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Negotiating Belonging in Times of War: Chinese Women's Migration and Diasporic Lives in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Chinese women in the United States negotiated belonging across overlapping regimes of war, exclusion, racialization, and diaspora. Rather than treating migration as a simple movement from one nation to another, the study approaches Chinese women's lives as historically produced through border policing, family separation, labor markets, community formation, and transnational memory. It focuses on the period from the Page Act of 1875 and Chinese Exclusion through World War II, the repeal of exclusion in 1943, postwar war-bride migration, the Chinese Civil War and Cold War refugee era, and the post-1965 expansion of Chinese American communities. The central argument is that war did not only displace Chinese women; it also reorganized the terms under which they could be admitted, surveilled, recognized, loved, employed, and remembered. Chinese women's belonging in the United States therefore emerged through negotiation: with immigration inspectors, husbands and families, employers, churches and associations, U.S. racial hierarchies, Chinese nationalist and diaspora politics, and later generations seeking usable pasts. Drawing on historical scholarship, public archives, immigration-law history, and diaspora studies, the paper shows that Chinese women's migration was shaped by both intimate decisions and geopolitical forces.

Their diasporic lives reveal that belonging is neither a final status granted by citizenship nor a private feeling of home; it is a contested social practice made and remade in conditions of conflict.

Introduction

To write about Chinese women's migration to the United States in times of war is to begin with an apparent paradox. Chinese women were often imagined by the American state as either absent or excessively visible. They were absent because exclusionary immigration law sharply restricted their entry, separated wives from husbands, and produced the male-dominated "bachelor societies" that became a familiar feature of early Chinatowns. Yet they were also excessively visible because the women who did seek entry were subjected to intense scrutiny: of their bodies, sexual reputations, marital relationships, labor status, family papers, and political loyalties. In both absence and visibility, Chinese women became central to the making of American immigration policy. The terms by which they could cross the Pacific were never simply administrative. They were ideological arguments about race, morality, gender, labor, and the future of the nation.

The title of this paper, "Negotiating Belonging in Times of War," uses the phrase "times of war" broadly and deliberately. It refers not only to declared wars such as World War II, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Chinese Civil War, but also to the conditions of racialized emergency that shaped Chinese American history. The Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 emerged from domestic political warfare over labor, race, and the western United States. The United States later recast China from racial threat to wartime ally during World War II, leading to the repeal of exclusion in 1943, but that repeal produced only a tiny annual quota and did not immediately dismantle the social logic of exclusion (U.S. Department of State, n.d.; Immigration History, n.d.-b). The War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1946 created new pathways for some Asian spouses of U.S. servicemen, including Chinese wives, yet these pathways were organized around military marriage and family respectability rather than equal migration rights (Immigration History, n.d.-c; National WWII Museum, 2020). In the Cold War era, Chinese migrants were again filtered through anxieties about communism, fraud, loyalty, and refugee legitimacy (Hsu, 2015; Ngai, 2004).

This paper argues that Chinese women's diasporic lives in the United States illuminate the unstable character of belonging. Belonging was not simply achieved when a woman entered the country, married a

citizen, became a mother, found work, or gained legal citizenship. Each of these milestones could open one door while closing another. A woman admitted as a merchant's wife might still live in a segregated community and face anti-miscegenation norms. A war bride might gain lawful entry yet confront suspicion from both U.S. officials and Chinese American communities. A garment worker might support family survival while laboring under exploitative conditions. A student, refugee, or professional woman after 1949 might be praised as a Cold War symbol of freedom while still confronting racism and gendered expectations. Belonging, in this history, was not a stable possession. It was a practice of making home under constraints.

The study uses a historical and interpretive method, synthesizing immigration history, Asian American studies, women's history, and diaspora theory. Its evidence is drawn from major scholarly works by historians such as Judy Yung, Huping Ling, Erika Lee, Madeline Hsu, Sucheng Chan, Mae Ngai, and others, alongside public historical sources from the National Archives, National Park Service, Library of Congress, and immigration-history repositories. Because the topic spans more than a century, the paper does not attempt a complete chronology of every Chinese female migrant stream. Instead, it follows key moments in which war and gender redefined the possibilities of Chinese women's migration and community life.

Conceptual Framework: Belonging, Diaspora, War, and Gender

Belonging is often treated as an emotional attachment to place, but in migration history it must be understood as a political and social process. A migrant may feel attached to a home while being denied legal membership, and a citizen may possess formal rights while being marked as foreign. For Chinese women in the United States, belonging has operated across at least four interrelated registers: legal status, social recognition, intimate life, and historical memory. Legal status determined who could enter, remain, naturalize, marry, sponsor relatives, or claim protection from deportation. Social recognition shaped whether Chinese women were seen as neighbors, workers, wives, mothers, students, patriots, aliens, or threats. Intimate life involved marriage, reproduction, caregiving, kinship obligation, and the emotional work of sustaining families across oceans. Historical memory later determined whose stories were preserved, whose losses were named, and whose contributions counted as American history.

Diaspora studies helps explain why belonging cannot be reduced to assimilation. Diaspora refers to dispersed communities whose identities are shaped by movement, memory, and ties across borders. Chinese diasporic life in the United States has never been a single story. It includes migrants from

Guangdong villages, Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, Southeast Asian Chinese communities, and mixed-status families created by exclusion and war. Diaspora also involves uneven relations to homeland. Some migrants longed to return to China; others were prevented from returning; others maintained family obligations through remittances, letters, and arranged marriages; still others developed Chinese American identities rooted in U.S. cities and struggles. Women's diasporic lives were especially shaped by family strategies, because women were often asked to reproduce culture, care for elders, maintain language, and transmit moral values, even while adapting to American institutions (Ling, 1998; Yung, 1995).

War intensifies the contradictions of diaspora. It can close borders, militarize suspicion, and separate families. It can also create unexpected openings, such as military marriage provisions, refugee laws, and symbolic inclusion of formerly excluded groups. World War II is the clearest example. For decades, Chinese immigrants had been constructed as racially unassimilable. During the war, China's alliance with the United States made anti-Chinese exclusion diplomatically embarrassing, and Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.; U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.). Yet repeal was not a generous act of equality. The quota for China was set at roughly 105 immigrants per year, a figure that revealed how inclusion could remain narrow even when formal exclusion ended (Immigration History, n.d.-b). War therefore changed the language of belonging without necessarily changing its racial structure.

Gender is central because the boundary of the nation is often imagined through women's bodies. The Page Act of 1875 did not announce itself as a blanket racial ban. It claimed to prevent the importation of forced labor and women for "immoral purposes," but in practice it targeted Chinese women and forced them to prove sexual respectability before they could enter the United States (National Park Service, 2022; Immigration History, n.d.-a). This made gender and sexuality into instruments of immigration control. A Chinese woman's eligibility depended not only on nationality but also on whether officials believed she was a wife, daughter, student, servant, prostitute, or fraud. The regulation of Chinese women thus served a broader demographic purpose: limiting the formation of Chinese American families and slowing community reproduction. Exclusion was never only about labor competition; it was also about preventing settlement.

The framework of negotiation is useful because Chinese women were not merely victims of policy. They navigated constraints through family networks, testimony, paperwork, community sponsorship, work, religious institutions, education, labor organizing, and cultural adaptation. Negotiation does not imply

equal power. Immigration inspectors, employers, husbands, courts, and the state held enormous authority. But women's lives show agency within unequal fields. They answered interrogations, learned the details of family genealogies, joined community associations, raised children in hostile environments, entered garment shops, pursued schooling, served in wartime roles, and built kinship across borders. Their strategies were sometimes conservative, emphasizing respectability and family duty, and sometimes resistant, as in labor strikes and community activism. Belonging was negotiated precisely because it was not freely given.

Gendered Exclusion and the Making of a Chinese American Border

The earliest phase of Chinese women's migration to the United States was defined by a gendered contradiction. Chinese men were recruited and tolerated when their labor served mining, railroad construction, agriculture, domestic service, and manufacturing, but Chinese women were represented as morally dangerous and socially undesirable. The Page Act of 1875 became the first major federal restrictive immigration law and was enforced primarily against Chinese women under the language of excluding contract laborers and women brought for prostitution (National Park Service, 2022; Immigration History, n.d.-a). By requiring Asian women to prove that they were not entering for "immoral" purposes, the law created a presumption of sexual guilt. It also allowed consular and immigration officials to scrutinize Chinese women's intentions before arrival and at the port of entry.

The Page Act mattered not only because it prevented individual women from migrating, but because it reshaped the demographic future of Chinese America. Historians have shown that Chinese women were already a small minority among Chinese migrants, but the Page Act deepened this imbalance by making the admission of wives and daughters far more difficult (Yung, 1995; Lee, 2003). The result was a community in which many men lived without spouses or children in the United States, sending remittances to families in China and sustaining transpacific households from afar. These arrangements were not simply cultural preferences. They were produced by law. The American state used the border to regulate Chinese family formation.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 intensified this process. It suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers and denied Chinese immigrants the path to naturalized citizenship. It also required documentation for Chinese persons traveling into and out of the United States, creating a bureaucratic regime of certificates, interrogations, and documentary suspicion (U.S. Department of State, n.d.-a; National Archives, 2026). Although the law formally targeted laborers, its effects spread through families

and communities. Wives of laborers could not easily join husbands; children could be separated from parents; merchants and students had to prove exempt status; and women's admissibility depended on male status and official recognition of respectable dependency.

This legal order transformed Chinese women's bodies into evidence. Immigration officers wanted to know whether a woman was truly married, whether she was of proper character, whether she knew the correct details of family life, whether her papers matched her story, and whether her appearance conformed to official expectations. Such scrutiny reflected the broader racial logic that Asian women were either prostitutes, servants, or fraudulent dependents until proven otherwise. The burden of proof was not neutral. It required Chinese women to perform respectability according to both Chinese patriarchal norms and American racial-sexual stereotypes. In this sense, the border demanded a double translation: women had to translate Chinese kinship into American legal categories while also translating themselves into acceptable feminine subjects.

The exclusion era also shaped marriage and reproduction. Because Chinese women were often barred, Chinese men in the United States frequently maintained split households. A man might work in California, Oregon, Washington, New York, or the Mississippi Delta while his wife remained in a village in China raising children and managing remittances. Some men returned periodically to marry or father children, and some families developed cyclical migration patterns around the rhythm of exclusion and reentry. These families were not less real because they were geographically divided. They were diasporic households created by restrictive law and economic necessity.

Angel Island, Detention, and the Archive of Suspicion

Angel Island Immigration Station, operating from 1910 to 1940 in San Francisco Bay, has become one of the most powerful symbols of Asian American exclusion. Unlike Ellis Island, which is often remembered as a gateway to national incorporation, Angel Island functioned heavily as a detention and interrogation site for Asian immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants subject to exclusion laws (Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, n.d.; Angel Island Conservancy, n.d.). The station's history is not only institutional; it is emotional. The poems carved into its walls by detained migrants speak of waiting, humiliation, uncertainty, and longing. For Chinese women, Angel Island was a space where the state converted family stories into tests of admissibility.

Detention was gendered in both procedure and meaning. Women and men were housed separately, and questions about family, marriage, pregnancy, and sexual reputation carried special weight for women. A

female migrant's answers had to match the testimony of husbands, fathers, or sponsors. She might be asked about the layout of a village, the number of steps in a house, the names of relatives, the sequence of marriages, the placement of ancestral halls, or the details of a spouse's life in America. Such questions were meant to detect fraud, especially after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed municipal records and made "paper son" and "paper daughter" claims more possible. Yet the interrogation process also reveals how the state misunderstood and exploited the complexity of Chinese kinship. Memory became a legal burden.

For women who passed through Angel Island, belonging began with suspicion. Even before setting foot in a mainland community, they encountered the message that their claims to family were not trusted. This experience could shape diasporic identity for years. A woman who entered as a wife or daughter might later become a mother of American citizens, a worker in a family business, or a community elder, but the memory of detention could remain a private wound. The very act of arrival was tied to humiliation. This is one reason oral history has been so important to Chinese American women's history. Official records often show questions and answers; family stories preserve fear, shame, endurance, and pride.

Angel Island also illustrates the role of paperwork in diasporic belonging. Exclusion-era Chinese migrants often learned to live through documents: certificates of residence, coaching books, affidavits, merchant papers, photographs, and family correspondence. The state demanded documentary proof, but it also created conditions in which documentary manipulation became a survival strategy. "Paper families" were not merely evidence of deception; they were evidence of a legal system that made ordinary migration impossible for most Chinese people. Women who entered through such arrangements faced additional risks, because a discovered inconsistency could threaten not only their own status but also the status of relatives and sponsors.

The consequences of exclusion extended across generations. Children born in the United States to Chinese parents could claim birthright citizenship after the Supreme Court's Wong Kim Ark decision in 1898, yet their families still faced exclusionary suspicion (Ngai, 2004; Lee, 2003). U.S.-born daughters grew up in a country that legally recognized them as citizens but socially treated them as foreign. Their mothers may have lacked naturalization rights, and their fathers may have been constrained by travel documents and labor restrictions. This produced a layered family citizenship: children with formal American membership, parents with precarious legal standing, and relatives in China dependent on remittances and sponsorship. Belonging became a family project rather than an individual possession.

World War II, Wartime Citizenship, and the Conditional Inclusion of Chinese Women

World War II transformed the political meaning of Chinese America without fully undoing the structures of racial exclusion. Before the war, Chinese immigrants had been represented as unassimilable laborers, immoral women, and permanent aliens. During the war, the United States needed China as an ally against Japan, and Chinese Americans became symbolically useful to American diplomacy. Posters, fundraising campaigns, newspaper stories, and patriotic events increasingly emphasized Chinese courage and friendship. This shift did not emerge from a sudden rejection of racism. It emerged from geopolitics. The same population previously excluded now had to be partially incorporated into a wartime narrative of democracy.

Chinese American women played important roles in this shift. Some participated in war relief for China, raising money for refugees, medical supplies, and resistance to Japanese aggression. Others worked in factories, service sectors, clerical positions, and community organizations. Chinese American women's wartime labor was often framed through both gender and race: they were expected to be patriotic, respectable, and visibly loyal. Their contributions challenged stereotypes of Chinese women as secluded or dependent, yet recognition often depended on presenting them as symbols of democratic assimilation or loyal ethnic femininity (Lee, 2015; Yung, 1995). Wartime visibility could therefore be empowering and limiting at the same time.

The repeal of Chinese exclusion in 1943 is often described as a turning point, and it was. Congress ended the formal exclusion regime and made Chinese immigrants eligible for naturalization, a major legal change after six decades of restriction (U.S. Department of State, n.d.-b; DocsTeach, n.d.). For Chinese women, naturalization eligibility mattered because citizenship could alter family status, property rights, travel, and public recognition. It also had symbolic force. A population once declared racially unfit for membership was now, at least formally, capable of citizenship.

Yet the 1943 repeal must be understood as limited. The new annual quota for China was about 105 immigrants, a number so small that it could not meet the needs of family reunification or refugee migration (Immigration History, n.d.-b; Britannica, n.d.). The repeal thus combined symbolic inclusion with numerical exclusion. Chinese Americans could celebrate a victory while recognizing its narrowness. For women separated from husbands, children, or parents, the quota meant that the door was open in principle but nearly closed in practice. The contradiction reveals how wartime liberalization could preserve racial hierarchy under the language of equality.

At the same time, wartime alliance did not erase racial boundaries within the United States. Chinese Americans still faced segregation, employment discrimination, housing barriers, and cultural stereotypes. Chinese women could be praised as allies while still exoticized as "Oriental" figures. They could be welcomed into certain patriotic roles while excluded from full social equality. Their belonging was conditional on performance: they had to demonstrate loyalty, femininity, gratitude, and usefulness. This conditionality became especially visible in contrasts with Japanese Americans, who were incarcerated by the U.S. government during the same war. Chinese Americans sometimes wore buttons stating "I am Chinese" to avoid being mistaken for Japanese, a practice that reveals the violent absurdity of racial identification in wartime. Belonging depended not only on who one was, but on who one could prove not to be.

World War II therefore marks a crucial transition in this paper's argument. It shows that war can create openings for marginalized groups while also instrumentalizing them. Chinese women's belonging was renegotiated through alliance politics, patriotic labor, and legal reform. But the new terms of belonging were fragile. They depended on China's status as ally, on women's respectability, and on the state's willingness to make narrow exceptions. When the war ended and the Chinese Civil War intensified, the language of alliance gave way to Cold War suspicion. Chinese women who had been symbols of allied suffering or loyal family life could soon be read through another lens: refugee, communist, dependent, fraud, or security risk.

War Brides, Intimate Migration, and the Militarization of Family Reunification

The War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1946 created one of the most important postwar migration channels for women connected to U.S. military personnel. The first act allowed foreign spouses and children of U.S. servicemen to enter as non-quota immigrants, and later provisions extended this possibility to Chinese spouses (Immigration History, n.d.-c; Library of Congress, n.d.-b). For Chinese women, war-bride migration brought together intimate life and geopolitics. Marriage became a route through which exclusionary immigration structures could be bypassed, but only for women whose relationships fit the state's preferred model of military family reunification.

War brides were often represented sentimentally in American public culture: foreign women rescued by love, brought into American homes, and incorporated through marriage. This story obscures the complexity of Chinese women's experiences. Some married Chinese American servicemen who had served in the U.S. military; others married white servicemen or men from other backgrounds. Some had

met husbands during wartime service in China or in other parts of Asia. Some were educated urban women; others came from families displaced by war. Their marriages could involve affection, strategy, family obligation, survival, or a mixture of motives. To treat all war brides as passive dependents is to miss the agency involved in choosing migration under conditions of violence and uncertainty.

The state, however, did not view intimate migration as purely private. Officials worried about fraud, admissibility, race, health, and public charge status. A Chinese woman's marriage to a serviceman did not eliminate scrutiny; it changed its form. Instead of proving that she was not a prostitute under the Page Act logic, she now had to prove that she was a legitimate spouse within a militarized family framework. The question was no longer only whether she was morally admissible, but whether her marriage fit the national narrative of rewarding soldiers and restoring families. This reveals a continuity across legal eras: Chinese women's entry remained tied to assessments of sexual and familial legitimacy.

War-bride migration also exposed contradictions in American racial law. Many U.S. states still enforced anti-miscegenation laws in the mid-twentieth century, and interracial couples could face hostility even when federal immigration law permitted entry. The National WWII Museum notes that war-bride provisions helped challenge elements of the racial quota system and intersected with broader legal struggles against anti-miscegenation regimes (National WWII Museum, 2020). For Chinese women married to non-Chinese men, belonging could be contested in neighborhoods, churches, military families, and schools. For those married to Chinese American men, migration could mean entering Chinatowns shaped by decades of bachelor life, paper families, and gender imbalance.

The arrival of Chinese war brides contributed to the rebuilding of Chinese American family life after exclusion. Their presence helped transform communities that had long been dominated by male workers and merchants. They became wives, mothers, wage earners, cultural mediators, and community members. Yet family reunification did not necessarily mean ease. Women often had to adapt to unfamiliar language environments, racial segregation, economic hardship, and marital expectations formed in transnational circumstances. Some found support in Chinese churches, family associations, women's groups, and ethnic businesses. Others faced isolation, domestic conflict, or pressure to conform to both Chinese and American ideals of womanhood.

The war-bride pathway illustrates the intimate politics of belonging. Chinese women entered not as abstract immigrants but as wives whose admissibility was tied to men's military service. Their belonging was therefore derivative in law but not derivative in life. Once in the United States, they built households,

raised citizens, worked for wages, and shaped community culture. The state may have admitted them because of husbands, but their long-term significance cannot be reduced to marriage. They helped remake Chinese America from a predominantly male sojourner society into a more family-based community.

Chinese Civil War, Cold War Refugeehood, and the Politics of Proof

The end of World War II did not bring stability to Chinese migration. The Chinese Civil War, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the retreat of the Nationalist government to Taiwan, and the Korean War placed Chinese migrants at the center of Cold War anxieties. In American political discourse, Chinese people could be refugees from communism, allies of Free China, students stranded by revolution, or suspected agents of a hostile state. Chinese women's migration and belonging were reorganized through this Cold War framework.

For some Chinese women, the Civil War and communist victory produced displacement. Students and visitors already in the United States faced uncertainty about return. Families divided across mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States had to navigate new borders and political dangers. Refugee and relief provisions allowed some Chinese migrants to adjust status or enter under special categories, but these policies were selective and politically charged (Hsu, 2015; EBSCO, n.d.). Women who qualified as students, wives, daughters, or refugees could be welcomed as evidence of communist oppression, but their welcome was shaped by ideological usefulness. A refugee woman could become a symbol of American freedom precisely because she had fled an enemy system.

Cold War politics also revived suspicion of Chinese identity. The U.S. government feared communist infiltration and scrutinized Chinese migrants' papers, political associations, and family ties. The "confession program" of the 1950s, which encouraged Chinese immigrants with false paper identities to confess in exchange for possible regularization, reflected this environment of surveillance (Lee, 2003; Ngai, 2004). Although paper identities had emerged as survival strategies under exclusion, Cold War officials recast them as security concerns. Women connected to paper families had to manage the risk that family histories could unravel. Silence, secrecy, and selective storytelling became forms of protection.

Chinese women's belonging in the Cold War was therefore shaped by the politics of proof. To be accepted, a woman might need to prove that she was anti-communist, properly dependent, legally married, economically self-sufficient, or culturally assimilable. These proofs overlapped. A student

woman could be praised for educational achievement while being watched for political loyalty. A refugee mother could be admired for sacrifice while expected to raise grateful American children. A wife from Taiwan or Hong Kong might be positioned differently from a woman with relatives in mainland China. Political geography entered the household.

Cold War domestic ideals also affected Chinese women. The United States celebrated the nuclear family as a symbol of democratic stability. Chinese women who performed domestic respectability could be incorporated into this ideology, especially if they contrasted with images of communist collectivism. But many women needed wage work for family survival. They worked in laundries, restaurants, garment shops, canneries, domestic service, small businesses, and later professional sectors. Their labor unsettled the notion that belonging depended on domestic dependence. They were not only wives and mothers; they were economic actors whose work sustained households and community institutions.

The Cold War era thus extended the paper's central theme: war reorganized belonging by changing what Chinese women had to represent. In the exclusion era, they were moral threats and demographic risks. In World War II, they became allied women and patriotic contributors. In the Cold War, they became refugees, anti-communist symbols, suspicious aliens, students, wives, and workers. These categories were not mutually exclusive. A single woman could be many of them at once. Negotiating belonging meant learning which identity to emphasize in which context, and which parts of the self to conceal.

Labor, Family, and Everyday Belonging in Chinese American Communities

The most enduring negotiations of belonging occurred not at the moment of legal entry but in daily life. Chinese women made home in boardinghouses, family apartments, restaurant kitchens, garment shops, church basements, laundries, schools, and association halls. These spaces rarely appear as dramatic scenes of war, yet they were shaped by war's consequences: separated families, refugee arrivals, gender imbalance, racial labor markets, and transnational obligation. Everyday life was where geopolitical conflict became food, rent, remittances, childcare, language learning, and fatigue.

Labor was central. During the exclusion era, Chinese women's wage work was often constrained by limited numbers, family status, and racialized employment niches. Some worked in domestic service, sewing, small businesses, or family enterprises. After World War II and especially after 1965, Chinese immigrant women became vital to urban garment industries, particularly in New York and San Francisco. The growth of Chinatown garment work created employment opportunities but also exposed women to low wages, long hours, crowded shops, and exploitative contractors (Bao, 2001; International Ladies'

Garment Workers' Union histories summarized by Immigration Learning Center, n.d.). In these workplaces, women negotiated belonging through labor solidarity as well as ethnic community.

The 1982 New York Chinatown garment workers' strike is a landmark in this history. Thousands of Chinese immigrant women, many members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Local 23-25, mobilized against employers who threatened to withdraw from union contracts. Their activism challenged stereotypes of Asian immigrant women as docile or apolitical. It also showed that ethnic community did not always mean class unity: Chinese women workers could confront Chinese employers while still claiming a place in Chinatown. Labor struggle became a way of saying that belonging in the diaspora required dignity, not merely survival (Bao, 2001).

Family was equally important. Chinese women often carried the emotional burden of making migration meaningful for others. They raised children who moved between Chinese languages and English, ancestral expectations and American schooling, racial exclusion and citizenship claims. Mothers might insist on Chinese food, festivals, language lessons, and respect for elders while also encouraging education as a path to security. This cultural labor was not simply conservative tradition. It was a way of creating continuity after war and migration had disrupted family lines. To prepare a meal, teach a child a kinship term, or send money to a relative abroad could be an act of diasporic repair.

Marriage and motherhood, however, were ambivalent sources of belonging. They could provide legal status, community recognition, and emotional support. They could also impose dependence, domestic confinement, and pressure to preserve patriarchal norms. Chinese women in diasporic households often negotiated between expectations from husbands, in-laws, children, employers, and state institutions. A woman might be praised for sacrifice but denied autonomy. She might be expected to work for wages and still perform all domestic duties. She might be responsible for translating American schools and welfare systems to elders while maintaining filial obligations to kin abroad. Belonging could become a burden of mediation.

Language shaped these negotiations. English proficiency opened access to jobs, schools, courts, healthcare, and civic participation, but Chinese languages sustained intimacy and community. Women who lacked English could be isolated or dependent on children and husbands. Women who gained English could become interpreters, brokers, or leaders. Language also marked generational conflict. Children might reject Chinese speech to avoid racial stigma, while mothers might view language loss as

family loss. These tensions were not simply cultural misunderstandings; they reflected the pressure of assimilation in a society that often treated Chinese difference as foreignness.

The everyday history of Chinese women's labor and family life reveals that belonging was built through repetition. It was not achieved once at naturalization ceremonies or immigration checkpoints. It was made through wages saved, children enrolled, letters written, meals cooked, strikes organized, elders cared for, and stories remembered or withheld. War appears in these practices as absence, debt, grief, ambition, and caution. Chinese women's diasporic lives show that the aftermath of war is not only a treaty or a statute; it is a household economy and a community memory.

Memory, Silence, and Intergenerational Identity

Belonging also depends on how histories are remembered. Chinese women's migration histories have often been fragmented because exclusion, shame, language barriers, and patriarchal archival practices limited what was recorded. Many women left traces in immigration files, mission records, labor-union archives, photographs, oral histories, and family stories, but these traces require careful interpretation. An interrogation transcript may tell us what a woman answered, but not what she feared. A family photograph may show respectability, but not the labor required to produce it. A community celebration may record public pride while concealing private conflict.

Oral history has been crucial in recovering Chinese American women's experiences. Judy Yung's work, for example, demonstrated how Chinese American women's lives in San Francisco could be reconstructed through interviews, photographs, and community sources that challenged male-centered narratives of Chinatown history (Yung, 1995). Huping Ling similarly emphasized the survival strategies of Chinese American women across generations, showing that women's lives cannot be reduced to victimization or assimilation (Ling, 1998). These scholars made clear that women were not marginal to Chinese American history; they were central to its reproduction, transformation, and memory.

Memory is complicated by secrecy. Exclusion produced paper identities and family arrangements that could not always be spoken openly. A child might grow up with a legal surname that did not match biological ancestry. A mother might know the truth but avoid telling it to protect the family. A war bride might minimize wartime trauma to avoid burdening children. A refugee might remain silent about political affiliations or relatives left behind. Silence in this context is not simply absence. It is a historical practice shaped by fear, protection, and the desire to belong without inviting danger.

Second-generation and later Chinese American women often negotiate belonging through acts of recovery. They search archives, interview elders, translate documents, visit ancestral villages, restore Angel Island poems, and write memoirs or fiction. These acts are not merely personal. They challenge national histories that present America as a straightforward land of immigrants. Chinese women's stories reveal that immigration has often been structured by exclusion, detention, and conditional inclusion. Recovering those stories changes the meaning of American belonging by making visible the violence that produced it.

Public history has begun to recognize Chinese women's roles more fully. Angel Island preservation, museum exhibits, digital archives, and Asian American studies curricula have created spaces for stories once confined to families or specialist scholarship. Yet representation remains uneven. War brides, garment workers, paper daughters, refugee mothers, and undocumented women still receive less attention than male laborers, railroad workers, merchants, or political leaders. A gendered approach does not simply add women to an existing story. It changes the questions. Instead of asking only how Chinese immigrants contributed to America, it asks how the nation controlled reproduction, intimacy, labor, and memory.

The politics of memory matters in contemporary debates. Anti-Asian racism, suspicion of Chinese students and scientists, and geopolitical tension between the United States and China have revived older patterns of racialized foreignness. Contemporary Chinese American women may be U.S.-born citizens, long-term residents, international students, professionals, or recent migrants, yet they can still be treated as representatives of a foreign power. Historical memory helps explain why such suspicion feels familiar. The exclusion era's demand for proof, the wartime demand for loyalty, and the Cold War demand for ideological clarity have not disappeared entirely. They reappear in new forms.

Negotiating belonging through memory therefore involves both mourning and critique. It means honoring women's endurance without romanticizing suffering. It means recognizing family strategies without ignoring patriarchy. It means celebrating community formation without forgetting detention and exclusion. It means understanding war not only as an event overseas but as a force that enters archives, households, bodies, and names. Chinese women's diasporic memories are not supplementary to political history. They are one of the places where political history becomes intimate and enduring.

Post-1965 Transformations and Contemporary Resonances

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 transformed Chinese migration to the United States by abolishing the old national-origins quota system and creating greater opportunities for family reunification and skilled migration. The Library of Congress notes that the law allowed far more skilled workers and family members to enter and that the Chinese American population almost doubled within ten years (Library of Congress, n.d.-a). This post-1965 expansion changed the gender composition, class profile, and geographic distribution of Chinese America. More women entered as wives, mothers, students, professionals, workers, and later as independent migrants.

Post-1965 migration did not erase earlier histories of war and exclusion. Instead, it layered new migrations onto older communities. Established Chinatowns received immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, and Southeast Asia. Suburban ethnoburbs and professional networks developed alongside working-class enclaves. Women's experiences varied widely by class, education, language, documentation, and family status. A university-trained scientist from Taiwan, a garment worker from Hong Kong, a restaurant worker from Fujian, a refugee-background ethnic Chinese woman from Vietnam, and an international student from Shanghai all entered different social worlds, yet each could be racialized under the broad sign of Chineseness.

Family reunification was especially important for women. Because U.S. immigration law after 1965 prioritized family categories, women often migrated through chains of sponsorship. This could empower families separated by earlier restrictions, but it could also reproduce dependency. A woman sponsored by a husband or adult child might face pressure to maintain family harmony even in difficult circumstances. Conversely, women who became citizens or permanent residents could sponsor relatives, transforming them into anchors of migration networks. The same legal structure could produce vulnerability and authority.

The post-1965 period also saw the rise of Chinese immigrant women's labor activism. In New York Chinatown, women garment workers were central to labor struggles that linked immigrant rights, feminism, class politics, and ethnic community. Their activism showed that belonging was not merely cultural recognition but also economic justice. Women demanded fair contracts, wages, and dignity in workplaces where ethnic solidarity was sometimes used to excuse exploitation (Bao, 2001; Immigration Learning Center, n.d.). These struggles complicate model-minority narratives that portray Asian Americans as uniformly upwardly mobile and politically quiet.

Education and professional migration created another pathway of belonging. Chinese women entered American universities in increasing numbers, pursued careers in science, medicine, engineering, business, and academia, and built transnational professional identities. Yet professional success could coexist with racial suspicion. During periods of U.S.-China tension, Chinese-origin scientists and students have sometimes been viewed through national-security frames. This recalls older patterns in which Chinese migrants had to prove loyalty and legitimacy. The forms of suspicion have changed, but the burden of proof remains historically recognizable.

Contemporary demographics show the scale of transformation. Pew Research Center estimated that 5.5 million people in the United States identified as Chinese in 2023, making Chinese Americans the largest Asian origin group and about 22 percent of the U.S. Asian population (Pew Research Center, 2025). This population is internally diverse by nativity, language, class, region, generation, and political orientation. Chinese women's diasporic lives today include U.S.-born professionals, undocumented workers, international students, transnational mothers, adoptees, activists, artists, caregivers, and elders aging in immigrant communities. No single narrative can contain them.

The notion of "times of war" remains relevant in the twenty-first century, even when Chinese women are not migrating directly from battlefield conditions. Trade conflict, pandemic racism, surveillance concerns, and geopolitical rivalry can produce a wartime atmosphere in which Chinese bodies are treated as suspect. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified anti-Asian racism, and Chinese and other Asian women were often targeted through a combination of racism and misogyny. Contemporary hostility drew on old images of Asian foreignness, disease, sexualization, and threat. The history of the Page Act and exclusion helps explain why attacks on Chinese women often focus on bodies, reproduction, morality, and loyalty.

Synthesis: What Chinese Women's Migration Reveals About Belonging

Across these historical periods, three patterns emerge. First, Chinese women's migration was repeatedly filtered through family categories. The Page Act treated women's sexuality as a border problem. Exclusion allowed some wives and daughters only through male exempt status. War-bride laws admitted women through military marriage. Family reunification after 1965 expanded entry but still organized migration through kinship. This does not mean Chinese women lacked independent aspirations. Rather, it shows that the state often recognized their mobility only when it could attach them to acceptable family roles. Belonging was gendered through dependency.

Second, war created both openings and dangers. World War II helped produce repeal of exclusion and new respect for Chinese American patriotism, but repeal remained numerically restrictive. The Chinese Civil War and Cold War created refugee pathways but also suspicion. Post-1965 migration grew partly in a world shaped by Cold War alliances, decolonization, and global capitalism. War did not simply push women out of China or pull them into America. It reorganized legal categories, public images, and moral claims. Chinese women could be excluded as immoral, included as allied, admitted as wives, welcomed as refugees, monitored as communists, praised as model minorities, or suspected as agents. These shifting categories reveal that belonging was contingent on geopolitical context.

Third, Chinese women transformed conditional entry into durable community life. The state might admit a woman as a wife, but she could become a worker, organizer, mother, citizen, translator, business owner, artist, or historian. A woman detained at Angel Island could later anchor a family whose descendants claimed American history. A war bride could raise children who challenged silence around migration. A garment worker could turn a workplace grievance into collective action. These transformations are central because they show that belonging is made from below as well as granted from above.

The concept of negotiation helps avoid two inadequate narratives. The first is a victimization narrative in which Chinese women are only acted upon by racist law, patriarchal family, and war. This narrative recognizes real harm but misses women's strategies, creativity, and leadership. The second is a triumph narrative in which migration culminates in successful assimilation. This narrative celebrates endurance but can minimize exclusion, silence, and ongoing racism. Negotiation offers a more accurate middle ground. It acknowledges constrained agency: women acted, but not under conditions of their choosing.

Conclusion

Chinese women's migration and diasporic lives in the United States show that belonging is not a final destination reached after crossing a border. It is a contested process shaped by law, war, gender, labor, family, memory, and power. From the Page Act's sexualized suspicion to Chinese Exclusion's family separation, from Angel Island detention to World War II's conditional inclusion, from war-bride migration to Cold War refugee politics, and from post-1965 community expansion to contemporary anti-Asian racism, Chinese women have repeatedly had to negotiate the terms under which they could be seen as legitimate members of American life.

War is central to this story because it changes the value assigned to migrants. In one moment, Chinese women were imagined as threats to morality and racial order; in another, they were wives of soldiers,

symbols of allied China, refugees from communism, or skilled contributors to American prosperity. These categories were unstable because they depended on U.S. political needs. Yet Chinese women did not simply accept the identities assigned to them. They built families, worked, organized, studied, translated, remembered, and challenged exclusion. Their lives reveal both the violence of conditional belonging and the creativity of diasporic survival.

The paper has emphasized that Chinese women's belonging operated across multiple scales. At the border, it was tested through documents and interrogations. In law, it was defined through exclusion, quotas, naturalization, marriage, and family sponsorship. In communities, it was built through labor, associations, churches, unions, schools, and mutual aid. In households, it was made through caregiving, food, language, remittance, and silence. In memory, it was reconstructed through oral history, archives, and intergenerational questioning. No single scale can explain the whole story.

This history also changes how we understand American immigration. The United States has often celebrated itself as a nation of immigrants, but Chinese women's experiences reveal a nation equally shaped by exclusion, surveillance, and selective inclusion. The ability to belong was never distributed evenly. It was mediated by race, gender, sexuality, class, marriage, military service, and geopolitical usefulness. Chinese women's histories force us to ask who had to prove belonging, what forms of proof were demanded, and what was lost in the process.

At the same time, this is not only a history of suffering. It is a history of endurance, adaptation, and world-making. Chinese women turned narrow legal openings into communities. They transformed derivative statuses into active lives. They preserved memory when archives failed. They made homes in places that did not always welcome them. Their negotiations did not always dismantle the structures that constrained them, but they created possibilities for later generations to claim fuller belonging.

In contemporary America, where Chinese-origin women may be citizens, immigrants, students, workers, mothers, artists, activists, refugees, adoptees, or transnational professionals, the history remains urgent. Geopolitical tension can still make Chinese identity suspect; racism and misogyny can still target Asian women's bodies; public memory can still overlook women's labor. To remember Chinese women's migration in times of war is therefore not merely to recover a past. It is to understand the ongoing conditions under which belonging is negotiated. Their histories teach that belonging must be more than admission, more than tolerance, and more than symbolic inclusion. It must include the right to be complex, rooted, critical, remembered, and fully human.

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