

# Unseen and Unforgiving: Massage Brothels and the Sex Trafficking of Chinese Women

Angela Li

**Abstract:** In recognition of the thousands of Asian women who are sexually trafficked from China into the United States each year, I decided to research the historical roots of sexual trafficking and the current conditions that the victims face. Historical and ongoing marginalization of communities of color into urban slums have created a foundation for illegal trafficking that is largely visible in the public eye, but the actual victims remain invisible. Current laws that are meant to help victims of sexual trafficking lack sensitivity in the intersectionality of culture, gender, and sexuality. To help victims of sexual trafficking is to put their narratives in the forefront of discussion and to give them the specialized attention that community grassroots organizations like the Garden of Hope have done.

**Keywords:** *sexual trafficking, Chinese women, massage parlor, immigration, ethnic enclaves*

## **Introduction**

In November 2017, a 38-year-old woman named Song Yang, also known as SiSi, fell from the fourth-floor balcony of a massage parlor and died on 40th Road, a busy commercial street in Flushing, New York (Barry and Singer 2019). Just as ubiquitous as the Chinese restaurants with roasted duck on display on the street are the massage parlors offering sex-for-money services. SiSi's death might have been unique, but her situation is not; she is just one of thousands of Chinese women who are trafficked into the United States to become pawns in the massive underground sex economy which has over nine thousand parlors and an annual revenue of \$2.5 billion ("Human Trafficking Report" 2018, 10). Sex work operations can be found in large massage parlors in ethnic Chinese enclaves across the United States (Chin 2015, 536). Historic anti-Chinese legislation initiated the development of illicit massage parlors in these enclaves by creating a sharp gender imbalance. Promises of economic security expanded the business by luring Chinese women away from the harsh social conditions in China, and the lack of effective regulatory laws maintained the status quo where Chinese women are continuing to be trafficked in large numbers. Consequently, Chinese women working in the illicit massage business occupy a fragile, liminal space where they face discrimination at the intersection of race and gender.

## **The Foundations: Exclusion Laws, Urban Slums, and Shifting Perspective Through Literature**

Before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricting immigration of Chinese laborers was enacted, the Page Act of 1875 had prevented Chinese women from entering the United States for "immoral purposes" (Lee 2003, 7). In effect, the Act severely limited the number of Chinese immigrant women who were able to immigrate and reinforced the stereotypical association of Chinese women with prostitution, a notion which was disseminated by American writers and journalists of the time. Concurrent with the negative views of Chinatown are the contradictory perspectives of Chinese women, from prostitute to helpless woman, which are consistently controlled by the

dominant white society through literature and popular media, depriving Chinese women control over their own narratives and relegating them to a subservient status in society. In early nineteenth-century San Francisco, representations of sexually “immoral” Chinese women took center stage in both print and leisure culture (Sueyoshi 2018, 74). Society conveniently blamed the city’s dilemmas of sex for sale on the newly arrived Chinese female immigrants. Prominent authors of the time portrayed Chinese women as deliberately manipulative and evil, “seeking out partnerships for money rather than love” (Sueyoshi 2018, 82).

Court records held that Chinese women actively embraced sex work. While this notion has some merit, it is important to recognize the underlying causes that drove many women towards that particular career: the patriarchal and discriminatory nature of society made sex work the only lucrative job available to impoverished immigrant women, specifically Chinese women. In 1890, it was reported that there were 27 Chinese men for every one Chinese woman living in the United States (Keely 2007, 131). In his observations about Chinatown during the time, journalist Jacob Riis emphasized, “All kinds of men are met, but no women... The reason is simple: there are none. A few, a very few” (Keely 2007, 131). Male Chinese laborers who were lonely in the United States took advantage of the prostitutes and popularized the business. Given the limitations that were already placed on jobs available for Chinese men, the very few women that were in the U.S. initially entered prostitution as a survival strategy due to its high demand.

Barriers to entry into the U.S. reinforced the negative association between unmarried Chinese women and prostitution. Immigration officials on Angel Island tended to detain or deny entry to individual Chinese women, so much so that all Chinese women who immigrated by themselves were suspected of being prostitutes until proven otherwise (Lee 2003, 80). As a result, Chinese women became dependent on male merchants to enter the United States, reinforcing the gendered and racialized immigration process. Moreover, from 1910 to 1924, 73% of Chinese women immigrating to the United States entered as dependent (Lee 2003, 83). This dependency on men further limited the agency of Chinese

women and made them vulnerable to both racial discrimination in the larger society and gender exploitation within the Chinese community.

Spatially, Chinese prostitutes were conditionally trapped in poor working conditions due to a lack of labor regulations and conscious efforts made by the government to marginalize Chinese immigrants. In the late nineteenth century, Chinatowns were synonymous with sin and vice. San Francisco citizens refused to allow “bawdy houses” into their neighborhoods (Sueyoshi 2018, 75). Criminal and immigration case files reveal the policing of gender and sexuality in large urban slums heavily populated by Chinese immigrants like Chinatown (Sueyoshi 2018, 9). Ironically, white men who were policing Chinese women in the United States frequented Chinatown brothels, and government officials profited off of the municipal graft that fueled sex trafficking into the Chinese communities (Sueyoshi 2018, 18). Brothels with white prostitutes were similarly established in Chinatowns, furthering the negative connotations associated with the closed off community. Chinatowns across the nation took the brunt of social ills by being funnels for all things “inappropriate” and “immoral.” Officials who knew about the underground sex economy did little to stop it (Kamiya 2018). The effects of isolation can still be felt today, decades later, as sex work continues to cluster in Chinese enclaves like Flushing, New York, where SiSi’s massage parlor was located. There, women remain susceptible to law enforcement monitoring where police would periodically raid their brothels and arrest workers (Chin 2015, 534). In effect, sex work, masked as massage parlors in the current society, continues to linger in the shadows.

In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act dismantled the exclusion acts, abolishing the quota system and reopening the United States’ doors to immigrants. Perceptions of Chinese women shifted away from the manipulative prostitute as literature began depicting these women as helpless victims in need of pity (Sueyoshi 2018, 90). This developed into larger stereotypes of Asian women as “submissive” and “exotic,” and advertised Asian women as objects to be conquered (Kuo 2017). According to scholar Robert Lee, the Chinese prostitute could be made a subject of popularity

because she was rendered “voiceless” and such publicity unveiled a “forbidden and unspeakable alliance between Chinese and white men that facilitated the extremely profitable commodification of Chinese women” (Sueyoshi 2018, 91). Chinese women fulfilled the sexual fantasies of white men and occupied a sexually active sphere that middle class white women had not yet entered, rooting the underground sex businesses as a socioeconomic niche for Chinese women.

### **Victims of Sex Trafficking: Their Stories and How They Came to America**

Contrary to misconceptions perpetuated by early literature that Chinese women enter the massage parlor businesses because of their inherent sexual depravity, narratives of women in the industry reveal the non-consensual nature of their prostitution. Many did not know what they were getting themselves into when they left China in search of economic opportunities abroad. The collectivist and patriarchal nature of Chinese culture made Chinese women susceptible to the whims of their male family members who often prioritized communal interests over individual desires. These families were willing to sell, mortgage, and possibly kill girls because they were considered inferior to boys (Kamiya 2018). Some Chinese sex workers were forced by their struggling families from traditional areas to immigrate to the United States because of their gender because Chinese culture saw women as dispensable since they couldn’t carry on the family name. For example, Ah Sou, a Cantonese-born American sex worker, was purportedly one of the first of many Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco who came to the United States in the 1850s as a slave after being sold by her foster mother (McKeown and Ryo 2008, 741).

Decades later, in today’s society, some community members still persuade Chinese women to immigrate to the United States without much detail about the nature of the work that they are expected to perform. A previous Chinese sex worker shared:

I was persuaded by my villager to work for her

in Florida. She was nice and said it is a great opportunity to make money as they have an influx of customers. I know nothing about Florida but I trust her as she is from my village in China. When I paid my own plane ticket and got to her massage parlor, she asked me to deliver sex services to clients. I rejected the request as it was not what I was told on the phone. She slammed the table and changed her attitude 180 degrees. (“Human Trafficking Report” 2018, 26)

Here, the victim’s story cites a betrayal by a fellow villager, a common occurrence in the poor rural villages of China. Instead of having a supportive transnational community network, Chinese women fall vulnerable to seemingly benign community members who mask their ill intent. SiSi, the woman who fell from the balcony in Flushing, entered the massage parlor business after several failed business ventures to support her much older husband (Barry and Singer 2018). A Lan, an alias for another sex worker in Flushing, migrated to the United States under the impression that she would be wed to a rich Taiwanese businessman, a tempting lure used by traffickers in advertisements (Tu 2016). Other stories reveal women who fled abusive marriages only to be ostracized by their family and joined the massage parlors as a last resort to provide for their children. Ultimately, many factors that pressure Chinese women to migrate are entrenched in antiquated Chinese principles which create unique barriers to addressing the transnational phenomena of the sex trafficking of Chinese women in the United States because solutions require an understanding of these patriarchal customs.

Once trapped in these illicit massage parlor businesses, Chinese women often face horrible conditions and abuse by the Chinese men heading the businesses who want to exploit them for profit. All the while, they received little help from authorities because these businesses are operated clandestinely. Ah Sou endured frequent and severe physical abuse where she was whipped and beaten almost every day by Moy Sam, the man who brought her to the United States. She said, “Every day I

was beaten by him with sticks of wood until I was black and blue” (McKeown and Ryo 2008, 740). Another woman who was interviewed for the *New York Times*’s exposition on SiSi’s story expressed the demanding toll of sex work: “My body can’t take it...My body can’t take so many men” (Barry and Singer 2018). SiSi also revealed before her death that a law enforcement officer “had held a gun to her head while forcing her to perform oral sex” (Barry and Singer 2018). SiSi’s story underscores that the same conditions that plagued Chinese communities in Chinatowns of the past persist to this day, where those whose professions entail them to protect and serve the communities are engaging in the same type of criminal activity that they are supposed to eradicate. In another *New York Times* exposition, sex workers in Florida, in what was described as a multimillion-dollar human-trafficking and prostitution operation, were “having unprotected sex with up to 1,000 men a year” (Mazzei 2019). Sylvia, an intern at the Garden of Hope organization in New York which dedicates itself to helping Chinese migrant women who are victims of domestic abuse and violence, explains that a lot of the Chinese victims of sex trafficking come into the facilities mentally unstable from experiencing both physical and emotional trauma (Sylvia Peng, Interview, February 22, 2019).

The situations that Chinese female sex workers are placed in are even more precarious due to discrimination on both fronts; in the homeland where they are being sent abroad to make money or marry and in the host country where they are violated by men who want to indulge their sexual fantasies on vulnerable women. Owners of massage parlors manipulate the negative connotations of a corrupt police force that will abuse instead of aid sex workers to build mistrust against authority, delineating any desire to reach out and ask for help (Polaris 2018). Due to their little awareness about the complex business scheme, coupled with feelings of shame, many workers in the illicit massage parlor continue to feel inclined to remain hidden and continue about their daily lives in the dark.

Vulnerabilities like debt, unstable immigration status, shame, language barriers, and lack of access to legal protection compound together to trap Chinese women in underground sex

businesses. To maintain a sense of normalcy and ties to the family back in China, many of these women have turned to social media platforms like WeChat. SiSi, whose own tiny apartment room in Flushing was mostly barren and empty, used WeChat to communicate the impression of a comfortable lifestyle to her family back in China. Despite frequent video chats, SiSi's family never really got a clear glimpse of what she was doing in America. During periods where there were evident signs of abuse on her face, SiSi refused to video chat. Social media posts on platforms like WeChat can also be manipulated to lure more women into the business by advertising to women to come to the United States. Sylvia reinforced this notion by sharing that a lot of the women first came into contact with recruiters through false advertisements of high-paying jobs offered in the United States (Sylvia Peng, Interview, February 22, 2019). False depictions of a comfortable lifestyle are also used to reinforce these false advertisements about lucrative jobs abroad, revealing the sex trafficking business as a vicious cycle that actively continues to lure and trap women.

### **Current Conditions and Legislation on Illicit Massage Parlors – What Next?**

The continued isolation of Chinese female sex workers from society, during the exclusion period until today, inhibits both important discussion from taking place and acknowledgment that there needs to be effective humanitarian laws that address the negative repercussions. Victims of sex trafficking occupy a liminal space that stems from both a lack of awareness of protectionary laws and the ineffective regulations currently in place to help victims better integrate into society. Sylvia points out: “Victims are afraid of seeking help and escaping because they fear that if they reveal their status, they’ll be deported” (Sylvia Peng, Interview, February 22, 2019).

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was finally passed by the United States in 2000 after decades of visible sex trafficking patterns (Siddharth 2017, 194). Despite opening the doors for conversation about how to help victims, the 2000 TVPA excluded cases of sex trafficking where acts are not induced by



“force, fraud, or coercion” and also excludes illegal immigrants from receiving any aid (Siddharth 2017, 194). While the former exclusion is difficult to quantify due to the subjective definitions of “force, fraud, or coercion,” the latter exclusion diminishes the purpose of the legislation because almost all victims of transnational sex trafficking are brought into the United States illegally.

Revisions to the original TVPA like the implementation of T-Visas, a special three-year-residency visa provided to victims of severe forms of human trafficking, have also received unanimous criticism from the public (Siddharth 2017, 195-196). The visas give victims an opportunity to legalize their status, but it requires compliance and heavy cooperation with the police, a step that many are not willing to take considering the long nine-month application process in which workers and their status are put in a limbo. It also draws the negative implication that a victim’s access to safety is transactional. Furthermore, victims may not want to draw attention to themselves due to fears created by their employers of a corrupt police force as well as evidence that law enforcement perpetuates these systems of violence by engaging in police raids and sometimes even being patrons of these establishments.

In SiSi’s case, she was in the process of trying to leave the business, engaging in frequent conversation with a lawyer friend before the undercover police investigation pushed her to jump off and commit suicide. Aptly put:

When done right, law enforcement actions can disrupt entire (often international) criminal networks and create pathways to freedom and healing. When done wrong, law enforcement actions can play into the hands of traffickers, arresting women inside IMBs (illicit massage parlors) for prostitution, and in the process, strengthening the traffickers’ hands by feeding into the narratives used by traffickers to coerce and control. (Polaris 2018)

How do you navigate an institution that is partly responsible for the conditions that sex workers are in? Moreover, victims of trafficking have to submit themselves to the scrutiny of the government which also has the power to deport ineligible victims.

There needs to be more effective regulation of the sex trafficking businesses; this entails an understanding of who are the victims and law enforcement policies that are centered around the victim, adjusting to their individual needs and recognizing their cultural background. Garden of Hope follows this model closely by taking into consideration the family ties, relationships, responsibilities survivors want to maintain and upkeep when developing a new plan for each woman that enters their facilities. Established in 2004, Garden of Hope “dedicates itself to serving, caring, and rebuilding the lives of people who have been exposed to domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking; specifically targeting its services towards the growing Chinese communities in the NYC region” (Garden of Hope, n.d.). Its mission is largely inspired by the work of Ms. Angie Golmon who in 1983, worked with girls in Taiwan who used to be teen prostitutes (Garden of Hope, n.d.). Recognizing the language and cultural barriers, they centered their mission on helping those who cannot speak for themselves and worked both within and outside the legal system to provide a holistic support to victims of human trafficking. In this method, they prioritize the victims as deserving of care, working with instead of against them.

## **Conclusion**

Anti-Chinese exclusion immigration laws kept the Chinese from immigrating to the United States, but it also opened the doors for the illegal trafficking of Chinese women into the United States to engage in sex work for underground sex businesses disguised as massage parlors. Today, thousands of Chinese women are still working in crowded, ethnic urban slums, working to survive while still trying to maintain connections with their families in China. Their transnational identity is one that was forced onto them due to both discrimination based on gender in their home country, China, and race in their host country, the United States. Specifically, the discrimination in the United States in the form

of exploitation to satisfy the market demands for Asian women. Despite the United States' involvement in catalyzing the business, the government has yet to make effective rules and regulations to address the problem. Much more needs to be done to help victims of sex trafficking escape their current conditions and assimilate into society. A better approach, exercised by community organizations like Garden of Hope, is acknowledging the women as victims in the situation and centering help around the needs of each individual. This includes taking into consideration their transnational identity and important cultural remnants they value. If the U.S. will adopt these approaches to helping victims of sexual trafficking, perhaps more can be done to change the current situation for these women. Until then, massage brothels and the sex trafficking of Chinese women will remain in the shadows, largely unseen and unforgiving.

## References

- Barry, Dan, and Jeffrey E. Singer. “The Case of Jane Doe Ponytail.” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/11/nyregion/sex-workers-massage-parlor.html>.
- Chin, John J., Anna J. Kim, Lois Takahashi, and Douglas J. Wiebe. “Do Sexually Oriented Massage Parlors Cluster in Specific Neighborhoods? A Spatial Analysis of Indoor Sex Work in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, California.” *Public Health Reports* 130, no. 5 (September 2015): 533–42. doi:10.1177/003335491513000516.
- “Garden of Hope.” Rebuild Life Through Hope and Love. Garden of Hope, January 16, 2020. <https://gohny.org/>.
- “Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Businesses.” Polaris, January 1, 2018. <https://polarisproject.org/resources/human-trafficking-in-illicit-massage-businesses/>.
- Kara, Siddharth. “The United States.” In *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, 179-99. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. doi:10.7312/kara13960.
- Keely, Karen A. “Sexual Slavery in San Francisco’s Chinatown: “Yellow Peril” and “White Slavery” in Frank Norris’s Early Fiction.” *Studies in American Naturalism* 2, no. 2 (2007): 129-49. [www.jstor.org/stable/23431248](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23431248).
- Kuo, Rachel. “How Rape Culture And Racism Combine To Hurt Asian Women.” *The Huffington Post*, May 30, 2017. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-rape-culture-and-racism-combine-to-hurt-asian-women\\_b\\_592a15ade4b0a7b7b469cb22](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-rape-culture-and-racism-combine-to-hurt-asian-women_b_592a15ade4b0a7b7b469cb22)
- Lee, Erika. “Exclusion Acts: Chinese Women during the Chinese Exclusion Era, 1882-1943.” In *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: An Anthology*, 77-89. NYU Press. December 1, 2003.
- Mazzei, Patricia. “‘The Monsters Are the Men’: Inside a Thriving Sex Trafficking Trade in Florida.” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/23/us/robert-kraft-trafficking-florida.html>.
- McKeown, M. Margaret, and Emily Ryo. “The Lost Sanctuary:

- Examining Sex Trafficking Through the Lens of United States v. Ah Sou.” *Cornell International Law Journal* 41, no. 3 (2008): 739-73. <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol41/iss3/4>.
- Ochiai, Emiko, and Kaoru Aoyama. *Asian Women and Intimate Work*. Brill, 2018.
- Kamiya, Gary. “Shame of the City: When Chinese Sex Slaves Were Trafficked in SF.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 6, 2018. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Shame-of-the-city-When-Chinese-sex-slaves-were-12477457.php>.
- Sueyoshi, Amy Haruko. *Discriminating Sex: White Leisure and the Making of the American “Oriental”*. University of Illinois Press, 2018.
- Tu, Yichen. “‘I Am a Sex Worker’.” *Open City*, April 27, 2016. Accessed February 27, 2019. <https://opencitymag.aaww.org/i-am-a-sex-worker/>.