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PWR 2SC: The Rhetoric of Mobility

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1878.
How does a Chinese worker
Immigrant, businessman and war vet
Make it in a hostile country with nothing but more debt?
Fight the racist laws and system till he has to forfeit?
Have it all, lose it all
Can he handle more yet?[1]

PART I: FOREIGNERS

This is a story of foreigners.

Foreigners who came in droves, hopeful hearts and threadbare pockets. They demanded little. But the people demanded them to leave.

"Go back," they heard; back to the homes they could no longer inhabit[2], back to families that would be ashamed to see the brokenness in their faces. They had taken a gamble with their lives, trading warm beds for cold floors and family farms for relentless foremen. Some had traded away their lives altogether. They were "paper sons" and "paper daughters," burying their names in false documents, burning their dark secrets in the 1906 fire. They told no one; they stopped using Chinese at home, so that their writings—and the identity that lived only in memory—would be lost to their children[3].

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[1] A parody of "What'd I Miss" from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. I find the theme very appropriately fits the purpose of my research paper.

[2] Samuel. In the 1850's, flooding and crop destruction in China prompted large-scale Chinese migration.

[3] Ni. A "paper son" or "paper daughter" is an individual who immigrated to the United States with false paperwork. After the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, only those with pre-existing family members could enter the country. Many Chinese-Americans used this loophole to claim that they were "sons" and "daughters" of individuals already in the U.S. The details of this story are based on the account of Steve Yee, whose father was a "paper son."

This is an immigration story rooted in the xenophobia of an era, but certainly not an unfamiliar one:

"Go back to China!"

"The Chinaman must go[4]!"

"Go back to your country!"

Go back. It is the white bread of xenophobic rhetoric. When people are too frightened to articulate their concerns, too terrified to consider the possibility of change, they mark their territory. Go back.

At first, the immigrants acquiesce. It is true; they have no right to this land. They duck their heads, fold into their work. They are quiet enough to distract the attention, productive enough to rise through the ranks. Someday soon, they know, all this will end. Their children, after all, will be American.

Such is the mentality of so many immigrants—perhaps they will never find true belonging, but their children will. Richard Alba and Victor Nee succinctly articulate this idea; their work on assimilation theory describes a progression of generations, over which "prejudice and discrimination will decline (if not disappear)" (830). Assimilation, by their definition, occurs via the out-group's slow entrance into the in-group's institutions. As immigrants join the social circles of their new country—as they become educated in the new nation's institutions, work in its businesses, and so forth—they will lose their separate identity and smoothly integrate into the new country.

In particular, Alba and Nee point to intermarriage as an important mechanism for assimilation. With intermarriage, they argue, race is less an intractable barrier and more a

[4] Commons 254. Denis Kearney, the bombastic leader of the Workingman's Party, advocated removing Chinese workers from the country. "The Chinaman must go!" was the party's slogan.

temporary inconvenience. The Irish, for instance, were once viewed as a distinct ethnicity. In the 1850's, they faced such severe job discrimination that "No Irish Need Apply" was a near-ubiquitous addition to job postings (Bulik). However, over time—and with intermarriage— the Irish disappeared into the folds of the American public. Alba and Nee argue that the same phenomenon could occur with other immigrant groups: "In the case of some Asian groups, the relatively high intermarriage rates...suggest their acceptability to many whites, the most frequent partners in intermarriage, and the absence of a deep racial divide" (846).

However, the standard of "acceptability to whites" is far too low a bar for proclaiming that prejudice has disappeared. Grounding assimilation in the mechanism of intermarriage not only takes an ahistorical viewpoint of immigration, but also ignores the nuanced interactions between different immigrant groups. Many Chinese-Americans believed that assimilation theory's truth could lead to eventual acceptance—that adopting a "reactive identity" against negative stereotypes would protect them against discrimination. Thus began the "model minority" myth: arguably an incredibly well-executed attempt at assimilation, but ultimately proof that classical assimilation theory is deeply misguided.

When we return to the opening vignette—the image of early Chinese-American immigrants—we might notice the obvious: immigration history framed by "us versus them." You probably imagined those who shouted "go back" as White men, in-group members protecting their sense of "us." The newly-arrived Chinese workers were "them." Indeed, much of history is described in terms of this binary. Alba and Nee's assimilation theory relies upon the dominant group's gaze; by their model, the goal of assimilation is to become "acceptable" in the White man's eye.

Most obvious under this gaze are "extrinsic traits," described by sociologist Milton Gordon. These traits, such as manners of style and dress, are "products of the...group's adjustment to the local environment" and can therefore be easily changed (qtd. in Alba and Nee 829). In other words, the first step to becoming an American was looking like one—when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

To some extent, the point seems intuitively true. Many early Chinese-American immigrants had distinctly different clothing and hairstyles from those of the average White American; in most cases, the extrinsic traits were non-negotiable. The most common hairstyle, the queue (in which the front of the head is shaved, and the back is styled in a long braid), was mandated by the Manchu regime (Zhang 5), and immigrants who planned to return to China were thus unable to cut their hair for fear of legal retribution when returning home. As a result, the queue was an endless source of prejudice, caricature, and legal discrimination. The Chinese were painted as "filthy," Chinatown a home for prostitution (Miller); in 1878, San Francisco passed the Cubic Air Ordinance, which required at least 500 cubic feet of living space for every person. The law functionally targeted Chinese-Americans, who were often forced to reside in cramped slums. When poverty became criminal, Chinese-Americans were evicted from their (already abysmal) homes and sent to prison. A cartoon from a popular magazine of the time depicted a caricature of the law's enforcement: "a White official removing Chinese men from their sleeping quarters into the even more crowded county jail by order of the Cubic Air Ordinance" (Yang). The caption? "Out of the frying pan. Into the fryer."

Thus, the us-versus-them perspective is particularly resonant from a legal viewpoint—laws were created by the dominant group explicitly to otherize immigrant populations. One would hypothesize, therefore, that most of the discrimination would be initiated by members of

the dominant group. If assimilation is a game of learning to play by a new country's rules, surely the rules' authors and enforcers are from the dominant group.

But that is where the binary begins to break down. In the 1870's, a bombastic leader, Denis Kearney, created a political party for the explicit purpose of removing Chinese low-wage laborers from the workforce. Speaking passionately about the Chinese threat to American jobs, Kearney rallied hundreds around the cry "the Chinaman must go" (Commons 254). Kearney was later elected president of the Workingman's Union, and in 1879, he led the Workingman voting bloc to approve a new, explicitly anti-Chinese California state constitution. From there, he began to advocate for further anti-Chinese legislation (Wei).

Kearney, however, was not a White Protestant nativist. Instead, he was Irish. Kearney, who had originally lived in the American South, had only adopted his racist rhetoric after moving to California (Sanchez 69). He was another oppressed immigrant, someone for whom "No Irish Need Apply" postings restricted work. And yet, rather than lobby for equal work opportunity, Kearney chose to align himself with the oppressors.

The example of Denis Kearney shatters the image of "us versus them"—rather, it paints a more complicated image of assimilation, in which various oppressed groups simultaneously experience and create discrimination. Though the Irish and Chinese had much in common in the 1870's, they chose to antagonize one another rather than collectively seek justice.

Indeed, the antagonization of minority groups by other minority groups is an unfortunate but very frequent consequence of assimilation. It demonstrates the more insidious side of reactive identity—that successful assimilation is negatively correlated with solidarity.

The same narrative holds for Chinese-Americans. Between 1910 and 1930, as Chinese-Americans transitioned into the middle class, they found that they fell into an in-between

category—neither black nor white—and took full advantage of their position. They became entrepreneurs, grocers whose stores became one of the few racially integrated social settings in Southern towns. They found profit from both races, blending with both African-American and White social circles, yet sending their children to the much more affluent White schools (Wong 21).

But as increasingly racist and anti-Chinese policies began to push the Chinese out of White society, Chinese-Americans realized that to be "in between" was to be disadvantaged. Propelled by an irrational fear that mixed Chinese-Black students—and, by extension, more Black students—would begin to trickle into white schools, Whites began to bar Chinese students from attending their schools. In reality, the fear was entirely unfounded; mixed-race children were relatively few and far between (Wong 21). But the predicament was clear: Chinese-Americans could no longer walk between the lines, choosing to take on the identity that benefitted them most. They had to define themselves. And for many, the choice was obvious. They would give up their ties with other minority communities in exchanging of passing as part of the dominant majority. They would make a strategic, if perhaps selfish choice: "Rather than challenge racism, they distanced themselves from the black community. The Chinese believed that as soon as they could prove...that the children...are racially pure Chinese, the white community would be willing to accept them" (Wong 22).

In this way, the Chinese-Americans acted exactly as the Irish did. They chose to side with the oppressors, in the hopes that they themselves would be less oppressed. One might even call this the beginnings of the "model minority" myth—the earliest examples of Chinese Americans presenting themselves as the perfect nonwhite White people. Indeed, even in cases when Chinese-Americans attempted to stand up for social justice, as in the 1927 case of *Lum v. Rice*

(where a Chinese family sued a school for its rejection of their daughter), the motivations had racist undertones. While the *Lum* case is often lauded for its early attempts at desegregation, it is tainted by the "very obvious fact that [the Lum family] did not want their daughters going to school with black children" (Begley). Ultimately, then, assimilation is not, as Milton Gordon argues, the simple matter of shedding your clothes and cutting your hair; it is not, as early scholars R.E. Park and E.W. Burguess hypothesize, "a natural and unassisted process." Rather, it is a deliberate choice to isolate yourself from other minority communities—a tradeoff grounded in a desire for self-defense.

The tragedy of the act, however, is that assimilation is not defensive. The assumption that prejudice disappears when members of the minority group enter the country's institutions and mingle in their social circles is overly simplistic and misleading. In fact, prejudice does not really diminish with time. For even after Chinese-Americans entered America's institutions—even after they built its railroads (Chang and Fishkin), fought in the Civil War ("Historian Recounts"), and became the most educated group in America ("The Rise of"), the perception of foreignness has remained.

As it turns out, assimilation is not so effective after all.

PART II: DOING EVERYTHING JUST RIGHT

We did exactly as you said, America
We held our heads up high
We know, We know, shh—
We know, We know, shh—
We know you did everything just right[5].

This is a story of Americans.

[5] Parody from the song "Stay Alive" from *Hamilton*. I chose this particular verse because it conveys the frustration of failure, despite having done everything right.

Americans for whom it is senseless to ask them to "go back"—for where is back? They have as legitimate a claim to this country as anyone else.

And yet, the identity is fragile. In a single moment, it can be torn apart.

For Michael Luo, it happened on a Sunday afternoon. He had been leaving church with his family, pushing his daughter in a stroller.

And then, a woman's voice sliced the serenity: "Go back to China!" She brandished her cell phone menacingly, threatened to call the police. "Go back to your fucking country."

For a moment, Michael was speechless. The life he had built for himself is the American dream: he is a Harvard graduate, father of two, working a steady job at the *New York Times*.

He realized to his horror that no amount of assimilation could erase the perception of foreignness. For Chinese-Americans, "no matter what we do, how successful we are, what friends we make, we don't belong. We're foreign. We're not American[6]."

Finally, he screamed back, "I was born in this country!"

But he already knew that it does not matter.

Ethnic scholar George Sanchez frames this problem in a more telling example: Black Americans, even when viewed by someone racist, are still presumed to be United States citizens. Despite the increase in immigration from Africa and the Caribbean, African-Americans are rarely seen as foreign. However, "[t]he reverse is often true for Asian Americans, including those born in the United States, as well as those whose families have been in the United States for generations" (72). Sanchez believes that this phenomenon is much more than a function of immigration and adjustment, since it "does not disappear with the passing of generations" (72). Rather, the problem is rooted in a deep-seated desire to maintain the status quo. Even the 1965 Immigration Act, hailed as an achievement of the Civil Rights movement, prioritized family

[6] This is a retelling of Michael Luo's story, which he published as an opinion piece in the *New York Times*.

reunification rather than increasing diversity (History.com Staff). When the racial composition of the country began to shift as a result of the policy, those in favor of the status quo replaced legal barriers with something more sinister: otherization.

Sanchez takes the example of Mexican immigrants on the Rio Grande border: when immigration laws loosened, nativist-minded Americans made "each crossing full of...racial confrontation and fear of apprehension—even when done in a perfect[ly] legal way" (73). Thus, racial stereotyping was born: everyone who even vaguely resembled an immigrant became subject to accusations of foreignness. This reaction is explicitly in response to immigrants' assimilation into American society; as a result, it exists in spite of efforts by minority groups to adapt. Fear of change, motivated by racism, thus explains the experience of Michael Luo, who was singled out despite fitting neatly within America's social structures. It explains the BART rider who, just weeks ago, shouted racialized insults at an otherwise unassuming Asian passenger (Cerullo). Racism against immigrants has not died with explicitly racist laws; rather, it strengthens with assimilation, albeit in more insidious ways.

The particular difficulty of the problem, however, is that it places Chinese-Americans in a double-bind: we are both oppressed and oppressors. As the Chinese-American community relentlessly pursues assimilation, we distance ourselves from the worst-off of minority groups. It is true that Chinese-Americans are among the country's best educated, that we report high rates of intergenerational social mobility ("The Rise of") and experience far less police violence than other minorities (Hu and Esthappan). In this way, we are privileged, having benefited from the historical tactic of sending children to mostly-white schools, and having been complicit in oppressive institutions. But in another sense, Chinese-American success fuels reactionary racism. The desire to stall change has only strengthened in recent years; arguably, "Make America Great

Again" is a response to the rapid demographic shift in our institutions. Trump supporters, nostalgic for the days when the most prominent scholars and leaders were White, still resent the shift in the face of America—for no amount of assimilation and success can hide that Chinese-Americans fundamentally look different.

In other words, we have done everything just right. But in some ways, we have made things worse.

This problem is further complicated by the fact that assimilation definitionally requires the assimilator to disappear into the background. Thus, Chinese-American assimilation simultaneously increases racism and drives racism into the background of Chinese-American issues. It is therefore difficult for Chinese-Americans to voice their concerns in social justice movements. One college activist described a "frustration with the oftentimes-overlooked Asian American perspective during discussions of minority rights;" because assimilation is seen as having already cured racism for Chinese-Americans, "conversations about racial equality [do] not address issues that Asian Americans face on campus" (Cheng). One Princeton student, who participated in the 2015 protests of campus racism, recalls being asked "in a very condescending way" whether Asian students still deserved community centers; "I think that they expected the answer to be no. ...Asians are minorities whenever it's useful for people to frame them as such" (qtd. in Cheng).

And so, the standard of assimilation remains the White man's eye. Chinese-Americans are the institution's social battering rams, used to tear down other races' social movements by showing that there was nothing wrong with the system after all.

In one particularly illustrative case, Duke professor Jerry Hough commented online that Black students were lower achieving than Asian students because Black students were less

willing to assimilate into society. “Every Asian student has a very simple old American first name that symbolizes their desire for integration,” he wrote. “Virtually every black [student] has a strange new name that symbolizes their lack of desire for integration” (qtd. in Craven). Hough later cited high Asian-American intermarriage rates as evidence that we are more well-assimilated. And though his comments were widely decried, especially by Duke University, Hough continued to stand by his claims.

Hough’s comments demonstrate the continued influence of assimilation theory. In particular, the intermarriage standard—identical to Alba and Nee’s theoretical work—reflects the shift in power away from Asians and onto Whites, whose responsibility it is to control the flow of who does and does not belong with them. In this way, the assimilators lose agency: though we receive some privileges in White-dominated institutions, our story is never our own.

Perhaps we have not, after all, done everything just right. Perhaps we have inadvertently traded away our independence for a small scrap of success, and we have distanced ourselves from the movements that lead to tangible change. Perhaps there is much more that we could have done.

Ultimately, choosing to assimilate does come with gain. But it accompanies a deeper loss. Allyson Hobbs, a history professor at Stanford, describes the framework of racial passing as one of “chosen exile.” She tells the story of a cousin who, having left her community in Chicago and assimilated into White society, could no longer return home to see a dying father: “[s]he was a White woman now, and there was simply no turning back.” And having passed as White, she also gave up the cultural elements of Blackness—Bud Billiken parades and community belonging—that she could never pass down to her children.

Thus, at the problem's core is a tension between gaining privilege and retaining community. Because the values and experiences at stake are deeply personal, however, it is difficult to judge any individual for choosing one side over another. After all, one cannot in good conscience demand the oppressed to experience racism and wait for change that may never happen in their lifetimes. Often choosing to retain one's ethnic identity, to fight for justice, requires counter-intuitive actions. Chinese-Americans in the 1920's chose White schools because they would help their children succeed—and there is nothing wrong with working toward success. The problem is that, without reorienting society's value judgements toward minority contributions, no amount of hard work will be justly recognized. In the long run, working hard only reinforces antagonism at the steep cost of one's ethnic community.

For others, however, ethnic identity is a crucial part of themselves, without which they would be incomplete. Those who chose to remain have allied with other social movements, helping to counteract the historical tactic of pitting minorities against one another. Even in the 1960's, Asian-American activists held "signs like 'Yellow Peril supports Black Power' to demonstrate solidarity" with the Black Panther movement (Cheng). Today, the group Asians 4 Black Lives vocally supports Black Lives Matter. Their philosophy proclaims that "[w]e acknowledge that we, as Asians, have often been used as part of a "divide-and-conquer" strategy to uphold white supremacy. We refuse to be used as tools to uphold a racist and violent system."

This dichotomy frames two images of Chinese America: the model minority; the vocal activists. The outspoken Trump supporters, who hope to "mingle with white people" (Bull in a…"). Michael Luo, a target of racialized insults. It is a division marked by the tragedy of racism. It is a long, complicated, incomplete story.

But it is my story.

For years, I had learned to ignore my own foreignness. Ignore the high school classmate who asked if "ching chong" was a word in Chinese. Ignore the passerby who mockingly shouted "ni hao." Because saying nothing would help the growing feeling of unease disappear.

It did not. The unease magnified with recent political events. At social gatherings, Chinese-American friends praised Trump's toughness on border security. The night he was elected, a woman from our Chinese church publicly thanked God.

I realized that the contradiction was too deep. Its roots were wedged deeply in history—a history that I had too long ignored.

Go back.

The rallying cry of the xenophobic, too afraid to confront change. But sometimes there are answers in the back. There are opportunities to confess privilege and offer help. To make my story my own.

And so, I reclaim the words.

Go back.

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