

Housewives or Prostitutes? Chinese Women in Washington and other Northwestern States before 1910

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When 12-year old Margaret Chin arrived from Hong Kong to Seattle on April 2, 1909, she wasn't sure she would be admitted, although an American citizen. She of course wasn't aware that suffrage for Washington women would be won the following year and, in any case, was too young to vote. But her mother, Dong Oy, who landed in Seattle with Margaret and was American-born and had an American-born husband, should not have expected problems. Or should she?

From Left to Right
Margaret, Chin Lem, Dong Oy
1907



Dong Oy was born in San Francisco and went back to China with her parents when she was a teenager. At the age of 17 she was married in China to a Seattle-born Chinese young man. They had their daughter Margaret in 1896. The father left for Seattle soon afterwards. Dong Oy and Margaret joined him there when the girl was five years old and stayed there until she was ten.

When Margaret wrote a long statement in English for the immigration officer to petition for herself and her mother, everyone was surprised and, delighted. What a smart little girl, they all remarked¹. Her mother Dong Oy, on the other hand, was illiterate. She could not do more than sign her name in Chinese.

The reason why the mother and daughter had to petition for themselves instead of having the husband and father do it is a sad story of domestic strife. Dong Oy's insistence on returning to the United States was seen as desertion by her husband's influential family. They had withheld her identification papers and tried to bar her from entering the U.S. by sending slanderous letters to the Immigration Bureau. They went as far as accusing her of prostitution, a status that often led Immigration to bar Chinese women from landing (Stevens 2002).

Luckily for Dong Oy and Margaret, they were admitted in spite of not having solid proof of their citizenship. Judging from the official records that exist in the NARA archives in Seattle, the favorable decision was largely due to young Margaret's ability to explain her case in English, on top of Dong Oy's persuasive story and pleasant personality. Their case nonetheless illustrates the barriers that were experienced by most Chinese woman immigrants in those days.

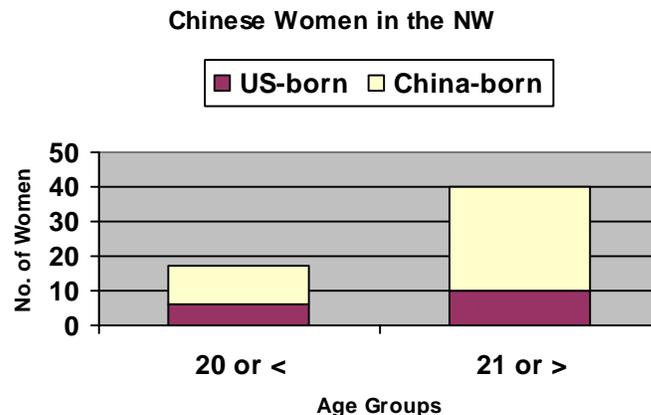
While in 1910 most American women in Washington were celebrating having gained the right to vote, Chinese women there still struggled for the basics of life. Of the 2700 Chinese living in Washington at that time, fewer than 5% were women. Only a handful, born in the US and hence citizens, could vote. Dong Oy was one of them. The rest were immigrants and--because they were Chinese--legally barred from citizenship. Bought from China with few skills and little English, and some even with bound feet that made daily activities difficult, those women have traditionally been stereotyped as helpless victims. Contemporary newspapers also disproportionately reported cases of prostitution, creating an impression that Chinese women in America were either helpless housewives or prostitutes. Modern writers too have often focused on such women as victims, as pawns of an ancient system of values that enforced complete subordination to fathers, husbands, brothers, and even sons.²

This paper focuses on Chinese women who had lived in Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Oregon before 1910, looking at their education level and familial relationships in an attempt to discover their real place in Chinese-American and majority American society. The results show that most Chinese women in the Pacific Northwest were neither helpless nor immoral. Dong Oy and Maggie were not the only ones to take their fates into their own hands. They overcame enormous personal obstacles, built bridges to the larger American society, and contributed greatly to the gender-skewed Chinese community of the Northwest.

Demographics: young women from rural China

1910 census shows that there were 66,855 Chinese men and 4,676 Chinese women in the U.S., the most skewed males-female ratio among all ethnic groups in the U.S.³ Of these American Chinese, 14,956 lived in the four Northwestern states⁴, with several hundred being women. Between the 1880s, when partial records began to be kept, and 1910, when American women started to gain real political power, about 150

Chinese women entered or reentered the country through immigration offices in Seattle, Portland, Port Townsend, Sumas, and Helena.



This paper focuses on 59 women whose sketchy life-stories survive in the so-called Chinese Exclusion Files compiled by the Immigration Service and preserved in the National Archives and Records Administration office in Seattle. In addition, data from a variety of official sources on 73 Chinese couples, married in Washington before 1910, have been included in the present discussion. As this information derives from an ongoing research project, it is expected that the conclusions presented here will be refined when more cases can be added.

A series of immigration laws passed by Congress since 1875 made it exceedingly hard for any Chinese woman to enter the country unless she was the child of a US citizen, a student, or the wife of a diplomat or merchant. However, not all of the 59 women mentioned above fell into those categories. Most were indeed merchants' wives. A few were students or American-born Chinese who had lived for a number of years in China. Only two, not including Dong Oy and her talented daughter, were determined to be prostitutes.

One was Leong Shi, who landed as a bride intending to join her new husband in Portland. Her mistake was a statement made to the Immigration officials when she arrived at Seattle in 1909. Reporting that both parents had passed away, she stated that she lived in the same house with her uncle who was single and young. This set off the alarm bells. She was finally deported in 1913 for alleged prostitution.⁵

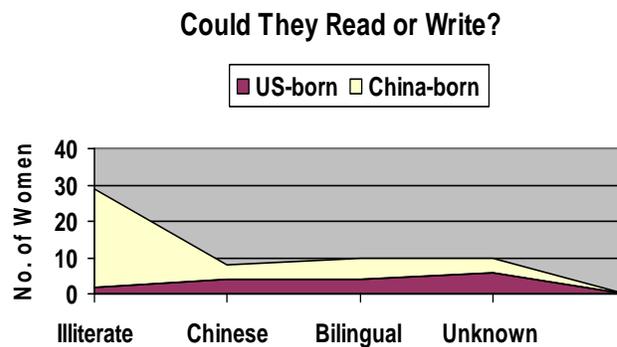
The other, deported in 1907, was Annie Kum Chee. That was her name given to her when she fled to the Presbyterian Mission from a brothel in San Francisco, in 1891. A free-spirited girl who was sold as a slave and brought to the U.S. at the age of seven, she was “rescued” by the Mission a few years later, and stayed at the Presbyterian Mission House for five years before marrying a local Chinese man under Mission auspices. Shortly afterward, she ran away to seek her own love, survived many mishaps, lived with a second man, and finally married a third before being arrested in Helena in 1905 for not having an alien certificate.⁶

Leong She and Annie Ku Chee cannot have been the only Chinese prostitutes in the Pacific Northwest. However, it would seem that Chinese prostitutes were scarcer here than in California. In San Francisco in 1880, 21% of Chinese women were prostitutes (Hirata 1979), while in 1910 there cannot have been nearly that many in the Seattle area. But before concluding that the many single Chinese men in this region were unusually puritanical, it is worth remembering that almost all prostitutes in contemporary East Coast Chinatowns were white ⁷, that by 1910 there were many more Japanese than Chinese in Washington State, and that some Japanese women too were prostitutes.

The 59 women in question were mostly of child-bearing age, partly explaining why the national censuses of 1920 and 1930 showed an increase in Chinese population in the northwestern states. Even though most of the 59 were arriving in the U.S. from China, not all were natives of that country. 16 of the 59, or 27%, had been born in America. As is the case of Dong Oy, eight were old enough to vote in 1910. It is not clear if they did exercise that right. As this paper will show, the second generation of Chinese American women were already showing distinctively different attitudes from the first generation. The right to vote, and the empowerment that came with it, was one more feature that helped to widen the gap between them.

Education: not much

Files of 47 women contain enough information to indicate how well educated they were. The illiteracy rate was very high. 29 of them or 61% were totally illiterate and 12% could sign their name only. 17% could communicate in English. This pattern is consistent with the general impression that in those days, few women in China had much education.



But were US-born Chinese women better educated than their China-born counterparts? The answer is yes. There was a huge educational difference between the two groups. Only 20% of the US-born group was totally illiterate versus 72% of the China-born group.

Women's low education level meant a limited ability to live on their own. These early Chinese women depended heavily on their spouses, children, and community for

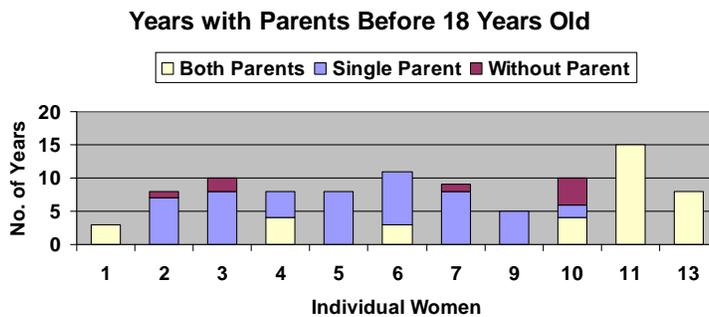
survival. It is not surprising that many Chinese family associations in America sprang up in the 1890s and remained active through the 1930s.

Margaret Chin was an exceptionally bright girl. Although her total English education was the few years that she spent in Seattle when she was five to ten years old, she seems to have been able to write, as well as speak, English well.

Childhood Experience: a single-parent upbringing embedded in a cultural gap

Most of the files on US-born Chinese immigrants or re-entering residents contain enough information to indicate where and with whom they lived when young. As the files of the China-born women generally lack childhood information, they are not included for discussion in this section.

The eleven US-born Chinese women had spent three to fifteen years in China before they turned 18, averaging to 8.5 years of residence in China. While in that country, eight of them lived with a single parent most of the time and four lived without either parent some of the time. All eleven girls returned to northwestern America when they reached a mature age. Dong Oy was one of them, having spent more than 10 years in China and in Hong Kong before returning to the U.S. One can imagine how confusing it must have been for women like Dong Oy to adapt herself to both societies.



Historians point out that, between 1850 and 1920, Chinese-Americans typically maintained a split household family structure in which the husband worked in the U.S. and the wife and children lived in China (Glenn 1983). Dong Oy's family is an example. Her husband returned to Seattle after the wedding. He worked for his father in Seattle as a successful merchant. Researchers have offered two explanations for the development of split households among early Chinese residents in this country: the difficult immigration laws that separated Chinese families involuntarily, and the high cost of maintaining a Chinese family in America.

While the NARA data does support idea that a spilt-household family structure was common among American Chinese, it does not fully support either of the above explanations. The US-born girls certainly did not have immigration problems, and yet they too were raised in split families. The economic explanation does not seem to ring true either, since these US-born girls were mostly from well to-do merchant families, and since the cost of sending them back to China may have been just as high as the cost of having the daughters and mothers live with their fathers/husbands in America. Dong Oy is definitely one such case. She was a citizen and could have proven her status easily, had her husband not kept her documents away from her. Her own family and her husband's family were both among the richest Chinese families on the West Coast. So what else caused Chinese families to live apart?

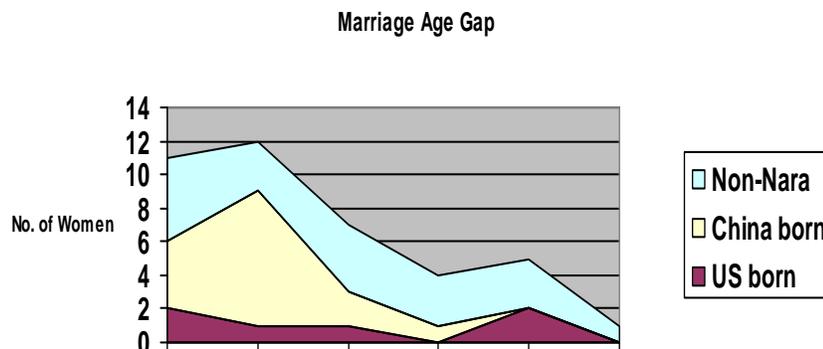
Several other explanations are possible. I will not attempt to offer explanations here as the subject will have to wait until comprehensive data is available, preferably in the form of personal letters, family archives, and personal journals. As for now, it is enough to say that Chinese women in the U.S. did not have a friendly environment or good support system in place.

Adulthood: Companionship? Dependence?

Like their American peers, the lives of many early Chinese women in America depended on their husbands. Unlike their American peers, Chinese-American wives had poor support systems in place. Assuming that they had overcome barriers of language, education, and cultural differences, and that they had been admitted as lawful wives without too much injury to their dignity⁸, their roles as wives and mothers were still likely to be very challenging. In the event that their marriages fell apart, like that of Dong Oy, the wives did not usually have a natal family in the U.S, nor friends, government agencies, nor advocacy groups for them to turn to. We may never really know exactly how difficult life was like for them. However, we can at least guess at their quality of life by looking at statistics relating to their marriages.

Marriage age and age gap: how old were the brides when they got married?

In traditional China as in many parts of Europe, women married by parental arrangement and at a young age, soon after puberty. Our samples, consisting of 39 women, seem to show a departure from that norm. Only 23% of the girls married at 17 years old or younger. The majority married between 18 and 22, and no fewer than 27% married even later than that. The pattern indicates that most Chinese-American women married as young adults rather than as teenager, at an age a little more matured than their peers in China.



What is interesting is that the US-born Chinese girls conform more closely with the traditional pattern in China. More US-born girls married as teenagers than did their China-born peers. Dong Oy was one of them. She was 17 when her parents married her off. Why such a pattern existed is not clear. But it is safe to conclude that these teenage brides, brought up with conflicting cultural values in Chinese and American societies, must have had huge adjustment issues when they jumped from being a sheltered daughter to be a stranger's wife.

Over 70% of the women in our sample married a partner less than 10 years older than they were. This finding is consistent with data on Chinese in Nevada, where the age gap was about 9 years (Beesley 1988). But when one increases the sample size by adding data on the 19 other married women in Washington State⁹, one finds the percentage of women in similar-age marriages slips from 70% to 57%, with the rest of the marriages showing an age gap greater than 10 years.

Being US-born does not seem to have any influence on a Chinese woman's chances of getting a more age-compatible partner. While Dong Oy married a man of her own age, the 17-year old Lee Kin Tin married in 1900 a man 21 years her senior in Port Townsend, the same town where she was born.¹⁰ Like Dong Oy, Lee Kin Tin too was taken to China by her family while just a girl. Her marriage is likely to have been arranged by her older sister who also came from China to Port Townsend in 1897 to marry.¹¹ So at least the two Lee sisters had each other in Port Townsend for a while. But Lee Kin Tin did not stay long. Unlike Dong Oy and Margaret Chin who spent the rest of their lives in Seattle, Lee Kin Tin left for China again in 1904, this time with a daughter and son, thus starting another cycle of split-household existence. Did she ever return to Port Townsend to join her husband? Possibly, but not before 1910.

Times married: first or second wife?

Chinese traditional customs allowed multiple wives but established that the first wife was more socially respected and financially secure than the later, lesser wives. As American law did not recognize second or third wives, these could find themselves labeled as prostitutes (Abrams 2005). The Chinese prostitution industry in California, did indeed bring "slave girls" in as so-called wives.

The situation in the Northwest may have different from that of California. The majority of Chinese women, or 88%, who landed in the Northwest were married for the first time. But only 44% of them were the second or third wives of their partners; the senior wives might either have passed away, making the second marriage legal under American law, or been still alive in China. U.S.-born women stood a slightly higher chance of being a first wife than did those born in China: 37% of US-born women and 47% of China-born women became second or third wives.

Spousal Togetherness:

The sojourner/split-household model suggests that couples generally lived apart, with the wife in China and the husband overseas. And yet in any marriage, Chinese or otherwise, most would agree that marriage quality correlates to some extent with the time the couple spends together. The pre-1910 NARA records offer 39 relevant cases.

Of the Chinese women in those records, 10, or 25%, spent less than a quarter of their married lives with their husbands. All of the women with basically absentee husbands happened to be China-born. By the end of 1910, all had been married for at least seven years, and one for as many as 31 years. We may assume that long periods of separation were the norm for all those Chinese spouses who do not appear in the NARA records because while their husbands were recorded as entering and perhaps reentering the U.S., they themselves stayed permanently in China.

Given the split-household structure in place, it is surprising that as many as 56% of the women who do appear in the records had spent more than three-quarters of their married lives with their husbands. While it is possible that these results might be skewed due to small sample size and incomplete data, the level of spousal togetherness still is striking. One wonders whether the split-household model was ever popular despite its advantages.

In the case of Lee See How, it is clear that her family structure had advanced from the “spilt-household” to the “small producer” model (Glenn 1983). She came to Seattle in 1878, right after they got married in China. This 14-year old bride for a 23-year old groom walked slowly due to her bound feet, was illiterate, knew nothing about America before her wedding, and had no family of her own in the U.S.¹² In spite of this the marriage worked out well: she and her husband spent uninterrupted 23 years in Seattle and Olympia, raised six successful children and tended three businesses. Lee See How's first trip back to China was in 1904, to bring a niece to Seattle. Widowed shortly afterwards, she lived many more years as a respected mother and grandmother. Sadly, like almost all other Chinese immigrants born in the 1860s, she would not live long enough to see the anti-Chinese laws changed that kept her from becoming a citizen.

Inter-racial Families

Early families that crossed ethnic boundaries often got attention from journalists but not, or not enough, from later researchers.¹³ Much about the subject needs to be understood. In the case of Chinese in the U.S before 1910, the great majority of such marriages occurred between a Chinese man and a non-Chinese woman. Such "miscegenation," though not uncommon in such states as New York and Illinois, was illegal both in California and everywhere in the Pacific Northwest except Washington. The NARA data in questions show only one mixed East-West marriage – the well known case of the Chinese woman Polly Bemis¹⁴ who married Charles Bemis in Idaho, as well as one case of a Chinese girl adopted in China by American missionaries¹⁵, and another case of a Japanese baby from Spokane adopted by a Chinese couple in Seattle¹⁶.

Non-NARA data, mostly county marriage registers in Washington State, record thirteen Chinese husbands with non-Chinese wives. Because Washington was the only state on the West Coast to allow interracial marriage, some of the couples are likely to have been out-of-state residents who came to Washington to get married.¹⁷ My impression is that such marriages were sometimes recognized even in states with strict anti-miscegenation laws. However, the subject is complex, not least because of similarities with the functioning of laws against and for gay marriage. It deserves a fuller treatment than there is a pace for here.

Conclusions

It would seem that Dong Oy did not get together with her husband again after he returned to the United States. She made an independent living as a nanny and dressmaker. In 1912 she petitioned to sponsor the 12-year old daughter of her deceased brother to join her from China.¹⁸ Her own daughter Margaret Chin graduated from the University of Washington in 1919 and later married Sam Chin. He was the architect for the 1929 Chong Wah building. Located in Seattle's International District, the Chong Wah Building is still a cultural icon in the eyes of local Chinese-Americans.

I should add that much of our understanding of early Chinese women in America has been based on data from San Francisco. On the basis of an admittedly small sample, one may conclude that the Pacific Northwest appears not to exhibit the same pattern as California and deserves to be studied separately. In the late 19th century, Chinese prostitutes there may have been fewer in relation to the overall Chinese population. A higher proportion of Chinese women participated in stable marriages and lived with their husbands in non-split households for extended periods of time. But the region was still a difficult one for non-white women.

We modern liberal Northwesterners tend to forget that vicious racial prejudice was endemic in our region until after World War II. Before then, the annoyances, and indeed risks, were enough to deter all but the most determined and adaptable Chinese females from making their homes in Washington, Idaho, Oregon, or neighboring states. By the early 1900s parts of the Northwest, especially southern Idaho and Portland, had become somewhat easier for Chinese. However, the region was still no place for Chinese

women. It was especially hostile to the young ones, always in danger of being treated by the authorities as a prostitute or worse. It is no wonder that most Chinese parents did not dare to send their daughters to Northeastern secondary schools and universities. They either could send them back to China or, if a western education was felt to be essential, to schools on the East Coast. The atmosphere there was much more secure and welcoming for Chinese students, especially girls.

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¹ NARA RS 17824-5.

² For example, Chang 2003, pp.88-92.

³ For every 100 Chinese female there are 1,430 male. The 1910 census report acknowledges “a very great excess of males among the Chinese...”. (See website:

// <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/36894832v1ch03.pdf> , Table 2).

⁴ Washington 2709, Oregon 7363, Idaho 859, Montana 1285. 1910 Census Report, Table 18.

⁵ NARA RS 1990.

⁶ NARA Helena 4-247.

⁷ Lew Chew in 1903 is my authority. See http://www.ccamuseum.org/Research-2.html#anchor_19

⁸ The immigration process was daunting to many. Files in NARA recorded questions that often intruded on privacy and dignity.

⁹ Data of these married couples come from census as well as marriage records of Washington State.

¹⁰ NARA RS 15697.

¹¹ NARA RS 14831.

¹² NARA RS 978.

¹³ Most of the newspaper articles are not in favor of inter-racial marriages. For instance, see “White Women Marrying Chinese” published in the Seattle Republican July 2nd, 1909.

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polly_Bemis

¹⁵ NARA RS 1964 Ruth Semon

¹⁶ NARA RS 28068 Ruth Eng

¹⁷ Several of the marriage certificates were issued in Vancouver, WA, showing out of state addresses for the newly wed. See Irving G. Tragen (1944) “Statutory Prohibitions Against Interracial Marriage” in California Law Review, vol. 32.

¹⁸ The niece, Bo Yoke Dong, was a daughter of Dong Oy’s brother, Dong Fook Teung who died in 1907. Bo Yoke and her siblings were in China with their mother. NARA RS 28678.