

## Letter by a Chinese Girl (1876)

*Sing Kum*

*Among the small number of Chinese women who immigrated to America in the nineteenth century, some came as the wives of merchants, but the majority were young women who had been kidnapped, tricked, or purchased from poor peasant families in southern China to be prostitutes. According to the federal census, some 70 percent of the Chinese women in San Francisco were prostitutes in 1870. As indentured slave girls, they were usually confined in brothels and, according to the terms of their contracts, worked without wages in order to repay debts incurred in their sale and passage to America. They endured brutal, degrading conditions, and many died from disease and mistreatment after just a few years.*

*The lucky ones escaped bondage by buying out their contracts, running away, or seeking protection from the police or mission homes in Chinatown. In the following account, Sing Kum writes about how she ran away from an abusive mistress to seek refuge at the Methodist Mission Home founded by Rev. Otis Gibson in 1870. According to Gibson's book, *The Chinese in America*, when he opened the mission door at midnight that fateful Sunday, "a Chinese girl in dirty, ragged clothes rushed in hurriedly and immediately ran upstairs. When asked what she wanted, she replied in Chinese, 'I want to go to the school for Chinese girls—my mother whips me all the time, and I have run away from her,—let me go to the school before they catch me.'" Sing Kum was allowed to stay at the Mission Home, where she learned to read and write in English and Chinese, and eventually worked as an assistant teacher.*

Miss B,—

You ask me to write about my life. I can not write very well, but will do the best I can.

I was born in Sin Lam, China, seventeen years ago. My father was a weaver and my mother had small feet. I had a sister and brother younger than myself. My father was an industrious man, but we were very poor. My feet were

never bound; I am thankful they were not. My father sold me when I was about seven years old; my mother cried. I was afraid, and ran under the bed to hide. My father came to see me once and brought me some fruit; but my mistress told me to say that he was not my father. I did so, but afterward I felt very sorry. He seemed very sad, and when he went away he gave me a few cash, and wished me prosperity. That was the last time I saw him. I was sold four times. I came to California about five years ago. My last mistress was very cruel to me; she used to whip me, pull my hair, and pinch the inside of my cheeks. A friend of mine told me of this place, and at night I ran away. My friend pointed out the house. I was very much afraid while I was coming up the street; the dogs barked, and I was afraid my mistress was coming after me. I rang the bell twice, and when the door was opened I ran in quickly. I thank God that he led me to this place. I have now been here nearly three years. I am very happy, for I do not have those troubles which I had before. I have kind friends, but most of all, I am thankful that Jesus died to save me. God has given me the Bible to read, which teaches me that "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life." I was very bad before I came here. I used to gamble, lie, and steal. Now I love Jesus, and by God's help I will try to be obedient, and do those things which will please him.

Yours truly,

Sing Kum

San Francisco, January 4, 1876

SOURCE: Rev. O. Gibson, *The Chinese in America* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1877), pp. 220-21.

#### OTHER REFERENCES

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