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Author

Mullins, Elizabeth Heather

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From Past to Present

Elizabeth Heather Mullins

Abstract: *This paper surveys the life of Alice Yang, a 30 year-old second generation Chinese-American woman. In doing so, I attempt to place Yang's experiences within the broader contexts of the various social and historical conditions affecting Chinese-Americans at the time.*

Our understanding of a person and his or her life drastically changes when we attempt to look at that person's life from a different viewpoint. I discovered this in interviewing a family friend of mine, Alicia Yang.¹ I have talked to Yang several times and have thus learned a little bit about her life, but until recently we never delved into her family history – we tended to focus on other topics. Because of this and the fact that Yang seemed to have typical American mannerisms, it never occurred to me that she would have a different experience growing up than I would just because she was of a different ethnicity. Consequently, I interpreted everything that I learned about her assuming that she had the same background as myself, a fourth generation white woman. Once I started focusing on her life as a second generation Chinese-American woman, however, I found that Yang's life story was significantly deeper and more complex than I imagined.

Yang's story began with her parents'. Her mother, Mei, was born in 1944 in Toison (a village near Guangzhou City), and her father, Fa, came from nearby. Fa used to help Mei's family around the house, and years after the two met, they married and had Yang's older

siblings (Kimberly, Vanessa, George, and Emma) in the 60s and 70s.

Mei and Fa left China due to several common push and pull factors. In the mid 1900s, Toison was a large village (with about 200,000 people in it) but also rural, mostly made up of farmland. After 1965, the US immigration policies favored immigrants that received more education and had more white collar jobs in their home country, due to the current demand for such workers in the existing service and technology-based US economy.² Mei and Fa, unlike other second-wave immigrants, did not have such backgrounds, having emigrated from a rural and thus poorer area. Because their qualifications did not match the demand in the economy, Mei and Fa faced limited job prospects in California. This made upward mobility less likely for their children, as they would receive less economic support from their parents, and thus would have less access to various resources that could help them succeed in life. Conversely, Mei and Fa still heard about opportunities in America; to them, America was "a place with gold leaves on the trees – it's the land of opportunities."³ With four children already born, educational opportunities and a calmer political environment attracted them as well. Specifically, free public education and evasion from communism in China most likely pulled them as it did others.⁴

Moreover, Mei's mother was already in California by the 1970s. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act (which let citizens sponsor a relative to immigrate)⁵ allowed Yang's family to gradually immigrate to the US through "chain immigration," like the majority of Asian immigrants at the time.⁶ But, this also forced Yang's family to come over in stages, temporarily splitting them up. Vanessa and her father stayed in Hong Kong for a couple of years before arriving in the US around 1977, and "the rest came over about two years following" in 1979.⁷ Mei and Fa followed and diverged from common Chinese migration patterns. Leaving from Hong Kong rather than the mainland resembles refugee migration (necessary movement to avoid immediate threats to one's personal safety), as refugees typically left China indirectly from nearby territories under foreign rule, such as Hong Kong or Taiwan.⁸ This further emphasizes her family's motivation to leave for political reasons. Moreover, Yang's father immigrated first while her mother remained in China with most of her siblings. This resembles the general first wave of migration, which took place in the 1800s, more than the second wave after 1965, which they were actually a part of.⁹ First wave Asian immigrants were mostly men that saw the move to America as a temporary living situation, while second wave immigrants consisted of entire families undertaking a permanent life change.¹⁰ Yet, her father was not the typical sojourner traveling to the US alone and expecting to return to his family in China; instead he came with his daughter and intended for the rest of his family to follow (although most likely the separation still gave Mei a greater sense of responsibility and independence.) In following and breaking these patterns, Yang's family represents the transition between these forms of migration, and the resulting shift in Chinese-American society. Her family, therefore, exemplifies the changing view of America as a new home rather than a brief source of work, and the consequent shift away from the bachelor Chinese society.¹¹

Because Fa's sister lived with her husband Fay in their apartment complex in San Francisco Chinatown, Yang's family lived in one of the units upon arrival. Chinatown was a small, close-knit society, with many residents living there for over twenty years – according to Yang, "everyone knew each other."¹² Consequently, the community retained most of its culture; Yang remembers many residents eating ethnic foods and playing games such as Chi-

nese chess and mahjong. Most residents were first-generation and only spoke Chinese; thus these enclaves most likely formed from the necessity to work in an ethnic economy where a language barrier would not be problematic for finding work. Upon arriving, Mei and Fa worked in a fast-food restaurant. This restaurant, like other Chinese-owned restaurants serving American food, exhibits immigrants' responses to the need to conform to American culture attract a wider array of customers. Likewise, it portrays how the Chinese culture evolved in the United States, as immigrants adapted both Chinese and American customs (such as the type of cuisine served and eaten) to form a hybrid, Chinese-American culture. In 1981 Yang was born, though sadly her father passed away months later.

As a girl, Yang attended school blocks away from her home in Chinatown. Interestingly, Yang could not attend this school initially; children in her area were then assigned to schools far away in the Richmond district. This policy resulted from a 1983 consent decree that limited the students from each ethnic group that could attend certain San Francisco public schools.¹³ In this case, the San Francisco community enacted policies to promote diversity in schools. These actions contrast with ones taken by the community less than a century earlier in 1906, when the San Francisco Board of Education decided to place Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students into a separate "Oriental school."¹⁴ While students were placed in schools at that time to follow segregation policies, Yang was assigned to her school to promote integration. Ironically though, had Yang's family followed the policy (they instead enrolled her in school with a fake address), it would have created similar problems for Yang by forcing her to attend an inconveniently located school. Furthermore, many Chinese-Americans could not attend certain schools even though they had higher test scores than students from other minority groups.¹⁵ Following past trends, these institutions did not treat Yang as an individual, considering her personal needs, but only took into consideration her ethnic/racial background. Even though the program's goal was to fight segregation, it actually imposed further discrimination on Yang and other Chinese-Americans in her situation by forcing them to take greater measures to get an education than someone of another race living in the same area. This exhibits the negative effects of the "model minority"¹⁶ identity on Asian Americans – others did not factor in the detrimental way certain policies affected them due to their supposedly high-achieving nature. Yang remembers her schools having predominantly Asian populations. While one might assume that this reinforced Asian culture in Yang, most of her friends also felt "crossed tied between being Chinese or being American."¹⁷ Because public schools emphasized American customs,¹⁸ Yang's friends probably experienced the same opposing cultural influences that Yang did herself. Consequently, Yang's friends made it seem normal Yang's attitudes differed from her family's, as they likely experienced a similar struggle in identity.

Growing up, Yang noticed Chinatown transforming. While whites and Chinese were separated for a long time – "even in my early twenties it was all Chinese those few blocks" – Yang observed diversity increasing.¹⁹ While de jure residential segregation had been prohibited since *Buchanan v. Warley* in 1917,²⁰ de facto segregation still existed. This hints at the long-term ways that racialized laws and other forms of exclusion have affected the Chinese community. It further explains how Chinese Americans have retained so much of the Chinese culture, as exclusionary policies and limited opportunities due to lack of English proficiency forcefully induced a close-knit community that reinforced the customs within it,

and prevented outside influences from changing it.

When Fa passed away, Mei became the sole provider for Yang and her siblings. Most likely, Mei and Fa's separation before immigrating prepared Mei for this role, as she already had experience in providing for her children. Mei's independence at this time most likely set an example for Yang for how women should act, explaining some of the differences in her beliefs regarding female roles compared to her older sisters. Mei's busy schedule resulted in Kimberly and Vanessa often picking Yang up after school and, in Yang's mind, essentially raising her. Yet, this did not detract from Yang's relationship with her mother: "Her presence wasn't always there, but she always made it a point to be there for my birthdays and any fieldtrips. That's something that really stuck with me."²¹ Mei's emphasis on spending time together led to Yang maintaining a strong understanding of the importance of family. From this one can observe one of the many influences strongly affecting Yang's beliefs, and thus her identity as a Chinese-American.

While Yang was close with her family, age differences (from six to 13) between her and her siblings made Yang feel disconnected at home – not having "anyone to communicate with" made her feel isolated. As the only American-born in her family, a "lack of understanding between the different cultures" also aggravated this, as it was "difficult to understand what [her family considers] right or proper."²² This displays the various effects of the Chinese culture's strength within ethnic enclaves, as it allowed for first generation immigrations to retain their identity, but it also created tension between the various generations when different customs were practiced. Overall Yang thought, "nobody understood within my family how I was feeling" as a Chinese-American,²³ as she held very different ideas about who was acceptable to date, the type of roles men and women had, and the importance of certain holidays or traditions (such as the Qingming Festival).

These feelings led to a drastic change in 1998, when she and her boyfriend moved to Sacramento. Yang wanted change, and felt that it was time to explore somewhere else – "it could have been anywhere."²⁴ Yang's desperation to leave her home highlights the lack of belonging she felt in Chinatown. As for many second-generation Chinese-Americans,²⁵ the differences in culture were too strong to make Yang feel as if she completely belonged. There in Sacramento, Yang spent her time finishing high school and working. Yang exercised a sense of independence rare for a young woman her age, not even involving Mei in her move. Yang explained, "I wanted to be independent. I skip to my own beat and still do to this day."²⁶ In employing this independence, Yang helped set the precedent for the changing role of Asian American women. This was also seen with the Nisei girls (discussed by Matsumoto), who loosened gender expectations in the 1920s and 1930s by making male-female interactions more common in their club events.²⁷ But while the Nisei girls asserted their independence through their personal relationships, Yang did so by choosing where she lived and attended school. But after moving, Yang strongly missed San Francisco: "It's too flat, too humid. It's just not my pace, being more of a city girl."²⁸ Likewise, Yang returned home after graduation. Yang notably did not revert against her upbringing completely by permanently leaving the Bay Area. The desire to distance herself from the Chinese culture (but only partially so) exhibits her cultural identity as a mixture of Chinese and American. Once in San Francisco, Yang attended the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM). For Yang, fashion was "something that's natural to me that I gravitated towards."

Despite her love of fashion, Mei wanted her to do something “more stable, [like] the stereotypical lawyer, doctor [or] accountant.”²⁹ Even so, Yang followed her heart. She attended FIDM, learning sewing, pattern draping, and other skills. After two years, she completed the program with an Associates of Art degree. In doing this, Yang once again resembles other Asian women who have pushed the boundaries set for them by society in terms of the type of occupation they were allowed to achieve, or the amount of independence they were permitted to exercise. By attending FIDM to prepare for a fashion career, Yang followed other second-generation Chinese who tried to ensure future success through higher education. This therefore propelled the trend of Chinese-Americans attempting to work outside of the low-paying economic sectors that previous generations dominated by receiving the necessary education to be qualified for higher paying, more “professional” jobs.³⁰ Then again, Yang inadvertently magnified the “model minority”³¹ myth in receiving more education than other minority groups.

In one of her classes during the program, Yang met her fiancé, Cody Henson. Eventually they started dating and became engaged in 2009. Yang and Henson have had some challenges as a biracial couple; for example, many people have questioned their relationship. Some acquaintances in the Chinese American community have asked Yang, “Why aren’t you dating one of your own people?”³² These questions portray the fear commonly seen among previous generations that interracial marriages will result in destruction of the Chinese heritage.³³ This concern marks a notable reversal from the laws seen in the 1900s (such as the Cable Act in 1922)³⁴ that intended to discourage such interracial unions. This attitude possibly originates as a reaction to the previous prejudices imposed on Asian Americans, as that poor treatment could give Asian Americans reason to distrust Caucasians and other ethnicities that once held similarly racist views. Yang ignores these people, arguing that they are “rude and they lack understanding.”³⁵ Once more, Yang deviates from traditional Chinese practices, making her own path. Although her family immediately accepted Henson, Yang also notes that if he was “darker than a medium shade,” Yang’s family would see her as “dating down,” and would stop communicating with her.³⁶ This social hierarchy follows a general trend seen with other Asian families.³⁷ This could originate as a long-term effect from Asian people attempting to assimilate by conforming to white middle-class values, who have historically been the most privileged group in US society.³⁸ Conversely, Nazli Kibria argues that it could also signify the gradual acceptance of certain interethnic marriages among older generation, and thus the eventual destruction of the inter-ethnic barriers.³⁹ This is seen in how Yang’s family has grown to accept Cody, a white man, but not men from other races. Either way, the trend takes root in Yang’s life in the most personal of ways, even affecting the men that she dates.

After FIDM, Yang worked for MGC’s Harley Davidson division, overseeing their line’s production from “start to finish.”⁴⁰ On the side, Yang worked as a labor contractor, using her fluency in Chinese and her Chinatown connections to arrange for seamstresses to sew her clients’ garments at low prices. This resembles the 1960s when businesses took advantage of the high Chinese-female immigrant population and their inability to speak English to obtain cheap workers in the garment industry.⁴¹ As a result, Yang was part of a larger cycle of industrializing Chinatowns through the garment business. Through her employees, Yang also helped set the trend of more Chinese women working outside the home, and thereby

earning a more respected role in the family.

Three years later in 2005, she changed her life again, procuring a job as an assistant for a hair restoration surgeon. Yang recently made some major changes in her living situation as well. While attending San Francisco community college, Yang moved back into her uncle's Fay's apartment complex in Chinatown. However in 2009, Yang left to visit Henson in medical school in St. Martin. During that time, Fay passed away without a will. The San Francisco courts ordered the complex to be sold and the tenants to move out, each one receiving a small sum of money as compensation. George told her that because she was away, the family would combine all of the payouts to buy a house in Chinatown (each family member a part owner) if she let them sign and collect her money. Yang agreed and waived her rights to sign the papers.

Sadly, George did not keep his promise, only putting his and his wife's name on the house's deed. While Yang had a room in the house, she was not a part owner. "I came back resentful. He betrayed me."⁴² Though Yang was upset, her family did not empathize. Vanessa already lived in San Mateo at the time, and thus was not affected by the deed, and Emma did not express an opinion. The rest of Yang's family believed that George should own the house alone. According to Yang, her family believed that if she married Henson, his family would take care of her: "I'm part of the Henson family, I'm no longer with the Yangs."⁴³ This attitude carries over from the Chinese practice of a daughter moving in with her husband's family.⁴⁴ Moreover they think that George, as the only boy, "should have some power." But to Yang, "it's such a joke."⁴⁵ In opposing these outlooks, Yang exhibits the ways that living in the United States has changed her beliefs compared to the rest of her family who grew up in China. Consequently, she has been influenced by the broader trends for second-generation Chinese women in the United States to adapt more Western ideas regarding gender roles.⁴⁶ Refusing to live with George in his new house, Yang moved into Vanessa's house in San Mateo. Yang still does not communicate with George to this day, refusing to be around "people who don't look out for [her] best interests ... period."⁴⁷ As seen before, Yang defies the boundaries imposed on her as a woman, this time by refusing to accept the special privileges given to her brother.

Recently, Yang moved to a small city in Marin County to live with Henson. Yang still visits her friends, many of which she has known since age seven or eight. Living in the small, Chinatown community has caused Yang to develop long lasting relationships similar to the ones Yang describes her mother having with her friends. The close-knit community created from the formation of ethnic enclaves⁴⁸ with the first-generation has carried over to the second generation, even though they have dispersed more as a group. Most of Yang's friends have found jobs or significant others outside of California; they have "moved on and established their own individual lives."⁴⁹ This significantly differs from the previous generation, who according to Yang still mostly reside in the San Francisco Chinatown. Yang argues that most older Chinese people have the resources to live in a nicer house somewhere else, but they choose not to, as "they're in their element of comfort and friends."⁵⁰ Unlike other first-generation Chinese who have children born here,⁵¹ Yang's family seems to only feel attached to Chinatown, not to the rest of the United States. Most likely this is because Yang is their only true connection to the nation, whereas other families have more children born in the country to tie them to it. One can assume that this creates more challenges for Yang as

she attempts to branch out.

In terms of culture specifically, some friends of Yang have retained more of their Chinese culture - they "are comfortable with their upbringing."⁵² Conversely, others "always strived for something different." This disparity indicates that the second generation is still determining their identity - it has not been established yet. Yang even witnesses this discovery process in herself: "I'm still learning what I like and what I don't like everyday."⁵³ In this way, Yang seems to avoid the pulls from either culture by refusing to completely identify with either one. Yang may not know exactly where she fits in among other Chinese-American women, but she revels in the "adventure" of finding out.

Alicia Yang's life has been shaped by many of the broader contexts and influences in both Chinese and American society. These effects started with her very origin in the United States (resulting from the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act and other push-pull factors in China and the United States) and still work to this day, her ambiguous identity as a second-generation Chinese American influencing her beliefs and actions, and thereby shaping her relationships with her friends, family, and fiancé. Likewise, the particular factors affecting her family, such as ethnic enclaves and their identities as first-generation immigrants, have added to this dynamic as well. However, Alicia Yang's story also demonstrates that these trends constantly change. Thus her future as an Asian American in the United States, as well as that of other people with similar backgrounds, is still widely undetermined and unpredictable.

Notes

1. Certain details in this paper, such as Alicia's name, have been changed to protect Alicia's privacy.
2. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 420-423.
3. Alicia Yang, in discussion with the author, October 2011.
4. Takaki, 423-424.
5. Xiaolan Bao, "Politicizing Motherhood: Chinese Garment Workers' Campaign for Daycare Centers in New York City," in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 287.
6. Ibid.
7. See note 3.
8. Takaki, 422.
9. Ibid., 421, 423.
10. Ibid., 423.
11. Ibid., 254.
12. See note 3.
13. Ibrahim J. Gassama, "Transnational Critical Race Scholarship: Transcending Ethnic and National Chauvinism in the Era of Globalization," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 5, no. 134 (1999-2000): 134.
14. Takaki, 201.
15. See note 3.
16. Wilma Mankiller and Barbara Smith, *The Reader's Companion to US Women's History* (Boston:

- Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 97.
17. See note 3.
 18. Takaki, 257.
 19. See note 3.
 20. Charles McClain, *Chinese Immigrants and American Law* (New York: Garland Publications 1994), 240.
 21. See note 3.
 22. Ibid.
 23. Ibid.
 24. Ibid.
 25. Takaki, 259
 26. See note 3.
 27. Valerie Matsumoto, "Japanese American Girls' Clubs in Los Angeles during the 1920s and 1930s" in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 172-187.
 28. See note 3.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Takaki, 257.
 31. See note 3.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 267.
 34. See note 3.
 35. Ibid.
 36. Ibid.
 37. Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 174.
 38. Birgit Zinzius, *Chinese America: Stereotype and Reality: History, Present, and Future of the Chinese Americans* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2005), 221.
 39. See note 20.
 40. See note 3.
 41. Bao, 288.
 42. See note 3.
 43. Ibid.
 44. Sucheta Mazumdar, "What Happened to the Women? Chinese and Indian Male Migration to the United States in Global Perspective" in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 67.
 45. See note 3.
 46. Takaki, 259.
 47. See note 3.
 48. See note 5.
 49. See note 3.
 50. Ibid.
 51. Takaki, 256.
 52. See note 3.
 53. Ibid.