



PROJECT MUSE®

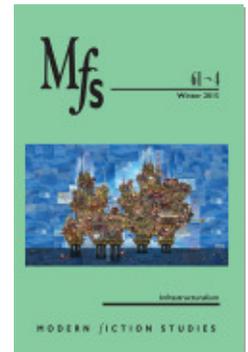
---

## Collaboration and Translation: Lin Yutang and the Archive of Asian American Literature

Richard Jean So

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 56, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 40-62 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/mfs.0.1667](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1667)



➔ For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v056/56.1.so.html>



**COLLABORATION AND  
TRANSLATION: LIN YUTANG  
AND THE ARCHIVE OF ASIAN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

---

**Richard Jean So**

In spring of 1947, Richard Walsh, editor in chief of the John Day Publishing House, wrote a letter to his star author, Lin Yutang, the famous Chinese diasporic writer and novelist. Walsh had invited Lin to relocate to the United States from China several years earlier. The radical 1930s in China had been unkind to Lin: as a self-described liberal, he had become the target of a mounting Chinese Communist backlash, earning the scorn and hostility of a growing number of leftist writers. In 1935, with the help of Walsh and Pearl Buck, whom he had befriended earlier in Shanghai, Lin fled to America in hopes of reconstructing his literary career outside the nation. The intervening decade proved far kinder to Lin. Between 1935 and 1945, Lin published three bestselling novels, including *A Moment in Peking*, that catapulted him to American fame and celebrity. He became the toast of the New York literary world and found admirers among writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and W. H. Auden. Lin's partnership with John Day, as well as the sponsorship of Walsh, no doubt played a significant role in his sudden and massive rise to literary fame. Walsh and Buck commissioned his first novel, and carefully edited, revised, and marketed every book he wrote in the US. In the spring of 1947, sensing a hot new literary topic, they asked him to write a new kind of a novel—a

---

"Chinese-American" novel that dealt exclusively with the "experiences of the Chinese in America" ("To Lin" 30 Sept.). Lin happily agreed to their suggestion and quickly began the task of writing *Chinatown Family*, what would become the first Asian American novel published by a major publishing house and explicitly marketed as what Walsh and Buck would call "Chinese American" literature.<sup>1</sup>

One small obstacle, however, stood in the way of this project: Lin knew virtually nothing about Chinese Americans or the Chinese American experience. Despite his self-identification as a Chinese immigrant, Lin operated in a rarefied world of the cultural and social elite, far from the tussle and toil of Chinatown's working poor. Thus, the project of writing *Chinatown Family* evolved into a complex collaborative venture between Lin, Buck, and Walsh. Ironically, Buck and Walsh, who had earlier organized the campaign to overturn the Chinese Exclusion Laws, knew far more about the Chinese in America than Lin.<sup>2</sup> They represented a cohort of experts on Chinese America to whom Lin deferred in the writing process. Walsh regularly sent historical and sociological studies of Chinese Exclusion to Lin and established contacts for him at the Chinese embassy; he poured over Lin's drafts of the novel and meticulously corrected perceived historical errors in his representations of Chinese Americans. Artistic autonomy succumbed to an aggressive form of editorial collaboration, while research replaced inspiration and sociology supplanted narrative.

Ultimately, the suppression of authorial independence only thinly masked a clear political and ideological purpose. Walsh and Buck's investment in the repeal of Chinese Exclusion did not end in 1943; rather, they imagined Lin's novel as generating a distinct vision of what Chinese America might look like in its wake: a micro US-China nation. The period between 1943 and 1950, a period often overlooked in Asian American Studies, signaled a new but uncertain era in Asian American social life. Suddenly, there existed the category of the legal Chinese American immigrant; yet, given the slowness of actual legislative change, a visible population of such subjects paradoxically had yet to fully emerge. The idea of a thriving modern "Chinese America" existed in mind if not yet in reality, and Walsh and Buck had a clear notion of what that should look like. The writing of *Chinatown Family* thus came to embody a crucial site in the production of new discourses of Asian racial identity in the US. What at first glance appears to be a rather mundane process of editorial handling in fact articulates a dynamic terrain or place of ideological formation. Here I want to underscore the physicality invoked by the idea of place. If Walsh's involvement represented a coercive collaboration, the novel's form bears the material traces of that process. And, if that involvement

served a greater ideology, the novel's physical archive sheds light on the forces of conflict and dissent that underwrote that ideology but remain invisible within the novel itself.

This essay attempts to theorize the archive of Asian American literature by taking *Chinatown Family* and its conditions of production as its object. Since the 1990s, calls for the theorization of Asian American literature have become, and remain, a steady feature of the field: in recent years, psychoanalysis, the law, and racial formation have given way to transnationalism.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite such sounding, the *archive* remains an overlooked if not invisible element within the field. The making of Lin's novel critiques some otherwise intuitive assumptions of Asian American literary criticism; for example, rather than treat Asian American texts as a totalistic form of discourse, the story of *Chinatown Family's* development returns our attention to its pre-lives within the more mundane realm of production. This essay heeds the call for an increased theorization of Asian American literature but challenges its assumed target. That is, there exists a strong assumption in the field that its texts, while far from ideologically or discursively cogent, are nonetheless materially whole. Rarely does one probe the troubled sites of production, such as editorial conflict, that often prefigure and constitute the text.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of this approach is to reconstruct a notion of Asian American literature through its elided material history. To this end, *Chinatown Family* presents a most ideal opportunity to pursue this work: in building a literary canon, founding scholars of Asian American Studies derided Lin and his texts as Orientalist or reactionary, far removed from the more radical work of post-1965 Asian American authors.<sup>5</sup> Lin has become one of the most marginalized writers in the canon. Yet, his work and the archive of history it invokes chart an alternative genealogy of Asian American subjectivity, one more sensitive to the contradictions of identity that have constituted that experience but have been ignored by conventional Asian American history.

The archive of Lin's work thus articulates two analytical categories vital to Asian American literary studies. First, collaboration: how have white Americans and Asian Americans interacted in the past, and how have such interactions affected the emergence of Asian American literary form? Walsh and Lin's collaborations exemplified a complex relationship mediated by racial patronage as well as, counter-intuitively, a form of deracialized, profit-driven bureaucracy. The archive marks the site where mainstream American literature intersects with Asian American texts. Second, translation: how have Asian American writers translated concepts such as race, both figuratively and literally, across the Pacific, and how have such render-

ings shaped the contours of Asian American culture? Lin, in writing *Chinatown Family*, hoped to translate key concepts from Chinese into the form of American literature. Through translation, he sought to render ideas such as "equality" legible across nations and somehow universal. The archive also marks the bilingual, transnational site where Chinese culture encounters Asian America. In its holding of different nations, languages, and voices—complexities lost otherwise on the surface of the text—the archive returns us to an estranged past that serves to disorient us from the very texts we read. Brent Edwards writes:

The analysis of the archive involves a "privileged region" that is in fact the "border" of the present we inhabit. The archive starts at the outside of our own social language practices, and thus reading it deprives us of our continuities . . . Reading the archive must not serve to buttress the pretensions and mystifications of the present self or the current community, in other words. The archive instead establishes that we are difference, and that difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is the dispersion that we are and make. (12)

In what follows, I pursue a wide-ranging reconstruction of *Chinatown Family's* literary archive, one that reaches across the Pacific to Shanghai and includes both Chinese and English language materials. This essay recovers the perilous encounters between white and Asian authors, as well as American and Chinese cultures, that have served to constitute both Asian American literary form as well as Asian American racial identity.

### Setting the Scene

The initial motive behind Walsh's letter to Lin was primarily financial in nature. During this time, the John Day Company had fallen into financial straits. Best-selling novels about China by Lin, as well as other Chinese diasporic authors such as Helena Kuo, had reaped millions for John Day in the 1930s. Despite its focus on China, the company had come to rival Penguin and Random House in scale and profits. Yet, since the end of World War II, John Day had begun to experience a precipitous decline in revenue. The public's interest in China and East Asia had started to wane, and John Day was its inevitable victim. Thus, in commissioning Lin to write *Chinatown Family*, Walsh hoped to reverse his company's fortunes. In a series of memos from 1948 to his staff, he posits that a "new kind of novel,"

a story about the Chinese in New York, would serve to generate a new readersly public: a public no longer interested in China, but one now interested in "the immigrant experience". The marketing division of John Day agreed and enthusiastically supported Walsh's vision; indeed, their research indicated that the American public would enjoy such a novel. Still, they stipulated one important caveat: the appeal of China novels such as *A Moment in Peking* derived from their reality effect or ability to accurately document what the US public perceived to be life in China. American readers of Lin's novels judged his works according to a rubric of realism. Therefore, in writing *Chinatown Family*, the marketing staff recommended that Lin similarly hew to a rigorously defined notion of reality. The novel must report the reality of Chinese America as would a journalist and style literary narrative through a disciplined arrangement of facts—in their words, a kind of "ethnography" ("Walsh Memo").

The main goal of *Chinatown Family*, of course, was to make a lot of money. Yet, behind Walsh's financial motive lay a genuine political vision. His commitment to Lin's work, and his service to the John Day Company, also dwelt on a more encompassing ideological level. In 1942, he helped to organize the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion and used his company to publicize the campaign. Also in the 1940s, he formed the East-West Organization, a group devoted to cultural exchange between the US and China. Walsh thus imagined *Chinatown Family* as usefully intervening in American political discourse. In particular, as Walsh outlines in a second letter to Lin, he hoped that *Chinatown Family* might serve to repair a worsening US-Sino relationship in the wake of World War II and the rise of the communists in China. Walsh argues that Chinatown represents a kind of microcosm of US-Sino relations, and by documenting the harmonious integration and "socialization" of Chinese immigrants into America, the novel would espouse a larger pattern of US-China political unity writ small ("To Lin" 30 Sept.). Walsh had a clear notion of the role to be played by newly legalized Chinese immigrants in the US after Exclusion. In lobbying for their civil rights in 1943, he wanted them to become a future bridge between nations, the brokers of a future trans-Pacific community. The fact that between 1943 and 1948 there had yet to emerge a large Chinese American population made them all the more interesting; they could be molded, and Lin's new novel would richly contribute to this emerging project.

The production apparatus of *Chinatown Family* thus consisted of a series of editorial mandates from John Day. This is the prearranged world of memos, reports, research, and politics Lin stepped into before he began to write, and this world vitally defined his writing conditions. The rest of this essay details the various mandates and

---

forms of editorial coercion placed on Lin's writing, the forms of aporia and limited autonomy that nonetheless occur, and the material text and modes of identity that result.

### John Day Versus Lin Yutang

Lin, who came to the US as a celebrated writer in exile, knew conspicuously little about the experiences of the Chinese in America, the majority of whom arrived as illegal, overseas workers. Walsh, however, believed that this gap in knowledge could be handled through careful oversight and revision. He dictated to Lin a firm work plan for the timely production of the novel. Each month, Lin would write a chapter, which would be quickly "corrected" by Walsh. Lin would then revise the chapter according to Walsh's remarks, and then begin the next chapter. The novel's writing thus functioned as a form of literary collaboration, and through this process, the final product would conform to what Walsh imagined to be the reality of Chinese America.

However, Walsh underestimated the conflicts and erosions of textual cogency that would result through such a collaboration. In the winter of 1947, Lin completed the first two chapters of *Chinatown Family*. These chapters introduce the main characters of the novel, including Father and Tom Fong, and establish the novel's setting, Chinatown in the late 1930s. Based on archival material, we know that the majority of this first draft remained intact for the final version. The two chapters offer a mundane picture of a Chinese immigrant family living in New York, and document their various family dynamics and daily activities. One aspect of these two chapters, however, greatly troubled Walsh and required a major rewrite ("To Lin" 12 Dec.).

Indeed, Walsh enjoyed the first chunk of text sent to him but had one very pressing question: given the Chinese Exclusion Laws in the 1930s, how could this family, which consisted of grandparents, daughters, and sons, exist in New York? How did they all come to New York City legally? In Walsh's view, Lin's first chapter seemed completely unrealistic. Images of the entire Fong family conducting themselves like a typical white American family—eating dinner, holding jobs, and dating—clashed against an obvious historical reality. Walsh, perhaps better than any other American, understood the forms of legal exclusion imposed by the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924, which implemented an unprecedented immigration quota system and prevented individuals from East Asian nations from naturalization or legal citizenship. It was well known that the Reed-Johnson Act reduced Chinese immigration to zero and thus warped the otherwise normal population forms of American Chinatowns. The Chinese in America

between 1924 and 1940 were a people facing numerical extinction. Walsh's critique, therefore, again resounds in the archive: how did they all get here?<sup>6</sup>

Lin faced a genuine paradox in writing his novel that achieves clearer visibility within his correspondence with Walsh. Lin hoped to use the novel to identify a new post-1943 Exclusion "Chinese-American" subject, yet the novel takes place during the Exclusion period and thus presents an obvious paradox. The novel must write backward into the past the genealogy of a future, speculative subject. Walsh keenly felt the force of this paradox and worried that it would negatively impact the novel's reception:

But I am very worried, indeed, about the immigration point, so much so that I have been consulting a good many types of persons about it. Yesterday at the Dutch Treat Club I was lucky to be sitting with three ideal guinea pigs to try it on—a novelist (Homer Croy), a critic (Burton Rascoe), and a newspaper columnist (Lee Shipley of the *LA Times*, where they especially are wary of this question). They all agreed that you would be criticized severely by anyone who knows the facts about Chinese immigration, if you didn't give a plausible explanation of how the mother and two children came into this country . . . Later in the day I put it up to a group of six men in our sales and advertisement organization, and they all felt the same. So I beg you to go at once to the Chinese Consulate and other sources and get yourself straightened out. ("To Lin" 25 May)

Lin quickly sent back a modest revision, but Walsh remained unsatisfied. In fact, he only grew more obsessed with historical accuracy in the novel regarding what he calls "the immigration point." That week, Walsh sent Lin a number of recent studies of Chinese immigration, including *Asiatics and the Law*, and put him in touch with several officials at the Chinese Embassy in New York who specialized in immigration. Walsh did not feel that Lin could "straighten" himself out through sheer self-reflection, inward thinking, or literary creativity. The correction of the novel required diligent research; it demanded administration, official oversight, and, most importantly, editorial supervision.

Finally, after several more drafts, Lin completed a version of the first chapter that satisfied Walsh's historical fixations. In particular, he drafted a new, concluding paragraph that, in almost empirical fashion, addresses the skepticism of Walsh and other Chinese immigration "experts." The last passage of the first chapter reads:

No it was not easy. There were those immigration officials, and there were immigration laws, laws made, it seemed, especially to keep Chinese out of America. But Chinese are used to officials and know of old that there are ways to get around laws. Yiko's way had been to jump ship . . . [Entering the country] was irregular. But the thing was done. (11)

The heavy editorial hand of Walsh should be evident here; the passage opens with a clear invocation of the history of the Exclusion laws, followed by a vivid explanation of how the Fongs, Yiko included, managed to come to the US. In fact, Lin seems even to mimic the aggressive discourse of historical fidelity we find in Walsh's various letters to Lin. In one particularly scolding moment of correspondence, Walsh writes:

You are going to have to find one of the ways by which they could get around the law. There was of course, jumping ship . . . fleeing ashore in a barrel . . . smuggling across the Mexican border, and that seems almost likely—but you would have to explain how a Chinese woman and two children got all the way to New York without being detected. This is a tough one and I hate to bother you with it when you are in the full tide of writing. But it has to be done. ("To Lin" 30 May)

The emphatic last line of the chapter ("but the thing was done") seems to respond to the emphatic last line of Walsh's letter ("but it has to be done"). In later chapters, Lin fleshes out this narrative by describing how Father Fong was able to alter his status from "laborer" to "merchant," thus facilitating his entrance into the nation and the legal transport of his wife and child. In the end, several weeks worth of intensive editorial work, revision, and research had furnished a sound command of the key terms of Chinese Exclusion.

The John Day Company as embodied by Walsh dominated the early production of *Chinatown Family*. Beyond our above example, Walsh also assailed what he and a group of linguistic "experts" at John Day perceived to be a lack of realism in the representation of Cantonese Chinatown speech. Walsh assumed that Lin, who spoke a northern dialect of Mandarin and did not know Cantonese, required assistance in capturing the sound of the language, and he patronizingly sent language manuals and translation charts. On several occasions, John Day's editorial team complained that the novel's depictions of vernacular Cantonese speech lacked a perceived authenticity. The first quarter of the novel thus bears the traces of intense authorial compromise, the mark of a writing process constantly deflated by a

vision of reality imposed from above. That said, it would be misleading to envision Lin, one of the most significant Chinese writers of the twentieth century, as John Day's puppet, someone entirely malleable to American editorial interests or devoid of literary autonomy. Rather, despite the guiding hand of Richard Walsh, Lin imagined the novel as generative of new social forms and ideologies particular to his own notion of Chinese American identity, one not necessarily congruent with that of Walsh or John Day. Lin struggled to endow his novel with such ideas by drawing on a broader field of concepts beyond the editorial sphere of the John Day Company. In particular, the completion of the novel's second half came to embody a space of growing friction or distance between author and editor. Yet, before turning to this second half, we must first return to Lin's previous life in China to reconstruct the basis of this eventual rise to total authorial independence.

### Shanghai Digression

Lin was a pivotal figure in China's thriving if turbulent Shanghai literary scene in the 1930s. Initially, Lin aligned himself with the May Fourth generation of Chinese leftists in Shanghai. The May Fourth Movement was a widespread intellectual movement in China that occurred between 1919 and 1927, and it took social reform, cultural innovation, and modernization as its primary goals. Lin taught at Beijing University in the 1920s, where he met Lu Xun, and later moved to Shanghai, where he befriended writers such as Zhou Zuoren and Mao Dun. After the sudden partition of China into Communist and Nationalist factions in the 1930s though, Lin began to find himself increasingly at odds with Shanghai's emerging proletarian Left. Lin supported a staunchly liberal conception of China's future. As a former student of Hu Shi, he argued that China must adopt a US style of government based on constitutionalism and civil rights protection in order to reform itself. Lin wrote a series of controversial essays on liberalism in China and translated the American Declaration of Independence into Chinese (美國獨立宣言). Against what then amounted to a rising consensus, he rejected the idea of a future Chinese government modeled on a Russian-inspired, Marxist-Leninist political pattern. Lin felt that socialism in China would signal a turn toward ideological extremism. As a result, Chinese radicals smeared Lin's name in the press and publicly derided him as a "running dog" of Western imperialism. The early 1930s in Shanghai were unkind to Lin. Former friends turned into enemies. Liberalism in China grew increasingly marginalized. In 1933, Lu Xun published a defamation

---

of Lin in *Zhong Liu* (中流), and later that same year, Lin was expelled from the Chinese League of Leftist Writers (中國左翼作家聯盟).<sup>7</sup>

A savior of sorts suddenly appeared in 1935 in the unlikely if not ironical guise of two white, American leftist intellectuals: Buck and Walsh. Although Lin's liberal essays on China found hostile reception in Shanghai, they also circulated widely in the trans-Pacific press, including *The China Critic* (also known as 中國評論週報), where they found a number of supportive American internationalist readers, such as Buck. Buck and Walsh, two devout anti-Communist US liberals, admired Lin's writings. They believed that his work articulated an essential vision of China—how it should be—and lamented his expulsion from the Chinese literary left. In an effort to restore his reputation, and in part produce a counter, anti-Communist trans-Pacific literary sphere, one based on liberal values, the two commissioned Lin to write a primer on modern China, what would become *My Country and My People*. Lin's introduction to China became an immediate best seller and initiated a productive partnership between John Day and himself. Lin's fall in China enabled his rise to success in America.

This brief background provides an alternative angle of vision through which to approach the *Chinatown Family* archive. Within the archive, there often arises, however quietly, allusions and references to this context that bear careful scrutiny. While living in China, Lin wrote a body of work in Chinese that defies our usual fixation on English in analyzing Asian American fiction. These writings, I want to argue, constitute a cogent vision of Chinese-American identity—what Lin calls "the Republican Chinaman"—that disrupts the ostensibly seamless production of the novel ("Gu Hongming" 38). In particular, Lin's Shanghai texts advance a concept of language essential to the formation of a democratized Asian American subject. It is this vision of an international language, I argue, that provided Lin the means to take back control over the production of *Chinatown Family*. Ultimately, he imagined the novel as an opportunity to extend the work of his China writings and reconstruct his failed dream of a Chinese liberalism in the form of Chinese American literature. Here, we decipher the archive of Asian American literature through its trans-Pacific, bilingual reach.

In 1934, Lin translated the American Declaration of Independence into Chinese and published it in his magazine, *The Analects* (論語月刊). The translation was part of a broader series of articles devoted to propagating American ideals of democracy and civil rights in China published in that journal as well as others, such as *The China Critic*. It was not the first time someone had translated the Declaration into Chinese. During the late nineteenth century, or late Qing period, a number of classic texts of the Western and American political tradition,

including Rousseau's *Social Contract* and the American Declaration, appeared in China through a number of well-received translations that laid the groundwork for the emergence of Chinese liberalism in the 1920s. Lin's translation, however, possesses several unique facets that merit special attention. For example, rather than pursue a straight transliteration of the text by foregrounding an unproblematic notion of commensurability between English and Chinese, Lin articulates a more dynamic vision of translation as, what Lydia Liu has described, a kind of practice.<sup>8</sup>

First though, let us briefly consider Lin's ideas about words. Lin believed that all languages, regardless of national or ethnic variation, embody a universal form of expression unbound by identity or geography. He derived this view of language from his former teacher Joel Spingarn, whom he studied with at Columbia University. Spingarn helped to popularize the idea of expressionism in literature by introducing the influential Italian aesthetic theorist Benedetto Croce to America in the 1920s. Following Croce, Spingarn argued that every literary text, regardless of context, embodied a unique vision of the world rather than a document of a particular historical moment, generic code, or biographical instance. Spingarn believed that literature as a mode of expressionism transcends race, class, nation, or gender.<sup>9</sup> Lin found this idea of pure expression in language quite appealing. Yet, unlike Spingarn, who argued that aesthetic forms of expression are unrelated to social forms of expression, Lin wanted to socialize the former as a version of the latter. That is, Lin believed that language allowed one to connect to a perceived universal realm of human experience that we typically associate with the aesthetic: affect and subjectivity. Yet, language also enables us to connect to and participate within the social world; it is both a form of aesthetic expression as well as a form of political expression, such as voting or paying taxes. Lin identified "expressionism" as the "single, underlying principle" that links the aesthetic world of the individual to his or her social and political world ("Introduction" 1).

Lin fleshes out this reinterpretation of Spingarn in a series of essays written in the 1920s. For example, in a preface to his translation of Spingarn's groundbreaking essay, "New Criticism," Lin interprets "expressionism" as a mediating force between so-called "individual consciousness" and "social experience" ("Discussing" 2). Expression, as a link between interiority and the social, allows the subject to openly confront reality and discern broader patterns of society. The subject is able to reconcile individual sensibility with the social through this idea of expression. Similarly, in an essay titled "Talking About Myself" Lin argues that expression represents more a form of "conversation" than pure affect by fomenting a kind of contact

or "friction" between one's consciousness and society ( 7). This kind of friction, he argues, is vital to developing a critical social mind capable of making good political decisions and ultimately becoming a citizen. Language is expression, and expression is one's ability to join a universal—as well as we imagine, international—discourse of liberty and human rights.

Lin's socialization of Spingarn provided an interpretative foundation to translate the American Declaration into Chinese. As an aspiring theorist of "Sino-liberalism," Lin translated the Declaration in order to introduce ideas such as civil rights into Chinese political discourse. The method by which he chose to translate the text, however, was highly particular: as he writes, Lin aimed to underscore the universal (or "expressionist") ideas of freedom immanent in the text, ideas he believed to transcend time and location. The Declaration's highly archaic and difficult language, though, represented an obstacle: how to reveal such immanence of meaning when the text's nominal language is so hard to read? After several false starts, Lin decided to translate H. L. Mencken's popular "translation" of the Declaration into "American English" instead of the original version. Mencken's version, which converts the text's outdated language into modern slang, had appeared two decades earlier in the US to great acclaim. Readers praised its use of slang to rework the Declaration, and Lin encountered it in 1928 while studying at Columbia. Despite their differences, Lin felt that both Spingarn and Mencken were joined together by a shared interest in the vernacular English. He believed that Mencken's translation of the Declaration into an "American vulgate" returned the document's language of rights to its original basis in expression (Mencken 1).<sup>10</sup>

Mencken's version thus provided an ideal template to translate notions of civil liberties into modern Chinese. Lin finished his translation in the fall of 1936 and published it in *The Analects* soon after. As he explains in the preface, Lin deploys a flexible version of the Chinese vernacular, making regular use of slang and colloquialisms, to naturalize the Declaration's rhetoric of rights into the local social idiom. Take for example the following bit of English-to-Chinese translation:

[Mencken "Translation"]

When things get so balled up that the people of a country have got to cut loose from some other country, and go it on their own hook, without asking no permission from nobody, excepting maybe God Almighty, then they ought to let everybody know why they done it, so that everybody can see they are on the level, and not trying to put nothing over nobody. (5)

[Lin Yutang Translation]

咱們國事亂到這般田地，叫咱們不得不跟皇上分家，自起爐灶，除了老天爺以外，誰也不要管誰，所以這會子總應向大家交個賬，說個明白，叫人家懂得這是怎麼一回事，別疑心了咱們是在做什麼坑崩拐騙蒙的好勾當。 ("Translation" 1)

First, this passage makes use of a Northern Beijing dialect to translate the slangy cadence of Mencken's "American vulgate" into Chinese. Lin uses the "咱們" form of address to translate the informal "we" of Mencken's text and inserts local colloquialisms such as 坑崩拐騙蒙的好勾當 to mimic everyday speech. Further, Lin replaces words in Mencken's text that bind its content to specific historical contexts, such as "God Almighty," with terms more aligned with the present crisis in China. For instance, Lin uses the expression 皇上 ("imperial sovereign") to rearticulate the text's original meaning of American anti-British independence as a form of resistance specific to the 1930s Chinese context. This expression, 皇上, invokes a specifically Chinese notion of sovereignty, one perceived as emanating from a divine source and, thus, anti-populist and in need of social reform.

Underwriting this translation is a theory of equivalence that doubles as a model of socio-political universality. Lin attaches a glossary at the end of his text to help readers unpack several difficult phrases. However, more than serving as a simple reader's aid, the glossary also asserts the direct translatability of the Declaration's original meaning into not only modern Chinese but also an increasingly "universal" form of spoken vernacular, be it English or Chinese. Take the following examples:

Self-stand = independence = 獨立  
 No can = cannot = 不能  
 Self-go = be free = 自由  
 Shave earth's skin = rob people = 刮地皮  
 Beat drum and attack = rise against = 鳴鼓而攻  
 No-government = anarchism = 無政府主義。 ("Translation" 378)

The first term in each row represents Mencken's language; the second term, the text's original language; and, finally, the third term, Lin's translated language. Lin's use of the equal sign ("=") unties the specificity of key phrases, such as "freedom," from any particular social or historical context. That is, the chart's equal sign (=) flattens the ostensible historicity or cultural specificity of each concept, such as "independence": no term or phrase in each row, English or Chinese, is privileged as a point of origin or index of authenticity. Each is a mere expression of what is imagined here to be a universal concept. Thus, an important premise of this text is its implicit claim

that concepts such as "freedom" and "civil rights" (自由 and 民權) represent values immanent in all societies and cultures. Lin hoped to furnish a discursive means to propagate such ideas in modern China. He does so, quite ingeniously, by rendering such political concepts as already constitutive of what here is posited as a "universal" mode of socio-political linguistic practice.

The goal of this work was to imagine a democratically socialized Chinese subject, or as Lin dubbed it, "Republican Chinaman." This project, unfortunately, was doomed and would not survive the rise of the Communist Party in 1949. Yet the figure of the so-called Republican Chinaman, along with the ideas of universal language it invokes, resurfaces in the archive of *Chinatown Family* as well as the novel itself. The various materials in Chinese I reconstruct above constitute the discursive prelife of the main archive of the novel, and thus they embody a kind of para-archive in and of itself. Lin was quite determined not to abandon his dream of a democratic Chinese subject, and if he could not continue this work in China, he would continue it in the US. The writing of *Chinatown Family* presented an ideal opportunity to do so. Here, we return to the making of Lin's novel, but with a broader conception of the materials that served to generate the physical text. How did such materials help to shape the contours of the novel's production?

### Discovering Chinese America

In his 1948 fall correspondence with Walsh, Lin appears to have begun taking back control of his novel by the writing of its second half. Walsh's earlier visible editorial hand starts to recede into the background: editorial mandates and the like virtually vanish from the archive by early June, and Lin begins to adopt a tone of growing confidence in his correspondence. Ultimately, Walsh believed in Lin's singular literary genius, and, following Lin's minor "mistakes" in the novel's first two chapters, Walsh decided to let his celebrated writer once again roam unfettered. The second half of the novel thus evinces more of what we typically identify as literary creativity, namely, the materialization of a unique aesthetic mind. Freed from Walsh's editorial grip, the rest of *Chinatown Family* registers this feeling of autonomy, yet I argue that the novel still retains a deep relationship to a rich archive of social and political materials. Literary freedom for Lin merely means the substitution of Walsh's mandated archive of texts for his own. In this last section, I offer several close readings of the final version of *Chinatown Family* to examine both the emergence of an autonomous Chinese American literary aesthetic *as well as* Lin's handling of an otherwise invisible archive of important social materials,

including one drawn from his time in Shanghai. The second half of the novel describes the Fong Family's steady assimilation into American society. It focuses on the character Tom Fong, who, as the youngest son of the Fong Family and an American-born Chinese, represents a potentially ideal instance of US-China social integration. Indeed, the second half of the novel explores different models of Chinese democratic "socialization," the incorporation of Chinese subjects into US liberal democracy, through the impressionable figure of Tom. The novel frames his experience of America as a kind of political pedagogy, and the classroom appropriately becomes the site of his assimilation. One important scene follows: "But Tom was absorbing new ideas. When he was in the ninth grade, he had to study more American history. It did not seem close to him. He had to wrestle with the Declaration of Independence. He had never read anything quite so difficult and obscure, and moreover, it was not the kind of English he liked. He went to his to teacher for assistance" (91).

The novel's invocation of the Declaration of Independence, of course, is far from random or incidental: it directly alludes to Lin's earlier translation work on the Declaration in the 1930s in Shanghai. Moreover, the concept of language and its relationship to the ideas of the Declaration also clearly resonate with Lin's earlier handling of the text and his efforts to translate it into vernacular Chinese. As we see in the next paragraph of the text, Mr. Watson, Tom's teacher, renders the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, sentence by sentence, into plain colloquial English. As a result, Tom begins to comprehend as well as absorb the text's significance: "Mr. Watson saw that some new ideas were penetrating Tom's mind." Tom struggles with the Declaration's archaic and difficult prose, yet when the text is transformed into clear English, its ostensibly universal ideas start to "penetrate" his mind through a kind of post-lingual cipher. In this scene, I argue that Tom replaces Lin's earlier 1930s imagined pre-political Chinese subject as his pedagogical target, a subject he worked to socialize politically through his translations of the Declaration of Independence. Tom is the utopian afterlife of Lin's Republican Chinaman.

The novel's link to Lin's Shanghai intellectual work grows clearer in the chapter's next passage, which outlines Tom's increasing absorption of the Declaration:

When the next day came, the teacher said, "Tom Fong, stand up and tell the class what the Declaration of Independence says." Tom gave everybody a surprise. He began, "When one people wants to break the ties with another people, they owe it to the other fellows to tell them why they did it. A government exists to protect our rights of

life, liberty, and the pursuits of happiness. Nobody can take these rights away from the people. When any government takes these rights away, the people must throw the government out and get another." The class listened closely. No student had thought the Declaration could be put so plainly. . . . [After Tom finishes his recitation of the Declaration] The teacher's eyes were bright and his face was happy as he heard Tom express so clearly the ideas he had taught him the day before. (92)

This passage, through Tom's voice, mimics Mencken's translation of the Declaration into "American vulgate," what Lin then renders into Chinese, almost verbatim. For example, Tom speaks, "When any government takes these rights away, the people must throw the government out and get another," while Mencken translates, "When things get so balled up that the people of a country have got to cut loose from some other country, and go it on their own hook without asking no permission from nobody." The overall effect of this textual translation is to fix Tom as a model of US citizenship, an ideal citizen who not only can read the Declaration but also comprehend its full import. In this way, Tom comes to represent the ideal speculative outcome of Lin's failed project of Chinese liberalism in Shanghai, the dream of a "Republican Chinaman." The 1935 Chinese text and the 1948 *Chinatown Family* text both emphasize democracy's imagined "vernacular" quality and its sociability as a political project. Here, however, Lin remarkably localizes this virtue of democracy in the unlikely figure of Tom Fong. Tom is able to explain and articulate the ideas of the Declaration better than his American classmates.

This gesture—this return to his own past—signals a rising sense of autonomy for the author, as well as a break from Walsh's earlier control. It also, however, marks the emergence of a new archive (call it a "counter-archive") of source texts distinct from John Day's materials and a point of departure for the completion of the novel. Starting in the summer of 1948, the novel's archive takes a sharp turn in discourse. Lin's revival of his Shanghai democracy writings, it seems, paves the way for the arrival of a more empowered sense of literary agency that enables the novel's final production. As I mention above, for Walsh, the promise of Lin's novel lay in its ability to actualize a form of US-China identity, one amenable to American democracy, within the emerging shape of the Chinese American subject. Lin shared this sense of promise, but here he finally breaks away from Walsh's vision by advancing his own particular aesthetic.

Fittingly an ethnographic vision comes to the fore, whereby suddenly there appears a canon of sociology texts in the archive. In the 1930s, Lin had begun developing a keen interest in US sociology

and its study of race in America. In particular, through his affiliation with the journal *Asia and the Americas*, which printed a number of important ethnographic essays, Lin had grown familiar with the work of Robert Park and the Chicago school of sociology. He was most interested in their research on Asian migrants in America, or what they dubbed "the sojourner" figure. As Henry Yu has outlined, Park and his colleagues believed that the "American Oriental" presented a challenge to their seminal "marginal man" thesis, which identified the African American as occupying a liminal position between different racial worlds. They had begun research on the American Oriental in order to expand their work on race relations to include new forms of US-Asia cultural contact and exoticism. In particular, they focused on Chinatowns. As relatively isolated, racialized ethnic enclaves, Chinatowns embodied an ideal space to test new ideas of racial assimilation in a fresh context.<sup>11</sup> Lin grew fascinated. In 1934, he met and befriended the American-born Chinese writer, Pardee Lowe, who had studied at Chicago with Park in the 1920s. The two initiated a correspondence, and Lowe sent Lin a series of essays he had written about San Francisco's Chinatown, which Lin helped to have published in *Asia and the Americas*. These essays provide a detailed ethnography of Chinatown's residents, including their various forms of behavior, community, and language.

One specific passage from Lowe's ethnography captured Lin's attention. In part two of his ethnographic study, Lowe explains that Chinatown's:

Local politics are firmly grounded on the basic pattern found in the ancestral village. Social control of the community is vested in the elderly, the wealthy, and the businessmen. However, each individual has the right, actual as well as theoretical, to express his own views in the general meetings held in the local Town Hall. Upon the basic political pattern are superimposed like successive layers of a Chinese winter-padded garment an attenuated labor guild and trade organization. Every Chinatonian, if qualified, is entitled to belong to all these numerous societies, associations, and clubs. Chinatown is a democratic immigrant community. It governs by custom and precedent. It exerts pressure by intelligent direction of moral suasion, the formation of an overwhelming public opinion. (129)

Lin's fascination with Lowe's sociological insights has an obvious basis: in identifying a "basic pattern" of "democracy" in Chinatown, one that synthesizes forms of indigenous governance found in China with US democracy, Lowe effectively models a broader form of cultural

integration that generalizes Lin's socialization of Tom Fong in the first part of his novel. The keywords "pattern" and "democracy" are essential here. Lin's Shanghai work failed to produce a sustainable pattern of liberal democracy in China; the challenge of *Chinatown Family* is to imagine a form of US-China democracy based on the figure of the Chinaman. In one stroke, Lowe resolves both issues. The "Chinatonian," or new Asian American subject, unites both the American and Chinese modes or patterns of social life, while at the same time generating a new and emergent form of US-China liberal democracy: a "democratic immigrant community."

Lin explicitly weaves this conception of Chinatown into the fabric of the novel's final section. Consider the following passage:

Mother Fong was in Chinatown, and Chinatown was a society in itself. Pell Street was not like an uptown street; it was intimate, closely packed, and full of neighbors where everyone knew everyone else by sight at least. People knew through unofficial but intimate sources how each family was faring and almost how much business was transacted each month. Mother Fong began to know her neighbors. All around her people talked her dialect, and it was as if she were back in Canton. She sat in the shop and watched and tried to remember to send gifts to this family and that when there were wedding presents or birthdays. (248)

The thematic parallels with Lowe's essay should be clear: through Mother Fong, the text paints a picture of an egalitarian, horizontally arranged community. The social aggregate is "closely packed" and "intimate," private family life extends to a broader public sphere, and commerce represents a communal, collective endeavor. Mirroring Lowe, Chinatown also expresses the site where East meets West, harmonizing China and America ("as if she were back in Canton") as well as emerging as a "society in itself." The novel's thematic debt to Lowe is discernable. Here though, I also want to draw attention to the forms of aesthetics that appear to emerge in this passage. Lin mimics not only Lowe's thematic insights but also his mode of representation: auto-ethnography. Like the anthropological participant-observer, the narrator deploys a form of thick description—the recovery of a society's inside meanings of ritual and behavior—to stand both within a community and, at the same time, apart from it to generate a coherent narrative. The narrator, for example, hears and thus understands the original language spoken by Mother Fong yet immediately translates her speech into English as a form of reported dialogue.

This perhaps is what Walsh wanted Lin to do all along. We recall from our above discussion that Walsh encouraged Lin to discover Chi-

natown by reading contemporary sociological studies and immersing himself in the community. The call for a kind of self-ethnography is distinctly heard in Walsh's letters. Yet, I want to argue, the forms of literary aesthetics produced in this passage and others represent a break from the notion of realism mandated by Walsh. Let us look at a slightly earlier passage from *Chinatown Family*:

It was a little universe in itself in which babies were born, food was eaten, laxatives were taken, and the dead were embalmed, completing the life process . . . Boys grew up and fought and burned wooden boxes in the street to melt the snow in winter and dashed almost naked through the water from the hydrant in summer, grown-up boys and girls had dates in dark doorways, and men toiled and sweated . . . and the old sat on the doorsteps in summer evenings. It teemed with life, and on summer nights it was wet with the perspiration of humanity. (46)

The documentary narrative, the slow accretion of social details and effects, reflects Lin's interest in creating a sociological literary aesthetic. These individuals, through their interactions and social bonds, create a "little universe" of human totality, a never-ending chain of life and death, action and reaction. In its language of metaphorical affect, the text also spurs a form of aesthetic greater than mere sociological vision. For example, in an earlier moment, the narrator describes: "Out on Lexington the vibrations were again different. Second Avenue seemed like a suburban district where there was more air and sunlight and the population moved on what was the periphery of this tense, exciting and brooding universe" (45). The narrative here transcends mere realism by discerning social reality as affect as well as description, feeling as well as materiality, through the use of metaphor. Chinatown breathes, "perspires," "vibrates," and "broods" like a human. The narrative both represents and reveals reality, and thus expands Walsh's earlier rigid injunction of realism to include a richer invocation of affect and metaphor. Here then, we come full-circle: Walsh's editorial grip, felt so keenly in the early stages of the text's production, slowly gives way to a gathering sense of literary autonomy, culminating with the emergence of a fully-realized Asian American literary voice.

### **The Archive of Asian American Literature**

This essay begins the important work of recovering, as well as theorizing, the archive of Asian American literature. I argue that

---

Lin Yutang's example—the history of *Chinatown Family's* physical production—dramatizes a social condition seemingly timeless to the Asian American literary experience: tensions among white cultural institutions, such as John Day, and Asian American novelists. The archive of Asian American writing, however, reveals unexpected forms of encounter that transcend the analytical categories we have established to describe such interactions: assimilation and resistance. The archive, we might say, articulates vital conjunctures of experience—collaboration between white editors and Asian authors, transnational flows of literary concepts—that, for various reasons, have been elided by the histories of Asian American literature we have chosen to write in the post-1965 era. To return to the quotation by Edwards in this essay's introduction, we are usefully reminded that the archive estranges us from the present by revealing the historical ruptures that have invisibly served to form the present we now inhabit. The past and present, sometimes quite literally, speak a different language. Thus, to investigate the archive is to rediscover the complex processes through which Asian American fiction first emerged, and further to reimagine the analytical terms we have developed to examine that literature. Lin has appeared to literary critics as perhaps the most vexing of Asian American writers. Yet his archive exposes the true complexity of his literary texts, and it perhaps redeems him from the political and aesthetic charges we have leveled at him: "self-Orientalist" and "auto-ethnographer."

More broadly, this essay strategizes a new method for interpreting Asian American literature. As I have argued, scholars tend to read Asian American literature as discursively uneven or fragmented, but they rarely consider the material incoherence of Asian American writing. We tend to believe works of Asian American fiction represent a kind of autonomous creation, a direct link to a single author's creative agency. The archive, though, allows us to reframe current conceptions of the literary within Asian American writing: rather than probe Asian American texts in order to reveal some knowable literary or aesthetic sensibility, I propose we turn our attention to the interactions between editors and writers, as well as to marketing strategies and so forth, in order to examine how those sensibilities came to be through real-world, physical encounters and meetings. Such a method provides some necessary relief to long-standing debates over defining an Asian American aesthetic, and locating authenticity within Asian American literature. My approach aspires to enrich such debates by exploring the terms through which Asian American literature, as well as Asian American racial identity, have and continue to be constructed. The quandaries and challenges faced by Lin are not restricted to the late 1940s; they were instrumental

in the emergence of novels such as *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston in the 1970s and *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee in the late 1990s. We need more materialist, archival histories of Asian American literature to answer such questions as: why have some literary forms, such as ethnographic realism, persisted in the Asian American literary tradition? How have marketing strategies and relationships between editors and Asian American writers evolved since the 1950s, and how have these impacted popular perceptions and self-perceptions of Asians in America? To answer such questions, I argue, is to rethink Asian American literature's tangible and material agency in society.

### Notes

1. Works of Chinese and Asian American literature, of course, precede Lin's novel, but *Chinatown Family* represented one of the very first efforts by a major publishing house to publish and market a novel as a work of Asian American fiction in the mainstream press. One important exception though is Carlos Bulosan's major work, *America Is in the Heart*.
2. See Conn (273–74). Also, see Mae Ngai and Erika Lee for more on the history of Chinese Exclusion. The Chinese Exclusion Acts, signed into law on May 8, 1882, by President Arthur, suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers to the US. This law would be expanded by the Immigration Act of 1924 that prohibited the immigration of all classes of Chinese, as well as subjects from other Asian nations. See also Riggs.
3. See Lisa Lowe's seminal essay on the transnational turn in Asian American Studies. See also Sau-Ling Wong's important response to Lowe's argument, "Denationalization Reconsidered."
4. One exception is Wong's excellent essay "The Stakes of Textual Border-Crossing."
5. Consider, for example, Elaine Kim's dismissal of Lin (a tendency repeated in a large volume of later Asian American literary criticism) in her *Asian American Literature*.
6. See Ngai (1–40). In her study of American immigration law, Ngai delineates the various legal measures imposed by the US government to prohibit immigration from China and to identify all Chinese subjects in America as illegal or alien. By the time the novel takes place, it would have been virtually impossible for a family of Chinese immigrants to have entered the US without great difficulty or personal trauma.
7. See C. T. Hsia (132).

8. See Lydia Liu (1–30). In her study, Liu argues that the translation of words and ideas, particularly between China and the West, never represents a seamless, linear, or one-to-one process. Rather, she contends that there exists a zone between languages in which commensurability is produced and translation made possible. Here, Lin appears to prefigure Liu in underscoring the process or practice by which words and concepts between different languages are made to appear equivalent.
9. For information on Spingarn and Croce in America, see Morris Dickstein.
10. See John Diran Song (200–300) for more details about Lin's background in this context.
11. For information regarding the Chicago school, see Yu (1–20).

### Works Cited

- Conn, Peter. *Pearl S Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Bulosan, Carlos. *America is in the Heart*. New York: Harcourt, 1946.
- Dickstein, Morris. "Critic and Society, 1910–1950." *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Ed. A. Walton Litz, et. al. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Edwards, Brent. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Hsia, C. T. *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1971.
- Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982.
- Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2003.
- Lin Yutang 林語堂. *Chinatown Family*. New York: John Day, 1948.
- . 新的文評:序言 ["Introduction"]. 林語堂全集 [The Collected Works of Lin Yutang]. Taipei: Taiwan Normal UP, 1994. 1.
- . "美國獨立宣言," [Translation of Declaration of Independence]. 論語月刊 [The Analects Fortnightly]. May 1935. Shanghai: The Analects. [上海: 論語 出版社]. 378.
- . "論小品文筆調," [Discussing the Familiar Essay]. 人間世 [This Mortal World]. July 1934. Shanghai: Friendship. [上海: 良友 圖書 印刷 有限 公司]. 1.
- . "辜鴻銘"[Gu Hongming]. 人間世 [This Mortal World] September 1934. Shanghai: Friendship . [上海: 良友 圖書 印刷 有限 公司]. 37.
- . "說自我," [Talking About Myself]. 人間世 [This Mortal World]. August 1934. Shanghai: Friendship . [上海: 良友 圖書 印刷 有限 公司]. 3.
- Liu, Lydia. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937*. Palo Alto: Stanford, 1995.

- Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences." *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 24–44.
- Lowe, Pardee. "Chinatown." *Asia and the Americas*. (1938): 129–30.
- Mencken, H. L. *The American language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. New York: Knopf, 1929.
- Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Riggs, Frederick. *Pressures on Congress: A Study of the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Movement*. New York: King's Crown, 1950.
- Song, John Diran. "The Life and Times of Lin Yutang." Diss. Columbia University, 1991.
- Walsh, Richard. *Letters and Memos. Archive of John Day Correspondence: 1926–1969*. Princeton University Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Collection. Princeton University, NJ.
- . "To Lin Yutang." 10 July, 1947. Box 218, Folder 24.
- . "To Lin Yutang." 30 Sept., 1947. Box 218, Folder 24.
- . "To Lin Yutang." 12 Dec., 1947. Box 218, Folder 24.
- . "To Lin Yutang." 5 May, 1948. Box 238, Folder 12.
- . "To Lin Yutang." 30 May, 1948. Box 238, Folder 12.
- . "Walsh Memo." 20 Sept., 1948. Box 218, Folder 24.
- Wong, Sau-Ling. "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." *Amerasia* 21.1–2 (1995): 1–27.
- . "The Stakes of Textual Border-Crossing: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* in Sinocentric, Asian American, and Feminist Critical Practices." *Orientations*. Ed. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Yu, Henry. *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.