This is the story of LaLu Nathoy and her struggles against racism, sexism, and her fight for freedom and independence. In the late 1860’s, LaLu lives in Northern China with her family. They are a happy clan, and she does her best to please her father by helping as a farmer when times are tough.

Unfortunately, bandits run rampant in Lalu’s village, forcing her father to sell her in order for the rest of the family to survive. She is bought by Chen, who eventually sells her to a Madam under pretenses of becoming a prostitute.

However, Lalu is shipped to San Francisco, to be “auctioned off” as either a Chinese wife, or a prostitute. She has no say in her future, as it is made implicitly clear to her that she must repay her debt.
After being “bought” by Jim, she is transported to the town of Warrens, Idaho, to be kept as a prostitute for saloon owner, Hong King. Jim is something of a confidante to Lalu initially; however, she must endure mistreatment and cruelty at the hands of Hong King. Her name is immediately changed to “Polly,” and she becomes the novelty “China Doll” whose sole purpose is to please the men of the small town.

After working at Hong King’s saloon, Polly is befriended by Charlie Bemis, who owns the saloon next door. After Jim dies, Charlie becomes Polly’s companion, her escape from a life filled with men who want nothing but pleasure from her. After “winning” Polly from a game of poker, Charlie essentially “gives” her conditional freedom; although Polly is free from prostitution, the Chinese Exclusion Act prevents her from really having freedom. She is unable to own land, and she is unable to become a citizen. After enduring hardships from being a foreign-born woman, Polly must now endure the anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States.
Pacific Chivalry.

This Thomas Nast cartoon first appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1879. It illustrates the unsympathetic attitude of many eastern journals toward California’s mistreatment of the Chinese. (*Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.*)
The West was experiencing the Gold Rush, and so many new settlers, from all descents, were traveling in hopes to uncover gold. At Charlie’s urging, Polly and Charlie marry to ensure her rights and property that are solely hers. He also wants to ensure her freedom from deportation, since U.S. anti-immigration sentiment was at a high.

Charlie and Polly live a happy life together, and eventually build their dream house by Salmon Creek in Idaho.
Polly becomes something of a mother figure to the community of Warrens, making many friends and connections. Although she is treated well, she often realizes that she is an Asian woman amongst many white settlers. After Charlie’s death, Polly lives out the rest of her years as a caretaker for those in need, always keeping a happy demeanor.

Polly Bemis experienced many hardships throughout her life. From being an “improper” farmhand in Northern China, sold to slavery and then prostitution, living in an era where anti-immigration feelings ran rampant, and being one of few Asian Americans living in a predominantly white area, Polly proved to be of strong character. Throughout her struggles, she managed to live an extremely fulfilling life. Although her independence was due largely to her marriage to Charlie, a white citizen, Polly beat the odds in terms of establishing herself and her freedom. She struggled against and eventually beat the odds dealt against her in terms of racism and sexism.