

# CHINESE EXCLUSION FICTION AND GLOBAL HISTORIES OF RACE: HT TSIANG AND THEODORE DREISER, 1930

RICHARD JEAN SO

By the time the overseas Chinese writer and political activist HT Tsiang came to New York City in 1926, two social ideas – one literary, the other political – seem to have overtaken his imagination: American literary realism and Chinese Exclusion. Four years earlier, Tsiang had been forced to flee mainland China during Chiang Kai-Shek's rise to power. He arrived on a student visa – thus bypassing the restrictive Exclusion laws targeted at workers – first enrolling at Stanford and then Columbia, where he studied English literature and met Mark Van Doren. In China, Tsiang had already grown interested in American literary forms, particularly literary realism; at Columbia and New York, this interest intensified through local exposure to the US urban literary scene, where he later met and befriended Upton Sinclair and Waldo Frank. While his student visa allowed a small refuge from the Exclusion Laws, the powerful influence the laws held over the Chinese immigrant community remained close and familiar. Tsiang developed strong and immediate ties to New York's Chinatown. By the late 1920s, he grew active in Chinatown labor politics, eventually joining their campaign to overturn the Exclusion laws. Tsiang's literary and political interests, rather than drifting apart, only grew more entangled as his interest in literary realism intensified and his involvement in local ethnic proletarian politics grew throughout the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more complete biographical details, see Floyd Cheung's introduction to *And China has Hands*.  
GENRE XXXIX - WINTER 2006 - 1-21. COPYRIGHT © 2007 BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA. ALL RIGHTS OF REPRODUCTION IN ANY FORM RESERVED.

A chance literary correspondence with Theodore Dreiser helped to sharpen the connection between the literary and the political, the idea of “exclusion” emerging as a thematic bridge. On November 25, 1930, Tsiang sent a copy of his unpublished novel *China Red* to Dreiser in hopes of finding a suitable publisher. His decision to contact Dreiser initially seemed like a good idea: both Dreiser and Tsiang had recently published pro-proletarian art pieces in *The Daily Worker*, a key literary organ of the 1930s radical leftist movement, and both appeared to share similar political interests, Dreiser having begun his “romance” with Communism in the late 1920s. Dreiser quickly decides to reject Tsiang’s manuscript, however, and his response draws attention to the novel’s *literary form* rather than its political ideologies. Dreiser’s response to Tsiang’s first letter reads:

Your “*China Red*” Mr. Dreiser feels contains much that is moving and colorful. The idea of presenting both sides of an argument is always interesting; however, Mr. Dreiser feels that your method of working to this end is at times confusing. In other words, the book in its present form would require more concentration than even the most interested student of Chinese government problems would care to bring to it. Perhaps you can clarify its general form, or you can probably find a market for certain sections that are complete in of themselves.<sup>2</sup> (Dreiser “Letter”)

Dreiser bases his rejection of Tsiang’s manuscript on a perceived incongruity between American literary form (literary realism we assume here)<sup>3</sup> and Chinese material. While Dreiser appears generally to like the novel, praising much that is “moving and colorful,” he ultimately concludes that Tsiang’s “method,” a fusion of American literary form and Chinese material is “confusing.” Dreiser implicitly erects a rigid binary between his idea of American literary form and Chinese material. The two represent opposing “sides” of cognition, and Tsiang’s attempt to bypass this division in his “general form” of the novel fails to produce a coherent work of American literature. Dreiser’s position on literary form seems extreme: despite the novel’s overwhelming “American”

<sup>2</sup> Recent critics tend to overemphasize the nation-based “political meanings” of Tsiang’s work. See Denning and Lee. Both critics imagine Tsiang as situated squarely within an American or Asian American proletarian context, draining Tsiang’s work of much of its internationalism and dialectical encounter with mainstream American culture.

<sup>3</sup> By 1930, Dreiser had become America’s most famous and esteemed practitioner of American literary realism. The writer and the literary style had become nearly inseparable both in his own mind and the literary public’s perception. See Lingeman, 336-343. Moreover, Alfred Kazin retrospectively writes of Dreiser in 1965, “It is because we have all identified Dreiser’s work with reality, that for more than a half a century now, he has been for us not a writer like other writers, but a whole chapter of American life” (quoted in Kaplan.)

material – its plot takes place mainly in the US and primarily features American and Chinese American characters – the slightest trace of Chinese material interrupts Dreiser's reading gaze: "the book in its present form would require more concentration than even the most interested student of Chinese government problems." The form of American literary realism excludes the Chinese from literary representation.

A word about terminology would be useful here. First, I classify Dreiser as a "realist" instead of a "naturalist" to draw attention to his important historical position in promoting and representing American literary realism in the early 20th century, as well as to emphasize his effort to engage and rework the classical realism of Howells, a complexity of style that does not sit well with a "naturalist" classification. I refer to American literary realism as a "literary form" to highlight its broader function in actively engaging the social questions of its time, one that subsumes the literary categories of "genre" and "narrative mode." Following June Howard, I argue that literary realism represents a "literary form" because it not only has or reflects an ideology but is an ideology (Howard 1-2).<sup>4</sup> Finally, I define "social form" as the structural principle or design of some aspect of a society at some point in its historical development that organizes its human relations and possibilities of lived experience.

While recent work in immigration history has significantly increased our understanding of Chinese Exclusion as political and legal apparatus, an examination of the laws as a form of lived experience, a social form that articulates and negotiates domestic and foreign epistemologies of race and identity, continues to elude attention.

In her seminal study *Impossible Subjects*, Mae Ngai gestures towards this possibility by describing the ontological category of the "illegal alien" – as both legal construct and lived experience – as a kind of "abstract" form or shape-shifting "specter" (Ngai 64). This evocative image begs the question: what precisely constitutes this "form" of experience, and what does it mean to live through this social template?

Using the brief exchange between Dreiser and Tsiang as a starting point, this essay attempts to address these questions by examining early 20th century Chinese American literary realism as partially built from below by a racial

---

<sup>4</sup> Scholarship since Howard has regularly used both "literary form" and "genre" to describe American literary realism and naturalism with no particular rigor or single consistency. See Kaplan 1-15 and more recently Pizer 1-5.

feeling of exclusion. Literary form in these novels helps to communicate and embody denser “inside meanings” of the lived experience or ‘social form’ of Chinese Exclusion,<sup>5</sup> an abstract form of life that not only finds expression in these texts, but finally and most powerfully comes alive. Literary and social form thus coordinate to produce a clearer image of the anarchy of meaning that overlays this lived experience, one lending vision and vocabulary to the other. Tsiang’s novel *And China has Hands* (1937) offers an especially rich opportunity to examine this phenomenon. Written partly as a rebuttal to Dreiser’s snub, the novel rewrites Dreiser’s vision of Chinese literary exclusion from a Chinese American perspective. Yet, the novel ultimately draws its literary force from a more sophisticated strategy than mere literary revision. Tsiang’s novel, which moves through global literary histories of race, such as Dreiser’s fiction and Lin Shu’s famous Chinese translation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, emerges at the intersection of both domestic and foreign literary sources, rearticulating the history of Chinese Exclusion as a transpacific history of race.

### Theodore Dreiser’s Missing Chinese

Why does Dreiser so emphatically reject the possible synthesis of American literary form and Chinese material? What literary and political ideologies underlie this cognitive binary and apparent anxiety over a Chinese/American cultural hybrid? Dreiser’s hard-line position on a possible Chinese/American literary form possesses a specific personal and literary genealogy, which, although somewhat subtly, puts pressure on his otherwise cogent articulation of American literary realism and larger vision of American reality.

I attempt to map out a key literary trope as it develops from his non-fiction writing into his later fiction, beginning with his St. Louis “newspaper days” and ending with his most celebrated novel *An American Tragedy*. “The Chinaman” represents the specific figure I trace as it appears in a series of popular Chinatown newspaper features in the late 1880s and 30 years later in *An American Tragedy*. In mapping out the literary genealogy of “The Chinaman,” I more broadly aim to reconstruct a specific racial epistemology in Dreiser’s writing: Chinese racial formation as narrative exclusion, and I believe, the arc of Dreiser’s career from journalism to *An American Tragedy* offers particularly rich ter-

---

<sup>5</sup> The term “inside meanings” I borrow from Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, which interprets social practice and habit, such as consumption, as articulated through language internal to a specific community.

rain to examine the development of this literary trope. Dreiser's newspaper days in St. Louis provided him with a particular 'social vocabulary' to look at the world, and this worldview later became central to his practice of literary realism.<sup>6</sup> Years later, Dreiser returned to his journalistic roots with the writing of *An American Tragedy*, drawing extensively from actual newspaper accounts of the murder, synthesizing literary narrative with journalistic prose. Any nascent worldview he began to form as a journalist, particularly an attitude towards a race of people, congealed most strongly in this novel.

In setting up a reading of race in Dreiser, we must also note his interest in the idea of different 'social worlds', an interest that characterized his journalism and later influenced his treatment of race in his novels. Richard Lingeman rightfully points out that Dreiser "discovered" reality as a reporter in St. Louis in the 1880s, yet more importantly, he also "discovered" the multiple social worlds – be it the tenement or posh hotel – that constitute American reality (108-9). Reality appeared to Dreiser as a collection of different "ontological spheres," and the bulk of Dreiser's reportage focuses on navigating these various "magical, temporary improvisations," (Fisher 134) and the way humans attempt to negotiate their identities within such transient worlds.

In 1891, Dreiser wrote a long and popular feature describing life in the St. Louis Chinatown ghetto, which, written in a pseudo-ethnographic style, recounts Dreiser's trip to several Chinatown restaurants. The article generally reproduces popular "Yellow Peril" stereotypes: "At the next table sat two Chinamen ... their positions were grotesque. The one squatted on the chair seat, knees tucked under his chin, jabbering and grimacing, was forcing hot rice down his capacious jaw." Dreiser's narrative works to aggregate Chinese subjectivity into a larger dehumanized collective form, replacing psychology and interiority with bestial typologies and social categories: the Chinese are "Mongolians" and "heathens," and while Dreiser at one point feels compelled to report actual Chinese names ("Hong Sing, Wah Lung") he quickly gives up on such a "long list of meaningless translations that are drearily void of interest" (Journalism 236-240). While this passage traffics in many familiar tropes of literary realism (bestiality, degeneration), it draws most of its representational force from popular Orientalist images of American culture.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction* and Kaplan.

<sup>7</sup> See Lee, *Orientalism* 1-29.

Dreiser's Orientalist innovation, however, consists of a narratological displacement of Chinese materiality. By focusing on the image of Chinese graveyards and traditional burial practices, Dreiser imagines the Chinese as cognitively displaced from "American reality" despite their physical presence. He begins by conflating the living world of Chinese America with its cemeteries: "besides the widely scattered array of red sign laundries and occasional Chinese stores, there is a feature, not so much social as dependent thereon ... this nothing more nor less than a Chinese graveyard" (*Journalism* 241). By foregrounding this image, Dreiser represents the graveyard as a key "feature" of Chinatown life, the social fabric of this community tightly linked to its graveyard geography. He continues:

Perhaps it is more of an American graveyard, with the Chinese element as a dependent feature, and perhaps the Mongolian end is more of a way-station resting place en route to China; but nevertheless, it is a Chinese graveyard ... They are resting there awaiting that auspicious moment when fate and fortune shall decree that their bones shall be removed to that celestial haven of which Wingrave Cook so aptly wrote: "A land where the roses have no fragrance and the women no petticoats; where the needle points to the south ...," namely China. (*Journalism* 242)

Chinese "bones" come to stand in for the nameless, dehumanized Chinamen that populate his earlier reportage, and in this image, Dreiser finds a more comfortable register to describe life in this community. These bones appear forever lost in transit, somewhere between American reality and the non-reality of "China," a "land where the roses have no fragrance ... where the needle points to the south." Narrative works to drive out Chinese materiality from American domestic space, reversing the immigration narrative of arrival and settlement as inevitable departure upon death: the Chinese do not leave material traces of life before or after death. This narrative labor of 'removal' enhances the rhetoric of US Orientalism by positing an entirely different ontological sphere for Chinese immigrants, an unreal geography defined by racial exclusion.

Seven short years later, Dreiser read a newspaper story about an ambitious young society man who murders his pregnant, working class girlfriend to advance his social position. Dreiser became fascinated by the news story, largely basing *An American Tragedy* on the actual murder and court case in an effort to articulate the problem of modern identity within the flux of differ-

ent social worlds.<sup>8</sup> The novel describes Clyde Griffith's "identity crises" as he attempts to rise through different social strata – the rural Midwest, the Northeast metropolis – Clyde's "defective identity" underscoring the centrality of place in the novel, whereby identity remains contingent on one's movement through different social spheres (Fisher 137). Recent criticism has expanded this reading to account for the novel's final court scene, which intensifies Clyde's continual entrapment between subject and object-status.<sup>9</sup> This scene describes the modern world's power, not only through the power of commodities, but the media to modulate experience through different subjective lenses. The media transform singular experience – Clyde murdering Roberta – into an endless stream of narrative impressions, the 'real world' mediated by the spectacle of media visibility. Modern identity emerges at the intersection of place and what Dreiser calls "the materialized forces of modernity," be they the media or commodities (Brown 95).

One thus finds the conclusion, Clyde's time in prison, most striking in its shifting of story outside this system of identity. In prison, there exists no sense of 'world' – no consumption, no products, no media – only barren space and mundane objects. Clyde drops out of the world of social motion to at last become still, his identity replaced by a number: 7721. To strengthen this scene of identity loss, Dreiser includes other prison "lowlifes" to highlight the nowhere-ness of prison that erases identity, in which most visibly emerges the dreadful figure of the Chinaman:

But worse—there, in that cell directly opposite him, a sallow and emaciated and sinister-looking Chinaman in a suit exactly like his own, who had come to the bars of his door and was looking at him out of inscrutable slant eyes, but as immediately turning and scratching himself—vermin, maybe, as Clyde immediately feared. A Chinese murderer. For was not this the death house? But as good as himself here. And with a garb like his own. Thank God visitors were probably not many ... Horrible! Horrible! (AAT 794-5)

Philip Fisher reads this scene as Clyde at last realizing he has become "invisible" to the world (Fisher 133). Clyde discerns part of his identity in the "horrible" Chinaman (they wear similar clothes), and in seeing part of himself in the racial "other" of the Chinaman, he recognizes the "other" to modern society

<sup>8</sup> Dreiser based *An American Tragedy* on a composite of the three murder trials, but one court case in particular, the Gillette trial of 1906, provided the most direct material for the novel. For a more complete account see Fishkin, "From Fact to Fiction: *An American Tragedy*" 107-115.

<sup>9</sup> See Brown.

he has similarly become. Indeed, the Chinaman invokes the paradoxical form of invisibility in physical form, but, to read the Chinaman as only a metaphor for some unknowable other strips this passage of some necessary complexity. What if we read the Chinaman as representing a real Chinese person and not just a metaphor?

This passage articulates in literary form many of the core features of Dreiser's Chinatown journalism. As a work of literature though, it develops these ideas by more aggressively positing the link between the 'nowhere' or outside of modernity and Chinese subjectivity. In this scene, the prison represents the limit of literary realism's ability to narrate the modern insofar as an ideal, normative vision of the modern ceases to be recognizable. The prison, in fact, describes the space of exclusion in literary realism, a social structure that lacks a clear literary form. Representation in this place becomes dry and immobile, rigid and nameless. If Dreiser's fiction seeks to map out the endless variations of life within his "Great Equation Inevitable," (Lingeman 66) the prison is the place where the equation calcifies into its simplest form, and – quite significantly – the Chinaman appears as the most visible and naturalized figure in this non-existent space of American realism and reality.<sup>10</sup>

Dreiser never mentions "Chinese Exclusion" in either journalism or fiction, but it is important to think about this social structure as shaping Dreiser's literary representations of the Chinese. For example, if the Chinese of St. Louis in 1891 appeared to be an insular and anomalous micro-community, it was in part due to the recently imposed Chinese Exclusion laws nine years before; and, if he paints the image of the "Chinaman" as fixed in the deepest, most obscure dungeons of American society in *An American Tragedy* (1925), it is in part due to the fact that three years earlier, the Chinese Exclusion Laws were "perfected," barring all Chinese immigration to the US. The social form of Chinese Exclusion powerfully shapes the specific racial epistemology of the "Chinaman" within Dreiser's literary realism. The Chinaman within literary form enacts an important social paradox: his legal Exclusion within American society defines his physical presence within that society. By most legislative and social accounts, the Chinese

<sup>10</sup> This appearance represents the only depiction of a Chinese character in a major literary work by Dreiser from 1900-1947, based on a guided search through the University of Adelaide's library Ebook text archive of Dreiser fiction. I conducted this search by entering the following keywords into their search engine: "Chinaman," "China," "Chinese," "Asian," "Asiatic," "Asia," "Chink," "Orient" and "Oriental."



were a fast vanishing minority in US society by 1925, the year *An American Tragedy* was published.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, compared to other racial formations within Dreiser's fiction,<sup>12</sup> the Chinaman still represents a seemingly near-invisible literary trope that operates on the outer fringes of realist narration. This quality poses an interpretative problem: one can simply believe that Dreiser was not "interested" in the Chinese. Evidence, however, suggests otherwise, and thus the question becomes, how can we think about Chinese subjectivity and literary realism in more systematic terms? My readings of Dreiser interpret this phenomenon as a specific literary form bound to the social form of Chinese Exclusion.

### Chinese American Literary Realism

Dreiser's representation of Chinese people, however, produces only a partial vision of a literary form of Chinese Exclusion. His racial epistemology of "the Chinaman" appears at the edges of his otherwise more coherent system of literary realism, and thus, contact between Dreiser's literary imagination and the social structure of Chinese Exclusion remains limited. A look at HT Tsiang's fiction though, allows us to discern a more complete image of Chinese Exclusion literary form in its attempt to present a counter-representation. In his response to Dreiser's letter that began this essay, Tsiang rejects Dreiser's vision of narrative exclusion by exploring the possible use of Chinese material in American realism. He mentions that he is hard at work on a new novel (what would in part become *And China has Hands*) that will more fully synthesize American and Chinese materials to create a new dialectic of US literary form. He writes:

In accordance with your suggestion as to form, I have in preparation a novel ...It is an odyssey of a Chinese proletarian covering the old regime in China and the renaissance of the new China. It is in four parts:

1. Life in old China's "Lower Depths."
2. Unconformity to the American Scene.

<sup>11</sup> For a more complete history of Chinese Exclusion in the United States 1880-1943, see Lee, *At America's Gates*.

<sup>12</sup> Both European immigration and African American politics interested Dreiser: the son of German immigrants, he was long haunted by his immigrant background, perhaps unconsciously injecting his prose with what has been called a "hidden ethnic sensibility" (see Giles 56). Similarly, Dreiser constantly turned a sympathetic eye towards the African American struggle for equality in the early Civil Rights period, traveling South in 1935 to help defend "the Scottsboro boys." Many years before, he wrote a formative anti-lynching story, "The Nigger Jeff," after witnessing a real-life lynching in the early 1880s. See Lingeman for a more comprehensive account.

4. Underground revolutionary work and heroic struggle of the Proletariat of the New China.<sup>13</sup> (Tsiang "Letter")

Tsiang ignores Dreiser's suggestion to modify his "general form," implicitly rejecting Dreiser's model of burying Chinese life within the cemetery of American realism. Instead, he argues for a program of cultural synthesis – the encounter between the Chinese and American scenes – that results in new social forms, such as the "Proletariat of the New China."

Tsiang's idea of a Chinese/American literary form appears most fully in *And China has Hands*, his best-known and most realized novel. Tsiang describes this style, which aims to narrate the experience of Chinese Exclusion from the viewpoint of those who live under it, as a mix of "Socialistic Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism."<sup>14</sup> Critics of his own time and modern scholars both view Tsiang's generic innovation as part of a larger proletarian art trend of moving away from rigid "Marxist realist" accounts of society,<sup>15</sup> but I would like to "unpack" more fully what Tsiang actually meant by these categories to understand its exact function. Against forcing Tsiang's literary practice into more homogenous accounts of proletarian art in the 1930s, close readings of his literary form open up the history of Chinese Exclusion to new contexts and perspectives. The novel's generic irregularities point to the unresolvable contradictions of life and representation within Chinese Exclusion. Its heterogeneous narrative style helps us to discern the uneven epistemologies of race and Chinese identity that form within this exclusionary political and legal regime, amounting to a larger counter-narrative of Chinese Exclusion.

*And China has Hands* describes the life and times of Wong Wan-Lee, a Chinese American laundryman who struggles to find success and wealth in America. Wong runs a laundry business in New York's Chinatown, but quickly falls prey to a series of economic hardships and reversals. Extortion by local white businessmen and constant harassment by immigration authorities cripple his business until finally he loses his laundromat and becomes a waiter. Wong's

<sup>13</sup> I excise "#3" from Tsiang's letter as a matter of reading convenience: number three concerns the geography of the Soviet Union as the final component to the development of "the new China." Tsiang would later tackle this third space in his unpublished, still not found novel *The Floating Chinaman*; for the writing of *And China has Hands*, however, he sticks to the dialectic of American and Chinese geographies and social-political forms.

<sup>14</sup> Terminology taken from Tsiang's earlier novel *The Hanging on Union Square* in which he describes his "style" in the introduction to the text.

<sup>15</sup> See Waldo Frank's endorsement from the original edition of *The Hanging on Union Square* for a contemporaneous account; see Denning 234-240 for a contemporary version.

political views are radicalized; he becomes a committed union activist, organizing and participating in a massive labor strike. The novel functions as a proletarian bildungsroman: Wong begins the story as an earnest, hopeful recent immigrant with middle-class values seeking upward mobility; he ends the novel as a transformed, militant labor activist who finally attains class-consciousness. Yet, although the novel appears to be a solidly “proletarian novel” at first glance, I argue that the novel more pressingly organizes itself around the theme of Chinese Exclusion.

From the novel’s first page, Tsiang invokes the crisis of Chinese Exclusion and the paradox of identity and citizenship that constitutes Wong’s life in the United States. Wong is a legal American citizen – he was born in China but his father was an American citizen – yet he constantly faces harassment in the US as an “illegal” alien. Upon arriving at Angel Island from China, he must bribe the immigration officer despite having the proper legal citizenship documentation. Throughout the story, Wong fends off continued deportation threats by local police by using common immigrant strategies such as pretending to not speak English. Wong ultimately joins the labor union to help preserve his legal citizenship status, reasoning that if he makes enough money, he can ward off any threat of deportation. Beyond himself, the Chinatown community appears stricken by the stress of life under Exclusion. Wong recounts the tragic story of two cousins, Skinny and Fat Wong, who once happily worked together. Fat Wong, one day, fires Skinny, however, and threatens to report him “to the immigration authorities” if he tries to get his job back. Skinny, terrified because “he came through Cuba and doesn’t have papers,” kills Fat Wong and then himself in fear and panic (*ACHH* 111).

Focusing on Chinese Exclusion law, recent historical work on immigration in the early 1900s has theorized this problematic state of life as a kind of “impossible subjectivity.” Mae Ngai traces the development of the legal category of the “illegal alien” in early 20th century American law to argue that, as a legal construct, this category of personhood remained contingent on political pressures, and as a social ‘idea’, appeared ontologically unstable. Public perceptions of the “illegal alien,” particularly in regards to racially marked “others” such as Chinese and Mexicans, typically conflated “illegal aliens” and “legal citizens” solely on the basis of race. Illegal aliens became “abstract constructions” or a kind of social “specter” stripped of “individual personage” that often pulled racially marked citizens (especially Chinese and Mexicans) into its floating orbit

(Ngai 57-64). As Erika Lee argues, this conflation of illegal and legal citizens in the public and legal American mind had profound impacts on the Chinese American community. Legal or not, all Chinese in America lived under “the shadow of exclusion,” whereby Chinese legal claims to citizenship became marked by a systemic inequality (Lee 222-232). Deportation – a not uncommon occurrence within the Chinese community – easily stripped even legal immigrants of their legal status, and undermined any secure sense of American identity a Chinese person may have had. Lee contends that Chinese Exclusion “saturated” every corner of American society, leaving no Chinese American unexposed to its influence.

*And China has Hands* makes use of a specific aesthetic – a kind of heterogeneous literary form – to narrate this state of life. This aesthetic, however, does more than just “reflect” the social contradictions of Chinese Exclusion. Its disjuncture of literary form reveals the basic incommensurability of understanding the laws as an “objective fact” with material outcomes (as seen in Dreiser’s work) and the laws as lived experiences. By fragmenting more normative, observed understandings of Chinese Exclusion as a coherent social form, Tsiang’s generic disjunctures reframe and open up history to a denser reading of the “inside meanings” of Chinese Exclusion.

The novel begins in the style of Tsiang’s “socialistic realism.” This persistent and mundane style of writing mirrors Dreiser’s literary realism in its “concrete accumulation of details” and its depiction of how things and people give meaning to each other within modern urban life:

He kept thinking of those things [small errands] until he realized that it was lunchtime.  
 It took a long time to cook rice, so he started this first.  
 He took a bowl of raw rice, enough for two bowls of cooked rice, and put it into a pot.  
 He washed the rice with his hands, and he washed it till the water was clear.  
 Then he put the pot on the fire. (*ACHH* 34)

This passage documents the suppression of thought and interiority within systematic actions governed by material objects, wherein the importance of “things” in this passage is obvious: much like Dreiser’s fictional characters, Wong appears “caged in the world of the material” (Brown 84). While he begins the passage with the thought of some small errand, the demands of his quotidian lunchtime routine quickly eclipse this mental wandering. Objects found before him redirect his attention. The choppy style of Tsiang’s writing – each line of

description constituting a full, individual paragraph – helps to affirm this robotic regularity of life as well as to describe the coordination of human action with mechanical time, or what American realist critics call the “mechanical operation of the spirit” (Pizer 7). Wong is trapped in this cycle of the material mundane, the passage ending as it begins: Wong cooking, washing, and finally replacing the pots in the fire yet again.

Tsiang’s style of “revolutionary romanticism,” however, quickly interrupts this realist form of narration. His “socialistic realism” operates only as a partial system of representation that competes with other generic disruptions in the text. The following passage describes Wong’s gaze towards Pearl Chang’s body:

Pearl Chang awakened from her dream ... Pearl Chang’s nose was like an almond seed. Pearl Chang’s eyes were like an autumn stream. Pearl Chang’s face was like an autumn seed. ... Pearl Chang was just like he angel he had met in his dream when he first moved to his laundry. “Angel! My angel! Where have you been?” He walked forward and grasped her ... “Thanks very much for your compliment, my dear Prince!” returned Pearl Chang. (*ACHH* 77-78)

Drawing on Wong’s extensive knowledge of Chinese history and folklore, the novel articulates “revolutionary romanticism” through tropes and themes taken from classical Chinese culture. This mode of discourse is magically transformative: Pearl’s nose becomes “an almond seed,” her eyes an “autumn stream,” and her face “an autumn seed.” The play of assonance and consonance underscores this passage’s romanticism, while the repetitive use (with playful variations in diction) of simile resists the stable signification patterns of realist discourse. Against the barebones realism of the first passage, which reduces thoughts to banal things, this mode of writing refigures plain objects as wondrous images. Tsiang blurs the line between the dream Pearl wakes up from and the dream-like state of consciousness she enters upon waking. From the magical objects it produces from scratch to the waking dream it imagines, Tsiang’s romanticist discourse reconstitutes “reality” into lovely images and forms.

The larger structure underlying Tsiang’s “revolutionary romanticism” is a general social cosmology drawn from ancient Chinese cultural history. Again and again, Wong invokes scenes and anecdotes from Chinese antiquity to help explain modern day social phenomena. In describing the potential “causes” of their current plight within the United States, Wong turns to the classical Chinese story of China’s division into nine parts, which then provided a geographical template for modern Communism. Wong tells these stories in a mythical regis-

ter: "It was the Emperor Fu who with a magic octagon made the sun and moon." This style of narration rearticulates modern American social life as alternative social forms, such as "magic octagons" and all-powerful emperors (*ACHH* 72). Our main characters, Wong and Pearl, both adopt this alternative vernacular to reimagine themselves and the urban world they inhabit. Wong becomes a "Prince" and Pearl becomes an "Angel" and "princess" living in some magical world instead of the barren and impoverished Chinatown ghetto of "American reality."

"Revolutionary romanticism," however, ultimately proves to be a passing generic disruption within the larger frame of literary realism. Romanticism in the text folds back into the ideological demands of literary realism. While at first Pearl finds the alternative vernacular of Chinese mysticism thrilling, she later rejects Wong's imaginative gaze towards her body when the gaze becomes physical groping:

This is not a tennis ball; this is my breast! This is not a Lee Chee nut; this is my nipple! You hurt me! I thought you were born in China, the land of Confucius, Lao-Tze, and Buddha. But you are as tough as any white brat I ever met when I was South! (*ACHH* 78)

Pearl returns the text to its earlier realist indicative/declarative modality of representation: in each sentence, she negates the imaginative transformation of her body from curious "thing" or image to what it really is in "reality," overcoming Wong's earlier dreamy discourse of magical objects. Yet this moment does not signal a final consolidation or reunification of romance under the larger sign of realism. Rather, the dialectic of various narrative registers continues unabated in the novel. This moment marks the ongoing tension between generic forms in the text, one that produces a perpetual narrative indeterminacy that refuses to concede to one or the other.

The meaning of this generic play, however, reaches well beyond mere literary innovation. In naming his literary categories "socialistic realism" and "revolutionary romanticism," adding a political prefix to each phrase, Tsiang signals that his play of genres has a larger social function. For example, while Tsiang derives his idea of "socialistic realism" from Western literary influences such as American realism, "revolutionary romanticism," which interrupts the former,

derives from Chinese literary sources such as the May Fourth movement in China.<sup>16</sup> If the novel's style twists basic forms of language-object relations, putting into question the idea of "the social," the "general form" of the novel itself, an uneven blend of Western and Chinese influences, problematizes "the social" even further. Dreiser, as is well-known, based his idea of literary realism on the understanding that reality is "social" from top to bottom and made through social institutions; Tsiang reformats this idea of the social through other visions of life and cultural practice.

Through this window enabled by the text's play of narrative registers, the experience and meaning of life under Chinese Exclusion opens up. In the spaces between the back-and-forth of realism/romance, there appear new subject-positions to engage the no longer singular "reality" of Chinese Exclusion. These "other" histories of Chinese Exclusion, I demonstrate in my next section, find fullest expression in the novel's co-protagonist Pearl Chang. More broadly, they indicate new epistemologies of racial identity that suggest not only a rift between "observed" and "lived" versions of this experience, but a multiplicity of meanings within "lived" accounts.

### Racial Metaphors of Sympathy

Pearl Chang represents the most clearly marked character in the text where realist and romanticist discourses converge. In the novel's recurring images of "angels" and "princesses," we have already seen Pearl's fluctuation between magical and mundane selfhood. This use of metaphor, which reimagines Pearl's quotidian troubles as part of a more significant ancient history, creates a lens of sympathy to view her subjectivity. More than simply extending Tsiang's mode of "revolutionary romanticism" to Pearl's character space, however, this mode of sympathy serves to intensify the meaning behind Pearl's actual physical body, creating what Jing Tsu has called a "racial metaphor of sympathy" (Tsu 55). Pearl, of course, is half black, half Chinese and grew up in the South: "she was of mixed blood, her father was Mr. Chang Chung Li, and her mother was a Negress" (*ACHH* 32). Her inability to pass as "white" in the South invokes the sympathetic figure of "the tragic mulatto," yet her doubly marginalized position as both black and Chinese produces a more complex vision of sympathy. While

<sup>16</sup> For example, Tsiang's idea of "revolutionary romanticism" echoes the "revolutionary romanticism" of Chinese May Fourth radicals such as Guo Muoruo and the literary society Chuangzao She. See Zhou.

Pearl identifies as “Chinese,” her mixed racial heritage draws the history of slavery and its afterlife in the South into present accounts of Chinese Exclusion.<sup>17</sup> The two become imaginatively linked through Pearl’s physical body.

The novel thus rearticulates the idea of “sympathy” as a form of interracial sympathy, extending social meaning to what otherwise appears to be mere literary innovation. This sub-theme of interracial affiliation builds on its general vision of sympathy to create a more specific trope of racial sympathy. Romanticist tropes, such as “the fallen Princess,” become reworked through a modern-day racial logic: during one moment of crisis – Wong complains that white laundrymen terrorize Chinese laundries – he invokes the history of white “savages” in China, and how the Chinese beat back these “savages:” “Their eyes were blue like the eyes of fisher birds, for they had stayed in the water so long ... they looked like the devils one sees in Hell in a Buddhist temple.” Upon hearing this, Pearl takes “a small mirror out of her pocketbook. She had a look at herself, and she was glad that she was a Chinese, and quietly threw away a small picture of a white movie actress” (*ACHH* 72). Pearl struggles against and ultimately rejects whiteness, invoking both black and Chinese memories of racial resistance, implicitly yoking them together in the moment she looks in the mirror and sees black and yellow – but not white.

This Afro-Asian trope of racial sympathy appears as an embedded, secret history within the more conventional history of Chinese Exclusion. Yet, as a secret history with a specific transnational genealogy, this trope pulls a more global vision of race into the history of Chinese Exclusion in the US, which we reconstruct by shifting contexts from the national to the international. Recent historical scholarship in Chinese studies has outlined the close links between Chinese anxieties over nationalism in the late Qing period and global imaginings of race.<sup>18</sup> Drawing heavily from recently imported writings in Social Darwinism, intellectuals such as Kang Youwei viewed the Chinese “yellow race” as situated between black and white. In his famous writings on “One World”

<sup>17</sup> This linking of Chinese Exclusion and African American slavery was not an entirely uncommon discursive political strategy in the 1920s and 1930s. See Yu for a discussion of this discourse amongst early Chinese American civil rights groups (CHLA in particular, early 1930s) linking desegregation in the South to the fight for citizenship rights for Chinese Americans. This rhetoric connected the struggles of blacks in the South to the struggles of Chinese American men in the Northeast. For example, many of these activists noted that the same senators in Congress who supported Chinese Exclusion also supported segregation in the South. Tsiang actively worked with such civil rights groups as the CHLA.

<sup>18</sup> See Tsu and Shih.



(Datong) philosophy, Kang argues that the yellow race must align with the white race in order to avoid the doomed racial fates of ‘blacks and browns’ (Kang 3). This racial imagining became a key component in emerging nationalist discourse in the late 19th century within the context of Western semi-colonialism. Nascent discourses of nationalism formed through a comparative national model, or how China perceived itself in relation to other nations. Nation-based categories of identity typically emerged in conjunction with categories of racial classification. For example, the emerging rhetoric of Han ethno-nationalism became articulated through a social imaginary of white/black /yellow, which put yellow between black and white, but moving closer to white.

The crisis of Chinese Exclusion, which humiliated the Chinese nation and subjected thousands of overseas Chinese workers to racist immigration laws, however, sparked a counter-discourse of “racial metaphors of sympathy” (Tsu 55). Many Chinese intellectuals began to view the Chinese as aligned with, rather than “above” or superior, other Third World races. “Black, brown, and yellow” all shared a common struggle against white racism on a global scale. At the turn of the century, a slew of Chinese literature describing life in the US under Chinese Exclusion began to appear. These works often used racial metaphors (such as the figure of blackness) and African/African American characters to describe the mistreatment of Chinese overseas workers, drawing clear connections between African slavery and Chinese Exclusion. Lin Shu’s introduction to his translation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* represents the most famous example. In this extremely popular translation, Lin writes:

Recently the treatment of black slaves in America has been carried over to yellow people ... Our people’s livelihood is impoverished to the extent that they cannot make ends meet. Thus they try to support themselves by going to America to work ... [The Americans] treat Chinese workers cruelly so as to stop them from coming. As a result, yellow people are probably treated even worse than black people. The only precedent I can rely on is *A Record of the Black Slaves’ Plea to Heaven* [the translated title of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*]. (Lin 1)

This passage strongly identifies Chinese immigrants with the condition of black slaves. This passage, however, takes the “idea” of blackness one step further. It uses the memory of African slavery as a powerful metaphor to be invoked and imported into the present context of Chinese Exclusion, thus manufacturing a racial metaphor of sympathy to view the Chinese Exclusion experience. Lin mentions the depressing fates of hundreds of Chinese workers

trying to send enough money “back to support their families.” Not only does Lin choose a highly sensational title for his translation, but the translation itself dwells on the parts of the novel that typically induce reader sympathy, such as George’s escape and attempt to reunite with his family. While the translation considerably abridges the original text, it still draws out the original’s most intense moments of affective attachment.

Pearl Chang, while clearly drawn from this literary history, ultimately embodies Tsiang’s ambivalence towards this trope as an effective mode of representation. Unlike Lin and other Chinese writers interested in Chinese Exclusion, Tsiang spent the majority of his life in the US, and thus, in invoking this trope, sought to project a more critical vision of its usefulness. In one key scene, Tsiang appears to mock the ethno-racial thinking of late Qing Chinese intellectuals when an older Chinese woman scolds Pearl for being “black”: “We Chinese are dark enough and don’t want to become any darker. I have to respect the national race purity. You fooled me! You have scorned my racial theory!” (*ACHH* 102). Two ironizing gestures occur at once: while Tsiang parodies Chinese “pure race” thinking, he also rejects the potential political effectiveness of black/Chinese interracial affiliation. Pearl negates the woman’s pure Chinese “racial theory” through the simple fact of her existence, yet in earning her scorn, Pearl herself becomes negated as a productive symbol of interracial sympathy: she elicits the woman’s contempt, not appreciation. This scene suggests the limitations of interracial sympathy when placed within real material conditions. Tsiang circulates the Chinese trope of racial sympathy through his Chinese American novel, but in that moment of circulation, he exposes its inability to provide a satisfying representation of Chinese Exclusion.

The novel’s sudden conclusion with a New York interracial labor strike, attempts to move beyond this impasse by proposing a utopian alternative: collective action to overthrow the Chinese Exclusion laws. This section primarily consists of collective narration or what has been called “radical representation,” in which the novel’s literary form and content shift towards a significantly more didactic and univocal mode of representation. The novel erupts into a pan-racial workers’ chant to signal the start of the strike: “All the workers in this cafeteria paraded. The white, the yellow, and the black, the ones between yellow and black, the ones between yellow and white ... They were marching on” (*ACHH* 126). Individuality and interiority both dissolve within this all-encompassing

political chant, mirroring the typical proletarian revision of the American realist novel's standard conclusion: the labor strike.

By largely abandoning its earlier more complex handling of literary form and representation, the novel appears to weakly 'resolve' the problem of interracial affiliation by rescripting Pearl's mulatto condition as a collective black/yellow labor force; yet a more generous reading helps to explain this shortcoming: in its utopian and perhaps desperate vision, this scene might be better understood as the desired outcome to the much hated Chinese Exclusion laws, reflecting Tsiang's inability to provide a satisfactory resolution to the problematic experience of Chinese Exclusion. If the novel coheres around a more "proletarian" literary form in its final pages, it only represents the imagined endpoint of Exclusion, not the experience as it happens. Further, if the novel ultimately fails to provide satisfactory metaphors to represent Exclusion life, its reaching in several different directions at once – realism and romanticism, the national and transnational – exposes the anarchy of social meaning underlying life under Chinese Exclusion from observed, imagined, and lived points of view.

Ultimately, the correspondence between Tsiang and Dreiser represents only one literary history within the larger, more global history of *And China has Hands*' literary production. More than just simply 'rewriting' Dreiser's literary form of exclusion, the novel circulates overseas Chinese visions of Exclusion in that moment of revision, amounting to a larger dialectic of Chinese American literary realism. Chinese American fiction during Exclusion, or "Chinese Exclusion Fiction," forms at the intersection of both domestic and foreign literary histories and genealogies of racial knowledge. Embedded within such novels as *And China has Hands* lie important 'secret histories' of race that inform the lived experience of Exclusion, histories that reach well-beyond the US nation-state and await more thorough dialectical excavation.

### WORKS CITED

- Brown, Bill. "The Matter of Dreiser's Modernity." Ed. Lawrence Cassuto. *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *An American Tragedy*. New York: Signet Classics, 2000.

- . *Journalism*. Ed. T.D. Nostwich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.
- . "Letter to HT Tsiang." December 4, 1930. Theodore Dreiser Papers, ca. 1890-1965. University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Philadelphia.
- Fisher, Philip. "The Life History of Objects." Ed. Harold Bloom. *Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy*. New York: Chelsea House, 1988.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *From Fact to Fiction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- . "*From Fact to Fiction: An American Tragedy*." Ed. Harold Bloom. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.
- Giles, Paul. "Dreiser's Style." Ed. Lawrence Cassuto. *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*.
- Howard, June. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Kang, Youwei. "Datong Shu." Ed. Zhu Weizheng. *Kang Youwei Datonglun Liang Zhong*. Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian, 1998.
- Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Lee, Julia. "The Capitalist and Imperialist Critique in H. T. Tsiang's *And China has Hands*." *Recovered Legacies*. Ed. Floyd Cheung and Keith Lawrence. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.
- Lee, Robert. *Orientalism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.
- Lin, Shu and Wei Yi, trans. *Heinu Yutian Lu*. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1981.
- Lingeman, Richard. *Theodore Dreiser*. 2 vols. New York: Putnam, 1990.
- Mintz, Sidney. *Sweetness and Power*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Pizer, Donald. "*An American Tragedy*." Ed. Harold Bloom. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.
- , ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995.
- Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Shih, Shu-mei. *The Lure of the Modern*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Tsiang, H.T. *And China has Hands*. New York: Ironweed Press, 2003.
- . *The Hanging on Union Square*. New York: published by author, 1935.
- . "Letter to Theodore Dreiser." November 25, 1930. Theodore Dreiser Papers, ca. 1890-1965. University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Philadelphia.

- . "Letter to Theodore Dreiser." December 31, 1930. Theodore Dreiser Papers, ca. 1890-1965. University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Philadelphia.
- Tsu, Jing. *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Yu, Renqiu. *To Save Ourselves, To Save China*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Zhou, Cezong. *The May Fourth Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.

## Notes

