

## Article

# Immigrant Exclusion Acts: On Early Chinese Labor and Domestic Matriarchal Agency in Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family*

Xiao Di Tong<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801, USA; xiaodi.tong@gmail.com; Tel.: +1-617-913-9835

<sup>2</sup> Racial Formation, 250 Kennedy Drive APT 709, Malden, MA 02148, USA

**Abstract:** In the introduction to her influential work on Asian American cultural studies and feminist materialist critique, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe shatters the contradictions manifested in Asian immigration, wherein Asians' entry into the United States marked them either as marginalized from "within" the national political sphere or as linguistically, culturally, and racially "outside" of the national polity. For Asian immigrants, the debate of being simultaneously needed and excluded is no more evidenced historically than using Chinese labor during the California Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century. Their migratory relocation was hardly met with ease and public enthusiasm, however. Evoking anxiety in their Anglo counterparts, the Chinese were characterized as foreign noncitizens: barbaric, alien, and dangerous, the quintessential "yellow peril" threatening to displace white European immigrants such as the Irish. The irrational fear of the "Oriental" from the Far East led to a succession of immigration exclusion laws passed by Congress that denied the Chinese from entering the U.S. and their rights to naturalization in 1882. Passed by Congress and signed by President Chester A. Arthur, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act suspended the entry of Chinese laborers into the U.S. based on their nationality for ten years. This paper argues that the possibility of agency for Chinese workers existed throughout the exclusionary period. Specifically, this site of agency resides with Chinese women and is expressed through a literary mode. For instance, Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family* (1948) captures this moment of immigrant agency in the post-exclusion era. Lin, a pioneering Chinese writer and inventor who wrote texts such as *My Country and My People* (1935), *The Importance of Living* (1937), and *Moment in Peking* (1939), often utilized his narratives to bridge the clash between the East and West. Identifying what I see as the inadequacy of probing one of the earliest Chinese American texts from a rigid literary mode, I move to reconsider the novel as a legal counternarrative to the three exclusionary laws: the Page Law of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Cable Act of 1922. To direct my critical reorientation of Lin's novel *away from*, though not necessarily *against*, literary castings of this early immigrant tale, I take the narrative as a strategic literary re-imagination that structures itself around these three legislative pieces to critique restrictive practices enacted upon the Chinese. The novel showcases how Chinese immigrants maneuvered and manipulated the legal system in their favor during assimilation. In this context, critical reappraisal is needed in scrutinizing how the Exclusion Act generated a wave of domestic-based diasporic relocation of Chinese workers from California to New York. Due to acute anti-Chinese sentiments on the West Coast, resetting Chinese workers in the northeast in search of a new Gold Mountain led to a unique phenomenon. This dispersal elevated Chinese women as valuable social capitals who transformed metropolises like New York City and redefined their views as nationalist subjects of the "about-to-be" in industrial capitalist modernity. Through a legal framework, then, Lin's portrayal of the Fong clan suggests the emergence of a gendered Sino-immigrant agency, one that enabled the Chinese woman/mother to situate herself as the locus of the traditional patriarchal Chinese entrepreneurial family and the forefront of the northeast industrial capitalist scene.



**Citation:** Tong, Xiao Di. 2024. Immigrant Exclusion Acts: On Early Chinese Labor and Domestic Matriarchal Agency in Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family*. *Genealogy* 8: 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8010021>

Received: 9 January 2024

Revised: 6 February 2024

Accepted: 13 February 2024

Published: 21 February 2024



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**Keywords:** family; immigration; Chinese; ethnicity; law; U.S. history

## 1. Introduction

In the introduction to her influential work on Asian American cultural studies and feminist materialist critique, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe shatters the contradictions manifested in Asian immigration, wherein Asians' entry into the United States marked them either as marginalized from "within" the national political sphere or as linguistically, culturally, and racially "outside" of the national polity (Lowe 1999, p. 8). While the state purportedly operated on the grounds of democracy that granted membership to all subjects, it simultaneously exploited cheap immigrant workers by racializing and excluding them from political participation in the state from which capital profited (Lowe 1999, p. 183). The terrain of national culture that the individual subject resides, according to Lowe, is "politically formed as the American citizen: a terrain introduced by the Statue of Liberty, discovered by the immigrant, dreamed in a common language and defended in battle by the independent, self-made man" (Lowe 1999, p. 2). When the subject is immersed in this repertoire of American memories, domain language, social hierarchy, law, etc., the subject inevitably experiences the "American feeling" and its ethos and pathos of being (Lowe 1999, p. 2). The enduring slippage to the "terrain of national culture", however, maintains its unattainable status for Asian immigrants, or as Lowe articulates, the "American citizen [is] defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and economically" (Lowe 1999, p. 4).

## 2. Historical Background

For Asian immigrants, the debate of being simultaneously needed and excluded is no more evidenced historically than using Chinese labor during the California Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century. Upon discovering gold, a massive exodus of human subjects, particularly Chinese laborers, miners, and railroad builders, sought employment overseas and migrated to the state. At the watershed moment, they attracted an influx of people from various regions of the United States to California. A special state census in 1852 reported that the non-Native American population of the state totaled over 250,000, of which 47 percent resided in the most prominent mining sites: Calaveras, El Dorado, Mariposa, Florida, Placer, Sierra, and Tuolumne (Kanazawa 2005, p. 781). Though many miners came from foreign countries such as Mexico, Chile, and other European regions, the Chinese comprised nearly one-third of the population in all seven California counties. According to Mark Kanazawa, about 25,000 Chinese immigrants comprised 10 percent of the total non-American Indian population and over 35 percent of the total foreign-born ethnic group in California (Kanazawa 2005, p. 781). Most early Chinese immigrants came from the southern provinces of Kwangtung (modern name Guangdong, or its capital, Canton) and Fukien in China (Chinese and Westward Expansion 2003). They were part of a massive departure from southeast China for economic advancement while fleeing their homeland's political upheaval and corruption (Chinese and Westward Expansion 2003). In hopes of reaching *Kum Sum* or the Gold Mountain, Chinese immigrants flocked to the San Francisco port during the state's economic boon, while maintaining the intention to return home upon their fortune-seeking voyage (Chua 2007, p. xvi).

However, their migratory relocation could have been met with ease and public enthusiasm. Newly settled in California, the Chinese were an anomaly whose presence disrupted the narrative structure of the community. Chinese immigration, according to Robert Lee, became a metonym for the "collapse of time and space produced by the transition to industrial capitalism, a collapse that constituted a boundary crisis within the symbolic or ideological structure of American society" (Lee 2010a).

The cheap, proletarianized Chinese labor—the "coolie" labor—fulfilled the capitalist demand that was needed in the state's transition from an agricultural economy to a market

economy (Tong 2015). The “coolie” labor’s profitability was more exploitable because of the Chinese’s status as “free” labor in contrast to their African counterparts. During the 1870s and 1880s, Chinese workers collectively became proletarianized and racially excluded “coolies”, an inferior labor class that was unable to transcend their status as wage labor to independent producers of the economy (Lee 2010b, p. 59). Unfree and obedient, the Chinese “coolie” symbolized a threat to the Anglo working-class culture, or the “Free labor”, and embodied a potential danger that contaminated the American labor market (Lee 2010b, p. 51). Evoking anxiety in their Anglo counterparts, the Chinese were characterized as foreign noncitizens: barbaric, alien, and dangerous, the quintessential “yellow peril” threatening to displace white European immigrants such as the Irish.

The irrational fear of the “Oriental” from the Far East led to a succession of immigration exclusion laws passed by Congress that denied the Chinese from entering the U.S. and their rights to naturalization in 1882. Passed by Congress and signed by President Chester A. Arthur, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act suspended the entry of Chinese laborers into the U.S. based on their nationality for ten years (Ryo 2006). With only a few exceptions, this law barred Chinese people from immigrating to the United States. It marked the first time U.S. immigration policy targeted citizens of a particular nation for blanket discrimination (Campi 2004, p. 1). This act provided an absolute 10-year ban on Chinese laborers immigrating to the United States and proscribed an ethnic group as endangering the good order of certain localities (Zhang 2022, p. 1737). This period was held in place with the belief that the Chinese were incapable of “assimilation” into American society, let alone involvement in American political processes. Sarah M. Griffith suggests that the act distinguished Chinese laborers from elite Chinese merchants, diplomats, students, and governmental officials who retained their access to the U.S. However, the exclusion lasted over six decades and further polarized the hierarchy between Chinese merchants and laborers (Griffith 2004, p. 476). While the exclusion was not gender-oriented, before its passage, the Page Law of 1875 barred Chinese laborers’ spouses, exclusively women, from migrating to the U.S., for they were looked at as indistinguishable from prostitutes. The legal prohibition with fixed gender rules did not stop there. In what followed, the Cable Act of 1922 stripped female citizens of their U.S. citizenship if they married an “alien ineligible to citizenship” (Lowe 1999, p. 187 n 33). The act was the ultimate state policing of interracial intimacy that would taint the sexual purity of white women and the superiority of the Anglo race. The legal system, in this context, became the apparatus that legitimized the universality of the state and its political stance on the immigration of the Chinese, the most undesirable alien group, at the turn of the century.

### 3. Materials and Methods: Novel of Study

Not to be cast aside by the state’s absolute control, immigrants, inscribed by the law as an exotic threat, did maneuver through the legal institution through subversive means. This paper argues that the possibility of agency for Chinese workers existed throughout the exclusionary period. Specifically, this site of agency resides with Chinese women and is expressed through a literary mode. For instance, Lin Yutang’s *Chinatown Family* (1948) captures this moment of immigrant agency in the post-exclusion era (Lin 2007). The novel focuses on the life of the Fong family of Chinese immigrants living and assimilating in New York City in the 1930s. Tom, Sr. runs a laundry while his son, Tom, Jr., must learn English and read Walt Whitman. After the death of Tom, Sr., from a horrific car accident, the family inherits a large amount of money and opens a Chinese restaurant—a tragic but typical American story.

Lin, a pioneering Chinese writer and inventor who wrote texts such as *My Country and My People* (1935), *The Importance of Living* (1937), and *Moment in Peking* (1939), often utilized his narratives to bridge the clash between the East and West (Lin 1938). *Chinatown Family* was usually interpreted as a unique story that dealt explicitly with the Chinese American experience since literary works on this topic were scarce when Lin published the novel in 1948. As C. Lok Chua accurately points out, it is one of the earliest English

texts by a Chinese writer dealing with the immigrant experience (Chua 2007, p. xvi). Lin's work was only preceded by authors such as Sui Sin Far (pseudonym of Edith Maud Eaton), published during the 1890s through 1910s, and memoir writers like Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong (Chua 2007, p. xvi).

Considering Lin's fictive piece was the first full-length Chinese American novel published by a major New York publisher, John Day Company, many of the textual analyses have centered on the story's critique of the cultural gap Chinese immigrants negotiated between Confucian Chinese ideals and Christian and individualistic materialism of the West. Katherine A. Karle reads *Chinatown Family* as a story comparing two cultures and a *Bildungsroman* (Carle 1988, p. 93). Approaching the novel as a series of balances between the characters, Karle sees the text juxtaposing these figures' reactions to "new world American" concepts with "traditional Chinese philosophy and attitudes (Carle 1988, p. 99). Structuring the narrative on the debate of traditional spirituality of Chinese Taoism and Western modernity, Lin, Karle elaborates, employs the trope of "complementariness", or the "yin and yang" dialectic, to draw attention to the reconciliatory journey that Chinese immigrants experienced in a foreign country (Carle 1988, p. 99). Through a similar lens, C. Lok Chua approaches the text as capturing the assimilation trials of the Fong family in New York City during the 1930s (Chua 1981, p. 61).

Such interpretations, albeit intelligent, have yet to interrogate Lin's writing from a socio-legal framework. Identifying what I see as the inadequacy of probing one of the earliest Chinese American texts from a rigid literary mode, I move to reconsider the novel as a legal counternarrative to the three exclusionary laws: the Page Law of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Cable Act of 1922. It is essential, though, to establish that Lin's novel was written in 1948, six years after the end of WWII, for the text was a critical response to the shifting attitude that the U.S. had towards the Chinese during the interwar period. After Pearl Harbor, Japan became *the* target of America's Pacific War aggressions, whereas China joined the U.S. as Allies and enjoyed a wave of enthusiasm and sympathetic sentiments (Ma 2000, pp. 46–49). Under the leadership of Chiang-Kai-Shek and his American-educated wife, Soong Mayling, China cooperated with the U.S. in resisting Japan's ideal order of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere" and demonstrated that it shared principles of democracy with America (Ma 2000, p. 45). Due to altering sentiments, "The Citizen Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion and Place Immigration on A Quota Basis" was created in New York City on 25 May 1943, by notable intellectuals like Pearl Buck, Richard Walsh, Bruno Lusker, and Henry Luce (Ma 2000, p. 51). Under increasing pressure from the Committee to repeal the Exclusion Acts, establish a quota for Chinese immigrants, and allow eligibility of Chinese immigrants for American citizenship, in May 1943, the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization held public hearings to debate the repeal of the Acts (Ma 2000, p. 52). Against the backdrop of the repeal campaign's call for racial equality and burgeoning East–West collaboration, Lin constructs his novel. The narrative does not respond to legal restrictions imposed upon the Chinese in the mid-nineteenth century, as previously seen. Instead, it is a commentary on the pro-China sentiments seen during the U.S.'s reform of its East Asian foreign policy, which differed from the previously observed antagonism. Earlier interpretations of *Chinatown Family* as a mere tale of "assimilation trials" are thus inadequate in capturing the novel's legal–political underpinning.

#### 4. Analysis

To direct my critical reorientation of Lin's novel *away from*, though, not necessarily *against*, literary castings of this early immigrant tale, I take the narrative as a strategic literary re-imagination that structures itself around these three legislative pieces to critique restrictive practices enacted upon the Chinese (So 2010, p. 42). The novel showcases how Chinese immigrants maneuvered and manipulated the legal system in their favor during assimilation. In this context, critical reappraisal is needed in scrutinizing how the Exclusion Act generated a wave of domestic-based diasporic relocation of Chinese

workers from California to New York. One fundamental difference between “diaspora” and “immigration” is motive: a migration is willing, and a diaspora is forced. This force can be either physical or economic in origin and is coupled with the longing to return and recreate the lost homeland (though the definition of ‘diaspora’ has been expanded in recent debates). The ‘ancestral return’ theme characterizes the diasporic experience and its historic cultural disruption: the culture that Chinese immigrants have left behind is the one to which they cannot return. The homeland becomes an alien land inaccessible within their grasp but accessible only through their imagination. In this context, when I say “homeland”, I am not referring to China but to their settled home in California instead. Due to growing antagonism from Anglo working-class laborers, the Chinese were forced out of California and sought refuge and employment elsewhere. This forced removal from the West Coast counterintuitively created a diasporic agency for Chinese women to become entrepreneurs in northeast industrial centers.

Due to acute anti-Chinese sentiments on the West Coast, relocating Chinese workers in the northeast in search of a new Gold Mountain led to a unique phenomenon. This dispersal elevated Chinese women as valuable social capitals who transformed metropolises like New York City and redefined their views as nationalist subjects of the “about-to-be” in industrial capitalist modernity (Koshy 1996, p. 315; Yang 2010, p. 64). Through a legal framework, then, Lin’s portrayal of the Fong clan suggests the emergence of a gendered Sino-immigrant agency, one that enabled the Chinese woman/mother to situate herself as the locus of the traditional patriarchal Chinese entrepreneurial family and the forefront of the northeast industrial capitalist scene.

However, my critical intervention of Lin’s novel through a legal–historical methodology is not discursively sought after. Lowe sees law as the apparatus that “binds and seals the universality of the nation’s political body” (Lowe 1999, p. 8). The immigrant produced by the law as a margin and threat to that symbolic whole is “precisely a generative site for the critique of that universality” (Lowe 1999, p. 8). Through this logic, we need to approach Lin’s novel as a locus of legal and political restriction of Asians re-imagined through literary production. The Chinese Exclusion Act, the Page Law, and the Cable Act symbolize the ultimate apparatus of state policing. In Ariela J. Gross’s study of racial identity trials, *What Blood Will not Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America*, the author foregrounds the court cases as the interlocutor in determining a person’s race and attendant rights and privileges. Through her examination, Gross approaches the construction of whiteness and the volatile race category as constituted *by* and *within* the courtroom. In her account, law has been “a crucial institution in creating racial meanings at every level” (Gross 2008, p. 12).

She goes on to say:

The courtroom conclusions about how to decide a person’s racial identity reverberated through American culture because of the importance of the courtroom as a cultural arena. Moreover, while many cultural institutions participate in creating racial meanings, legal institutions often had the final word. A legal case could fix the identity of an individual or an entire national group with a conclusiveness that was hard to overturn (Gross 2008, p. 12).

This paper uses specific congressional acts as a historical framework in interrogating the constitution of immigrant subjectivity in literary expressions through a legal context. Federal exclusionary policies codified the racial meanings of early Chinese immigrants. Administrative and legislative identity determination was crucial in barring Chinese immigrants from obtaining naturalization and U.S. citizenship.

Though much scholarship on Chinese exclusion has focused on most Chinese subjects settling in California, the migratory patterns from the West Coast to other regions of the country, like the Mid-Atlantic, have mainly been ignored (Lo 2008, pp. 383–409). This diasporic movement across the continental U.S. from West to East domestically enabled individual Chinese women, in Lin’s narrative at least, to develop strategies to surmount the limitations imposed on them. After Fong Sr.’s death, Mother Fong inhabited the matriarchal power position and led the family to capitalist fulfillment with the restaurant’s

successful operation. Despite discriminatory practices, Lin allows the emergence of a capitalist Chinese female figure amid legal exclusion, labor exploitation, and political marginalization. Lowe conceptualizes immigration as the locus of legal and political disenfranchisement of Asians and a site for the “emergence of critical negation of the nation-state for which those legislations are the expression” (Lowe 1999, p. 9). Thus, Lin’s writing becomes a complex site for a critical response to Chinese exclusion and its historical legacy. It narrates the possibility of a female figure on the outskirts of capitalism’s periphery. It yet is soon propelled to the forefront of sociopolitical terrain previously dominated by a heteromale economy. The novel is an incisive legal counternarrative disguised in literary form that explores the potential of Chinese women traversing into the male arena of commerce and politics. It places the Chinese woman as a potent subject who transforms the national culture by inscribing the Asian immigrant’s definition not as a *contradiction* but as a *continuum* of the definition of American citizenry and domestic market economy that it fuels.

## 5. Discussion

### Gold Rush and the Anti-Chinese Fervor

Much of Lin’s novel can be read as a literary–legal counternarrative to the anti-Chinese agitation espoused during the California Gold Rush. As a landmark historical event, the discovery of gold altered the economic and sociopolitical landscape of the American western frontier. In 1848, John A. Sutter, a Swiss American pioneer, was building a sawmill with the contractor and builder of the mill, James W. Marshall, when both discovered gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, California. In his own words, Sutter himself recalled the discovery:

It was a rainy afternoon when Mr. Marshall arrived at my office in the Fort. It was very wet. I was somewhat surprised to see him, as he was down a few days previous; and then, I sent up to Coloma several teams with provisions, mill irons, etc., etc. He told me then that he had some important and interesting news that he wished to communicate secretly to me and wished me to go with him to a place where we should not be disturbed and where no listeners could come and hear what we had to say. I went with him to my private rooms; he requested me to lock the door; I complied [. . .] Marshall took a rag from his pocket, showing me the yellow metal: he had about two ounces of it, but how quick Mr. M. put the yellow metal in his pocket again can hardly be described. [. . .] Then Mr. M. began to show me this metal, which consisted of small pieces and specimens, some of them worth a few dollars; he told me that he had expressed his opinion to the laborers at the mill, that this might be gold; but some of them were laughing at him and called him a crazy man, and could not believe such a thing” (“[The Discovery of Gold in California n.d.](#)”).

Sutter and Marshall’s startling unearthing turned the American terrain into a domestic-based phenomenon that the entire nation partook in and capitalized on. The massive continental movement to California transformed the United States into a globalized market economy with an influx of immigrants from within the states and beyond.

Lin’s novel sets up the narrative against the backdrop of the California Gold Rush. The male protagonist, Tom Fong, the paternal figure, migrated from China to the United States amid the spectacle of gold:

Family legends told that he had come to the United States with the Alaska gold rush. San Francisco was known to all Cantonese back home as Old Gold Mountain, and to the overseas Chinese in America as the Great Port. Their father has sent home what were called “gold dollars.” What Cantonese villager on the south coast—in Toishan, Sunwei, Fanyu—had not heard of the gold country? (Lin 2007, p. 6).

Fong, allured by the possibility of wealth California offers, uproots from his homeland to the Old Gold Mountain to partake in the massive migrant exodus. Believing firmly in the dream of economic prosperity, Fong was one of thousands of overseas Chinese resettling in America during the mid-nineteenth century. Lin deploys the enduring historical legacy

of early Chinese immigration as its textual backdrop to generate narrative tension as the story unfolds.

Fong's quest for gold was fraught with adversity and tribulation, however. The novel points to the hardships and disenfranchisement the paternal character endured, which prompted him to relocate domestically from the East Coast to the West Coast:

There were village legends that the Chinese were mobbed, robbed, killed, and many were driven out of the West Coast, and it was a family legend that their, father, Tom Fong, Sr., had escape to the East Coast after some thrilling adventures. However, that was long ago; these stories always sounded like pirated tales. The fact remained that Tom Fong, Sr. survived, and that, year after year, he and other villagers' sons continued to send gold dollars home to support parents, brothers, and wives and to send their nephews to school. It was a story of survival; it was a success; it was a struggle triumphant (Lin 2007, p. 6).

Though the character undergoes a "triumphant struggle", the text portrays the U.S., particularly the West Coast, as a paradise with a certain degree of sociopolitical intolerance. Fong's fleeing to the East Coast is hardly a fictionalized account of anti-Chinese sentiments but is rather firmly wedded to stifling sociopolitical hierarchy contingent to the Exclusion-era labor history. After waves of immigrants flocked to California, intense competition between ethnic groups surfaced. Much of the interethnic rivalry stemmed from the changing nature of capitalism's multifaceted modes. According to Mark Kanazawa, the method of gold mining shifted from industrial (i.e., individual labor-intensive) to entrepreneurial (i.e., Chinese workers employed as wage laborers to mining companies) (Kanazawa 2005, p. 782).

Consequently, this transformation created intense competition between miners and mining companies. Chinese workers became foreign threats, bearing the brunt of antagonism native miners used to rationalize their exclusion (Kanazawa 2005, p. 782). Waves of anti-Chinese forces insidiously ensued.

Though political debates over race in California have often centered around issues of Negro slavery and (white) free labor, the rhetoric of racial anxiety gradually turned towards the "Chinese problem". The California State Senate Special Committee on Chinese Immigration in 1878, for instance, argued that the use of Chinese contracted laborers in California lacked the "beneficial influence" associated with chattel slavery (Almaguer 2009, p. 174). While blacks were deemed as a race that was kind and faithful, the Chinese were characterized as cruel and treacherous (Almaguer 2009, p. 174). Robert Lee elaborates that by the end of the 1850s, the 4000 black residents seemed a lesser threat to the white Mechanics' republic than the 47,000 Chinese residents of the state (Lee 2010b, p. 47). The anti-Chinese ethos intensified during the 1850s in the gold fields as the production of mining was transformed by the emergence of capital-intensive hydraulic mining, which subsequently placed pressure on independent miners and small producers (Lee 2010b, p. 47). As Chinese workers survived and thrived in entrepreneurial competition, California state legislature passed resolutions to undermine the Chinese immigrants' increasing success. In 1849, native miners in Tuolumne County passed a resolution barring Chinese miners from working claims (Kanazawa 2005, p. 783). One year later, California required a gold mining license fee of USD 20 per month from all those not native-born or without citizenship through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Lee 2010b, p. 48). For instance, white miners on the Yuba River passed a resolution prohibiting Chinese workers from mining in the district (Lee 2010b, p. 48). In 1855, the state legislature passed a bill titled "An Act to Discourage the Immigration to This State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens" to prohibit persons from China from being categorized as "free white persons" who can apply for citizenship.

Despite these marginalization practices and legal enactments, the rise of industrial capitalism and factory production on the East Coast demanded massive cheap labor, wherein Chinese immigrants fulfilled such capitalist demand. Between 1848 and 1851, Chinese workers provided massive amounts of labor in developing capitalist economies: the transcontinental railroad, agricultural economy, and textile and service industries.

Paul Ong's study of Chinese labor in early San Francisco demonstrates that early Chinese immigrants who initially settled in San Francisco developed an "ethnic economy" that catered to their Anglo compatriots' demands for Chinese goods and services (Almaguer 2009, p. 171). According to Ong, Chinatown has become the core of this ethnic economy, serving as the retailing, service, vice, and entertainment metropole for Chinese people in California (Almaguer 2009, p. 171). Despite the growth of Chinatown, in late 1860, only 10 to 15 percent of the Chinese people in San Francisco earned a living as laundrymen and contract wage laborers in the city's Anglo-dominated labor market (Almaguer 2009, p. 171). By 1870, the Chinese constituted up to "one-fifth of the potential wage workers" in the urban economy (Ong 1981, pp. 74–75).

This proletarianization process, as Tomás Almaguer articulates, reflected the segmented racial division of labor that played a critical role in the "white supremacist transformation of urban California" (Almaguer 2009, p. 171). Economic transformation coupled with the creation of an industrial metropole exploited Chinese workers for cheap labor while simultaneously blaming them for contaminating what was then a paradisiacal Western frontier. Because the capitalists in competitive industries such as sectors of small manufacturing (i.e., cigars or shoes) routinely sought the Chinese as a cheap labor force, this created a significant point of contention. Although the Chinese took up menial jobs and held the lowest of the semiskilled occupations, their presence nonetheless posed an apparent threat to the status of free white labor and fueled anti-Chinese activities.

Against this historical legacy, Lin combines the contours of his narrative of Fong Sr.'s journey. However, the depiction of the Chinese being "robbed, killed, and driven out of the West Coast" does not have prominence in the text. Instead, Lin dilutes the history of discrimination against the Chinese by calling attention to Fong Sr.'s survival: "The fact remained that Tom Fong Sr. survived" and "[...] continued to send gold dollars home" (Lin 2007, p. 6). One speculation remains that Lin underlines Fong Sr.'s triumph by adhering to the literary model of a coming-of-age tale preoccupied with assimilation, materialism, and identity quest. In so doing, the author crafts a categorical immigrant novel that stages the Fong family as a site to explore problems intrinsic to nomadic subjects' minority status in the U.S. This often-encountered reading requires a new critical appraisal, however. To direct my critical reorientation of reading the novel *away* though not necessary *against* this tradition of interpretation, I argue that Lin's attention to Fong Sr.'s perceived victory serves as the author's tool in setting up a literary counternarrative to the legal discourse in U.S. immigration policies in the 1880s and the ensuing problems faced by U.S. minorities. The novel is a text of resistance: a counter-hegemonic narrative towards the all-encompassing nineteenth-century legal superstructure's status quo that exploits and denies. In this context, I approach *Chinatown Family* through the legal framework of the Page Act of 1875 and the Cable Act of 1922, attempting an interdisciplinary methodology of historical and literary readings as a part of my recovery project of this early Chinese American text.

The immigrant's identity, according to Lin, then takes an abrupt shift in ideological orientation through the discourse of liberalism and the racial logic of the Cold War that later followed. The deployment of Chinese Americans as a "model minority" became a myth par excellence of triumphant ethnic assimilation brought forth by hard work, self-reliance, discipline, tradition, and, most importantly, by the liberal rhetoric of American progressive racial inclusion. Against the backdrop of intensified demand for racial equality in the Civil Rights era, nonpolitical Chinese people (i.e., ahistorical, and non-threatening), thus the perfect contrast to their black counterparts, are constructed as the triumphant byproduct of Americanization. This is to say, the immigrant is ethnically domesticated and reformed, for it restores credibility to the "American Creed" of America, aspirations are actualized, and dreams are fulfilled. The fear that the Chinese had disrupted Anglo familial order was replaced with the belief that the Chinese family had become an exemplar of family cohesion to be modeled after. Lin recognizes the hypocrisy of such a shift in what seems like an absurd irony and identifies that the underlying principle behind the "model minority"

myth remains how the U.S. viewed China as its strategic economic trading partner post-WWII. The Pacific Rim became a testing ground, a social capital, for U.S. contestation for power with the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. Lin's critique, however, does not end there. The "model minority" representation that gained visibility in the 60s and intensified during the Cold War took yet another turn in the final manifestation of the "gook". Configured as the flipside to the "model minority", the "gook" became the scapegoat for U.S. economic decline and failures of imperialist enactments in the Pacific.

### Page Law and Matriarchal Power in the Capitalist Market

Though when the Chinese first came to the U.S., the migration was primarily a male enterprise, the population comprised women. By 1860, over 10 percent of the Chinese employed in San Francisco were males working in gambling, the sale of opium, or prostitution (Almaguer 2009, p. 174). The other 23.4 percent were made up of Chinese women working as prostitutes (Almaguer 2009, p. 174). Though sociologist Lucie Cheng Hirata (1979a, 1979b) argues that Chinese female prostitution was carried over from the "semifederal" system of Confucian China in which female prostitution became an acceptable recourse to a family facing economic hardship, Almaguer sees it differently (Almaguer 2009, p. 175). He argues that the first Chinese women who came in the gold rush period were self-employed or "free agent" prostitutes (Almaguer 2009, p. 175). By the 1870s, the number of female Chinese prostitutes had doubled from 654 in 1860 to 1426 (Almaguer 2009, p. 175).

This doubling figure of Chinese prostitutes became an erotic sexual threat that the "Oriental" posed to the Cult of Domesticity. Chinese women falsified sexual deviance and destabilized the heterosexual normativity that the Victorian family required, even though the male-dominated consumption of women was still an underlying power dynamic of family, gender, and social structures. In addition to being characterized as the 'yellow peril' that competed with the white labor force, Chinese women were deemed as a sexual threat that terrorized the Anglo nuclear family with their seductive otherness and ability to provoke sexual over-consumption. Female prostitutes tapped into the public's fear of miscegenation between whites and Asians. Prostitution and polygamy were erroneously believed to be entrenched in Chinese immigrant culture and thus "deeply antithetical to American conceptions of marriage as a consensual 'love match'" (Abrams 2005, p. 643).

To prohibit Chinese prostitutes' sexual contamination, Congress passed the first federal restrictive immigration statute in 1875: The Page Law. This law banned the "immigration of women who had entered contracts for 'lewd and immoral purposes', made it a felony to import women into the United States for purposes of prostitution and included enforcement mechanism specifically targeting Chinese women" (Abrams 2005, p. 643). According to Kerry Abrams, the Page Law had a prime purpose that operated twofold. On the one hand, it served to prevent the Chinese practices of polygamy and prostitution from gaining a foothold in the United States (Abrams 2005, p. 643). Using the federal immigration system, the state successfully preserved the traditional Anglo familial order and conception of marriage by punishing those who threatened such order. On the other hand, under the veneer of the rhetoric of guarding the American institution of marriage and hegemonic Anglo sexuality, Congress devised a legislative tool to achieve regulatory ends of policing immigrants, explicitly targeting Chinese female immigrants from entry. Within the historical context of immigrant marginalization, the Page Law was a federal attempt to regulate the sexuality of Chinese women in shaping the racial and cultural landscape of the late nineteenth United States. It is precisely the law's reliance on the white public's anxiety that renders its impermissibility on the grounds of frivolous immigration restriction. The strategy of invoking the public's deep-seated anxiety towards deviant sexuality disrupts Anglo working-class stability. It is a prominent example of how the state practices exclusionary laws to protect public morals that are long-lasting. For instance, the Chinese Exclusion Act had a profound impact on Chinese women. According to American census data from 1870 to 1890, the Chinese female population in the United States dropped from 7.2 percent to 3.6 percent after the Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented in 1882 (Chan 1991, pp. 94–146). Some historians, like Peffer (1999), explained that Chinese domestic life

was patriarchal at the time, emphasizing the grandeur of patriarchal and marital power; so, married women could only stay home to raise their children and serve their in-laws" (pp. 28–46). Others argue that the reason for gender imbalance is that most Chinese males who immigrated to America did so to work for a living (Lee 2010b, pp. 248–71).

Lin's novel captures this twofold regulatory policing. Nevertheless, it does so by pointing to how the matriarchal figure, Mother Fong, is a character who defies the societal construction of Chinese women as the hypersexualized Other. George Anthony Peffer has argued that the Page Law was a "serious obstacle hindering the immigration of Chinese women and the establishment of Chinese families in the United States (McKeown 1999, p. 79). Peffer claims that American consuls in Hong Kong attempted to make emigration processes for Chinese women more rigorous and restrictive (McKeown 1999, p. 80). Despite such regulatory mechanisms enacted by the State, Lin, in his novel, rewrites the history of exclusion by avowing his female character with self-empowering means. Female figures such as Mother Fong are not confined by the Page Law's bounds that exclude them from the category of "wives". Instead, they maneuver around the biological propensity of Chinese women as exotic beings and redefine themselves as high-achieving capitalist agents. That is, Chinese women in Lin's narrative anticipate and respond to the tactics of legal restrictions at which they are directed with shrewdness. However, their strenuous circumstances may appear.

Upon reaching the American shore, Mother Fong was captivated by the abundance of products to be brought. During a family visit to the department store, Macy's, to celebrate Tom and Eva's arrival, the family, the "Fong possession", filed into the store and became almost entranced with the goods presented to them. In one telling scene, Lin depicts Mother Fong becoming uncontrollable in buying the array of goods offered by the store. The reader is confronted with a greedy capitalist who devours everything in sight:

Once in the basement, the mother lost all will power. She could not resist buying a new teapot, with a set of cups and saucers. She could not resist buying a dozen glasses, all made in America. She liked the feeling of having new things. While Loy went off to buy bluing and soap flakes, and the mother and Flora dug deeper and deeper into their purses, where was the father to go? (Lin 2007, p. 27).

Although the matriarchal character justifies her overindulgence with the self-justification that the family needed to prepare for Tom and Flora's arrival, her overconsumption filled with material greed is hard to dismiss:

Mother Fong had surveyed the situation and collected notes in her head. Many things were needed for the house and for the children. She had arrived with one hundred and fifty dollars in her pocket, for she had sold some of their property when she left [...] Nevertheless, they had to have dresses. Shirts, socks, shoes. She could afford to be extravagant (Lin 2007, p. 24).

Although Mother Fong acknowledges the typical American wastefulness when her goods are delivered in parcels, "The excitement of the unpacking began. There was no mistake, but Macy's was extravagant. It was America that was extravagant", she still appears uncontrollably gluttonous and loving every moment of it. C. Lok Chua reads this humorous scene as Mother Fong's fantasy of "materialist heaven" come true (Chua 1981, p. 62). The family's pursuit of the Gold Mountain is, in Chua's words, materially fulfilled during their shopping trip (Chua 1981, p. 69). The scene of consumer extravagance has a subversive undertone not to be overlooked. The passage foretells Mother Fong's wealth to be accumulated later through the family restaurant. It exemplifies the maternal character's almost symptomatic obsession with purchasing goods from the department store.

The subtext of self-indulgence manifests through the narrative trope of consumer products. Here, the very presence, or rather the abundance, of American domestic material purchases that inundate the novel has become a capitalized fetish for the character. By tracing the fugitive yet increased presence of these "nonsymbolic objects" that overwhelm these novels, such as "a new teapot", "a set of cups and saucers", "a dozen glasses", the delivery cord, and the "fine, snowy-white" tissue paper, we see that mother devours these

American domestic goods as if they were capitalist substitutes in consumer product form. The trope of mass-produced material objects as some dark force infiltrating the character is foregrounded. For these, domestic goods are hardly benign. They are an invitation to a symbol packed with the threat of contingency. These products become a figural stand-in for social capital: a non-materialized yet highly contingent fetish that ignites Mother Fong's imagination. The more considerable significance of the Macy's shopping passage remains the way the mother compulsively resorts to external elements to reconcile the rupture that the immigrant subject feels in resettlement. Her exaggerated obsession with American purchases becomes a symbolic site on which immigrant displacements are projected. The materiality of these social capitals presents an incentive that disguises the disorientation experienced by early Chinese immigrants in migration. The pleasure that Mother Fong experiences is the surplus of capital decadence that penetrates the character with an unquenchable thirst for material assets and entrepreneurial ambition. Her unabashed material consumption echoes her unbounded appetite to amass economic gains upon receiving money from the insurance company after Fong Sr.'s tragic death, a development we shall see later.

As the narrative unfolds, Fong Sr. is tragically killed in a car accident, and the drastic news shakes the foundation of the family:

He went then to Chinatown to a meeting of the elders of the guild to which he had recently elected [. . .] Then, the tragedy struck. By eleven o'clock the father had not returned. The family remembered that he had said he would be late. At quarter to twelve the telephone rang. The call was from the Bellevue Hospital. There had been an accident; the family was to come immediately. [. . .] They arrived at the hospital to find Tom Fong in a state of unconsciousness. He had been struck by a motor car near the ramp of the Manhattan Bridge, and his skull was fractured (Lin 2007, p. 166).

The father's death was an unanticipated event, signaling an abrupt end to the patriarchal power structure that the family and the narrative itself revolve around. The vanishing of the male figurehead in the family supposedly brings a sudden halt to the textual flow of Lin's story. Such an unforeseen incident hardly punctuates the novel to a standstill, however. Instead, the abrupt end to the patriarchal system is replaced with a matriarchal one, or as Lin writes, "Tom Fong's death by accident had an irony about it, for it changed the whole life of his family" (Lin 2007, p. 170). After collecting the five thousand dollars from the insurance family and the two thousand from the wife of the man who killed Fong Sr. with his car, the family used the money as the "capital for the restaurant of which they had dreamed" (Lin 2007, p. 171). In an ironic twist, the tragic event was turned into a lucky, bittersweet fortune and made possible the materialist heaven that the family had sought since their arrival to America. With the "five thousand dollars and the woman's gift for Tom and their savings, they had more than eight thousand dollars in case" (Lin 2007, p. 171). Though Loy, the eldest son, assumed the role of the head of the family since he was now its support", it became rather apparent Mother Fong was the bedrock of the Fong clan. She appears to be a capitalist female agent in the making whose identity is highly contingent upon her. She defies the formulaic characterization of a filial-pious, patriarchy-supporting Chinese housewife that we often encounter.

In setting up the restaurant, Loy is initially hesitant to forsake the laundry business that he was accustomed to but eventually submits under his mother and Flora's persistent urging. Under the mother's matriarchal leadership, the family was mobilized instantly into a full-blown small capitalist operation: "If Loy were willing to give up the laundry and manage the restaurant, the uncle would help to arrange credit through his store" (Lin 2007, p. 171). Charged with the mission of revitalizing the family after Fong Sr.'s death, Mother Fong overturns what was then the patriarchal order by asserting herself as the head of the familial hierarchal system. When discussing the expenses used on purchasing food supplies for the restaurant, Flora, and Loy alike all seem to adhere to mother's policy of using fresh-killed poultry and live fish:

“Yes, but we make so little profit and there are so many expenses. You know Mother. She will not leave the buying of meat and poultry to the cook. She wants Loy to do it, and she insists that we buy fresh-killed poultry and live fish. She will not hear of frozen chicken; frozen broiler chicken costs forty-five cents a pound, but fresh-killed coasts sixty-four and live fish costs almost twice as much as fish on ice”. “Mother’s policy is sound”, said Flora. “She is building up a reputation for good food”. “Of course. Customers come back when the food is really good. Mother goes in for good meat and poultry. The secret of good food is fresh meat, and half the secret of cooking is in buying. The cook is angry because Mother will not allow the use of gourmet powder”. “Mother is right”, said Flora. “If our customers always come back, we are sure to have more and more customers as time goes on. We are doing well already” (Lin 2007, p. 201).

Lin glimpses a Chinese woman with a tight grip over the business operation in this poignant dialogue passage. Building a good reputation for the restaurant, the mother, as a matriarchal entrepreneur, is economically astute. Under her wise business tactic that does not compromise her public credibility within the Chinatown community, the restaurant thrives in profits due to reliable business ethics. The belief and practice in offering “fresh” products to her customers lends itself to Mother Fong’s insistence on delivering high-quality service to promote optimal financial outcomes. Simultaneously, her candid approach to offering the finest food products lays the groundwork for establishing mutually respectful rapport with her customers. Indeed, her reputable tactic undoubtedly translated into and boosted the profitability of the family operation.

The element of sincerity in business operations is not unique in this regard. In a previous scene before Fong Sr.’s death, Mother Fong’s incisive yet frank entrepreneur strategy, a seemingly paradoxical yet mutually constitutive approach, remains an unmistakable mark of her character:

Mother Fong made the business expand, not only by taking care of more laundry and promising quick delivery, but by doing something extra to satisfy her customers. Her business principles were sound. If she kept a reputation for quick and clean laundry, the business was bound to grow, limited only by what the family, men, and women, could do. She wanted to please her customers. She would not send laundry back with buttons lost or seams torn. This was great extra inducement to housewives who sent their laundry to her, and she did the mending and sewing of buttons without extra charge. To regular customers she was willing to promise especially quick delivery when they wanted it. The anxiety to oblige was the secret of the increase in the business” (Lin 2007, pp. 61–62).

Here, the immigrant narrative’s ethnic triumph rhetoric presents itself. Diligent, driven, respectful, and thought oppressed, Mother Fong’s anxiety to “please her customer” reads like a typical immigrant tale in which the characters exceedingly accommodate the public’s perception and perhaps comfort with the submissive “Oriental”. Against the U.S. wading foreign policy towards China during the interwar period, Lin deploys Mother Fong as the quintessential “model minority” in the text. Such deployment offers the illusion, a myth *par excellence*, of the Asian American immigrant experience as triumphant ethnic assimilation brought forth by hard work, self-reliance, discipline, tradition, and, most importantly, by the liberal rhetoric of American progressive racial inclusion, a decayed illusion at heart. The mother’s readiness to cater to her “regular customers” bespeaks the intensity of her fear of being outcast by the market economy that was dominated by the Anglo-American working-class labor force. It is almost symptomatic of the Chinese immigrant’s narrative representation that whatever strategies of self-definition s/he deploys are foreclosed by the larger sociopolitical stratifications imposed upon the character. Mother Fong, despite her “sound” business principles, remains an undeniable byproduct of Americanization and all its purported racial logics of acceptance. The matriarchal head becomes an appeasing “Oriental” that must not threaten but accommodate her consumer public’s demands. The “Oriental” is domesticated and reformed; her business expansion restores credibility and public faith in the “American Creed” that American aspirations are actualized, and dreams are fulfilled.

Not to dismiss Mother Fong's flexibility in adapting to the external apparatus that restricts her economic mobility as wholly dictated by the consumer market, it is imperative to note that Lin's treatment of Fong as an entrepreneur mastermind differs from the way female Chinese immigrants are usually constructed during the post-exclusion era. Chinese women were often relegated to the periphery of the urban workforce, dominating sectors of the sex industry such as prostitution. The doubling of Chinese prostitutes from the 1860s to the 1870s that solidified the construction of Chinese women as erotic sexual threats is overturned in Lin's novel. Not only does Mother Fong lack sexual deviance but she is also constructed on the opposite of the continuum. Self-possessed and economically intuitive, the maternal figure remains in absolute control. The "Oriental's sexual transgression that destabilized the heterosexual normativity and terrorized the American nuclear family through the "Oriental's seductive otherness and its dangerous ability to provoke overconsumption is nowhere to be found. Punctuating the historical narrative of Chinese sexual perversion, however distorting an account, Lin's portrayal of Mother Fong as a potent agent whose identity does not seem to fit such cultural construction is a deliberate one. Even in the last passage of the novel, Mother Fong assumes a structural position and function that unites the entire clan:

The day had arrived, and Mother Fong felt truly happy with all her children by her side [. . .] She had three sons and a daughter, all doing well. The occasion was proof that she had raised a successful family, which was as much happiness as one dared to hope for in a world full of tricky pitfalls and sad failures. Toasts were drunk to her, and since it would have been discourteous to leave any of the Chinatown leaders out of the speechmaking, there were more than a dozen eulogies of her virtue as a mother (Lin 2007, p. 245).

Though scholars like Almaguer see the first Chinese women who came in the gold rush period as self-employed or "free agent" prostitutes, this analysis leaves no room to envision an alternative cultural space for Chinese immigrant women to escape such misappropriation of their identity as anything other than "Little Brown Fucking Machines Powered by Rice" (Almaguer 2009, p. 174). In different parts of the world, the choice of "prostitute" is contested and replaced by the less loaded term "sex-worker". The word "prostitute" has existed throughout recorded history. In ancient Rome, they were required to wear distinctive dress; under Hebrew law, only foreign women could be prostitutes; and in pre-World War II Japan, they were required to live sections of the city (Britannica, "Prostitution Summary"). In medieval Europe, prostitution was licensed and regulated by law, but by the 16th century, an epidemic of venereal disease and post-Reformation morality led to the closure of brothels (Britannica, "Prostitution Summary"). Through Lin's account, we see that the Page Law, created by the federal government as an oppressive legal discourse that regulated the sexuality of Chinese women, does not have a textual presence. Asian women supposed uncontrollable sexual impulse within the confines of the legal system is neither repressed nor prohibited in Lin's narrative. Instead, the author depicts the maternal figure as one devoid of the stigma traditionally attached to Chinese women as prostitutes, rendering the Page Law almost frivolous. Mother Fong's domestic agency is intricately linked to her capitalist inclusion and not to her alleged extraterrestrial sexual license:

Mother Fong had other ways of making and saving money. She joined, with some of her women friends, a *tsung-hwei*, a mutual saving society run on a pari-mutuel basis. A group of housewives would get together and pledge a monthly saving of ten, twenty, or thirty dollars. At each meeting, each member would bring the pledge sum, and the one who bid the highest interests would get the whole amount for that month (Lin 2007, p. 204).

*Chinatown Family* delineates the strict dichotomy between prostitutes and wives that underlies the Page Law and introduces the third category of small business owners into the vocabulary in defining Chinese female immigrants, thereby blurring the boundaries of these multiple and cross-cutting social roles. The narrative of Chinese women's sexual promiscuity disappears in the text; instead, Lin presents a counternarrative that radically

departs from the confines of conventional Anglo sexual morality that Chinese women are measured *with* and *against*.

Lin's rewriting of Congress' exaggerated construction of the Chinese female sexual identity and their lack of economic-political inclination is not purely crafted from his imagination but is somewhat grounded in history. In their study titled "Guilds, Unions, and Garment Factories: Notes on Chinese in the Apparel History", Him Mark Lai and Russell Jeung took notice of Chinese women's labor that contributed to the apparel industry from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. During the exclusion era, the Chinese made up the bulk of the sewing trades in California, so much so that Rev. A.S. Loomis articulated the phenomenon that "Pantaloons, vests, shirts, drawers, and overalls are made extensively by Chinamen" (Lai and Jeung 2008, p. 1). An 1870 Census tabulated 110 Chinese workers in the industry, though Rev. Ous Gibson estimated that at least 1230 Chinese workers were making wages in the sewing market (Lai and Jeung 2008, p. 1). Lai and Jeung observed a growing female labor pool due to the exclusion laws that made it difficult to find recruits among immigrants to replace retired or deceased male garment workers (Lai and Jeung 2008, p. 3). As the Chinese female labor force slowly but surely began to dominate the garment factories, the apparel industry shifted in its workers' gender ratio. The 1920 census listed only 128 male and 20 female operatives, and by 1922, a subsequent survey in San Francisco and Oakland revealed an additional 142 female home workers (Lai and Jeung 2008, p. 5). This trend continued into the 1930s, in which 300 female workers were employed in forty-six factories in San Francisco Chinatown, and by the mid-1930s, garment factories comprised six-tenths of all Chinatown factories and employed 564 female workers (Lai and Jeung 2008, p. 5). By setting his narrative in the 1930s, Lin captures the growing presence of Chinese women in the urban capitalist market scene. Mother Fong's flourishing family business confers Chinese female laborers' undeniable contribution to urban market economy growth and profitability.

The maternal figure's newfound self-definition does not end here. In one telling passage toward the novel's conclusion, the text points to the "Women's Committee" that consisted of English-speaking women and their daughters and non-English-speaking Chinese women in the "Women's Patriotic Society" that "sprang into activity" after the Sino-Japanese war began in 1937 (Lin 2007, p. 211). The organization was formed in 1932 during China's military warfare with Japan in Shanghai (Lin 2007, p. 211). In 1932, during the fighting with Japan in Shanghai, Chinese housewives existed strictly within the domestic realm, cooking, and childbearing: "Their life was entirely in their homes, with babies coming at the rate of one a year" (Lin 2007, p. 211). During the interwar period, however, the war had "brought about a social change in the life of the women in Chinatown" in America (Lin 2007, p. 211). Instead of being unequivocally imprisoned within the domestic realm, female Chinese immigrants were now "coming out" (Lin 2007, p. 211). The sense of collectivism is distinctive and unforeseen: "There were meetings and meetings. For the first time, wives of Chinatown did not go home to cook supper for their husbands. 'Let them cook it themselves or go out and eat at a restaurant'" (Lin 2007, p. 211). Here, Lin attempts to reconcile the dichotomy between individual and collective agency experienced by Chinese women. The novel celebrates the abandonment of domestic duties and a burgeoning female empowerment and maturation process. No longer restrained by traditional gender expectations, Chinese women now adopt a fiercely politically charged persona, partaking in the political process of nation-building with collective patriotic sentiments. Self-definition is not impossible but indeed fulfilled through political participation. The suggestion is that the "wives of Chinatown" could hardly be missed. Female agency is celebrated, perhaps even glorified, in the novel, but only under the condition of being a collective endeavor. However, the celebration of Mother Fong's financial agency must be inscribed within this female collective circle, and this individual/communal dialectic is manifested to showcase the cooperative nature between women within the community. Chinatown is no longer a site where discriminatory practices are enacted. Instead, Lin's symbolic gesture of representing Chinatown as a reservoir of inclusion situates the site as a spatial metaphor

for social mobility. The “Wives of Chinatown” partnership does not suggest textual closure. Still, it demonstrates that the microcosm of immigrant life can be reconciled, integrated, and, in some sense, co-exist within the broader macrocosm of American culture. The community stands for a symbolic site where Asian immigrant women’s voice and political agency emerge against the backdrop of social stratification that the Chinese exclusion has left behind.

Outside of the geographical and conceptual border of home, Chinese female immigrants traverse into the political sphere in which racial and class hierarchies have often denied their entry. In this context, domesticity no longer occupies a central position in Lin’s narrative (Kaplan 1998, pp. 581–606). Chinatown wives now occupy two separate spheres, one domestic, i.e., ahistorical, and one political, i.e., national, and historical, and weave themselves into the fabric of American national defense and expansion during WWII. Contrary to what was previously seen, no longer marginalized to the periphery of political and capitalist realms, Chinese women join hands with white women in the shared project of American nationalism. The discourse of exclusion disappears but remains solid and prevalent. The image of social unity underwrites the domestic sphere of home as a “bounded and rigidly ordered interior space” (Kaplan 1998, p. 583). Lin’s novel imagines Mother Fong as a female counterforce who transforms the national culture by inscribing the Asian immigrant’s definition not as a *contradiction* but rather as a *continuum* of the definition of American citizenry and capitalist market economy.

### **Sexual Naturalization: Sino-Anglo Interracial Intimacy**

Against the backdrop of the fueling anti-Chinese sentiments in California and Congress’ subsequent passing of the Page Act in 1875 that barred the entry of involuntary “Oriental” workers, prostitutes, and others coming for “lewd and immoral purposes, there was an intense fear of interracial engagement between the white people and the Chinese. Though the Page Act and the Exclusion Act created, and later exacerbated, a population ratio of male to female which was nearly 13 to 1 in 1870 and 21 to 1 in 1880, the fear the public had towards the expansion of Chinese families did not cease to exist (Lee 2010b, p. 255). Because Chinese men accounted for nearly 90% of the early immigrant population, the gender imbalance produced what was known as the “bachelor society” in Chinatown (Lee 2010b, p. 255). Because the male Chinese workforce was a threat to native-born Anglo-American workingmen, Congress implemented whatever legislative means necessary to police the Chinese immigrant communities. In 1922, Congress passed the 1922 Cable Act that revoked the citizenship of women who married “aliens ineligible for citizenship”, which, according to Erika Lee, was a “code phrase that applied to Asians only (Lee 2010b, p. 238). The main victims of this law, Lee elaborates, were Asian American women who lost their citizenship when they married Asian American male immigrants. Accordingly, they would lose their rights to own property, vote, and travel freely (Lee 2010b, p. 238). In parallel, the Cable Act also policed native-born Anglo women for engaging in interracial intimacy. The act also stated that *any* U.S.-born female citizen would lose her citizenship if married to an “ineligible alien”. Conversely, the act allowed provisions for U.S.-born women of European or African descent to reclaim their citizenship in the event of divorce from a noncitizen spouse or after his death (Lowe 1999, p. 188). This provision was not allowed for U.S.-born Asian immigrant women.

In Lin’s treatment of the interracial intimacy between Loy, a Chinese man and the oldest son, and Flora, a Catholic Italian American woman, the narratives underwrite the intention behind the Cable Act by allowing the interracial couple to be married and, more importantly, thrive in what was a hostile environment for white–Asian interethnic romance. In Susan Koshy’s brilliant analysis of white–Asian miscegenation, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*, she argues that the “study of miscegenation allows us to rethink the complex history and meanings of Asian American women’s sexual agency” (Koshy 2004, p. 15). Koshy goes on to coin the term “sexual capital” to “capture the shifting values encoded in images of Asian American femininity” (Koshy 2004, p. 15). I quote a passage from her discussion of this term:

By sexual capital, I refer to the aggregated attributes that index desirability within the field of romantic or marital relationships in each culture and thereby influence the life-chances and opportunities of an individual. Like Bourdieu and Claude (1990)'s terms social and cultural capital, sexual capital involves specific nonmarket processes that have economic effects. Sexual capital, like social and cultural capital, is linked but not reducible to economic capital. I introduce the term *sexual capital* to highlight the impact of gender and sexuality on mobility and to identify a particular set of constraints within which individuals function as agents (Koshy 2004, p. 15).

Through this context, we see that Lin's narrative captures a sexual capital, namely their mixed-race child, that Loy and Flora's forbidden relations produce.

Their miscegenous marriage exposes a crisis in white bourgeois sexuality and the domestication of familial order. Racial amalgamation in the text ends in harmony with the birth of a "Sino-Italian baby named Marco Polo."

Mother Fong took off her coat, carefully wrapped the baby up with the lining next to it and waited for the cord to come out. She lost no time in groping over the baby. "It's a Marco", she whispered to Loy. "Congratulations, Flora". "Congratulations, Mother", said Loy. Turning to the policeman, she said, "It's a Marco Polo." "What do you mean Marco Polo?" "It's a boy", Loy said proudly. "My wife is an Italian". The car started again and proceeded slowly towards the hospital. The next day the evening paper reported that Sergeant O'Toole had delivered a Sino-Italian baby named Marco Polo in a taxicab. There was a picture of the mother and the baby. The following morning, Flora received a telegram of congratulations from Mayor La Guardia (Lin 2007, pp. 153–54).

Before we readily accept Lin's textual utopia, we must recognize that the child is named "Marco Polo", suggesting Lin's symbolic gesture of marking the baby with a signifier of Western white history. More so, a white man delivered the child, not Loy himself. Sergeant O'Toole symbolically castrates Loy by robbing him of his familial lineage. Disappeared from the birthing moment, the Chinese male figure, once again, becomes emasculated by his Anglo counterpart. Nevertheless, the anxiety that the "Oriental" had disrupted Anglo familial order was replaced with the belief that the Asian family had become an exemplar of family cohesion to be modeled after. One caveat in the appeal of Loy and Flora's relationship remains how the often encountered white man-Asian woman dyad is overturned in the novel; here, it is with an Asian man-white woman dyad that the story replaces the preexisting cultural script of miscegenation discourse with whites and "barbaric but noble Indians; the heroic, self-sacrificing Indian princess; the promiscuous squaw, the black rapist; the hypersexual black woman; and the erotically volatile mulatto woman" (Lin 2007, p. 17). The narrative defies and rewrites the myth of "Oriental" male degeneracy. Lin advertently challenges the accompanying belief that Asian men, in Richard Fung's words, are personified with "desexualized Zen asceticism" and cannot escape the register of their identity as either castrated "egghead[s]/wimp[s]" or "kung fu master[s]/ninja/samurai[s]" (Fung 1998, p. 117). Under the rubrics of hegemonic images of white men, Asian men are stigmatized as "too peripheral", yet still men defined in biological yet pejorative terms. However, in Lin's account, the transgressive love across racial lines manifests differently. The author confronts the taboo nature of racial mixing. Not only is Flora's citizenship not revoked, of which such an occurrence would not be difficult to imagine given the passage of the 1922 Cable Act, but the byproduct of her miscegenous union with Loy is celebrated. Indeed, the Sino-Anglo pair's love bond thrives in the text, and perhaps it is only in the literary mode that such subversive potential for interracial coupling would be possible.

In a chronological approach to his historical analysis of the immigrant Chinese family, Lin begins articulating the emergence of these dynamics. Though the family was commonly conceived as a utopian family of independent subjects, the Chinese nostalgic pastoral idolization was short-lived. The rise of industrial capitalism and factory production demanded a massive amount of cheap labor, wherein Chinese immigrants between 1848 and 1851 fulfilled such capitalist demand. The economic transformation, coupled with

the creation of an industrial metropole, exploited Chinese workers for cheap labor while simultaneously blaming them for contaminating what was then a paradisiacal Western frontier. At this precise moment in history, the terms “pollutant”, an infiltrating foreign force that disrupted pastoral tranquility, and the “coolie”, cheap proletarianized Chinese labor, emerged. Echoing the sentiment of *The Birth of a Nation* in their thematic agenda, these early cautionary tales of sex and corruption project the public’s fear of miscegenation between whites and Chinese immigrants by deliberately projecting it through literary portrayal, thereby deepening the belief in the crisis of the working-class family that the Chinese had created.

## 6. Conclusions

Identifying what Lin conceptualizes as different faces of the Asian family—the “pollutant”, the “coolie”, the “deviant”, “the yellow peril”, the “model minority”, and the “gook”—the novel lays out a colorfully narrated story, *Chinatown Family*, to theorize the Chinese as an alien body and a threat to the American national family. Tracing the multiple and cross-cutting cultural representations of Chinese Americans through a historicized cultural lens, Lee articulates the origin of the immigrant myth from a diasporic “pollutant” in mid-nineteenth century California to its current manifestation as the death of Tom Sr. that emerged since the 1970s. Despite the shift in the U.S. economy from large-scale industrial production to a flexible yet much-needed global realignment of capital and cheap labor, the enduring legacy of Lin Yutang’s family novel’s manifestations remains ossified in and through American popular cultural history. Assembling an archive of pain, ranging from studying literature to opening a laundromat to opening a Chinese restaurant, the author appropriates a cultural studies methodology as a framework to narrate his historicist project that astutely places the Chinese immigrant at the center of American sociopolitical discourses on race, gender, and class. Though Lin appropriates a wide range of cultural vehicles to drive forward his critique of America Orientalizing the Asian grotesque subject, his selection of storylines, the technology of their genres, and their critical receptions are not discursively sought after, however. Rather, Lin selectively deconstructs “texts” to expose the entrenching aftermath of benign-and-so-disregarded artistic vehicles that perpetuate white supremacy. *Chinatown Family* interjects its critical intervention that debunks the binary logic, perhaps limited, between “good” stereotypes and “bad” ones. Instead, Lin Yutang explodes this rather “narrow utilitarian calculus” model of “positive” vs. “negative” by offering his insight that the immigrant Chinese family operates on mutually reinforcing and contradicting ideological grounds. Conversely, it is precisely these contradictory struggles (i.e., “model minority” and “sexual deviant”) and the difficulty of pinpointing the Chinese’s ethnic particularity that renders this subversive racial signifier’s ability to survive, mutate, and reproduce racist episteme.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are contained within the article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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