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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Patriarchy and Racism: The Female Lament in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

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| ABSTRACT

Eat a Bowl of Tea, the only novel by Chinese American author Louis Chu, first published in 1961, is regarded as a significant contribution to the field of Chinese American literature. Set within the context of Chinatown's bachelor society, the novel realistically portrays the lived experiences of early Chinese immigrants in the United States through the marital narrative of Ben Loy and Mei Oi. Existing scholarship has focused mainly on the representation of male characters in the novel, while critical attention to female figures remains relatively limited. In response to this gap, this study centres on three distinctly characterized female figures, Lau Shee, Mei Oi, and the Jook Sing girls in the novel, and examines their lived realities and struggles under the dual pressures of patriarchal traditions within the Chinese immigrant community and systemic racism in American society, thereby revealing the structural oppression produced by the intersection of gender and ethnicity.

| KEYWORDS

Eat a Bowl of Tea, Female Images, Patriarchy, Racism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Louis Chu (1915 – 1970) was born in Taishan City, Guangdong Province, China, and immigrated to the United States at the age of nine, where he resided with his father in New Jersey while his mother remained in China. He obtained a master's degree from New York University and subsequently worked in the welfare department of the New York City government. Additionally, he held the position of executive secretary for the Chinese Benevolent Association and hosted the Chinese Festival radio program within the Chinese community of New York City. Around 1945, during a visit to China to see his family, he married and returned to the United States with his wife and daughter. Chu's personal experiences and his encounters with the Chinese community serve as the basis for the unique characters and authentic depiction of life in Chinatown presented in his work, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*.

First published in New York in 1961 and brought to the silver screen in 1989, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* received widespread acclaim from both readers and audiences. Set in 1940s American Chinatown society, the novel portrays the psychology and living conditions of two generations of Chinese immigrants, delving into themes such as the struggles of Chinese immigrants in a foreign land and the collision of tradition and modern culture. Jeffrey Paul Chan, co-founder of the Department of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, and Frank Chin, a writer of Chinese American literature, regarded it as the first Chinese-American novel not set against the exotic backdrop of Chinatown (Chin et al., 1974). As an essential work of Chinese American literature, this novel "has become not only an active cultural agent for Asian American writers' self-empowerment but also an important site of Asian American critics' ideological contestation" (Ling, 1995, p. 35).

To date, studies of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* have primarily centered on the imagery of tea, identity, male characters, and variations in Chinese culture. In contrast, interpretations of the female figures in the novel remain relatively underexplored. Nie (2008), for instance, briefly analyzes female characters in the novel, contending that figures such as Mei Oi merely represent women who emerged during a transitional stage in Chinatown's patriarchal society rather than truly epoch-making figures. This statement, however, risks reducing their narrative significance by overlooking the structural oppressions that circumscribe their agency. Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a foundational figure in critical race theory, introduced the concept of intersectionality to

illuminate how categories such as race and gender intersect rather than operate independently, thereby producing unique and compounded forms of oppression. From this perspective, women's experiences must be understood not as isolated from structural forces but as shaped by overlapping systems of constraint. Accordingly, this study adopts an intersectional framework to move beyond viewing these women as transitional symbols of patriarchy, emphasizing instead their victimization under the dual pressures of patriarchal norms and racial prejudice within the context of immigration. Despite their indispensable role in the migration process, the experiences and narratives of women have often been overlooked or misinterpreted. As Xue (2004) observes, the American bachelor society in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* "inflicted tremendous harm, both physically and mentally, on the early Chinese immigrants and their wives far from home, and was an unrelenting destruction of humanity" (p. 125). By situating the analysis within an intersectional framework, this study seeks to reveal how patriarchy and racism jointly marginalize its women, thereby deepening our understanding of their lived experiences and drawing attention to persistent issues of sexism and racial discrimination.

2. Female Lament in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

In a society dominated by bachelors, the presence of women carries great significance (Wu, 1997, p. 50). In *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Chu depicts several women with distinct personalities and traits, among whom Lau Shee, Mei Oi, and the Jook Sing girls stand out the most. They respectively represent the stoic, conflicted, and marginalized female groups within the Chinese immigrant experience. The presence of these women not only reflects the tragic circumstances of Chinese immigrants but also reveals the resilience and struggles of Chinese women under the dual oppression of patriarchy and racism.

2.1 The Stoic Victim of Sacrifice

In the Chinese New Year of 2025, *Detective Chinatown 1900* was released, which brought attention to the Chinese workers involved in the construction of the United States. In the mid-nineteenth century, large numbers of Chinese immigrants were drawn to the United States by the allure of the Gold Rush. They played a significant role in major undertakings in American history, including the development of California's gold mines, the expansion of agriculture in the West, the cultivation of plantations in the South, and the construction of the transcontinental railroad. In 1862, the United States began to build the Pacific Railroad across the North American continent, of which the western section, which traversed the entire Sierra Nevada mountain range, was the most difficult, and a large number of white workers left the job. In 1864, the railroad company began recruiting Chinese workers on a large scale, and tens of thousands of Chinese workers participated in the construction, accounting for approximately 85% of the railroad's workforce. Despite their dedication and hard work, the first Chinese immigrants lived at the bottom of American society, unable to enjoy any civil rights, and were indiscriminately marginalised by a hostile culture.

1882 saw the enactment of *the Chinese Exclusion Act*, which stipulated that Chinese labourers were prohibited from entering the United States for a period of ten years and were simultaneously denied the right to acquire U.S. citizenship through naturalisation. In conjunction with *the Page Act* of 1875, its enforcement in practice barred the vast majority of Chinese women from admission, making it extremely difficult for the wives of Chinese labourers as well as single Chinese women to immigrate. At the same time, the widespread anti-miscegenation laws in various U.S. states imposed further restrictions on marriages between Chinese men and American women, and American women who married Chinese men often faced the loss of their citizenship and associated civil rights. The federal government's exclusionary immigration policies and institutionalised racial segregation thus placed Chinese men in a prolonged state of isolation in the United States, preventing them from establishing secure and complete family lives. *The Chinese Exclusion Act* was not repealed until 1943. During that time, many single Chinese men chose to go back to China to marry and return to the United States when their wives became pregnant, thus fulfilling their mission of marrying and having children. However, this practice also contributed to the formation of a peculiar bachelor society in Chinatown.

In *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Lau Shee, the mother of the hero Ben Loy, is one of the many women who were left behind by their American husbands. Her husband, Wang Wah Gay, returned to his hometown in 1923, and due to *the Chinese Exclusion Act* at the time, they were unable to travel to the United States together after they were married, so Wang Wah Gay had no choice but to leave her behind in his hometown of Sunwei District in Guangdong Province. Lau Shee thus became a typical "Jinshan woman" (Tan, 2010, p. 32), a group of females who stayed in their homes and spent most of their lives in a state of widowhood-like solitude. The Pearl River Delta folk song, "Away from home, across the distant seas, for ten long years he scarcely thinks of his native land. By the roadside, willows trail their tender green. At the same time, in her chamber, the young wife pines in grief untold" (Tan, 2010, p. 39), is a reflection of this tragic fate. Faced with the reality that their husbands never return, these women are often forced to shoulder the heavy burden of the family, and even "marry the rooster" (Tan, 2010, p. 33), symbolically keeping a marriage that does not exist. The hostility and lack of acceptance of Chinese in American society kept Lau Shee and her husband separated and unable to reunite. "Maybe next year. Maybe the year after next. And the dutiful wife waited and hoped. She faithfully went to the market place every Sunday and prayed for her husband's return, just as she had fervently pleaded for his return home with the idols at the temples prior to her conversion to Christianity" (Chu, 2002, p. 45). Lau Shee, an

indirect victim of racism, was powerless to change her situation in the face of the irrational immigration policies of the American authorities and could only endure the pain of separation caused by *the Chinese Exclusion Act* in silence.

Moreover, the traditional Chinese patriarchy is equally a boulder weighing on Lau Shee. In traditional Chinese society, men are the decision-makers and dominant figures, while women are seen as subordinate to men. Females are the Other in society, and in order to be accommodated by the patriarchal society, they have to accept a series of requirements stipulated by the patriarchal society, such as obedience to the father at home, obedience to the husband upon marriage, and obedience to the son upon the death of the husband. "Overseas Chinese marriages are a variation of traditional Chinese patriarchal marriages in the process of international migration, … and the females left behind often have to take on social, economic, and family responsibilities that traditionally belonged to their husbands, and their marital lives have changed" (Shen, 2011, p. 68). The ethical thinking of the man is in charge of the outside, the woman is in charge of the inside, is deeply engraved in Lau Shee's bones, and she regards her husband as the pillar of the family's economy, while she herself quietly stays at home and assumes her responsibilities as a wife.

It is written in the novel that Wang Wah Gay left Sunwei District after Lau Shee's pregnancy and never came back. Being in the United States, not only did he not write to Lau Shee frequently, but he also used the excuse of being busy with his business when faced with Lau Shee's expectation for him to return home. From Wang Wah Gay left Sunwei District in 1923 to Ben Loy went to the United States in 1941, China experienced a period of turmoil, marked by the War of Northern Expedition, the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, and other significant events. During this period, Lau Shee single-handedly raised her son and managed household affairs. She harbored little resentment toward her husband's long absence and the lack of his presence in the roles of son and father, instead responding with"sympathy and understanding" (Chu, 2002, p. 45). While she faces all this bravely, she also waits doggedly for her husband's return. "Lau Shee was not alone in her husbandless existence. There were hundreds and hundreds of females in Sunwei like her, whose menfolks had sailed the wide seas for the Beautiful Country and never returned. There remained, however, always the hope that someday they would come back" (Chu, 2002, p. 45).

Lau Shee's waiting and enduring is the group fate of countless left-behind women. Their hope for husbands is motivated by both their affections and the pressure of social opinion. Under the traditional patriarchal discourse, if a female chooses to remarry, she will be accused of unchastity, so most of them can only choose to put up with it, and even regard fidelity as an honour. However, this fidelity is not exchanged for respect. When her husband, Wang Wah Gay, receives Lau Shee's letter, "Even before he opened the letter, he was sure he knew what was in it. It was the same old story. Money" (Chu, 2002, p. 23). Wang Wah Gay took it for granted that Lau Shee's letters were evidence of her asking him for money, but completely ignored the fact that letters were the only bridge Lau Shee had to communicate with him. Only through these letters could the lonely and helpless Lau Shee feel the existence of her husband and a complete family. After her son goes to the United States, Lau Shee still does not break away from the traditional role of a wife and qualified mother; she takes her son's lifelong affairs as her own task and urges her husband to help her son get married as soon as possible. It can be said that Lau Shee lacks an ego; she does not have a life of her own, but instead centres her life around her entire family. She could have left her husband in a foreign land, stopped worrying about her adult son's married life, and been herself again. However, Lau Shee found many ways to maintain her relationship with her husband, who was far away in the United States, even by converting her faith as a way to hold on to her emotional ties. "She had been an active church member since. Whenever her husband sent a remittance back home, she would take out a certain amount to donate to the church, saying that herhusband had so indicated, This made her feel very proud of him" (Chu, 2002, p. 45). Lau Shee's numbness and obedience to patriarchy shows us "a group of forgotten females; a group of stoic chaste females; a group full of existential pain and embarrassment" (Xie, 2015, pp. 68-69).

Thus, Lau Shee is not only a stoic wife but also a victim of transnational patriarchy and racist policies. The meaning of her life has been reduced to the status of wife and mother, and her emotions have been suppressed to waiting and obedience. Lau Shee, in the novel, epitomises the thousands of Jinshan women who were silent but carried the heaviest family and social responsibilities. Their existence reveals a long-neglected group in the history of early Chinese immigrants, those females who were not in the United States but who suffered greatly from American immigration policies and Chinese patriarchal culture.

2.2 The Contradiction Between Obedience and Rebellion

It is mentioned above that Lau Shee is an indirect victim of racism, a victim of patriarchy, and her obedience and stoicism make her life a tragedy. Compared with Lau Shee, the character of Mei Oi is more complicated. She tries to resist under the oppression of patriarchy and wants to free herself from it, but her resistance is incomplete and unsuccessful.

As a woman born and raised in China, Mei Oi was brought up with traditional values and moral teachings, which were strongly shaped by the patriarchal system. The famous Chinese writer Lu Xun (2005, p. 134) once said, "In China, parental authority is important, but paternal authority is even more so," and the authority of the father has always been considered sacrosanct. Although Mei Oi's father, Lee Gong, is a frequent visitor to Jinshan, this does not diminish his dominant position in the family. Mei Oi shows absolute obedience as well as fear of her father's power. When Lee Gong takes it upon himself to betroth Mei Oi to the son of an old friend, she readily accepts her father's assigned marriage, and neither hesitates nor resists. What's more, Mei Oi's external image reflects the requirements of traditional Chinese patriarchal society for females. At the first meeting between Mei Oi and Ben Loy, Chu writes that Mei Oi "wore a dull blue cotton long dress" and "The soft, clear skin was

without blemish, smooth like ivory. Her full lips, forming a small mouth, were cherry-red. Her nose wasstraight and delicate, perfect as a distant star" (Chu, 2002, p. 50). From his description, it can be seen that Mei Oi was a pure and natural rural girl, and she fully conformed to the traditional Chinese man's demand for a well-read, gentle, and virtuous wife. Finally, Mei Oi's emphasis and insistence on having offspring reflect her tradition and conservatism. The traditional Chinese patriarchal system advocates the principle that there are three unfilial things, of which having no offspring is the greatest, which requires that children must shoulder the responsibility of carrying on the family line, or else they will be labelled as unfilial. After her marriage, Mei Oi was committed to the conception of a new life; in her view, "A married woman without a little one feels naked at social gatherings" (Chu, 2002, p. 169) and would attract the judgment of rakish men and women, so the loss of her husband Ben Loy's sexual function made her suffer immensely. Later, confined to traditional ethics, Mei Oi reacts violently when she learns that she is pregnant: "She wanted to tell the whole world she was pregnant. She was going to have a baby after all! … She hurried to the mirror to stare at the soon-to-be-mother" (Chu, 2002, p. 104). Ironically, the child is not Ben Loy's, but that of Mei Oi and her lover, Ah Song. Nonetheless, Mei Oi, who is traditional and conservative at heart, views nurturing life as a crucial means of upholding her conventional ethical values.

Facing the oppression of the suffocating patriarchy, Mei Oi has also tried to resist. Her resistance is primarily manifested in her pursuit of realising her self-worth. When she first arrives in the United States, Mei Oi stays at home all day long. Her husband Ben Loy's unspeakable secret and her busy work schedule make Mei Oi's life boring and lonely. She tries to find a job for herself to relieve her worries, but to no avail. In America, where all men are equal, the bachelors of Chinatown seem to be unaffected by this new thinking. They still adhere to the traditional Chinese patriarchal ideology that a woman's job is to teach her children and run a household. In addition to consulting Ben Loy, Mei Oi also takes orders from her father-in-law, Wang Wah Gay, about her work. For Mei Oi, who lacks the financial means and social connections to support her, her challenge to the traditional family roles is doomed to failure.

Mei Oi's resistance also lies in her revolt against the conjugal ethic, an informal, deviant striving for females' right to enjoy themselves. The Chinese society in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is a bachelor-centred society. Due to their marginalised status in American culture, these Chinese in a foreign land are neither able to integrate into American society fully nor can they perfectly inherit the best Chinese traditions. Their daily pastimes are dominated by prostitution and gambling, behaviours that are not accepted by mainstream Chinese culture but are rationalised in Chinatown, and even females, represented by Ben Loy's cousin's wife, Eng Shee, find these behaviours acceptable. The traditional Chinese patriarchal system is far harsher on females than on men, and the Chinese community, since there are more men than females, is more tolerant of females to a certain extent, but still inevitably from a strong male power perspective, demanding that females should not be as sexually active as men, but rather should be faithful and keep the rules and raise children.

In his introduction to the 1979 edition of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Jeffrey Paul Chan (Chu, 2002, p. 5) writes that "Mei Oi's adultery represents comic revenge perpetrated by the wives who remained in the villages of Kwantung while their husbands played mah jong in New York". It can be argued that Mei Oi's infidelity is caused in large part by hearing about her husband's dishonourable past. Mei Oi has always kept her principles in the face of Ah Song's seduction, but when she hears from Ah Song that her husband "was a regular customer at the local whorehouses" (Chu, 2002, p. 94), she breaks down. She could not accept the reality that her husband was out to have a fling and could not fulfil his conjugal duties to her. Thus, she prefers to violate the ethics of fidelity, indulges in Ah Song's flowery words, and commits the act of betraying her husband. Up to this point, it can be seen that Mei Oi has challenged the traditional ethics of husband and wife by arguing that it is not only men who have the right to enjoy themselves, but that women also have such a right. Since men are not bound by traditional morality, women are also allowed to act out of line. This can also be seen in the conversation between Mei Oi and her relative Eng Shee. When learning of Mei Oi's infidelity, Eng Shee deliberately voiced reproaches, with her words saturated with criticism of Mei Oi's unfaithfulness and with a clear defense of male authority. In response, Mei Oi hit back relentlessly: "Some females would like to have a baby by another man, but they don't get the opportunity because no one else would have them. … Some would stay home and just dream of a pretty boy whom she could never have. That's very true, isn't it?" (Chu, 2002, p. 168). Instead of being remorseful about her cheating behaviour, Mei Oi takes this attraction to men as her proud capital, and her attitude towards traditional morality and ethics is clearly transformed.

This mindset of Mei Oi is also reflected in her relationship with Ben Loy's old friend, Chin Yuen. The relationship between the two undergoes a severe test when Ben Loy learns of Mei Oi's cheating behaviour. The fate of Ah Song also shows Mei Oi how her father and father-in-law treat those who cheat. Nevertheless, Mei Oi boldly displays her beauty when confronted by Chin Yuen; she intentionally puts on the gold necklace given by her father-in-law, puts on delicate makeup, and even entertains this heterosexual guest in front of her husband in an almost seductive manner. Mei Oi's series of behaviors not only demonstrates her growing self-confidence during this period but also reveals a rebellious spirit at her core. Rather than submitting to male authority, she resists it, taking pleasure in earning attention and admiration through her own abilities.

Through the above analysis, it is not difficult to find that Mei Oi's resistance is carried out with the help of her own body and beauty. Although this kind of resistance affects the patriarchy to a certain extent, Mei Oi herself also pays the price. At the end of the novel, Mei Oi and Ben Loy are reconciled. Mei Oi willingly admits her mistake of cheating on Ben Loy and looks forward to starting a new life with him. She returns to her traditional role as a wife, and the rebellion is over for the time being. Mei Oi's

incomplete rebellion against the patriarchy is doomed to failure. Whoever holds the economic power holds the initiative. In a foreign country, Mei Oi was always dependent on male power, and it was difficult for her to detach herself from the Chinese society in which she lived. This also reflects the fact that the Chinese at that time did not integrate into the American mainstream culture, and it was difficult for them to be inculcated by its mainstream thinking. They were isolated aliens who reproduced the traditions of their homeland in a foreign land.

2.3 The Marginalised Other in Chinatown

In *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Chu mentions a special group of females, the Jook Sing girls. The term "Jook Sing" was coined by the first generation of overseas Chinese immigrants to describe the descendants of Chinese born and raised in the United States. In the eyes of elder generations, the Jook Sing Chinese lacked cultural roots, had no fundamental ideas or traditions to carry, and appeared to be free, but like a hollow bamboo pole, they wavered and were not accepted by either side. In the novel, the Jook Sing girls do not appear as independent and specific characters, but are indirectly presented through the talk and rejection of men in Chinatown. This writing style is ironic: they are absent from the textual level, but are repeatedly constructed and stared at in the narrative, revealing their marginalised identities that are always outside the mainstream narrative. In other words, the existence of the Jook Sing girls is a kind of discursive existence. "These American-born girls conform neither to the values of Chinatown males nor to American values" (Wang, 2011, p. 26). They do not speak out as subjects, but as objects to be discussed and evaluated, and thus lack a real identity.

In the shaping of American mainstream culture, Chinese females have long been alienated as the Oriental wonders. The media and film productions have constantly exported two polarised images: the soft, docile "Lotus Woman" waiting to be rescued and the cold, alluring, and dangerous "Dragon Woman". This dichotomous cultural imagination has a direct impact on society's perception of Chinese-American females, making them seen as a projection of desire, "an object to be looked at as a mere body, appraised only in terms of its appearance" (Longhurst et al., 2014, p. 203). For example, in the movie *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), in which Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong stars, Chinese-American women are portrayed as victims who are dependent on white males; in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), they are portrayed as cold-blooded and sexually seductive. In the real American society, Chinese-American women had the same low social status and could only engage in some vulgar and straightforward jobs, even selling their bodies. The scope of their activities was also confined to the Chinese community, and intermarriages with other races were rare.

Although Jook Sing girls who grew up in the United States can communicate fluently in English and try to imitate the values of the American society, make themselves look more open with the help of external dress and pursue happiness and romantic love, their efforts backfire due to the lack of in-depth understanding of the American culture and the stereotypical image of Chinese females in the United States society. The excessive openness and hedonistic values of Jook Sing girls were a misinterpretation of the mainstream American culture at the time, and a replica of the "Oriental spectacle that met the psychological needs of Western audiences" (Hu, 2013, p. 20) as propagated by the American media at the time. Therefore, they have still not escaped the fate of being marginalised by American mainstream society.

At the same time, the patriarchal order of Chinatown also labelled the Jook Sing girls in another way. "The Chinese community in New York maintains many of the feudal traditions of old China, a closed, patriarchal society ruled by older men with strict hierarchies and double standards" (Wu, 1997, p. 49). In this community, to be recognised, females must conform to the traditional model of a good wife and mother: humble, submissive, and thrifty. However, the sense of independence and the pursuit of equality shown by the Jook Sing girls are in intense conflict with this tradition. For example, they downplayed the traditional notion of seniority and used to call people by their first names, which in the eyes of Chinese men, represented by Wang Wah Gay, was a serious disrespect, believing that "Girls born in China are better. They are courteous and modest. Not like these jook sings born in New York" (Chu, 2002, p. 19).

In the eyes of these Chinese men, Jook Sing girls have abandoned the virtues and etiquette of traditional Chinese females, and are wasteful, pleasure-seeking, and ungentlefemalesly. Even with the extreme scarcity of females in the Chinese community, they only use them as a tool for amusement. For example, in Wang Wah Gay's opinion, Jook Sing girls can't tell good from bad, and "They are always going out and having a good time. Always new clothes, new shoes, new hats. Expensive perfumes. You needed to be a millionaire to support them" (Chu, 2002, p. 44). The Jook Sing girls' bold dressing styles and advocacy for relationships challenge the traditional Chinese patriarchy. When it came time to consider a life-long relationship for his son Ben Loy, Wang Wah Gay first excluded the Jook Sing girls. He believes that these Jook Sing girls, infected by the liberal and avant-garde culture of the United States, will lead his son, whom he has worked so hard to bring up on the right path, astray, and that his son may even marry an unwed woman who is pregnant. Therefore, he would rather have his son travel thousands of miles back to China to choose a traditional woman from his hometown to marry than to get entangled with these Jook Sing girls. For Wang Wah Gay, the ideal wife should be as hard-working and devoted as Lau Shee. The Jook Sing girls are far from the perfect image of a wife in his mind, as traditional parental authority fails to exert any influence over them. They have long become a pastime and a subject of laughter for men after meals, with their value reduced to a symbolic body and an object of desire.

The tragedy of the Jook Sing girls lies not only in their rejection but also in the fact that their identity is caught between two cultures, forming a floating modernity. Their outward modernity is often viewed as licentious by the patriarchal society and as

unqualified imitators in American society. This in-between identity makes them neither equally accepted by the mainstream Western society nor truly recognised by the Chinese community. Their modernisation, therefore, carries a false appearance without social support and cultural recognition; it can only be reduced to a pompous or even ironic symbol. Jook Sing girls are the symbol of this suspended identity, and they are like pavilions in the air, seemingly close to freedom, but without a solid foundation.

3. Conclusions

The lament of the females in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* does not stem solely from personalities or family conflicts but is deeply embedded in the history of immigration policy and social structure in the United States. *The Page Act* of 1875 became the first restrictive federal immigration law in the United States, which, under the guise of preventing prostitution, in fact prevented the entry of the vast majority of Chinese women into the country. Subsequently, *the Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 formally excluded Chinese labourers from entering the country and de facto cut off the possibility of Chinese men being reunited with their wives. By 1890, there were very few Chinese females in the United States. This extreme gender imbalance led to the perpetuation of the bachelor society in Chinatown. In this deformed social structure, the absence or distorted incarnation of females became a structural tragedy.

Lau Shee's long wait in the novel is a reflection of the Jinshan women. They are forced to bear the loneliness and labour in their hometown, with little choice but to pray and write letters to maintain the symbolic existence of their family. This fate perfectly matches the large number of Chinese wives who were left behind in China due to legal barriers at that time. Mei Oi's contradictions and rebellions are not only ethical deviations, but a response to an institutionalised marriage that emasculates the normal conjugal relationship. Her body becomes the only way to rebel against patriarchal power and institutional deprivation, which makes her rebellion bear the imprint of the times. As for the Jook Sing girls, as American-born Chinese females, they had the opportunity to engage with new Western ideas, but became rootless between the two cultures under the double attack of the patriarchal gaze of Chinatown and the discrimination of American society. Therefore, the female tragedy presented in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is not just a personal or family story, but the result of institutional segregation, ethnic discrimination, and patriarchal tradition working together. By studying the pathos of the three Chinese females in Chu's book, the article helps us to understand the real life of early Chinese immigrants in America and the double oppression they suffered from racism and Chinese patriarchal traditions.

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