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Illegal Noise
—**The Sound of Change in H. T. Tsiang's**
And China Has Hands

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of sound in H. T. Tsiang's 1937 novel *And China Has Hands*. Sound, and its dialectical partner, silence, work in this novel to create a "sonic landscape" in which a cognitive map of identity, community, political affiliations, oppression and resistance might be sketched. Tsiang's use of sound adds an aural dimension to the text which is typically ignored by readers accustomed to Western modes of reading. This paper examines how Tsiang produced a narrative that emerges from enforced silence to emphasize the value and limits of orality in Chinese culture. Those limits cause Tsiang to seek new cadences and choruses within an internationalist working-class movement modulated by racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic differences, in a common struggle for liberation.

Key Words: literature, Chinese-American, H. T. Tsiang, sound

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The factory whistle thrilled the atmosphere
 With a challenging shriek; the doors opened suddenly
 And vomited black-faced men, toil-worn men:
 Their feet whispered wearily upon the gravel path;
 They reach the gate and looked at each other.
 No words—lidless eyes moved, reaching for love.
 Silence and fear made them strong, invincible, wise.
 (Bulosan, 1996: 64)

The opening lines of Bulosan's "Factory Town" identify the regulation of labor, male bodies, and minds with the shrieks and whistles of the factory. The weary pace in the last four lines reflects the movements of the tired bodies of workers disciplined by the noises of the factory; the whispers of their footfalls and their grim silence mark the beginning of their resistance to the exploitation and de-humanization that serves as the basic function and logic of capitalism. Bulosan's poem uses mechanical noise in the opening lines and grim human silence to signify the exploitation and disciplining of workers and their emergent resistance to that exploitation. In comparison, sound, in H. T. Tsiang's (Jiang Xizeng)¹ *And China Has Hands* (1937), works similarly, but with a carefully orchestrated system of signifiers to locate subjects and communities and to mark the contradictions within the social formation.

Tsiang's novel echoes a history of Chinese exclusion that forced Chinese men and women out of industrial factories into the extra-exploited edges of capitalist economic life.² Tsiang, a

¹ On the spelling and pronunciation of Tsiang's name in the pinyin system, see Floyd Cheung, introduction to *And China Has Hands* (2003: 14, n1).

² Prior to the 1870s, thousands of Chinese immigrants built the western portion of the "transcontinental railroad," while thousands of others labored as self-employed miners throughout California and the Southwest. In addition, Chinese immigrants comprise large segments of the industrial workforce in California, working in cigar making factories, garment manufacturing, and numerous other industrial occupations. In the 1870s, a vocal and violent movement of white organizations were almost completely forced them out of these jobs by accusing

contemporary and ideological ally of Bulosan's (Vials, 2009: 110-148), produced a narrative that emerges from enforced silence in the marginal spaces of Chinese America. Using a framework that literary scholar Chris Vials describes as Tsiang's preferences for "genuine cultural pluralism" (114), the narrative emphasizes the political and cultural value and limits of orality in Chinese culture. In addition, the narrative stresses the cadences and choruses of an internationalist working-class movement, in which multi-racial, multi-national alliances may work for common liberation. Simply put, by tracing the patterns of sound—and, silence, its dialogical other—in this novel, the narrative's figurative wavelengths can be detected.

Theorists and scholars have implicated sound (and its subsets: music, speech, noise, and silence) in racial formation, regulation and disciplining of marginalized communities and classes, and the perpetuation of unequal power relations. For example, both Rose (1994) and Lipsitz (1997) link political and cultural struggles over noise, especially the production and consumption of music and hip hop, to the contest over social space, cultural agency, and the African American freedom movement generally. Prashad (2001) also implicates sound through musical performance in the construction of polycultural alliances among global communities of color to resist racism, focusing specifically on political and cultural ties forged by African Americans and Asian Americans.³ Of note is Joanna Hearne's study of Native American filmmakers who used sound (including Native music, speech, interviews, and oral narrative) as part of a "post-colonial strategy" to "re-code" dominant

them of stealing "white" or "American" jobs and pressuring employers to hire whites instead. By 1920, most Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants had been forced into three main low-paid, typically non-unionized occupations: laundry, food service, and domestic service (Takaki, 1998: 240).

³ Attali (2006) and Ong (2002), among the originators of this vibratory field of cultural studies in the 1980s, emphasize the importance of the production of sound in the formation of cultural identities.

images produced by Euro-Americans designed to subdue indigenous populations (2005: 189-190). Glenn (2004) and King-Kok Cheung (1993) have insisted on the negotiation between silence and sound as strategic means of introducing the possibility of self-determination, a signification of resistance to oppressive or exploitative relations, and the production of horizontal alliances among communities.

Of further value to my argument here is Christopher Hight's study of "sonic landscape" and "sonic experimentation" in the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Listening beyond and through the imagery of sight and vision usually associated with that text for what Hight calls Ellison's "tactics of sounds." Hight writes:

Ellison's narrative unfolds a sonic landscape of a rhythmic organization based on appropriation, pulsing, overlapping, phase-shifting, resonance and feedback. The novel is filled with conjunctions of sound and power and affect—noises that are not heard so much as viscerally felt—church bells, Armstrong trumpet solos, crashes, bangs, screams, flutters, scrapes, machines. (2003: 16)

Sound production in Ellison's text expresses a transformative power. In this "sonic landscape," "Ellison writes himself out of whiteness by occupying this gap in time and turning it into a potential agency between identification beyond the logic of the Same." If representations can be re-appropriated by the dominant power systems (ruling class, white supremacy, patriarchy) and used oppressively against their creators, "sonic experimentation" within a text—like *Invisible Man*, and here I include *And China Has Hands*—offers the opportunity of "a sonic flight from regimes of singular identity and organic wholes." Sonic material operates, thusly, on a "prerepresentational level" that allows the author to subvert dominant oppressive values and re-imagine social identities in an open and liberatory way (2003: 16-17).

Reading *And China Has Hands* within the theoretical framework offered here, Tsiang's use of sound reveals how silence

and isolation bound the existence of the Chinese laundryman, while noise is organized and mobilized by contending social forces in the transformation of the exiled transnational Chinese immigrant. A critical focus on sound, orality, and noise alerts the reader of Tsiang's novel to systematized power relations, resistances, and modes of individual and collective, subversive action. Indeed, Tsiang's use of sound contests the Western privileging of the gaze, image, and literacy as the dominant modes of representation and the construction of meaning.⁴ Simply put, following Hearne's argument, Tsiang seeks to re-code images and English language literature with sounds in ways that challenge controlling stereotypes of Chinese immigrants and works toward

⁴ Derrida (1978) and Said (1994) identify the production of literature in the formation of knowledge as a primary Western imperialist project, while Foucault (1994, 1995) adds the use of the production of knowledge through writing in the maintenance of more localized forms of control. Because the production of knowledge through writing is so clearly imbricated in Western power systems, it must be considered a "dominant" mode of representation. Nikulin (2010) traces the movement from oral dialogue to written dialectic in early Greek philosophy and reads its patterns throughout Western thinking up through the 20th century. Bhabha argues that the Western production of text and literature is enacted in service of the colonial project. He writes, "[Colonial discourse] resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are *bound in a reformed and recognizable totality*" (emphasis added) (1994: 71). This description is, of course, of a book, specifically an "English book," which, Bhabha notes, is the "insignia of colonial authority" (102). Likewise, Michaelsen argues American anthropology, specifically, was forged in the crucible of an uneven and unequal ethnographic contest among white and Native American writers in the nineteenth century. The anthropologist's impulse—to observe "the other" and, through writing, to invent or imagine that "other" into existence—is inseparable from the very notion of an "American" literature, he suggests (1999: 20). Significantly, Derrida, Foucault, and Said tie the production of literary culture in the West to ethnology, or the anthropological project of looking and image construction through literary production. Tsiang's counter-narrative works imaginatively in the mold of African anthropological critiques offered by V. Y. Mudimbe or Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010), deconstructing the imagined "other" and "reversing the gaze." Further, Tsiang's novel works similarly to the measures adopted by Native American filmmakers and writers who sought to imagine a "post-visual" world (Hearne, 2005; Jacobs, 2004).

imagining a subjectivity and collectivity based in a cultural pluralist notion of radical social revolution.

The enforcement of silence and the organization of acceptable noises discipline the Chinese American subject and transnational community in Tsiang's work. "This is a residential district. If you make noise, you're breaking a law!" says the local housing inspector to Chinese laundry owner Wong Wan-Lee, Tsiang's male protagonist (Tsiang, 2003: 81). Though he determines that Wong's business and housing meets legal standards, the pushy bureaucrat preemptively insists on quiet and demands a bribe from Wong to avoid being punished. Silence, however, is Wong's constant companion. He works alone in his laundry, which he acquired after working awhile as a waiter in a restaurant and saving his money. Even his name, meaning 10,000 fortunes, as the narrator explains in the opening sentences, suggests the quiet pursuit of the dream of Gold Mountain.⁵ One even suspects, Wong got into the laundry business for the quiet, a symbol of self-mastery and social mobility. When he bought the laundry, Wong had labored under the delusion that as a self-employed person "there would be no boss to tell him how to move, how to breathe, or when he should and when he should not" (21). Wong associates independence and upward social mobility with self-determination over his own bodily sounds (for example, his breath), but through the course of the story he discovers that business owners, both white and Chinese, and government authorities patrol and control the borderlands between Chinatown and native-born American territory.

⁵ On Wong's name see Tsiang (2003: 19). Derived from the globally publicized "gold rush" to California, which drew some of the first Chinese immigrants to the U.S., the image of "Gold Mountain" served as a foundational and contested myth for the Chinese-American transnational community and the hope for social mobility associated with economic success (see Cassel, 2002; Chen, 2002; Liu, 2005).

I. Background Noise

H. T. Tsiang was born in 1899 in the Jiangsu province in eastern China and was orphaned at 13. Excelling in school and in English and, after seeing his educational career disrupted by the complicated and dangerous politics of anti-Qing activism in his teen years, Tsiang earned a B.A. in “political economy” at the age of 26. Fleeing political repression, he migrated to the United States in 1926 under the provisions of U.S. immigration law that allowed entry for Chinese students and excluded Chinese workers. He briefly attended Stanford University where he edited a Kuo Min Tang affiliated Chinese-language publication, *The China Guide in America*. Under Tsiang’s editorship, that publication sought to build support for China’s nationalist movement among Chinese people and progressive-minded Americans in the United States. Tsiang participated in the communist-led Hands off China campaign and, with only moderate success, tried to strengthen relationships between the Chinese and U.S. communists. Caught between competing factions among pro-KMT students at Stanford and hounded by federal authorities, Tsiang was expelled from Stanford in the spring of 1927. That summer, U.S. immigration authorities detained him, and he was forced to pay some \$3,000 (provided by “Chinese friends”) to settle the dispute over his status as a legal immigrant student. In the fall of 1927, he moved to New York and enrolled at Columbia University where he studied politics, economics, and law (F. Cheung, 2003: 7-15; Fowler, 2007: 127-128).

In New York, Tsiang found his literary voice in a milieu of English-speaking cultural radicals who gathered around the communist movement. He published a number of poems, including a tribute to Italian immigrant radicals Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were executed for political reasons in 1927, about the time of Tsiang’s arrival in New York. His other poems, like “Chinaman, Laundryman” and “Rickshaw Boy,”

articulated some experiences of the Chinese American transnational community and were published in 1928 in the Communist Party's national newspaper *Daily Worker* (Tsiang, 1996a, 1996b).⁶ Tsiang subsequently collected these and a number of other poems in his self-published *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* (published in 1929). Thus began a brief but productive literary career in English that saw the publication of three novels as well as several unpublished pieces, including two plays. Tsiang also conducted an extensive correspondence with literary radicals like Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Waldo Frank. Tsiang sent them his work, seeking criticism and encouragement. Their responses, some of which he published as promotional matter in his second self-published novel *The Hanging in Union Square* (published in 1935), reflected their ambivalence about his writing. They noted his literary potential but described it as unpolished. For example, in his collection of poems, Tsiang included a brief "Statement" by Sinclair who noted, "What he has written is not perfect poetry, but it is the perfect voice of Young China, protesting against the lot of the under-dog" (Tsiang, 1935: 3). Waldo Frank struck a similar tone in his "Foreword" to *The Hanging in Union Square*.⁷

And China Has Hands was Tsiang's third and only commercially published book. A unique work still worthy of wide reading due to its subject matter and literary strengths, it provides an imaginative representation of the Chinese American transnational community in New York during the Great Depression. While readers should avoid reducing this novel to an account of the experiences of Chinese laundry owners, its depictions would later reverberate in the sociological and historical

⁶ Composer Ruth Crawford Seeger set "Sacco, Vanzetti" and "Chinaman, Laundryman" to music in a discordant experimental modernist style in the early 1930s (Hisama, 2007: 73-93).

⁷ Alan Wald, who closely identifies Tsiang with the proletarian writers' movement of the 1930s, suggests that Tsiang's use of Chinese modes of expression in his English went unrecognized by his critics (1996: 341-344).

accounts of those experiences found in scholarship by Paul C. P. Siu's "The Isolation of the Chinese Laundryman" (1962: 429-442) and more recently Renqiu Yu's research on the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance in the Great Depression, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (1992).

Unable to gain a viable income from writing, Tsiang moved to Hollywood in the early 1940s and found work as an actor. He played small, typically uncredited parts in such pro-war movies as *Behind the Rising Sun* (1943), the highly regarded and successful *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944), and *Betrayal from the East* (1945). Tsiang also appeared in *The Keys to the Kingdom* (1944) and *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948) and several other productions. Tsiang also took small parts in popular 1960s TV shows like *Gunsmoke*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *I Spy*.⁸ Many of these roles, despite Tsiang's early radical critique of racism, capitalism, and stereotypes of Chinese people, reenacted anti-Chinese (and anti-Asian and Asian American) stereotypes. Ironically, just thirty years after his masterful, imaginative tale full of noise and sounds precisely locating them in the social conflicts of the 1930s, Hollywood breathed new life into global versions of the stereotypes Tsiang had sought to counter. He passed away in 1971.

II. Power and Silence

With the purchase of a laundry business, Wong hopes to leave behind his days as an exploited restaurant worker and overcome the tenuousness of his immigration status. In this site, Wong seeks

⁸ Information about Tsiang's acting career can be found at The Internet Movie Database (IMDb, n.d.). As Kendall R. Phillips notes, World War II saw a large opening for Chinese American movie actors as they took roles depicting Japanese characters (2008: 118). Though the Chinese Exclusion Act had been repealed in 1943 because of the wartime alliance, after the Chinese revolution in 1949, U.S. immigration officials targeted for possible deportation Chinese immigrants with perceived ties to the left, like Tsiang (Takaki, 1998: 416-418).

to fulfill his imagined dreams of Gold Mountain. He arrived in the U.S. from Canton, China (Guangdong) apparently as a “paper son,” the term used for male Chinese immigrants who sought entry into the United States and purchased forged birth certificates from Chinese Americans who held U.S. citizenship.⁹ As K. Scott Wong notes, many Chinese immigrants who used forged immigration papers in this manner did so without the intention of settling in the United States permanently. Most planned to return to China after saving some money, and many never wanted to bring their families over (2000: xvi; Yu, 1992: 21-22). After a period of detention in San Francisco’s Angel Island immigration center, lengthy government scrutiny, and expensive legal wrangling, a “paper son” might be granted entry and U.S. citizenship. In the novel, the narrator notes that Wong’s legal case cost \$2,000 of his investment nest egg. Discovery of the deception by federal authorities could lead to further expensive legal action and even deportation.

The presence of this existential threat of deportation, while not directly developed in the novel, likely looms large in Wong’s mind and conditions his actions, even though he possesses legal documents. For example, at his first job in restaurant work, Wong proves deferential to his employer despite his hatred for him and his affinity for the African American dishwasher in the back of the restaurant. Everyone there, from the manager to the cooks, order him around to the extent that “he felt there were so many bosses.” Each one takes a portion of the tips he earns as a waiter, and he could only eke out “[a] bare living.” He dare not complain or raise his voice to question authority; “just smile” silently and accept what happens was the best advice (Tsiang, 2003: 20-21).

With a little money saved, Wong leaves the hated restaurant

⁹ For more details, see Chin and Chin (2000) and Takaki (1998: 235-239). U.S. authorities enforced restrictions on the entry of Chinese women with the view to limiting the number of children born of Chinese parents who, after the 1898 U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark case, could then claim citizenship regardless of their parents’ status (Haney-Lopez, 2006: 29).

and purchases a laundry from a “cousin.” There, he has “no boss to tell him how to move, how to breathe, or when he should and when he should not.” Indeed, it serves as the first site in the novel in which one hears the first sounds of the story: Wong’s apparently free breath (21). The temporary feeling of self-empowerment encourages in Wong his fantasy of exacting “revenge” on his former employer and co-workers by returning to the restaurant and showing off his new-found riches by ordering expensive dishes, making a point of tipping his favorite waiters and cooks, and befriending the African American dishwasher. He imagines this statement of wealth and position as a silent gesture, evident in his magnanimous actions and displays of friendliness to his social inferiors (21-22). Thus, power and agency for Wong is signified by chosen silence, while the enforced silence of the employee signifies powerlessness. In fact, on the wall of his sleeping quarters in his shop, he has put a scroll with a Chinese phrase extolling the virtues of silence (39).¹⁰

Wong’s shop is a quiet place in which little meaningful division between his private world and public interactions exists. A mere curtain divides the two spheres. This physical confinement and the thinness of this divide promote claustrophobia, which Tsiang works to evoke. On his first night sleeping in the back room, after reading an old Chinese ghost story he dreams that he travels to hell and is chased by demons. He tries “to shout for help, but breath would not come, and he could not shout” (24). Saved by an “angel” gendered as female, the dream seems to foreshadow the limits on his independence, emphasizes the confinement of his small space, and hints that his dreams of finding Gold Mountain may be little more than fantasy. And while Wong awakens to his alarm clock—only the second noise in the story—it is the knocking

¹⁰ The second scroll notes, “He who can eat the bitterness of the better may out himself above others” (Tsiang, 2003: 39). It foreshadows Wong’s failures to realize the dream of Gold Mountain and the moral—if not social—superiority of victims of racial oppression.

and calling of his first demanding customer moments later that brings him out of his half-sleep and starts his working day (24).¹¹ The subsequent narration of the minute details of Wong's work day—told silently, though the splash of water, the hiss of steam, and the grunts of the overworked launderer make hand laundry noisy work—enhances Wong's isolation. Indeed, a deliberate, nearly two-page description of how Wong cooks his rice during his lunch break amplifies the “crunch” (47-48) of slightly overcooked rice in the otherwise silent laundry, and, as Julia H. Lee astutely explains, “underscore[s] the marginalized position” he occupies (2005: 85).

Shattering the predominant silence of this domain, Wong's first recorded utterance stands as a response to the racial realities of the U.S. One day, several white children stand outside his shop and yell tauntingly, “Where's your pigtail?”¹² This speech, even when uttered by children represents a racially-derived power. In response, Wong Wan-Lee “closed his lips tightly, lifted his lower jaw; he clenched his teeth. And in silence he cursed.” They yell louder several times and throw rocks at his store when he tries to ignore them in order to discourage them. The yelling is temporarily abated when Wong throws “*lee chee*” (lychee) fruit at the children, hoping they will stop. When the kids scramble to pick

¹¹ Many of the details of Wong's life, from the layout of his shop to the physical activities of the laundry and the isolation, are generalized as typical of Chinese laundry owners in Siu. Among the various aspects of the Chinese laundry owner's work and life, Siu notes, “it would be impracticable and impossible to live apart from the shop” (1962: 434).

¹² Chinese men were required to wear their hair in a “queue” by the Qing government as a visual representation of their loyalty to what many Chinese people considered a foreign government. Without a queue in China up to the nationalist movement's overthrow of the Qing government first in 1912, and finally in 1917, a Chinese man could be considered a traitor. Wong's conscious decision to have his shorn may reflect his pro-nationalist politics and the uncertainty of the nationalist movement at the time. During the late nineteenth century, the issue posed a specific problem for Chinese male immigrants as some U.S. cities legally mandated haircuts, which, for those seeking to go back to China could prove dangerous (Cheng, 1998: 124-126).

up the treats, Wong yells: “You savvy!”

These first spoken, public words are neither Chinese nor English. Significantly, they are a slang term that, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*, originated in the 18th century in Spanish and Portuguese colonies and is usually attributed to African slaves who supposedly distort Spanish or Portuguese in their communication with slaveowners. The meaning was also turned back on slaves or non-native foreigners by whites as an insulting utterance questioning their intelligence after having been given a command or directive. While the term may have Caribbean origins, it also found wide usage in the first half of the 20th century in popular fiction, musicals, and movies. The phrase is typically referred to as being from a “pidgin” language created in the contested and porous border regions, constructed by European empires, that overlapped communities, the multinational zones in which enslaved Africans of various linguistic backgrounds, and other global immigrants, used combinations of languages to forge modes of communication amongst themselves. “Pidgin” served as the primary linguistic zone of interaction between Americans and Chinese laundry owners, as both Siu and Yu have noted in their studies (Siu, 1962: 431; Yu, 1992: 24-25).

That Wong’s first words are selected from this pidgin dictionary invokes a predictable audible scenario: a verbal encounter cum power relation between the colonizer and the colonized, the native and the foreigner. The words signify the power struggle inherent in that relation and in the use and sound of language when the colonized utters the language of the colonizer. Wong’s first audible utterance is inflected by a history of colonialism, the global movements of peoples (both forced and voluntary), the amalgamations of ethnic groups and their cultures (both forced and strategic), as well as the ambiguities and erasures of the histories of the people who utter in “pidgin.”¹³ It is an

¹³ Chinese immigrants also wrote and circulated English-Chinese phrase books containing the essential English phrases needed for interaction with

involuntary assertion of the in-betweenness of identities that Wong's life has become a signification of his exclusion from a racially organized and regulated American identity—despite his legal citizenship. While the text provides clues to Wong's fierce Chinese cultural nationalism, Tsiang's depiction of the interlocking nature of racial formations and capitalism's omnipresent market-places undermines the notion of a comforting static or fixed conception of Chinese identity for Wong. It is also apparent that Wong's old assumption about how his self-regulation of his utterances and sounds signify his personal power and standing may be inoperative in the U.S. racial and class formation. Tsiang constructs a scenario in which Wong must speak, and the language of the border are both a means of communication with non-Chinese speakers and a defense mechanism. In addition, Tsiang's construction of this utterance within this "sonic landscape" configures Wong as more than the stereotypical and ahistorical Chinese laundryman. While he may look the part, in this scene, he sounds like a transnational subject with a past and a future.

III. Sound, Stereotypes and Identity

The children stop harassing Wong only when the novel's second protagonist Pearl Chang enters the story and threatens them with violence or with calling a cop. They hear her "smart English" and see her anger and run away (29). Pearl is the daughter of a Chinese grocer, Chang Chung-Li, and an unnamed African American mother. The narrator divulges these facts to the reader independently of the action of the story or through dialogue with the Wong, a narrative device that turns Pearl into a character partially unmediated by her interactions with Wong. Pearl was born in the South, where racial segregation and the system of white supremacy forces Chinese people in a conflicted racial zone: while

English-speaking Americans (Takaki, 1998: 128).

it isn't forbidden for a Chinese man to marry a Black woman, Jim Crow rules would force him to ride in the "white" train car, for example. "For these reasons," the narrator tells us, "some Chinese think they are better than black men." Pearl has internalized this racial hierarchy; she was "every inch a Chinese" (Tsiang, 2003: 32-33). She speaks Chinese, but cannot read it. Though she sought to assert her Chinese identity to avoid the same racial discrimination faced by Blacks, her curly hair and "heavy lips" gave her away and she decided to move to New York, where she worked briefly as a model for artists (33). She has internalized Hollywood (white) conceptions of beauty and ultimately hopes to make her success in the movies.

Pearl's internalization of some of the codes of white supremacy comes with beliefs in stereotypes about Chinese people as well, some of which are audible or uttered. For example, before meeting Wong, Pearl encounters a Chinese writer who sells his self-published books on the street. He talks endlessly about his books and about this or that -ism, which to Pearl is disappointing because it makes him seem as though "he had not the least Chinese flavor" (36). The writer's speech here clashes with Pearl's internalized belief in an image of Chinese men, while Wong's silence reinforces with that stereotype, making him the more attractive of the two as a "real" Chinese man. During her initial encounter with Wong, Pearl imagines Wong's laundry to be like a "Buddhist temple, filled with calm and solitude" (37). She doesn't go in, but she imagines that "she must have heard the bells ringing and drums beating" to chase away bad spirits. Wong is the second Chinese man she has met, but she has clearly formed a stereotypical understanding of the sounds that surround one. While Wong fits some of this notional audibility which she has garnered from dominant popular culture, his appearance does not match the internalized image of the Chinese man in her mind: his missing queue for Pearl makes him look "like most Americans." Though the sounds he makes and which surround him contradict the presumed meanings of his visible image, he intrigues her (37).

Several weeks after their initial meeting, Pearl joins Wong in his shop/home for a meal. After they begin to eat, she asks why Wong has failed to serve *chop suey* and *chow mein*, assuming all Chinese people must eat these dishes. He retorts, “With thousands and thousands of apologies, I am no American. I eat no Chop Suey. I eat no Chow Mein” (53).¹⁴ Pearl responds that Americans are easily fooled, and says, “I am glad I am a Chinese!” To this Wong half-jokingly replies, “Be quiet!” If Americans came to learn that Chinese people really considered themselves superior, they would stop giving them their business. Wong is concerned deeply about the organization of Chinese noise and voice in ways that do not displease Americans and strain their business relations. As the meal proceeds, one learns she has never seen chopsticks before, let alone knows how to use them. To himself, Wong chuckles at this proudly—“how well he could handle chopsticks!” After their meal together, Pearl again imagines the “laundry as a kind of Buddhist temple with bells and drums. But she could not hear the bells and drums” (53-54). The internalized audible dimension of anti-Chinese stereotypes grows fainter.

As their first evening together continues, Pearl removes her shoes and begins to whistle and dance. Wong thinks to himself that she must be a *mo no*, or “no brains.” It is a term applied to Chinese Americans who know little of Chinese culture. The cat may have more brains, Wong thinks. But during this internal rumination, Wong notes that “With all the brains the cat had, she didn’t know how to make any other sound besides ‘meow’; Pearl

¹⁴ Historian Min Zhou notes, contrary to Wong’s implication here, that *chow mein* was a traditional Cantonese dish brought by immigrants from the Chinese province of Guangdong to America. Though Tsiang was born and grew up in a province about 1,000 miles from Guangdong, his character Wong, like most Chinese immigrants and New York Chinese laundry owners in the early 20th century, came from that province. It is possible Tsiang may have first encountered *chow mein* in California and thus attributed the inaccuracy to Wong. *Chop suey*, on the other hand, was an “‘Americanized’ dish” (Zhou, 1995: 93). Yu explains that a majority of Chinese immigrants to the United States in that time period came from Taishan county in Guangdong (1992: 28).

Chang could make more sounds than that.” In other words, despite her naiveté about Chinese history and culture, sounds signify intellectual potential, attractiveness, and sexuality, making Pearl a far worthier companion. As Wong explains to himself, “With all the brains the cat had, she did not know how to put on high-heeled shoes and let the heels make sharp sounds on the pavement. Pearl Chang could” (55). The sound of her heels accompanies the movement of her hips and breasts as imagined in Wong’s mental eye. Tsiang’s construction of Pearl as a sexual being also (hetero)sexualizes Wong, a stereotype-breaking image of a Chinese man,¹⁵ yearning for sexual and romantic companionship (Lee, 2005: 93).

Indeed, the sonic associations that Tsiang makes here seem to have important implications about Wong’s relationship to his Chinese identity and the transnational community in which he now lives. The intelligence and silence of the cat are contrasted with noisy Pearl’s lack of knowledge about China and its culture. The silent, intelligent cat symbolizes for Wong his affiliation with China and its culture, while Pearl, the Afro-Asian American woman who stands as the physical embodiment and descendant of the people who inhabited the world in which “pidgin” dialects were formed. Of the two, Wong finds himself drawn toward the latter. While Lee sees Pearl as a figure symbolizing for Tsiang a “New China” (powerful, revitalized, socialist), listening to the “sonic landscape” suggests something more: it echoes with Pearl’s internationalist and anti-colonialist potentialities (Tsiang, 2003: 93).

IV. Demythologizing Gold Mountain

Tsiang uses Wong’s public interactions with Pearl to reveal the

¹⁵ For further discussion of the relationship between “controlling images” of Asian Americans and sexuality, see Espiritu (2008: 13-15).

inadequacies of the ideological underpinnings of the Gold Mountain dream. Together they visit New York's Chinatown during the noisy Chinese New Year celebration, at which they discover more Americans than Chinese people. Pearl is full of laughter, but proves herself again to Wong to be a *mo no* when she calls a baby "You little Chinky." The baby cries, and as Wong comforts the baby, it smiles, which Wong sees as good luck. Pearl's comment suggests how deeply she has internalized dominant white racism, but for Wong it signals no more than an obvious lack of understanding of Chinese culture (59). In fact, her public display of this *mo no* behavior causes him to be ambivalent about going around town with her. In other words, while examining racism might expose the shortcomings of his hopes for social mobility in America, Wong is limited to seeking to regulate Pearl's behavior to reflecting accurately Chinese culture as the best means of improved interactions with whites and for economic success.

Tsiang links this scene to larger public presentations of Chinese cultural performances. Just as Wong mulls over Pearl's behaviors, the drums and gongs announce the start of the Lion Dance, which Wong has seen many times, but which is new to Pearl. The Lion Dance follows an interesting pattern: less a representation of authentic Chinese culture and more an economic imperative. As Wong notes: "the lion in the park cage [at the zoo] ate meat . . . the lion in Chinatown ate dollar bills" (58-59). Here, Tsiang's narrative reflects certain historical realities. As historian Chiou-ling Yeh writes in *Making of an American Festival*, Chinese business and community leaders who were prominent in the community understood the monetary value of performances such as these for American tourists. As Yeh notes, they "understood the power of Orientalist fantasy in the American imagination" (2008: 15-17). This Orientalist fantasy produces dollars for Chinese business owners. As both Yeh and Yu point out, Chinese business elites carefully regulated the noise and sounds (and activities that produced them) in Chinatown to comport with stereotypes in order to promote this economic activity. This sometimes meant

that Chinese business and community leaders sought to suppress organized protests against abusive and discriminatory laws or economic exploitation of Chinese workers and small business owners, as in the case of the Chinese Hand Laundry Association in New York in 1933 (Yu, 1992: 34). Hearing the sounds in both Wong's interaction with Pearl and in the larger festival setting, enables an understanding of how Tsiang uses this historical form of the organization and regulation of public sounds to highlight the limits and contradictions of the ideology behind the dream of Gold Mountain.

Listening to the text also allows the critical reader to hear ways Tsiang simultaneously constructs those class and community boundaries. For example, when Pearl and Wong arrive at a widely publicized dinner to which Wong has been invited, they are greeted in Chinese with happy wishes for the New Year. After Pearl returns the greeting, she bursts into laughter so hard she cries. The sound of her laughter and her crying signal how her initial internalized understanding of "authentic" Chinese culture has eroded as a result of her closer encounters with the community. Although the narrator never describes or gives voice to an imagined "true" authenticity to replace Pearl's internalized stereotypes, the sounds of the welcoming voices and replied to with her laughter and tears suggest the possibility of mutual recognition. The dinner is full of games, speeches, and loud talk, and other party noises as a feeling of community and festivity permeates the atmosphere.

Encounters with whites, however, indicate how that community is circumscribed by white racism and controlling stereotypes. During the dinner, Wong gets drunk and annoys Pearl who leaves. Wong tries to follow her through the city streets, but loses her in the crowds. During his walk, he accidentally visit to a soup kitchen whose customers were almost all white men, unemployed and dressed shabbily. Wong is swept into the soup kitchen as a tour by "well-dressed men" pushes into the building to learn about the conditions of the poor. In the soup kitchen, he

hears white men blame the economic crisis on immigrants, specifically the Chinese. After furtively leaving the soup kitchen, he encounters a group of white tourists emerging from a Chinese art museum designed to look like a temple. Unfortunately for its paying customers, however, the museum did not fulfill their stereotyped images of Chinese life; there were no depictions of gang wars, no imminent danger to themselves. “The Chinatown guides who bark on Forty-second Street had cheated them,” Wong imagines ironically (Tsiang, 2003: 65-66). The tourists are *mo no* like Pearl, Wong concludes to himself, despite the fact that as customers, tourists should always be deferred to. Here, Wong expresses the same ideological point of view held by Chinese business leaders about the economic value of their relationship with whites and the appropriate regulation of their activities and noises to avoid disturbing that relationship. In these encounters with whites, one sees Wong express a critique of white racism centered not on it as an interlocking system of exploitation and oppression, but its failure to discern the truth of authentic Chinese culture and the apparent equality of economic elites despite their racial or national origins.

In his private meetings with Pearl in his silent room behind the laundry, Wong seeks to instruct her on authentic Chinese identity. Pearl describes Wong as a “clever Chinaman,” because of his skillful negotiation of voice and silence with Americans in order to keep them as customers. Wong explains that his motives are more than just business related. He sees himself as an ambassador of all of China and Chinese business owners, but he rejects the Americanization of his identity as a “Chinaman.” In English, he says, “Me no Chinaman. Me, Chun Kou Ren—man of the Middle Kingdom” (30). It is during their fourth meeting that Wong more fully explores the audible qualities of the meaning of this identity. On this occasion, Wong tells Pearl “the whole history of China.” These several pages of oral history of China break the silence of the laundry and Wong’s usual pattern of reticence.

This oral history includes an explanation of why the story

should be related orally rather than written down. First, spoken words produce differences of dialect not fully captured in writing, differences of identity—for example, between those who speak Cantonese and those who speak Mandarin—that being Chinese in America tends to erase (71). Secondly, through the telling of this history Wong strongly identifies with the heroes of Chinese history as family members (71). A written history would make these links more tenuous and unlikely, weakening Wong’s personal affiliation with the history he reveals (Nikulin, 2010: 120-121). Thirdly, Wong explains that the telling shows a deep cultural difference between Europeans and the Chinese. Whites trust only what is written down; their knowledge of the world and the choices of action depend on writing (Tsiang, 2003: 73). Whereas knowledge gained and retained orally is more fully internalized and the result of an interactive community of story transmitters across space and time. “A Chinese by merely closing his eyes would know all,” Wong tells Pearl (73).

During the telling of the story and the theoretical explanation, Pearl discards a picture of a white movie actress and looks at herself in a small mirror. She symbolically abandons her internalized metaphoric picture of the Hollywood star she imagined she would become—“she was glad that she was a Chinese” (72). As the story winds up, she imagines Wong as a “prince” and repeatedly laughs a liberating laugh. These emergent feelings move Pearl to seek intimacy with Wong. They kiss awkwardly, and the narrator describes it as “musical” and as a conversation: “They spoke of the East. They spoke of the West” (76-77). But Wong goes too far and fondles her breasts against her wishes, objectifying her sexually. Angry, she yells that he is no different than the white boys she had fought off in the South and storms out.

The sounds associated with the interactions between Wong and Pearl alert the reader to how her mixed racial heritage, gender, sexuality and the struggle to find work critique the boundaries of dominant essentialist cultural, national, or racial identities. As Julia

H. Lee notes, she represents a critique of American racial and gender systems by virtue of her exclusion from valorized hierarchical identities and her marginalization to border regions (2005: 89-90). If one's approximation of the appearance and tones of whiteness, male identity, economic achievement and power determine the degree to which one resonates with normative ideologies in America, Pearl's irreconcilable discordant break with these ideologies, while being preserved as the book's surviving heroine, suggests both Tsiang's subversion of a traditional Marxist notion of the working-class as industrial workers and his attempts to re-imagine the dynamic possibility of transformative non-essentialist racial and national identities dialectically emergent from Pearl's transnational and multi-racial, gendered and sexualized subjectivity.¹⁶ Tsiang imagines that the transnational dimension of their kiss produces a new sound, a music that signifies the potential of alliances in those borderlands, but Wong's insecurity and groping return to his identification with normative masculinist ideologies, as represented by his aggressive sexual assault, reveals the contingency of those alliances. The scene suggests a sustained critique of the limits of normative ideologies combined with transformative political actions serve as the only means for amplifying the musical notes of a brief kiss into the symphony of a lasting relationship.

V. Sound, Power and the Collapse of Myth

If in the narrative centered on Pearl the reader hears a development in her articulations of what it means to be Chinese, we can, then, also discern how Wong's notion of Gold Mountain has been destabilized. His transformation, however, results from his interactions with both Chinese and Americans who seek to

¹⁶ On the inaccurate distinction in traditional Marxist theory between "productive" labor associated with industrial workers and the "non-productive" labor of service workers, see Marquit (2008).

exploit him. Because the laundry business keeps Wong isolated in his shop for 15–18 of his waking hours each day, he has few opportunities to enter the capitalist marketplace (Yu, 1992: 26). Such isolation made the laundry worker/owner a captive audience for traveling salespersons of sorts who brought the marketplace—both legal and criminal—to his door. Listening for the sounds in these encounters helps to amplify how Tsiang articulates the inevitable dissolution of Wong’s belief in the myth of Gold Mountain, the loss of his business, and his ultimate serene acceptance of working-class positionality.

Over the course of the story, seven people visit Wong’s shop for business other than laundry. Four of them are Chinese, and three of those people serve up a critique American racism and exploitation and offer strategies to counter them. Other than speech, their visits aren’t accompanied by the same rich sonic associations that mark the rest of the novel. The first is a coat salesperson who appeals to Wong’s knowledge and practice of Chinese customs and convinces Wong to purchase an expensive coat. “It was unfortunate being . . . Chinese in this country,” the salesperson notes. And “[n]o matter how much money you had, you could not change your face, but with money you could change your manner.” If you don’t have much money, he explains, you could put a little down and pay interest to buy a fashionable coat that would “show outsiders what you were, and what you had in your pocket, and what you had in your head” (Tsiang, 2003: 40). The solution to racism implicated in the salesperson’s pitch could be found by purchasing the right commodities that would show Wong’s true worth.

Wong’s decision to buy the coat has its historical and cultural basis in the desire for social mobility. As historian Yu notes, some Chinese laundry owners saw dressing up as a response to white racism and negative stereotypes associated with poverty. He quotes one former laundry owner as saying, “Chinese were looked down on by whites. Then if you went out dressed poorly, they looked down on you even more. So, not only on Sundays, but whenever

we went out, we always dressed up and tried to behave decently” (Yu, 1992: 29). For the price of an overcoat, Wong imagines he could both build a positive image of himself as an ambassador of China while he is in public and interacting with whites and really show Pearl, whose intellect he has already admitted he thinks so little of, his economic worth. Further, as Lee argues, “[t]he object signifies the worth of the owner, signaling the kind of false identity and alienation that a capitalist system perpetrates on its adherents” (Lee, 2005: 85). This bit of self-reinvention, a common thread of U.S. immigrant narratives of the early twentieth century, through commodity fetishism for Wong is well worth going into debt for.

After the coat salesperson an elderly vegetable peddler comes and explains his disillusionment with the Gold Mountain mythology. Instead of a sales pitch, he tells Wong (and the reader) his life story. He had arrived in the U.S. decades ago and worked the mines and built the railroads out West. He kept his queue, an indication of his intention to earn some money and return to China soon. Despite these hopes and after many years, America has failed to live up to his dreams. He spent more than he saved and never learned English or a trade, believing that he would not stay long enough to need either. “Beware, while you are still young!” he warns Wong, “America is an evil land, and once you sink in, you can never get out.” Wong feels sorry for the man and buys nearly all of his produce (Tsiang, 2003: 45-47).

The historical irony, which Tsiang intentionally and brilliantly accents here, is that the failure of the myth of the Gold Mountain for the elderly vegetable salesperson is linked to the “social invention” of the Chinese laundry that Wong believes will help him realize that same myth. In other words, because of racism, Chinese immigrants were not only unable to make their fortunes in America, but they were also forced into service occupations like laundries. And it is in this isolated laundry created by American racism that Wong imagines he will overcome the racial barriers to Gold Mountain. Even further, as the historian Siu notes, “Under the race and ethnic situation, the Chinese immigrants were driven

to make a choice, and they founded the laundry as a form of accommodation to the situation.” And because of exclusion and marginalization within American society, the laundry was seen as a means to economic independence and “a greater possibility of maintaining their cultural identity” (Siu, 1962: 429).¹⁷ While Wong may feel sympathy for the old man, the illusion of independence that causes him to hold onto his dream of Gold Mountain also disinclines him to follow the advice to resign himself to permanent residence in the United States as well as some cultural negotiations that will help him survive that life.

A third Chinese visitor is a poet who offers to work and recite poetry for food. Wong agrees, and after sharing a meal, the poet helps with some laundry. The writer delivers a few platitudes about the treatment of workers in the Soviet Union and complains about the “capitalist police.” In addition to helping Wong with some of his work, he recites a poem as partial repayment for Wong’s kindness. “To the masses,” he recites, “I blow the horn/To the crooks/I nail the thorn” While the poem uses noise to promise a revolutionary social transformation, it offers little more than a promise.¹⁸ Still enamored of dreams of Gold Mountain, Wong remains unmoved by the poet’s vocalizations, even as his hopes for realizing the myth of upward social mobility ring ever more hollow (Tsiang, 2003: 83-86).

While these three visitors serve to warn Wong about the

¹⁷ Prior to the 1870s, thousands of Chinese immigrants built the western portion of the “transcontinental railroad,” while thousands of others labored as self-employed miners throughout California and the Southwest. In both instances, they were almost completely forced out of these jobs by whites who accused them of stealing “white” or “American” jobs. By 1920, most Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants had been forced into three main occupations: laundry, restaurant, and domestic service (Takaki, 1998: 240).

¹⁸ The author appears self-conscious about the political limits of words, either written or spoken. When Pearl and Wong join the workers’ parade during the strike, the character of the writer also joins the march. “[H]e thought that since he had written so much about revolution, he had better do something about it” (Tsiang, 2003: 124).

contradictions and failings of the immigrant mythology, Tsiang juxtaposes them with three visits by white Americans who, by contrast, are threatening and exploitative. The sounds invoked by their interactions with Wong provide Tsiang the vehicle to critique American racism, economic exploitation, and the myth of Gold Mountain. The first of these is a white woman, whom the reader later discovers is pseudonymously named “Darling,” offering regular sexual services. In his responses, Wong returns to “broken” English, pretending not to understand her proposal. “By acting dumb, he had made sure of saving his dollar,” the narrator explains. Apparently, she had frequented this store before but does not realize Wong is a different man than the previous owner of the shop. “Can’t you remember me?” she asks ironically when he tries to give her the silent treatment. The woman leaves angrily, when she garners no response from Wong and supposes he simply doesn’t understand what she is proposing. “Why don’t you read a tabloid to get yourself educated! Then you wouldn’t be so dumb,” she yells, cursing as she storms out (Tsiang, 2003: 42, 44).

Tsiang’s inclusion of this ironic description of Wong’s performance of silence to avoid dealing with “Darling” has socio-historical significance. Siu links the frequency of such transactions with women for sexual services to the scarcity of Chinese women, a fact enforced by discriminatory immigration laws (Siu, 1962: 440).¹⁹ This portion of the narrative is also important, because nearly from the time Chinese immigration to the United States began in significant numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, the issue of prostitution became a central feature of anti-Chinese (and anti-immigrant) discourse. Federal authorities also used illicit sexual transactions as a basis for developing a pseudo scientific taxonomy of race, such as the 1907 Dillingham Commission’s *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, which

¹⁹ Takaki estimates that only one in five people of Chinese descent in the United States in the 1930s were women (1998: 235). Min Zhou estimates that in New York the ratio of women to men stood at one to six at the time (2001: 145).

linked prostitution to immigrant communities. Specifically, Chinese men and women were implicated—men as enslavers and women as always sexually suspect. The historical evidence suggests, however, that in San Francisco, for example, Chinese involvement in prostitution, a constant obsession of local authorities, dramatically declined by the 1870s. By the turn of the century, federal authorities and public discourse also associated prostitution with immigrant communities from Eastern Europe now considered to be among the country's top social, cultural, even racial threats (Hune, 1994: 107-108; Roediger, 2005: 3-17). At the time in New York, arrests for prostitution overwhelmingly ensnared European-originated immigrant and working-class women (Gardner, 2005: 60-69). Tsiang's inclusion of this prostitution narrative ties Wong and "Darling" to the historical process of the construction of citizenship and American identity through racial formation and discourses of sexuality.

"Darling" reappears later in the story when Wong visits a dance hall, where a man can purchase dances with a woman. The manager of the hall advertises her as "Darling," and she tells Wong as they dance that she is from the West Coast. Though the white woman's national origins are not identified, her status as a migrant sex worker implicates her in the nativist anti-immigrant narrative. Her audible presence in this novel invokes the historical reality of white racism toward Chinese immigrants, for example the violent anti-Chinese riots and boycotts led by Irish immigrant workers in California in the 1870s that forced Chinese workers out of industrial jobs and led to the exclusion laws (Saxton, 1971). Though "Darling's" potentially contingent national status and suspect sexuality gives her much in common with Wong, she voices no urgency to identify with him or to articulate a political alliance of the marginalized or exploited. In fact, she aids the owner of the dance hall in taking his money—speeding his economic downfall—using a promise of meeting him for sexual services after the hall closes. Instead, she leaves the dance hall with her white boyfriend and insults Wong with a racial slur (Tsiang, 2003:

92-96).

The sounds that accompany a second white person to visit Wong's shop further signal the trajectory of the laundry owner's decline. This person is an extortionist who demands of Wong a weekly payment in exchange for "protection." At first, Wong tries to fend off the extortionist demand by claiming he has all the protection he needs from the police, after all, as a citizen he has a right to expect such protection. The man is unconvinced, and Wong resorts to the same tactic of deploying "pidgin" to ward off the prostitute. "No savvy, me no speak English!" he says. This time it doesn't work. The man leaves, but apparently orchestrates two subsequent robberies at Wong's store. In the second incident a man enters with a gun and orders Wong to face the wall. "Although he was facing the wall, he could hear the noise of the opening of the box and the sound of the silver coins" (68-69). He hears his savings, and along with them, his dreams of social mobility disappear into the pockets of the robbers. In the end, the extortionist gets his money, and police protection for Wong against robbery never materializes.

Using the bureaucratic regulation of sound as his weapon, the third American to visit Wong is a white public health inspector who seeks to further exploit the beleaguered laundry owner. First, however, he demands a bribe from Wong to avoid citing him for violations of laws that require living quarters to be separate from the laundry. To deflect the demands of the inspector, Wong again reverts to his strategy of using "pidgin," a strategy which the white man recognizes and gets angry about. "How dare you speak to a white like this!" the inspector snarls. "You deserve to sleep in the doorway of a Bowery beerhouse. You should sleep on a bare bench in a mission hall in Chinatown." Though the inspector found Wong technically in compliance with the law, he threatened him with another violation: "This is a residential district. If you make noise, you're breaking the law!" Ultimately, the inspector forces Wong to pay \$50 and promises to return frequently (81).

Many laws like these in various cities punitively targeted

Chinese immigrants. For example, in San Francisco, the “Cubic Air Ordinance” (1870s) required a certain amount of air for each person in designated living quarters. Ostensibly a public health law, it aimed to mandate enough air and light for each person, but in reality it targeted Chinese-businesses that employed workers who shared the same living quarters. Wong’s encounter with this form of legal extortion reflects the general history of the use of the law by whites to punish Chinese immigrants in America. In 1933, by way of another nonfiction example, New York City politicians proposed a law imposing a \$25 annual fee on laundries along with a \$1,000 bond. In addition, the measure would have limited laundry ownership to U.S. citizens. The law didn’t mention Chinese laundries specifically, but, as Yu writes, the law “would have forced most of the Chinese hand laundries out of existence since they apparently could not afford the exorbitant fees and the majority of the Chinese laundrymen did not have U.S. citizenship” (Yu, 1992: 32).

The final event that decides Wong’s inevitable financial failure comes with the arrival of the seventh person to his shop, a Chinese loan shark. After the visit from the inspector, the debt on the coat, and the robbery, and after Wong foolishly spent a small fortune gambling and dancing with “Darling,” Wong desperately needed some cash to cover his bills and to buy food. So he agrees to take a loan. The following day, the loan shark, who also turns out to be the earlier overcoat salesman, returns with the loan agreement that describes the loan as a purchase of an ironing machine. Wong’s previous preferences for Chinese oral culture are dismissed in this transaction in favor of the imperatives of the market and the Western reliance on written contracts. When Wong hints that he might simply refuse to pay the loan shark, invoking legal protections against criminal usury, the loan shark replies, “For a Chinese, one’s word is one’s honor! You’ll pay.” Thinking he has the man outwitted, Wong responds, “If one’s word is one’s honor, I cannot sign this paper. I didn’t buy machine from you. I cannot tell what is not a truth.” To which, the loan shark announces, “No

tickee, no shirtee; no signature, no money.” Besides this financial leverage, the refusal to pay will result in the loss of Wong’s ironing machine, his livelihood, and probably physical harm as well. Wong signs the agreement, temporarily forestalling financial ruin, but ultimately sealing his fate and bringing to a bitter close his illusions of independence (88-89).

The ebb and flow of the noises, sounds, and voices brought by these seven visitors narrates the financial ruin of Wong Wan-Lee and the dashing of his beliefs in the myth of Gold Mountain. True to his anti-capitalist politics, Tsiang’s narrative emphasizes the role of the “free market” in extracting value and exploiting the powerless. While racial discrimination forces Wong into an isolated life in a quiet shop and provides illusions about control over his body and his labor, seeming protections both from the capitalist market and the need for assimilation, the omnipotent market brings its hustle and bustle to his doorsteps and extracts every last dollar from Wong.²⁰ When his debt to the loan shark comes due, he has no money to repay him or the inspector’s bribe, the debt for the coat, or his other bills. He is forced to close the laundry and return to restaurant work. The salespersons, hucksters, politicians and bureaucrats—both white and Chinese—along with the white laundry owners force Wong out of business; the dream of Gold Mountain ends. “Poor Wong,” the narrator laments, “who had made no ten thousand fortunes, was a failure; but his cousin Wong Lung had made a million and had become the hero of *The Good Earth*—Horatio Alger!” (121). Despite his citizenship, Chinese origins mark Wong as permanently excluded from both normative American identities and the realization of myths of social mobility. Success stories are the stuff of fiction.²¹

²⁰ Siu argues that Chinese laundry owners saw the enforced isolation of their occupation as giving them “a greater opportunity to retain their cultural identity” (1962: 429). Siu’s article reveals, however, that rather than strictly defined boundaries between Chinese and American cultural identities, they were porous, making cultural interactions and exchanges inevitable.

²¹ My argument here converges in important ways with Lee’s who suggests that the

VI. Working-Class Noises and Liberation

The final chapters up to the last are relatively silent, advancing rapidly through Wong's downward mobility and Pearl's employment troubles. The story returns to Pearl who has stopped laughing and has become less talkative (105). She becomes more thoughtful and ruminates on Wong's treatment of her, concluding it was his way to make her feel inferior. She found a job as a waiter but faces discrimination from her Chinese employer because of her African American heritage. Wong also turns to restaurant work as a bus boy—ironically where he had started his pursuit of the myth of Gold Mountain—to make ends meet.

After several quiet chapters, the final chapter erupts in noise. In fact, competing noises echo the clashing interests in class struggle. The restaurant workers, tired of exploitation and racial discrimination organize a union and go on strike. (In relating the events of the strike, the narrator also celebrates the real-life emergence of the Chinese Hand Laundry Associations—union of laundry owners—and the international struggle of the Chinese against Japanese imperialism.) The strike protest is celebrated in a song: “The workers in the other cafeterias joined: /The white, the yellow, and the black, /The ones between yellow and black, /The ones between yellow and white, /And the ones between white and black.” The song provides a political prescription for a reversal of hegemonic racial ideas by calling for an occupation of the borderlands that are between and which overlap dominant and oppressive demarcations of racial identity. Rigid categories constructed under white supremacy that divide the oppressed and

central feature of Wong's existence is exploitation within a racialized capitalist class structure conditioned by its globalizing features. She emphasizes how race works in conjunction with capitalism to turn workers like Wong into servants, placing limits on their social mobility, and using them as a foundation for the profit motive that makes myths of “Gold Mountain” possible for a select few (Lee, 2005: 84).

exploited are dismissed by “the song that knows nothing of white, yellow, or black” (124).²² It identifies the multiracial, hybrid “pidgin” speakers as a revolutionary vanguard, a political force with liberation on its metaphorical lips. The tumult of the singing protesters contrasts sharply with the police—the armed representatives of coercive state authority patrolling and regulating the ideological boundary lines of identity, difference, and class power—barking to the protesters to stay in columns of two or face arrest. “Keep moving,” they yell (125). Then a shot rings out, and Wong is struck. He screams and drops to the concrete unconscious. The wail of an ambulance siren approaches. Wong’s blood dramatically stains Pearl’s dress.

In his final moments he apparently makes amends with her and vocalizes his hope in China as a savior of the world from exploitation. His final words, the closing words of the novel, are shouted as a poem that rejects the illusions of Gold Mountain and asserts the potential realities of revolutionary China, one no longer confined within fixed national or political borders, but unbounded within a transnational community whose aim is human liberation.

I have no ten thousand fortunes
 But I’ll have all of China!
 Yes,
 Oh, yes,
 Red
 Or no red,
 China
 Unite!
 Woe to her foe—
 Mikado!
 Up, China now stands,
 And China has hands—

²² As Yu notes, left-leaning laundry association leaders frequently sought interracial political and cultural alliances, especially with African Americans. For example, further implicating sound in their social movement, launderers invited African American celebrity and left-leaning activist Paul Robeson to sing at their rallies (Yu, 1992: 121).

Eight
 Hundred
 Million
 Hands! (127-128)

The foreshadowing of this final scene can be found in the dream sequence described in the novel's opening pages and alluded to earlier in this essay (Lee, 2005: 90). In that dream, Wong had been unable to shout for help against demons that plague him. In the nighttime silence of his living quarters behind his shop, "breath would not come" (Tsiang, 2003: 21). In the final death sequence, however, on a noisy street in New York with shouting, striking workers, angry cops, gunfire, a panicked crowd, the sounds of traffic and an ambulance siren, Wong finds his voice. His final utterance, in sharp contrast to his first in "pidgin," appeals to an imagined resistant Chinese community, and is declaimed in the arms of the sexualized Black Asian American woman worker in the midst of a multi-racial worker's rebellion. The poem, which evokes a nationalist sentiment, is uttered on the streets of New York in the arms of a woman who stands as a critique of class and racial exploitation. The confluence of these ideologies and material realities suggests Tsiang sought to break with narrowly defining identities like nationalism or racial identity in favor of a larger, global movement of workers against colonialism, racism, and class oppression.²³ One narrative of Wong's isolation and exploitation closes with his death and the opening of a new discordant, loud, hopeful one that transcends borders and prescriptive identities.

²³ These themes are dominant in Tsiang's poetry, especially his wonderful "Chinaman, Laundryman" (1996a: 31-34).

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非法噪音：蔣希曾《出番記》中改變的聲音

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摘要

本文研究聲音在蔣希曾1937年作品《出番記》中所扮演的角色。聲音，以及其辯證對偶——噤聲，在此作品中創造了一個「聲音地景」，可於其中勾勒出身分、群體、政治派系、壓迫與抵抗的認知地圖。蔣希曾對於聲音的運用，為文本增添了新的聽覺層面，這是習於西方閱讀模式的讀者所常忽略的。本文檢視蔣希曾如何在被強迫的沈默中敘事，強調中華文化中口語的價值與限制。在國際主義勞動階級運動一片追求解放，操控種族、族裔、國家與語言分歧之際，這些限制反而激發蔣希曾追尋新的旋律與節奏。

關鍵詞：文學、華裔美國人、蔣希曾、聲音