

FROM PARIAH TO PARAGON: SHIFTING IMAGES OF CHINESE AMERICANS DURING WORLD WAR II

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When the United States entered World War II in late 1941 and became allies with China in the shared fight against Japanese aggression, the first sizable American-born generation of Chinese Americans was reaching adulthood.¹ Their parents and grandparents had suffered the indignities of the Chinese exclusion acts, which had greatly curtailed the number of Chinese allowed into the country, denied them the right of naturalization, and shaped the composition of the Chinese immigrant population, giving preference to males, merchants, students, and others seen as more desirable than common laborers. The racial and cultural stereotypes of the Chinese in America centered on their supposed inability to embrace American political and social values; they were seen as “perpetual foreigners,” forever on the margins of American society. When this American-born generation came of age, however, they were determined to claim a place in the broader American political, social, and cultural landscape. In this pursuit, Chinese Americans sought to take control of their public portrayals, which in turn reflected how they saw themselves as Americans.

This chapter examines three interrelated trends in the late 1930s and early 1940s that would greatly improve the image of Chinese Americans and would allow them to move from the status of social pariahs to paragons—what would later be called the “model minority”: the distinguishing and distancing of the Chinese from the Japanese, Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s tour of the United States, and the

congressional repeal of the Chinese exclusion acts. These developments were played out in the public sphere through political and cultural activities, congressional hearings, and the print media—both the mainstream press and English-language Chinese American newspapers.

The Chinese American Press

The rise of the Chinese American periodical press was one of the most important developments in the shaping of second-generation Chinese Americans' identity formation. Although there were Chinese-language newspapers available, most American-born Chinese did not read or write Chinese well enough to read them; thus, English-language publications were vital. As Dorothy Eng of Oakland, California, remarked, "Our generation couldn't read or write Chinese, we spoke English among ourselves, as it was faster thinking in English. By the time you could figure the Chinese, the person had left." Mary Wong of Philadelphia echoed this position: "Our parents spoke Chinese and we would usually answer them in Chinese, or the parents of our friends. But among ourselves, my brothers and sisters, and friends, we only spoke English to each other."²

Founded in San Francisco in 1935 by Thomas Chinn and Chingwah Lee, the *Chinese Digest* was the first newspaper published in English specifically for American-born Chinese. It tried to bridge the gap between the second generation's ties to the culture of their parents and Chinatown and their own attempts to enter the American mainstream. In its inaugural issue, an editorial titled "Why the Digest?" clearly stated the mission of the paper: "The *Chinese Digest* is not just a hobby or a business—it is all that with a full-sized battle thrown in. We are fighting on five fronts."³ The first front was "Killing a Celestial":

There are no people in America more misunderstood than the Chinese. From the time of 'Sand-lot Kearny' [*sic*] to the present, the Chinese is pictured as a sleepy Celestial enveloped in the mists of opium fumes or a halo of Oriental philosophy, but never as a human being. The pulp magazines and Hollywood have served to keep this illusion alive. The 'Chinese Digest' is fighting this Celestial bogey and substitutes a normal being who drives automobiles, shops for the latest gadgets, and speaks good

English.⁴

The second front was “The Truth Is Our Battle Cry,” meaning that the paper wanted to report accounts of Japanese aggression in Asia that were more accurate than those appearing in most American newspapers. The third, “Bridging the Pacific,” referred to the desire to cultivate an appreciation for and understanding of Chinese history and culture among Chinese Americans who might feel estranged from their ethnic heritage. The fourth, “Inter-Trench Communication,” was a call for better ties among the Chinese American communities in America, as the editors recognized that the “Chinese in Boston or Portland have natural ties and common interests. Adverse legislation in one is adverse to all.”⁵ The final front was “The War on Neglect,” a call for more economic opportunities for Chinese Americans. This initial editorial showed the editors’ conscious effort to articulate the concerns of their generation and to educate, unify, and mobilize the community.

Soon after the *Chinese Digest* folded in 1940, William Hoy and Charles Leong, Chinatown journalists, began another Chinese American publication, the *California Chinese Press* (the title would later be shortened to the *Chinese Press*). According to Karl Lo and Him Mark Lai, the circulation of the *Chinese Digest* never reached a thousand, but the *Chinese Press* enjoyed a national readership.⁶ In the opening editorial, Hoy made it clear that this paper would be geared toward second-generation concerns. He wrote, “Over sixty per cent of the 30,000 Chinese [in California] are those of the second or younger generation, the generation that speaks, reads and writes predominantly in the English language. The language of the California Chinese today is the language of their fellow Americans, and therefore their voice should also be in English.”⁷ The following paragraphs clearly set this newspaper apart from its predecessors:

The California Chinese today are predominantly Americans, either through the privilege of birth or by derivative citizenship. As Americans of Chinese descent their future is the future of America, and their social and political ideals are those of American democracy. As they become rapidly Americanized there is an urgent need for a newspaper to act as a voice for this large group. The California Chinese Press hopes to become this voice.

The California Chinese also look across the Pacific Ocean, seeking opportunities to help China in her present plight and to plan for the reconstruction of a greater China to come. The American people have always been the staunchest helpers of China. And the California Chinese, bound by the ties of race to the people of that Republic across the Pacific, can do no less than to bend their every effort in helping China emerge victorious from her present war with Japan, and later aid her in the gigantic task of reconstruction.⁸

Although the *Chinese Digest* was geared toward the second generation as well, there was still a tension between its desire to honor Chinese traditions and its determination to adopt American cultural mores. The group of second-generation Chinese Americans represented by the *Chinese Press*, however, felt wedded to America. Without rejecting China or Chinese culture, the editors fully embraced the United States as the land where their futures would unfold. Even though they referred to themselves as “California Chinese,” they also called themselves “Americans,” thereby forcefully claiming a place and role in American society. China was now “that Republic across the Pacific” rather than the “motherland.” Although Chinese immigrants and their offspring had long desired to claim America as their rightful home, the weight of social, cultural, and legislative pressures constrained them from doing so. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, they were asserting their identification with American society and culture with strong conviction, and much of this would be articulated through the Chinese American press.

“How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs”

Once allied with China in the war, many Americans thought it necessary to distinguish Chinese from Japanese—a distinction that became important in how the two groups of Asian Americans would be perceived and treated by the American public. Two of the best-known examples came from Henry R. Luce’s *Time* and *Life* magazines. On December 22, 1941, *Time* ran a three-quarter-page illustrated article in the “Home Affairs” section entitled “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs.” Photographs of two Chinese and Japanese men ran across the top

and bottom of the article, with the text in between. The text is replete with cultural and physical stereotypes of Chinese and Japanese, but the author also warns that the guidelines offered are not always reliable: "There is no infallible way of telling them apart, because the same racial strains are mixed in both. Even an anthropologist with calipers and plenty of time to measure heads, noses, shoulders, hips, is sometimes stumped." Nevertheless, the article listed nine general differences between the two, ranging from height (the Chinese being taller than the Japanese), to weight (the Japanese are seldom fat, whereas in China being fat is a sign of prosperity), body hair (the Chinese seldom grow an impressive mustache), eyes (Japanese eyes are set closer together), and social demeanor (the Japanese are hesitant, nervous in conversation, and laugh loudly at the wrong time). Nothing, of course, was significant about these so-called differences, and none of them could hold up from one individual to the next, but the idea that there were important differences between the Chinese and the Japanese, and that one might be able to tell the two apart because of these traits, helped set the tone by which the Chinese became "friends" and the Japanese became "Japs."⁹

The *Life* version, which appeared on the same day, "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese," took a similar tack of explicating subtle physical differences between the Chinese and Japanese, couching them in pseudoscientific theories of race and racial origins: "To physical anthropologists, devoted debunkers of race myths, the difference between Chinese and Japs is measurable in millimeters. Both are related to the Eskimo and North American Indian. . . . Physical anthropology, in consequence, finds Japs and Chinese as closely related as Germans and English. It can, however, set apart the special types of each national group." Unlike the *Time* article, which featured four small pictures of Chinese and Japanese men for comparison, the *Life* article provided readers with a large portrait of a pleasant-looking Chinese government official and a menacing picture of Japanese General Tojo. Both portraits were inscribed with lines drawn to facial features and comparisons made in hand-written labels, such as "scant beard," "parchment yellow complexion," "never has rosy cheeks," and "more frequent epicanthic fold" for the Chinese and a "heavy beard," "earthy yellow complexion," "sometimes rosy cheeks," and "less frequent epicanthic fold" for the Japanese. Another set of pictures on the following page compared the height and leg length of "tall Chinese brothers" and "short Japanese admirals." The caption under the Chinese brothers stated, "Most

Chinese in America come from southern and coastal cities, Canton and Shanghai. They are shorter than Northern Chinese, but retain the slight proportions of the young men shown here. When middle-aged and fat, they look more like Japs." In contrast, "aristocratic Japs . . . are proud to approximate the patrician lines of the Northern Chinese."¹⁰ Despite the pictures and text, the articles were not really useful for distinguishing between Chinese and Japanese Americans. Nonetheless, the message was clear that the Chinese were friendly whereas the Japanese were ruthlessly militaristic; all of the pictures of the Japanese showed them in military uniforms.

If it was important for Americans on the home front to be able to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese Americans, it was vital that service personnel in Asia be able to tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese soldiers. To help meet this need, the Army issued *A Pocket Guide to China* to American military personnel stationed there. In addition to explaining Chinese cultural customs and habits and suggesting how Americans should behave in China, it offered a section entitled "How to Spot a Jap," written and drawn by cartoonist Milton Caniff and featuring characters from Caniff's best-known work, the comic strip "Terry and the Pirates." The title frame of this strip showed an officer asking Terry and his friend Ryan to show "the men a few points of difference between the Japs and our Oriental allies." As in the articles in *Time* and *Life*, these differences were constructed around physical traits supposedly common to the two nationalities. According to this guide, the skin color of the Chinese and Japanese is slightly different (the Chinese having a "dull bronze" skin tone and the Japanese, a "lemon yellow"); the Chinese have evenly set teeth, whereas the Japanese have buck teeth; when walking, the Chinese stride, whereas the Japanese shuffle (conversely, the *Time* article maintained that the Japanese walked "stiffly erect," whereas the Chinese shuffled); the Chinese and "other Asiatics have fairly normal feet," but the Japanese had a wide space between their first and second toes because of the wooden sandals they wore before being "issued Army shoes"; and finally, the Japanese had less ease with the English language, sucking in on any "s" sound and unable to pronounce the letter "l." Terry even advised the reader to "try 'lalafalooza' on them! That's a panic!" To sum up, the strip emphasized that "spotting a Jap" depended on three things: appearance, feet, and pronunciation; and that, in general, a Japanese individual was "short, squat, [with a] fairly heavy beard, with lemon-yellow skin and

slanted eyes.”¹¹ Although the Chinese are not described in as much detail, the general judgment is that they are much like Americans and should be treated with kindness and respect, whereas the Japanese—or, as they were more commonly called, “Japs”—could not be trusted nor did they deserve to be treated with respect or humanity.

Once the United States entered the war, many Chinese Americans took immediate steps to express their support for the American war effort and to separate themselves from the Japanese and Japanese Americans. Within days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Chinese consulate in San Francisco, with the assistance of various Chinese American community organizations, issued identification cards to Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans in order to verify their ethnicity. Soon, buttons were available, for ten cents each, which declared “I’m Chinese,” or simply “China”; other buttons depicted American and Chinese flags crossed in unity. The editors of the *Chinese Press* urged its readers to carry some sort of identification in order to distinguish themselves from Japanese: “For your own protection, the authorities MUST distinguish you from the Japanese, a people at war and an enemy of China and the United States.”¹² Despite the use of such buttons, Chinese Americans found themselves frequently mistaken for Japanese Americans. Newspapers published many reports on such incidents. “Identification cards, buttons, and car stickers are displayed and wore [*sic*] by the thousands, but still the practice of Chinese being mistaken for Japanese goes merrily on. Minor incidents, such as Chinese being refused service in department stores and restaurants, etc. are still making the rounds. Here is this week’s ‘So sorry—thought you were a Jap’ news stories.”¹³ Chinese Americans were urged to be patient and understanding if mistaken for a Japanese American. The editors of the *Chinese News*, a semimonthly founded by Thomas Chinn after the *Chinese Digest* ceased publication in 1940, wrote,

The average American cannot tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese. With this thought in mind, we wish to caution every Chinese to bear with patience if the salesgirl does not wait on you; show that you’re Chinese in some way, but do not do so arrogantly. In all cases, remember that most people cannot tell the difference between flags, so even the display of a flag is best augmented with the word “Chinese” in connection

with it. The duty of every Chinese in America is to participate in the defense of this country.¹⁴

In conjunction with distancing themselves from Japanese Americans, there was little mention of the incarceration of Japanese Americans except when it might benefit Chinese Americans.¹⁵ When Japanese Americans were taken from their homes and placed in concentration camps in the spring of 1942, there was a severe shortage of farm laborers on the West Coast, especially in California. The United States Employment Service issued a call for a thousand Chinese Americans to fill the ranks of the depleted farm workers. The *Chinese Press* urged Chinese Americans to respond to this call, mentioning that "Food is just as important as machine-guns to help win the war. . . . This is an opportunity for all Chinese with farm experience to develop a business as well as perform a patriotic duty. All types of produce and berry farms, vacated by the Japanese are available."¹⁶ Thus, some Chinese Americans saw the internment as an opportunity to make gains in the name of patriotism.

The *Chinese Press* also participated in spreading the belief that Japanese Americans may have been guilty of fifth column activities to aid Japan. When writing about Chinese Americans taking over stores and business spaces left vacant by Japanese Americans, H. K. Wong reported that a "Japanese-owned hotel" on the corner of California and Grant Avenue in San Francisco had been leased by Albert and Nellie Lee and would reopen as a residence hotel for girls and businesswomen. When workers arrived to begin remodeling, "they found chairs and tables all set up for (could be fifth columnist) conferees. . . . The whole works were torn down in record time." ¹⁷ The fifth column message, however, had been made even more explicitly in an earlier article, which reported that Dr. Gordon S. Watkins, professor of economics and Dean of the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Los Angeles, lectured to an alumni group and stated that "Pearl Harbor's fall was mainly caused by fifth column work by American-born Japs."¹⁸ Watkins placed the blame on those Japanese Americans who had gone to Japan, claiming that some had become "officers for the mikado" and that "a number of them were fliers."¹⁹ He concluded that Japanese parents and teachers from Japan prevented the *Nisei* from assimilating into American life. Japanese schools and Buddhist priests saw "to it that the boys and girls do not lose the virtues of their ancestors." ²⁰ The

editors of the *Chinese Press*, although acutely aware of the generational conflicts within the Chinese American community, were apparently not willing to acknowledge that similar tensions existed in the Japanese American community and that, like themselves, their Japanese American counterparts were overwhelmingly loyal to the United States and the American war effort.

The internment of Japanese Americans also provided Chinese Americans with the unlikely opportunity to make temporary gains in the motion picture industry. The war created a demand for films about the conflict, and stories set in the Pacific theater or China were popular. A piece in the *Chinese Press* describing the call for Chinese American actors began, "If your cheekbones are high and prominent, if your eyes will slant with the aid of a little adhesive tape, Hollywood's harried casting directors may be looking for you. And if you're really an Oriental, you haven't a Chinaman's chance of ducking a movie job unless you can run faster than the sprinting scouts of half a dozen studios where China is in just about every other title on the production lists."²¹ Before the war, about a thousand Chinese Americans worked occasionally in the movie industry, but the war effort drew them into the military, defense industries, and other jobs that offered steady employment, and there was such a shortage of Asian actors at this point that the Screen Actors' Guild waived its membership requirements for hiring. The article emphasized, "The Japs are gone to internment camps. So many Chinese are playing Jap roles that there are practically no Chinese left for Chinese roles. Koreans are scarce. Malayans are scarce [and] Filipinos are so busy they have to stop and think which side they are really on."²² An executive for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, speaking of the need for Chinese American actors for Pearl S. Buck's *Dragon Seed*, remarked, "I'll venture to say that every Chinese man, woman, and child west of Denver can get work in that picture. The only ones we definitely don't want are those in the army or defense plants."²³ On the one hand, Chinese Americans took this opportunity to make a statement about their loyalties and concerns about playing roles to portray the enemy. Filipinos, however, were said to relish the roles because "they all get killed at the end."²⁴ On the other hand, Mei Lee Foo, a San Francisco-born Chinese opera and concert singer, agreed to play a Japanese geisha girl because "the geisha girl is symbolic to many people of the moral decadence of Japan."²⁵ Thus, Chinese Americans could express their antipathy toward the Japanese while making economic gains for themselves.

In addition to the performing arts, Chinese Americans engaged in other forms of cultural production in the public sphere that boosted their status as loyal Americans. On May 16, 1943, the Department of the Treasury's War Savings Staff hosted an "I Am an American" Day at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. Representing Chinatown, May Jeannette Wong joined groups of Armenian, Austrian, Czechoslovakian, Danish, Dutch, Filipino, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish, and Yugoslavian Americans to celebrate the climax of American Citizenship Week. Each of the twenty-two participating groups sponsored a booth, some of which sold "art objects and native trinkets," while others sold coffee and refreshments. All the proceeds would be used to buy war bonds. An evening show featured each nationality performing "folk dancing, singing, and a variety of other features that [would] illustrate the cultural contribution of each group to the development and upbuilding of America."²⁶ All new citizens were honored during a ceremony in the afternoon. The newspaper account of the event is striking in its praise of those participating: "They are the people who came to America to enjoy the freedoms guaranteed under our American form of government—the freedom of speech and of press, the freedom of worship, and the freedoms of petition and assembly. They show by their participation that they appreciate what America has given them and want to give all they can to preserve the American way of life."²⁷ Although German and Italian immigrants were among those honored as loyal Americans, Japanese Americans were not. And although Chinese Americans were invited to participate, there was no mention of the fact that Chinese immigrants were still barred from citizenship at this point.



The Chinese American chapter of the American Women's Volunteer Service, 1942. (From the Martha Taam collection. Courtesy of Judy Yung.)

This pageant was consistent with other expressions of ethnic patriotism during the war. Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Cooke MacGregor published a volume of photojournalism in which the “American Chinese” were the first ethnic group covered. The text praised their patriotism while acknowledging that “Under our laws, some of our older Chinese people have never been able to become American citizens . . . [but] we have today many young Chinese, also born here, serving in our armed forces. They are serving equally the nation from which their parents or grandparents came, since China and the United States are now Allies.”²⁸ As in the pageant held in San Francisco, Italian and German Americans were celebrated as part of the American mosaic. There is no mention of Italy as part of the Axis powers, and the German immigrant featured is described as a loyal American “though he may grieve for the second war which has now come between the country of his origin and the country of his birth.”²⁹ Not surprisingly, Japanese Americans do not appear in the book.

The two themes, that the Chinese are similar to Americans and that they are loyal patriotic Americans in the war effort, are echoed in the film series *Why We Fight*, directed by Frank Capra at the behest of the War Department. In the sixth installment, *The Battle for China*, China is praised for being the world's oldest country, a civilization of "art, learning, and peace," one that has never "waged a war of conquest." Furthermore, the war had brought the oldest and the youngest nations together to fight "side by side in a struggle that is as old as China itself; the struggle of freedom against slavery, civilization against barbarism, and good against evil."³⁰ The final film of the series, *War Comes to America*, stresses that "we the people, all the people" were involved in the war and that the war was being fought in defense of all Americans, including the "English, Scotch, Dutch, Italians, French, Swiss, Danes, Norwegians, Poles, Welsh, Negroes, Spaniards, Mexicans, Greeks, Portuguese, Germans, Hungarians, Russians, Irish, Slavs, and Chinese."³¹ Chinese Americans were pleased to participate in these events and to be included in similar publications, for these venues allowed them to parade their ethnic heritage while demonstrating their loyalty to America. Thus, many Chinese Americans consciously claimed their place in American society during the war, often at the expense of Japanese Americans. Most Japanese Americans, powerless behind the barbed wire of concentration camps, had little recourse to counter this trend. One wonders how different the Chinese American response to Japanese Americans would have been had Japanese Americans not been interned.

As Chinese Americans separated themselves from Japanese Americans, and other Americans distinguished between friendly Asian allies and hostile Asian enemies, the general perception of Chinese Americans improved. In an article published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and later reprinted in the *Chinese News*, a reporter wrote about Chinatown's readiness to aid the war effort. The end of the article is most revealing of the changing attitudes toward Chinese Americans. The reporter writes, "Next time you're eating or drinking in the district, don't let the fancy neon lights, the Cantonese talk, or the Oriental architecture fool you. These people are American through and through. The fact that their parents may have come from the old country and that their children have a tougher Americanization job on their hands than most of us makes them all the better Americans."³² In 1942, Earl Warren, running for governor of California, issued a statement in observation of China's "Independence Day" (October 10) declaring, "Like all

native born Californians, I have cherished during my entire life a warm and cordial feeling for the Chinese people. Under your great leader, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek you have long been in the forefront of the battle for freedom. My sincere congratulations to you on this anniversary of Chinese independence, and with it my prayer that the Jap invaders will be driven from Chinese soil before the beginning of the New Year.”³³ Wartime relations between the United States and China had created a new interpretation of both American history and Sino-American relations in which the hostilities between the two countries and the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans were conveniently forgotten.

Madame Chiang Kai-Shek’s Tour of the United States

If there was one Chinese who changed the image of the Chinese and Chinese Americans in the American public’s imagination, it was Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, the wife of the leader of wartime Nationalist China. Chiang’s well-publicized and well-orchestrated tour of the United States officially began in the nation’s capital on February 17, 1943. A guest of the Roosevelts, she stayed in the White House and was photographed often chatting with Eleanor Roosevelt on the White House lawn and meeting various politicians and military figures. On February 18, she made history by becoming the first private citizen and only the second woman to address both houses of Congress. *Time’s* account mentioned her poise, clothes, figure, and presence, characteristics that would be commented on throughout her visit:

The Senators watched in curious silence as Madame Chiang walked down the aisle of the Senate Chamber. They saw a still face with dark eyes. They saw a slim, straight figure in a black Chinese gown, with a tiny splash of jade, there a black sequin’s unstated sparkle. Madame Chiang stepped to the rostrum, listened as Vice President Wallace introduced her, shot a smile at the Senators, and then, after apologizing for not having a set speech, knocked their silvery blocks off extemporaneously. ³⁴

Chiang’s speech was eloquent, witty, flattering of the United States, and forceful in presenting China’s case. At one point, she stressed the commonalities between

the two countries, giving it a personal bent, "I came to your country as a little girl. I knew your people. I have lived with them. I spent the formative years of my life among your people. I speak your language, not only the language of your hearts, but also your tongue. So coming here today, I feel that I am also coming home." ³⁵ When her speech ended, the chamber erupted in generous applause. As *Time* put it, "The U.S. Senate is not in the habit of rising to its feet to applaud. For Madame Chiang it rose and thundered."³⁶

Chiang's tour took her from Washington, DC, to New York City, her alma mater Wellesley College, and across the country by rail to San Francisco and Los Angeles. In both New York and San Francisco, she often delivered speeches to both white audiences, to whom she stressed China's plight, and to Chinese American audiences, whom she exhorted to support China's efforts while being loyal Americans. After a stay in San Francisco, Madame Chiang traveled south to Los Angeles, where she appeared at the Hollywood Bowl on the afternoon of April 4, 1943. Produced by David O. Selznick, "China: A Symphonic Narrative" was an elaborate spectacle in front of 30,000 people with music provided by the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra, a narration read by Walter Huston, and five hundred Chinese Americans acting out scenes of China's history and its role in the war. As the performance ended, Madame Chiang rose to give a speech that recounted China's struggle against the Japanese and also touched on the close relationship between China and the United States. Hailed as a great success, this was viewed as a proper ending to her impassioned tour.

Throughout Madame Chiang's time in the United States, the response from the American public was overwhelming. She received hundreds of cards and letters a day. One sent by Mrs. Cathleen Quinn of East Orange, New Jersey, included a money order for three dollars and a note reading, "It is from my three daughters and it is for the little guy on the railroad tracks somewhere in China."³⁷ As Carl Sandburg wrote, "What she wants, she wants for the Family of Man over the entire earth."³⁸ Referred to affectionately as the "Missimo" (to match her husband Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's abbreviated title of "Gis-simo") and more formally as "Madame" or "the First Lady of China," she was embraced by Americans with a level of respect and kindness that contrasted starkly with how most Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans had been received throughout American history. She represented not the heathen Chinese slave girl of the past

but the modern Christian woman of China's future. Historian Karen Leong claims that Chiang was "the ultimate symbol of a modern and Americanized China"; historian T. Christopher Jespersen views her from a different angle, stating, "As a woman who fitted squarely within domestic ideas about gender roles, Mme. Chiang could be viewed as the foreign equivalent of an American woman."³⁹ In her, Americans could embrace China's cause because Madame Chiang made China more familiar to them. She was American-educated, Christian, attractive, fluent in English, and an outstanding orator. For many Chinese Americans, she was all these things and more. She represented a modern and respected China: a heroine they could believe in, one who made them proud of their cultural roots, and one to whom all of America's press and celebrities eagerly paid homage.

Some scholars have criticized Madame Chiang for not confronting the issues of racial discrimination faced by the Chinese in America or the continued enforcement of the Chinese exclusion acts.⁴⁰ Although it is true that Madame Chiang said little in public about them, she apparently played her hand in mid-May of 1943, when she invited several key congressmen to dinner, days before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization was to begin hearings on the various bills before them. She is said to have stressed how much the repeal of the Chinese exclusion acts would boost Chinese morale and thus contribute to the war effort.⁴¹ Throughout the congressional hearings and debates over the scope of repeal, those supporting repeal repeatedly invoked Madame Chiang.

The Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts

The push for repeal came primarily from the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion, a group of well-connected white Americans who had ties to China. In early 1943, Richard J. Walsh, editor of *Asia* and the second husband of Pearl S. Buck, published an article by Charles Nelson Spinks calling for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, declaring, "As our allies, the Chinese deserve racial equality now. As fellow human beings, they have been entitled to it ever since the United States first came into contact with their country."⁴²

The article received considerable attention, and support for repeal grew. The Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion began meeting in New York to

map out their strategy while Madame Chiang was touring the United States. Seizing on her presence in the country, Martin Kennedy (D-NY) introduced HR 1882, which called for repeal of the exclusion acts and made the Chinese eligible for naturalization.⁴³ Once this bill was introduced, other versions and amendments would follow in steady succession. Some supporters wanted to repeal all the laws that excluded Asians from immigrating and naturalization, whereas others advocated putting the Chinese on the quota system established by the 1924 Immigration Act. Some wanted to include a provision to allow Chinese men to bring their wives into the country as nonquota immigrants. In the end, it would be the bill sponsored by Warren Magnuson (D-WA), HR 3070, that emerged as the version that carried the most support. It called for the repeal of the Chinese exclusion statutes, establishing an annual quota based on the system outlined in the 1924 Immigration Act and allowing Chinese immigrants to apply for citizenship. This bill passed the House on October 21 and the Senate on November 26; President Roosevelt signed it into law on December 17, 1943.

As Congress debated repeal, much of the rhetoric employed on both sides was reminiscent of the debates over “the Chinese Question” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those opposed to repeal came from four main constituencies: labor, veterans’ groups, “patriotic” societies, and some West Coast interests. Among those who supported some form of repeal were commercial interests, religious groups, “China Hands,” and Chinese Americans and Chinese nationals. The debate over repeal focused on a number of overlapping and interrelated issues: countering anti-American propaganda employed by the Japanese; raising Chinese morale vis-à-vis their war effort; addressing the meaning of racial equality; and navigating the fear that repeal would allow a mass influx of Asian immigrants into the country, which would threaten the postwar economy and create racial tensions.

The issue of Japanese propaganda was at the forefront of much of the congressional discussion. Pearl Buck testified that “the Japanese have not failed to taunt them [i.e., the Chinese] with the friendliness of our words and the unfriendliness of our deeds. The Chinese have heard this propaganda and while they have not heeded it much, it has nevertheless been true. As a war measure, it would simply be the wisest thing we could do to make it impossible for Japan to use this sort of propaganda any more, by making it untrue.”⁴⁴ The argument to

establish an annual quota for the Chinese was a controversial issue for many. Although some believed that a quota would signify that the Chinese were seen as equals to other immigrants, others did not want to tamper with the nation's immigration laws during wartime, and yet others saw it as the beginning of a deluge of Asian immigrants and refugees. Supporters pointed out that "Hitler could come in under a quota, Mussolini could come in under a quota, but Madame Chiang Kai-shek, or the finest type of Chinese people, cannot because we say they are ineligible to come here."⁴⁵ Opponents, such as the national committees of the American Federation of Labor, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, feared that a rise in Asian immigration would threaten the job prospects of returning veterans after the war, and that by allowing the Chinese to immigrate, other Asians would then seek the same privileges as "there would be no tenable argument after this war to deny admission to the Japanese, Hindus, Malays, and all other people of the brown and yellow races."⁴⁶

Underlying the arguments for and against repeal was the American attitude toward race and citizenship and how Chinese and Chinese Americans figured into that discourse. Those who supported repeal often denounced the racial discrimination that was practiced through exclusion, although it was usually in relation to the war effort, Japanese propaganda, and the international reputation of American policy, and not necessarily to the moral questions of racism and social justice. The rhetoric among those opposed to the repeal may have included issues of economics and wartime conditions, but racial antipathy toward the Chinese was evident, as was their general opposition to racial equality and integration. Many of those opposed to repeal often asked witnesses whether they supported equality for all racial groups in all social situations, implying that their position on exclusion was linked to their stand on segregation. One of repeal's most ardent supporters, Walter Judd (R-MN), appealed to his colleagues in Congress to pass the bill on the grounds of fair and equal treatment. He remarked, "The Chinese are good enough to die by the millions in a war against Axis tyranny—but a Chinese who is not born in the United States is not good enough, so the law implies, to become an American citizen by naturalization. A man of German descent may so be naturalized, and so may an Italian. But a Chinese alien is not so fortunate. He is beyond the pale." He then pointed out that many Americans knew that the Chinese were not inferior as American laws had deemed them to be, for "in the

United States we have come to admire the Chinese for his industry, his intelligence, his patriotism, and his good faith, and we have come to see, in the person of Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, the symbol of a truly great people.”⁴⁷ Pearl Buck concurred on the quality of the Chinese as citizens, using language that would reappear in the 1960s as Chinese Americans were hailed as the “model minority.” She declared, “the Chinese we have here are among our best citizens—they do not go on relief; their crime record is very low; they are honest and industrious and friendly.”⁴⁸

Organized labor and its affiliates saw repeal as a threat to the postwar job opportunities of returning veterans, whereas others were against changing immigration policies during a time of war. Some opponents simply continued the racialized attacks on the Chinese and the perceived inability of the Chinese to become Americans. William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, was quoted as saying, “People from other countries are absorbed in a few years and you can’t tell where they came from. A Chinaman is a Chinaman. Haven’t you noticed that?”⁴⁹ Echoing his predecessors from the West Coast in the late nineteenth century, Compton White (D-ID) declared, “I do not think we can take the Chinese with their habits and mentalities in this year and time into our great American melting pot and in 10 years or a hundred years bring them up to our standards of civilization. It is impossible. We may be placed in the same position as the sentimentalists were in the South after the Civil War who wanted to do something grand for civilization. You have got a long, tough job to bring them up, and you still have race riots and other racial problems confronting you.” Not content to stop with an obvious white supremacist tirade, White asked his colleagues, “How many of you Members know anything of the devious ways of the ‘wily Chinese?’” He went on to discuss their slavelike labor conditions, their penchant for gambling and opium smoking, and their filthy standards of living. Yet he finished by stating, “I have no animosity against the Chinese. We children loved the Chinese cooks and laundrymen who lavished Chinese ‘goodies’ on us on Chinese New Year’s—and even remembered our own Christmas. Let us help the Chinese—but help them in their own country!”⁵⁰

One of the most striking aspects of the repeal movement is the absence of a strong Chinese immigrant or Chinese American presence in the public campaign. According to Fred Riggs, the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion decided early on to limit its membership to “American citizens not of Asiatic origin

so as to give the impression that the demand was completely indigenous, and not fostered by the Chinese or anyone with a personal 'axe to grind.' ”⁵¹ This approach was a continuation of a patronizing and paternalistic attitude that many so-called well-meaning white Americans maintained toward Chinese Americans. Fearing that opponents would brand the movement as one of special interests, the Citizens Committee’s decision to limit membership to “Americans” served to disenfranchise Chinese Americans of their legal status as “Americans” and made one writer feel as if “we were just outside observers.”⁵² Nevertheless, Chinese Americans were not silent on the issue. They wrote letters to political figures, and they let it be known that the repeal of the exclusion laws was indeed something important to them. Taking a very accommodating, yet direct line, Theodora Chan Wang, representing the Chinese Women’s Association of New York City, took advantage of Madame Chiang’s visit to the United States and wrote Eleanor Roosevelt to express support for the establishment of an immigration quota for the Chinese. She stressed the issue of equality with other nations, although never mentioning them by name, by voicing her hopes that “a quota may be established—however limited it might be—whereby members of the Chinese race would be accorded the privileges enjoyed by our companions in ideology and arms.” Wang addressed the concern that repeal might lead to an influx of unwanted labor. She emphasized that the establishment of a quota would simply send a message to the Chinese that the United States was sincere in its proclamations of equality; otherwise, the Chinese would continue to be “savagely assailed by the irrefutable claims of [the] Japanese that those who would accept us as their brothers-inarms yet regard us as strangers within their gates. . . . They see only the cold facts before them.”⁵³

As the national campaign for repeal picked up, the Chinese American press ran more articles and advertisements in support of these efforts. When the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce voted to support repeal and to establish a quota for the Chinese, it was front page news. The *Chinese Press* also urged its readers to send letters to their representatives in Congress urging them to support the movement for repeal.⁵⁴ And when the City Board of Supervisors of San Francisco voted to support repeal, the paper commented that “sixty years ago [the city] was the chief center of violent ‘The Chinese must go’ discriminatory measures, this week repaid its debt to justice” with this vote. To add to the significance of their appeal, this article ran beneath a large photograph of Mr. Chow Fong accepting

Silver Star and Purple Heart medals on behalf of his son Lt. Albert P. Fong, who had fallen in combat.⁵⁵

In addition to articles of this kind, there were advertisements that proclaimed support for the Chinese American community. One taken out by the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, CIO, was especially poignant. It read, "Here is where we Stand. . . . From 1935 on we refused to pass the picket lines of the Chinese People as they protested the sending of scrap iron to Japanese militarist murderers. We stand now for repeal of the Chinese exclusion laws, and for full equality of the Chinese people with all of us. We are united with the Chinese People and with them we will fight for the right of all to use the maximum energy against the common enemy on an equal basis."⁵⁶ The appearance of such appeals in the Chinese American press indicates that Chinese Americans were indeed concerned with repeal and issues of equity, and they appreciated the support they received from the broader community.

When the details of repeal were worked out, there were three main advances for Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans: Sixty-one years of excluding aspiring Chinese immigrants on the basis of race and class ended, an annual quota based on the Immigration Act of 1924 was established, and Chinese immigrants were allowed to apply for naturalization. However, it was a limited victory. Chinese wives of American citizens were still not allowed to enter as nonquota immigrants; the annual quota was set at a mere 105; and naturalization was open only to those who could prove they had entered the country legally, pass an English-proficiency test, and demonstrate a knowledge of American history and the Constitution. These hurdles would prove insurmountable for many Chinese immigrants.⁵⁷ The annual quota of 105 was most revealing of persistent racial antagonism toward the Chinese. Although the quota was on a par with some other nations according to the Immigration Act of 1924, it was assigned to the Chinese as a "race," rather than on the basis of their nativity. Seventy-five percent of the entrants were to come from China and the remaining immigrants from elsewhere. Moreover, the language used also shaped who was to be considered "Chinese." The definition of "Chinese" was broad yet specific. It defined Chinese persons and persons of Chinese descent as "persons who are of as much as one-half Chinese blood and are not as much as one-half blood of a race ineligible to citizenship."⁵⁸ Therefore, those Chinese who were of mixed heritage with a parent who was of another Asian origin could not

enter. Despite its limitations, the repeal of the Chinese exclusion laws in 1943 would eventually prove to be the “entering wedge” that its opponents feared. It paved the way for legislation that would eventually allow Filipinos, South Asians, Koreans, and Japanese to immigrate freely, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1965, which did away with racial and geographic restrictions to immigration.⁵⁹

Conclusion

If the Chinese were social pariahs during much of their prewar presence in the United States, the war years saw Chinese Americans become the paragons of American assimilation and patriotism. As they embraced “the internal experience of citizenship” and developed a better sense of themselves as Americans, others also came to view them in a more positive light. Both the American mainstream and Chinese American periodical press played a role in the early 1940s in shaping how white Americans and Chinese Americans would see the Chinese American community. By becoming the “good Asian in the good war,” they continued to be portrayed, and they portrayed themselves, in an increasingly normative light, gaining a degree of social acceptance previously denied them. These positive images, however, would shift in the postwar era as China turned to Communism and Japan became an important ally of the United States. Sociologist Rose Hum Lee perspicaciously foresaw this possibility when she wrote in 1944, “As violently as the Chinese were once attacked, they are now glorified and mounted on a pedestal. It is impossible to predict how lasting this change will be. . . . Largely grounded on the sandy loam of sentimentality, one is left conjecturing what the tone of the literature toward the Chinese will be in 1954.”⁶⁰ Although Lee could not have predicted the course of events from the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, or the more recent incarceration of Wen Ho Lee, she was well aware that American images of Asians and Asian Americans would be dependent on American relations with the nations of Asia.

NOTES

1. This chapter is drawn from K. Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). The native-born Chinese American population of the United States in 1900 was 5,621. By 1930 it was 17,320, and by 1940

it had reached 22,880. *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, vol. 2: Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), 516.

2. Interviews with Dorothy Eng, June 9, 1995, and Mary Wong, August 20, 2002. A different perspective on this is offered by Him Mark Lai, "Retention of the Chinese Heritage: Chinese Schools in America before World War II," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2000): 10–31; and "Retention of the Chinese Heritage, Part II: Chinese Schools in America, World War II to the Present," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2001): 1–30.

3. *Chinese Digest*, November 15, 1935, 8.

4. Ibid. It is difficult to determine how the term *celestial* came to be associated with the Chinese. One possibility is that the term for the Chinese imperial court, "Tian chao," translates as "Heavenly Court," which gave rise to the Western term *celestial* for Chinese.

5. Ibid.

6. See Karl Lo and H. M. Lai, *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854–1975* (Washington, DC: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1977), 14; and Marjorie Lee, "Hu-Jee: The Forgotten Second Generation of Chinese America, 1930–1950" (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984), 57. Him Mark Lai estimates that the circulation of the *Chinese Digest* probably never exceeded five hundred, whereas the *Chinese Press*, published "during a period of relative prosperity," may have had a circulation of 1,000–1,500. Correspondence with Him Mark Lai, April 16, 1999.

7. *California Chinese Press*, November 22, 1940, 1.

8. Ibid.

9. *Time*, December 22, 1941, 33.

10. *Life*, December 22, 1941, 81–82.

11. United States Army, *A Pocket Guide to China* (Washington, DC: War and Navy Departments, n.d.), 65–75.

12. *Chinese Press*, December 19, 1941, 1.

13. *Chinese Press*, January 9, 1942, 1.

14. *Chinese News*, December 15, 1941, 6. After the *Chinese Digest* ceased publication in 1940, Thomas Chinn began publishing the *Chinese News*. This latter periodical was published semimonthly until early 1942, when Chinn entered government service in support of the war effort.

15. When I asked Thomas Chinn about the lack of coverage of Japanese American internment in his papers, he simply stated, "My papers were for and about Chinese Americans," implying that there was little need to address Japanese American concerns. Interview with

Thomas Chinn, June 6, 1995.

16. *Chinese Press*, May 1, 1942, 1.

17. *Chinese Press*, May 1, 1942, 6.

18. *Chinese Press*, January 30, 1942, 1.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. *Chinese Press*, May 14, 1943, 5.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid. This statement is rather ironic because the film starred Katherine Hepburn, rather than an Asian actor, in the lead female role.

24. Ibid.

25. *Chinese Press*, August 13, 1943, 1.

26. *Chinese Press*, May 14, 1943, 1.

27. Ibid.

28. Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Cook MacGregor, *This Is America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), no page number.

29. Ibid.

30. "The Battle for China," directed by Frank Capra, 1944.

31. "War Comes to America," directed by Frank Capra, 1945.

32. Bill Simons, "Chinatown Ready for Any Emergency for She Knows Aggressor," *Chinese News*, January 15, 1942, 3. Originally published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 14, 1942.

33. *Chinese Press*, October 16, 1942, 7.

34. *Time*, March 1, 1943, 23.

35. Harry J. Thomas, *The First Lady of China: The Historic Wartime Visit of Mme. Chiang Kai-shek to the United States in 1943* (New York: International Business Machines, 1943).

36. *Time*, March 1, 1943, 23.

37. Quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 349.

38. Quoted in Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, 350.

39. Karen Janis Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong,*

and the Transformation of American Orientalism (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 144; and T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 88.

40. See especially Lorraine Dong, “Song Meiling in America 1943,” *The Repeal and Its Legacy: Proceedings of the Conference on the 50th Anniversary of the Repeal of the Exclusion Acts* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1994), 39–46.

41. Fred W. Riggs, *Pressures on Congress: A Study of the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1950), 116.

42. Charles Nelson Spinks, “Repeal Chinese Exclusion!” *Asia* (February 1942): 94.

43. The bill’s number, 1882, matched the date of the passage of the first exclusion bill to prohibit the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years.

44. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization*, 78th Cong., 1943, 68 (hereafter cited as *Hearings*).

45. *Congressional Record* 89, U.S. House, 78th Cong. (June 16, 1943): 5966.

46. *Congressional Record* 89, U.S. Senate, 78th Cong. (November 26, 1943): 10014.

47. *Congressional Record*, 89, Appendix, 78th Cong. (June 11, 1943): A2928.

48. *Hearings*, 69–70. Buck’s comments are very similar to those found in the seminal “Model Minority” article in the 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article, which remarked, “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else. . . . Visit ‘Chinatown USA’ and you will find an important racial minority pulling itself up from hardship and discrimination to become a model of self-respect and achievement in today’s America.” “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.,” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 26, 1966, 73.

49. Quoted in Riggs, *Pressures on Congress*, 67.

50. *Congressional Record* 89, U.S. Senate, 78th Cong. (October 21, 1943): 8626–27.

51. Riggs, *Pressures on Congress*, 113. See also Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, to Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 130–37.

52. L. Ling-chi Wang, “Politics of the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Laws,” in *The Repeal and Its Legacy: Proceedings of the Conference on the 50th Anniversary of the Repeal of the Exclusion Acts* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1994), 66.

53. *Hearings*, 6.

54. *Chinese Press*, June 11, 1943, 1.

55. *Chinese Press*, September 10, 1943, 1.
56. *Chinese Press*, July 9, 1943, 3.
57. Wang, "Politics of the Repeal," 80.
58. Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 198.
59. For a study that examines the racial ideologies embedded in the repeal of the various exclusion laws, see Neil Gotanda, "Towards Repeal of Asian Exclusion: The Magnuson Act of 1943, the Act of July 2, 1946, the Presidential Proclamation of July 4, 1946, the Act of August 9, 1946, and the Act of August 1, 1950," in *Asian Americans and Congress: A Documentary History*, ed. Hyung-chan Kim (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 309–37.
60. Rose Hum Lee, quoted in Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1980; originally published in 1958), 120.