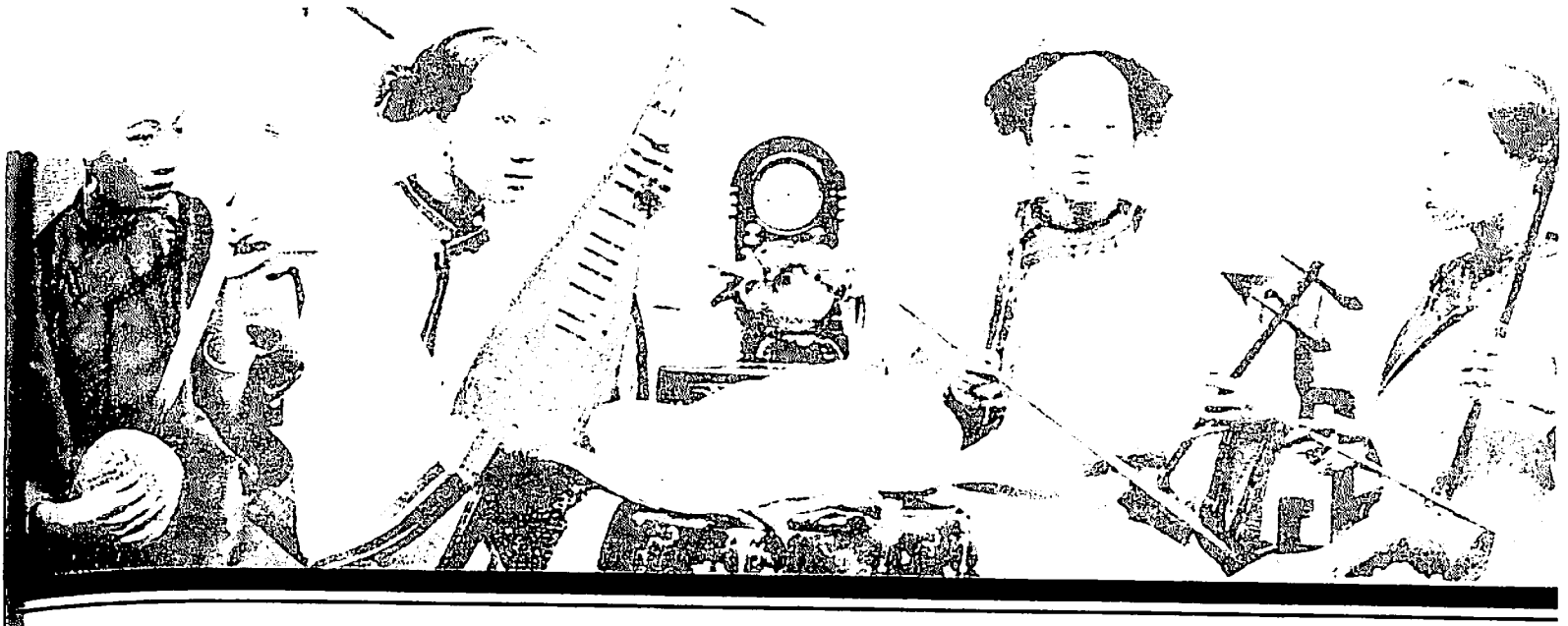
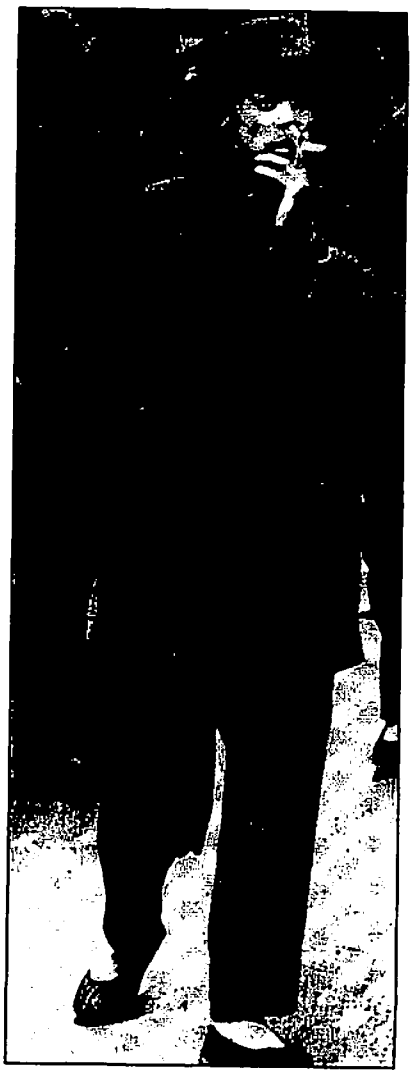


1884 Profile

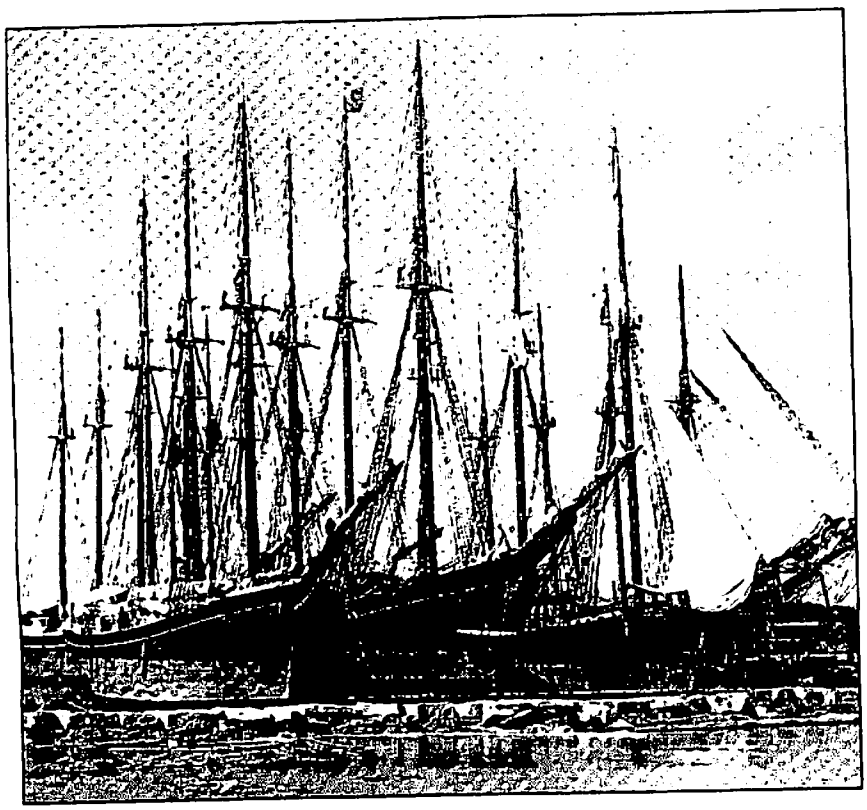
Twenty-nine-year-old Liu Wang came to America on the promise of wealth and adventure, but found low wages and discrimination instead.

Life at Home

- Liu Wang's "coming to America" story always included being packed in a tiny wooden crate, a leaky ship, vicious dockworkers and severe dehydration.
- The story of his 61-day trip from China to San Francisco in 1872 always solicited cheers, tears and another round of drinks.
- Suffocating confinement in a tiny, wet box hidden in the well of a heaving ship made for a far better story than purchased, cramped space in steerage where everyone threw up on their neighbors and wondered why the trip to "Gold Mountain" started on such a rocky road.
- Besides, the spirit within Liu always quickened when he heard or told a fascinating tale of adventure and cunning.
- Since his first week in America, 29-year-old Liu continued to visit the docks and witness the excitement of fortune-seeking men as they clambered off clipper ships christened *Stag-Hound*, *Fleet Wing* or *Sea-witch*, all capable of traversing from New York, past the tip of South America and docking in San Francisco in just 100 days.
- Adventure hunters fresh from the boats were always eager to have their picture taken; some would even believe they cost $2 a pose—twice the normal price—after a few stiff drinks.
- Indeed, an American photographer with a lively Chinese assistant could make good money when the docks were full.
- Since Liu arrived in San Francisco 14 years ago from the desperately poor region of Suchow, China, he had panned for gold, lost a wife, picked strawberries and fallen in love with the life of a traveling photography wagon.
- Only starvation awaited Liu in China, where land ownership had become more concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few.
- Like most peasants, he could either revolt or leave.



Liu Wang was 29-years-old when he left Suchow, China.



Ships carrying fortune-seeking men arrived frequently in San Francisco.

- But he never seemed to be able to leave his love of water or the beauty of his homeland; homesickness always hovered nearby.
- Suchow was a city on the east bank of Tai Hu Lake.
- It was one of the oldest cities in China and prized for its delicate silk embroidery, magnificent palaces and soaring temples; its canals and ancient bridges had earned the city its Western name as the "Venice of China."
- As a boy, Liu learned to fish with cormorants on the lake.
- The birds were leashed at the boats and tossed into the water to fish.
- Once the cormorant caught a fish, the bird was hauled to the boat; a ring around its throat stopped it from swallowing its catch.
- It was a grand adventure, but a poor way to make a living.
- Like many in his village, Liu believed the stories told about America, where food was always plentiful.
- He told himself the journey would be only a few years until he made his fortune; repeatedly, he told the same story to his new wife.

Liu left his young wife in China when he traveled to America to make his fortune.

- China's closed-door policy to the rest of the world had ended in 1842 when England defeated China in the Opium Wars, which forced China to open itself to foreign trade and all ow its citizens to leave the country.
- The development of a passage system then allowed poor Chinese laborers to finance the journey by agreeing to work out their debt after arrival.
- This system quickly became popular among the emigrants to other parts of Southeast Asia, Australia, and North America.
- Arrangements were handled at the treaty ports by Chinese recruiters working for Western entrepreneurs; this kind of labor contracting was known as "pig selling."
- Liu's parents warned him repeatedly to be careful of the labor traders who roamed the docks looking for customers, but didn't ask him to stay, knowing they could never feed nine children adequately.
- To keep his young wife safe while he made his fortune, Liu made arrangements for her to stay behind.
- Chinese women did not go to strange places willingly.
- For two years she waited faithfully, mostly without complaint.
- When she decided to continue her life with another man, she regretted that she was never taught to write and explain the emptiness she felt.
- Liu would not know for another two years that his wife had run off, and then only through village gossip brought by new arrivals.
- Chinese men in America outnumbered Chinese women 20 to one.

Life at Work

- When Liu arrived in California in 1872, resentment toward immigrants was already well established.
- American feelings were deep-seated and often supported by public policy.
- The first Chinese entered California in 1848, and within a few years, thousands more came, lured by the promise of Gam Sann or "Gold Mountain."
- Quickly, discriminatory laws designed to protect American jobs forced the Chinese out of the gold fields and into low-paying, menial jobs.
- The Chinese immigrants laid tracks for the Central Pacific Railroad, reclaimed swampland in the Sacramento delta, developed shrimp and abalone fisheries, and provided cheap labor wherever there was work no other group wanted or needed.
- During the 1870s, an economic downturn resulted in serious unemployment problems, and more outcries against Asian immigrants who would work for low wages.
- In reaction to the states starting to pass immigration laws, in 1882 the federal government asserted its authority to control immigration and passed the first immigration law, barring lunatics and felons from entering the country.
- Later in 1882, the second immigration law barred Chinese, with a few narrow exceptions.
- Imperial China was too weak and impoverished to exert any influence against American policy.
- Through it all, Liu continued to work beside Edward Roberts, a traveling photographer, and move from place to place taking pictures of the newly wealthy, the soon to be wealthy and the newly arrived.

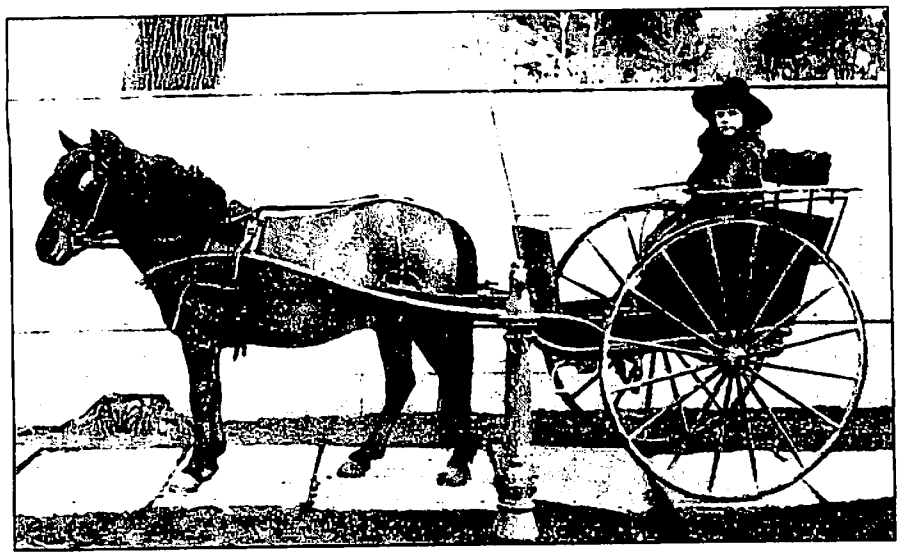
Liu worked in San Francisco as an assistant to a traveling photographer.

In the 1880s, Chinese men in America outnumbered Chinese women 20 to one.

- Liu liked to tell photography customers that the Chinese came to the United States before the arrival of most Jewish, Italian, Hungarian and Polish immigrants.
- Most ignored his comments, and a minority muttered, "They can go back now."
- In fact, Liu often wondered whether Thomas Jefferson had thought at all about the Chinese people when he wrote "all men are created equal" and that liberty was an "unalienable right."
- Many times, especially on the long buggy rides from town to town, Liu and his boss Edward talked about why the Chinese were so hated.
- "It's pretty simple," Edward declared. "The bosses know the Chinese workers will always stick together and will have too much power. They hate it when a bunch of Chinese gaggle together in a group to talk; they just know that they are being plotted against."
- Chinese workers were seen as being on the side of major corporations, railroads, and large landowners, and thus against workers and small farmers.
- "The workers resent the Chinese because they will work for less, even if it's a job they don't want," Edward remarked.
- Christian missionaries saw the Chinese immigrants as the chance of a lifetime; Liu believed he'd been baptized 12 times in 10 different cities by Christian performers eager for converts.
- Most of the time, he was rewarded with a nice dinner and new clothes.
- Often, the church people did not realize how well he spoke English and that he understood the slurs "yellow peril" and "heathen."
- Since 1872, groups such as the Anti-Coolie Association and the Supreme Order of the Caucasians had been staging boycotts of Chinese labor throughout the country.
- The boycotts cost Liu his job in the gold fields shoveling slurry, and later his job picking strawberries.
- The Panic of 1873 that followed, caused largely by the overcapitalization of the railroads, was blamed on the Chinese immigrants for the lost American jobs.
- Bloody riots erupted in Chinatowns from Denver to Los Angeles, where the Chinese were attacked by violent mobs.
- Anti-Chinese riots even occurred in Liu's home town of San Francisco, which had the largest and most well-established Chinatown.
- A community of only nine city blocks, it housed over 30,000 people.
- "The Chinese must go!" was the official slogan of Denis Kearney of the California Workingmen's party; politicians echoed this cry to win votes, and labor leaders exploited the issue to encourage unionization of real Americans.
- In 1876, anti-Chinese sentiment was so intense that Congress launched an investigation into Chinese immigration.
- During the hearings, held in San Francisco, the committee heard 1,200 pages of testimony.
- Industrialists like Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker testified that the Chinese were industrious and dependable, and that without them the Transcontinental Railroad would not have been built.
- Farmers, dependent on Chinese labor, defended the Chinese as well, praising them for their agricultural skill.
- Yet public officials referred to the Chinese as heathens who lived in filthy quarters.
- Labor leaders testified that the Chinese drove decent white men out of work, forcing their wives and children to starve.
- Before 1882, America had a free immigration policy without restrictions.
- Then, in the midst of the West Coast backlash against Chinese labor, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, temporarily suspending the immigration of skilled

and unskilled Chinese laborers for 10 years and prohibiting the naturalization of any Chinese.

- Only officials, teachers, students, merchants, and those who "traveled for curiosity" were exempted from the act in accordance with an 1880 treaty with China.
- The law also said resident Chinese must obtain a permit to re-enter if they left the country.
- It also stated that "hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed."
- Through it all, Liu continued learning English and traveling around California with the self-proclaimed "King of the Carte de Visite" in the back of his photography wagon.
- Packing, unpacking and setting up the camera was Liu's job, along with cooking, cleaning, fixing wagon wheels and scaring unhappy customers with his long sword.



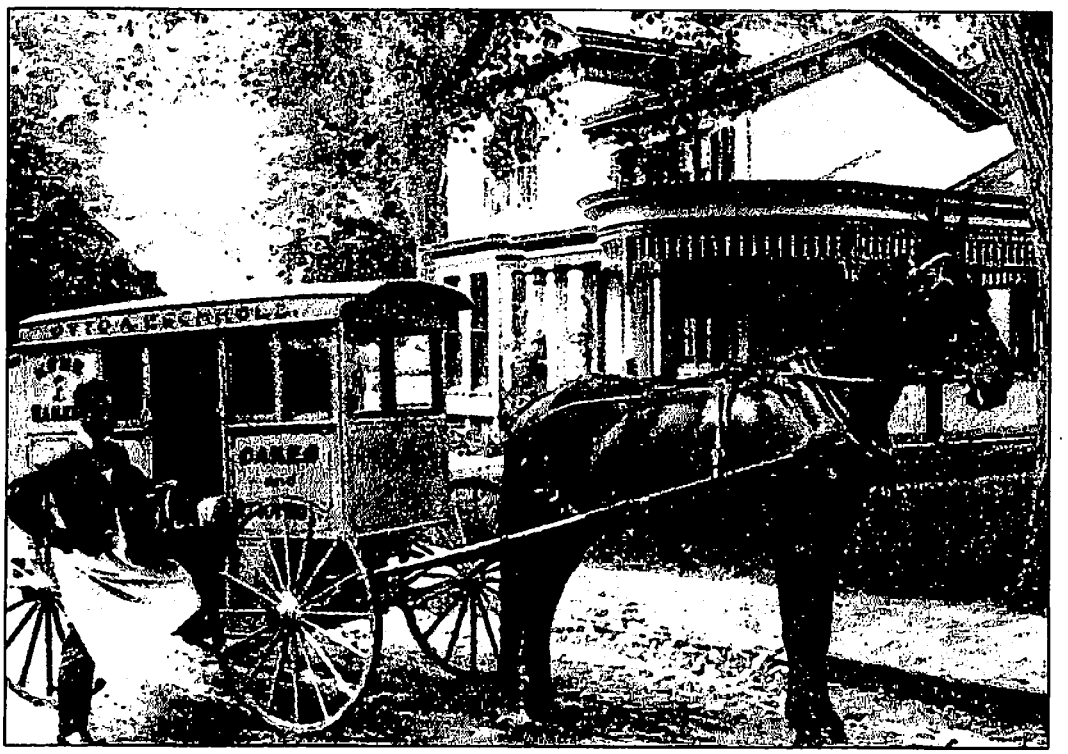
Liu often fixed wagon wheels and helped pose subjects for his photographer boss.

- The heavy camera itself had four lenses designed to make four small photographs measuring 3.25 x 2.125 inches on a full-size plate of 6.5 x 8.5 inches.
- These photographs could be produced cheaply, selling for half the price charged by a portrait photographer.
- The pose was standardized; most often the subject stood next to a table piled high with books or sat in a fancy high-backed chair to display a favorite rifle or other weapon.
- The resulting photograph displayed the face small enough that slight movements by the subject would not cause the picture to be out of focus.
- Most of the men rarely smiled; instead, they stared grimly into the camera.

Life in the Community: San Francisco, California

- San Francisco was on its way to becoming a respectable town in 1848 when fate intervened in the form of gold.
- The result was a flood of gold seekers from the East Coast United States to the West Coast to China, all convinced they would become rich overnight.
- The discovery was a transforming event for California and the Chinese immigrants who responded to the lure of new wealth.
- Most immigrants were convinced they would return to the homeland someday.
- Many knew so little about the "new world," they were not even sure whether it rained in America.
- The Chinese were employed to build some intrastate railroads in California as early as 1858, but the first large-scale use of Chinese labor—some 12,000 to 14,000 workers—was in the construction of the Central Pacific portion of the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869.
- They also constructed the western sections of the Southern Pacific and Northern Pacific, as well as a number of trunk and branch lines.
- Chinese labor and skill were essential to the construction of the Central Pacific, the western portion of the great Transcontinental Railroad, from 1865 to 1869.

- Ultimately, 12,000 Chinese carved tunnels and laid track across the Sierra Nevada; an estimated 1,200 of them were killed in the process, buried in avalanches during the severe winters or blown apart while handling explosives.
- The work required both skill and daring, including the ability to carve ledges from cliffs while hanging in baskets.
- Their speed was remarkable; when racing to meet the Union Pacific coming from the East, Chinese workers laid 10 miles of track in one day.
- By 1880, more than 105,000 Chinese were in the United States, most of them in California, where they converted the turtle swamps of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta into rich farmland, cultivated and harvested vineyards, and raised sugar beets, citrus fruits and celery crops.
- Chinese farmers dominated the strawberry-growing industry in California and pioneered new methods of horticulture.
- In 1880, they amounted to more than a third of California's truck gardeners, and Chinese vegetable peddlers became a familiar sight in many towns.
- Chinese factory workers were also important in the California industries that had grown up during the Civil War, especially woolen mills and the cigar, shoe and garment industries of San Francisco.
- By the early 1870s they comprised 70 to 80 percent of woolen-mill workers and 90 percent of the cigar makers in the city.
- By the mid-1870s, they were a majority of the shoemakers and garment makers, producing almost all the undergarments on the market; they also manufactured brooms, slippers and cigar boxes.
- Although never more than a tenth of the California population, they formed about a quarter of the state's labor force because they were nearly all males of working age.
- In the 1880s, Chinese accounted for 86 percent of the work force in the salmon canneries of California and the Northwest, 80 percent of the shirt makers in San Francisco, 70-80 percent of the work force in the wool industry, 84 percent of the cigar industry, and 50 percent of the fishery workers.



Food peddlers were a common sight in many towns around the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta.

Chinese Immigration Timeline

1847–1850
A drought in Canton Province in China and the discovery of gold in California in 1848 ignited Chinese immigration to the United States.

1849
Three hundred twenty-five Chinese were recorded as residents of California; about 4,018 Chinese lived in the United States.

1850
Chinese were invited to march in President Zachery Taylor's funeral procession, and helped celebrate California's admission to the union later that year.

1852
California legislature reenacted the Foreign Miners' Tax law targeted at Chinese.
A monthly Alien Poll Tax charged each Chinese $2.50.
Twenty thousand Chinese arrived in America.

1854
The state of California barred any Chinese from testifying in court against a white; the courts also provided that "No Black, or Mulato person, or Indian, shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a White man."

1859
The California Superintendent of Education asked that state funds be withheld from schools that enrolled Chinese students.

1860
The census counted 34,933 Chinese.

1870
A San Francisco city ordinance prohibited the use of sidewalks against those carrying loads on a pole, aimed at the Chinese method of carrying heavy objects.
The census recorded 63,100 Chinese, an 81 percent increase from the previous decade.

1872
Chinese were forbidden to have business licenses or to own land.

1877
The California legislature appealed to Congress to limit Chinese immigration.

1879
The California legislature adopted a new constitution containing a section with punitive anti-Chinese provisions.

1880
President Hayes renegotiated the Burlingame Treaty with China, securing the right of the United States to regulate, limit, or suspend (but not prohibit) Chinese immigration.
Two years before the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted, the census counted 105,465 Chinese, a 67 percent increase from 1870.