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The Forgotten Chinatown in Merced, California: Acceptable Otherness, 1890-1970

By Jessica Martinez¹

From the early 1860s, Chinese railroad builders helped establish the town of Merced California, thus becoming some of the first residents along the Central Pacific Railroad. In Merced, Chinese individuals made up much of the workforce within sectors of city development, domestic work, and as business owners, all while experiencing anti-Chinese sentiment due to the political climate of the time. This racism resulted in violence against the Chinese population all across California. Anti-Chinese sentiment had a negative effect on archival preservation, noting their impact on Merced's social and political sphere, due to the lack of resources and individuals not wanting to take on these tasks or only acknowledging the community negatively. This research will present the diverse profiles of individuals whose complex lives helped portray the inner workings of the Chinese community. Shining a light on the overlooked communal struggles of the Merced Chinatown from 1870's-1970's with the use of newspaper articles, death records and other official Merced County City records. Analyzing the marginalization experienced by individuals in the subcategories of business, laborers, laundry workers, wives, and sexworkers, in order to try and give back power into their existence and representation.

Like many other immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants were met with different stereotypes that continued to justify oppression created by the White society. During the 19th century caricatures and literature only portrayed this population in cunning ways due to the "Yellow Peril." The 'yellow peril' historically represents a western fear that Asian immigrants were evil and would take over the country with their 'savage ways.' White society saw them as a

¹The author, being also an editor, recused themselves from the editing process of this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

detachment to society, refusing to assimilate into Western culture and posing a serious threat to their white supremacist ideals.² Business owners, oftentimes laundrymen, were looked down upon for taking up jobs contrary to the times' gender norms. Workers were thought to steal jobs from white workers while sending all their earnings back to China with no contribution to the country's economy. Due to wage discrepancies and high prices for traveling tickets, Chinese workers were seen paying off their passage for many years, or just trying to help their families but still being involved in local economies. This paper will first introduce jobs males were most seen taking on such as business owners, laborers, and doctors. It will then analyze the different roles women were occupying; wives and other occupations within the community.

Business Owners:

Within the Chinese enclaves, there was a set social hierarchy that resembled the social position of their home country; business owners and merchants occupy the higher class stature. This class was known for establishing communication bridges with the white population while generally providing services in Chinatown as a proactive to racist business owners. Businesses ranged from laundromats (wash houses), convenience stores, to gardener peddlers. "Their business generally provided a sense of community such as storekeepers. They sold imported goods from China and local goods peddled by gardeners to continue participating in the cultural cuisine and customs."³ Bringing a small piece of their homeland into the United States for those who were homesick or tried to continue their cultural resistance.

Some business owners like laundrymen were seen as defying gender norms by obtaining jobs in female role sectors. Helping form a shift from a restrictive labor market to a self

² John Kuo Wei Tchen, Dylan Yates, *Yellow Peril!:An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, (London:Verso, 2014)

³ Sarah C Lim, "Remembering the Merced Chinese: The Builders of the Great Central Valley", M.A. diss.(California State University, Stanislaus, 2000), 30.

employed economy by allowing self employment to escape any violence or abuse from employers. The merchant and business owner this project focuses on is Hung Wo Sing, who began making a name for himself in 1873 as a successful storekeeper after acquiring a significant amount of property. He was born in China in 1839, although it is not clear when he migrated to the US, he began appearing in census records in 1880 and in tax deeds. He owned a total of 7 properties, deed records demonstrate him paying taxes on houses number; 12, 20, 21, 22, and house 24, modern day 14th St and L. It is not clear what kind of store he owned, tax records only note 'goods', 'merchandise' and mules for transportation which he was taxed for as noted in the County assessment Rolls.⁴ Owners of multiple properties were often seen renting out to other Chinese residents since it was almost rare for white individuals to rent out to minorities. This can be inferred by cross analysing census records and tax deeds; tax records show us those living in the properties while tax records show another individual playing for those properties.

Mr. Wo Sing had a wife, Shee For, in addition to two second-generation daughters living with him. Chinese men were not usually seen having a family in the US, as most immigrated alone. Due to the lack of women migrating to the US there were disproportionately more men than women. This was a result of harsh immigration laws, expensive voyage tickets and the ability for men to find more job opportunities. Wo Sing's family status helped portray how businessmen were some of the few to have family due to their monetary advantages.

Laborer:

The second level were laborers, divided into subcategories of industrial jobs, house servants, cooks, and those working in merchant's trade. These individuals were a vital asset to

⁴ Merced County Record, "Merced County Assessment Rolls (1875-1990) "

the economic growth of the Chinatowns and the city of Merced. Females made up the last category and often served as wives of merchants, second-generation daughters, and sex workers. Wives were seen running family businesses while still having to care for the family. The few children seen in Chinatowns came from wealthy families, second-generation Chinese-Americans, or children with contract based employment. Families pooled their resources to send a man while others came through contract labor systems.⁵ Men had better chances to obtain work and send money back to their families. Nonetheless, regardless of gender, social and class status individuals all suffered from the same stereotypes. Those with lower class statuses faced the hardest forms of racism.

Railroad workers were the foundation of the Merced community, helping industrialize it allowed an increase of population. Ah Loy, was a railroad worker for the Pacific Improvement Company in Merced. As mentioned before, record keeping of Chinese individuals was very hard to find, when not painted negatively. Ah Loy was a very common name of the time within the Chinese population, thus in order to create a profile for this particular Ah Loy, there was a need to cross match his age and race with census and death records. Although his occupation also matches Merced county Gleaning records, census and coroner's records, allowing researchers to this can be the same person. It can be concluded he first arrived in Merced around the year 1880 due to an individual with the same name, occupation, place of residency, and age which can be found in the census of the same year making him 14 years old.⁶ His presence in census records at that young age draws questions of possible child labour and to whom he could have been related to. Mr. Loy died on August 21, 1888, at the age of 22 after a deadly accident with train

⁵ Sarah C. Lim, *Remembering the Merced Chinese*, 20.

⁶ Merced County Records, "Merced County Census Records" (1880)

cars owned by the company first reported on August 25th in the *Merced Express* newspaper.⁷ He had 5 dollars in gold and 5 cents in silver in his possession that in today's economy translates to roughly \$130, a very high quantity for a worker. He was also found with a pocket knife and a pipe, which were all turned over to the County Treasurer of Merced. Turning in possessions over to the county or a public fund was seen as an excuse to steal from the deceased. False claims of putting back the money into the community or using it for burial expenses were used. When in reality the Chinese community came together to bury individuals or families from China were seen to pool needs to transport their relatives back home.

Workers were known to smoke from pipes both cigar and opium. Opium within the worker population was identified as relievers of pain and energy generators, as mentioned in historian Sarah Lim's "*Remembering the Merced Chinese*".⁸ There is no proof Mr. Loy had an addiction to opioids, but it is important to point out, workers had to turn to opium usage in order to meet the demand of this bone aching work. Proving the narratives of being lazy workers wrong or drug addicts were wrong. This was just a result of constant workers exploitation faced by many Chinese workers. Coroner E.S. O'Brien ruled his death "resulted from an accident and no blame was attached to any person."⁹ There is no record of a lawsuit filed against the company. In the beginning years of railway industrialization, these accidents were extremely common. Employees often did not receive the proper training in addition to the trains being uncontrollable. Chinese workers had no form of established unions in Merced county to protect them from exploitation or lack of settlement from employers. Similar to others, Mr. Loy did not obtain remuneration as we modernly see individuals obtaining from a company with hazardous

⁷ "Ah, Loy," *Merced Express*, (August 25th, 1888), 125.

⁸ Sarah C Lim, "*Remembering the Merced Chinese*" 5-6.

⁹ Merced County City Records, "Coroners Register of Merced County 1870-1910" (1888), 14.

work environments. Americans were oftentimes seen turning such jobs away at the same time employers saw Chinese workers as a source of cheap labor due to the dual wage system, their main importance was to create profit with no regard for these immigrant lives.

Doctors:

Doctors were also seen taking this role of bringing a piece of home overseas. Kee Kow was a 52-year-old doctor in Merced in 1880. Other doctors like Chong Sing (38) were also present in Merced County.¹⁰ In the 1875 assessment rolls, which are used as an estimator for a property's value, describe a doctor registered as a taxpayer for the property house #5 on the south side of that street in Snelling, CA. Doctors peddling Chinese medicine were known as 'herb and roots doctors' in the United States. The book *Herbs and Roots* by Tamara Venit-Shelton, emphasizes the importance of Chinese doctors in underrepresented communities that didn't benefit from Western medicine.¹¹ Chinese doctors were also taking up other occupations like merchants or business owners since the USA did not allow for the practice of their medicine due to lack of working permits to practice medicine or being unable to obtain a medical license due to prejudice. A practice seen even during modern times by immigrants who cannot exercise their careers due to discrimination and legal status.

Women:

Second generation Chinese Americans were rarely seen during 1870's, most of the female population included sex workers, wives of wealthy merchants, or small children brought to work as house servants. One of the well-documented sex workers was Lizzie, a Chinese woman residing in Snelling. Lizzie was born in 1833 in Guangzhou, China. Although her actual

¹⁰ Merced City Records, "Merced County Census Records" (1870)

¹¹ Tamara Venit-Shelton, "*Herbs and Roots: A History of Chinese Doctors in the American Medical Marketplace*" (Yale University Press, 2020)

name has never been reported. She began appearing in Merced County reports in 1880.⁹ She was the only Chinese woman of the time to own her own plot of land which she was seen paying taxes for a house for a little over 5 years. The property was located in Snelling on the North Side of the Chinatown house, No.8.¹² Lizzie was a well-known individual within the community, as a “Mistress Whore” titled provided by the 1880 census registers.¹³ The vulgar title can reflect how Chinese women in that line of work were perceived by American officials. Her distinction of gender and class status is very prominent just in her title. Instead of giving her the title such as “Head of household or Mistress of home” like the titles issued to Chinese males who owned property.

Prostitution houses were very profitable due to the demand on the bachelor workers, “The business of prostitution was thriving in the foothill Chinese communities because white prostitutes generally would not serve Chinese men and because only a small number of Chinese women were in America.”¹⁴ Although some women perceived prostitution as a job with mobility to migrate to other cities or become financially independent, most were forced into this line of work. Like Lizzie, many women throughout the US helped produce a local economy by providing bachelors with companionship in an unfamiliar country. Lizzie gave a new outlook on how to perceive sex work in this situation, it can be seen as just another source of income. Women became part of the working class whether helping run a business or being a sex worker while demeaning titles stigmatize that line of work. Proving that although some individuals did fall within the stereotypes, their complex personhood gave depth and complicity to them. Like mentioned, Lizzie was only seen as a simple sex worker by the white community and sexist

¹² Merced City Records, “Merced County Assessment Rolls (1875-1990),” 1880.

¹³ Merced County, “Merced County Census Records” (1880).

¹⁴ Sarah C Lim, “*Remembering the Merced Chinese*,” 40.

norms. Nonetheless, she went against this simple title by being the only woman recorded during that time to owe property and using her circumstances to her benefit.

Stigmatization and criminalization of the work was unsafe by nature but the pressure from the American public and the disregard from women bodies created more unsafe work environments. On March 29, 1870 California lawmakers passed a resolution to control the number of Chinese women moving to the United States to stop prostitution.¹⁵ This proposal called for a stricter screening of migrants and their purposes coming into the states. California delegates and the Chinese community set in a debate about the criminalization and migration of sex workers. After the late 1930s, Merced prostitution began to decrease with the Chinese population.

Another female figure was Mrs. Lai Hoo, who was reported dead on December 17, 1903, in Chinatown home number 21 due to pneumonia and lung congestion at age 40.¹⁶ There is no clear correlation between Mrs. Lai Hoo and Mr. Wo Sing, owner of the home. Mr. Sing can again be seen as a community leader by providing residency to those of the community as a form of communitary aid. Hoo did not appear in the 1900 census nor in the tax and deed records, making the coroner's record the only form of writing that proves her existence so far. The exorbitant amount of money sets her apart from the many Chinese individuals listed. At the time of death, she had \$300.95 which was turned into a public fund. Implying she was married into a wealthy family or she had a successful business that was not recorded or has yet to be uncovered. Proving city documents available to us do not show the full picture of how successful these residents were, debunking the false narrative Chinese were a malacic to the

¹⁵ Sucheng Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women". In *Entry denied: Exclusion and the Chinese community in America 1882-1943*. (Temple University Press, 1994), 50.

¹⁶ Merced City Records, "Coroners Register of Merced County 1870-1910," (1903), 68.

American society. Wives at the time helped run the husband's business, making them highly knowledgeable about industry affairs. The lack of male documentation linked with Ms. Hoo makes it seem she had wealth of her own and knew how to administer it.

Social hierarchy was a very important part of the Chinese community allowing different power dynamics. Some merchants and business proprietors were the spokesmen for their people to bridge the white and Chinese populations. However, this position did not ensure businessmen from suffering racist attacks. The white population believed Chinese laundromats and laborers were the principal factors causing the loss of jobs throughout Merced county. Employers in the fields of railroad work, lumber cutting, milling, and ranching preferred hiring Chinese employees.¹⁷ Employers praising them for their hard-working mentality, but ultimately benefiting from their wage exploitations. Local laundry owners were faced with strong anti-Chinese sentiments along with industrialized workers. Contrary to public belief, Chinese doctors were also present in the communities where medical aid by western doctors was denied on the basis of race.

Racist acts done by private individuals and the displacement of these Chinese individuals were the downfall of the Chinese community. In 1960 the last building of the original Chinatown was destroyed, erasing any physical evidence of the once-thriving Merced Chinatown. The few pictures and archival records have allowed me to create written evidence of the lives and social structure the community had. Noting how individuals of different social hierarchies helped empower others and help their community, such as laborers. Being the backbone of the industrialization of the city they were often exploited with bone aching jobs and taken advantage of well after their deaths. In order to honor those who came before us it is important to present

¹⁷ Sarah C Lim, "*Remembering the Merced Chinese*," 50.

their lives and impacts they had in the community of the once standing Chinatown. Especially to those women whose stories are often overlooked due to sexist ideals, yet contributed so much to the city and community. These stories and personal profiles still continue to exist in the Merced community causing a form of resistance.

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