19TH CENTURY FOLK SONGS FROM “GOLD MOUNTAIN”

The following folk songs were collected and first written down by a literary society in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The songs reprinted here express two common themes, the Chinese immigrants’ longing for those left at home and frustration with their treatment in the United States.

Since you left for North America,
You haven’t thought of me for twenty long years.
You’ve banished me to solitude and to my knitted brows.
It’s wrong for lovers to be separated in two places.
O, you are bad!
You don’t feel a thing for your poor wife.
You care only for your fun and games outside.
And I must live with the fate of separation for the rest of my life!

What is the tone of the narrator in this song?

What “fun and games” does she think her partner has chosen instead of returning to his family in China?

Would you wait for someone for “twenty long years”?

Fellow countrymen, four hundred million strong;
Many are great, with exceptional talents.
We want to come to the Flowery Flag Nation but are barred;
The Golden Gate is firmly locked, without even a crack to crawl through.
This moment -
Truly deplorable is the imprisonment.
Our hearts ache in pain and shame;
Though talented, how can we put on wings and fly past the barbarians?

Why does the narrator refer to the Golden Gate as being “firmly locked”?

Who are the “barbarians” mentioned in the last line?
How long do you think the author of this folk song expected to stay in the United States when he arrived?

What may have prevented him from going home?

What are some of the obstacles he might have encountered?

What are the complaints he is sending home to China?

From whose point of view is this song written?

What do you think this “forsaken” narrator’s prospects are for a happy future? What options are open to her?

Why does she mention her “parents-in-law”?

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*“Glue and lacquer” is a conventional metaphor used for an ideal marital relationship.