

A Project entitled

**To Break the Rules: Transformation and Empowerment of Chinese American Women  
through WWII Experience**

Submitted by

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### **Declaration**

I, *LEE Man Ka* declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of *Assistant Professor Dr. Jason PETRULIS* and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signed

LEE Man Ka

18<sup>th</sup> April 2022



## **To Break the Rules: Transformation and Empowerment of Chinese American Women through WWII Experience**

### **Abstract**

The United States' entrance into World War II in 1942 marked a crucial turning point for American women, as the war provided opportunities for them to move from private space to public space. Chinese American women also experienced such transformation and empowerment. For many Chinese American women, World War II was not only a chance to reshape their gender roles and socioeconomic status, but a milestone of stepping out Chinatown and being included in American world. With the end of World War II, however, the rules of expecting women to stay at domesticity reappeared, and women's opportunities in American society were limited again. Yet, it was not a temporary empowerment for some Chinese American women, but an ongoing empowerment that they broke the rules with the war ended. This paper tried to answer the following questions: How did the wartime experience change and empower Chinese American women from pre-WWII to post-WWII, and why some Chinese American women were able to maintain their empowerment after World War II. I examine such questions with the experiences of four Chinese American women, who participated during World War II, as case studies. Unlike the majority, these Chinese American women did not experience a fall back in their lives, but an upgrade through World War II. I explore the possible reasons behind with the discussion of their identities as Chinese, intellectual and woman themselves, and illustrate how exceptional they were in the history of Chinese American women.

**Keywords:** Chinese American women, World War II, women's empowerment

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## 1. Introduction

### **A. Historical Background**

When Maggie Gee was little, driving out to the Oakland Airport to watch airplanes take off had been her accustomed Sunday activity.<sup>1</sup> Once, Gee saw her favorite airwoman, Amelia Earhart, and it became her inspiration of dreaming to be a female pilot someday.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it was not easy for minority girls, like Gee, to achieve their dreams in America. Since their arrival to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese American women confronted various tribulations from their lives and suffered frequently from the discrimination and hostility of the White Americans. Restricted by their race, gender and low socioeconomic status, these women were unable to make a breakthrough of their lives or accomplish their dreams until the 1940s. After the United States entered World War II, the government issued massive war campaigns to encourage the Americans to make contribution to the country, including women and even the racial minorities. With the call of mass media and campaigns as the “loyal sons and daughters of Uncle Sam”,<sup>3</sup> more than twelve thousand Chinese Americans, including women, volunteered to different military services, and over thousands of them joined the American workforce in defense industries.<sup>4</sup> New World War II Sino-American relations also made the White Americans tended to accept Chinese more, and offered more opportunities to them. Young Chinese American women like Maggie Gee, Elizabeth Lew, Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo

<sup>1</sup> Marissa Moss and Carl Angel, *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee* (Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Moss and Angel, *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee*.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and H. Mark Lai, “Part II: Life under Exclusion, 1904–1943,” in *Chinese American Voices: from the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2012), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Yung, Chang, and Lai, “Part II: Life under Exclusion, 1904–1943,” 106.

and Helen Pon Onyett therefore grasped these wartime opportunities and served in different defense industries and women armed forces. Through World War II, Chinese women were first integrated into the American war efforts and community, and thus, it was also viewed as a watershed for them to be first empowered, transformed and “reborn” in the society. Yet, most career American girls experienced a fall back of their lives, as they were asked to return to domesticity, and most of their wartime jobs were taken away after the war ended. Being a woman and an ethnic minority, it was hard to believe that Chinese American women could break such rules --- but these four women did. Surprisingly, they were able to stay at the workforce and continued their empowerment throughout the post-WWII years. It thus leaves us some questions: how and why they could be such “exceptional”.

### **B. Statement of the Research Questions**

To reveal the transforming lives of Chinese American women, this paper applies related experiences of Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo (1918-), Helen Pon Onyett (1918-2005), Maggie Gee (1923-2013) and Elizabeth Lew (1924-), and largely base on their oral history records. These four women were all born in the U.S., involved in the World War II efforts, and experienced the American society before, during and after the war.

This paper attempts to answer two layers of research questions regarding these four Chinese American women. First, it is about “How did the wartime experience change and empower Chinese American women from pre-WWII to post-WWII?”, to study their restriction and

limitation before the war, wartime participation and the transformation of roles of Chinese American women during World War II. Second, it refers to an ongoing empowerment of Chinese American women after World War II and to answer, “Why did some Chinese American women are able to maintain their empowerment after World War II?”. I will examine the causes behind with the lenses of “gender” and “race”, and explore through their identities as Chinese Americans, intellectuals and women.

For their Chinese identity, it refers to how wartime experiences and Chinese-U.S. relations improved the images of Chinese Americans, which benefited the post-war career path of these women. Comparison between Chinese American women, Black American women and Japanese American women will also be discussed to argue how the Chinese identity tended to be more favorable for their ongoing empowerment. Next, I will analyze how the education opportunities offered by the war shaped these women’s identity as intellectuals, and how such identity strengthened their status in their post-war lives. Finally, for women identity, it is about how their empowered gender roles helped them to breakthrough different gender stereotypes or discrimination, and to formulate their continuous empowerment after the war. Further discussion will relate to post-war feminism, and I will examine how the breakthrough of these Chinese American women in gender roles (at domesticity, community, and workplace) contributed to the construction of post-war feminism trend.

### **C. Who were these four Chinese American women?**

Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo was born in Stockton, California in 1918 to non-U.S. citizen parents.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by the Great Depression, her father closed his Chinese grocery business in the U.S. and moved his entire family back to Xinhui, China in 1931.<sup>6</sup> Seetoo thus spent her teenage years in China, and in 1938, she attended a nurse training programme at Hong Kong Queen Mary Hospital.<sup>7</sup> Following with her graduation and Japan's invasion in Hong Kong in 1942, Seetoo traveled to Guiyang to enter the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps, and continued her service until 1944, when she finally entered the Army Nurse Corps and became a U.S. Army nurse.<sup>8</sup>

Helen Pon Onyett was born in 1918 in Waterbury, Connecticut, where her parents ran a laundry store there.<sup>9</sup> Encouraged by her teachers, she had been interested in nursing when she was little, and eventually entered the Waterbury Hospital School of Nursing in 1938.<sup>10</sup> Like Seetoo, Onyett also joined the U.S. Red Cross in 1939 before she went to the Army.<sup>11</sup> With the outbreak of war in 1942, Onyett enlisted in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps and served in North Africa until 1945.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005, interview, transcript, Women Veterans Historical Project, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/WVHP/id/10300/rec/1>.

<sup>6</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Pon Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004, interview, transcript, Women's Overseas Service League Oral History Project, Michigan State University, <http://d.lib.msu.edu/wosl/163>.

<sup>10</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.



Maggie Gee was born in Berkeley, California in 1923, whose father was a Hong Kong businessman and her mother was a second-generation Chinese American.<sup>13</sup> In 1941, when the Pearl Harbor Incident happened, it was also her freshman year at the University of California, Berkeley, to study physics.<sup>14</sup> Soon, Gee dropped out from college and engaged in war efforts as engineer assistant at Mare Island Naval Shipyard.<sup>15</sup> Few years later, Gee even got accepted in the Women's Air Service Pilots (WASPs), and finally fulfilled her dream as a pilot in 1944.<sup>16</sup>

Elizabeth Lew was also a third-generation Chinese American, who was born and raised in Oakland Chinatown.<sup>17</sup> Her grandfather had arrived in the U.S. since 1877 and ran cannery businesses for decades.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in 1925, Lew's family faced huge financial difficulties as they lost most of their family business.<sup>19</sup> To support their family income, Lew and her siblings started to work at young ages, and their jobs included live-in housemaid, cannery worker and garment worker etc.<sup>20</sup> At age 18 in 1942, Lew began to work at Alameda Naval Air Station as a metalsmith to serve for the American war efforts until 1946.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003, interview, transcript, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project, University of California, Berkeley, [http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/gee\\_maggie.pdf](http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/gee_maggie.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Katie Hafner, "Overlooked No More: When Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee Soared the Skies," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020, <http://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/obituaries/hazael-ying-lee-and-maggie-gee-overlooked.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014, interview, transcript, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project, University of California, Berkeley, [https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/lew\\_elizabeth\\_2016.pdf](https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/lew_elizabeth_2016.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

#### **D. Research Significance**

First, I would like to upraise the importance of Chinese American women history under the context of World War II. In this project, it aims at analyzing the cases of four American born Chinese women to draw a picture of Chinese American women's history before, during and after World War II. Stories of these women were all notable and interesting, as they have gone through the time of a big change for Chinese Americans. Carrying a mixture of complex identities as both Chinese Americans and women, their life experiences, dedications to the war and the United States appeared to be more valuable. As Chinese Americans, it was about the struggle of determining their racial identities, which was rooted from American's long-term discrimination against Asians. It would be interesting to investigate their self-identification when living and serving for the United States. As women, it related to another struggle of how these Chinese American women overcame gender assumptions on their roles at marriage, family, and workplace from pre-war to post war era. Furthermore, when most people flip through the World War II history, such parts of Chinese Americans are usually overlooked. The more unfamiliar part would be the long-lasting empowerment of these Chinese American women in the rest of their lives. Here, investigating the relationship between wartime experience and post-war lives of Chinese American women would be the "gap" that I would like to fill in. It would be noteworthy to let people realize and honor the history of Chinese American women. As a woman, I also find their stories inspirational, that would be a role

model for us to learn from. Therefore, these are the significances of this project that I would like to present.



**Figure 1: Portrait of Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo**  
(Source: Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo Collection)



**Figure 2: Photo of Helen Pon Onyett**  
(Source: Helen Pon Onyett Collection)



**Figure 3: Portrait of Maggie Gee**  
(Source: Maggie Gee Collection)



**Figure 4: Photo of Elizabeth Lew**  
(Source: Elizabeth Lew Anderson Collection)

## 2. Literature Review

Before the 1990s, there were few scholarly discussions regarding to the history of Chinese American women under World War II context, and most of them were not illustrated from a female or an Asian American perspective.<sup>22</sup> Not until the 1990s to the 2000s, female or Asian American historians have finally conducted related research and put their focus on these women's experience, and its relations with World War II. These scholars include Xiaojian Zhao, Judy Yung, and Huping Ling.

Xiaojian Zhao's *Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II* and *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community, 1940-1965*, examined the theory of "World War II profoundly changed the lives of Chinese American women", which is an important idea that this project will cover.<sup>23</sup> She focuses on the life experiences of these women defense workers and covers World War II influences on household, gender and different community relations on these women.<sup>24</sup> From her works, I discover that there are limited discussions on the wartime experience of Chinese American military nurses. As Zhao claims that World War II transformed Chinese American women's lives, I will thus broaden this argument from the experiences of military nurses, and not only defense workers. Moreover, Zhao also emphasizes greatly on the "growing gender consciousness" of Chinese American women from the 1940s to 1960s, and states that these women experienced an expansion on

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer J. Jue, "Chinese American Women's Development of Voice and Cultural Identity: A Participatory Research Study via Feminist Oral History" (dissertation, The University of San Francisco, 1993), p.20.

<sup>23</sup> Xiaojian Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II," *California History* 75, no. 2 (1996): pp. 138-153.; Xiaojian Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community, 1940-1965* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II," pp. 144.

their gender roles at labor forces and domesticity.<sup>25</sup> Connecting to her arguments, I will apply such gender perspectives to explain the reasons of why some Chinese American women could stay at workforce in the post-war era. My further contribution would be linking to such gender consciousness to explain the construction of post-war feminism.

Judy Yung centers on the San Francisco areas to study Chinese American women. In her work of *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, she explores San Francisco Chinese American women's history starting from late nineteenth century to the war years until 1945.<sup>26</sup> She applies different U.S. sociohistorical context, for examples, the early immigration period, the Great Depression and World War II, to analyze how they frequently and comprehensively affected these women's lives.<sup>27</sup> Yung also emphasizes on the gender issues of Chinese American women, and argues that "gender perceptions, roles and relationships changed because of these women's work, family and political lives in America."<sup>28</sup> Based on her arguments, I will present a new angle of focusing the influence of education, to examine how education opportunities affected these women's empowerment in the post-war period. Another argument of Yung relates to the significance of World War II. She argues that the lack of labor forces and new Sino-American relations during the war, helped reducing gender and racial barriers of Chinese American women.<sup>29</sup> Connecting to her conversation, I

<sup>25</sup> Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 7-8.

<sup>28</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 6.

will apply a similar perspective of Yung to use the war influence as an argument, but use it to explain the continuous women empowerment after World War II.

Huping Ling, whose work focuses on examining Chinese American women's history from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Compared to other historians, she provides a more comprehensive story of Chinese American women, which covers both urban and rural areas, and numerous types of Chinese women, such as prostitutes, trader's wives, intellectuals etc.<sup>31</sup> She applies "new ethnicity approach" and sees immigrant Chinese American women were "not only as victims of discrimination and prejudice but also as survivors of hardships and obstacles."<sup>32</sup> Such interpretation would be an valuable support for my project, as I will also explain both hardships and improvements of Chinese American women from prewar to postwar years, when illustrating their process of empowerment through World War II. However, when explaining the higher involvement of Chinese American women in the labor force after the war, Ling just merely mentions two reasons, which was the family economic needs and higher proportion of Chinese American women with higher education degree.<sup>33</sup> Linking to Ling's arguments, I will further explore the causes of continuous labor participation through gender and social history perspectives, and divide into three directions (identities as Chinese, intellectuals and women), to present a more in-depth analysis on such questions.

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<sup>30</sup> Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 180.

### 3. Methodology

To illustrate Chinese American women history crossing through the pre-war period to post-war period, a qualitative research approach will be applied in this project. In this study, it focuses on the life experiences of four Chinese American women, spanning from the 1920s to the 1980s, to study the transformation and empowerment of these women through World War II. Using the four life stories of these women as case studies would be a small set of data, in order to “ask big questions in small place”.

Research materials in this paper include oral history interviews, contemporary newspapers and other current academic books and journal articles. Among these sources, oral history records would be the core of this study, and they are mainly extracted from *Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project* by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, *Women's Overseas Service League Oral History Project* by the Michigan State University and *Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project* by the University of California, Berkeley. These collections consist of detailed oral history records from Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, Helen Pon Onyett, Maggie Gee and Elizabeth Lew. Family background, pre-war early lives, wartime experiences and post-war lives of each woman are mentioned, which are useful to understand the evolving history of Chinese American women before, during and after World War II. Furthermore, these materials include their personal thoughts or recollections on some specific issues, for instance, their reflections on female roles and reactions towards the war. It would be beneficial for us to examine their identity issues.





It would be difficult for me to conduct a large scale of surveys due to regional restriction. As I am unable to travel to the United States, I choose to find some existing interviews of these women, and luckily, I could collect them for this project through the Internet. In addition, as most Chinese American women, who experienced WWII may have passed away or at a very old age now, it would be more suitable to search for the present oral history records. However, this would be one of the limitations of this study as I could not conduct interviews by myself. There would be some missing information in their interview records, and I could not ask these Chinese American women directly and apply them to this research. Moreover, as oral histories are illustrated from personal perspective, they do not cover some factual data or statistics, and thus it requires the addition of other secondary sources.

This study also includes the historiography of gender history and social history. Through utilizing oral history from Chinese American women, I will adopt a “herstory” approach to construct my analysis from women’s perspectives, and center Chinese American women as the historical subject. “Herstory” emphasizes “on female agency, on the causal role played by women in their history, and on the qualities of women’s experience that sharply distinguish it from men’s experience”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the direction of “herstory” would be the focus in this paper, when studying the transformation and empowerment of Chinese women. For social history, it refers to the examination on the relationships, structures, interactions between family, status,

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<sup>34</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “Women’s History,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 20.



various social groups, and classes etc.<sup>35</sup> As this study also includes different American communities, such as Chinese, Black, Japanese and White Americans, the perspective from social history will be utilized to explore their correlation and other related conflicts, which influenced the changing lives of these women.

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<sup>35</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): pp. 29-31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20023989>.



## 4. From Isolation to Empowerment in World War II

### **A. Prior to Empowerment --- Restrictions and Limitations before WWII**

Before the outbreak of World War II, it was not easy for most Chinese women to live in the United States. With the difference in appearance, skin color and language communication, Chinese American women were frequently being isolated, discriminated and excluded in the society. Rules and regulations towards Chinese communities were imposed at most places, that limited their activities and workplace in Chinatown and other minorities areas. Worse, their social status and opportunities were also restricted by their gender, resulted in a rather low social mobility among them. Being a Chinese American and living in the 1920s to 1930s world, Maggie Gee, Elizabeth Lew, and their family were deeply influenced by these written and unwritten rules.

Since the arrival of Chinese in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Chinese American women had been limited due to numerous immigration regulations, which were designed targeting Chinese migrants. Starting from 1882, a series of restrictive immigration laws, for instances, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the Geary Act in 1892 were signed, which prohibited many Chinese women' entry and they could not reunite with their spouse and other family members in the United States.<sup>36</sup> For Chinese American men who had successfully immigrated, such harsh immigration acts implied that they were forced to “abandon” their

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<sup>36</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 27-28.

wives and child in China.<sup>37</sup> Exceptions only would be given to government officials, businessman and their families and students etc.<sup>38</sup> As Elizabeth Lew's grandfather was an early U.S. immigrant, her family was greatly affected by such acts. Since Lew's grandmother could not come to the U.S., her grandfather must travel between the U.S. and China every three to four years, for building up his family.<sup>39</sup>

Towards American-born Chinese women, the Cable Act of 1922 was another law that hindered their interests. The act aimed at recovering the citizenship of American women, who had "married to foreigners eligible for naturalization".<sup>40</sup> However, for women who married to non-white husbands, mostly referring to the "ineligible" Asian or Pacific immigrant men, these women would lose their U.S. citizenship and other rights automatically.<sup>41</sup> For Maggie Gee's U.S. born Chinese mother, Ah Yoke Gee, she had been the sufferer of this act as she married a Chinese man.<sup>42</sup> This shows how these restrictive discriminating laws affected Chinese American families, and it thus reveals a kind of hostility from the non-Asian Americans towards Chinese females. Not only female Chinese immigrants, but native Chinese American women also need to confront such unfavorable and unfair treatments.

Restricted by their racial identity, it was only comfortable for most Chinese American women to be active in Chinatown or other Chinese community areas before WWII. In terms of

<sup>37</sup> Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II," 141-142.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 111-112.

<sup>39</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah A. Sadlier, "'That's Leaving It Pretty Much up to Jane': Gendered Citizenship, Explicit Feminism, And Implicit Racism in the 1922 Cable Act." *Vanderbilt Historical Review*, 2016, 16. <http://doi.org/10.15695/vhr.2016summer.16>.

<sup>41</sup> Sadlier, "'That's Leaving It Pretty Much up to Jane'," 16.

<sup>42</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

workplace, Elizabeth Lew mentioned that Chinese American women could only work for Chinese business or restaurants, and for her sister, she had once got a job at a Chinese restaurant as waitress, and in a National Dollar Store as wearing the Chinese clothes.<sup>43</sup> For Maggie Gee's mother, her job before the war was also limited in a Chinatown sewing factory.<sup>44</sup> As Chinese American women, it could be inferred that their workplace were limited and they were difficult to find other jobs that out of the Chinese "comfort zone".

While in schools, white students often segregated Chinese American students due to their Chinese identities. For most Chinese high school students, they were not being invited to many extracurricular activities, and other parties that hosted by non-Asian classmates.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, according to a study that conducted in the 1930s, it discovered that Chinese American boys and girls were commonly attending Chinese YMCA and YWCA club activities, but not the fraternities and sororities.<sup>46</sup> Even in the college, such situation did not improve. For some Chinese students in Stanford University, white students kicked them out from the hostels, and they had to create a residential Chinese Club House for themselves.<sup>47</sup> As Maggie Gee was also a student before WWII, she shared a similar experience of Chinese students in Berkeley that forming their own student club on Etna Street, which was a place owned by a congregational church.<sup>48</sup> Exclusion also happened in community facilities. When Gee shared her impression

<sup>43</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America*, 52.

<sup>46</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 127-128.

<sup>47</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 127-128.

<sup>48</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

on Richmond, she recalled that non-whites were not allowed to swim in the pools, and such rule was specifically against Asian Americans.<sup>49</sup>

For many Chinese American women, they had narrow social circles and hard to make friends outside Chinese or Asian American communities. Even for public facilities, they often faced prohibition and being isolated. These women failed to being included in the society as recalled by Helen Onyett, she mentioned that “Really at that time, even being second generation, it was a little bit difficult being in the minority. You weren't really a part of things”,<sup>50</sup> revealed how Chinese women were being restricted before World War II.

Woman’s identity would be another barrier that restricted Chinese American women before the war. For most Chinese American girls in the 1920s to 1930s, it was usual that they had to start working at their teenage years for helping family income.<sup>51</sup> Yet, the job opportunities that available for Chinese American women were mostly limited in non-competitive sectors, including garment workers, shrimp cleaners, waitresses in Chinese restaurant and cannery workers.<sup>52</sup> Among these positions, garment worker was the most common job for Chinese American women. Elizabeth Lew, whose family had huge expenses of raising 8 children, shared the most working experiences during her adolescent years. In her teenage period, she worked at a sewing factory in Oakland with her mother from 3PM to 10PM every day.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Helen Pon Onyett, interview by Judy Yung, January 9, 1983.

<sup>51</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 133-134.

<sup>52</sup> Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America*, 50.; Yung, Chang, and Lai, *Chinese American Voices: from the Gold Rush to the Present*, p.104.

<sup>53</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

Maggie Gee's mother also shared a similar experience of working at a sewing factory before World War II.<sup>54</sup> However, as garment industry belongs to non-competitive fields, Chinese women workers could only receive low wages, which was about \$4 to \$16 per week.<sup>55</sup> Comparing to the unionized garment workers, who got \$19 to \$30 per week in prewar period, the conditions for Chinese women workers appeared to be more disadvantaged.<sup>56</sup>

Another types of work that popular among Chinese American women would be domestic helpers. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was common for poor American women to work as domestic helpers.<sup>57</sup> While for Elizabeth Lew and her sister, both had worked as live-in housekeepers for white families during their high school years.<sup>58</sup> Although there were various types of work that available for Chinese American women before the war, they were mostly confined in non-professional fields with cheap salaries. Limited by their Chinese identity, most of them could not be employed outside Chinese community. Even they could get a job, Chinese women could only stay at traditional and domestic services. Therefore, this was how gender and race determined the roles and status of Chinese American women before WWII, and they were hard to make a breakthrough of their lives.

<sup>54</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>55</sup> Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II," pp. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II," pp. 142.

<sup>57</sup> María Cristina Santana, "From Empowerment to Domesticity: The Case of Rosie the Riveter and the WWII Campaign," *Frontiers in Sociology* 1 (2016): pp. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

## **B. In the Process of Empowerment --- Wartime Experience during WWII**

Constantly facing gender, race, and cultural barriers in their lives, the future of young Chinese American women appeared to be gloomy, until the war happened. On December 7, 1941, the naval air forces of Japan launched a sudden attack on Hawaii's Pearl Harbor. With the message of "... a date which will live in infamy" by President Roosevelt, it represented the entry of the United States into World War II, along with the Allies, including China.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, for the Chinese Americans, such moment had become their turning point.

Shortly, the U.S. government published a large quantity of war campaigns, to recruit the rest of the Americans, mainly targeting young females, for joining the wartime workforce. Unprecedented jobs opportunities had shown up for American women, and even the ethnic minorities. However, for Chinese Americans in the 1940s, their Asian identity drove them into a dilemma: the concern of whether the whites could distinguish Chinese and Japanese Americans.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it would be understandable that they would choose to get rid of everything and tried not to be involved. Nevertheless, many of them decided to display their patriotism through detaching themselves from the Japanese, for examples, sending identification cards for Chinese Americans and wearing badges of declaring themselves as Chinese.<sup>61</sup> Passion of

<sup>59</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt, New York (Transcript)*, 1941, <http://www.loc.gov/item/afcca1000483/>.

<sup>60</sup> Doris Weatherford, *American Women during World War II: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2015), 86.

<sup>61</sup> K Scott Wong, "From Pariah to Paragon: Shifting Images of Chinese Americans during World War II," in *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), pp.158.

patriotism had spread out throughout the Chinese community. As a Year 1 university student in 1941, Maggie Gee recalled how she felt after the Pearl Harbor Incident:

[I] felt that “I got to do something. What can I do? What can I do to help this country?” ... “What are these options I have?” The options were to go to work... Or to join the service... Help this country. Made you feel very patriotic.<sup>62</sup>

Such patriotism of Chinese American even made them broke all Japanese goods at home, including Gee.<sup>63</sup> As Gee recalled, such practice only spread through word-of-mouth, and she was quite sure that lots of Chinese Americans did that.<sup>64</sup> This shows that these Chinese American women were proud of their Chinese identities and willing to present it throughout the war years. There were also some wartime volunteer works that were available for Chinese American girls, such as the YWCA programs for education and recreation. During her first year in college, Gee worked for the YWCA V5 and V12 programs for recreation for servicemen.<sup>65</sup> From Gee’s experience, it reveals how patriotism drove Chinese American women entered the war efforts. Yet, only doing volunteer service was not enough for the Chinese American women, and they need earnings. It thus brought these women to the most common and the easiest path of wartime labor force --- the defense industry.

<sup>62</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.



With the speedy development of the U.S. wartime industries and the effect of “Rosie the Riveter” campaigns, it had already attracted over 2.5 million of new women workers in entering such sectors.<sup>66</sup> For the defense industries in the San Francisco Bay Areas, they also tried to recruit Chinese American workers for covering labor shortage.<sup>67</sup> For instances, Richmond Shipyard and Moore Dry Dock Company were willing to employ Chinese American workers regardless their identities or English proficiency, while the latter even prepared “a special bus service between the shipyard and Chinatown” for Chinese American workers.<sup>68</sup> Although most American-born Chinese women in the 1940s could speak fluent English, such hiring policies targeted Chinese Americans, which represented a friendly and welcome attitude of the American companies towards the Chinese Americans. It thus attracted a number of Chinese American women to apply these jobs.

Being a young lady, with great passion in serving the country, Maggie Gee also decided to get a job as a shipyard draftswoman at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in 1941.<sup>69</sup> Since working at Mare Island shipyard was a civil service job, Gee had attended civil service examination and interview during her application, and she eventually succeed.<sup>70</sup> At the shipyard, Gee’s job duties included assisting engineers and repairing ships, destroyers and cruisers.<sup>71</sup> Except Gee, there were also two young American draftswomen in the engineer department of Mare Island.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>67</sup> Zhao, “Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II,” pp. 140.

<sup>68</sup> Zhao, “Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II,” pp. 140.

<sup>69</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>70</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

Such opportunities were not only limited to young Chinese women. For Gee's mother, Ah Yoke Gee, who was at age 45 in 1941, also got a job as a burner at Kaiser Shipyard.<sup>73</sup> During the time of labor shortage, it was easier for Chinese American women to apply these "men's job", as Gee recalled, "if they thought you knew how to do something, you were hired."<sup>74</sup>

While Gee and her mother served at the shipyards, Elizabeth Lew, another young Chinese American lady also received an opportunity to work at the Alameda Naval Air Station. In 1942, after Lew graduated from high school, she registered for a training at Alameda Naval Air Station and successfully got recruited as a trainee starting from sheet metal.<sup>75</sup> Recalled by Lew, her tasks in the naval air station included cowlings (which means replacing the broken flaps), forming and hardening the wings, manufacturing and making new parts of all types of fighter planes.<sup>76</sup> In the station, there were different assembly lines of work, and one section was "take the plane apart and they work all the sections to repair as needed."<sup>77</sup> While there was another section that was direct fixing on the aircraft itself.<sup>78</sup> Although Lew was a girl, she thought these manufacturing work was all repetitious, and was not difficult for her.<sup>79</sup>

Before the war, these categories of engineering works were used to be male dominated. However, it was the war that created these industrial war job opportunities for women, specifically in these cases, for the Chinese American women like Maggie Gee, Ah Yoke Gee

<sup>73</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>74</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>75</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

and Elizabeth Lew. Compared to their pre-war jobs, it had been a great transformation that they could breakthrough their gender role at workplace and tried different “men’s work”. According to historian Zhao, in San Francisco Bay Area, she predicted that there were about 500 to 600 Chinese women engaged in defense-related industries by 1943, which accounted for 12 percent of the total number of Chinese American defense workers.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to getting a wartime industrial job, enlisting in the military would be another option for Chinese American women to contribute for the country. With the urgency of war, Chinese Americans were also welcomed to enter the U.S. military forces. For Chinese American women, the available service units would be the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and Women’s Air Service Pilots (WASPs).<sup>81</sup>

Like Maggie Gee, the passion of patriotism stimulated Helen Pon Onyett to join the Army. She recollected that she was very irritated after hearing the Pearl Harbor Incident, and it made her think that “I ought to contribute something.”<sup>82</sup> Therefore, in 1942, Onyett volunteered to the Army Nurse Corps and started her journey as a military nurse.<sup>83</sup> During World War II, Onyett had been to the overseas and stationed at a tent hospital in North Africa, with the duties of taking care of the wounded soldiers.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Zhao, “Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II,” pp. 141.

<sup>81</sup> Weatherford, *American Women during World War II: An Encyclopedia*, 86-87.

<sup>82</sup> Onyett, interview by Judy Yung, January 9, 1983.

<sup>83</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

Compared to Onyett, Elsie Seetoo shared a different experience of joining the Army Nurse Corps. As mentioned in previous section, Seetoo had moved back to China in 1931, with her father's retirement in the U.S.<sup>85</sup> When Japan invaded Hong Kong in 1942, she first joined the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps in Kunming and later traveled to Camp Ramgarh in India for medical service training duties in 1943.<sup>86</sup> Yet, as she had served for Chinese Army, Seetoo was informed that she had lost her U.S. citizenship.<sup>87</sup> To regain her citizenship, Seetoo applied for the ANC and was finally commissioned as First Lieutenant in 1944.<sup>88</sup> Seetoo then stationed at the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force as Air Service Command member, and served at 95<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital and 172<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital in China, until she discharged in 1946.<sup>89</sup>

Maggie Gee was another Chinese American woman that choose to serve for the WASPs. After working at the Mare Island shipyard for a year, Gee decided to travel to Nevada, using her savings from the shipyards work, to learn to fly.<sup>90</sup> After Gee completed flight training with enough hours, she was recruited by the WASP flying training program and enrolled into class 44-W-9.<sup>91</sup> Recalled by Gee, her training was highly physical and same as male soldiers did.<sup>92</sup> Finally, in November 1944, Gee earned her silver wings and became one of two Chinese American WASP pilots.<sup>93</sup> Later, she stationed at the Nellis Airbase Field and served as "a tow

<sup>85</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>86</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>93</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

target pilot for flexible gunnery training for male cadets”.<sup>94</sup> Such missions was to guide and help male gunners to practice shooting in large planes.<sup>95</sup> For WASP pilots, there were other duties included conducting mock gunnery missions, transferring aircrafts, instructing and testing planes and aviators, which offered precious opportunities for Gee to fly.<sup>96</sup>

Although these three Chinese American women veterans had different backgrounds and duties, undoubtedly, their military services represented a breakthrough of Chinese American women, that they were able to be included in the U.S. military for the first time. Through military services, Seetoo and Gee met new non-Chinese friends, which broadened their social circles of their surrounded lives. Not only for veterans, for defense worker like Elizabeth Lew, the war also allowed them to step out and even move out of Chinatown, to find more opportunities in the outside world. As Lew recalled:

Before that time, the Chinese could never get a job outside, you only have to work for a Chinese... if they can't hire you in Chinatown what have you got? So when the war broke out, all these places would hire, and after the war, it really helped us go out into the world.<sup>97</sup>

Lew's sharing also reveals an improvement of the community status of Chinese American women, as the war helped lowering the discriminatory barriers established between Chinese and non-Chinese.

<sup>94</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>95</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>97</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

Through World War II, these women also reinforced their self-identification on racial and national identities. In Maggie Gee's WASPs journey, she was once being asked whether she was a Japanese, enemy aviator, or a spy.<sup>98</sup> Eventually, she ended up by proudly saying that she was a "born and bred" American.<sup>99</sup> Her answer thus determined her recognition as a "true" American. Such servicewomen experience made Gee proudly embrace her American identity. Meanwhile, since Elsie Seetoo was in China for 15 years, she experienced a rather special connection with her homeland, that strengthened her self-recognition as "Chinese American":

I had had a huge opportunity to dig deeper into my roots and learn more about my Chinese heritage, its history, geography, and traditions. The war years gave me the opportunity to sample places I knew in earlier times only through a geography book.....and on touching U.S. soil I felt I was really straddling two cultures.<sup>100</sup>

Such thoughts from Seetoo revealed how she felt herself of being included in both American and Chinese cultures, through her wartime experience.

From women's perspective, Chinese American women were being empowered through World War II, regarding to their gender roles. Before the war, female identity restricted most Chinese women, that they could only work in non-professional fields, such as garment workers and domestic helpers. However, during World War II, Chinese American women were welcomed by the male-dominated industries to do "men's work" for the first time. It would be

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<sup>98</sup> Moss and Angel, *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee*, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Moss and Angel, *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee*, 23.

<sup>100</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

a process of empowerment that giving confidence on Chinese women's female identity. Such empowerment also happened in Chinese American servicewomen. For instance, Maggie Gee received positive reactions from her mother and other shipyard draftsmen towards her flying experience.<sup>101</sup> She also felt an enjoyment of shock value when she flew to some small towns in military uniform.<sup>102</sup> Through performing flying missions, Gee was able to see a different world at Southeast regions, such as Atlanta and Greenville.<sup>103</sup> It was the war that allowed Gee to broaden her horizons, that also made more people believe that women can do such "men's things" too. Gender roles of these women had been strengthened through WWII, and they were not longer viewed as the weak side.

Finally, opportunities that offered by World War II also empowered Chinese American women on their socioeconomic status. To upgrade one's social status, it is commonly related to one's financial ability. While Chinese American women were able to get a job at defense industries in the interwar period, it increased their income compared to the pre-war period. According to Elizabeth Lew, her salary in Naval Air Station was about \$10-\$15 per hour.<sup>104</sup> Compared to her previous income as live-in housekeeper, it was only \$15 per month.<sup>105</sup> In addition, World War II offered a chance for some Chinese American women to achieve their personal desire. For Gee, she would not become a pilot if she did not get those money from the

<sup>101</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>103</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>104</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.



shipyard work. She would not be able to drive a large plane if she did not enter the WASPs.

For Onyett, she also indicated how the wartime experience meant to her: “I wouldn’t have done half the things I did if I hadn’t been in the service”.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, for most Chinese American women, World War II would be their turning point of their lives, that they were transformed and empowered for the first time.



**Figure 5: Elsie Seetoo with her U.S. Army nurse colleagues in China, in 1945**  
(Source: Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo Collection)



**Figure 6: Photo of Maggie Gee with the plane**  
(Source: Maggie Gee Collection)

<sup>106</sup> Helen Pon Onyett, interview by Judy Yung, January 17, 1983.



## 5. Ongoing Empowerment after World War II

### A. Exceptional Post-war Lives of Chinese American Women

On September 1, 1945, the official surrender of Japan represented the end of World War II involvement of most Americans, including Chinese American women. Meanwhile, Elsie Seetoo just finished her required hours at Kunming Station Hospital, and could be rotated back to the United States.<sup>107</sup> Instead, Seetoo decided to stay a bit longer, so that she could visit her parents before she left China.<sup>108</sup> In October 1945, she therefore continued her service at 172<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital in Shanghai until she came back to the United States and left the Army in February 1946.<sup>109</sup> For Helen Onyett, she choose to return to Virginia and discharged immediately after she completed her service in North Africa at the end of 1945.<sup>110</sup> Unlike Seetoo and Onyett that could made their own discharge decision, Maggie Gee's military service already ended a year ago, with the deactivation of WASP programme on December 20, 1944.<sup>111</sup>

While these women veterans were considering the next step of their lives, the social assumptions towards American women were gradually falling back to the pre-war condition. Since the American servicemen returned to their homeland, they were desired to regain civilian jobs and thus driving women out of the workforce, urging them to return to domesticity.<sup>112</sup> As a young woman, Maggie Gee had expressed her thoughts on such postwar condition:

<sup>107</sup> Penny Lee, A Chinese American Veteran Story: ELSIE SEETOO, Other, *VIMEO*, 2019, <http://vimeo.com/320510118>.

<sup>108</sup> Lee, A Chinese American Veteran Story: ELSIE SEETOO, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>110</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>111</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>112</sup> Mary Weeks-Baxter, Christine Bruun and Catherine Forslund, "Twentieth-Century Feminism and New Roles for Women," in *We Are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II* (Carbondale (Ill.): South Illinois University Press, 2015), pp.184.

I think that World War II gave women a lot of opportunity to do things... But when the war was over, the opportunities were taken away because there were more men back. They were jobs that the men could fulfill... [and] a man would get a job, always.<sup>113</sup>

Although the 1945 U.S. Women's Bureau survey revealed that there were about 85% of females expressed their willingness of staying at the workforce after the war, these women were still pressurized by the American public, including the media.<sup>114</sup> For examples, headings of popular magazine were listed as "Watch Out for the Women" and "Getting Rid of the Women."<sup>115</sup> Before World War II, the American media had encouraged and shaped the positive images of career women; however, such encouragement disappeared and turned to celebrate traditional female roles as "occupation housewife" after the war.<sup>116</sup> It therefore resulted in over 4 millions of American women quitted their wartime jobs from July 1945 to May 1946.<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Lew, who worked at Alameda Naval Air Station since 1942, also resigned in 1946.<sup>118</sup>

Additionally, the American public concerned that "the definition of family was in jeopardy", as more career women appeared during World War II.<sup>119</sup> To re-establish the former family patterns, the postwar society thus expected these women to put family as the focus of their lives again. Influenced by such postwar social atmosphere, a great number of American women selected the path of marriage and about 2.2 million couples got married in 1946.<sup>120</sup> As Onyett,

<sup>113</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>114</sup> Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work the Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: Univ. of Ill. Pr, 1987), 102.

<sup>115</sup> Weeks-Baxter, Bruun, and Forslund, "Twentieth-Century Feminism and New Roles for Women," pp. 184.

<sup>116</sup> Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 8-9.

<sup>117</sup> Annelise Orleck, "Witnessing the End of an Era: The Postwar Years and the Decline of Industrial Feminism," in *Common Sense & A Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), pp. 258.

<sup>118</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Santana, "From Empowerment to Domesticity", pp. 4-5.

<sup>120</sup> James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 76-77.

Seetoo and Lew, these young Chinese American women just ended their wartime service, they also followed the trend and married right away. For Onyett, she was married in 1945, with a medical supply officer.<sup>121</sup> One year later, Seetoo and Lew also married and began to raise children, while the former married a Chinese American and the latter married a white man.<sup>122</sup> Although Maggie Gee was the only woman who never got married, few of her close friends also choose marriage and start families after WASPs disbanded.<sup>123</sup>

By 1950, over 81 percent of the American women were married.<sup>124</sup> Such postwar marriage boom also led to the baby boom, that an average of 4.24 million babies were born every year from the mid 40s to mid 60s.<sup>125</sup> Yet, once women were married, it would be more difficult for them to return to the labor market. From a 1946 postwar survey conducted by the *Fortune* magazine, most Americans showed a negative attitude towards married women whose had children to go to work.<sup>126</sup> Even they wanted to find a job, the available job categories were also limited due to such social attitudes.<sup>127</sup> Since Seetoo, Onyett and Lew were all married, it seemed to be impossible for them to re-enter the workforce after their marriage. In the time of World War II, these women were empowered, that allowing them to step out the restrictions of traditional female characters and responsibilities. Now, they were facing a crisis of going

<sup>121</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004

<sup>122</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005; Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003

<sup>124</sup> Jeremy Greenwood and Nezih Guner, "Marriage and Divorce since World War II: Analyzing the Role of Technological Progress on the Formation of Households," *NBER Macroeconomics Annual* 23, no.1 (2008): pp. 255.

<sup>125</sup> Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*, 76-77.

<sup>126</sup> Weeks-Baxter, Bruun, and Forslund, "Twentieth-Century Feminism and New Roles for Women," pp. 185.

<sup>127</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "Changing the Shape of the Work Force," in *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (Old Westbury (New York): The Feminist Press, 1981), 143-144.

backward and being limited by domesticity. Future of these Chinese American women appeared to be uncertain again, just like the prewar times.

Unexpectedly, these four Chinese American women were all able to overcome such negative social assumptions and successfully returned to workplace in postwar period. Through acquiring a job, these women not only recovered and maintained their empowerment, but also made contributions to their respective sectors. For Elsie Seetoo, although she started raising her four children and settled down in Washington, she got a job as a translator, which was introduced by her friend in 1954.<sup>128</sup> As a translator, her work was about interpreting Chinese medical article into English.<sup>129</sup> *The Barefoot Doctors Manual*, a reference book about traditional Chinese medicine, was one of her famous contributions.<sup>130</sup> Few years later, Seetoo even received a U.S. government post and worked as “a technical publications writer-editor at the Naval Medical Center and National Institutes of Health”.<sup>131</sup> After that, she continued such occupations for over 30 years, until she retired in the 1980s.<sup>132</sup>

Being a mother of two, Elizabeth Lew underwent different ups and downs in her postwar lives; however, she was also able to find jobs in the 1960s and kept working until her retirement in 1985. Between 1958 to 1959, Lew’s family had moved to Okinawa, Japan, because of her

<sup>128</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>129</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>130</sup> “Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo,” Chinese American WWII Veterans Recognition Project, 2018, <http://www.caww2.org/profiles>

<sup>131</sup> “Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo,” Chinese American WWII Veterans Recognition Project, 2018.; Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>132</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005

husband's job.<sup>133</sup> Yet, couple years later, Lew divorced and returned to the United States.<sup>134</sup>

For running her family, she had to back to work, and luckily, she got many jobs. In the early 1960s, Lew had first worked at a government department of selling extra equipment, and later worked at Fort Mason, responsible for military sea transportation.<sup>135</sup> From the mid 1960s to 1980s, she returned to Naval Air Station intermittently for three times and went to fix fighter planes again.<sup>136</sup> Before her retirement, Lew also worked for various “men’s job”, such as sheetrock, tiles and carpentry work.<sup>137</sup>

Maggie Gee was the only woman who did not start a family. Without the constraint of family life, her postwar experiences were not only about work, but also included politics. On one hand, Gee became a physicist in 1958, and worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory for over 30 years.<sup>138</sup> As a physics researcher, Gee was in the theoretical division, and covered the areas of “cancer, nuclear weapon design, fusion energy” etc.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, Gee had devoted her postwar times into politics and had served at most of the Berkeley commissions, such as public work and housing, since the late 1940s.<sup>140</sup> She also joined different political organizations, for examples, Berkeley Democratic Club and California Democratic Party Executive Board, and remained politically active in the rest of her life.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>134</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>136</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by George Michael, February 11, 1998, interview, transcript, <https://www.computer-history.info/Page1.dir/pages/Gee.html>

<sup>139</sup> Gee, interview by George Michael, February 11, 1998.; “Maggie Gee International Airport,” Welcome to the Campaign to Rename Oakland International Airport!. 2018, <http://www.maggiieee.org/>.

<sup>140</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

<sup>141</sup> “Maggie Gee International Airport,” Welcome to the Campaign to Rename Oakland International Airport!, 2018.

Helen Onyett had a rather special postwar experience, as she was the only woman who restarted her military service. After Onyett left the Army in 1945, she decided to enter the U.S. Army Reserves in the early 1950s.<sup>142</sup> In the reserves, she stationed at the General Hospital Unit, and continued her service for 30 years more, retiring in 1978. When she was not in the reserves, she taught medical and nursing students in the Indiana University School of Nursing.<sup>143</sup> With her 35-year of military contributions, Onyett became the first Chinese American woman to be promoted to Colonel in 1971.<sup>144</sup>

From their life stories, we can discover that these Chinese American women were “exceptional”, as they all kept moving forward in their postwar lives. Even most of them were married, they could still break the postwar social assumptions and returned to be a career woman. More importantly, Seetoo and Gee even entered white-collar and professional sectors, which was quite uncommon among American women veterans. Their stories were some extraordinary examples, to show that Chinese American women could continuously break away traditional female occupations, and eventually became other professionals after the war. Although Elizabeth Lew remained at blue-collar industries, her postwar jobs implied an ongoing breakthrough of female roles at workplace, that women could still do “men’s work” even World War II ended. Furthermore, these women kept integrating into the “real” American world through working at the government department or participating in the American politics.

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<sup>142</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>143</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>144</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.



For Onyett, she also made great personal achievement to become a high-rank army officer.

Through their postwar career, it strengthened their gender and social status, which brought them with an ongoing empowerment. Considering their job categories and accomplishments, their postwar experiences were thus “exceptional”.

### **B. Causes of the Continuous Empowerment**

Not only these four women continuously went to work, indeed, lots of Chinese American women also entered the workforce after World War II, and even more than white female population. According to the U.S. Census, the employment rate of Chinese American women in 1950 and 1960 was 30.8% and 44.2% respectively, while it was only about 28.1% and 33.6% for the White American women (see **Figure 7**).<sup>145</sup> Chinese American women seemed to be more special than White American women in terms of their postwar employment. Here, I will thus analyze the reasons behind from three different angles, regarding to their Chinese, intellectual, and female identities.

Percentage of Chinese American Women in the Labor Force Compared with White Women, 1930-1980		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Chinese American Women</i>	<i>White American Women</i>
1930	16.0	39.3
1940	22.3	39.5
1950	30.8	28.1
1960	44.2	33.6
1970	49.5	42.0
1980	58.3	49.4

**Figure 7: Employment rate of Chinese American Women and White Women, 1930-1980**  
(Source: *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives*)

<sup>145</sup> Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 179-180.

### *i. Identity as Chinese*

Certainly, Chinese identity was one of the causes that led to the ongoing empowerment of Chinese American women and kept working in postwar American society. In fact, such factor connected to World War II, that constructed a better Chinese American image and benefited their postwar employment.

Diplomatically, wartime Sino-American relations improved the images of Chinese Americans with the effort of Soong Mei-ling, the First Lady of wartime Nationalist China. In 1943, Soong started her diplomatic tour in the United States to gain further American support towards the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>146</sup> She became the guest of the Roosevelts, while continued delivering speeches towards the American public in the house of Congress and several cities.<sup>147</sup> With her American-educated background, fluent English and excellent oratory skills, the white audience welcomed and embraced Soong, also with her representing symbol as “a modern and Americanized China.”<sup>148</sup> Her contributions therefore altered how White Americans saw Chinese Americans, and they tended to offer more opportunities to Chinese Americans during World War II. One example was the liberal hiring policy in the Naval Air Station, to include minorities in all positions, recalled by Elizabeth Lew.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 163.

<sup>147</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 163-164.

<sup>148</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 164.

<sup>149</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.



Through participating in war effort, the American public impression towards Chinese American women also turned positive, that the government propaganda even praised them as the “patriotic Chinese daughters of Uncle Sam.”<sup>150</sup> A shipyard in Sausalito also described their Chinese American workers as “practical, teachable, excellent and reliable workmen.”<sup>151</sup> In such bettering conditions, the three Chinese American servicewomen faced less discrimination during World War II. When Elsie Seetoo recalled her wartime memories, she concluded that “I don’t think we were anyone’s enemy.”<sup>152</sup> Both Maggie Gee and Helen Onyett also experienced no racial discrimination and being kindly treated, while the latter even emphasized that “I was treated as a nurse nurse, not an Oriental somebody.”<sup>153</sup>

Yet, for other minority American women, they were not as lucky as the Chinese. In defense industries, African American women confronted serious racism, that they could not join parent unions and seldom being promoted.<sup>154</sup> From 1942 to 1945, black women had thus submitted over 50% of all lawsuits to the Fair Employment Practice Committee, regarding their unequal treatment at workplace.<sup>155</sup> In the U.S. Army, blacks also received fewer chances to enter different armed forces. Mentioned by Gee, the WASPs did not accept black women, even though they were qualified.<sup>156</sup> WAC and ANC were the few military forces that admitted black women into the service. However, black servicewomen still suffered discrimination as they

<sup>150</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 262.

<sup>151</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 264.

<sup>152</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>153</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.; Onyett, interview by Judy Yung, January 9, 1983.

<sup>154</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 266.

<sup>155</sup> Karen Mudd, “Contradictions in Women’s Culture in the Days of Rosie the Riveter,” *Off Our Backs* 15, no.5 (1985): p.16.

<sup>156</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

had to stay at segregated quarters and were rarely commissioned to officer rank.<sup>157</sup> For Japanese Americans, they also faced severe racism that they were imprisoned in concentration camps with loss of freedom and properties during the war years.<sup>158</sup>

Consequently, this was how World War II transformed Chinese American images and brought them better wartime experience compared to other minorities. Such improved impression was beneficial to Chinese American women on their postwar career. When the four Chinese American women recalled their postwar employment, none of them was rejected regarding their Chinese identity. Maggie Gee even kept breaking racial barriers, and successfully entered the American politics. With the changing Chinese American images through the war, these women further integrated into the “real American world” and experienced a shift of status “from social pariahs to paragons.”<sup>159</sup> Empowerment of these Chinese American women was thus enhanced.

## ***ii. Identity as Intellectuals***

Next, intellectual identity also contributed to a better postwar employment of these Chinese American women and thus resumed their empowerment after the war. Indeed, the formation of such identity also related to the consequence of World War II. To accommodate the returning World War II veterans, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (“G.I. Bill”) was signed,

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<sup>157</sup> Weak-Baxter, Bruun, and Forslund, “Women Wanted,” pp. 124.

<sup>158</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, 251.

<sup>159</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 153.

offering low-interest loans, unemployment aids and education benefits to them.<sup>160</sup> Since Elsie Seetoo and Helen Onyett were veterans, they therefore seized this G.I. educational opportunity and went to college after they discharged. For Seetoo, she enrolled in the Women's College of the University of North Carolina in 1946 through the G.I. Bill and finally got a bachelor's degree in nursing.<sup>161</sup> For Onyett, she also made use of the G.I. benefits and received her Bachelor of Science in medical technology in the late 1940s.<sup>162</sup>

Unfortunately, not every American veteran was able to accept the G.I. benefits. On one hand, as most black-friendly colleges and universities were lack of funding, black veterans in the South were hard to enjoy the G.I. educational benefits and attend college.<sup>163</sup> For Chinese American veterans like Seetoo and Onyett, they were already lucky enough to receive the G.I. Bill. On the other hand, military nurses and WASPs were treated differently regarding their retirement welfare. After WASPs disbanded, all female pilots did not receive veteran status due to the strong objections from male pilots.<sup>164</sup> Without a veteran status, they were ineligible to use the G.I. benefits. Luckily, since Maggie Gee had already enrolled in University of California, Berkeley before the war, she was able to complete her physics degree in 1944.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>160</sup> Conor Lennon, "G.I. Jane Goes to College? Female Educational Attainment, Earnings, and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944," *The Journal of Economic History* 81, no.4 (2021): pp. 1223-1253, <http://doi.org/10.1017/s0022050721000425>.

<sup>161</sup> Seetoo, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, September 9, 2005.

<sup>162</sup> Onyett, interview by Ruth F. Stewart, April 8, 2004.

<sup>163</sup> Sarah Turner and John Bound, "Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide: The Effects of the G.I. Bill and World War II on the Educational Outcomes of Black Americans," *The Journal of Economic History* 63, no.1 (2003): pp.145.

<sup>164</sup> Kathleen Cornelsen, "Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II: Exploring Military Aviation, Encountering Discrimination, and Exchanging Traditional Roles in Service to America," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no.4 (2005): pp.115.

<sup>165</sup> Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003.

For these Chinese American women, it was the World War II that constructed their intellectual identity and enriched themselves through the G.I. educational opportunities. With such higher education background, these women could therefore be employed more easily, and even got into professional fields after World War II. Like Seetoo and Gee, who later became technical writer and physicist respectively, were the successful examples of maintaining their empowerment in postwar America along with their intellectual identity.

### ***iii. Identity as Women***

Lastly, female identity also facilitated the continuous empowerment of Chinese American women in the postwar America. This identity was also shaped by their World War II experience that led to a growing gender consciousness on these women. Such consciousness became their strength of breaking through different gender stereotypes at workplace, community, and domesticity throughout the postwar times.

In terms of workplace, gender discrimination was still existed in the 1950s to 1980s, and women kept confronting various obstacles at work. Elizabeth Lew, who returned to work in the 1960s, was one of the sufferers. She had once received complaints by some men just because she got hired by the Naval Air Station.<sup>166</sup> “That guy couldn’t even read a blueprint. He couldn’t see a female get a job,” said Lew.<sup>167</sup> Yet, such trouble did not deter Lew from applying “men’s job”. Not only her wartime working experience strengthened her mechanical

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<sup>166</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>167</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

skills, but her gender role was also empowered, that she was confident to explore more types of jobs other than traditional female occupations, such as tile and carpentry works. When Lew was asked why she could find these traditional male jobs in her postwar lives, she just simply answered “I’d just apply,”<sup>168</sup> showing her empowered female identity made her fearless, even when she faced sexism in her postwar lives.

Wartime experience also empowered and gave more confidence to women in participating politics. After Maggie Gee finished her WASPs journey, she became a more extroverted and confident woman. She said, “I returned to Berkeley, California, with a lot of more self-confidence. My horizon had broadened by the friendships I made with active women --- doers from all parts of the country.”<sup>169</sup> This confidence thus inspired Gee to become a political activist after World War II. In her political life, Gee dedicated to the community issues in Berkeley, also extended her influence through promoting women’s right.<sup>170</sup>

With the reference to the beginning of this chapter, at domesticity, women had certainly experienced external pressures of fulfilling their conventional housewife roles after World War II. Like Seetoo and Lew, both had once framed by their family life and raised children. However, it was their wartime experience empowered, encouraged, and changed their views towards women identities, that they no longer thought family and marriage as their only life

<sup>168</sup> Lew, interview by David Dunham, 2014.

<sup>169</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by Judy Yung, February 25, 1990.

<sup>170</sup> Erin Baldassari, “Rename Oakland Airport?” Petition Seeks to Recognize Trailblazing Berkeley Pilot,” *East Bay Times*, October 22, 2018, <http://www.eastbaytimes.com/2018/10/22/rename-oakland-airport-petition-seeks-to-recognize-trailblazing-berkeley-pilot/>.

target. With their empowered female identities, it helped them breakthrough such traditional female roles at home. For Seetoo, Onyett and Lew, they had all successfully re-entered the labor market after their marriage. While for Gee, she even completely broke the “traditional routine” of a woman, and never got married, according to her friend Susan Kennedy.<sup>171</sup> Therefore, these women could thus preserve their empowerment throughout the postwar period.

Interestingly, such growing gender awareness of these Chinese American women also represented a postwar feminism phenomenon. Unlike some American women who choose to settle down after the war, these women’s breakthrough revealed a kind of dissatisfaction and refusal towards their traditional female positions starting from the 1950s. Yet, it was not until the rise of Second Wave of Feminism in 1960s further promoted such discontentment in American mainstream with Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>172</sup> In her book, she supported women’s uniqueness and encouraged women to resist conventional homemaker images.<sup>173</sup> Prior to Freidan’s message, these Chinese American women had already performed such discontent since the 1950s, showing their foresight and representative in constructing postwar feminism. Although their efforts did not completely stimulate a new wave of feminism at that time, they were the leading figures of serving a foundation for the later feminism trend in the 1960s.

<sup>171</sup> Baldassari, “Rename Oakland Airport?” Petition Seeks to Recognize Trailblazing Berkeley Pilot,” 2018.

<sup>172</sup> Weeks-Baxter, Bruun, and Forslund, “Twentieth-Century Feminism and New Roles for Women,” pp. 187-190.

<sup>173</sup> Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life*, 8-9.

## 6. Conclusion

Life stories from the four women, Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, Helen Pon Onyett, Maggie Gee and Elizabeth Lew displayed the transforming lives of Chinese American women, starting from the pre-WWII isolation to post-WWII long-lasting empowerment. Throughout the times in 1920s to 1980s, these women kept breaking numerous written and unwritten rules regarding to their racial and gender identities. Before World War II, Chinese American women confronted legal discriminations, exclusions from the white and sexism at workplace, that they were unable to move forward in the U.S. society. Yet, World War II offered unprecedented job opportunities and empowerment to Chinese American women, that they could shatter racial and gender barriers to enter the native American and men's world. After World War II, their empowerment did not stop, but continued with their perseverance of seizing each educational and employment opportunity. Such ongoing empowerment connected to the wartime experience of each woman, that constructed their improved Chinese image, higher educational background, and gender consciousness, leading to their exceptional postwar lives.

Although these four women never met, their life stories were all representative among that generation of Chinese American women, who kept moving forward and breaking different social assumptions in the twentieth-century United States. With their dedication to World War II and the country, servicewomen Gee and Seetoo had been rewarded with the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the greatest civilian honors in the United States in 2010 and 2020

respectively.<sup>174</sup> Being a Chinese and a woman, their life achievements were truly inspirational and worth learning. Even though some of them had passed away, their stories live and will be remembered forever.

**Word Count: 9427**

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<sup>174</sup> Associated Press. "US Honours Chinese-Americans Who Served in WWII." *South China Morning Post*, December 10, 2020. <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3113294/us-honours-chinese-americans-who-served-wwii>.; Jonathan Morales, "Bay Area Aviation Pioneers Finally Get Their Due," *Easy Bay Times*, March 18, 2010, <http://www.easybaytimes.com/2010/03/18/bay-area-aviation-pioneers-finally-get-their-due/>.





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