows the careers of these women, noting that by 1880, the proportion of Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco had declined and the number of married women had increased. This was due partly to the immigration of Chinese wives during this period, but, as Tong suggests, it was also due to the number of prostitutes who were able to break free from the control of commercialized sex and enter into marriage. The opportunity to leave the trade is tied to a host of factors including an unbalanced gender ratio, the Chinese value placed on secondary wives, beliefs against interracial marriages, and antimiscegenation laws. In addition to marriage, a small number of prostitutes tried to leave prosti-

tution through the help of humanitarian and religious organizations. These prostitutes, however, generally resisted the paternalistic and patronizing views of the missionaries, and broke contact after marriage.

Tong has set out on an ambitious intellectual adventure as data sources on highly marginalized populations in history are quite typically scarce. His discovery and use of a variety of primary and secondary sources and his skillful analysis of the nature and extent of Chinese prostitution in San Francisco are to be applauded. His efforts greatly advance the study of Chinese women; as he reminds us in his succinct conclusion, "these unsubmitive women rose to the challenge of adapting to a circumscribed life, and many eventually overcame their oppressors" (p. 197).

Unsubmitive Women is well written and thoroughly documented, and it is quite suitable as a classroom text. Several maps, drawings, and sketches of San Francisco's Chinatown during the latter half of the 1800s, photographs of San Francisco Chinese residents and *baak haak chai* (one hundred men's wives), and bills of sale of Chinese prostitutes provide readers with a realistic sense of the period and place in which these women lived. This book is highly recommended for those interested in the history of the Chinese, the American West, Chinese vice activities, and gender and race relations.

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- NOTES
1. *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* is a collection of essays edited by Asian Women United of California, and published by Beacon Press (1989). Sucheng Chan's article appears in *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 94-146.
 2. One of the most impressive studies on Chinese immigrant women can be found in Lucie Cheng Hirata's "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* (Autumn 1979): 3-29. Tong's research moves in a different direction from Hirata's work, as his efforts are concerned with the women's experiences rather than the economic consequences of Chinese prostitution.
 3. Tong notes that section 16 of the Civil Rights Act of 1870 mandated the right to testify in court.