The Nation Body: Imagined Territories of Chinese American Abjection

Thesis & Purpose

In this research project, I am interested in how yellow/Chinese/Asian bodies and nations are co-configured in the American imagination and how they are internalized, reflected, and conflicted in Chinese American people. I am interested in this particular imagining of nations as bodies which can be invaded (by other nations) through racialized/othered organisms and how it affects the ways Chinese Americans are seen and the ways Chinese American people see themselves. This topic has become ever more pressing since the racialization of COVID-19 and increasingly aggressive anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiments in the US.

In my research I am interested in analyzing how bodies become emblematic of location/nation and how locations/nations become representative of/producing a certain kind of body/being. I am specifically interested in how American orientalism affects racism against Chinese Americans, and how Chinese Americans construct their identities. As a signifier, “China” can refer to nation-state, location, economy, culture, ethnicity, language, and body in overlapping, juxtaposing, and interlocking ways. In American narratives of sinophobia, the construction of Chineseness has othered the “yellow body” as disease, swarm, ornament, and automaton. The yellow peril narrative is not new, but it has seen a strong resurgence in the wake of sinophobic representations of COVID-19 and recent geopolitical tensions between the US and China. New generations of the Chinese American diaspora, ones which may not feel much connection to China (culturally, politically, nationally, geographically, or otherwise), have grown up with sinophobic, anti-China, and anti-Chinese sentiments from American media, but have also out tired of the need for a liberal claim to “American” as an identity and the urge to assimilate for survival must now navigate identity in a new way.

According to the national survey by AAPI Data and Momentive 2022, 1 in 6 Asian American adults reported experiencing a hate crime in 2021, up from 1 in 8 in 2020 (J. Lee). The 2022 STAATUS Index also reports that 1 in 5 Americans believe that Asian Americans are at least partly responsible for COVID-19 compared to 1 in 10 last year, that Americans are also now more likely to believe that referring to the coronavirus as “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus” is appropriate, and 1 in 3 believe that Asian Americans are more loyal to their country of origin than to the U.S., up from 1 in 5 in 2021 (J. Lee). Another study by AAPI Data reports that in the past year alone, 1 in 10 Asian Americans have been coughed on or spit on, and nearly 1 in 3 have been told to “go back to your country,” (J. Lee). These statistics not only show both how nations and bodies are conflated with one another and how they have been simultaneously pathologized as dirty, diseased, and dangerous. Chinese people are seen as foreign bodies invading a host body the way viruses infect peoples’ bodies, namely COVID-19. Not only are Chinese Americans seen as inherently virulent, invasive, parasitic but they are also all seen agents loyal to the Chinese government and therefore enemies and threats to the US. If being anti-China has become central to American political identity, and being anti-America has become central to Chinese political
identity, what does it mean to be Chinese-American? Comparing the contradicting frameworks of inhumanity that construct the Chinese body — bio-orientalism, disease, ornamentalism, techno-orientalism, and embodied nationality — how can we begin to map the somatic experience of what it is like to be and exist as a “Chinese American”? As diasporic people, how can we better navigate our relationships with nations, nationality, and belonging as a framework of identity and mode of being?

My analysis will draw most heavily from the work of the following critical theorists. I will use Benedict Anderson’s framework on the nation-state as collectively imagined political communities, which investigates how nationalism is constructed and reified by various economic, technological, geographic, and cultural factors. I will use this to investigate Chinese-ness and American-ness as mutually exclusive imagined communities, exiling Chinese Americans from both nationalities in different ways. I will also use Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. In thinking about nations as bodies, Chinese Americans are seen as not belonging to the American body but also inextricable from it at the same time, a conditionally useful bacteria which can be instrumentalized in certain moments, but must be expelled and purged from the body in others. Chinese Americans can be conceptualized as abject and somatically liminal, creating an ontological threat which disintegrates concepts of Chinese-ness, American-ness, Asian-ness, and nationality. I will also draw upon Edward Said’s framework of Orientalism, as well as its historically specific subvariants, bio-orientalism and techno-orientalism, and Anne Anlin Cheng’s ornamentalism to investigate the various, contradicting, axes along which Chinese Americans have been denied humanity and personhood, animality, monstrosity, hyperbiology, abiology, objecthood, ornament, machine, filth, disease, etc. Nayan Shah’s *Contagious Divides* will also be key to my analysis. Shah’s historical study of San Francisco Chinatown examines how representations of the Chinese body transformed from embodiment of disease to model minority from the nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century.

**Objective & Approach**

There are two parts to the intended outcome of my research project, a thesis and a journal.

**Thesis**

First, I will complete an undergraduate thesis paper around the length of 15-20 pages, which I plan to use as a writing sample for my applications to English and Comparative Literature PhD programs. My paper will investigate how sinophobic narratives affect imaginings of the self, body, and nation by using critical frameworks to read and compare narratives in primarily literary mediums, in forms such as poetry, novels, and short stories. However I also plan to investigate cultural artifacts of other mediums, such as film, shows, music, or visual art. Throughout my time researching I will also be reading historical archives to chart external forces imposing racialized caricatures onto Chinese people. I am interested in how external ideas of race are internalized as well as how the external and the internal interact dialectically.

Currently, I’m interested in examining the novels *Severance* by Ling Ma, *On Such a Full Sea* by Chang-rae Lee, and *Diary of a Madman* by Lu Xun, each of which grapples with stereotypes of Chineseness as a kind of communicable disease, and critically situates the stereotype within a specific historical context: post-2008 US economic downturn in *Severance*, early-2000s China panic in *On Such a Full Sea*, and republican era China in *Diary of a Madman*. These novels reveal how, at each of these
moments, the meanings of Chineseness -- as a national and racial form -- are contingent upon China's shifting geopolitical status.

Journal

For the second component of my research project, I want to encourage conversations about Chinese racialization outside of academia by publishing an art/literary journal, and by attending the Association for Asian American Studies annual meeting, which will be in Long Beach in April, 2023. As a part of my journey exploring Chinese American identity, I find it integral to help others do so as well. Through a multi-genre, multi-medium art/literary journal, I hope to provide a safe space for Chinese Americans to speak about how they experience discrimination, nationality, race, ethnicity, diaspora, Chinese-ness, American-ness, Asian-ness, embodiment, location, community, gender, queerness, illness, disability, queerness, diaspora, and etc. In doing so, I also aim to help bridge academic theory and applied praxis, which is especially necessary in fields like diaspora/ethnic studies, critical race theory, gender studies, English, and comparative literature. The journal will be a safe space for marginalized communities and anybody who wishes to publish anonymously or under a pseudonym can do so. Thus, the journal refuses to publish work that containing racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, imperialism, classism, ableism, xenophobia, etc. This journal will accept all art forms. It welcomes political critiques, research projects, poetry, short stories, flash fiction, news pieces, opinion pieces, essays, and prose, as well as visual art, such as paintings, photographs, drawings, collages, mixed media, digital art, and photographs of 3-D art. I will publish issues digitally on a website and by print.

Responsibility

It is my responsibility to approach these important subjects with care and humility. Although my academic interest in this topic is largely due to experiences of racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and othering I have faced personally as a “Chinese American” (whatever that label even means), I do not wish to project my personal experiences as representative of “Chinese American” or “Asian American” life. The Chinese/Asian diaspora is extremely diverse, and my attempt to map the embodied nationality which others Chinese American people from America is not a declarative one. Rather, I want to articulate the epistemic forces at work which imagines nations, lands, people, and bodies in ways that add new insights to the conversations people are currently having about race, nationality, gender, and the body politic through a narratological and literary analysis of Chinese American being. There is great power in naming, identifying, and articulating forces which are intentionally blurred and made invisible, because only then can we correctly locate blame where it really is, rather than where it has deflected. I also want to highlight and contribute to new frameworks Chinese Americans are developing regarding self conception, and identify how external modes of racialization and internal reconfigurations of identity interact dialectically.

It will also be my responsibility to consistently consult my faculty mentors for resources, advice about writing and analysis, and background information about existing scholarly discourse throughout the entire project. Since I also plan to create a journal to explore Chinese American identity, I will also take submissions into account when formulating my thesis.
**Timeline**

**Fall Quarter:**

**Thesis**
- Read and explore other primary sources about Chinese-American identity throughout remainder of Fall Quarter and into Winter Break
  - Develop analysis on 3 main primary sources
- Decide 3 main primary sources by beginning of Winter Quarter
  - How does each primary source contribute into the narrative of the thesis as a whole?
- Explore other relevant secondary academic sources to draw frameworks of analysis from
- Begin writing thesis during Winter Break

**Journal**
- Make website for journal by December 1st
- Send out call for submissions for Issue #1 of art/literary journal by December 1st (deadline January 15th)

**Winter Quarter:**

**Thesis**
- Working draft of thesis by end of quarter

**Journal**
- Editorial process for rest of quarter
- Release Issue #1 digitally and physically by end of Winter quarter

**Spring Quarter:**

**Thesis**
- Final Draft of Thesis

Prepare for Presentation at the UROP Symposium

**Itemized Budget**

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<th>Item</th>
<th>Budget Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>$500</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Books that the UC library doesn’t currently hold, or that I would need to mark up (both primary narratological sources and secondary academic sources)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>DVDs, videos, streaming subscriptions, and other media</td>
<td>$200</td>
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- Other media not in the UC library’s holdings
- **Killing Eve (2018-2022)** is available on Hulu
  - *Killing Eve (2018-2022)* explores how differently nationalized and racialized bodies/behaviors are constructed in various nations. Under the premise of undercover assassins, spies, agents, and double-agents, *Killing Eve* (2018-2022) explores how some bodies are seen as loyal to certain nations, how others are unable to represent certain nations, and how some bodies are seen as infectious and monstrous, and how others are seen as harmless and invisible.

- **The Half of It (2020)** is available on Netflix
  - *The Half of It (2020)* is a modern-day Cyrano de Bergerac with a queer twist, in which a Chinese American lesbian girl, whose labor is valuable as long as she remains invisible.

- **Saving Face (2004) and Everything Everywhere All At Once (2022)** are available on Prime Video
  - *Everything Everywhere All At Once (2022)* defies a techno-orientalist approach to Asian American existence, portraying Asian characters as users of technology rather than technological, programmed, automated, or robotic themselves

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<thead>
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<th>Cost to Physically Print Journal</th>
<th>$500</th>
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<td>Website Domain</td>
<td>$240</td>
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<td>- I will publish art/poetry submissions online as well as in print to make issues as accessible as possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- A website domain averages $20 per month, I would like the domain for at least 12 months.</td>
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<td>Association for Asian American Studies 2023 Annual Meeting (Long Beach) + Transportation to/from AAAS</td>
<td>$220</td>
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<td>- Attending the national flagship conference for Asian American Studies allows me to make connections with leading scholars and potential mentors.</td>
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<td>- I will also be able to directly engage with current conversations and research in the field.</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>Funds Requested from UROP Grant</td>
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References


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---. *The Melancholy of Race*


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