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## Strategic Hybridity in Early Chinese and Japanese American Literature

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# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature

## Strategic Hybridity in Early Chinese and Japanese American Literature

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### Summary and Keywords

Early Chinese and Japanese American male writers between 1887 and 1938 such as Yan Phou Lee, Yung Wing, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, and H. T. Tsiang accessed dominant US publishing markets and readerships by presenting themselves and their works as cultural hybrids that strategically blended enticing Eastern content and forms with familiar Western language and structures. Yan Phou Lee perpetrated cross-cultural comparisons that showed that Chinese were not unlike Europeans and Americans. Yung Wing appropriated and then transformed dominant American autobiographical narratives to recuperate Chinese character. Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi combined poetic traditions from Japan, Europe, and America in order to define a modernism that included cosmopolitans such as themselves. And H. T. Tsiang promoted Marxist world revolution by experimenting with fusions of Eastern and Western elements with leftist ideology. Although these writers have been discounted by some critics as overly compromising in their attempts to reach Western readers, they accomplished laudable cultural work in their particular historical circumstances and provide insights into the varied and complicated negotiations of Asian American identity during the exclusion era.

Keywords: early Asian American literature, Chinese American, Japanese American, strategic hybridity, Yan Phou Lee, Yung Wing, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, H. T. Tsiang

### Early Asian American Autobiographical Writing and Strategic Hybridity

Early Asian American writers gained access to US publishing markets by providing knowledge foreign to most American readers in literary forms familiar to them, especially autobiographical writing. The following list of “firsts” is instructive: The first book ever published in English by a Chinese American writer is Yan Phou Lee’s *My Life as a Boy in China* (1887). The first English-language novel by a Japanese American writer is Yone Noguchi’s *American Diary of a Japanese Girl* (1901). The first book to reach the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list by a Chinese author is Lin Yutang’s *My Country and My People* (1935). As the titles of these examples show, in order to succeed many early Asian American writers wove autobiography, or at least the semblance of autobiography,

into their work. They “entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography,” in the words of Sauling Cynthia Wong.<sup>1</sup> Through offering themselves as cultural insiders with special knowledge of the “foreign” or “exotic,” many early Asian American writers made their writing valuable. Essentially, they fulfilled mainstream US desires for ethnographic access to their countries of origin. Hence early Asian American writers were valued first as informational conduits and only secondarily as literary artists, a legacy that haunts writers even in the 21st century.

By carefully modulating genre and language to suit their purposes, however, they could demonstrate literary artistry as well as perform other cultural work. As Jane Tompkins explains, cultural work involves “providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions.”<sup>2</sup> In spite of audience expectations and formal constraints, some authors managed to practice various levels of epistemic disobedience in their writing. Caught between an imperative to represent and the opportunity to intervene, these writers navigated “the Asian American autobiographical predicament.”<sup>3</sup>

To reach a dominant US audience, writers not only presented themselves as bridges between East and West but also fused literary and aesthetic elements from Eastern and Western cultures in their writing, producing what may be called hybrid work. Of course, not all forms and uses of hybridity are the same. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse explains, “We can think of types of hybridity along a continuum with, at one end, hybridity that affirms the center of power, adopts the canon, and mimics hegemonic styles, and, at the other end, mixtures that blur lines of power, destabilize the canon and subvert the center.”<sup>4</sup> True to this theory, works by early Chinese American and Japanese American writers span this continuum. Asian American cultural critics have not always agreed, however, on where particular authors and works reside on this continuum between affirming and subverting the hegemonic.

In *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings in Their Social Context* (1982), Elaine Kim understood that many early writers “found that elements from two vastly different cultures could be combined within themselves.” Her critique of writers like Yan Phou Lee, Yung Wing, and others focused, however, on their tendency to represent “elite” elements of Chinese culture instead of the experiences and views of the working-class majority of Asian American laborers in the United States. “Their writing,” Kim averred, “is marked by dissociation from the Asian common people, whether in Asia or in the West, and even their pleas for racial tolerance are made primarily on behalf of members of their own privileged class.”<sup>5</sup> The editors of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), for their part, believed that most early writers propagated stereotypical views of Asian Americans as “good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, [and] cultured.”<sup>6</sup> They accused Yone Noguchi and Sadakichi Hartmann, for instance, of pandering to mainstream US desire by producing poems that performed “the quaintness of the Orient but said nothing about Asian America, because, in fact, these writers weren’t Asian Americans but Americanized Asians.”<sup>7</sup> According to these critics, most early Asian American writers failed to use their hybridity in ways that would be perceived as radical or liberatory. Instead of representing common Asian people, they overly identified with those in dominant positions—either elite Asians or mainstream white Americans. In terms of Pieterse’s continuum, they affirmed the hegemonic.

Postcolonial theories of hybridity can further illuminate how differences in power and privilege conditioned the choices of early Asian American writers. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, for instance, insist that hybridity “does not mean any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but implies a markedly unbalanced relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Sten Pultz Moslund observes further that hybrid works of literature participate in “an asymmetric dialectic in which each side of the binary is contaminated by the other but in an uneven fashion.”<sup>9</sup> Writers like Lee,

Yung, Noguchi, and Hartmann found themselves in positions of little power. All were immigrants. All were poor at points in their lives. All were members of a race excluded from naturalized US citizenship. Consequently when mixing elements from Chinese or Japanese culture with those from US or European culture, they understood that the forms and ideologies of the latter usually dominated.

Therefore, Elaine Kim and the Aiiieeeee! editors are largely correct in their assessment about these authors' tendency to affirm Euro-American hegemony. It may even be correct to say that they practiced "self-Orientalism," which Helena Liu defines as "casting themselves as exotic commodities for the benefit of white people and institutions."<sup>10</sup> This choice certainly had problematic consequences, such as reinforcing stereotypes (positive and negative), but it also enabled them to publish, survive, and perhaps practice strategic hybridity. Akin to Gayatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism—wherein minority groups know the problematic nature of essentializing shared racial, ethnic, national, or other identities, yet deploy them for political aims—strategic hybridity can "shock, change, challenge, revitalise or disrupt through deliberate, intended fusions."<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that as a result of legislation like the Page Act of 1875, which made it difficult for Chinese women to enter America, most immigrants from Asia during the exclusion era were men; hence most writers were men. Interestingly, during the 1970s until the 1990s, the most often discussed early Asian American writers were women, namely, Sui Sin Far née Edith Eaton and Onoto Watanna née Winnifred Eaton. Both daughters of a Chinese mother and English father, the Eaton sisters published widely and also practiced various forms of hybridity. Critics like the Aiiieeeee! editors lauded Sui Sin Far's ability to tell stories of Chinatown to a mainstream audience without lapsing into self-Orientalism. At the end of her personal essay, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909), she declares that she will never perform exotic gestures like quoting Confucius, although well-meaning friends encourage her "that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers." With wry self-awareness, however, Sui Sin Far does publish under a Chinese pen name meaning "water lily," writes in autobiographical forms, and ends "Leaves" by quoting Confucius: "Individuality is more than nationality. 'You are you and I am I,' says Confucius."<sup>12</sup> This is certainly one way to practice strategic hybridity. Her sister practiced another. In order to capitalize on the turn-of-the-20th-century craze for Japonisme, Winnifred Eaton published under the Japanese-sounding pen name Onoto Watanna and claimed to be born in Nagasaki. With the exception of her autobiographical work, *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915), Watanna wrote about Japan as if she were Japanese. In light of these choices, some early critics critiqued her "as a racial traitor and sellout."<sup>13</sup> Criticism of both Eaton sisters has evolved, however, and both have enjoyed more thorough discussions elsewhere. This article concentrates on male writers of the era because they have received much less attention, having been dismissed as "inauthentic" by both cultural nationalists and feminists.<sup>14</sup>

Asian American cultural critics in the 2000s have argued for a more forgiving and capacious reading of early Asian American writers. For example, Viet Thanh Nguyen has maintained in *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002) that readers need to appreciate "the flexible strategies often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations."<sup>15</sup> In the same literary text, hybridity may be deployed to both affirm and subvert hegemony. And certainly over the course of their writing careers, some writers traverse the continuum between affirmation and subversion. Scholarly essays in *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature* (2005), edited by Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung, and *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (2005), edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, acknowledge, historicize, and read closely the works of previously denigrated writers to appreciate how they sometimes appropriated, fused, and transformed aspects of various cultures in their hybrid work.

# Strategic Hybridity in Autobiography: Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing

Two of the earliest book-length works by Chinese Americans published in English are Yan Phou Lee's *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887) and Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America* (1909). Both Lee and Yung chose the genre of autobiography as their vehicle for influencing attitudes about their countries of origin as well as the status of the Chinese in America. To some degree, both practiced self-Orientalism. For instance, Lee spends most of his pages reviewing Chinese customs, and Yung gives us a glimpse of his early life growing up in Nanping. A more complex aspect of their hybridity, however, lies in how both combine their personal knowledge of China with references that would have been familiar to American readers. For example, Lee compared the Chinese practice of celebrating the first month of a baby's life to "christening-day [. . .] in England." Furthermore, he explained Chinese discipline with a Greek simile: "The bamboo rod hung over my head like the sword of Damocles."<sup>16</sup> For his part, Yung associated his own work gleaning rice in the fields with that of the Biblical Ruth harvesting barley. These cross-cultural comparisons reinforced Lee's and Yung's authority as "cultural brokers," since they demonstrated their knowledge of both Chinese and Western culture.<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, equating supposedly exotic accounts of Chinese life with familiar references to British tradition, Greek parable, and Biblical history may have gone some way toward countering one of the racist attitudes of the period, namely that Chinese are of "a race so different from our own," as Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan argued in his dissent against the majority opinion of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>18</sup> While his colleagues upheld the idea of separate accommodations for black and white Americans, Harlan believed that both groups had much more in common than they did with Chinese "strangers from a different shore."<sup>19</sup> On this point, he was not alone. Anti-Chinese rhetoric and laws increased in the late 19th century, culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for a limited period, and the 1902 Geary Act, which made Chinese exclusion permanent. These laws also categorized Chinese as "unassimilable aliens" ineligible for naturalized citizenship.<sup>20</sup> Although Lee's and Yung's cross-cultural comparisons may be unremarkable in 2019, they subtly made the case in their time that people from China are not as different as Harlan and others believed. In this way, their autobiographies were strategically hybrid; they were designed to "disrupt through deliberate, intended fusions."<sup>21</sup>

Yung Wing made his Chinese American life story even more familiar to a US audience by fusing it with conventions borrowed from Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Douglass. Besides accommodating his readers, however, he also challenged their assumptions. For example, to counter dominant stereotypes which figured Chinese men as unassertive and servile, Yung wrote a success-story narrative that sought to prove his "manliness," as ideologues of his day defined it. In his 1899 speech on "The Strenuous Life," Roosevelt argued for "that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil."<sup>22</sup> In fact, Roosevelt used Yung's country of origin as his negative exemplar. He warned that if the United States did not follow his plan for imperial assertiveness, it may discover "what China has already found, that in this world the nation that has trained itself to a career of unwarlike and isolated ease is bound, in the end, to go down before other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurous qualities."<sup>23</sup> Fortunately for Yung, Roosevelt also opined, "As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation."<sup>24</sup> Hence, Yung performed strategic hybridity in his autobiography to demonstrate that as it is with himself, so it could be with China.

Answering Roosevelt's calls for adventurous ambition and for manly strength, Yung wove elements of both into his life story. He even used Roosevelt's vocabulary, writing "in a strenuous life one needs to be a dreamer in order to accomplish possibilities."<sup>25</sup> Yung thus represented his rise from poor rice gleaner to comfortable businessman and leader with vivid tales of assertive manliness. Take, for instance, this story from his days as a foreman during a rice-trading expedition in China:

In one or two instances the boatmen were very reluctant to jump into the water to do the work of deepening the river, and on one occasion I had to jump in, with the water up to my waist, in order to set them an example. When they caught the idea and saw me in the water, every man followed my example and vied with each other in clearing a way for the boats, for they saw I meant business and there was no fooling about it either.<sup>26</sup>

With performances of physical manliness and colloquial American language like this, Yung communicated to his readers also that he bore the requisite qualities of tough masculinity.

Similarly, Yung accomplished a disruptive form of Chinese masculinity in a carefully modulated account of a fist fight from his days in Shanghai. The staging and language of this scene echo the famous altercation between Frederick Douglass and the slave breaker Covey in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), in which Douglass prefaces the turning point in his life with the following chiasmus: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."<sup>27</sup> Although Yung is not a slave, he occupies a position of racial abjection which can be disrupted in a similar performance of physical manliness. (Of course, there are other ways to define and perform manliness, but Yung chose this dominant form to reach an audience familiar with Roosevelt's rhetoric.) While attending an auction, a "stalwart six-footer of a Scotchman" decided to tease Yung by tying a cotton ball to his queue. When Yung discovered this trick, he asked the man to undo it and apologize. Instead, the man hit Yung. Cognizant that if "personal insults and affronts [were] to pass unresented and unchallenged," he may "encourage arrogance and insolence on the part of ignorant foreigners." Therefore, Yung "struck him back in the identical place where he punched me, but my blow was a stinger and it went with lightning rapidity to the spot, without giving him time to think." He capped off the incident by declaring that he had acted in self-defense and denouncing his opponent. "With this stinging remark, which was heard all over the room," Yung tells us, he "retired from the scene."<sup>28</sup> Yung's account echoes Douglass's in at least two ways. First, it reinforces restraint. Yung strikes him "back in the identical place where he punched me." Second, it underscores verbal as well as physical prowess. Yung's "stinging remark" redoubles his "stinger" of a blow. Like Douglass, Yung thought it wise to temper his ability to fight, which may be read simply and problematically as a bestial response, with proper restraint and eloquent speech. Thus did Yung perform strategic hybridity by mapping dominant forms of manliness onto the life story of a Chinese American man usually denied masculinity.

## **Strategic Hybridity in Poetry: Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi**

Mindful of his biracial heritage (Japanese and Prussian), many of Sadakichi Hartmann's contemporaries considered him an organic or unintentional hybrid, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, but in fact, Hartmann deployed his hybridity both strategically and intentionally.<sup>29</sup> Upon the death of his mother when he was a baby, Hartmann was sent to Hamburg to be raised by his grandmother and rich uncle. There he learned to read literature in German,

French, and English and appreciate art from around the world. When he came of age, his father sent him to join the German navy, but military training did not agree with the independent-minded Hartmann. In short order, he escaped to Paris. When he was discovered, his father sent him to Philadelphia as punishment. There, he took various odd jobs such as a perfume salesman and photographic retoucher. He also spent much of his time reading in local bookstores, often poring over a copy of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. Instead of throwing him out or forcing him to buy the book, one bookseller encouraged Hartmann to visit Whitman in nearby Camden, New Jersey. He did so and thus struck up a relationship that led to a literary exchange as well as to escapades that would inspire Whitman later to call Hartmann “that damned Japanee.” Hartmann’s literary work, however, inspired his elder to call him “the most promising of the boys”—boys meaning the various young Japanese men with whom Whitman consorted.

Hartmann’s literary works ranged from French Symbolist poems to haiku, essays on art history to a book-length meditation on the burden of living with asthma, in addition to plays about Jesus and Buddha. Sometimes Hartmann fused conventions from Japanese, English, and American traditions in his writing. For instance, he claimed to be the first to combine the haiku form with end-rhyme. Consider the following:

Oh, red maple leaves,  
There seem more of you these eves  
Than ever grew on trees!<sup>30</sup>

The poem follows the traditional (and now disputed) haiku three-line form: five syllables followed by seven syllables and then five syllables.<sup>31</sup> It also adheres to the conventions of signaling a season and having a cutting word. The “red maple leaves” indicate the fall setting, and the poem shifts after the word “eves,” as an epiphany strikes the speaker. Hartmann’s innovation was to rhyme “leaves” and “eves.” While this choice surely constrained his options, it has the advantage of reinforcing the cutting effect, since the last line departs from the first two in both mood and sound. Therefore, Hartmann intentionally styled his work as aesthetically hybrid, to use Bakhtin’s terms again. Whitman warned Hartmann that one cannot “grow roses on a peach tree”—that is, in this case, graft Euro-American conventions with a Japanese art form—but this poem and others argue otherwise.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, his and Noguchi’s poems were works of strategic hybridity, since they intentionally fused forms in order to disrupt. As Audrey Wu Clark argues in *The Asian American Avant-Garde: Universalist Aspirations in Modernist Literature and Art* (2015), “Hartmann’s and Noguchi’s practice of the modernist haiku within elite literary circles were acts of political resistance against late 19th- and early 20th-century populism that led to Japanese exclusion.”<sup>33</sup> Writing in a form marked as Orientalist, they demonstrated that the other could be the self—that is, the haiku could be modernist, and those with Japanese heritage could be the authors of such elite literature. As the modernist poet Ezra Pound himself admitted, “If one hadn’t been oneself, it would have been worthwhile to have been Sadakichi.”<sup>34</sup>

Pound also admired Noguchi, whose path differed greatly from Hartmann’s. While Hartmann hardly knew Japan, Noguchi was born in the small town of Tsushima, came of age in the nearby city of Nagoya, and attended Keio University in Tokyo before traveling to San Francisco in 1893. An aspiring intellectual, Noguchi developed as a poet under the influence and encouragement of Joachin Miller. Noguchi met and worked with other writers in the Bay Area, New York, and London before returning to Tokyo in 1904. During his time in America and England, Noguchi published several works in English, including two novels—*The American Diary of a Japanese Girl* (1902) and *The American Letters of a Japanese Parlor Maid* (1905)—and three volumes of poetry—*Seen and Unseen: Or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail* (1897), *The Voice of the Valley* (1897), and *From the Eastern Sea*

(1903). Upon his return to Tokyo, he became a professor of English at his alma mater and published many more works including *The Story of Yone Noguchi* (1914) and *Japan and America* (1921). Lecturing and writing in both English and Japanese, Noguchi translated *America and England for Japan* and *Japan for America and England*. For instance, in one comment, Noguchi describes “our original Japanese mind” as “indeed quite a Celtic mind, like that of the young woman in Yeat’s *Land of Heart’s Desire*.”<sup>35</sup> Edward Marx argues that while Noguchi was not an Asian American writer per se, he “exerted an influence . . . on the development of Asian America.”<sup>36</sup>

Yone Noguchi’s transnational form of hybridity is perceptible, for instance, in the last poem in his book *Seen and Unseen* (1897), which reads in part:

The world is so filled with names; often the  
necessity is forgotten, often the difference  
Is unnamed!  
The Name is nothing!  
East is West,  
West is East:  
South is North,  
North is South<sup>37</sup>

Noguchi’s poem declares the designations themselves meaningless. Hence, all points of the compass are equivalent and interchangeable in Noguchi’s version of “My Universe,” the title of this poem. As Clark maintains regarding both Hartmann and Noguchi, “their contributions to cosmopolitan communities of modernists were expressions of universalist aspirations.”<sup>38</sup>

## **Strategic Hybridity in Proletarian Writing: H. T. Tsiang**

While Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing deployed hybridity via autobiography to challenge American racism and define alternative ways of knowing Chineseness, and Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi intentionally fused Western and Eastern forms to make universalist art and arguments, H. T. Tsiang wrote poetry, novels, and a play that practiced strategic hybridity to critique global capitalism and promote what he called “world revolution.” Born to a poor family in Nanjing, China, Tsiang attended Southeastern University on scholarship, where he majored in political economy. Eager to put his education and energy to use in supporting the Chinese revolution, he worked as a secretary to Sun Yat-sen. Upon the latter’s death in 1925, however, the forces of Chiang Kai-shek sought to purge him as well as other leftists. Fortunately, Tsiang was able to escape to the United States to pursue graduate studies, one of the exceptional reasons allowed by the Chinese Exclusion Act. Although he was enrolled at Stanford University, he rarely attended classes. Instead, he leafleted in San Francisco’s and Los Angeles’s Chinatowns, hoping to foment a rebellion against the new Chinese government, believing it unfaithful to Sun Yat-sen’s vision. These Chinese American communities, however, did not want the kind of trouble Tsiang was stirring. He was even attacked by a mob on one occasion and arrested by the police on another. Finding California inhospitable, Tsiang transferred to Columbia University in New York City. There, he learned about Shakespeare in his classes and the proletarian movement on the street.

Tsiang’s poetry found receptive audiences in proletarian periodicals like *The Daily Worker* and leftist gatherings like *Red Poets’ Nite*. He self-published *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* in 1929. Although many of the poems in



this volume focus on China, some represent struggles in America in order to make the case that members of the working class in both countries ought to be united. For instance, one poem focuses on the martyrdom of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were executed for a crime they may not have committed. In 1933, Radiana Pazmor sang a version of Tsiang's "Sacco, Vanzetti," composed by Ruth Crawford Seeger, at Mellon Gallery in Philadelphia and Carnegie Hall in New York City. This poem calls on "foreigners" and "workers" to carry on the work of these martyrs. The final lines of the poem address Sacco and Vanzetti: "Listen to the war cries of your living brothers! / This is the incense / We are burning / To you." The synesthetic transformation of "cries" into "incense" fuses sound and smell. Interestingly, this form of offering—burned incense—is conventionally made to Chinese ancestors but is intended in this case for Italian American forebears. The fusion of senses represented in these lines consequently reinforces the unity of workers no matter their ethnic background.

As James McDougall observes, "Tsiang's poetry expounds a global vision for a revolutionary movement."<sup>39</sup> In his study, "H. T. Tsiang's Poems of the Chinese Revolution and Transpacific Bridges to a Radical Past," McDougall also traces Tsiang's hybridization of poetic traditions ranging from Chinese opera to the May Fourth poet, Guo Morou, to Walt Whitman. Noting Tsiang's use of anaphora and apostrophe, McDougall writes, "It seems as if Tsiang rerouted Walt Whitman's 'Passage to India,' refitted it with Marxist theory, and sent it back across the Pacific to give Whitman a revolutionary embrace."<sup>40</sup>

All of Tsiang's novels hybridize multiple forms, Chinese and Western, with his commitment to world revolution à la Vladimir Lenin's vision in which all countries eventually would join the Communist International. His 1931 *China Red* is an epistolary novel that fuses a narrative of proletarian awakening with the Chinese tradition of qing-shu—or collections of love letters that "read like short epistolary fiction" stretching back to the 17th century. The latter enjoyed a resurgence in China thanks to Guo Morou's popular 1922 translation of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).<sup>41</sup> Although Tsiang's novel begins in sentimental fashion, its incorporation of his signature quirkiness informs readers that their expectations will be challenged. Indeed, the lovers' exchange gradually transforms into a political conversation, and one protagonist ultimately declares with revolutionary fervor, "With our paper bullets we shall change the direction of the wind."<sup>42</sup> Tsiang's 1935 *Hanging on Union Square* is a collective novel, which Barbara Foley describes as a genre that experiments with the conventions of realism and "narrative technique by introducing unmediated bits of environmental buzz—slogans, songs, news-broadcasts, noise."<sup>43</sup> *Hanging* follows the racially unmarked protagonist Mr. Nut, who wanders through the environment of Depression-era Manhattan on a single day, much as does Leopold Bloom through the streets of Dublin in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Mr. Nut, however, encounters the "noise" of advertisements, evictions, and protests. In addition, he views both the struggles of desperate New Yorkers as well as the machinations of those who feed upon their desperation. Rather than fall victim to or participate in capitalistic exploitation, Mr. Nut ultimately takes down Mr. System in this experimental novel. The narrator tells us that the pitiable Mr. Nut turns into a trickster who "was acting nuttily. His eyes, however, were expressing deep thoughtfulness. He was acting nuttily as a soldier off for a war. But he was thoughtful as a soldier when he turns his gun."<sup>44</sup> Tsiang's final novel, *And China Has Hands* (1937), is in some ways his most conventional work. It features a Chinese immigrant who hopes to succeed as a laundry worker-owner and a mixed-race Chinese and black woman who hopes to succeed as an actress. Racism, capitalism, and imperialism, however, interrupt their aspirational plans and incipient romance. Unlike a rags-to-riches bildungsroman in the fashion of Horatio Alger, *And China Has Hands* makes the case that individuals cannot succeed by dint of luck and pluck as long as exploitative systems remain in place.

Tsiang's 1938 play, *China Marches On*, strategically hybridizes the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan (familiar to 20th- and 21st-century US audiences thanks to Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* and Disney's

animated film *Mulan*) with then-contemporary news of the 524th Regiment of the 88th Division of the Chinese army, which, in spite of receiving an order to retreat, resolved to defend a tactically important warehouse in Shanghai against Japanese invaders, vowing to “fight to the last bullet.”<sup>45</sup> Tsiang had experienced the power of revolutionary theatre during his stint as an actor in Sergei Tretyakov’s New York production of *Roar China!* in 1930, which dramatized the struggle of a Chinese village against British colonialism. In his own *China Marches On*, characters begin with individualistic motives but eventually set aside personal interests in favor of political resistance. As in *And China Has Hands*, the representative of imperial capitalism is played by the Japanese empire. Although it may seem that Tsiang has a particular animus against Japan, it is important to notice that his novel is dedicated not to the demise of Japanese people but rather “To the Death of the Japanese Empire.”<sup>46</sup>

## Survival, Access, and Resistance via Strategic Hybridity

Immigrants from Asia and their descendants faced difficult social, economic, and legal conditions during the era between the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1924, and the lifting of these and other restrictions in 1965. Historian Sucheng Chan details this period of “hostility and conflict” in chapter 3 of her *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991). Although some left the United States, most found ways to persist and even thrive.

Traces of their experience and flashes of artistry can be gleaned from the literature they produced. Many communicated in their mother tongues with an intracultural audience via letters, prison writing, and oral performance. *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (2006), compiled by Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, captures some of this communication. Others wrote and published in English for a mainstream readership. In order to reach this market, early Asian American writers often had to make compromises in terms of language, form, and politics. In the interest of survival and access, they often reinforced hegemonic positions; however, they also sometimes took the opportunity to perform resistance via strategic hybridity. Yan Phou Lee did this by perpetrating cross-cultural comparisons that showed that Asians were not members of a “race so different from our own.”<sup>47</sup> Yung Wing appropriated and transformed dominant American autobiographical narratives to recuperate Chinese character. Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi combined poetic traditions from several continents in order to define a modernism that included cosmopolitans such as themselves. And H. T. Tsiang promoted world revolution by experimenting with fusions of Eastern and Western forms with Marxist ideology. Many other early writers, from Sui Sin Far to José Garcia Villa, deployed their own versions of hybridity. As Susan Stewart points out, no writer creates *ex nihilo*.<sup>48</sup> All do their best with the materials they have at hand, hybridizing at will.

## Discussion of the Literature

Elaine Kim in *Asian American Literature*, Amy Ling in *Between Worlds*, and Frank Chin in “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” recognize that early Asian American writers like Yan Phou Lee, Yung Wing, Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, and H. T. Tsiang hybridize Eastern and Western elements in their literature, but they discount them as “fake,” “Americanized,” “elite,” and less “authentic” compared to writers like Sui Sin Far and Carlos Bulosan.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, K. Scott Wong defends Yung Wing as a “cultural broker,” and Patricia P. Chu adds nuance to his story in her book, *Where I Have Never Been: Migration, Melancholia, and Memory* in

Asian American Narratives of Return.<sup>50</sup> Essays in Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History, edited by Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa; Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature, edited by Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung; and Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature, edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, offer historicized readings of these early works.<sup>51</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that seeking signs of resistance or accommodation in early works falls short of acknowledging “the flexible strategies often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations.”<sup>52</sup> More capacious readings of Hartmann and Noguchi can be found in Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* and Audrey Wu Clark’s *The Asian American Avant-Garde: Universalist Aspirations in Modernist Literature and Art*.<sup>53</sup> Floyd Cheung, Aaron Lecklider, Julia H. Lee, and James McDougall have written critical essays on H. T. Tsiang.<sup>54</sup> Hua Hsu’s *A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure across the Pacific* puts Tsiang’s work into transnational context.<sup>55</sup>

Key theories of hybridity are summarized in Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s entry on that topic in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* and Pnina Werbner’s introduction to *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*.<sup>56</sup> Paul Sharrad discusses strategic hybridity in his essay in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*, edited by Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman.<sup>57</sup>

## Links to Digital Materials

Cheung, Floyd. “**H. T. Tsiang: Literary Innovator and Activist.**” *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* 2 (2011).

Find this resource:

**Poetry Foundation’s entry on Sadakichi Hartmann.**

**Poetry Foundation’s entry on Yone Noguchi.**

## Further Reading

Chin, Frank. “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake.” In *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. Edited by Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. New York: Meridian, 1991.

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Find this resource:

## Notes:

(1.) Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy," in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

(2.) Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 200.

- (3.) Floyd Cheung, "The Origins of Chinese American Autobiography," in *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature*, ed. Min Song and Rajini Srikanth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 40.
- (4.) Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hybridity," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016).
- (5.) Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings in Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 24–25.
- (6.) Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers, 1974* (New York: Penguin-Mentor, 1991), xiv.
- (7.) Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, xxi.
- (8.) Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, eds., *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 3.
- (9.) Sten Pultz Moslund, *Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 14.
- (10.) Helena Liu, "Beneath the White Gaze: Strategic Self-Orientalism among Chinese Australians," *human relations* 70 (2017): 781.
- (11.) Pnina Werbner, "Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), 4–5. See also Paul Sharrad, "Strategic Hybridity: Some Pacific Takes on Postcolonial Theory," in *Reconstructing*, ed. Kuortti and Nyman, 106.
- (12.) Sui Sin Far, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 230.
- (13.) Melissa Eriko Poulsen, "American Orientalism and Cosmopolitan Mixed Race: Early Asian American Mixed Race in the American Literary Imagination," *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* 3 (2012): 8.
- (14.) Floyd Cheung, "Early Chinese American Autobiography: Reconsidering the Works of Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing," in *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*, ed. Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 24–25.
- (15.) Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4, italics in original.
- (16.) Yan Phou Lee, *When I Was a Boy in China* (Boston: Lothrop, 1887), 8, 21.
- (17.) K. Scott Wong, "Cultural Defenders and Brokers: Chinese Responses to the Anti-Chinese Movement," in *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era*, ed. K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 3–40.
- (18.) *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537, 560 (1896).

- (19.) Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998).
- (20.) Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 281. Chinese exclusion was technically lifted in 1943 as a kind gesture toward a US ally in World War II. Fuller dismantling of race-based exclusion did not happen until 1965.
- (21.) Pnina Werbner, "Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), 4–5.
- (22.) Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 20 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1926), vol. 13: 319.
- (23.) Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," vol. 13: 322.
- (24.) Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," vol. 13: 321.
- (25.) Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Holt), 65.
- (26.) Yung, *My Life*, 134.
- (27.) Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 107.
- (28.) Yung, *My Life*, 70–72.
- (29.) Kuortti and Nyman, *Reconstructing*, 6.
- (30.) Sadakichi Hartmann, *Collected Poems, 1886-1944*, ed. Floyd Cheung (Stroud, U.K.: Little Island, 2016), 122.
- (31.) The editors of *Modern Haiku* state, "Syllable and line count are not vital in contemporary English-language haiku—in particular in our journal. We find, in fact, that few poets are able to write effective haiku in the 'traditional' 5–7–5-syllable format."
- (32.) Sadakichi Hartmann, *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy*, ed. George Knox (Frankfurt and Munich: Herbert Lang Bern, Peter Lang, 1976), 68.
- (33.) Audrey Wu Clark, *The Asian American Avant-Garde: Universalist Aspirations in Modernist Literature and Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 62.
- (34.) Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 309–310.
- (35.) Yone Noguchi, *Selected English Writings of Yone Noguchi*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), vol. 2: 89.
- (36.) Edward Marx, "'A Different Mode of Speech': Yone Noguchi in Meiji America," in *Re/Collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Josephine Lee et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 288.

- (37.) Yone Noguchi, *Seen and Unseen: Or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail* (San Francisco: Gelett Burgess & Porter Garnett, 1897), 51.
- (38.) Clark, *Asian American*, 11.
- (39.) James McDougall, "H. T. Tsiang's Poems of the Chinese Revolution and Transpacific Bridges to a Radical Past," *American Modernist Poetry and the Chinese Encounter*, ed. Yuejun Zhang and Stuart Christie (New York, Palgrave, 2012), 50.
- (40.) McDougall, "H. T. Tsiang," 56.
- (41.) Kathryn Lowry, trans., "Personal Letters in Seventeenth-Century Epistolary Guides," in *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, ed. Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 158.
- (42.) Tsiang, *China Red* (self-published, 1931), 90.
- (43.) Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 401.
- (44.) Tsiang, *Hanging on Union Square* (self-published, 1935), 206.
- (45.) "Chinese Fight to Finish." *New York Times* October 27, 1937: 3.
- (46.) Tsiang, dedication in *And China Has Hands* (New York: Speller, 1937), emphasis added.
- (47.) *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537, 560 (1896).
- (48.) Susan Stewart, *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 25.
- (49.) Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings in Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990); and Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: Meridian, 1991).
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- (52.) Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 4. Italics in original.

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(55.) Hua Hsu, *A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure across the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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