

“The Stage on Which the Whole East is Confined”: Asian American Racial Construction in Lauren Yee’s Ching Chong Chinaman

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Abstract

From its origins in the Asian American Movement in the 1960s, the term “Asian American” has characterized a specific construction of identity within the racial understanding of the United States. Of medias in conversation regarding this identity terminology, Lauren Yee’s Ching Chong Chinaman navigates identity politics and proximity-based power in association with Whiteness through questions of racial essentialism; power dynamics; gender dynamics and Ornamental womanhood as outlined by Ann Anlin Cheng’s Ornamentalism; systemic power structures in relation to Whiteness; and what it means to be “Asian American”. This study is organized in three sections: the history of Asian American racialized identity and “Othering” from the 1960s; an analysis of Asian American identity and Ornamental Womanhood as seen in Yee’s Wong family, “J”, and “The Chinese Woman”, and the evaluation of identity within construction. The analysis begins with the narrative dichotomy between Desdemona Wong and Kim Lee Park and contextualizes them through Ornamentalism. Subsequently, the gendered constructions of the male characters “J” and Ed Wong as well as the female characters portrayed by “The Chinese Woman” are analyzed. Finally, the play’s depiction of proximity to Whiteness as survival in the United States is discussed, as well as moments of alignment and subversion within the play. This study seeks to understand Asian American identity as outlined within Yee’s play and contextualize it in the larger context of Asian American identity construction within the United States

Keywords

Asian American Identity, Chinaman, Racial Construction

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1 Historical Background

When examining current-day Asian American formations of political and social identity, the activist movement of the 20th century provides vital background for a constructed identity which had no prior name. “Asian American” as a racial construct emerged in the late 1960s, as one of various pan-ethnic constructions labelled and discussed amid a changing social discourse. In current-day discussions of the Asian American racialized identity, it is often understood as a largely imperfect one. It encompasses a massive group of ethnic identities, many of which do not fit under an umbrella term, and it is often associated with a specific subset of East Asian identities—mainly Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—as the dominant presence in discussion and historical movements.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) discusses the construction of race, specifically as a “notion that race is not merely a classificatory system based on the distinctions among human bodies at any given moment,” but that it “also contains traces of past struggle over, and present understanding of, social and political relationships” (Kim 2388). Janine Young Kim’s “Are Asians Black?: The Asian American Civil Rights Agenda and the Contemporary Significance of the Black/White Paradigm” examines the Black/White racial paradigm which functioned as a “bipolar model of race”, and the misrepresentation of history the paradigm enhances.

Though the civil rights movement of Black and African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s undeniably began and led the nationwide discourse of civil rights, the Asian American Movement (AAM) can be traced even to the 1930s, according to Michael Liu,

Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, though it reached the “height of mass protests” in the mid-seventies (15). By their definition, the AAM was “the vehicle that brought the Asian American communities into the mainstream of civic life” (Liu 15). While some scholars view the creation of the Asian American identity as a main goal of the AAM, Liu, Geron and Lai view it not as a primary goal, but rather as a “strengthening of the AAM [...] reimagining itself in a pan-Asian context and as part of a cross-race struggle to throw off a history of oppression” (16). The movement was methodically aimed towards structural changes of the American social and power structure, contributing towards its goals of community service and institutions, building a new community infrastructure until its ebb in the 1990s.

With this in mind, the intention behind coining “Asian American” in place of the previously used “oriental” to emphasize the pan-Asian identity to emphasize a sense of unity during the movement is understandable, despite it being more of a side effect of the clear primary goals. University of California, Berkeley graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka are credited for coining the term in 1968 (Okamoto 1). The racialization of Asian Americans had been, until that point, almost exclusively as “Others” from American society. In Josephine Lee’s “Introduction to Milestones in Asian American Theatre”, she describes the “perpetual foreigners” stereotype emerging through the first large wave of Asian migration to the United States during the California Gold Rush in the late 19th century. At the time, white anxiety and xenophobic fear directed towards the presence of Chinese laborers pushed for legal barriers to immigration and citizenship. Anti-citizenship laws continued to be implemented in some fashion until 1952, though immigration caps

for Asian immigrants remained extremely low even once the laws were repealed. In a society so steeply structured around the Black/White paradigm, the Asian presence offered a distinct complication and alternative—that was exploited for capitalist benefit—in the American power structure. Chinese laborers were fundamental to the development of 19th and 20th century American industrial development, but remained barred from citizenship until 1943, when the option of naturalization became accessible to them.

The effects of the legalized Othering of Asian Americans were a nuanced racial construction in entertainment and literature. In Robert Lee's *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Lee outlines the Asian American identity constructed as a third-choice alternative to the social norm emphasized during the rise of Victorian America: "the relations of desire with the Oriental (male or female) offered an alternative (albeit a tabooed one) to the social order represented by the racially exclusive, presumptively heterosexual, nuclear family" (85). This representation, as Lee points out, is "shaped not only by actual human encounters and actions" but by "the myths and fantasies" being popularized (Lee 7). Various caricatures began to emerge in Asian American representation: "the Alien, the Kamikaze, the Brute, the Lotus Blossom, the Guru, the Brain, the Temptress, and the Manipulator" (Chiu 4) which, naturally, were apparent on the theatrical stage as well as in literary works.

In fact, the very construction of the Asian American label is closely knit with theatricality. Edward Said's foundational study *Orientalism* described these stereotypical representations as a theatrical idea: "the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined" (63). Of the stock characters constructed by

the popular representation, the Western opera (and eventual 1989 musical) *Madame Butterfly*/*Miss Saigon* were, and remain, sensationalist successes, all the while presenting modernized fantasies surrounding Eastern harems and the commercialization of Asian women. The AAM's move from the label "Oriental" towards "Asian American" functioned as an attempt to escape these imposed representations; the evaluation of their success begs a different question. The exoticism of Asian culture and aesthetics, and their displays as entertainment, fundamentally continued the perpetual foreigner's stereotype.

As to the literal practice of staging Asian and Asian American characters, the AAM's activism came in concurrence with the fight against yellowface practices. In her article "Yellowface Performance: Historical and Contemporary Contexts", Josephine Lee describes the practice of "yellowface"—a non-Asian (-American) actor portraying an Asian (-American) character, often with skin-altering makeup on—"not only misrepresent[ing] Asians and Asian Americans by limiting the kinds of visibility and opportunities [for them]" (Lee 1), but by "support[ing] the imagined distinctions between [the] values...embodied by white Americans and those associated with oriental others" (Lee 1). As Lee describes in her introduction to *Orientalism*, representation of Asians and Asian Americans functioned mainly in "portrayals of the yellow peril" while Asian immigrants themselves were legally excluded from the stage (Lee 10). In response, Asian American performing artists created "alternative venues [...] to make their talents known, such as Los Angeles' East West Players" (Lee 1). The East West Players, established in 1965, and still active at the time of this publication, are known as the pioneering company for Asian

American theater. As noted by Choi Sung Hee in “Searching for the Voice of Their Own: East West Players and the Beginning of Asian American Drama”, the group was “truly a pioneer that showed the potential of pan-Asian solidarity and pointed out their common past and future” (Hee 1). Furthermore, the Players’ playwriting contest, established in 1968, provided so-called “first wave” Asian American playwrights the stage to develop “a new dramatic canon” for Asian American theater (Hee 1). Though Asian and Asian American representation is imperfect, the work of the AAM made significant progress in the realm of performance.

Though the organization of the AAM was in its twilight years in the 1990s, pan-Asian and Asian American activism continued its legacy of theater in the continuing decades. Established in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1992 by playwright and director Rick Shiomi, Theater Mu (formerly Mu Performing Arts) is the second largest Asian American arts organization in the Midwest (Classon 4). As noted by Hsiu-chen Lin Classon in “A Different Kind of Asian American: Negotiating and Redefining Asian/American in Theater Mu”, Theater Mu emerged in the Midwest amongst a low Asian/American population, while most other Asian American theater companies established themselves in New York City or California (Classon 3-4) such as Asian American Theater Company (San Francisco, 1973), Artists at Play (Los Angeles, 2011), Ma-Yi Theatre Company (NYC, 1989), and Second Generation Productions (NYC, 1997). In the decade of 2000-2010, Asian American theater especially saw the emergence of playwrights such as David Henry Hwang (*Yellowface*, 2007), Young Jean Lee (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, 2006), and Lauren Yee (*Ching Chong Chinaman*, 2009). Questions of identity construction and the meaning of

“Asian American” itself grew prominent among the works of Asian American playwrights. Building on the legacy of political, social, and cultural identity as first solidified by the AAM and its goals, Asian American activism became inseparable from theatrical works emerging in this era.

2 Identity and Ornamental Womanhood in Lauren Yee’s *Ching Chong Chinaman*

Premiering in Mixed Blood Theatre in 2009, Lauren Yee’s *Ching Chong Chinaman* offers a scathing satire of the model minority myth, while examining the construction of the “real” Asian American identity in proximity to Whiteness as a source of societal power. The play’s synopsis reads:

The ultra-assimilated Wong family is as Chinese American as apple pie: teenage Upton dreams of World of Warcraft superstardom; his sister Desdemona dreams of early admission to Princeton. Unfortunately, Upton’s chores and homework get in the way of his 24/7 videogaming, as Desi’s math grades don’t fit the Asian American stereotype. Then Upton comes up with a novel solution for both problems: He acquires a Chinese indentured servant, who harbors an American dream of his own. (Lee 267)

Lee’s cast of characters features the Wong family, composed of sulky teenager Upton, performative liberal Desdemona, oblivious Ed, and his wife and “boss-woman” Grace, Upton’s hired indentured servant “J” Jin-qiang, and The Chinese Woman, who is cast

in the additional roles of Desdemona's Korean orphan sponsee Kim Lee Park, Jin-qiang's mother Mrs. J, Upton's fantasy The Chinese Schoolgirl, and Desdemona's college interviewer Princeton Alum. Lee's characters are vivid and caricatured in their offensive behavior, functioning as satirical figures for the exploration of identity construction within the play.

As the summary suggests, Ching Chong Chinaman uses the "traditional" white American family as a basis to explore Asian American stereotypes. Desdemona and Kim Lee Park function especially as a notable dichotomy: Desdemona is a performer of identity politics whose savior fantasy and attempts to embody political correctness instead led her to a derogatory view of the very identities she attempts to capitalize on. Kim Lee Park, then, is her savior fantasy's subject, a distorted mirror of Desdemona's life. Through the scripted casting, Kim Lee Park is one aspect of an ensemble role. The multi-casting leads to the enmeshing of the Asian women with each other, an interesting exploration of the racial face-blindness the play uses satirically early on.

Both *The Chinese Woman* and J hold relevant roles in the play through Anne Cheng's concept of the "ornamental body": The Chinese Woman as precisely the example of the Asian woman Cheng describes, and J as the feminized Asian man that the play satirizes. As Cheng defines it, the materialism of the Asian woman's body is "a different kind of racialized female body whose 'flesh' survives through abstract and synthetic rather than organic means". In other words, she is "persistently sexualized yet barred from sexuality, simultaneously made and unmade by the aesthetic project" (Cheng 415). This is explicitly the case in the intentional choice of casting for *The Chinese Woman*, whose various roles

range from the purely sexual Asian Schoolgirl to the academic threat that Kim Lee Park represents, and even Mrs. J, who performs both the service roles of saleswoman and sex worker within her character.

In J's case, Ed does not fully conceive of him as what he truly is—an adult man living near his family and, especially, his wife. Ed does not see J as a person, as Ed functions as a satirized version of the "macho" man, J is placed in opposition and into the feminine sphere. Given the gender divide clearly seen throughout the play (Grace as the traditional homemaker, Upton as the spoiled and primarily carefree prince, Ed's beliefs on the role of a man in the house), J holds a role of domestic labor inherently through his "servant" status, a role complicated by the feminization of his racial identity. In addition, J is a desexualized figure despite his material sexual presence in the play. Ed has no concerns about the proximity of his wife and J, and during the intimate moments overheard by other characters, J is not scripted with any speech or sounds on his own. In this way, he is a completely silent figure in the affair. J's forced alignment with the female spaces of the play allows him to exist subtly in them, and eventually begin his affair with Grace, while constructing him as a non-threatening, feminine presence to the household's significant gender divide.

In contrast, *The Chinese Woman* carries a multitude of roles tied inherently to her ornamental femininity. As Kim Lee Park, she is literally an ornamental device for Desdemona's success. As Mrs. J, she is a multi-faceted actor of customer service, displaying and shedding imitations of Whiteness as a means of likeability. As the Asian Schoolgirl, she is a wide-eyed sexual fantasy, enamored with Upton in the classic harem motif. As the

Princeton Alum, she is a mystical mentor figure, offering Desdemona insight into the artificial identity she seeks to embody. All these portrayals, as Cheng states, display the synthetic identity Ornamentalism describes in the Asian woman, which “relied on a decorative grammar, a fantasmatic corporeal syntax that is artificial and layered” (Cheng 416). The layers of *The Chinese Woman* depend on the shallow perception the other characters have of her; the multiple roles portrayed by a single actor augment this effect, and even the audience is meant to question where one role ends and the other begins.

Notably, the two exchanges between Kim Lee Park and Desdemona display the changing value of *The Chinese Woman*’s most recurring role as moral trophy. In scene five, Desdemona uses Kim Lee Park’s voice to speak her own words; when Kim Lee Park protests, Desdemona violently reprimands her, calling her a “stupid little girl” despite their similarity in age. Kim Lee Park is the one to offer an apology for her own abuse and immediately offers “Beaten by my mother?” in the ensuing continuation of the false memoir the two create. The moment ends with Desdemona saying: “You’re my best friend, Kim. I’m glad I didn’t let you die” (Yee 278). Desdemona establishes herself as the power defining Kim Lee Park’s existence: her birth, her current circumstances (her “I need to milk the yak” should be viewed with extreme suspicion) and her potential future.

Conversely, when Desdemona learns she is, in fact, Korean instead of Chinese—an adopted child, as opposed to a biological child, of the Wongs—Kim Lee Park attempts to subvert the aesthetic construction imposed upon her by showing Desdemona as her reflection in the mirror. This is an attempt, rather than a true subversion or escape, as Kim

Lee Park remains a figure of Desdemona’s internal demons. The play’s satirical nature does not allow Kim Lee Park to exist as a true character independently of Desdemona, because humor would lose the stage if Kim Lee Park said words other than Desdemona’s. Notably, Kim Lee Park reappears after her “dematerialization” as the delivery nurse in Desdemona’s birth: not *The Chinese Woman*, but Kim Lee Park. In the next scene, the actress appears once again as *The Chinese Woman* posed as another role to meet with Grace; but Kim Lee Park specifically exists to serve as Desdemona’s stage decoration, tied so intrinsically to her “benefactor” that she materializes and dematerializes only to fulfill the fleshy fantasy of Desdemona’s savior complex and misguided idealism.

The relationship between Kim Lee Park and Desdemona is one grounded in subjugation and saviorism, with Desdemona’s militant insistence on claiming any minority identity to victimize herself ironically aligns her instead with Whiteness in the American structure of power—a behavior she inherits from her parents—rather than with Kim Lee Park, as she seems to both crave and fear. Cheng describes her attempt to explain the impossibly understood relationship between subjugator and subjugated as “not just a story about how we use people as things, or how things dictate our uses of them” but rather “a drama involving a deeper, stranger, more intricate, and more ineffable fusion between thing-ness and personhood” (Cheng 420). The dynamics of Kim Lee Park/Desdemona are, of course, complicated by Desdemona’s own identity as a Korean American. However, Yee is decidedly critical of essentialist racial ideology, the question of whether a race or ethnic identity have an inherent influence on the construction of identity. Desdemona is intentionally raised outside of the Chinese cultural heritage she

believes she has in favor of complete assimilation to the “American” identity; she clings to essentialism when she believes she is part Mexican; and is finally deeply disturbed and upset by the revelation that she is ethnically Korean. Both Desdemona and Kim Lee Park are constantly in conflict and held in tension within the construction of their identities, real and perceived. The play, without giving a definitive answer, asks: how much does our perceived identity interact with our physical reality?

3 Reality within Construction

While there is an impulse to dissect layers of identity until a singular “authentic truth” is found, one that Desdemona embodies through her actions and eventual revelations of self, it is important to remember that identity is not only the self’s image, but a constructed and fluid label in conversation with the discourses of society and the power structures which dominate social understandings. As outlined in his article, “An Exploratory Paper on Understanding Whiteness”, Ayan Abdulle notes that this is especially the case regarding racial identity within the United States, which fluctuates in construction according to its proximity to Whiteness (Abdulle 23). The multi-layered substance of identity is perceived not only by the self but by the outward world, shaping its overall development as a fully-fledged component of a human being rather than a singular instinctual or essentialist “truth”. Throughout American history, there has been a vastly complex system of racial hierarchy, socially and legally, dependent on the proximity of racial identity to Whiteness

(Abdulle 26). In understanding with Abdulle, Maria Garay and Jennifer Perry’s “The Maintenance of the U.S. Racial Hierarchy Through Judgements of Multiracial People Based on Proximity to Whiteness” describes that “White individuals have more power and status than, and are perceived as superior to, people of color” in concurrence with L. X. Zou and S. Cheryan’s 2017 article “Two axes of subordination: A new model of racial position” (Garay 1). The United States in the modern day exists upon a noted racial hierarchy established in its infancy.

Historically, perceived—or imposed—racial identity was a determining factor in the physical reality of life. Racial identity within the United States is a highly intentional, calculated social and legal construct, emphasized from the early colonial period to create a division between slaveholders and enslaved peoples, as described by Ian Lopez’s “The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice” (1994). As Lopez states, “Race permeates [...] politics” (Lopez 3). Even after the “end” of the colonial era, American laws dictated restrictions on voting, land ownership, citizenship, marriage, housing, and countless other aspects of life according to a person’s racial identity (Lopez 4). In the 19th and 20th centuries, American courts established guidelines for Whiteness with the general ruling that non-white status could be determined through examination of skin color or of a half Asian identity (Lopez 4). To be perceived as non-white, a perception based on colonial and systemic concepts of identity and proximity to Whiteness, was to be given a specific legal status (or to be barred from obtaining legal status) and subject to restrictions and systemic discrimination.

The deep-seated nature of this systemic categorization and construction of racial identity cannot be overstated. Within a system that rewards proximity to Whiteness and attempts to repress any deviation from the “ideal” homogenous white society through the oppression of non-white peoples, the push to assimilation is felt by non-whites acutely from every aspect of American society as a method of survival. Ching Chong Chinaman’s Wong family, “ultra-assimilated”, embodies this survival method to its fullest extent. Ed and Grace have inherited their strategic assimilation from their own parents, adopting racism towards themselves and others as a tool to align them with Whiteness.

Alternatively, Desdemona both subverts and upholds this behavior. While Ed and Grace distance themselves from non-white culture to align themselves with Whiteness, Desdemona commercializes it and attempts to capitalize on it. Though she attempts to connect with her perceived cultural identity, her reasons for doing so are material; she commodifies culture in a different way than her family but ultimately, commodifies it regardless. Her treatment of Kim Lee Park is precisely the action of imposing a perceived identity to dictate physical reality. As previously stated, Kim Lee Park is an ornamental object for Desdemona, barred from a multi-layered identity through Desdemona’s perception of her and her physical conditions. The play itself does not outline Kim Lee Park’s true physical reality beyond the lens of Desdemona’s American gaze, casting her as a foreign puppet for Desdemona’s words to be broadcast.

Kim Lee Park has one radical moment of attempted negation when she reflects Desdemona’s material conditions back towards her. “I am also working on my application to Princeton for next year. Thanks to you, I am

inspired to write about deep and tragic things,” she says, before parroting Desdemona’s narrative about her perceived identity back towards her (Yee 309). Though the ornamental nature of Kim Lee Park dictates her speech and ability to truly emancipate herself from the physical reality and perceived identity that Desdemona has constructed for her, the moment is nevertheless an especially poignant attempt at escape for Kim Lee Park. It displays how Kim Lee Park’s life is one ruled by construction, with an identity created through Desdemona’s perception of a Korean identity and physical conditions that are unknown but based on Desdemona’s assumptions.

The collision of Kim Lee Park and Desdemona through the discovery of their shared biological racial identity sparks the dismantling of the play’s presentation of Desdemona’s essentialist view of race and ethnicity. The understanding that Desdemona’s perceived social identity, which she has attempted to tie to various ethnicities, is in fact negated by biological truth that disrupts her sense of self. Her painstakingly constructed identity, perceived by herself and others as Chinese, is shaken by her biological ethnic identity of being Korean. Suddenly, the divisions Desdemona has placed between herself and Kim Lee Park are dissolved, and she is left to reconcile with this physical reality after the loss of her perceived identity.

Ching Chong Chinaman presents the complex and contradictory American concepts of racial and ethnic identities through a scathing use of satire and cultural absurdity. The layers of power, racialized identity, gender, stereotype, truth/deception/perception, and familial dynamics are simultaneously unified and divided structures of narrative, establishing an examination of the American past, present, and future as it tangles with identity politics.

It spotlights American focalization as a tool of subjugation, and the reality that intersectionality places those outcast from the “ideal” identity—white, male, wealthy, heterosexual and cisgender—in competition with each other. The construction of American Whiteness has created an arena for those barred from it to scrutinize and combat each other in attempts to align themselves with its power by casting off their perceived differences. But the solution is not an alignment with Whiteness, which is itself a social construct and by no means homogeneous, but the dismantling of it as the peak of a hierarchical power structure; the focus must remain on the structures of oppression for emancipation to be possible.

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