

Ship of Fates

Caitlin Chung

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Caitlin Chung's wondrous *Ship of Fates* begins with the ancient legend of Wong Zhi Mei, a Chinese bride promised by her family to a foreign suitor. But teenage Mei yearns for true love, and she steals the suitor's proffered gold and runs away.

Riding on a whale with the gold hidden in its belly, Mei crosses a "violent ocean," then hurls the gold over "poppy-covered hills" when she reaches land. The land is California. Centuries later, Mei's rebellious theft leads to the frenzied 1848 Gold Rush.

Cursed by the gods, Mei's punishment is to remain trapped in a lighthouse along San Francisco's Barbary Coast, where she must stay until she can find a young bride to replace her. As the lighthouse keeper, she witnesses the arrival of hopeful immigrants seeking California's hidden treasure. The docked ship of an Irishman becomes a place for these gold seekers to drink and gamble, until it is won by the cunning Madam Toy in a poker game.

With beautiful, tempered language, *Ship of Fates* weaves history and lore into a captivating, otherworldly tale. Its characters are as vibrant as its chaotic and carousing backdrop, centered around Mei's desperate, restless spirit. Jack flees the Irish famine for California and starts a successful saloon, yet he soon gambles it all away. Madam Toy cultivates and exploits the weaknesses of men, and while she takes in homeless girls, she involves them in prostitution without compunction.

The American immigrant experience is integral to *Ship of Fates*, in which California's population swells as people are lured to its shores "like a Pacific current." Mei's gold brings fame and fortune to the state, but the plight of Asian women, who are sold into arranged marriages, bought like whiskey, or even won in poker games, remains unchanged, just as Mei remains in her lighthouse, condemned for wanting to live her own life.

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