The Role of the Asian American Female in the U.S.

When did Asian Americans first arrive in the United States? Well, in the 1770’s the U.S. wanted to strengthen its economic base, so they turned to China following the lead of other European nations. China had silk, tea, furniture, and many other goods. In 1784 the Empress of China set sail en route to China to trade for various commodities. Turning a lucrative profit, other vessels soon followed suit. Between 1794 and 1812 American ships made 400 voyages to China. Asian crewmen were hired for return voyages, so as early as 1785 we see the arrival of Asians in America. These men lived in Maryland and Philadelphia for a year. “There names were Ashing, Achun, and Accun.”

As time passed, trading ships took Asian Americans to various parts of the Pacific coast of North America. Carpenters and smiths settled on Vancouver Island as early as 1788. Trading ran smoothly for a number of years because all parties were satisfied with their new found increased wealth. At times the Emperor of China insisted that trading countries pay tribute to him. All countries involved in the lucrative trading acquiesced and the Manchu Emperor was happy.

In the mid 19th century however, a series of events culminated in China’s defeat in the Opium War. Britain tried to use opium to offset a trade imbalance which had developed to their disadvantage. Therefore, to gain the silver Britain was transferring into the Chinese economy, it increased Chinese import of the habit-forming drug by only accepting silver as payment. In 1839 shots were fired and the war began.

The Manchu rulers who had controlled China since 1644 were losing power over the empire. The Qing (Ch’ing) Dynasty Manchu ruler was disgraced and humiliated with the loss of the Opium War. “This early negative image would later affect American attitudes toward Asian-American immigrants.”

During the 1840’s China suffered a number of crises. Crops were ruined by drought and floods, and the people suffered massive starvation and poverty. The Manchu leader sent in militia to squeeze money out of land owners. Because the peasants were hungry and in dire need, they revolted. The most famous of these revolts was the Taiping Rebellion. The leader of the rebellion was Hung Hsiuch’uan, and he felt inspired to lead a fight for what translates as the Heavenly Kingdom. Hung gathered an army of half a million and for 13 years he raised havoc throughout the country. Between 1851 and 1864 20 million Chinese were killed. Because of all the strife which existed in the country, thousands enlisted for work as unskilled laborers and were sent abroad. Some mortgaged farms while others borrowed money from relatives to secure passage to places such as Canada, Mexico, Hawaii, and California. These immigrants accepted one of two labor agreements. The first one was an indentured laborer where the immigrant was placed under contract in a nation which was in need of cheap labor. Some of them were tricked and sold by brokers and fell victim to a system called “pig-selling.” The second agreement was based on the credit-ticket system whereby an immigrant’s ticket was paid by the merchant or company in need of mass labor.

News of the California Gold Rush increased the flow of Asian immigrants into the United States. All of them after arriving in San Francisco, the point of disembarkment, were anxious to see Gam San or the Mountain of Gold. These Asian Americans worked the mines until they were exhausted. Then the immigrants moved to the cities and began to pursue other lines of work.
By the mid 1860’s Asian laborers began to construct the Continental Railroad. Irish crews of the Union Pacific built westward. The Central Pacific which had only a limited number of workers was to build towards the east. With the onslaught of the Civil War there was a major shortage of workers, so the company decided to hire Asians. By the time the railroad was completed 12,000 Asian workers had played a major part in its construction.

Throughout the 1870’s and 1880’s Asian Americans worked diligently and completed projects such as a 6 ft. levee around Shuman Island. They excelled in the fields of agriculture and farming. They increased productivity in factories. Asian Americans boosted the cigar industry thereby making California the fourth largest state in productivity. On the down side, the Anti-Chinese movement also began to spread throughout the U. S. during this time.

An anti-Chinese convention was held in California and all kinds of ordinances directed at this particular group were drawn up. Violence broke out and many Asians were attacked and murdered. “The most violent of these clashes was the Snake River Massacre of 1877. Ten miners who were working on a claim in the Snake River in Wallowa County were attacked and murdered by 7 white men, who then took flight with a reported $5,000 to $10,000 in gold dust. The three bandits who were brought to trial were acquitted.”[1] In the end the unions won with the passing of the “Chinese Exclusion Act.” Basically, this act suspended immigration.

Between the years 1910-1940 the American government continued to enforce the anti-Chinese policies by detaining them on Angel Island, a small island in the San Francisco Bay. Here they were given lengthy medical exams and then denied admission for some reason or another while other minorities were permitted to enter the country. Because fire destroyed records during the great earthquake of 1906, some Asians were able to get into the country by claiming American citizenship. Once admitted, most immigrants had but one place to live . . . Chinatown. Asian culture began to flourish. Asian Americans formed their own secret societies, district associations, and merchant guilds.

In Confucian China, a well ordered government was sustained by a rigid social order in which everyone had an established role. The masculine (yin) and feminine (yang) roles at first evenly divided in time placed the woman in a position subservient to the man. She was to serve her father when young, serve her husband when married, and serve her son when widowed.

Different treatment of the two sexes began at birth. The Chinese adage, “A boy is born facing in, a girl is born facing out,” meant that sons preserved the sacred family lineage while daughters would be chief benefit to the family into which they married.”[12] By the way marriages were arranged by parents, and the bride met the groom for the first time on the wedding day.

During the years when the Asian men worked in the mining camps prostitution and the use of slave girls was at an all time high. One woman known as “Lo Mo” or Cameron fought tirelessly to liberate these young women. She was the Harriet Tubman of her people.

During the 1920’s Asian American men were able to send for their wives. Once here, the wives ventured into the work force and helped to supplement the family income. They worked in laundries,
factories, hotels, and fish markets. They worked long hours and usually 6 days a week. Sometimes even the children were put to work.

In examining the role of contemporary Asian American women we find quite a few outstanding role models. During the silent movie era as far back as 1920 and up to 1960 Anna May Wong, born in Los Angeles Chinatown, was a successful box office star who appeared in over 100 films. Her first role was “The Thief of Baghdad” in 1924. Another actress of great prominence was Pilar Seurat. She was cast in numerous polynesian roles during the early 60’s. Another popular actress was and still is Nancy Kwan. She is most noted for her role opposite William Holden in “The World of Suzie Wong.”

In the field of literature Sui Sin Fah was the first writer to express the true voices of early Asian pioneers. In her Exclusion Era writing, she wrote short stories with realistic characters. Her work was published by the California magazine *Land of Sunshine*. Other noted authors are Jade Snow Wong, author of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), and Virginia Lee, author of *The House That Tai Ming Built* (1963). Diana Chang, a New York novelist and poet, teaches at Barnard College and is one of the most widely published Asian writers. She is the author of *The Frontier of Love* (1956) *A Woman of Thirty*, *A Passion for Life*, *The Only Game in Town*, and *Eye to Eye*. Nellie Wong, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Fay Chiang, Laureen Mar, and Kitty Tsui can be added to the ranks of Asian poets which continues to grow.

In the field of art Dora Fugh Lee began to display her talent at the tender age of 11. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland with her family and has received over 30 awards for watercolors and sculpture.

In the field of dance Yen Lu Wong presented her Golden Mountain in Jolla, California.

Chien-Shiun Wu won the nobel prize for proving the Yang-Lee theory. She was also the first woman to receive the Cyrus B. Comstock Award of the National Academy of Sciences.

In mass media Suzanne Joe and Connie Chung have gained recognition and prominence. Chung was the first Asian to anchor regional network news.

Seattle tennis pro, Amy Yee, earned a large number of titles including number one rankings in women’s singles in 1951 and 1954.
