

UCLA Center for the Study of Women (CSW)  
Thinking Gender Conference 2010  
Panel Paper Submission

**A Legacy of Deviance:  
Historical Constructions of Chinese Immigrant Masculinity**

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AAS 200A  
Term Paper Excerpt  
Fall 2009

**Abstract:**

*“[W]omen are...believers in muscular manhood. These lank, scrawny limbs...he was more like a woman than a man.”*

–1870

*“What other men visit salons to get, the Asian gene pool provides for free...ladyboy fingers: soft and long.”* –  
2004

Despite a difference of over a century in publication dates, these excerpts from popular periodicals evince remarkably similar imaginings of the Asian male body. This correspondence is indicative of the ways in which contemporary non-normative constructions of Asian American masculinity suggest a historical linearity rooted in early American conceptions of Asian immigrant men.

As the first group of Asian immigrants to warrant social visibility, an exploration of the social figuration of early Chinese immigrant laborers can serve as a basis for understanding this popularization of emasculation. Specifically, to the extent that this group also formed the foundational basis for a seemingly extant legacy of deviance today, an examination of how these pioneer Chinese men were descriptively bounded within popular spaces can expose both the parallels and points of departure from which we can more fully understand contemporary Asian American masculinity.

This paper analyzes the textual imagery of Chinese immigrant laborers as captured in popular periodicals and print media between 1850 and 1924. In exploring perceptions of Chinese masculinity during this period, the projection of deviance is examined through three lenses of Chinese male non-normative constitution: the diasporic attribution of otherness as non-White aliens, queer domesticity as defined by family and occupation, and most visibly within the perceived and material deficit of agency.

*“[W]omen are instinctive believers in muscular manhood. These lank, scrawny limbs, the drooping glance...he was more like a woman than a man.”*

– April, 1870<sup>1</sup>

*“[A] sashimi-smooth chest...what other men visit salons to get, the Asian gene pool provides for free...ladyboy fingers: soft and long.”* –April, 2004<sup>2</sup>

Despite a difference of over a century in publication dates, these excerpts from popular periodicals evince remarkably similar imaginings of the Asian male body. This correspondence is indicative of the ways in which contemporary non-normative constructions of Asian American masculinity and ‘manhood’ suggest a historical linearity rooted in early American conceptions of Asian immigrants. From early Chinese bachelor societies to contemporary renderings of ‘Asian men,’ several sociocultural tropes have persistently characterized and defined the ‘deviant’ space in which the sexuality of Asian men is created and reinforced. Indeed, such renderings can be interpreted as the anthropomorphic manifestation of complex intersectionalities of class, world politics, and racial ideologies.

As the first group of Asian immigrants to arrive in numbers great enough to warrant social visibility (and various forms of subsequent political disenfranchisement), an exploration of the social figuration of early Chinese immigrant laborers can serve as a basis for understanding this popularization of emasculation. As Ronald Takaki suggests, “the Chinese merit our close attention...[w]hat happened to them in the nineteenth century represented the beginning of a pattern for the ways Asians would be viewed and treated here.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, to the extent that this group also formed the foundational basis for a seemingly extant legacy of deviance today, an examination of how these pioneer Chinese men were descriptively bounded within popular

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<sup>1</sup> Minna Wright, “My Chinese Cook,” *The Ladies’ Repository: a Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*, Apr 1870, 301.

<sup>2</sup> Whitney McNally, “Anthropology: Gay or Asian?,” *Details*, March/April, 2004, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 80.

spaces can expose both the parallels and points of departure from which we can more fully understand contemporary Asian American masculinity.

This paper suggests the trajectory of such renderings by focusing on historical bases of contemporary Asian American male emasculation. Specifically, it analyzes the textual imagery of Chinese immigrant laborers as captured in popular periodicals and print media between 1850 and 1924 –years that reflect public opinions through and after a period of significant migration and the exclusion of Chinese migrants in 1882.<sup>4</sup> In exploring perceptions of Chinese masculinity during this period, the projection of deviance is examined through three lenses of Chinese male non-normative constitution: the diasporic attribution of otherness or queerness as non-White aliens, queer domesticity as defined by family and occupation, and most visibly within the perceived and material deficit of agency.

The pervasive application of such social and cultural generalizations necessitates a historical contextualization of early Chinese immigration and the distinguishing characteristics that contributed to such conceptions. In the mid to late nineteenth century, a number of social and political factors converged to construct a distinct Chinese immigrant population. As a result, contemporary Asian American history texts generally acknowledge several overlapping commonalities shared by many of these early Chinese immigrants such as region of origin, economic motivations, and mode(s) of arrival.<sup>5</sup> However, one aspect of this population, the arrival of Chinese immigrants as sojourners, is particularly salient for its impact on the construction of Chinese masculinity.

Several factors explain the emergence of this sojourner population. In her comprehensive review of Asian American history, Sucheng Chan attributes this peculiar phenomenon to

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<sup>4</sup> References the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

<sup>5</sup> Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1964), 1-2.

traditional roles of women, recruiters' solicitations for "unattached" men, and the expense of sustaining families in America.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances resulted in a large population of Chinese immigrant men perceived to be "bachelors;" by the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese men outnumbered women fourteen to one.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the underlying causes of this phenomenon, the increasing visibility of large numbers of presumably single Chinese men highlighted and reinforced their perceived foreignness.

When considered within a sexualized context, the grossly disproportionate number of these Chinese male immigrants both reified and aggravated apprehensions of non-normativity. In her study of these 'bachelor societies,' Jennifer Ting insightfully suggests that their status as sojourners is simultaneously and inextricably linked to their bachelorhood –an interdependence that, she argues, ultimately results in 'deviant heterosexuality.'<sup>8</sup> Ting critiques this interdependence within a heterosexual construct, problematizing the heterosexism of Asian American historiography while calling for a reappropriation of this heterosexism to conceptualize Chinese bachelor society.<sup>9</sup> While certainly insightful and applicable for understanding period-specific sexuality, the removal of just such a specifically *heterosexual* sexuality may also provide for novel interpretations of such "deviance" –particularly when framing the sexuality of Chinese bachelor society within a historically linear trajectory as is shown here.

However, it is important to consider how such notions of deviance were rooted in a fundamental perception of the Chinese as deviant ethnics. Their ethnic and racial heritage

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<sup>6</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, (Detroit: Twayne, 1991), 104.

<sup>7</sup> Takaki, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Ting, "Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography," *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies*, eds. Gary Okihiro, Marilyn Alquizola, Dorothy Fujita Rony, K. Scott Wong, (Pullman: Washington State UP, 1995), 272.

<sup>9</sup> Ting, 277.

produced social and cultural markers that differentiated them as non-European immigrants in both appearance and language. As a result, the process of immigration entailed the diasporic attribution of ‘otherness’ that was imagined to be inherent to their nation, and by extension, their people.

For example, in a 1900 news article entitled “Some Bright Phases of Oriental Life,” Asia is described as “broad, long, deep, and high geographically, physically, politically, as well as socially and morally.”<sup>10</sup> A land typified by “the absence of the laws of Moses,” “Asia and her little Asias...have the mightiest moral and religious problems of all the world.” Such descriptions produce an immediate and definite “other” through a consolidated body of homogenous “Asias.” The elision of any such individual identity or differentiating markers is masked by the feminization of the religiously and morally problematic continent. In the same feature, ‘Asia,’ ‘the Asiatic’ and ‘the Orient,’ induce an American “fascination...that appeals to the romantic and unconventional element in man’s nature.” In referring to “man’s nature,” the writer is, of course, limiting both what is “man” and what is “nature” to that of White men. Such simple statements form a coherent Other from which White, Christian masculinity is differentiated.

In other articles, particular traits of Chinese immigrant men are directly attributed to their nationality. For example, in the April 1870 article containing the introductory epigraph, the writer recounts her experience of hiring a “Chinese cook” named Aguwee. Aguwee’s “Mongolian character has points as unique as its obtuseness...[in its] disregard of our sex and religion.”<sup>11</sup> Such “national traits” of this “representative celestial” reinforce the correlation between their “unique” national identity and their foreignness. Still, in another periodical, the

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<sup>10</sup> John Barrett, “Some Bright Phases of Oriental Life,” *The New York Times*, Jun 10, 1900, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, 301.

Chinese immigrant is perceived as the manifest product of this correlation: “[b]ut of all the odd things China produces, a China *man* himself is the oddest...he is in truth a curious specimen of the genus homo...judge him by our standard, and he is to it a very antipode.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the ‘odd’ Chinaman is directly attributed to a China that is responsible for producing such oddities.

Such diasporic attribution underscored the imagined compatibility of Chinese national Otherness with the reality of familial and occupational circumstances of Chinese immigrant men in America. The conspicuous number of bachelors and their frequent relegation to traditionally female occupations simultaneously reinforced and expanded the justifications that served as evidence of their deviance. These non-normative patterns of bachelorhood and occupation comprised a peculiar ‘queer domesticity’ that is reflected in popular opinions of the period.

The prevalence of Chinese immigrant men without families in America produced speculation that reconciled their bachelor status with the unavailability of Chinese women. However, rather than attributing bachelorhood to the dearth of Chinese women, such explicatory attempts often endowed the Chinaman with an asexuality or hyposexuality that reinforced perceptions of deviance and queer subjectivity. For example, in the article cited earlier with Aguwee the Chinese cook, the writer imbues Aguwee’s person with just such an asexuality: “I never knew him to become attached to or interested in any person or thing for love’s sake...[a]ll the Chinese seem to have the greatest contempt for their country-women in America.”<sup>13</sup> The curious absence of any gendered descriptor to describe “the Chinese,” demonstrates the pervasiveness of the bachelor trope; all Chinese are casually assumed to be men. Moreover, these men neither realize nor express interest in romantic pursuits; the implication here is that Chinese men choose to not pursue such normative sexual interests.

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<sup>12</sup> G.H.V., “China and the Chinese,” *The American Quarterly Register and Magazine*, Mar 1849, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 303.

In an attempt to defend the Chinese and provide a counterargument to their critics, another writer provides a well-intentioned but incriminating confirmation of Chinese male queer subjectivity. Challenging what are presumably accusations of licentious behavior, the writer obliterates any semblance of a normative sexuality in positing their sexual 'integrity:' "it is not true that they desire young or pretty girls for teachers...they do not care whether they are male or female, young or old...the majority of the teachers are female."<sup>14</sup> In defending the morality of the Chinese, the writer ironically conflates morality with heterosexuality, thus problematizing the possibility of any normative sexual desire.

The untenability of such normativity was further reinforced by the economic relegation of Chinese men to narrowly restricted occupational niches. Their visibility in occupations traditionally reserved for women or children framed and evidenced this queer domesticity through perceived and material emasculation. Aguwee's employment as a Chinese cook replaces the "matrons of the present day" as a becomes the "queen of the kitchen." Not only is he "more like a woman than a man," Aguwee excels at "sweeping, dusting, and making beds...in half the time of most girls," even "pick[ing] up articles fallen on the floor—a most unmanly trait."<sup>15</sup> Ironically, it is Aguwee's extraordinary competence that consummates the link between his occupation and the emasculation of his person.

In another article published in 1921, Lim Chung, a 72 year-old Chinese servant, is praised for his "picturesque" dedication to his domestic obligations:

He was the house 'boy' of Mr. and Mrs. Roswell R. Brownson...he watched over the children with devoted attention during their infancy and as they grew up, became their

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<sup>14</sup> Sanford Culver Hearn, "Many are Devout and Faithful in Mission Work," *The New York Times*, Jun 28, 1909, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Wright 302.

adoring slave... for more than a week prior to his departure, Chung actually went about his work weeping like a child.<sup>16</sup>

Here, the mechanism of emasculation is distinct from the one that operates in Aguwee's feminization; rather than replacing the "queen" of the domestic sphere, the Chinaman is inserted as both a "boy" member and a "slave" Other into the domestic hierarchy. The elision of Lim Chung's manhood and maturity works concurrently within a sexual vacuum to construct a pubescent and "child"-like entity.

Such reliance of textual imagery on the physical body reflects the impact of these renderings on the projection of deviance. Indeed, the prevalence of perceived corporeal abnormalities as reflected in this period's print media is indicative of how these deficiencies were popularly mapped to a deficit of agency, and thus, masculinity. As seen with Lim Chung, the Chinese male body was perceived to be developmentally handicapped. In fact, the youthfulness that is frequently used to describe the Chinaman is also suggestive of arrested evolution; in one article that describes the Chinese as "lithe and active shapes," the writer also marks their "eyes at forty-five degrees, heightened malar bones, and other characteristics" as evidence of "races long gone by."<sup>17</sup>

A revisiting of John Barrett's 1900 article, "Some Bright Phases of Oriental Life," suggests not only the diasporic inherency of his observations of "clean, lithe-limbed, noiseless" Chinese boys "gliding about," but also the fleeting presence of a questionable existence.<sup>18</sup> Their underdevelopment, then, reflects a distinct form of emasculation by implying an ephemeral, spectral figure in the Chinaman. Such disembodiment of the Chinese male is powerfully

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<sup>16</sup> NA, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 30, 1921, II12.

<sup>17</sup> NA, "Orientals in America," *New York Times Daily*, Apr 15, 1852, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Barrett, 23



captured in a short narrative published in 1898, entitled “The Orange Lady.”<sup>19</sup> In it, a young man attempts to delicately position a request for a lady’s hand in marriage, only to be inconveniently (and persistently) interrupted by Quong, the Chinese servant:

A Chinese man mysteriously confronted them... “Quong,” said she, “Tell him to come back.” “All right, ‘m.” and the door closed noiselessly. Quong reappeared, and Fastnet imagined he had come through the door without opening it. He could conceive of a situation in which a disembodied servant might be embarrassing. Fastnet had fresh objections to incorporeal Chinamen. Quong faded away. He suddenly stopped. A figure all in white, holding a tray, stood impassively before him. Lives there a bachelor...who could have continued...under the shadow of a disembodied Chinaman? Meanwhile Quong stood there like the statue of a ghost. “Where did he come from?” he gasped. When the shadow had vanished, Fastnet’s wits began to revive.

Quong’s person lacks physical animus; his movements are disconcertingly otherworldly, his presence “ghost”-like, statuesque, and never human. The elision of any corporeal capacity further problematizes Chinese masculinity, marking the impossibility of normative agency – sexual, or otherwise. Thus, such anatomical features weave the diasporic attribution of foreignness and the queerness derived from Quong’s occupation into a coherent imagining of Chinese male subjectivity that lacks a physicality that any agency requires.

Such evidence of deviance, however, cannot be limited to the Chinese body as an independent subject of analysis. White agency, even that exercised by women, served to delineate the boundaries of Chinese non-normative masculinity. Beyond the emasculation of the Chinese male vis-à-vis White men, print media of the period also suggests a deference to the agency exercised by White women. For example, in 1878, the *New York Times* published the

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<sup>19</sup> Harry E. Andrews, “The Orange Lady,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 27, 1898, 8.

curious story of a “Chinaman and Chicago Woman.”<sup>20</sup> The article recounts the experience of a White woman and Chinese man applying for marriage:

The yellow complexion...the pig-tail...were all there. There was also on his arm a fair creature of 30. She was well dressed and good looking [sic], and was of American descent. The clerk gazed in astonishment...but quickly recovering, said: “Your lady’s name?” The Chinaman stared but said nothing, and then the bride came to the rescue. “And your gentleman’s name?” “Oh,” said the fair Estalla, “he’s a heathen Chinee, he is, and his name is King Yeap.” “I am going to get married just for the fun of it, you know.” “Take your hat off, Sir, and be sworn.” The Chinaman grinned. “Take your hat off, you heathen Chinee, you” said his future bride, and before the prospective bridegroom could comply, she pulled off his hat.

Despite reflecting the potential for a heteronormative realization of domesticity, this article reflects a conspicuous inversion of the traditional domestic sphere and its definition of appropriate gender roles. King Yeap’s dumb, “grinning” reticence suggests a desexualized deference that serves to highlight the auspices of White femininity. His existence as an odd novelty is stripped of any gendered agency, simultaneously necessitating and problematizing the groom’s “rescue” by the bride-to-be. The “yellow complexion” and “pig-tail” not only serve as phenotypical indicators of this Chinese otherness, but also function as the driving logic for his lack of vocal and bodily agency.

Like the other named Chinese men in these articles, King Yeap’s consummate lack of agency becomes the analogue for a deviance particular to, and representative of, Chinese men. Returning to the opening epigraph excerpted from the April, 2004 edition of *Details* suggests the continued role of such perceptions in defining contemporary spaces of normative masculinity. In

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<sup>20</sup> NA, “Chinaman and Chicago Woman,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1878, 5.

a modern interpretation of Chinese immigrant deviance, the article suggests strikingly similar conceptualizations of Asian American manhood; the Asian American “queen” is characterized by his “inscrutable affect,” with “ladyboy” appendages that are derived from his “Asian gene pool.” The textual imagery used to figure the Asian American male body in this recent article mirrors constructs of Chinese “masculinity” that have been examined in this project, including the presumption of foreignness and queer domesticity.

The provocative salience of such parallels suggests that historical analyses cannot be divorced from contemporary renderings of Asian American masculinity. Chinese immigrant men were consistently branded as interchangeably foreign, effeminate, impotent, and ultimately not “American.” The examples cited here illustrate a power dynamic that positioned White women and men, including the writers that captured these stories, as representative of normative ideals and as the sole heritors of agency. This brief review of period publications reveals the operation of these manifold mechanisms of emasculation and etiologies of deviance –many, of which, continue to exist and function today as evidenced by the *Details* article. More importantly, they reveal the epistemological potential of incorporating such studies in broaching the construction and articulation of contemporary Asian American masculinity.

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