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## An "Often Formidable Sting": Chinese American Female Aviators in the WASP during World War II

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**An “Often Formidable Sting”: Chinese American Female Aviators in the WASP during  
World War II**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Claudia Vinci

8 May 2020

*Abstract*

Pearl Harbor was one of the most shocking, devastating events in American military history. However, upon the entry of the United States into World War II, opportunities arose for Chinese American men and women. For Chinese American women, Pearl Harbor marked a pivotal transition as they were finally recruited by the United States military. More generally, American women expanded their noncombat roles and Asian Americans served in a number of capacities. I explore the related experiences of Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee, the only two Chinese American Women Airforce Service Pilots. Lee and Gee dealt with and observed the effects of racist legal discrimination, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the asymmetrical treatment of Chinese versus Japanese Americans. I analyze these themes within the scope of the evolving Sino-American relations before and during the war. While hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps because of their race and ethnicity, Chinese Americans purposefully brought attention to their own identities, which included such practices as wearing “I am Chinese” buttons. Additionally, Chinese American women were able to display their loyalty to the United States as they were given the chance to serve in the military. In *An “Often Formidable Sting”*, I include Lee and Gee as case studies of these experiences. I conducted archival research in order to utilize a variety of primary sources, such as oral histories and newspapers, to center the experiences of Chinese American WASPs in World War II history.

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I wanted to express my gratitude for those who have directly and indirectly supported me throughout the process of writing my honors thesis. Most importantly, my thesis advisor Dr. Zachary Scarlett has been consistently prepared for my many questions and has helped me navigate my historical interests and my research skills in order to successfully finish this project.

My second reader Dr. Elise Edwards graciously agreed to be my second reader and I am so grateful for her involvement in this project. Both Dr. Scarlett and Dr. Edwards were genuinely interested in my project and its focus on Chinese American history, so it has been quite a gift to work with such knowledgeable and dedicated people.

To my family and friends, you know who you are, and thank you for dealing with me during this process. Your support means the world to me. This project had its beginnings early last spring and it has been quite a journey to spend a year researching these women. Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee are both fascinating and inspiring women that deserve to have their stories told in historical research. I only hope to continue researching amazing women in my future career in history.

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## *Introduction*

Throughout 1943 and 1944, in the midst of the Second World War, Madge Minton, a young servicewoman in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), relayed in a letter to her family a story about one of her fellow pilots, Hazel Ying Lee.<sup>1</sup> Minton wrote, “our little Chinese chum got thoroughly lost and landed out of gas on a ranch in Texas. Our chief worry about [Lee] was not that she’d crack up and kill herself but that some ignorant Texas farmer or rancher would shoot her for a Japanese spy. We were relieved to learn that she landed among educated people.”<sup>2</sup> A testimony from another fellow WASP reported differently that when Lee landed, the farmer came out of his home with a pitchfork and yelled “I’m going to kill you, you dirty little Jap.”<sup>3</sup> The farmer began chasing Lee around his farm until she finally convinced him that she was truly Chinese, an American citizen, and flying for the United States Air Force.<sup>4</sup>

This anecdote may seem somewhat absurd yet Maggie Gee, the only other Chinese American WASP, dealt with a similar incident during her time in service: after a shaky landing, she came out of her plane to see a pilot staring at her. Gee knew immediately that he was not surprised just because she was a woman, but he “must have been startled to see an Asian face. I could tell that he was mistaking me for an enemy pilot, or a Japanese kamikaze, or a spy. I had heard it all before, but this time I didn’t get angry.”<sup>5</sup> After the pilot asked if she was American, Gee remarked that she was “born and bred” American.<sup>6</sup> Gee commented that she “felt like an exhibit at the country fair, a two-headed cow, the amazing Chinese American WASP. But only

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<sup>1</sup> Minton to E.V. and Irene Shortridge Rutherford, June 6, 1943, The Woman’s Collection, Texas Woman’s University, <https://twudigital.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p214coll2/id/5154/rec/12>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Inez W. Woods, *A Brief Flight: Hazel Ying Lee and the Women Who Flew Pursuit*, Documentary, directed by Alan H. Rosenberg (2002; Los Angeles: LAWAS Productions), DVD.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Marissa Moss and Carl Angel, *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee* (Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23.

for a minute. I got back in my plane and once more was a pilot, plain and simple.”<sup>7</sup> Gee recognized that she was a true American yet she felt as if she was only seen as the unusual Chinese pilot.

Both of these anecdotes relay a common struggle in defining one’s racial and ethnic identity that stems from a long-standing discrimination of Asians in the United States. Surrounding World War II, The United States’ general mistrust of Japanese Americans meant that Chinese Americans were included as a part of this broader bias. This racist ideology resulted in Chinese Americans explaining their own identities in order to avoid being seen as the Japanese enemy. Furthermore, they display the unique experiences that put Lee and Gee in a different position to other pilots in the Women Airforce Service Pilots due to their race and ethnicity. White servicemen and women, or even white immigrants in the United States, would not have to clarify their racial identities to prove their loyalty to their country in the same way that Lee and Gee’s immigrant families did at this time. Most other WASPs would not have similar experiences, especially because out of the 1,074 pilots in this organization, there were no black women and only “two Chinese-Americans, one Native-American, and a few Jewish women.”<sup>8</sup> WASP founder Jacqueline Cochran did not integrate black women into the organization due to anticipated racism and sexism: powerful men in the “military bureaucracy” and Congress would both not “overcome their bias against blacks as well as against women.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, while a very limited amount of other minority women were allowed into WASP,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah G. Douglas, Amy E. Foster, Alan D. Meyer, and Lucy B. Young, *American Women and Flight since 1940* (Lexington: University of Press, 2004), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 92.



Cochran ultimately “believed that to interject the race question into the project might well have spelled its demise.”<sup>10</sup> In the end, only two Chinese American women served in the organization.

While focusing on Chinese Americans in World War II, I explore how Hazel Ying Lee (1912-1944) and Maggie Gee (1923-2013) experienced these distinct moments of racism and social inequality in the United States. Lee and Gee dealt with and observed the effects of racist legal discrimination, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the asymmetrical treatment of Chinese versus Japanese American people. I analyze these themes within the scope of the evolving Sino-American relations before and during the war. While hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps because of their race and ethnicity, Chinese Americans purposefully brought attention to their own identities, which included such practices as wearing “I am Chinese” buttons. Additionally, Chinese American women were able to display their patriotism for their own country as they were given the chance to serve in its military.

Servicewomen Lee and Gee were noteworthy cases within distinct areas of the American social fabric, especially because these women served during a time of great change for Chinese Americans. Clearly, not only were Chinese Americans dealing with transitions regarding their place in American society, but Chinese American women specifically were in an especially unique situation. Relatedly, Lee and Gee’s experiences in WASP were shaped simultaneously by their American patriotism and their Chinese identity. This position was enhanced by their service in the military and their minority status in an often contradictory racist American society. Due to the overall discrimination of Asian Americans and the ever-changing state of Sino-American

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 92.

relations, among other factors, Chinese Americans had a complex position in the social hierarchy.

This project approaches Chinese American history by employing case studies to create a timeline of how Lee and Gee experienced American society before, during, and after World War II. Before the war, these women and other Chinese Americans dealt with legal discrimination and other ramifications of racist policies on Chinese immigration. During the war, those who served in the military had different views of their service, which could involve utilizing their position as a way to prove their loyalty to the United States. Chinese Americans also had different, asymmetrical experiences to Japanese Americans during the war. Lastly, Lee and Gee's plans for their lives after the war help to explain their patriotism and other passions.

Besides various secondary sources, such as scholarly articles and a documentary, I draw from primary sources on these women and my topic, including newspapers, oral histories, and other sources. The main historical archive I utilized for this project was the Women Airforce Service Pilots digital archive in the Woman's Collection of Texas Woman's University (TWU).<sup>11</sup> The specificity of this archive allowed me to incorporate information on Lee and Gee that is often not compiled anywhere else. Most significantly, this WASP archive included sources directly from this organization itself, such as class listings and accident reports. My research centers Chinese American servicewomen in World War II history in a way that has been mostly neglected in previous military research. There are several examples of military histories and related sources that did not account for differences in race and ethnicity, which is significant because these practices essentially whitewash the American military experience.

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<sup>11</sup> "Women Airforce Service Pilots Digital Archive", Woman's Collection, Texas Woman's University, <https://twudigital.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p214coll2>. I communicated via email with an archivist at TWU and the Woman's Collection in order to secure many of these primary resources.

*Who were Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee?*

Hazel Ying Lee was born in Portland, Oregon in 1912 to a merchant father and a mother who raised 8 children.<sup>12</sup> Both of her parents were born in China and later met in the United States. While she grew up in Portland's Chinatown, she attended Chinese language school and took great pride in learning the language and customs of Chinese culture.<sup>13</sup> Lee not only lived in Canton, China from 1933 to 1938, but also attempted to join the Chinese Air Force before she was a WASP.<sup>14</sup> Lee was denied due to bias against "erratic" women aviators.<sup>15</sup> Although she was not able to serve in the Chinese Air Force, a newspaper published when she died in 1944 stated that Lee "went to Shanghai in 1933 and did commercial flying for private airlines before the war began."<sup>16</sup> The newspaper continues that "she was in Canton on an Easter Sunday, 1938 when the city was bombed and more than 200 civilians were killed by Jap bombs and bullets."<sup>17</sup> Another newspaper clipping from 1939 includes Lee's reaction to this Japanese bombing: the paper quotes that Lee "learned first hand the horrors of the war in the Orient" and she remarks that "We've seen scrap metal burst from bombs and kill or wound everyone within range [...] America must stop these shipments to Japan in the interest of humanity."<sup>18</sup>

In 1943, Lee joined the WASP as a part of the US military, which allowed her to continue with her love of flying. She began her training in early 1943 and flew for WASP for over a year until her untimely death. In November of 1944, Lee and a group of pilots were transporting planes from a factory in New York to Montana yet during the landing process, there

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<sup>12</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Alan H. Rosenberg.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *The Oregonian*, "Girl Pilot in Crash Dies." From TWU.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *The Capital Journal*, "Picket Girls Know War First Hand." Mar. 7, 1939. From Newspapers.com.

was an issue between her and another male pilot's planes.<sup>19</sup> Both pilots were ordered to change their course slightly but only Lee responded, meaning Lee pulled up while the other plane stayed in its same position.<sup>20</sup> The planes collided and immediately exploded; consequently, according to the accident report regarding Lee's death, "an officer who witnessed the accident extricated the WASP pilot from the burning wreckage."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, two days later, Lee died from burns from the accident.<sup>22</sup>

Maggie Gee was born in Berkeley, California as a third-generation Chinese American as her father was a Chinese immigrant and her mother was second-generation. Gee's mother was greatly impacted by the discriminations of the Chinese Exclusion Act that was only repealed in 1943.<sup>23</sup> As I will discuss in later sections, her mother Ah Yoke Gee lost her citizenship after marrying a Chinese immigrant and dealt with other related obstacles at this time. As cited in a number of sources, Gee developed her love of flying at a very young age as her family would visit the airport every week to watch the planes take off. She even claimed that she once saw Amelia Earhart, which led her to the conclusion that she "didn't know of any other women pilots back then [...] well, I would be a pilot someday."<sup>24</sup> Gee also dealt with a different form of discrimination as she searched for housing: both her and her sister were not allowed to live in or even search for housing in certain areas due to anti-Chinese sentiment.

As she was accepted into the fourth WASP class, 43-W-4, Hazel Ying Lee was the first Chinese American woman to fly for the United States military. Maggie Gee was in the later 44-

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<sup>19</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Alan H. Rosenberg.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Army Air Forces: Report of Major Accident*. From TWU.

<sup>22</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Alan H. Rosenberg.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Platt, "Go into the Yard as a Worker, Not as a Woman," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2015), 139.

<sup>24</sup> Moss and Angel, *Sky High*, 3.

W-9 class, meaning that both of these women were the only Chinese American among their fellow trainees. Both of these women cited a passion for flying at a young age and were able to perform their patriotism by flying for the United States military, especially as China and the United States were allies against their common enemy of Japan.<sup>25</sup> Lee and Gee were already overcoming traditional beliefs of women's roles during war, but their Chinese American identities created an even more unique situation. Another important detail to note is that there are differences in the ways Lee and Gee have been historicized, especially as Lee died during the war and Gee only died in 2013. For example, in Rosenberg's documentary mostly about Lee, her fellow WASPs, close friend, and sister tell her story.<sup>26</sup> Gee then was able to participate in oral histories and book projects in order to convey her experiences.

### *Historical Context*

#### *Women Airforce Service Pilots*

In 2006, the poet Karen An-hwei Lee honored the determination of Hazel Ying Lee and the other WASPs by writing about how men feared these pilots and their "often formidable sting."<sup>27</sup> The WASP do not feature extensively in historical research yet they are a unique representation of women in military history. The Women Airforce Service Pilots ran from 1943 to 1944 and consisted of civilian women that flew military planes across the country in order to deliver aircraft to and from military bases or factories.<sup>28</sup> As "the nation's first women pilots of military planes, WASPs flew every model in the Army Air Forces' (AAF) Arsenal," which

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<sup>25</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Rosenberg; Maggie Gee, interview by Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine, 2003, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California.

<sup>26</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Rosenberg.

<sup>27</sup> Karen An-hwei Lee, "WASP," *Prairie Schooner* 80 no. 4 (2006): 55.

<sup>28</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): 110.

included bombers and fighter planes.<sup>29</sup> WASP operated under the Army Air Forces (AAF) and the AAF Command General Arnold relayed three general objectives in this organization's formation: "to see if women could serve as military pilots, to release male pilots for combat, and to decrease the Air Force's total demands for the cream of the manpower pool."<sup>30</sup> The need to recruit women in order to release men into other forms of military service was of utmost importance. WASPs also tested new military planes, which was often dangerous: 38 servicewomen, including Lee, died in non-combat service during the war.<sup>31</sup>

The WASP did not receive military status until 1977 and also did not attain the various corresponding benefits, such as military death benefits, until 1979.<sup>32</sup> The WASPs themselves fought for this recognition for thirty years. This passion is an example of writing and adapting history after it is seemingly finished. It is also fascinating and even discouraging information that these aviators were not give these different military benefits until long after their service, yet this is only one of the examples of discrimination these women faced. As far as the reason for such a limited number of minority servicewomen, there are similar themes throughout various actors' analyses, especially related to the lack of African American servicewomen: "the armed forces were still segregated and the WASP leadership was not ready to cross the race barrier."<sup>33</sup> More broadly, the AAF only allowed black male pilots in its squadrons after extensive pressure was put on the military yet even then these men were only allowed in racially segregated groups.<sup>34</sup> For women in the military, this step forward into wider acceptance in the military was not

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<sup>29</sup> Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Rosenberg.

<sup>32</sup> Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 156.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelsen, "Women Airforce Service Pilots," 111.

<sup>34</sup> Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 16.

instituted during the time that the WASPs were in service. The overwhelming presence of racism in the military meant that minority women were given less of a chance to serve, especially because of the intersection of gender and race discrimination.

### *Sino-American relations*

Because China was an important ally to the United States in World War II, there was a shift in the perception of Chinese Americans and an end to certain discriminatory practices. Historian Wong clearly establishes the unique status of China in relation to the United States: as China and the United States shared a common enemy of Japan, Americans' view of Chinese Americans improved because of these political dynamics.<sup>35</sup> For Chinese American women, the U.S. entrance into World War II specifically marked a pivotal transition as they were finally recruited by the United States military.<sup>36</sup>

East-Asian countries and their interactions with Western and other countries became of great importance in global affairs, especially leading up to World War II. Japan and the United States became more antagonistic as Japan sided with Germany and their dominance on the world stage more affected the status of Sino-American relations. Iriye establishes that the Pearl Harbor attack was “a symbol of Asia’s revolt against the West” for Imperial Japan.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, before the United States entered World War II, the war in the Pacific and the later Pearl Harbor attack both served as lessons for the United States: they were not immune from these “severe” attacks and they should have “intervened more actively when predatory nations had begun

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<sup>35</sup> Scott K. Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon: Shifting Images of Chinese-Americans during World War II,” in *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, ed. Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 153.

<sup>36</sup> Xiaojian Zhao, “Chinese American Women Defense Workers in World War II,” *California History* 75, no. 2 (1996) 153.

<sup>37</sup> Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 226.

showing their designs.”<sup>38</sup> Essentially, much of what the United States concluded related to reducing the impact of Japanese militarism as it was made more obvious that war in fact “began in 1931 when Japan invaded China.”<sup>39</sup>

The United States and China have not always sided with one another in times of conflict: between the United States, China, and Japan, these three countries have had varying combinations of alliances and opposition. Before World War II, Japan and the United States had warmer relations which gradually transitioned to opposition as both countries assumed high positions in the global hierarchy and the Western versus Eastern divide deepened. These changes are exhibited in a few different examples: first, the American reception of Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the last 19<sup>th</sup> century was very different. In the late 1800s, the anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States flourished and quickly “became one of the facts of political life” as Americans formed ideas of how differently Chinese people lived.<sup>40</sup> Americans made quick assumptions about Chinese people which focused on their supposedly unassimilable “alleged vices”, including opium-smoking, prostitution, gambling, and other activities.<sup>41</sup> As Japanese people came to the United States, starting in 1860, Americans had a much more “friendly and good-natured” response to these immigrants with a “simplicity of manners” and “extreme inquisitiveness.”<sup>42</sup>

These generally friendly relations between Japan and the United States did not last. Both Japan and China believed that Western imperialism would mean an exploitation of East Asia: Japanese policy reflected this fear and China saw this as a “key factor in China’s deterioration.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 211.



Even so, China “saw an even greater foe in Japan”, meaning American-Japanese interactions became more tense and Sino-American relations became more relatively and superficially positive.<sup>44</sup> While these two countries may have developed an alliance during the war, the Sino-American alliance did not last as the previous antagonism came back to play. Iriye identifies that the Sino-American alliance during World War II was an exception to their usual “mutual antagonism that followed the war.”<sup>45</sup> Even by 1948, all three of these countries disagreed quite heavily on a matter of issues, including United States involvement in Chinese domestic affairs and “for trying to resurrect Japanese militarism.”<sup>46</sup> Iriye summarizes the way these countries often interacted: “it is a measure of the superficial nature of American-Chinese-Japanese contact that such drastic transformations should have taken place in their mutual perceptions in less than ten years.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Historiography*

While I do draw from military histories and gender studies, among other types of research, I largely utilize a variety of scholarship on Chinese American histories in order to then contribute to this same type of research. To do this, I employ a micro-history approach with Lee and Gee as case studies to then discuss the larger themes in Chinese American histories. While servicewomen Lee and Gee are often not represented in accounts of World War II history, there are more studies on what these women were experiencing as Chinese Americans during World War II. Because of this, I include many different scholarly articles and books that discuss these themes in Chinese American history.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 200.

First, one of the dominant examples of scholarship on Sino-American relations, which also includes the broader relations between Japan, China, and the United States, is Akira Iriye's *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations*.<sup>48</sup> Iriye tracks and analyzes how these three countries have interacted through decades of history, which spans times of peace, conflict, cooperation, and antagonism. It is especially useful to study these interstate relations in the context of war because how these countries interact in times of conflict, whether this is as allies or enemies, provide a unique look into the countries' social environments and political affairs. Another prominent source is Gary Okihiro's book *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, which centers race as one of the most significant factors affecting interstate relations at this time when he claimed that the war "represented a continuation of and not a break with the past".<sup>49</sup> Within his analysis, Okihiro establishes both the positive and negative outcomes for various groups, including Chinese Americans, because of the war. For example, although Chinese women were given new job opportunities, racial discrimination still occurred and many newly acquired jobs were mostly only for the duration of the war.<sup>50</sup>

Another area of existing research is approaching Chinese American history on a regional or even local level. Because the majority of Chinese immigrants settled on the West Coast, especially California, scholars tend to focus their research on these populations. One of the most prominent historians in this type of research is Judy Yung, whose research mostly focuses on the San Francisco region yet also examines wide-reaching Chinese American experiences in several different timelines, spanning from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to recent decades.<sup>51</sup> Yung contributes

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, "World War II," in *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, (Oakland: University of California, 2015), 336.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>51</sup> Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, eds., *Chinese American-Voices: From*

significantly to projects on Chinese American women by accompanying their stories with an array of primary sources, such as letters, speeches, and oral histories.<sup>52</sup> Another author of regional history is Peggy Nagae, who studied Asian American women's experiences with citizenship issues and other forms of discrimination specifically in Oregon.<sup>53</sup> Both first and second-generation Chinese American women faced countless types of discrimination, including problems with marriage rights and labor, among others.<sup>54</sup>

Both Xiaojian Zhao's *Remaking Chinese America* and Scott Wong's contribution to the book *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture* proved to be a couple of the most useful secondary sources in this project.<sup>55</sup> Zhao approaches this era in Chinese American history in a similar manner as this project: Zhao partly focuses on these women in World War II to examine the family dynamics, gender relations, and other community interactions at that time.<sup>56</sup> Lee and Gee are even included as a couple of the many examples of these experiences. Zhao also emphasizes the importance of World War II and surrounding periods in Chinese American history as they relate to social transitions, especially regarding family dynamics. There was "a significant improvement in gender equality" as Chinese women "entered nontraditional occupations outside the home" and expanded their role in the family structure by establishing a new form of independence.<sup>57</sup> Scott Wong's work provides a detailed examination of multiple components of Chinese American history, including their involvement in the military, their

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*the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Judy Yung, *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Peggy Nagae, "Asian Women: Immigration and Citizenship in Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>55</sup> Xiaojian Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community, 1940-1965* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Wong, "From Pariah to Paragon".

<sup>56</sup> Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 2.

patriotism, and how they were viewed pre-war compared to during the war by other Americans.<sup>58</sup> Wong cites the importance of the Chinese American press, the Chinese Exclusion Acts, and their social separation from Japanese Americans as a few of the most influential factors in this period of Chinese American history.<sup>59</sup>

I approach this research by including a few different sections on Chinese American experiences, especially those related to Chinese immigration and related legal discrimination as well as the different lives of Chinese versus Japanese Americans during the war. Both of these areas of history have been heavily-researched. Most of the scholarship on Chinese immigration rightfully centers the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, partly because of its significance beyond its effect on Chinese Americans: it was “the country’s first significant restrictive immigration law” and “the first to restrict a group of immigrants based on their race, nationality, and class.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the Chinese Exclusion Act set a precedent for government-sanctioned and less formal manners of racism for Chinese and non-Chinese immigrants alike. Ultimately, the Chinese Exclusion Act and other forms of legal discrimination against Chinese people before and during the war have importance beyond Chinese American histories.

Some examples of previous research employ a gendered approach to this history by focusing on the experiences of Chinese immigrant women in the late-19th century. There are in fact identifiable differences between how Chinese men and women were affected by legal discriminations and racist policies. Ling argued that immigration meant changes in “family and marriage structures”, such as women being more of “a joint family head and co-provider” as well

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<sup>58</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 153.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Erika Lee, “The Chinese Are Coming: How Can We Stop Them?: Chinese Exclusion and the Origins of American Gatekeeping,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, ed. Wu Jean Yu-wen Shen and Chen Thomas C. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 144.

as Chinese marriages having larger age gaps.<sup>61</sup> More generally, due to Chinese ideals about family structures and men leaving China to work in the United States in the mid to late 1800s, women were not immigrating nearly as much as men.<sup>62</sup> In 1884, Chinese women were targeted more directly by later additions to the Act, which required wives of “returning immigrant laborers” to have a series of documents approved by an American consul.<sup>63</sup> This gender gap had cultural and economic impacts in the United States that would last for decades.

Another main theme of this scholarship is the evolving and often contradictory views that white or non-Asian American populations had of Japanese and Chinese Americans before and during World War II. Although Asians have been seen as model minorities at varying levels for several decades of American history, this was not equally applied to specific Asian populations, such as Chinese versus Japanese Americans. Historian Wong describes the shift of the status of Chinese Americans before and during the war from “social pariahs to paragons,” which was later called the model minority.<sup>64</sup> This classification of a model minority involves stereotypes and generalizations of a certain racial or ethnic group that is seen as more successful than other minorities. For Chinese Americans, this meant being reduced to being seen as generally friendly, noncriminal, and hardworking, among other qualities.<sup>65</sup> While this description is positive, it categorizes different minorities on a social hierarchy and puts forth a variety of stereotypes about an entire race or ethnicity.

While Japanese and Chinese Americans were constructed as distinct minorities, they were also often grouped as alike non-white Asians, especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to

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<sup>61</sup> Huping Ling, “Family and Marriage of Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Chinese Immigrant Women,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 2 (2000), 59-60.

<sup>62</sup> George Anthony Pepper, “From under the Sojourner’s Shadow: A Historiographical Study of Chinese Female Immigration to America, 1852-1882,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11, no. 3 (1992), 41.

<sup>63</sup> Zhao, *Remaking Chinese America*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 153.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

World War II. Wu identifies this process as race-making: “the incessant work of creating racial categories, living with and within them, altering them, and even obliterating them when they no longer have social or political utility.”<sup>66</sup> Because of these dynamic categories, divisions within and out of ethnic groups are more enhanced and “consciously concocted.”<sup>67</sup> Wang outlines the timeline of anti-Asian racism as it relates to US-Asian relations in the late-19th and early-20th centuries: “white racism gradually came to embody local resistance to Asian immigration. Chinese were the first to be excluded, and soon after, when the Japanese became an important part of the ethnic equation in the West, they replaced Chinese as the primary object of racism.”<sup>68</sup> As a result, “to the extent that they identified with their own national origins in Asia, conflicts between China and Japan pitted Chinese and Japanese migrants against each other.”<sup>69</sup> As these racial and ethnic categories evolved, Wang writes that a Chinese nationalism forming in the United States “created dual burdens for Chinese immigrants, first in the context of the white racism of American society, and second with regard to the international politics of East Asia.”<sup>70</sup> As Chinese Americans formed their ethnic identities and possible nationalist ideologies going into World War II, they often found themselves in opposition to Japanese Americans.

Historians writing about Chinese Americans have previously utilized micro-histories to apply their argument to individuals, which is a useful tactic in historical research. It is important to include minority women as the focus of micro-histories because of their underrepresentation in previous research. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s examination of Chinese American history “juxtaposes microscopic and macroscopic” histories by zeroing in on famed physician Margaret

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<sup>66</sup> Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Joan S. Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism: The Relationship between Chinese and Japanese in the American West, 1880s-1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27 no. 2 (2008), 49-50.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

Chung's life while also demonstrating what it meant to be a woman and Chinese American during the war.<sup>71</sup> While Lee and Gee have been included in a few other scholarly projects, these have mostly focused on their participation in WASP rather than these women's experiences as Chinese Americans. The scholarship that has focused on or at least mentioned WASP often failed to include or elaborate on Lee and Gee or any of the other minority servicewomen. While there were only a small number of minority women in WASP, this unfortunate trend whitewashes American history.

*Identity Construction: Before, During, and After War*

What did it mean to be Chinese American during World War II? How were Chinese American identities constructed and molded during this time? Ultimately, it is important to note that Chinese Americans, both then and now, do not have a singular identity or way of thinking, which is the case for any other racial or ethnic group. Therefore, Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee did not think about or act on their identities in the same ways. Ultimately, it is important to note that while identities can be consciously constructed by an individual, they are also significantly shaped by external events. It is helpful to then compare these two women's identities and beliefs at this time in order to display how events affected them differently. To do this, I construct a timeline of the events that shaped their lives before, during, and after the war.

I discuss how Chinese Americans, and these two women specifically, dealt with various forms of discrimination before the war, and then how they viewed their military roles. Next, I explore how they viewed their place in American society in comparison to Japanese Americans during the war. Lastly, I compare how Lee and Gee specifically planned to live their lives after the war to understand how their identities had been formed until that point. I approach this

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<sup>71</sup> Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards: The Life of a Wartime Celebrity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

process by organizing it both thematically and chronologically, as well as including Lee and Gee as case studies, in order to encapsulate how individuals and some Chinese Americans experienced this time in American history.

### *Chinese Immigration and Legal Discrimination*

Discrimination against Chinese Americans took multiple forms and was carried out in a variety of public spheres. The most dominant official type of discrimination was the restriction of Chinese immigration. While Chinese Americans were given various social and economic opportunities in the events of World War II, this does not mean they were exempt from widespread racism. First, the Chinese Exclusion Act is the primary example of legal discrimination that allowed for government-sanctioned racism towards Chinese Americans from the 1880s to the 1940s. While the polarizing effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act spanned multiple decades, its significance to World War II-era America is distinctive. The Chinese Exclusion Act included several components: the number of Chinese allowed in the country was limited, they were denied the right of naturalization, and there was a general legal bias against Chinese women rather than men.<sup>72</sup>

Chinese immigrants were targeted by an “American Orientalist ideology that homogenized Asia as one indistinguishable entity and positioned and defined the West and the East in diametrically opposite terms.”<sup>73</sup> Anti-Chinese rhetoric worked its way into both everyday racism and government-led acts that posed Chinese people as the “Other”.<sup>74</sup> Chinese exclusion was justified by the claimed “class- and gender-based” differences as Chinese men were becoming more significant to certain labor spheres.<sup>75</sup> Gender beliefs also played into these

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<sup>72</sup> Wong, “From Pariah to Paragon,” 153.

<sup>73</sup> Lee, “The Chinese Are Coming,” 145.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



relations: Chinese men became more involved in “occupations traditionally assigned to women”, they had a supposed “lack of manhood”, and cultural differences based on gender were increasingly apparent.<sup>76</sup> White Americans felt that there were stark differences between them and these Chinese immigrants, which then led to long-standing racist ideologies. Ultimately, the Chinese Exclusion Act had numerous long-lasting effects in American society, including bolstering white supremacy in the United States and solidifying negative stereotypes about Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans.

In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed with the Magnuson Act, which was instituted largely because of the needs of the war effort. Both proponents and opponents of its repeal included debates over race and citizenship as a part of their arguments, which represents the complex place Chinese Americans were in American society.<sup>77</sup> Rather than a focus on “racism and social equality”, the supporters of its repeal focused their movement on the ways racial discrimination negatively affected “the war effort, Japanese propaganda, and the international reputation of American policy.”<sup>78</sup> Then, those who opposed its repeal and the slackening of Chinese exclusion also considered wartime conditions. Even so, their viewpoint mostly displayed that “racial antipathy toward the Chinese was evident, as was their general opposition to racial equality and integration.”<sup>79</sup> Despite its positive legal ramifications, debates around the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act displayed continued widespread anti-Chinese ideology in the United States. This remained true even with the events of World War II and the involvement of Chinese Americans in the war effort.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>77</sup> Scott K. Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 114.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 115.

To demonstrate the problematic standards of American citizenship, Zhao writes about Gee's mother Ah Yoke Gee, a second-generation Chinese American, who was a defense worker yet lost her citizenship due to her marriage to "an alien from China".<sup>80</sup> Because Maggie's mother married a Chinese immigrant, due to existing laws, she lost her citizenship until the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed during the war.<sup>81</sup> Amidst these obstacles, Ah Yoke Gee also had to care for six children.<sup>82</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act forced Chinese families to deal with a number of negative outcomes. For Gee and her mother, this affected their work during the war and was enforced by some of the gender bias against Chinese women at this time.

Another component of discrimination was evident in public opposition to Chinese Americans attempting to secure housing, which Gee discussed in an oral history: "Berkeley was a very difficult town to rent in, for non-white. Very difficult."<sup>83</sup> Gee then asserted that her sister would "call ahead of time and say that she was Chinese" which "kind of settled things."<sup>84</sup> Those in charge of these transactions would give Gee and her sister little or no chance to rent because of their anti-Chinese beliefs. Gee and her sister were not even able to view certain accommodations simply because of their race and ethnicity. This unfortunate circumstance was not at all an irregular experience for Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants at this time. Elsie Chang, a friend of Hazel Ying Lee, remarked on a similar experience during her and Lee's housing search. When the people handling the transaction found out that Lee and Chang were both Chinese, they "jacked up the price to 5,000 [dollars] more."<sup>85</sup> The effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act and other forms of discrimination, as seen in Chinese Americans' experiences in

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<sup>80</sup> Zhao, "Chinese American Women Defense Workers," 139.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>83</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by McGarrigle, Li, and Stine.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Rosenberg.

finding housing, do not capture the full extent of anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States yet illustrate the complexity of their social position. While World War II may have given them economic and social opportunities, there are extensive examples before, during, and after the war that prove that Chinese Americans were not fully exempt from racial discrimination.

Chinese Americans and their immigrant families were dealing with various forms of discrimination that attempted to limit the prosperity and inclusion of Chinese people in the United States. Even so, these same people were not all affected in the same way and did not necessarily think negatively about their own racial identities because of this discrimination. For example, Hazel Ying Lee displayed her attachment to China and its culture in myriad ways. When she lived through the Japanese of Canton, Lee commented, “We’ve seen scrap metal burst from bombs and kill or wound everyone within range [...] America must stop these shipments to Japan in the interest of humanity.”<sup>86</sup> Lee’s words emphasize her strong connection to China and because she was actually there when Japan bombed Canton, she witnessed the intense sufferings of fellow Chinese people. If Lee left for China with strong convictions regarding her Chinese identity, her patriotism took on different meanings after having to leave everything behind in Canton and return back to the United States. These newspaper clippings demonstrate Lee’s patriotism towards China and the United States and how she was able to draw off of her experiences in China during her later service in WASP.

### *Military Service and Patriotism*

One way that Chinese Americans experienced this period in American history was by serving in the United States military. While Chinese American men had served in the Civil War and World War I, the surrounding Sino-American relations and the introduction of Chinese

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<sup>86</sup> *The Capital Journal*, “Picket Girls Know War First Hand,” 1939.

American women into the military made World War II an especially distinct time. Lee was remarkable yet also symbolic in her willingness to fly for both the Chinese Air Force and as a WASP. With the Japanese invasion of China, many Chinese Americans “felt compelled to do something”, especially because some of them even had family in China.<sup>87</sup> In Rosenberg’s documentary, Hom highlighted that “Hazel cared deeply for China”; therefore, her decision to promptly move to China and plan on flying for their Air Force is perhaps distinctive.<sup>88</sup> While historian Hom claimed that Lee’s passion for China was typical for Chinese Americans at this time, I argue that her case is unique. Not only did she uproot her life in the United States to work in China, she also came back to serve in WASP. Only the Japanese bombing of Canton, which forced Lee into being a refugee, meant she needed to go back to the United States.

Compared to Lee, Gee may appear to have had less affinity with her Chinese identity as she did not engage in these passionate endeavors. Even so, this does not diminish any portion of her Chinese American identity. Gee grew up surrounded by the harmful effects of racist exclusion laws as her mother Ah Yoke Gee lost her citizenship. She dealt with everyday racism against Chinese people before and during the war, both in her everyday life and in her military service. In an oral history, the interviewer asked Gee if her mother was motivated by patriotism when she started working at the shipyards for the war effort. She responded that there were multiple factors:

I think that during World War II, almost everyone wanted to do something for the war effort. There was a tremendous amount of patriotism. Since it was an Asian country that we were fighting, I think it made a lot of difference. It could have been the Chinese. It couldn’t have been, but people felt that since the Japanese and Chinese look alike, it could have been Chinese that attacked Pearl Harbor.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Rosenberg.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by McGarrigle, Li, and Stine.

It may seem a bit contradictory for Ah Yoke Gee to volunteer for the war effort because she had previously lost her citizenship from racist Chinese exclusion laws yet Maggie Gee commented that “she might have felt that this is one way of proving it, too. She did. You could work in the shipyard and not be a citizen. You could join the Army and not be a citizen and get your citizenship, too.”<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, Ah Yoke Gee was originally “deprived of citizenship by her own government” and then later allowed to regain her citizenship with the repeal of the Chinese exclusion laws.<sup>91</sup>

Gee often depicted her patriotism as working in a more general way rather than it being a part of her Chinese American identity. In an interview, Gee was asked “do you think being Chinese made you want to demonstrate your patriotism even more?”<sup>92</sup> Gee responded, “I think so, yeah. Even though the Chinese and Japanese did not get along at that particular time, because the Japanese had invaded China.”<sup>93</sup> This vague response to how Gee viewed the connection between her Chinese ethnicity and her patriotism provides for a glimpse into her identity. Another related anecdote comes from a children’s book about Gee’s life, where she asserted that she was “born and bred” American.<sup>94</sup> Gee was in fact American yet her experiences where others saw her in a somewhat derogatory way as “the amazing Chinese American WASP” perhaps affected her self-identity.<sup>95</sup> While Chinese Americans were privileged in certain contexts during World War II, it is evident through both Lee and Gee’s similar experiences that white people saw them as less or at least differently American because of their minority status. Lee and Gee were

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Zhao, “Chinese American Women Defense Workers,” 139.

<sup>92</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by McGarrigle, Li, and Stine.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Moss and Angel, *Sky High*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

equally American as their fellow servicepeople and as others in the United States yet the racist mindset of many of these people perhaps thought otherwise.

These examples indicate that Chinese American women saw their place in American society, their identities, and their military involvement in different ways. Some Chinese American servicewomen may have viewed their involvement in the United States military as just one way to prove their commitment to the United States and to China. Lee could more easily be seen as fitting into this way of thinking, especially since she was quick to try to join the Chinese Air Force and the U.S. military. Another possibility is that Chinese Americans may have not connected their racial and ethnic identities to their military service. For example, Gee proudly joined WASP to achieve her dreams of flying. Even while Lee and Gee had different perspectives on their involvement in the military and their identities at this time, I also do not mean to say that this is a dichotomous situation where Lee represents one way of thinking while Gee demonstrates the other way. The making of a Chinese American identity is not a categorical, simple task. It is an evolving and complex process.

Their recruitment into the military was also important because serving for the United States meant taking another step as an American citizen. After facing challenges with immigration laws, Chinese Americans, as well as other immigrants, were able to demonstrate their Americanness in a more concrete way. World War II meant that more minorities were able to have more agency in displaying their patriotism and inserting themselves into a still exclusionary American identity.

#### *Asymmetrical Experiences of Chinese and Japanese Americans*

The idea that Chinese Americans were more accepted in American society during this time is accurate but complicated. Although white Americans may have viewed Chinese

Americans as less problematic than Japanese Americans, all Asians in the United States, including those of Chinese descent, experienced discrimination. Furthermore, Chinese Americans were constantly confused for Japanese Americans, and vice versa. Despite all of these difficult situations, Chinese and Japanese Americans did have asymmetrical experiences throughout World War II for both obvious and more subtle reasons.

The most dominant example would be when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the executive order for 120,000 Japanese Americans to be forced into internment camps. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, both Japanese people with American citizenship and those excluded from citizenship “were summarily removed from their homes and placed in concentration camps for the duration of the war.”<sup>96</sup> The government deliberately deprived these people “not only of their civil liberties, property, and livelihoods but also of their dignity and humanity.”<sup>97</sup> Therefore, America’s entry into World War II resulted in an enforcement of an already present and widespread racism towards Asian Americans. Both Chinese and Japanese Americans were forced to deal with the negative effects of being reduced to one’s racial identities. Namely, Japanese Americans were put in internment camps while Chinese Americans were often mistaken for Japanese Americans.

Maggie Gee discussed in an oral history project that “you let people know you were Chinese”, referring to the practice of Chinese Americans wearing “I am Chinese” buttons on their clothes to distinguish themselves from Japanese people and perhaps try to avoid further discrimination.<sup>98</sup> As Americans of Chinese descent would utilize this practice to clarify their race and ethnicity to those questioning their identities, this exemplifies the dual representation and

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<sup>96</sup> Okihiro, “World War II,” in *American History Unbound*, 341.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>98</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by McGarrigle, Li, and Stine.

identities of Chinese Americans at this time. It was both important that they were seen as Chinese, to avoid being seen as Japanese, and as American, to explicate their actual nationality. Wong's analysis of Chinese Americans in World War II explores the struggle and necessity for Americans to be able to recognize differences between Chinese and Japanese people.<sup>99</sup>

Newspapers, magazines, and even the military released documents attempting to outline these supposed distinct physical and mental characteristics.<sup>100</sup> As previously stated, these often worked to elevate Chinese Americans in the visions of American society while also maintaining a general bias against Asian Americans.

Although racial and gender discrimination from the public and official government actors endured towards Asian Americans, Chinese Americans specifically encountered a shift in American attitudes after the United States entered the war. Both Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, as well as other minorities, went through adjustments within the American social hierarchy. At this time, these developments were prompted by the needs of the war effort and put into place by powerful institutions, like the government and military structures. Japanese Americans were heavily restricted in their everyday lives to the point that they were forced into internment camps and only some were able to serve in the military. These experiences display how Chinese and Japanese Americans had asymmetrical experiences during World War II based on their racial identities. Additionally, Lee and Gee both had experiences where they were mistaken for being Japanese, which displays how both of these groups of people had complicated positions in American society.

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<sup>99</sup> Wong, "From Pariah to Paragon," 156.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



*Post-War Planning: Patriotism and Passions*

The Women Airforce Service Pilots was in action from mid-1943 to the end of 1944, when it was disbanded, partly due to pressures on Congress, attacks from the media, and the priority placed on male pilots.<sup>101</sup> As the war continued, and then approached its end, male pilots ensured their dominant position in the military hierarchy. WASP founder Jacqueline Cochran and General Henry H. Arnold's attempt to have the organization receive full military status was met with great opposition. A combination of actors, including male civilian pilots and veteran groups lobbied Congress when they "learned that House Committee on Military Affairs had recommended passage of a bill to militarize Women Airforce Service Pilots."<sup>102</sup> Merryman argues "the most important factor leading to the demise" of WASP was "a negative media campaign precipitated in part by the return of combat pilots from overseas and the release of Army Air Forces cadets and pilot trainers."<sup>103</sup> This "media attack against the WASP program" portrayed women pilots as "a waste of taxpayer's money, as unnecessary, as lacking in skill, and as an overall detriment to the war effort."<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the War Department did not take the initiative to defend WASP and Congress was heavily influenced by the media in voting on the bill that would eventually disband the organization.<sup>105</sup>

How were Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee affected by this major time of transition for WASP and their lives? I contend that it is important to examine their post-war experiences in relation to how their identities were shaped by the end of the war and how this relates to Chinese American history more broadly. While this is a project focusing mostly on World War II-era

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<sup>101</sup> Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 116.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

women and experiences, pre-war and post-war history allows us to better understand these experiences, how they came to be, and what happened because of them.

WASP disbanded on December 20, 1944. This was almost exactly a month after Hazel Ying Lee's death on November 25, 1944. Lee's untimely, tragic death meant she was never able to fulfill her plans for her post-WASP life. On October 27, 1944, in a letter to fellow WASP Inez Woodward Woods, Hazel wrote:

Now that we're to be inactivated by Dec. 20th, all of us are deciding what to do in the future. Most everybody wants to go to China. I volunteered to write Madame Chiang, but the letter only got as far as her secretary. I was referred to Gen. Mow at [sic] Wash., D.C. In fact, I had written him a letter although it was a personal one. He offered me my old job with the Commission on Aeronautic Affairs in China. There are many angles to be considered on the offer, so I answered him and stated I hope to get a few days off before Dec. 20th to see and discuss matters over with him. If I can get down to Wash., I shall discuss over the possibilities of having ex-WASPs going over to China. I think, however, if the job is half-way promising and I can get some flying time in, I'm going to accept. The General will arrange for my transportation.<sup>106</sup>

Lee was prepared yet again to abandon her life in the United States to fly in China, just as she did before she served in WASP. This display of Lee's patriotism and her leadership role in this plan exemplify her commitment to China and the United States. Lee approached her post-WASP planning as if immediately going to China was the obvious thing to do. In addition, Lee's goal was to bring fellow WASP servicewomen with her. While it is unclear if these plans would have played out if she had lived until after WASP disbanded, in this letter, Lee demonstrates her attachment to China after her military service in the United States.

Maggie Gee's post-war life was quite different to Lee's for several reasons. Most significantly, she died at 89 years old after a long life of diverse careers. Following WASP's disbandment, Gee immediately pursued a degree in physics at UC Berkeley, which was her goal

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<sup>106</sup> Lee to Inez Woodward Woods, October 27, 1944, The Woman's Collection, TWU, 53. This comes from a collection of letters to and from Woods, which included a total of three letters from Lee to Woods. There was not any follow-up provided in this collection from either Woods or Lee about the plans put forth in this message.

prior to her military service.<sup>107</sup> On top of her academics and her later career at a federal research facility, Gee became involved in working on “community issues, including voter registration, advocating for the rights of women, fighting housing discrimination and representing the Berkeley Community Fund.”<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Gee also was a part of multiple contributions to historical research on WASP, her own life, and the war. While Lee desired to continue to fly, Gee decided to establish herself in the career she had originally planned on pursuing before she became involved in WASP.<sup>109</sup>

It matters how these two women decided to continue their lives after their service in World War II for multiple reasons, including the fact that they did not in fact choose to end their involvement in WASP. Its end, however unfortunate, meant that Lee and Gee were able to choose their next path. While Lee sadly did not go back to China as she had wished, her letters give us insight into her steadfast commitment for aiding the war effort. For Gee, while she was given unique opportunities in WASP, its end allowed her to explore her other interests. Not only did the WASPs have an unexpected, quick end affected by different actors limiting their success, but they also dealt with a decades-long process to officially achieve veteran status and other military benefits. Finally, in late 1977, the GI Improvement Act was finally approved by Congress and President Carter, which allowed for them to “receive honorable discharges and full veterans’ benefits”, as well as declaring them “as having served on active duty in the Armed Forces.”<sup>110</sup> After thirty years, WASPs were recognized for their contribution to the war effort after a series of governmental interactions. Furthermore, in 2009, President Obama even honored

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<sup>107</sup> John Hickey, “Is it time to rename Oakland International Airport for alumna Maggie Gee?” *Berkeley News*, Oct. 26, 2018.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 156.

these women with a Congressional Gold Medal, recognizing them as “the first women ever to fly American military aircraft.”<sup>111</sup> The President’s commendation captured the significance of these aviators: they “courageously answered their country’s call in a time of need while blazing a trail for the brave women who have given and continue to give so much in service to this nation since.”<sup>112</sup>

### *Two of One Thousand Servicewomen*

Many of the primary sources I found in the TWU WASP archive related to the historical significance of Lee and Gee and how they will or should be remembered. Much of this relates to the long-standing gap in historical research on these women, which a few different historians have addressed in their own scholarship. Cornelsen’s work establishes the significance of WASP itself in military history: “even though women had been flying for many years before the start of World War II, the concept of women flying military aircraft was unique”.<sup>113</sup> Korean American Susan Ahn Cuddy, the first Asian American woman in the United States Navy, was recognized as a fearless, groundbreaking woman who dealt with many of the obstacles faced by Asian Americans in World War II. According to her son Flip, “It was a white world and if you wanted to do anything you just had to forge ahead.”<sup>114</sup> This quote encapsulates the same determination exhibited in many Asian Americans in similar situations, especially Lee and Gee, as they were a couple of the first Chinese American women to fly in the military. For both Asian Americans and women generally, World War II allowed for many firsts in American history, especially regarding more groups’ introduction into the military.

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<sup>111</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “President Obama Signs Bill Awarding Congressional Gold Medal to Women Airforce Service Pilots,” July 1, 2009.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Cornelsen, “Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II,” 111.

<sup>114</sup> Mia Warren and Emma Bowman, “Their ‘Tough’ Mom Was Also The Navy’s 1<sup>st</sup> Asian American Woman Officer,” *WBUR News*, Aug. 17, 2019.

*Hazel Ying Lee*

In 2002, Alan Rosenberg directed the documentary *A Brief Flight: Hazel Ying Lee and the Women Who Flew Pursuit* about the Women Airforce Service Pilots and specifically Hazel Ying Lee.<sup>115</sup> Beckman wrote an article in 2003 regarding Rosenberg's process for creating this documentary: "about three years ago [he] dropped by [Hazel's sister's] home in Portland. She looked him up and down a couple of times, looked him straight in the eye, and said 'I've been waiting 60 years for you.'" <sup>116</sup> For sixty years, there was a gap in remembrance and historical research on Hazel Ying Lee, a fascinating Chinese American woman who flew for the US military in World War II.

In brief biographies of the 38 WASPs that died in service, written by fellow WASP pilots, Lee's description mentions that she was "sent to this country by Madam Chiang Kai-Shek to learn to fly" and "because of her Oriental descent, she was a legend in the ferry command."<sup>117</sup> Where the term Oriental is an outdated term, these statements also provide odd yet interesting ideas about Lee's motivations. This short biography is meant to celebrate Lee, but the comments related to her race and ethnicity provide a thought-provoking look into how other servicewomen described her. One perspective of these claims is to infer that either Lee was in fact motivated by her Chinese heritage in her military service or these could also refer to a more literal interpretation, that Lee was sent from China to participate in the US war effort. In actuality, Lee was not sent by the Chinese government. The writer of this comment about Lee was likely

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<sup>115</sup> *A Brief Flight*, directed by Alan H. Rosenberg.

<sup>116</sup> Beckman, Trish. "Hazel Ying Lee: A WASP Remembered (or, a Long Overdue Tribute to an American Hero of WWII)" *WASP News*, Summer 2003 Issue, 3. From TWU.

<sup>117</sup> Dawn Seymour, Clarice I. Bergemann, Jeanette J. Jenkins, and Mary Ellen Keil, *Women Airforce Service Pilots - WWII: In Memoriam Thirty-eight American Women Pilots* (Denton: Texas Woman's University Press, 1996), 7. From TWU.

constructing an anecdote about her that was based on stereotypes and assumptions about her Chinese descent.

More contemporary sources praised Lee and her service, such as this quote that depicts her as a neglected war hero in reference to both Lee and Gee being honored at a Women in Aviation International conference in 2003:

While long overdue, this tribute to Hazel has significant relevance to current events such as the Iraq War. Today the difference is that Americans are accustomed to seeing heroes of every race and both genders in print and on television, demonstrating their dedication to our country in ways that weren't allowed (or recognized) during World War II. It is about time that all Americans are given due recognition for their contributions to our nation's defense!<sup>118</sup>

In this quote, Beckman outlines the utterly profound nature of both Lee and Gee's service as both were minority women serving in World War II. This may seem to be obvious to praise them in this way yet, as Beckman clarified, these women were not seen as war heroes during their service, at least to most people and compared to white servicemen and women.<sup>119</sup> Even if Lee was not considered to be truly part of the military, today we are able to better capture the significance of her and other minority servicewomen's service. These vigorous stories on Lee and her service portray a passionate, patriotic Chinese American that was able to serve for the United States and be vocal about her support for China.

### *Maggie Gee*

As far as her experiences in the WASP, "Maggie found that she was more of an oddity than a victim of discrimination. Some of her associates had never even known a Chinese person before."<sup>120</sup> Gee went on to say that "I never had a bad experience. As for the instructors... they

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<sup>118</sup> Beckman, "Hazel Ying Lee: A WASP Remembered", 3.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Anita Bornschlegel and Claudia Herman, "Airborne Trailblazers." *Grand Times*, Nov. 1993, 12. From TWU.

were all different. Most were wonderful, but some WASPs had to deal with inflated male egos and a lack of respect.”<sup>121</sup> In this claim, Gee cited more issues coming from these men’s view of the women rather than their view of her as a minority servicewoman. Barnidge noted that Gee often did not prefer to mention many negative experiences from her service yet this quote does allow insight into how certain men viewed her as a woman.<sup>122</sup>

Where her and her mother faced racial discrimination, another type of discrimination Gee faced was from reactions to the WASP in general. The WASP only lasted one year and Gee clarifies in this interview that “the men pressured Congress to disband it, because they wanted our jobs. They just didn’t like to see the women fly.”<sup>123</sup> Rather than have the organization become militarized, Congress disbanded WASP. When discussing her experiences as a WASP, Gee also explains how being Chinese affected her service in the same oral history project previously mentioned. Gee says in this interview that being Chinese boosted her patriotism, especially with the tensions between the Japanese and Chinese after Japan invaded China.<sup>124</sup> Gee was essentially able to draw off of her Chinese identity to boost her patriotism.

Many of the sources on Maggie Gee add to how she is remembered as a WASP pilot and as a Chinese American servicewoman. In these sources, such as in various newspaper articles, Gee is persistently modest about her contributions to Chinese American and military history. In his article, Barnidge described Gee’s views about her own participation in WASP “as if it were a natural evolution, part of some grand scheme she envisioned years earlier”.<sup>125</sup> Historian Harvey Dong even established that Gee “actually changed the way we look at the role of Asian-

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>122</sup> Barnidge, Tom. “Berkeley’s Maggie Gee joins history’s heroes.” *Contra Costa Times*, Sept. 11, 2009. From TWU.

<sup>123</sup> Maggie Gee, interview by McGarrigle, Li, and Stine.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Barnidge, “Berkeley’s Maggie Gee.”

American women in history. She broke stereotypes of Asian-American women at that time”.<sup>126</sup>

These contemporary sources examined Gee decades after her service and Dong even argued that she had a profound influence on the current and later views of Asian American women. From her role in the WASP to her history as a third-generation Chinese American, Maggie Gee is an intriguing representation of American patriotism and a celebration of Chinese ancestry.

### *Conclusion*

Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee have both been useful case studies in studying broader themes in Chinese American history as they dealt with legal discriminations, different treatment of Asian Americans at this time, and military service, among other things. Their unique position in the American social fabric allowed for a wide-ranging study in Chinese American and military history. Chinese Americans in general experienced and thought about their identities differently, which is represented in Lee and Gee’s perspectives on their racial identities and their military service. These women came from different Chinese backgrounds and areas in the United States and therefore had both similar and different experiences in WASP. This project utilized both a micro and macro-history approach to cover these themes and how these specific women were an important part of this time in American history.

Rather than make broad strokes about the American military experience, it can be far more interesting and necessary to examine how one’s identities sculpt their service. Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee were only two servicewomen of the millions and millions of Americans who served in the Second World War yet their distinct experiences resulted from their identities as Chinese American. Servicewomen Lee and Gee were noteworthy cases within distinct areas of the American social fabric. One method of furthering this research would be to examine how

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<sup>126</sup> Baldassari, Erin. “Rename Oakland airport? Petition seeks to recognize trailblazing Berkeley pilot.” *East Bay Times*, Oct. 22, 2018. From TWU.



other minority servicemen and women navigated their experiences in World War II through their racial and ethnic identities. This is especially important as the minority servicewomen I researched are not the only example of a lack of research regarding a certain population. Further research could detail how other minorities, including black women and other Asian American women, were involved in the war effort.

As far as past research on Hazel Ying Lee's life, back in 2003, her sister expressed to director Alan Rosenberg that she had been waiting sixty years for her sister's story to be recounted.<sup>127</sup> There has been a general lack of research on both Lee and Gee; therefore, my research ultimately works to ensure that these women are not buried under any more decades of history. In this project, I included the case studies of Lee and Gee in order to both reveal how individuals experienced large-scale changes in American society and Sino-American relations and to demonstrate how two women with similar experiences had different processes of constructing their identities and ways of thinking. By focusing on World War II, as well as pre-war and post-war events, I explored Chinese American history in one of its most important periods of transition. The significance of this time period is furthered when considering that Chinese American women specifically were given an array of new opportunities, especially regarding their involvement in the United States military. For Lee and Gee, not only did this place them in a distinctive position as servicewomen in WASP, but their lives are representative of how some Chinese Americans experienced this time in American history.

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<sup>127</sup> Beckman, "Hazel Ying Lee: A WASP Remembered", 3.

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