



Surviving on The Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives, by Huping Ling
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). Pp.252.

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The Chinese American Family Album, by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Pp.128. ISBN: 0-19-508130-7.

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In the past 40 years in the United States, Chinese Americans have been known as a model minority with a strong work ethic and high academic achievement. Although many Americans (outside California and New York City) still view Chinese with curiosity, most no longer consider Asians as outsiders and few young Americans have heard of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and are aware that the Chinese were once a despised minority, denied citizenship until 1943. Two well-written books *Surviving on the Gold Mountain* and *The Chinese American Family Album* remind us of this history and provide rich materials for thinking about the causes of racial conflicts in the United States.

Surviving on the Gold Mountain by Huping Ling not only presents a comprehensive history of Chinese-American women, but also recounts the sources of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic Chinese in the United States. Through close examination of the lives and experiences of different subgroups of Chinese American women, this work chronicles the struggle and success of Chinese Americans as well as the transformation of their image from a despised and excluded minority to a model minority.

On the basis of immigration patterns and whites' attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, the book divides the history of Chinese women in America into three periods: *early*, from the middle nineteenth-century to 1943, post *World War II*, from 1943 to 1965, and *contemporary*, from 1965 to the present time. During the early period, Chinese females were discouraged from coming to America first by their families in China and later by the Chinese exclusion policies of the United States. Ling shows that the negative image of the Chinese leading to the Chinese exclusion acts, was, in part, due



to the presence of a large percentage of prostitutes and slave girls among Chinese women in the 1870s and 1880s. The author chooses the term "Chinese immigrant women," as opposed to "Chinese American women," to denote the anti-Chinese sentiment during this period and to emphasize the fact that Chinese were denied citizenship before 1943. By the early 1940s, the Sino-American alliance during World War II and a changed image of Chinese females from prostitutes to middle-class merchant wives and daughters in the preceding four decades helped form favorable public opinion toward the Chinese. This led to the repeal of Chinese exclusion laws in 1943 and the immigration of large numbers of single Chinese women, many of them as university students. Finally with the passage of a liberal immigration policy in 1965, more middle class and educated Chinese women came to America. This changed make-up of Chinese immigrants (women and men) from lower and working classes to middle class and their educational and occupational achievements helped contribute to their model-minority image in the United States.

Using archival documents, oral history interviews, census data, contemporary newspapers in English and Chinese, and secondary literature, Ling examines the 150-year immigrant odyssey of Chinese women as wives of merchants, farmers, and laborers, as prostitutes, and as students and professionals. This treatment of Chinese women by class and occupational status produces an instructive and accurate account of the experiences of different subgroups of this immigrant population. For students and scholars of race and stratification, Ling's analysis reveals relationships among socio-economic status, modes of adaptation, and chances of success in a modern



industrialized society. Moreover, the vastly different immigrant experiences of different subgroups of Chinese women denotes the interactions among such factors as image formation, ethnic group identity, power and prejudice in a multi-ethnic society.

Clearly contemporary advocates and liberal theorists for racial/ethnic equality like to emphasize that negative racial stereotypes limit competition for scarce resources in a multi-ethnic society. According to this theory, racial stereotypes are imposed on a racial minority by the majority largely to protect the latter's economic interests. While there is empirical support for this economic theory of racism, it overlooks one important source of negative racial images: class exploitation and oppressive cultural traditions within racial and ethnic groups. From the data provided by Ling in *Surviving on the Gold Mountain* it is clear that class exploitation and oppression of Chinese by Chinese played an important role in the negative public perception of Chinese immigrants and the demand for Chinese exclusion in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Indeed the anti-Chinese immigration policies in the 1870s and 1880s were direct responses to the prevalence of prostitution in the Chinese community. Several restrictive immigration laws against the Chinese were enacted at that time specifically to stop the trading and selling of Chinese women and girls (mostly by other Chinese) as slaves and prostitutes. Reading Ling's vivid account of the suffering of these slave girls and prostitutes and of the efforts to rescue them by middle-class Protestant women, one can imagine how these widely publicized cases affected the contemporary public perception of ethnic Chinese in the United States. Since intra-ethnic exploitation can be just as cruel as inter-ethnic



exploitation, the stories of these Chinese-American women help us see the danger in regarding racial stereotypes as imposed solely from without. While it may be painful for members of disadvantaged groups to acknowledge the role their own cultures and own people play in the formation of negative racial images, overlooking or denying such reality can only hamper our effort to understand and improve race relations.

Reading this book reminds me of Thomas Sowell's words: "History can be cruel to theories, as it has been cruel to peoples.... There is much in the history of every people that does not deserve respect." One can only hope that by studying history honestly and comprehensively, we may come up with better ways to handle race relations and to overcome racial prejudice and discrimination. To help achieve such goals, Dr. Ling has provided us with an important work and valuable information.

While reading Ling's work requires sobriety and careful reflection, reading *The Chinese American Family Album* by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler is very much like watching a well-made documentary on TV. The book presents a brief, 128-page, history of the hopes and dreams, the hardships and successes of Chinese Americans in the United States over the past 250 years. Its simple but eloquent description of this history is embellished by many unsmiling, often unforgettable, family photographs, graceful and touchingly melancholy poems, vividly articulated personal interviews, admiring accounts of the achievement of well-known Chinese Americans, and interesting, sometimes amusing newspaper clips written by white journalists and writers. Although one can not find history-changing, heroic figures among the Chinese Americans in these pages, one can not help



but being deeply moved by the fifty-plus little stories of the lives of these ordinary, yet extraordinary Chinese.

The six chapters in the book are organized to help the reader follow the footprints of Chinese immigrants from poor villages in China to various occupations in the United States. We learn of a 14-year-old farm boy who came to San Francisco to get rich during the Gold Rush, only to see one of his cousins get sick and die during their two-month voyage. We are then introduced to a girl who was sold by her mother to a Chinese merchant in America to pay for her father's funeral. Her family was so desperately poor and she was so eager to help; when she learnt that "every year in my age worth ten dollars," she wished she was older than nine so that "my mother could get more money" (p. 28). A few pages later, in an autobiography, we encounter a middle-class immigrant describing his ecstatic and proud arrival at Los Angeles Airport to start his successful journey in the United States.

The final chapter, *Part of America*, depicts the achievement of several well-known, contemporary Chinese Americans. Unlike the earlier immigrants, these individuals were often from well-to-do families and they (or their parents) came to America with college degrees. Perhaps the authors realize that these individuals are representative only of the more recently immigrated Chinese-Americans, because they end the chapter with a more typical immigrant experience. It is about a Chinatown family whose great-grandfather came from China in the late 19th century and opened a grocery store in New York City. The business prospered and since then, children have joined the family business, married people from other ethnic groups, and become active in local politics.



Although scholars may find *Family Album* lacking in critical analysis, it would make an excellent resource for introductory Asian-American courses for high-school and college students. This book also deserves a prominent place on the coffee table of every person interested in the history of Chinese Americans. For students who want to learn more about Chinese Americans and the Chinese family, the academic book I would recommend is *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*.

