

Miss Chinatown USA

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Abstract

The research takes Miss Chinatown USA, a nation-wide diasporic Chinese beauty contest in America in its focus. Adopting a combined historical and ethnographic method, it discusses how the ideal of Miss Chinatown evolved, and what role does it play in contemporary Chinese America. The research discusses how the ideal represented by the queen reflects the contested question of belonging in the Chinese-American context was framed by macro politics, negotiated by the diasporic community, and lived individually by the contestants through the course of the past sixty years.

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Introduction

The research takes Miss Chinatown USA, a nation-wide diasporic Chinese beauty contest in America in its focus. Miss Chinatown USA is one of the dozen diasporic Chinese beauty pageants organized across the globe. The aim of all beauty pageants is to choose a queen, who comes to represent a set of values both symbolically and physically. Given that the queen is a flesh and blood human being, she inevitably embodies race, class and gender, thus the ideal she represents inevitably lies at a particular axis of these categories. Diasporic beauty pageants offer an even more exciting site since they put the question of contested belongings into the spot light and require contestants to showcase the double-anchoredness of their presumed ethnic and national identities. What makes the case of Miss Chinatown USA profoundly distinct from other diasporic beauty pageant is that it took its recent form in 1958, which makes it the oldest continuous contest of its sort, already assuming the status of a tradition. Therefore, Miss Chinatown USA offers a fascinating site to study how the question of belonging in the Chinese-American context was framed by macro politics, negotiated by the diasporic community, and lived individually by the contestants through the course of the past sixty years. The themes outlined here provide the structure of the thesis. Each chapter contains a separate literature review in order to support the argument presented in the chapter and to avoid destructing attention from each other. For similar reasons each chapter has a separate, albeit intertwining conclusion as well.¹

The first chapter takes up the ambitious task of analyzing how the strikingly unchanging ideal of Miss Chinatown evolved through an intersectional historical overview of Chinese

¹ I am aware that this is not the official form a thesis should take. However, I decided to take up with this uncommon style of structuring because I believe it helped me to elaborate more on the individual chapters' arguments. My hope with communicating the connections between separate chapters' conclusions throughout the text – instead of drawing one general conclusion – was to highlight the ways in which the different levels of analyses dynamically shape each other.

American immigration, providing a macro framework for the subsequent analysis. The meso level, discussed in the second chapter will navigate us to contemporary San Francisco Chinatown and discuss what is the role of the pageant in the “community” it seeks to represents, and what is the “community” that is being produced through the organization and production. This chapter will thus outline the framework in which individual identities are constructed, discussed in the third chapter. My aim with the structuring of the thesis was to point to the existence of multi-layered frameworks which significantly restrict individual and communal identifications; while simultaneously highlight that these identifications are not fully determined, and individuals and groups seek their ways to negotiate and finally redraw the restrictions imposed on them. Thus, I hope to contribute to a more complex understanding of diasporic identity formations with strong implications to the fields of ethnic and racial studies. Albeit the subject of the case study seems to be a very peculiar creature, I believe the story it tells has significant implications to all of us, regarding how we see ourselves and each other in our social lives.

Methods

The thesis will attempt to deliver answers to the following questions: What is the ideal the queen embodies? How did that ideal evolved? How is it performed on stage? Why is it important for the “community” to perform this almost unchanging ideal year after year? Why do participants enter year after year and how does this event influence her identities? In order to provide answers for all these questions, I will adopt a combined methodology of history and ethnography.

The historical body of the thesis, relying on secondary sources provided by Chinese American historians will attempt to outline the sociohistorical particularities in which the model minority

image, as a desirable and publicly acknowledged ideal evolved, setting out the macro structural framework in which this specific intersection of race, class, gender and citizenship become a meaningful category. The intersectional historical account attempts to outline the framework in which the meaning of “Chinese” has been constructed in America. It also provides a background to organizational structure of Chinatown. Both these aspects are crucial to have a complete understanding of Miss Chinatown USA 2018.

A mixed ethnographic approach is adopted for both the meso and micro level for the analysis. I conducted field work for an intense period of ten days in San Francisco’s Chinatown (02. 18 – 02. 28, 2018) scheduling the pageant night in the middle (02. 22). This provided me with the opportunity to observe the preparations that lead up to the event as well as to observe the immediate reactions afterwards. Apart from attending to the pageant, I participated in various events connected to the pageant, such as a press conference, the pageant “after party,” and a lunch thrown by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce for former queens. These sites of participant observations were complemented with conducting four semi-structured interviews with CCC members, volunteers, and other staff members in order to gather data for the meso level of analysis. Complementing the first hand ethnographic material I also used official publications such as the pageant booklet, the pageant’s website and the entry criteria. This part of the analysis is concerned with the question of “community,” and attempts to answer what the community at first hand is, as well as traces the dynamics through which it is produced in relation to the pageant.

The micro level of the analysis focuses on individual identifications, for which semi-structured interviews seemed to be the best option. This section of the analysis looks at why individual contestants entered the pageant, how they sensed and reacted to the real and assumed expectations of the contest, and how this experience shaped their perceptions of their selves. To have more retrospective experiences I conducted five interviews with former contestants

including Miss Chinatown USA 1992 complementing the four interviews I was able to conduct with this year's contestants. Albeit former contestant were exclusively titleholders, I tried to diversify my sample with having contestants from this year, who did not earn a title. I interviewed three contestants, who did not make it into the court and one with the queen of 2018. All interviews were conducted during the week after the pageant, many of them via skype, since most of them flew back home right after the pageant. The interviews lasted for an average of fifty minutes, providing us with enough time to gain confidence in each other, learn each other's language and go into more detail with the more important themes. To complete these private and anonymous accounts, I also surveyed contestants' public articulations on social media sites (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). Appendix 2. contains all practical information about the interviews.

On a personal note - In quest of a community

When I arrived at San Francisco's Chinatown I knew that I had to look for a *community*, even if I was raised on Brubaker and Abu-Lughod because I knew that Miss Chinatown is a "community event." As I wandered across the streets of Chinatown I saw groups of people gathering on public squares, playing mahjong and exchanging gossips, which completely sufficed my expectations towards a Chinatown community, as I imagined it. After a few encounters, judging from the looks of complete incomprehension, I learned that the people on the streets of Chinatown were not the target audience of the event. As a gesture of friendliness they took a look at the pageant brochure I waved at them, said a few words about the girls, but it was apparent that they could not care less.

So, I tried to think of another way of defining a Chinatown community, and I went into shops and restaurants in Chinatown, engaging in a conversation while taking the service they sought to provide. Here, I got more concrete arguments for their lack of interest, as a lady in a shop rejected my question about Miss Chinatown with "I am not interested in politics." So, I

had to come to the conclusion that the community of Chinatown, contrary to my assumptions was not the people who lived and worked there, which was reassured when I finally entered the Herbst Theater. While watching the busy preparations and excited people running up and down the hall, I realized that these are not the faces I could see in Chinatown. They clearly represented another stratum of society, a lot more affluent one.

I only came to understand what “community” meant in this context well after my research was over. Trying to arrange the hundred pieces of the puzzle I collected through this intensive period, from researching the panel of judges and sponsors to learning how contestants entered the pageant I realized that when they say community, they mean the networks of people – the chambers, associations and organizations and dance schools and all other schools – that are interlocked with each other to form the fabric of the “tightly knit community” the pageant is organized for.

Theoretical Frame and methodology

The Social Theater of Miss Chinatown – Ritual, performance

As Miss Chinatown USA took place on the stage of the illustrious Herbst Theater of San Francisco, the event naturally lends itself to be read as a performance. The fact that the event happens on a stage is hardly ignorable. As performance studies Richard Schechner points out, the stage functions as a boundary between reality and pretention, which informs the audience that the “social and personal worlds enacted are not those of the actors, but those of the characters.”² What makes the Miss Chinatown pageant particularly interesting is that its stage is supposed to stand for enacting true, authentic performances instead of “pretention”. The

² Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2002), 43.

seemingly contradictory expectations towards the performance derive from its function as a “community event”. Enactments of this kind should demand a somewhat different understanding. Now I provide a brief theoretical review of the concepts I intend to apply for my analysis on MCU as a performance of a public ritual.

The pageant’s self-definition as a “community event,” makes it necessary to discuss the relation between performance and community formation. I identify three levels on which the performance relates to the community: 1) organizing and producing the show have brought together otherwise unrelated people, therefore it served to forge a community. 2) During the event, the norms and values of that community have been defined. 3) As contestants ritually enacted these values and norms, they simultaneously validated and solidified the proposed norms, while, through reciting these values and norms, they individually identified with them. The success of individual performances defines the success of the collective assertion of Chinese Americanness. Deliberate community formation through the event does not only serve to foster feelings of belonging or specific identifications, but also to establish and solidify a network, through which social capital can circulate. The presence of a wide range of mainstream public offices and ethnic associations (from Chinese dance clubs to other cities Citizenship Alliances and Chambers of Commerce to commercial enterprises) paint a portray of a densely interconnected network, making the event a prime site for social capital accumulation.

The sociology of performance, more precisely the performance of rituals and its power both to create and sustain “social solidarity” was first recognized by Durkheim within his broader body of work on religion *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. This double effect – creation and maintenance – carried out by rituals caused ambiguity considering the function of and thus the intention behind rituals. The first sociologist, who turned his attention

to the theatrical dynamics of ritual was van Gennep³, whose insight has been developed to a fully-fledged theory by V. Turner.⁴ In their theory, life is composed of a succession of passages from one social role to another, where each passing is carried out through a ritual. The three phases of such rituals identified by van Gennep – pre-liminal, liminal, post-liminal – remain unchanged in Turner’s theory, but he shifts his focus to the middle stage, liminality. Turner defines liminal entities as individuals, who are is “betwixt and between” social categories or personal identities as follows:

Liminal entities [...] behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new stations in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.⁵

In his book, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors* Turner further elaborates on ritual processes by completing it with his social drama theory⁶ that shows significant similarities with Goffman’s dramaturgical conception of the social world as theater.⁷ The social drama theory’s main argument is that similar ritual passages occur on a larger societal scale as well, where the phases are defined as: breach, crisis, redressive action, concluding with either reintegration or the recognition of irreparable schism. In this case, it is not an individual who is under transformation, but an entire “disturbed social group.”

The concept of liminal entities and its extension to liminal groups provide the basis of the present analysis that proposes the Chinese in America to be conceived as liminal entities, a “disturbed social group” between (both) China(s) and America. Furthermore, “coming of age”

³ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960).

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Transaction Publishers, 1995).

⁵ Turner, 95.

⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Cornell University Press, 1975), 38–41.

⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Universe of Edinburgh, 1956).

and “becoming women” were recurring discourses throughout the event promoted by staff, MCs and contestants as well. Therefore, I will apply the notion of liminality both to the discourse on ethnicity-citizenship – as a group, and gender – as individuals. This coupling of individual passages with communal passages forms the core of the conceptualization of the pageant. I apply Turner’s phases to my case as follows: breach – being Chinese in America, crisis - exclusion from the society; redressive action –negotiating norms; concerning the last stage, my case is profoundly ambiguous, it lies somewhere between the two options. The symbolic crowning of the Chinese queen of America can be interpreted both ways: schism – claiming sovereignty within America; reintegration – model minority as part of the “American family”. The pageant, with its sixty-year-old tradition can be understood as a ritual enactment for redressing the stigma of perpetual foreignness with an innate ambiguity concerning the future.

Albeit the applicability of Turner’s theory has received severe criticism blaming it with oversimplification and idealism,⁸ its insight on the fluid relationship between aesthetic and social processes is undoubtedly useful. The social drama theory explains how aesthetic and social processes are being mutually constitutive, as they inform and shape each other. This model requires each social drama and aesthetic drama (or other performance) to be understood in its specific cultural and historical circumstances.⁹ By pointing to the mutually constitutive nature of aesthetic and social processes, it provides a theoretical link for analyzing the sociological connotations deriving from the aesthetics of the pageant.

Thus, the pageant is understood as a theater of social life, particularly furnished to serve the ritual of performing Chinese Americanness. It is the theater in which contestants perform their selves. Goffman’s theory about the presentation of the self draws attention to the

⁸ For a complex critique of Turner’s work see: Graham St John, *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (Berghahn Books, 2008), 11–15.

⁹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 76.

“interaction order”, where self-image meets public image. The public image is how others see us, while the self-image is self-explanatory: how we see ourselves. However, the latter is heavily influenced by the former, as, according to Goffman, we adjust our presentations to the assumed expectations towards ourselves.¹⁰ Goffman introduces the notion of sign vehicles, through which we voluntarily and involuntarily give or give off signs. There are “fixed sign vehicles,” which constantly give off signs without our deliberate contribution, these all belong to the corporeality of our bodies, such as race, sex and age.¹¹ Albeit in his latter work Goffman dealt in detail with the undesirable fixed signs, the “stigmas”, he mostly discussed physical deformations and not the formerly mentioned three categories, despite their indisputable social significance.¹² Our race, sex and age are signs to our surroundings, endowed with specific meanings and expectations in particular places and times. Although we do not have control over the meanings we unwillingly and sometimes unknowingly convey through these signs, they become significant measures in judging our presentations, and the expectations directed at them influence our perceptions about the frame of our presentations even if we are not aware.

Implicit in the aforementioned theories, the power structures governing the dynamics of performativity were not theorized until the 90s. Judith Butler, dealing first and foremost with gender points to the matrixes of power, both internal and external to individual subjects that enable the meanings attributed to fixed signs to become unquestioned realities through their constant recitation. Butler argues that gender identity is performed and constituted in the process of doing, while also underlines the constraints of expectations and pre-existing structural factors.¹³ Therefore, her theory provides an intersection between Durkheim’s notion of ritual’s power to create and Goffman’s presentation of the self. She shifts her focus to the

¹⁰ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity* (SAGE, 2008), 61.

¹¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 14–15.

¹² Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Penguin, 1963).

¹³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Psychology Press, 1993).

dark side of performing: the pre-existing structural factors and expectations that are produced by power regimes, hegemonies in other words. As Woronov sharply puts it: performative acts "are part of regulatory practices that produce social categories and norms of membership.... [The activities] are sites where hegemonic definitions of the collective body relate to multiple injunctions of individual bodies."¹⁴

The question arises, who is the power behind defining expectations considering young Chinese American women of the pageant? I argue that there is a distinct diaspora truth regime governed by the ruling class of the diaspora, the leaders of interlocked organizations what I call the "Chinatown establishment", who functionally define the beauty pageant as a site for localizing disciplinable subjects.¹⁵ The expectation towards the contestants is summarized by the model minority discourse, emphasizing the capitalist values of hard work, individual merit, and competition. From this discourse I would like to draw attention to the class element implicit in it. The significance of performing an upwardly mobile middle class – showcasing the success of the Chinese in America – is explicit throughout the staging of the event and the entire spectacle. Goffman classified class as a transitory sign vehicle, which can be consciously performed by acquiring the "proper sign-equipment", an effective strategy for upward mobility. As already discussed, race and gender fixed sign vehicles – with the caveat that their meaning is still open to some extent to change and narration – and class can be ultimately performed with the help of other mobile sign vehicles such as dress and poise. As Mignonette Chiu argues in her analysis of Miss New York Chinese that one of the stated goals of MNYC is to "improve the self-presentation skills of the contestants; in other words, train them to behave within the

¹⁴ Woronov in Mignonette Chiu, "Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests: Ethnic Chinese Beauty Pageants and a Global Chinese" (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, 2010), 81, <http://gradworks.umi.com/34/20/3420823.html>.

¹⁵ This argument was inspired by Ong and Nonini's work on modern Chinese transnationalism conceived as a "third culture." They identify three power and truth regimes diaspora Chinese are subjected to – the Chinese family, the capitalist workplace and the nation-state – and analyze how each regime disciplines persons under its control in different ways "to form acceptable and normal subjectivities"

Aihwa Ong and Donald Macon Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23, <http://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203426661>.

boundaries of the numerously intersecting "fine lines" that distinguish the upper from the lower class."¹⁶ Adopting a Goffmanian wording, through the pageant the contestants learn the know-how of the 'proper sign-equipment' of what Chiu calls the capitalist elite, but I termed Chinatown establishment to reveal the sociocultural and historical particularities that make this class distinct from the general "capitalist elite". One part of this sign-equipment is fashion that plays a prominent role throughout the beauty pageant. According to Merleau-Ponty, the human body is a meaning-creating subject and a medium of culture, which can be further played out by clothing. "Clothing reveals personal ambitions, social aspirations, and the prevailing Zeitgeist."¹⁷ Thus, fashion will be an important aspect for the upcoming analysis.

Another fruitful aspect of Butler's notion on gender as a performative act is that it is easily transmittable to all other social constructs classified as fixed signs, such as race and ethnicity, as well as class. All of these constructs are explicitly performed on the stage of Miss Chinatown. Scholars such as John Clammer and Jon McKenzie argue that ethnicity, "one of the most obviously 'embodied' aspects of identity" is a prime example for a notion "that has to be acted out and constantly reproduced in everyday life."¹⁸ Even though this argument holds particularly true to asserted identities – instead of assigned ones, a distinction between ethnicity and race - dress, hairstyles, postures, accents, dance forms, and other cultural devices can be utilized to draw attention to, contest or deny ascribed – racial – identities as well. The confusion in the previous sentence points to the need to discuss what race and ethnicity are as sociological categories, especially since they will play a crucial role in the analysis.

¹⁶ Chiu, "Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests," 247.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty in Chiu, 191.

¹⁸ John Clammer, "Performing Ethnicity: Performance, Gender, Body and Belief in the Construction and Signalling of Identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 13 (October 21, 2015): 2162, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1045305>.

Race and ethnicity

Race, ethnicity and nationality are one of the most often used, yet notoriously un(der)defined categories of social sciences, causing great confusion in both academic and popular circles. According to a casual analytical distinction, it is the ‘phenomic’ that distinguishes race from ‘ethnicity,’ that is understood as ‘culture,’ and the ‘national,’ that means ‘peoplehood’ in this correlation.¹⁹ According to Jenkins, the notion of ethnicity “has obligingly stepped into the gap”²⁰ generated by the general disappointment with notions of ‘race’ after the Second World War. Ethnicity earned a place in popular discourse as “a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant ‘WASP’ group.”²¹ The original intention in adopting this new term was clearly to shift the analytical center of gravity from the innate biological and primordial connotations carried by race, towards a discourse of voluntarism and transactionality, promised by ethnicity. The extent to which this has reached popular discourse is highly doubtful, if we consider that “the common view among Americans is that ethnicity is a primordial, inherited characteristic, like hair color,”²² in this sense synonymous with race. Whether social science scholarship was more successful is also debatable, as I will argue in the next section.

The underlying logic of this mostly analytical distinction is the direction of the definition or identification: categories such as race are defined by others, externally; while ethnicities, or groups are thought to be internally defined. The latter suggests individualistic voluntarism in ethnic identifications while the first deprive individuals of any agency. Both American and European scholarship of ethnicity, identified respectively by Chicago sociologist

¹⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 248.

²⁰ Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 2008, 10.

²¹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, 3rd ed, Anthropology, Culture, and Society (London ; New York : New York: Pluto Press ; Distributed in the United States of America exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

²² Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (University of California Press, 1990), 17.

Robert E. Park²³ and Fredrik Barth,²⁴ based themselves on studying phenotypically identical groups. The lack of immutable and readily identifiable visible difference in these studies lead to the conceptualization of ethnicity, that, as opposed to race, was come to seen as a form of internally defined self-identification, voluntarily chosen. For Park, the ethnicity model served to explain the successful incorporation of tremendous waves of non- English, non- Protestant, European immigrants, as well as served to downplay conscious engagement with US racial politics.²⁵ Mary C. Waters also provides an insight to the freedom of choices of white ethnics in the USA enjoy in taking up or neglecting their ethnic identities under different circumstances. However, she also notes that being defined in racial terms restrains the freedom of choices significantly.²⁶

Barth on the other side of the Atlantic made inestimable contribution in the sense of shifting “the analytical center of gravity away from this or that settled, bounded group – or ‘society’ – [...] towards complex universes of relationships between groups and their members.”

²⁷ By purposely neglecting the substance of ethnic identification (the “cultural stuff,” as he called it) he described ethnicity as transactional in its nature, with an additional emphasis on the perceptions and purposive decision-making of social actors. The emphasis on the transactional nature of ethnic identifications implies a dialectical relationship between internal and external definitions as it “presuppose[s] both an audience, without whom they make no sense, and an externally derived framework of meaning.”²⁸ However, focusing on phenotypically identical groups, he did not see interactionalist as contradicting to the much-emphasized voluntariness in identifications. If one is to take seriously the implications

²³ Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture* (Arno Press, 1974).

²⁴ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Waveland Press, 1969).

²⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 26.

²⁶ Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (University of California Press, 1990).

²⁷ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 12.

²⁸ Richard Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 2 (April 1994): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1994.9993821>.

suggested by Barth, as Jenkins did, it is inevitable to come to the conclusion that ethnic identity, personal or social, is created “in the meeting of internal and external definition that identity,” through the simultaneous process of defining and being defined, therefore “in the complexity of day-to-day social life, each is chronically implicated in the other.”²⁹

When Eriksen revised his former standpoint, that race is merely “a subset of ethnic variation where the physical appearance of different groups or categories is brought to bear on intergroup relations,” he raised an important question relating to my argument: “Ethnicity can arguably exist without accompanying notions of race, as witnessed among people of European descent in the USA (...), but could it equally well be said that race can exist without ethnicity?”³⁰ I will revisit this question in the analysis, arguing that race severely limits one’s “ethnic options”³¹ in two ways. On the one hand, being racially categorized firmly necessitates opting *in* the presumed ancestors’ ethnicity, while it makes pretty much impossible or painful to opt *out*. On the other hand, it also serves as a barrier against opting in an ethnicity that is coupled with another race.³²

Several scholars pointed out the ways scholarship employs the notions of ethnicity³³, often time used analogously with the notion of culture,³⁴ and coupled with an isomorphism with space,³⁵ simultaneously serve to freeze differences and to construct coherent, homogenous,

²⁹ Richard Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1994.9993821>.

³⁰ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 8.

³¹ Waters, *Ethnic Options*, 1990.

³² In his latest book, Brubaker provides an interesting analogy between race and gender, and point to how differently they operate in real social life. While opting out from a gender to another that biologically belongs to the sex has become somewhat accepted socially, opting out from a race into another is still beyond the boundaries of human imagination.

Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

³³ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Nina Glick Schiller, Ayşe Çağlar, and Thaddeus Guldbrandsen, “Beyond the Ethnic Lens: Locality, Globality, and Born-Again Incorporation,” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 4 (November 2006): 612–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2006.33.4.612>.

³⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture,” *The Cultural Geography Reader*, March 3, 2008, 62–71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203931950-13>.

³⁵ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6–23.

self-contained and bounded entities. Anthropology and ethnography are highly charged with contributing to “the construction and reconstruction [of] coherent cultural others and interpreting selves, which in turn “contributes to the perception of communities as bounded and discrete.”³⁶ In this thesis, I will follow a strategy proposed by Brubaker in order to avoid “groupism” combined with Caglar and Glick Schiller’s approach who argue against research “through the ethnic lens.” Brubaker argues for a conceptualization of race, ethnicity and nation not as “substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals” but rather as relational, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated processes. A conceptualization based on verbs instead of nouns.³⁷ Thereby he suggests shifting the analytical unit of analysis from a readily identified and presumably coherent groups to the events when groupness happens.³⁸ In a similar vein Caglar and Glick Schiller argue for a shift of focus on “the modes of incorporation,” which they describe as an effective way to circumvent the “ethnic lens” that is prevalent in most migration studies. My case study, Miss Chinatown USA is a prime site for analyzing groupness, as an event, and its interconnectedness with Chinese diaspora organization suggests that it is a prime site for incorporation as well.

Embodied Intersectionality

A good illustration of challenging the unwritten norms of Miss Chinatown is provided by Chinese American artist Kristina Wong, who performed a “guerilla theater character,” Fannie Wong, former Miss Chinatown USA 2nd runner up, who made her fame by being forcibly removed by security from official Miss Chinatown events. Fannie wears the qipao, the crown, and the sash, unmistakably marking her Miss Chinatown, but her “class” and “poise”³⁹ is

³⁶ Clifford 1988b: 112 in Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture,” 471.

³⁷ Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 11.

³⁸ Brubaker, 12.

³⁹ Kristina Wong herself defined these characteristics. <http://kristinawong.com/about/fannie-wong/>

breaking all the rules defining a real Miss Chinatown. She drinks Jack Daniels, constantly curses, smokes an enormous cigar and is overtly predatory and vulgar with males. Albeit it is not stated anywhere that these characteristics make one illegible to hold the title, her performance and its receptions points to the expectations Chinese American women are subjected to.

As the previous illustration shows, adopting an intersectional perspective is crucial for an appropriate understanding of Miss Chinatown. Although the notion of intersectionality has moved “from oppression to diversity” as it started to be employed to describe “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities”⁴⁰ I find the original proposal by Cernshaw of describing “layered systems of oppressions” by pointing to the “cumulating features of discrimination and social exclusion (...) interwoven in various ways” more useful for this case study.⁴¹ McCall identifies three intersectional approaches defined based on their relation to the nature of the categories they work with. The second approach is the “intracategorical” that lies in the middle of “the continuum between the first approach, which rejects categories, and the third approach, which uses them strategically.”⁴² Instead, it focuses on “particular groups at neglected points of intersection.”

The Miss Chinatown contestants are not neglected at all, on the contrary, their particular group is put in the center of attention at a highly enhanced and very specific intersection. This particular intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and class is what defines the ideal represented by Miss Chinatown USA. I hope that the analysis of this embraced intersection also invites the reality of those who fall outside of it.

⁴⁰ Stephanie A. Shields, “Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective,” *Sex Roles* 59, no. 5–6 (September 1, 2008): 301–11, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8>.

⁴¹ Bürkner in Kinga Goodwin, “Class, Gender and Ethnicity - Performance Amongst Polish Women in the United Kingdom and New Zealand/Aotearoa: An International Perspective” (UCL School of Slavonic & East European Studies, 2016), 26.

⁴² Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (March 2005): 1773, <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.

History

Introduction: Starting from a scratch

To understand how the ideal that Miss Chinatown 2018 represent evolved, a historical perspective is indispensable. The ethnic, racial, gender and class dimensions of this ideal are deeply rooted in the pageant's own history of sixty years which is embedded in the two and a half century long history of Chinese immigration to America. In this chapter, I will trace the history of Chinese immigrant women to San Francisco, beginning with the late nineteenth century and point to the particular events which fundamentally shaped the ideal of Miss Chinatown. From exploring the various legal and popular ways of their exclusion and the subsequent responses of the community, I will arrive to the Cold war era and discuss the specific circumstances when Miss Chinatown beauty pageants have gotten underway and started to bloom. Understanding the history of severe discrimination Chinese people faced in the first half of the twentieth century is crucial to understand why diasporic Chinese beauty pageants came into being by choosing an all-American way for proving their belonging; and also explains how performing American citizenship became a central theme for the first decade's pageants.

A focus on the intersectional dimensions of discrimination that subsumed significant class and gender elements reveals the deliberation behind the pageant's inception and explains how the ideal of Miss Chinatown was constructed to serve that end. This historical chapter also provides an outline for the macro structure of US domestic racial politics and foreign policy that greatly influenced if not outright determined the ways Chinese could identify themselves. The memories of the Exclusion Era are carefully preserved and nurtured by the family associations that were conceived during this period. As these associations still foster strong connections with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the organizer of the pageant, the memory of exclusion is where "the transactional ebb-and flow of the here-and-now" in which Chinese

American's construct their identities are anchored. The history discussed in this chapter serves as a fascinating example of how the notions of race, ethnicity and citizenship dynamically interact with each other, becoming entangled in one era and decoupled in the other. Moreover, the chapter also shows how these notions overwrite and strengthen each other through these dynamic processes of constant rearrangement in practice.

The themes outlined above – the classed and gendered immigration history of Chinese during the Exclusion Era; the evolving organizational structure of the Chinese “community”⁴³ in response the Exclusion which later became the “establishment of Chinatown;” and the history of Miss Chinatown beauty pageants during the Cold War– define the structure and subchapters of this section. I will mostly rely on secondary sources provided by the latest wave of literature on the history of Chinese women by Chinese American scholars. This literature focuses on the legal barriers that hindered the migration of Chinese women, thereby successfully combatting the previously prevalent stereotypes corroborated by scholarship that saw Chinese immigrant women in the late 19th-early 20th century exclusively as prostitutes.

A historiography of Chinese women's history

The shortage of Chinese immigrant women in the US was so conspicuous since the beginning of the twentieth century that the earliest historical and sociological studies of American Chinatowns paid special attention and tried to explain the significant gender imbalance in the community. George A. Pepper⁴⁴ performed a thorough analysis of these early accounts, in which

⁴³ As I argued earlier, Chinese Americans do not form a community per se, but there are actors who intend to forge one out of them. These actors, sometimes referred as ‘ethnic leaders’ are the networks of diasporic Chinese organizations and associations, embodied by their heads. When I use the term community (hereafter without scare quotes) I mean these networks and their nodes. I use the term ‘leader,’ as short for associational and organizational leaders, especially those in interlocking positions (e.g. be in the leadership of several different association)

⁴⁴ George Anthony Pepper, “From Under the Sojourner's Shadow: A Historiographical Study of Chinese Female Immigration to America, 1852-1882,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 1992, 41–67.

he pointed out how scholarly work served to confirm the widespread anti-Chinese sentiments in the early twentieth century US through their general and uncritical acceptance of unfounded beliefs. The early accounts traced back the shortage of Chinese women exclusively to the traditional Chinese family structure, and the sojourner mentality of male Chinese migrants.⁴⁵ By ignoring the legal barriers and deep and wide spread public hostility as factors that hindered the immigration of Chinese women, this body of literature have effectively contributed to the popular view of the time, namely that only prostitutes, second wives or concubines of merchants journeyed from China to America in the years before exclusion, as family responsibilities kept the moral women at home.

As such, literature up until the '70's, but more so until the '90's, focused on the migration of Chinese women to the US with the presumption that Chinese women migrated only if they were prostitutes. This selective perception of women migration is not unique to the Chinese American case but is characteristic of a vast body of migration literature. Both Schrover⁴⁶ and Sinke⁴⁷ point it out that as prostitution and trafficking is more conspicuous and sensational than the migration of ordinary women. By emphasizing how important the monitoring of female migrants' morality has always been (as opposed to man), Schrover points out that morality has been frequently cited as ground for deportation or exclusion. Institutionalizing morality in immigration control and practice reflects how ubiquitous the convictions about migrant prostitution are, and also serves as legitimation for the nation state to protect its morality and health from contamination. Legal restrictions and their enforcement in the case of Chinese women migrants to the US can be used as an exemplary case study, as

⁴⁵ Peffer identified to the work of Mary Coolidge, "Chinese Immigration," 1909, as the trend setting article for the rest of the century. As Coolidge uncritically relied on local, state, and federal reports on the "Chinese issue," sought statistical verification from immigration and census data on the Chinese. The uncritical acceptance of these data sets as objective is misleading as they are deeply imbued by anti-Chinese bias of the time and mostly served as evidence, legitimation and defense for the exclusionary laws. Peffer, 42, 43.)

⁴⁶ Marlou Schrover, ed., *Illegal Migration and Gender in a Global and Historical Perspective*, IMISCOE Research (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 11-12, 19.

⁴⁷ Suzanne M. Sinke, "Gender and Migration: Historical Perspectives1," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1 (March 2006): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00004.x>.

the presumption that every woman, who wanted to cross the boundaries wanted to do so with immoral purposes formed the basis for an entire set of legislations, subjecting every Chinese women crossing the borders, and if successful, within the boundaries to prove their moral decency.

Despite the clear significance of legal restrictions (both regarding the sheer number of migrant women, as well as their impact on the everyday lives of those managed to overcome the legal barriers and settled down in the US) almost no scholarly attention was paid to them until the '90's, when a new wave of literature emerged about Chinese American history. This wave of literature consciously and successfully challenged the previously dominating scholarship that explained the shortage of Chinese women in the US exclusively with the traditional patriarchal cultural values and the unquestioned theory of male sojourning. By shifting the focus of their inquiry to the hitherto ignored legal barriers and the hostile reception that hindered Chinese women migration to a great extent, they painted a completely different history.

The main authors of this field are Sucheng Chan⁴⁸, Erika Lee⁴⁹, Judy Yung⁵⁰ and Huping Ling⁵¹ who all trace the history of exclusion of Chinese women with a focus on the intersection of legal barriers. Through a critical use of sources previously used⁵², adding Chinese language sources and oral histories, they rewrite history and prove that against all odds,

⁴⁸ Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), <https://trove.nla.gov.au/version/7052769>; Sucheng Chan, *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas Between China and America During the Exclusion Era* (Temple University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010); Erika Lee, "Defying Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants and Their Strategies During the Exclusion Era: The Trans-Pacific Flow of People, Goods, and Ideas," *Between China and America: The Trans-Pacific Flow of People, Goods, and Ideas*, 2005, 1–21.

⁵⁰ Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (University of California Press, 1995).

⁵¹ Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁵² For example, by questioning the objectivity of Census data that identified more than 70% of Chinese immigrant women as prostitutes.

Chinese women were migrating for purposes other than prostitution. The authors basically differ only in their choice of period, some including the pre- and post- Exclusion eras, some focusing only on the period when the Exclusion was implemented. The combination of these books gives a complete picture about the history of exclusion of the Chinese women, described in the next subchapter. I will use an article by Varsányi⁵³ to situate the Chinese exclusion laws in the greater structure of American immigration's legal history.

History of Exclusion – the construction of “Chinese” as a race

The first wave of Chinese immigrants to San Francisco constituted mostly of male contract laborers, was brought to the United States in order to make up for the shortage of local labor in mining and railroad industries. Their participation in the building of the first transcontinental American railroad – a notoriously dangerous enterprise – was considered to be valuable contribution to the expansion of American economy throughout the Gold Rush era. However, soon after the economy started to decline – signaling the end of the rush – Chinese men and women were started to be perceived as inassimilable foreigners, who are contaminating the nation of America with oriental diseases and moral pollution, thereby posing a continuous moral and racial threat.

The Reconstruction period, granting former slaves with citizenship and civil rights terminated in 1877. In the aftermath of the Reconstruction US color lines were redrawn: many previously racialized Atlantic immigrant group was refashioned as white, reallocating the color line around Europe, instead across it. As the legislations of the Exclusion era show, the distinction between free and slave has been reconstructed as a distinction between citizen and

⁵³ Monica W. Varsanyi, “Rescaling the ‘Alien,’ Rescaling Personhood: Neoliberalism, Immigration, and the State,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 4 (2008): 877–96.

alien.⁵⁴ American nationalism was constructed in opposition to the unassimilable aliens. “Immigration policy became viewed as a tool to define just what it meant to be an “American.””⁵⁵ During the economic recession, racist stereotyping of Chinese served as an antidote against which American purity was constructed. The Chinese were more and more perceived as an “unarmed invasion”⁵⁶ of aliens who posed serious threat to the American nation as a whole.⁵⁷

Constituting mostly of recently whitened Irish workers, an anti-Chinese movement was organized by the Workingmen’s Party of California, rallied under the name of “The Chinese Must Go!” “During the 1870s, Chinese settlements were attacked by bloodthirsty mobs that looted, lynched, burned, and murdered Chinese residents—men and women—in an effort to drive them out of the American West.”⁵⁸ The subsequent institutionalized discrimination against Chinese, first on the state, later on the federal level, was to a great extent due to the successful lobby of the Labor Party.⁵⁹

The flow of discriminatory legislations began on the state level at the end of the 50’s, when discriminatory taxes were introduced targeting Chinese miners, laundrymen, prostitutes, and fishermen. Californian state law denied Chinese basic civil rights, such as the right to immigrate, give testimony in court, be employed in public works, intermarry with whites, and own land. At a California Senate committee hearing on Chinese immigration in 1876, Chinese immigration was described as an evil, “unarmed invasion” that endangered both the state of California and the United States as a whole⁶⁰.

⁵⁴ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture, 1930-1960*, American History and Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 5.

⁵⁵ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 6.

⁵⁶ California State Senate, Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, Chinese Immigration, 275. In: Lee and Yung, 75

⁵⁷ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 25.

⁵⁸ Lee and Yung, 75.

⁵⁹ Fort more on the racialization of the American working class, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 66.

⁶⁰ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 74–75.

As a proof for the ubiquity of anti-Chinese sentiment, the Congress passed the infamous Page Law⁶¹ in 1875⁶², forbidding the entry of Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian laborers brought to the United States and Asian women brought for the purpose of prostitution. The law earned its milestone status with being the very first federal law regulating immigration in the US, the country of immigrants, which up until this date has upheld an open-door immigration policy. Until this time, states had power over regulating their membership policies. The significance of Page Law lies in the fact that it is the very first articulation of plenary power authorizing the federal government to treat “people as immigrants,” essentially “nonpersons” beyond the protections of the Constitution, basically allowing it to discriminate on the basis of noncitizen status. It is the beginning of the process which gave Congress and the executive branch authority over immigration as a sovereign right of the United States. Immigration policy became a tool to define what it meant to be American.⁶³

Given the law’s prominence, it is important to highlight that the first law that gave the state such an authority was a ban on immigrant prostitution. It clearly signifies how important and effective the notion of moral and racial purity was to the construction of America. This moral and racial purity, the unifying features of the US have been constructed against the Asian contamination. The small numbers of Chinese women were under continuous scrutiny as either probable or potential prostitutes. To illustrate how otiose their efforts were to prove their appropriate behavior, in the 1870 census 71% of the Chinese women in San Francisco were listed as prostitutes. As scholars like Lee⁶⁴ and Yung⁶⁵ have pointed out, the enumerators often overwritten the claims of “big-footed” women to work in agriculture or the textile industry

⁶¹ /The Page Act of 1875 (Immigration Act) FORTY-THIRD CONGRESS. SESS. II. CH. 141. 1875. CHAP. 141/

⁶² The Page Law was not without antecedent, it followed the line of earlier state-level regulations, such as the 1866 An Act For the Suppression of Chinese Houses of Ill Fame (San Francisco city law) (Chan, *Entry Denied*.)

⁶³ Varsanyi, “Rescaling the ‘Alien,’ Rescaling Personhood,” 884.

⁶⁴ Erika Lee, “Defying Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants and Their Strategies During the Exclusion Era,” in *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas Between China and America During the Exclusion Era* (Temple University Press, 2005), 1–22.

⁶⁵ Yung, *Unbound Feet*.

because they were convinced that a Chinese lady could be possibly decent only if she had bound feet. The custom of feet-binding never quite held true for the working class therefore we can argue that the enforcement of the law contained a class element as well. As the Page Law reveals that anti-Chinese legislations were never discriminating solely on the basis of race, but also on gender and class. The subsequent laws have followed this tendency.

In 1882, when the Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act barring all Chinese laborers from entering the country and prohibiting Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. As a result of the Page Law, women accounted only for 0.3 percent of the total number of Chinese admitted into the United States. The act was renewed in 1892 and 1902, extended to the U.S. territories of Hawaii and the Philippines and made permanent in 1904. The Chinese exclusion law was not repealed until 1943.

As the law pertained only to laborers, it exempted Chinese merchants, travelers, and students, but required them to maintain their exempt status as well. In this sense, we can see the continuation and institutionalization of class discrimination. Considering women, as their access for educational and professional opportunities were limited by the time, consequently, they could not apply for admission on their own right as one of the exempted classes. Therefore, the intersection of gender, class and race effectively prevented all lower class Chinese women from immigrating. Thus, it is not surprising that the class element, the performance of an upper-middle class status later became just as important in the beauty pageants as the performance of citizenship.

Albeit the laws of 1875 and 1882 focused particularly on Chinese workers and alleged prostitutes, they transformed American immigration policy and more so immigrant inspection and detention in general.⁶⁶ With these laws, the United States began to close its doors to a wide

⁶⁶ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 6.

range of people.⁶⁷ By illegalizing these particular groups, the Chinese became America's first illegal immigration problem, making them highly vulnerable to deportation. As identifying an out-group usually serves as a means for intensifying the cohesion of an in-group, the legalized exclusion of the Chinese became a crucial episode in the making of early 20th century America. The general changes regarding immigration policies can be understood as rescaling the authority over migration, by firmly placing immigration regulation under government control.⁶⁸

The enforcement of exclusionary laws firmly established the need for federal immigrant inspection sites and made federal documentation such as passports and green cards indispensable. The most important inspection site for Chinese immigrants was established on the Angel Island in 1910 and operated until 1940. The Angel Island Immigration Station⁶⁹ was the main Pacific gateway among the nineteen immigration stations operating around the United States. During its operation it processed over one million people, providing rich historical data on how immigration policies based on race, nationality, class and gender discrimination operated in practice, and what consequences these policies had on the lives of individuals, while drawing a vivid picture of how America decided about the values that included one and excluded the other. The detention site of Angel Island serves as a memento for the painfully racial history of the Exclusion Era and is a significant symbol for many Chinese Americans today. Detained on Angel island, the Chinese were subject to a "hundred kinds of oppressive

⁶⁷ The list began with paupers, lunatics, idiots, and those likely to become public charges (LPC) and continued with groups identified as causing "moral turpitude" (1891) going on to groups likely to cause political turpitude, such as anarchists (1903). Lee and Yung, 6–8.

⁶⁸ Varsanyi, "Rescaling the 'Alien,' Rescaling Personhood."

⁶⁹ Albeit the Angel Island is frequently referred to as the "Ellis Island of the West," they rather represent antithetical ends of the spectrum of US immigration policies: while Ellis Island was designed for processing the inclusion of immigrants who were considered white, Angel Island was established for the enforcement of exclusion.

laws,”⁷⁰ and were subjected to longer examinations, interrogations, and detentions than any other immigrants as the files of Angel Island prove.⁷¹

In the archives of Angel Island, the story of hundreds of Chinese women reveals the practical consequences the previously described laws implied. Most of these women travelled to the US shortly after marrying a Chinese immigrant with American citizenship, who managed to establish an exempt status that made it less risky to travel home and find a spouse. As discussed earlier, there were very few Chinese women in America, while Chinese were barred from interracial marriage. This made their only option to travel home shortly to find someone, and this could only work if they could somehow secure their return. As the Angel Island files reveal this was not easy to do so for Chinese, because even the possession of citizenship was not enough in itself given the prevalence of the anti-Chinese sentiments.

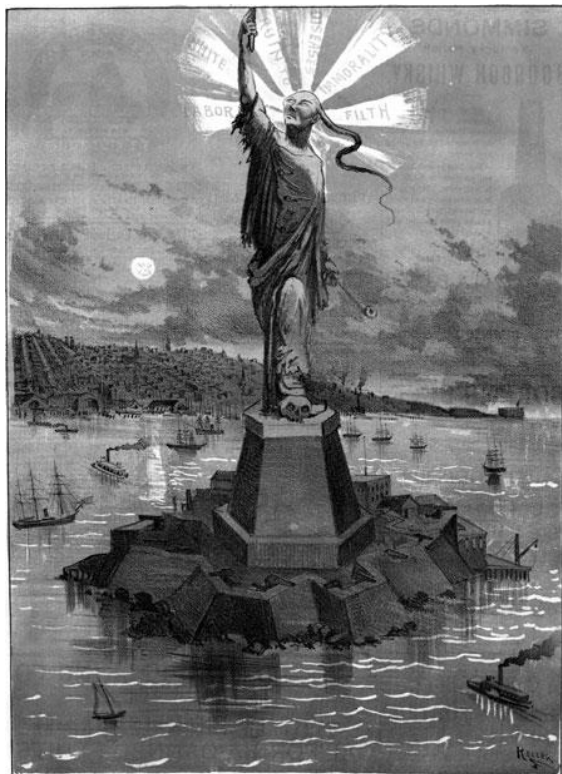
However, shortly after the newly-weds arrived back on American shores, they got separated and were subjected to cross-questioning. It is evident from the files, that the questioner’s only aim was to prove the relationship a fraud, and that the woman was trafficked for immoral purposes. The cross-questioning procedure proved to be very effective, as the partners indeed did not spend a long time together, therefore, their answers about say the furnishing of the living room often deviated. Despite the banality of these questions, which were combined with the scrutinized assessment of physical appearance (clothing, hands, feet – everything that told about the class status of the individual) and moral conduct, the detention of women lasted for months in general, and, more often than not ended up with deportation.⁷²

⁷⁰ Line from a poem carved in the wall of the detention camp. Him Mark Lai, Judy Yung and Genny Lim have composed an anthology of 150 poems that are remarkable mementos of a not so far away past that almost fell into oblivion. See: Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, eds., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, 2 edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

⁷¹ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 70.

⁷² The currently unfolding history of Angel Island would deserve an entire chapter, so while acknowledging that what I can provide here is absolutely incomplete, I will stop at this point as the scope of this paper does not allow longer evaluation. The wonderful monography by Lee and Yung (Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*.) extends their scope from focusing only on ethnic Chinese (who made up the vast majority of the detainees) to separately analyze detainees of other ethnic backgrounds, such as Filipinos, Mexicans, Koreans, Japanese, Jews and Poles. Their analysis gives a complete and coherent picture of the early 20th century immigration politics of the US, and

Resulting from the laws and their enforcement described above, the Chinese in America were barred from starting families and left them with no other options but to form “bachelor societies.” Neglecting the background and the involuntary reasons behind this unusual social organization, the bachelor society image of the Chinese informed a great range of stereotypes regarding their homosexuality and queerness along with their recreational activities such as gambling, and smoking opium.⁷³ One of the important incentives behind organizing Chinese beauty pageants was a necessity to refashion the bachelor society image by showcasing young Chinese beauties.



This cartoon, originally published in *The Wasp* in 1881 shows great resemblance with today’s Islamophobic cartoons, where highly valued constructs of national identities are replaced by mosques. The statue of a highly stereotyped Chinese coolie standing in the San Francisco Bay, where immigrants arrived, imitates the Statue of Liberty evoking a patently apocalyptic scene. Trampling upon a skull in his ragged robes, he indicates the death of the nation, not underestimating the threat Chinese pose to America, bringing ‘filth,’ ‘immorality,’ ‘diseases,’ and ‘ruin to white labor.’⁷⁴

I included this image as a counterpart to the image of Miss Chinatown USA 2018.

highlights how the intersections of race, nationality, class and gender played into the inclusion or exclusion of these groups.

⁷³ Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 47, 146.

⁷⁴ (By George Frederick Keller, *The Wasp*, November 11, 1881. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.) Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 74.

Besides discriminatory legislation bodies, other state apparatus, such as public health, contributed to the racialization of Chinese immigrants as well. In her analysis of the connections between public health reforms, conceptions of citizenship, racial formation and normative domesticity, Nayan Shah discusses how medical professionals and health officials endowed the popular beliefs of Chinese contaminations with the aura of scientific truth.⁷⁵ As San Francisco's Chinatown was indeed an impoverished ghetto at this era, the lack of sanitary conditions – which caused actual epidemics e.g. bubonic plague – was blamed on the Chinese and was seen as a proof for “racial incapability of self-regulation and hence racial ineligibility for citizenship.”⁷⁶ This book also reveals the mechanisms through which diseases were not only associated with the Chinese, but also with the geographical space they cohabited, making Chinatown a metonymic, yet palpable extension of the Chinese “menace.” This is the underlying incentive behind the pageant's framing as a Chinatown event. As Chinese were highly associated with this geographical space, in order to refashion the image of the Chinese, it was necessary to refashion Chinatown as well.

What finally put an end to the Exclusion Era with repealing the Exclusion Act after sixty years was due to the rearrangement of international relations during World War II. As the United States allied with China against Japanese aggression, “the federal government felt the need to symbolically incorporate Chinese Americans in the national family,”⁷⁷ and rewarded Chinese Americans with the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, which not only suspended immigration for over sixty years, but prevented Chinese Americans from naturalization as well. As noted above, the exclusionary laws from 1882 to 1943 led to numerous practices whereby Chinese immigrants came to circumvent the legislation. The

⁷⁵ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (University of California Press, 2001).

⁷⁶ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “Review Reviewed Work(s): *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* by Nayan Shah,” *Social History* 28, no. 1 (2003): 136–38.

⁷⁷ Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008, 2.

overwhelming majority of Chinese, who managed to cross the borders of the US had to keep a secret of legal fraud that made them highly vulnerable for deportation. Despite they were now offered the opportunity to become naturalized, legal citizens, the memories of severe persecution and illegality were still very much alive. Their sense of fear did not have enough time to become memory indeed.

The relief of the repeal proved to be short-lived, as a foreign policy rearrangement happened soon after, in the beginning of the Cold War. China's "fall to communism" in 1949 lead to large-scale investigations over fraudulent entries in Chinese communities across the country initiated by the federal government, ceasing the opportunity "to hunt down and deport 'pro Communists'"⁷⁸ as well. Representatives of the Chinese, headed by the Six Companies⁷⁹ opened negotiations in order to prevent mass prosecution and deportation, resulting in the 1956 "Confession Program."⁸⁰ As almost the entire Chinese community was implicated with fraudulent identities, understanding the determinative nature of illegality for the whole community is crucial to understand why diasporic beauty pageants emerged from the discourse of American citizenship.

Living through the Exclusion – Voluntary Associations and the organizational structure of Chinatown

The history of Exclusion sheds light on why the Chinese have started to organize themselves in America in particular ways, through establishing voluntary associations that provided assistance in the face of severe discrimination. As these organizations were mostly based on family lineages and clans, the myth of common ancestry became an influential factor not only

⁷⁸ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 106.

⁷⁹ See more in the section on voluntary associations and their role in brokering between mainstream social bodies. On pp 34.

⁸⁰ Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 105–7.

in organizing the community, but in individual identifications as well.⁸¹ A short overview of Chinese American voluntary associations is provided here, as they form the basis of what I will call the Chinatown establishment, and Chinese community henceforward. The core of today's dense and complicated networks that these associations form was planted during the Exclusion Era, helping many immigrants to set foot and to start a livelihood in America. Showcasing great adaptability, these organizations not only survived but still strive today, providing both newcomers and descendants of migrants with a source of valuable social capital. In this section, I briefly review this particular social formation because it is a decisive element of Miss Chinatown USA, which traditionally concludes in a week-long Chinatown tour, during which contestants got to visit all the significant historical and contemporary associations and organization.

In the face of severe legal discrimination coupled with prevalent general anti-Chinese attitudes, the Chinese arriving in America developed ways to overcome the difficulties the restrictions and lack of acceptance posed in establishing voluntary associations, *huiguans*. About the role family associations played during the Exclusion Era, Lee offers some hints. Although Lee does not use the term family associations when she describes the “new strategies” Chinese Americans adopted when they realized that official attempts were not effective and likely to succeed, I am rather convinced, judging from the highly organized structure and the involvement of clans that family associations earned their respected and prestigious statuses in today's San Francisco Chinatown through managing immigrants circumvent the a “hundred kinds of oppressive laws” during the Exclusion Era. According to Lee's exhaustive research of over six hundred immigration files, she points to the crucial role networks of family and kin played in maintaining a steady stream of immigrants throughout the Exclusion Era.

⁸¹ Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Evelyn Hu-Dehart, eds., *Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jc01q>.

The practice of forming self-help and mutual aid associations was not new or peculiar to the American diaspora, but evolved latest in the fifteenth century in China, in response to the difficulties that inland migration caused. As a tested and proved practice, it was transplanted to most locations of the Chinese diaspora. Voluntary associations offered hostel, credit, information, a sense of community, “a piece of home away from home.” In their niche book on this undeservingly understudied subject, Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart define voluntary associations as “those associations that originate out of the migrant communities and are controlled by them, hence not official and non-governmental, even though many of these might have worked in collaboration with (...) the governments of the host country.” Their voluntariness derives from their membership being open “to Chinese who meet the admission criteria,” but is “principally non-coercive, (...) participation is voluntary and optional.”⁸²

According to the authors, *huiguans* are usually organized along clans or patrilinear lineages defined by surnames,⁸³ district, region, or dialect lines, “whichever appeared the most logical and practical to serve the needs of new migrants making the transition.” These organizational lines overlapped to greater extent in practice, as usually clans originate in the same locality (district, region) therefore spoke the same dialect. As membership in one *huiguan* does not mean exclusion from others, and multiple membership is possible this does not cause conflict for individuals. Being pragmatic in their nature, *huiguans* often merge into one another or join under umbrella associations, thereby cumulating their capital and obtaining greater influence and impact within the society. This is particularly true to the Chinese associations of San Francisco where one such umbrella organization, the San Francisco Chinese Consolidated

⁸² Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, 6–7.

⁸³ The particular and highly complex kinship practices of the Chinese society are beyond the scope of this study. Maurice Freedman discussed the topic in detail in *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwantung* (Berg Publishers, 1971). See also Ai-li S. Chin, Maurice Freedman, and Joint Committee on Contemporary China Subcommittee on Research on Chinese Society, *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society* (Stanford University Press, 1970). Unfortunately none of these works deal with how these lineages got transplanted to the diaspora, this seem to be a black spot both in Chinese diaspora and Chinese lineage literature.

Benevolent Association (CCBA, also known as the Big Six) was in charge of internal social control of the Chinese in the area. Signaling its political power, the head of the CCBA was informally known as the “mayor of Chinatown”⁸⁴ and continues to be “the highest authority, at least symbolically, of the community.”⁸⁵

Given that their structure was organized according to the principle of patrilineal lineage, which was coupled with the disproportionately high ratio of males, *huiguans* historically developed in a patriarchal and fundamentally hierarchical way. They were “controlled by wealthy merchants and governed in an authoritarian, top-down fashion (...) [therefore] reflect class divisions and strive to contain class divisions within the community.”⁸⁶ Besides perpetuating class divisions, this organizational structure also serves to preserve the Confucian gender order, which completely excludes women from decision-making, and ranks men according to their age, thus concentrates all power in the hands of the oldest men. Since the associations provided crucial and indispensable means for survival this establishment remained absolutely unchallenged until the second half of the nineteenth century, and still operate through conserving class and gender divides. Deriving from the hierarchical and overlapping nature of these organizations, they tend to concentrate political power in the hands of a few leader, who amass interlocking leadership roles, which provided them with political capital that they can translate to economic capital which in turn leads them to more powerful political positions.⁸⁷

These dynamics laid the foundation of today’s Chinatown establishment. The actual power the

⁸⁴ Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, *Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora*, 7–8.

⁸⁵ Bernard P. Wong, *Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship: The New Chinese Immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 21.

⁸⁶ Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, *Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora*, 7. This is their particular feature that makes them distinct from another popular form of organization among Chinese, the “brotherhoods” of ‘secret societies.’ The membership of secret societies was open to unrelated individual, united by pursuit of a common goal.” This type of organization was cooperative, egalitarian, non-élite and proto-democratic in its structure and organization. A fascinating and exhaustive study of this type is provided by Ownby (David Ownby, “*Secret Societies*” *Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (M.E. Sharpe, 1993).) and is not discussed here, as it is not directly related to the subject.

⁸⁷ Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, *Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora*, 16.

establishment represents is probably best exemplified with former San Francisco mayor Ed Lee, making the first Chinese American to hold the office.

Showcasing great adaptability, these associations took up new roles, “going beyond satisfying the urgent needs of new comers and becoming cultural and political brokers, representing the needs of their segregated and racialized communities towards the wider society.”⁸⁸ Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart vividly describe the mechanism by which organizational leaders displaying leadership and organizational skills successfully engaged with local governments and through the mobilization of their members managed to become powerful members of local mayoral offices. This holds particularly true to San Francisco’s Chinese associations which played a significant role in making San Francisco’s Chinatown the most socially and politically connected to the larger society among all other Chinatown in the US. The influence of the Chinatown establishment in San Francisco’s City Hall is not only signaled by the victory of formerly mentioned Ed Lee but recognized by the non-Chinese elected officials of the city as well, who frequently tour Chinatown especially during election periods and never fail to seize the opportunity to participate in the New Year Festival. Elected Chinese officials on the other hand hold special office hours in Chinatown.⁸⁹

As Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart point out, another sign of the adaptability of voluntary associations is their effort to establish global networks and transnational linkages among their counterparts across the globe. This means that clan associations based on the same surname or hometown associations in different countries reach out to each other to create social networks of great economic potential. San Francisco, arguably the home of the largest American Chinese population, has over hundred family associations, which maintain regular relationship not only with their American counterparts, but also European and Asian ones. For example, the Lee

⁸⁸ Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, 14.

⁸⁹ Wong, *Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship*, 25.

association, which played a prominent role in securing Ed Lee's voting basis, has several "chapters" scattered around the US would hold three national conventions annually, and one international convention annually. These events provide board members with an opportunity to reinforce their relationships. This interconnected feature makes voluntary associations attractive not only for newcomers, but settled Chinese Americans as well because as nodes of networks, they provide valuable sites for accumulating social capital, therefore can be seen an efficient mode for incorporation⁹⁰ – both for new and old migrants. The pageant provides a site where multiple organizations come together, offering a great opportunity for forming connections between them, making the network of networks even more valuable resources of social capital. I identify this feature as one of the most significant factors for maintaining the tradition of the pageant and attracting both sponsors and contestants for the event.

Cold War – Constructing “Chinese” as ethnicity and citizenship

For analyzing the Cold War period, I will rely on two amazing books by Yeh and Lim, which can be seen as the intellectual continuation of the literature used for the first chapter, as well as an article by Wu. All of them compose the history of Chinese American women after the exclusion, situating their subject within the same larger context of transnational and national politics and understand beauty pageants as means for projecting the image of a model minority that deserves and is capable of practicing American citizenship. Yeh's study offers more insight on the dynamics of community formation, while Lim and Wu pay more attention to individual identity formations. Their abundant resources cover both mainstream and ethnic press off the time, complemented by oral histories, which I will use as secondary sources. The three works together provide a complete picture of Chinese American women's history during the Cold War

⁹⁰ Schiller, Çağlar, and Guldbrandsen, "Beyond the Ethnic Lens."

era, and a thorough understanding of the origins and early formation of Miss Chinatown USA.⁹¹ Given that the subject of my case study, Miss Chinatown USA 2018 is deeply rooted in its sixty-one-year-old tradition, it is impossible to deliver a complete analysis without taking it into consideration.

Besides gaining right to become naturalized citizens, the Cold War also marked a significant discursive shift in perceiving the Chinese in ethnic, rather than racial terms. Favoring multiculturalism and supporting ethnic claim-making for citizenship became an important rhetoric tool in Cold War liberal capitalist politics in its effort to defeat Soviet accusations over the lack of racial progress, that was upheld as the main proof against the fairness of a capitalist democratic political system.⁹² What Lim calls the ‘Cold War liberal democratic ethos’ thus provided Chinese leaders with the unprecedented opportunity to claim a place within America by refashioning their community image as an ethnic minority. Seizing the chance to counter the wide-spread racial stereotypes discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Chinese leaders started to promote a model minority imagery, portraying Chinese Americans as quiet, docile, agile, intelligent, hardworking and self-reliant. The model minority narrative proved to be very successful and got picked up by mainstream discourse as well, since it could be easily turned against other minorities, whose lack of development thus could be blamed on them.⁹³ The achievement of Chinese, whose progress did not depend on welfare-checks came also in hand

⁹¹ Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008; Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*; Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “‘Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!’: Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 5–31.

⁹² Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008; Chiou-ling Yeh, “Politicizing Chinese New Year Festivals: Cold War Politics, Transnational Conflicts, and Chinese America,” in *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies : Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 238–58; Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*.

⁹³ The early trend setters in the mainstream media of the Chinese model minority myth portrayed the Chinese as having: “high educational achievement levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, and the absence of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems.” Sylvia Van Ziegert identifies two articles in the early sixties as trendsetters. *Global Spaces of Chinese Culture: Diasporic Chinese Communities in the United States and Germany*, Studies in Asian Americans (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 24.

in the dismantling of the social welfare state.⁹⁴ Miss Chinatown USA was one site among others, where ethnic leaders promoted the newly conceived model minority image of the Chinese.

The real and assumed long-distance nationalism of the Chinese in San Francisco⁹⁵ made it necessary to officially take an anticommunist stance against the newly formed People's Republic by pledging alliance to Taiwan, "Free China" highly encouraged by the United States government. Yeh describes how the Nationalist government of ROC seized this moment of "anticommunist hysteria to become the dominant power in San Francisco's Chinatown."⁹⁶ The ROC cooperated with both the FBI and the INS in their joint hunt for both illegal and pro-Communist migrants. This foreign policy-turned domestic affair explained the conspicuous presence of ROC flags and officials within the newly conceived "ethnic" celebrations of the Cold War, such as the New Year Festival.

The Chinese New Year Festival in San Francisco continues to be one of the city's major tourist attractions, visited mostly by non-Chinese locals and tourists. MCU and the New Year Festival were conceived together, forming a joint army in their fight against anti-anticommunism. A float still carries around the queen and court of the pageant, which is their one and only public appearance, therefore the discourse around the pageant is inseparably embedded within the discourse of the festival. The public celebration of the Chinese New Year – an essentially American tradition, as traditionally it is a private family holiday – was a platform for Chinese leaders to display their patriotism and loyalty through waving ROC flags, as well as to showcase and commodify their newly conceived ethnicity to the larger public.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Lisa Sun-Hee Park, "Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation," *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (112) (2008): 135–36.

⁹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the heightened homeland nationalism in the Chinese American diaspora during the early 1930s and 1940s, see Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 223–78.

⁹⁶ Yeh, "Politicizing Chinese New Year Festivals: Cold War Politics, Transnational Conflicts, and Chinese America," 242.

⁹⁷ Yeh, "Politicizing Chinese New Year Festivals: Cold War Politics, Transnational Conflicts, and Chinese America"; Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008.

US Cold War politics essentially compelled the Chinese in San Francisco to constantly showcase their patriotism, loyalty and anticommunist stance, while provided them with a discourse for ethnicity to channel these performances. Within the cold war racial ideological context, ethnicity became a capital, what the established Chinese leaders exchanged to exercise power within the “community,” by constructing a group identity – both in its substance and drawing up its boundaries by means of exclusion and inclusion, using their newly gained power to manifest control over their group members.⁹⁸

The Cold War therefore essentially serves as the main framework in which the model minority image was constructed. The model minority stereotype continues to have significance up until today, when American citizens of Chinese ancestry are still subject to constant questioning of loyalty. In more precarious contexts – such as election campaign fund raisers or Los Alamos, Chinese ancestry seem to overwrite American citizenship. The controversies around Bill Clinton’s campaign financing in 1997 resulted in caricatures of him and Al Gore in “yellow face” suggesting that under certain circumstances even money has ethnicity, and Chinese ethnicity considered to be undesirable for money.⁹⁹ The case of former Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee is a more palpable and hurtful manifestation of distrust. The Taiwan born naturalized American citizen was charged with stealing secrets about the US nuclear arsenal for the PRC in December, 1999. His wrongful detention and the severe conditions of his incarceration became made him a symbol of the lasting precariousness of Chinese Americans from which citizenship still does not mean complete security.¹⁰⁰ These cases suggest that Americans of Chinese ancestry still obtain second class citizenship, which

⁹⁸ Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008, 7.

⁹⁹ I am not in the position to ascertain this situation and it is not my intention to claim anything else but to draw attention to how ethnicity and citizenship decouples in the case of this finance controversy. A telly example about the obviously conspiratorial trait is the book Edward Timperlake and William C. Triplett, *Year of the Rat: How Bill Clinton Compromised U.S. Security for Chinese Cash* (Regenery Pub., 1998). I believe it is enough to read its title.

¹⁰⁰ Van Ziegert, *Global Spaces of Chinese Culture*, 21.

Wen Ho Lee’s case was put an end only in 2006, when he received 1.6 million USD from the federal government as token of their apology.

legitimizes the need to have where a positive ethnic identity can be constructed. I believe that apart from the other functions it fulfills, which will be discussed later, MCU is up and running exactly because of this. If the Chinese were really accepted into the realms of first class citizens, this tradition did not have any meaning to continue. Now I will turn back to the pageant's origins.

Cold War history of Miss Chinatown USA

The Miss Chinatown USA pageant was founded on sporadic and fragmental initiations dating back to the first quarter of the twentieth century. The first queen for San Francisco's Chinatown had been chosen in 1915 during the Panama-Pacific World Exposition, six years before the first Miss America pageant took off in Atlanta city with the purpose of keeping tourists in town after Labor Day. These occasional queen contests predating the mainstream beauty pageants depicted Chineseness and Chinese femininity in a highly Orientalizing and essentializing manner, catering to the demand of old-fashioned multiculturalism.

As beauty pageantry took an institutionalized form and became a marketable platform of popular culture in the mainstream American society, ethnic beauty pageants gained new form and meanings in the post-World War II era and became an institutionalized tradition within several ethnic communities in the US. Leading Asian American civil rights groups such as the Chinese American Citizens Association (CACA) begun to center their fourth of July annual meetings on beauty pageants in 1948. CACA's cardinal principles were – and still are until date – “[t]o fully enjoy and defend our American citizenship,” for the practicing of which the so-called bathing beauty contests proved to be an efficient way.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 128, 147.

In the 1940's ethnic Chinese pageants abandoned their original practice of choosing queens through raffle ticket votes and started replicating the mainstream American national model instead. By adopting the American model, ethnic Chinese pageants rendered themselves as a form of all-American self-expression.¹⁰² By choosing this platform, the Chinese American community hoped to demonstrate its ability to stage their community's model citizenship to the larger American public. As Lim argues, ethnic Chinese beauty pageants enabled the Chinese community "to show that they knew and could distinguish ideal citizenship and ideal community, and thus were capable of exercising full American citizenship rights and privileges."¹⁰³ As the previous chapters have implicated, the need for projecting a model minority representation was crucial to the community that faced wide spread contempt and was de facto mostly illegal in its status. Albeit during this era the Chinese were eligible for citizenship in theory, their citizenship status was still considered "second class"¹⁰⁴ in practice and required constant reaffirmation. Beauty pageants offered an opportunity for the Chinese community to take a firm anticommunist stance while reaffirming their citizen status.

Thus, when the pageant took its recent form in 1953 as "Miss Chinatown USA," its main purpose was to represent the Chinese as a model minority using the bodies of young Chinese women by constructing a de-racialized, ethnicized and classed Americanized ideal. From the very beginning looks played a secondary role behind education. Education and educational achievement have been the cornerstone of the model minority imaginary from the very beginning, endorsing the American Dream of meritocracy and democracy.¹⁰⁵ Education also has a strong correlation with class status, therefore it is a significant element in representing the imaginary of an upwardly mobile middle-class, which was crucial in representing Cold War

¹⁰² Lim, 125–27.

¹⁰³ Lim, 127.

¹⁰⁴ I use the term in Rosaldo's sense. For his discussion on analogies between the controversial and ambiguous terms cultural and second class citizenship, see: Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 402–11.

¹⁰⁵ Park, "Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth," 132.

citizenship. The educational element in MCU therefore offers an interesting insight on how the notion of citizenship became entangled with a classed notion of ethnicity.

As we sweep through the contestants of the past sixty years we see a pattern that has changed strikingly little over the past decades: this ideal is a middle-class, well-educated and accomplished young woman, interested in same-sex social activities, fashion, beauty, and fun.¹⁰⁶ This ideal was reflected in the recruiting process from the very beginning, as the organizers primarily advertised within college organizations and made the promise – which they eventually kept – of turning the prize into scholarships.¹⁰⁷ The conspicuous salience of education can also be explained by its power to bring the overtone of decency and respectability to the contest which otherwise invited notions of immorality and prostitution as young Chinese women exposed their bodies to the public.

As already hinted, the pageants of the Cold War era were means for the Chinese community to assert their Americanness while representing themselves as a dream model minority that came true. Emphasizing and embodying American consumerist middle-class values, contestants enacted an American notion of femininity within their Chinese bodies. Chineseness was only displayed in a very narrow and peculiarly traditional form, the purpose of which was for first to emphasize that they are not communists and second, to showcase their freedoms guaranteed by American democracy helped to preserve traditional Chinese culture. In order to dissociate themselves from Communist China, the Cold War pageants adopted a traditional Confucian understanding of Chinese culture¹⁰⁸ and identified its source for authentic

¹⁰⁶ Lim provides fantastic excerpts from newspapers, such as this one from the cover of the Chinese Press, April 28, 1950:

“Although very serious in her goal at becoming a pharmacist, Miss Liu says she loves meeting people, and I’m really honored to contribute my efforts for our Cal club.’ College life, roller skating, dances (sources report she’s a terrific Charleston critter!)— these show up the likes of this hard-working candidate.” (Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 131.)

¹⁰⁷ Lim, 118.

¹⁰⁸ Yeh, *Making an American Festival*, 2008, 31–35.

culture with the geopolitical reality of the ROC.¹⁰⁹ Organizing beauty pageants was in itself a statement against the ideology of Mao's PRC that dismissed beauty pageants all together as "bourgeoisie nonsense,"¹¹⁰ and placed a ban on beauty pageants that has not been lifted for the following fifty years.

Apart from displaying their bodies, contestants were not required to showcase their Chineseness in any forms, not even speaking Chinese. Speaking a common language is a good proxy for claiming ethnicity, therefore, it is highly questionable if we can speak of the pageant as an "ethnic" festival. For example, the first queen of Miss Chinatown USA (after the pageant went national) in 1958, June Gong, claimed in a recent interview that she had not even known what her Chinese name, Ju Jun Tai – "turn the next child into a boy" – meant until she had stepped on the stage of Miss Chinatown, for gladdening the audience.¹¹¹

What was a common denominator for all the contestants at that time was ethnicity rather than race. Race, as a physical feature played an ambivalent role in early pageants. The long-time marker of their unassimable difference and perpetual foreignness, the main source of their exclusion has gained new meaning in the politics of the Cold War era. In the Cold War liberal capitalist politics racial difference became the very basis for claiming social rights.¹¹² Therefore, Lim argues that the race of Chinese women on pageants simultaneously served for claiming a place in the nation and to be different within it.¹¹³ Even though, I have more insight

¹⁰⁹ In a fascinating study about the history of one San Franciscan Chinese Association, Wong traces how source identification with ROC operated in practice depending on the shifts in foreign policy of the past half century. Sau-ling C. Wong, "Dancing in the Diaspora: Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 30, 2010), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/50k6k78p>.

¹¹⁰ Chiu, "Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests," 37.

¹¹¹ FOX, "Former Miss Chinatown USA to Reign over Chinese New Year Parade," KTVU, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://www.ktvu.com/entertainment/chinese-new-year-parade/former-miss-chinatown-usa-to-reign-over-chinese-new-year-parade>.

It is interesting to note, that one CCC member I made an interview with described June Gong as the ideal MCU, highlighting that she was bilingual.

¹¹² Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 121–30.

¹¹³ This antithetical approach to citizenship is described by Rosaldo as "cultural citizenship," and Lim argues that beauty pageants can be understood as such. I cannot agree with this conceptualization as I think that Chinese women can possibly perform American ethnicity, however absurd it may sound.

on the past decade's pageants, I am of the opinion that their racial difference is not a claim, but an inevitable stigma. To translate it to Goffman's theory, it is giving *off* signs, instead of giving signs. I will elaborate on this in more detail in my discussion of MCU 2018.

The public display of racialized bodies and claiming their beauty was of great significance throughout the Cold War. As Lim discusses, the "Cold War [gender ideology] realigned gendered nationalisms into the Soviet asexual female worker drone versus the hyperfeminine consumer American mother or sex kitten."¹¹⁴ Beauty in the Cold War's America meant first and foremost white middle-class, displaying consumerist values. Mainstream beauty pageants of the era also reflected these expectations, as Miss America's rule seven excluded all people of color. Claiming the beauty of other races was a way to counter Social Darwinism "that had posited nonwhite races as subhuman and thus not beautiful."¹¹⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to outline how the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, representing the interest of the Chinatown establishment arrived at the idea to promote their image through organizing a beauty pageant, and how they arrived at the ideal of Miss Chinatown, as female, middle-class ambassador for the community. The ideal Miss Chinatown represents was called into being in order to counter the ubiquitous stereotypes of the Chinese as a homosexual, disease-ridden bachelor society of illegal coolies. Apart from being female, Miss Chinatown USA also embodied a well-groomed and aspiring middle-class young American citizen, standing right ahead at starting a family.

The Cold War signaled a shift from the discourse of race to the discourse of ethnicity, outright encouraging ethnic self-expressions on the one hand, but also marked a shift in the

¹¹⁴ Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 124.

¹¹⁵ Lim, 141.

discourse of citizenship combined with the “anticommunist hysteria” on the other, once again jeopardizing the citizenship status of Chinese Americans. This compelled Chinese Americans to perform their Chinese ethnicity particularly attached to Taiwan. Choosing the beauty pageant, an ultimately American forms to perform their Taiwanese ethnic belongings, therefore also served to claim their American citizenship. In the next chapter I will finally turn to Miss Chinatown USA 2018, and analyze how the discourse of model minority, conceived sixty years ago translates into contemporary times on the level of the community level.

Crowning the Queen of the Betwixt – Miss Chinatown USA 2018

As the authors of the most comprehensive book on beauty pageantry note in their introduction, “beauty contests are places where cultural meanings are produced, consumed, and rejected; where local and global, ethnic and national, national and international cultures and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects.”¹¹⁶ The most obvious purpose of all beauty contests is to choose a queen who is a symbolic representation of the collective identity to the larger group, who chooses them throughout the course of the competition. The queen embodies “the values and goals of a nation, locality, or a group.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, beauty pageants “showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exists at the center of a group’s sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender and place”.¹¹⁸

On a practical level, this means that there is a group of people who organize an event through which they choose an ideal representative for themselves, therefore their sense as a group becomes consolidated through the course of the event. In order to find the ideal

¹¹⁶ Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 3.

¹¹⁸ Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 2.

representative, a set of entry criteria is defined to limit the pool of possible contestants and narrow down the discourse on the ‘ideal’. The entry criteria and the way the event is orchestrated assure that the would-be queen will embody the values the group wishes to identify itself with. Thus, the quest for the ideal contestant, whose deportment, appearance, and style (could be summarized as ‘class’) encompasses both gendered and ethnic representation turns the competition to a “field of shared symbols and practices that define both ethnicity and femininity in terms of national identity,” Banet-Weiser notes in her book about Miss America.¹¹⁹

The case of diasporic beauty queens differs significantly from mainstream beauty queens in that there is a deep-rooted uncertainty regarding the matrix of their racial (Chinese) - ethnic (Chinese American) - national (American or Chinese) identifications, outlined in the theory section above. In Miss Chinatown USA, contestants are expected to perform their Chineseness, Americanness, and Chinese Americanness and being judged according to what extent were they able to fulfill the expectations. The uncertainty about where does one category end and the other begin and whether there is something between them lies at the heart of Miss Chinatown USA. In this chapter, I will analyze the stage of the pageant as a site that offers a glimpse into the official narrative about the qualities that are deemed to be idealized characteristics of the diaspora, while in the next chapter, I will discuss the lived experience of the contestants that reveals the artificiality of these expectations, by pointing to the malposition and ambiguity inherent in the arrangements discussed here. Through unveiling how constrained these expectations of Chineseness, Americanness and Chinese Americanness are, the research

¹¹⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (University of California Press, 1999), 6–7.

can be a significant contribution in the deconstruction of the static view of culture underlying the myth of hyphenated identities.¹²⁰

The review of what I identified as structural elements – the entry criteria, the production, the segments that structure the event and the judges panel who have the final say in determining the queen will outline the skeleton of the proposed ideal, on which the contestants put flesh through their embodied performances. This chapter therefore serves to trace the boundaries of the discourse about the ideal queen, the ‘what’ and ‘how’, while simultaneously searching for answers for the ‘who’ and ‘why.’

Entry criteria

As neither ‘Chinese’ nor ‘American’ are self-explanatory categories, let alone speaking of ‘Chinese American’, we first have to turn to the entry criteria. This set of “qualifications”¹²¹ provides a clear-cut definition of who counts as Chinese and American according to the “community.” As I argued earlier, Chinese Americans do not form a community per se, but there are actors who intend to forge one out of them. These actors were referred to as the ‘Chinatown establishment,’ the networks of diasporic Chinese organizations and associations, personalized by their leaders. When I use the term community I mean these networks and their nodes. The San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce is the organizer of Miss Chinatown USA since its inception in 1958¹²² applied the same eligibility rules: Rule 1. “You must be a citizen or a permanent resident of the U.S.A.”; Rule 2. “You must be of Chinese ancestry,

¹²⁰ Ayse Caglar, “Hyphenated Identities and the Limits of ‘Culture,’” in *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*, ed. Prina Werbner and Tariq Modood (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 169–85.

¹²¹ The MCU qualification package employs “qualifications of a contestant” instead of “entry criteria.”

¹²² As I discussed earlier, MCU was not the first Chinese beauty pageant in San Francisco, but was built upon previous initiations. The CCC took over the MCU organized by the CACA in 1953, and 1958 marked the first year that the event „went national,” inviting contestants outside of San Francisco.

meaning your father must be of Chinese descent.”¹²³ According to Rule 1, whether one qualifies as American depends on the geographical location of her body, an external circumstance, while her Chineseness is measured along patrilineal lineage, traced back *within* her body. Albeit at first hand these criteria might seem to be reasonable considering the nature of the pageant, a closer look reveals great confusion about its implications towards both race and ethnicity.

Rule 1. allows for great heterogeneity among possible applicants, whose diversity might range from being immigrants themselves to 4th or 5th generation Americans. This has severe consequences considering the extent to which participants “share beliefs” – a measure all the myriad definitions of ethnicity have in common – as they possibly have very different perception of both American and Chinese culture, as well as have considerably divergent understanding of what they call their heritage. Even more confusing is the definition of Chineseness as patrilineal ancestry. This means that as long as one bears a Chinese surname, she is considered to be Chinese, regardless of the “percentage” of her ancestry.¹²⁴ Practically, one is Chinese if her name is Chinese. This practice excludes women who self-identify as Chinese, but their heritage comes from their maternal side, and might as well be “more Chinese,” than those contestants, who do qualify. It is also notable that knowledge or awareness of Chinese culture, starting with fluency in any dialects is not even an unwritten criterion, therefore Rule 2 is purely racial. As a CCC member explained, the importance of Rule 2 lies in carrying a Chinese surname, which is a good proxy for identifying a person as Chinese. She illustrated her point by saying “if someone comes in like *Williams*, that would not be representing Chinese.” When I called her attention to the percentage-based criteria adopted by other pageants she considered them to be racist and offensive and said she “never think[s]

¹²³ “Application packet” accessed from the pageant’s official website, “The Southwest Airlines Chinese New Year Parade,” accessed May 30, 2018, <http://www.chineseparade.com/pageant.asp?pageant=origin>.

¹²⁴ Percentage based entry criterion is often used in pageants self-identified as ethnic, and is common in other diasporic Chinese beauty pageants I have surveyed as well.

about [if] they are 50% or not.” (CCC member K) As we can see, despite the entry criteria narrows down the pool considerably, it does not inform what does it take to be Chinese nor American.

When applicants qualify with the basic criteria, members of the CCC Pageant Committee do an initial screening regarding the “substance” of their applications. Here, a set of unwritten criteria comes into play, that is very much dependent on the individual supervisors, who “do some ranking and comparison” based on the photos and hundred-word personal essays submitted by the contestants complemented with preliminary interviews. According to this committee member, what they look for is not primarily physical beauty, but intelligence and “a prospect of how well they would represent us” since earning the title means that they become “ambassadors of the Chinese community.” As I learned from our conversation, the qualities that makes the future ambassador are apparently: first and foremost, strong educational background, being compassionate, having ambitions “in terms of what they wanna do with life”, volunteering or being community service oriented (CCC member N). These features are not characteristic of either Chinese or American but lean towards the Chinese American model minority image. This unwritten set of criteria had an impact of homogenizing contestants, resulting in the fourteen finalists who had the prospect of representing the community as a model minority. Thus, we can see that through Miss Chinatown USA, the Chinatown establishment still continues to project the model minority portrayal of the Chinese Americans.

Setting the stage

While the official and unofficial criteria lead to a homogenized group of contestants, the production of the show sets the stage for their enacted performances. The Miss Chinatown 2018 has seen some changes in terms of its production as both the CCC members and the contestants underlined. The former director, who represented classical Hong Kong-style entertainment

retired, giving way to a new team appointed by the CCC. The new production team is headed by Vietnamese Mark Tran who has strong Hollywood affiliations and moved toward a more American type of event. This was mostly visible in the lighting and sound of the pageant, as well as in the lack of any visible hints that would make the event readily identifiable as Chinese. According to a CCC member, the opening numbers (she highlighted the lion dance and girls' choir singing a Chinese New Year song) assured the "Chinese atmosphere," upon which "a lot of American mainstream accents" were added, for example she singled out having former Miss Michigan as a pageant coach, and the selection of honorary guests who ranged from Hollywood veteran television producer and director Matt Dearbon, and Miss Universe 2007, Japanese Canadian Riyo Mori. (CCC member K).

Former Michigan's coaching transformed the pageant significantly, as it required contestants to present their bodies just like in mainstream American pageants. "Walking" is a crucial aspect of beauty pageantry, as I have learned from the contestants, who have initiated me into the different types of walks that different types of beauty pageants require. The walk taught by Miss Michigan was the most American style according to their expertise. This walk resembles more a catwalk, requiring bold, self-confident and sexy performances. (Contestant JG, JL) As these notions clearly belong to American type of femininity in contrast to Chinese femininity that is profoundly reserved, contestants were required to perform an ethnically American femininity.

The deliberate emphasis on adding both Chinese and American "accents" to the event captured by the CCC member was apparent throughout the whole production, reflected by its date and venue to start with. As noted earlier, the predecessor of Miss Chinatown, initiated by the CACA was conceived as a means to perform American citizenship, notably as part of the organization's patriotic 4th of July picnic. Moving the event to Chinese New Year instead suggests a shift in conceiving the pageant more so as a performance of ethnicity. Yeh in her

brilliant account on the making of San Francisco's Chinese New Year festival points out that the tradition of publicly celebrating the Chinese New Year is essentially American, as traditionally Chinese people celebrate New Year privately.¹²⁵ One staff member pointed out that Chinese New Year has great significance in the "community" because during these two weeks everybody is "in the celebration mood," and after it is over, they "*go back to [their] normal lives.*" As he said, "I feel the most in touch with *the culture* when it's Chinese New Year season, for these two weeks." He argued that Chinese New Year is analogous to Christmas in the sense that "everyone is in the Christmas spirit, buying presents, doing the things, and when Christmas is over, you are back to the *normal* things. And next Christmas you are back doing the things." For him being Chinese is a "seasonal thing," something different from the "normal" ways of life which becomes activated by the New Year Festivities. (Escort R, my emphasis)

The venue for this year's Miss Chinatown USA was the illustrious and prestigious Herbst Theatre, an auditorium in the War Memorial and Performing Arts Center in Civic Center in San Francisco, far away from Chinatown. The venue of MCU changed several times throughout its history, depending on its ticket sales. The Herbst Theatre has 928 seats¹²⁶, which none of the Chinatown institutions can offer, therefore moving out from Chinatown is not considered to be symbolic. This opinion is further confirmed by the fact that all other activities related to MCU – such as the press conference and even the pageant after party– are confined to Chinatown. I see the symbolic significance in the choice of venue that being able to rent and host an event in it showcases the capability of Chinese Americans to literally occupy a space in the mainstream society. Holding the event in the Civic Center could suggest an opening gesture toward the mainstream society. However, the vast majority of the audience constituted of

¹²⁵ Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (University of California Press, 2008).

¹²⁶ Today's 1000 visitors is a significant drop from previous years. At the heyday of MCU it was held in the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts that has a capacity to take 4500 people.

Chinese people, most likely because the event was only promoted within Chinatown. The public was seemingly not invited to the event, unless fostering connections with Chinatown organizations.

The only non-Chinese in the audience apart from myself were exclusively sponsors and judges – albeit the two functions overlapped to a great extent. The ‘judges panel’ is traditionally composed of both non-Chinese and Chinese members, mixed in gender as well. This years’ composition was three Chinese judges (among them only one woman) to four non-Chinese (among them three women).¹²⁷ Their ethnic/racial distribution intersecting with their gender had a significant impact on the final outcome, since they probably had quite different understanding of beauty. However, since the model minority representation was assured through the preliminary screening, organizers seemingly did not worry about the actual result. What organizers sought through the composition of the panel was more concerned with strengthening the Chinatown establishment’s socioeconomic standing within the city. The majority of judges represented political organizations (e.g. San Francisco’s Housing Authority Commission), city institutions (e.g. the War Memorial and Performance Arts that hosted the event) and business enterprises (e.g. Bank of the Orient or the Thunder Valley Casino Resort). Inviting these influential people and symbolically endowing them with the right to choose their queen, therefore provided a platform for the CCC in which it could solidify its connections politically, socially and economically.

The pageant received serious critiques because of the wide gap between the pageant’s glamour and the social reality of the community it claims to represent during the heightened civil rights movements during the sixties and seventies. While Chinatown still struggles with serious social problems, mostly revolving around housing and living standards still, Miss Chinatown did not tackle these issues directly – not even in the q/a section despite all questions

¹²⁷ See Appendix 2. for details on judges.

pertained to Chinese Americans. However, the panel of judges – especially the presence of president of the Housing Authority Commission and the president of Academy of Art University, the biggest landlord in San Francisco after the Church – seemed to suggest genuine concern with these issues.

The show begins

Scholars of other diasporic Chinese beauty pageants pointed to a contradiction between the event's self-definition as 'cultural' – a marker of difference from mainstream pageants - and the actual lack of "traditional Chinese practices."¹²⁸ A general confusion underlies these statements about the meaning of "culture" within these settings – both on the side of event organizers, contestants as well as on the scholars' who research them. Both look at the event through the ethnic lens and readily assume that the "cultural stuff," to borrow Barth's wording is "Chinese." Scholarly attention therefore either deprived the performed American elements from their cultural nature or framed them as performances of American citizenship, instead of ethnicity. None attributed attention to the decidedly culturally hybrid elements. In this section, I will review how Chineseness, Americanness, and Chinese Americanness have been performed on the stage going as far as to argue that contestants indeed performed American ethnicity.

The unmistakably Chinese cultural elements which provided the Chinese atmosphere according to CCC member K, mostly revolved mostly around the theme of the Chinese New Year. The show opened with a local sport association's lion dance performance. The lion dance is considered to be a traditional element of Chinese New Year festivities, accompanied by a drum number. All performers of the opening number were women, albeit traditionally both the drum and the dance are performed by men because they require intense physical presence.

¹²⁸ Yiu Fai Chow, "Moving, Sensing Intersectionality: A Case Study of Miss China Europe," *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): 418; Chiu, "Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests," 188.

Though the format and the shape were absolutely traditional, the lions were decorated with neon lights and the performance was carried out in the dark, which can be seen as an enactment of technological advancement, carefully adapted to preserved traditions. This symbolic enactment of progress coupled with heritage preservation along with shifting notions about women's capacities can be seen as a symbolic rearticulation of the communities' self-definition.

It is interesting to note that the guest performances indicated a deliberate intention for displaying every age cohort of Chinese American women that could be read as exemplifying the future, the present, and the past of them. After the traditional lion dance, Sutro Elementary School's 3rd-5th grader performed a New Year's children song in Mandarin. Even though they were introduced as all 3rd-5th graders of the school, no males and no other ethnicities featured in the group, only fourteen Chinese girls. Both their number and their uniform looks (hairdo and Chinese costume) anticipated the fourteen contestants, who appeared soon after them, wearing uniform Chinese-flavored cocktail dresses. The school girls' performance was deliberately deprived of any sexuality, the girls wore trousers and neither the song nor the choreography suggested any gendered expectations towards them. They were there to represent an open-ended future, filled with carefree youthful optimism. The girls' performance was the most authentic performance of Chineseness, meaning that it did not contain any elements of American culture. In Turner's ritual theory they would exemplify the pre-liminal phase, notably performed by "purely" Chinese children.

Before the contestants appeared, the queen and "court" of MCU 2016 performed an energetic K-pop number for popular Taiwanese singer, Jolin Tsai's *Play*. This performance showcased the opportunity lying in winning the title. The former queen and her court were designed to represent celebrities which was highlighted and enhanced by four professional back-up dancers. The choice for the song and the choreography aimed at representing a 21st century cool Asian vibe. Both K-pop moves, and even certain Mandopop songs broke into the

global market and earned fame and success for themselves. The former queen – who did not pursue a career at entertainment but works at Google as an engineer instead – promoted the idea of a globally attractive and absolutely independent Asian woman. This performance represented the perspective that lies in winning a title, that is to become a transnational celebrity. Offering this perspective is very significant as celebrity status, “the quickest route to material wealth is not quite open to Chinese Americans,”¹²⁹ aside from sporadic examples. To counter this statistic, the guest performers were exclusively Chinese Americans, the majority of them former MCU queens. The adoption of global Asian popular cultural elements detached the notion of Chineseness both off the ground from America and China, while it endowed the performance with transnational significance.

The emcees played the most significant role in the event, as they were on the stage the most, therefore had the opportunity to shape the dynamics and directions of discourses on stage. For the first time, the event was trilingual: Cantonese, Mandarin and English. The composition of the emcee triad was highly symbolical: Julia, wearing an elegant Chinese gown was the Cantonese speaking emcee represented the tradition in the event, having had emceeing it “for many-many years.” Betty, a former queen wearing a Western style Evening gown represented continuity and was in charge of English for the night. Both ladies wore an excessive amount of jewelry on their necks, ears, arms and fingers, which they changed on more occasions during the evening. The constant shining and glittering that surrounded them lend the event a glamorous atmosphere, showcasing the wealth and affluence of the community. The luxury of the event with all the costumes, jewelries, and shining high heels reflects the rise of a global

¹²⁹ Chiu, “Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests,” 244.

and transnational Chinese capitalist class, exemplified by the values propagated by most contestants.¹³⁰

The third emcee, the only male on stage was Jeff, the Mandarin speaking American, repeatedly referring to himself as “that white guy.” This was the first time in the history of MCU that a white American was invited to emcee the event, and this was the first time that there was a separate Mandarin emcee, as MCU’s Chinese has been traditionally Cantonese. Assuming that the producers could have hired an ethnic Chinese for this task, I understand this as an act of reversed colonization. Jeff’s role, who is a Yale graduate Hollywood entertainer, was primarily to serve the pride of the community. He quite willingly subsumed to this role by proving over and over again his admiration for Chinese culture. Julia complimented Jeff on his Mandarin on almost every occasion he said something, saying *shui de hen hao*,¹³¹ and attempted to teach him Cantonese as well. As Jeff also noted it, she did not try to teach Betty (nor to compliment on her English), who did not reveal any hints regarding her knowledge of (any) Chinese as she spoke only in English throughout the night. The figures of Betty and Jeff embodied hybridization through causing direct confusion about race and ethnicity. Betty, who could be considered as racially Chinese was actually ethnically American; while Jeff, who was racially American was ethnically Chinese. This confusion over race and ethnicity can be conceived as part of the rite the passage of a limonoid social group. This sense of in-betweenness was characteristic for the whole event, best exemplified by the contestants, who finally took stage.

The fourteen contestants finally appeared all at once on the stage, notably after a short period of complete darkness finally. The fact that they appeared all at once in their uniformly designed Chinese-flavored cocktail dresses inevitably evoked Turner’s theory about liminal

¹³⁰In this aspect, MCU was quite similar to MNYC, discussed by Chiu. See: Chiu, “Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests.”

¹³¹ *Shuo de hen hao* means “well said,” and is something you would say to someone who just started to learn the language – be it a child or a foreigner, but definitely not someone, who is completely fluent.

entities “being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew.” A prominent characteristic of these beauty contests which can be analyzed as means for producing a sense of community is the purposive creation of a common aesthetic “out of an orchestrated uniform appearance and behavior.” Except for infinitesimal differences in the group's formation and the different sets of costumes, contestants look very much the same on the stage. The common aesthetic is provided by uniformly designed costumes for the introduction and the swimsuit portions, designed by the committee. This is a conspicuous difference from other beauty pageants, where contestants have to take care their own outfits, turning these events to “wardrobe competitions.” The uniform aesthetic of the stage creates a “sense of cohesion and a sense of a common Chineseness [Americanness] as a naturalized category out of an otherwise incredibly eclectic and completely dissimilar group of young women”, as Chiu points it out in her analysis of Miss New York Chinese.¹³²

Thus, the uniformity in contestants’ looks symbolized a sense of community while they performed an absolutely uniform choreography to Tez Cadey’s 2015 electro/deep house hit, *Seve*. The song and choreography accompanied by the hybrid style of the dresses projected a common aesthetic of global cosmopolitan fantasy embodied by modern Chinese American women. This imagery had no distinct or readily identifiable ethnic elements, but a bit of everything, therefore was an enactment of absolute cultural hybridization. As a CCC member described the ideal contestants:

[they] have *the best of both worlds*. (...) We are Chinese American[s], they should definitely be *assimilated*, and *adapted*, you know, and *succeed* in America. But at the same time, this is what I do teach to my children, “You are Chinese American, so never forget your roots, and your culture,” I think that’s where being a Chinese American do have the advantage.¹³³

¹³² Chiu, “Beauty Unit(Es) and Contests,” 180.

¹³³ CCC member N, interview with the author.

Albeit the notion of hybridity is most often associated with a ‘neither-nor dialectic,’ what Said called a “general condition of homelessness,”¹³⁴ MCU’s conceptualization invites a ‘both-and’ connotation instead. The hybridity represented by MCU is an empowered hybridity, she is not *between* worlds, but at home *everywhere*. Her biculturality does not deprive her from claiming place but is an accomplishment that endows her with a stronger grasp on life and brighter prospects. This ideal has been exemplified in contestants’ self-introductions.

The collective introduction was followed by individual introductions. Although dramaturgically this part should have served the dissolution of the collectivity to its constituents, the individual portrays reinforced the common aesthetic once again. Every contestant attempted to say a Chinese New Year greeting in Chinese at least – mostly Cantonese, some Mandarin, thereby creating an illusion or affirming their grasp of their ability to speak Chinese.¹³⁵ As language was not part of the entry criteria, contestants varied greatly in their ability to speak a dialect of Chinese. While some contestants proudly showcased their fluency, others only memorized a few words, suggesting that they still felt the need to perform Chineseness lingually. This pressure cannot be solely attributed to the pageant, but is a common, everyday experience for most Chinese, especially for those who do not speak the language.¹³⁶ What Chow describes as following the “hegemony of visual Chineseness” Chinese people are “expected to “act,” and thus speak, Chinese if they looked Chinese.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Edward W. Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466405>. In Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture,’” 9.

¹³⁵ Crystal Lee, Miss Chinatown USA 2010, Miss America 2014 1st runner up, an active member within the Chinese (beauty) community shares eight tips on her website for “everyone who is, or is considering, running for Miss Chinatown,” among which the third is practicing the Chinese New Year four-character greetings. She says, “the more of these you learn, the larger your toolkit for useful self-introduction phrases. Cantonese or mandarin is fine.”

“So You Want To Be Miss Chinatown?,” CrystalClues, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.crystalclues.com/blog/2017/2/1/so-you-want-to-be-miss-chinatown>.

¹³⁶ This is why Ien Ang, leading cultural thinker gave her volume on overseas Chinese identity the title ‘On Not Speaking Chinese’. Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (Psychology Press, 2001).

¹³⁷ Chow, “Moving, Sensing Intersectionality,” 429.

After their greetings, instead of listing their measurements, contestants catalogued their achievements and accomplishments. All introduction bore a uniform design in departing from one's past, through present accomplishments to future aspirations. The aspirations included "hope to one day pursue a career in the field of engineering and consulting," "dream to become an anesthesiologist," or to "aspire to become a chief technology officer" to list but a few. These dreams and hopes are quite peculiar on the stage of a beauty pageant, and clearly promote an imagery of independent career women, standing on their own feet, with no mentioning of family or community service. This is a sharp divergence from the early MCU pageants, where family orientation was highly appreciated, as the need to showcase the ability to form families was salient due to the bachelor stereotype discussed earlier. The fact that family discourse vanished completely is due, on the one hand, to that the bachelor society stereotype has already faded away, and, on the other hand, to the significant change in general rhetoric about women's role in society.

Contestants' aspirations mostly pertained to high status jobs with a Caucasian male dominance. As one contestant explicitly put it: "tonight, I am going to show the world, what being Chinese American means to me. Fiercely competitive, and insanely driven." As contestant applications went through severe scanning we can assume the projection of this image is hardly accidental. As a CCC member argued "the female in society changed ... and we encourage that, they represent us well." (CCC member N) The same representative also pointed to importance of being "tech-savvy" that emerged as an important expectation alongside educational background, as this year's theme was "A New Generation of Beauty," seemingly best represented by the high ratio of STEM majors and professionals among contestants¹³⁸. Albeit being "very aware of technologies" has particular importance to the locality of San Francisco regarding the physical proximity of the Silicon Valley, it still

¹³⁸ Five contestants out of fourteen.

exemplifies global significance. Tech-savviness is a capital of good exchange rate across the globe. The discourse contestants produced evolved around being a role model for Asian Americans, defined in individualistic capitalist terms.

The next segment was one of the major non-fashion segments of the event, the talent portion. At this portion every contestant individually performed a talent of her choice. A significant majority chose dancing (ten out of fourteen) from which suggests that contestants found this portion to be the best option to showcase their femininity alongside their cultural knowledge about China. Even though the committee did not expect the talent performances to be related to Chinese culture, most of the contestants were convinced that it was an advantage to perform something Chinese. Albeit only half of them identified their dances explicitly as Chinese, or Chinese-fusion dance, almost everybody chose to display a somewhat restrained, Orientalized notion of femininity and applied classical accessories of Chinese dance such as the ribbon, flags, and fan. The only contestant, who decided to perform a distinctively “Western” dance – a tango to be more precise – and enacted an excessively sexual performance of femininity was the only contestant who was born and raised in the Mainland and moved to America not long before. As she had a firm grasp on “Chinese culture” she did not feel it necessary to showcase it on stage. While other contestants, who did not feel safe enough considering their Chinese sides, felt compelled to compensate their lack of actual knowledge with acting out Chineseness. As most contestant prepare for the pageant by watching previous years’ YouTube videos, this can also be an unintendedly solidified trend.

Another significant cause behind the homogeneity of performances is linked both to the organizational structure the pageant is staged on interrelated with the class component of the model minority image. Most contestants began dancing at an early age (four-five years old), as Chinese American parents *traditionally* make their kids to attend to all sort of classes, among which Chinese dance is highly popular, at least in the Bay Area. Chinese dance schools usually

take the form of associations that foster relationship with other Chinese associations. One contestant for example entered her first pageant, Miss Chinatown Houston, because her dance school has a tradition of sending girls to the pageant, organized by the CACA of Houston. However, having the opportunity to bring your children to extra classes requires both free time and money, which is a good proxy for excluding the working class from the pageant. As a copy shop owner in Chinatown summarized for me when I asked whether his daughter would participate in the pageant: “those who have talent, participate, those who don’t, watch.”

Therefore, the talent portion indirectly invite the notion of the Tiger Mom ideal, who is the mother protagonist in family of the model minority myth. As a contestant pointed out, MCU “care[s] a lot more about (...) the whole Tiger Mom ideal in America, about how Chinese people have this really strict standard for their kids, which I think is representative of ... kind of Chinese culture.” (Former contestant RL) Her hesitation of identifying the Tiger Mom ideal with Chinese culture right away derived from a particularly complicated situation she arrived at when compared the Chinese TVB pageants and the American MC pageants. She argued that the TVB pageants are more Chinese, because they are “more traditional” beauty pageants, whereas the MC pageants are more American, because “they want a more holistic, more well-rounded girls” which according to her requires Ivy league education, and a lot of talents growing up, that is well... More representative of Chinese culture.

This ideal, invoked by the figure of the Tiger Mom encompasses much of the model minority myth. As such it is a specifically American notion of Chineseness, that has been proposed and promoted by the Chinatown establishment in the early Cold War years and later became appropriated by Mainstream American media discourse. During the past half century, the model minority myth became reality for every Chinese Americans, as by now, it has assumed the status of an ideology, in Althusser’s sense, seeking to the back of the consciousness.

It has become the framework for the collective public image¹³⁹ in which every Chinese American has to conceive his or her success and failure what would constitute his or her identity. It has become the decisive factor whether one is Chinese or not. Therefore, I will refer to these notions as articulations and performances of American Chinese ethnicity.

Be that as it may, the unintended and unexpected uniformity of performances made them monotonous. As a result, the Miss Talent title went to the only classical Chinese instrument player, who performed the best-known piece written for *pipa*, to the greatest surprise and indignations to my neighbors in the audience, who found the performance quite miserable technically. The result signaled the lack of Chinese cultural knowledge on the side of the jury.

The Chinese femininity, exemplified by the talent portion was balanced with the very Americanized notion of femininity in the swimsuit round. The swimsuits were designed by the same designer, but differed in style and color, making it a symbol of “diversity and uniformity.” Most of the Chinese beauty pageants in the U.S. include the swimsuit segment, although when the MCU was founded in 1958, the organizers “prided themselves for not having their contestants parade around in bathing suits” and was not introduced until 1967.¹⁴⁰ As the bikini is “arguably one of the most modern and revealing pieces of women’s clothing,” it stands in sharp contrast with the Chinese notion of femininity that is reserved and introverted. Probably this is the reason why contestants were given Beijing opera masks, an emblem of Chinese cultural authenticity, to cover their face on an occasion at MCE, reported by Chow.¹⁴¹

In MCU 2018, contestants were only given a veil to cover their bottoms, which they had to unfold when turning their front to the audience. This segment lends itself for the harshest feminist critique as it solely serves the purpose of objectifying female bodies, literally reducing

¹³⁹ I borrow the term public image from Jenkins, who defined it as “the vexed question of how others see us.” Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 2008, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Wu, “Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!,” 23.

¹⁴¹ Chow, “Moving, Sensing Intersectionality,” 421.

them to flesh, worsened by enumerating contestants' measurements while they perform their walk. In this case, it was exacerbated by introducing contestants' sponsors, thereby attributing the physical form and fitness of contestants to their sponsors. Obtaining sponsorship is also a criterion for the pageant. The ability to recruit a sponsor presupposes a somewhat fledged network that can be translated to social capital. As sponsors get invited to all events related to the pageant, sponsoring a contestant is an investment for them in boosting their own networks. During this segment Jennifer Lopez's *Papi* was playing, the "lyrics [of which] center around Lopez's love for dancing for her man,"¹⁴² further enhancing the idea that a woman's worth is measured through the admiration she can squeeze off her sponsor. However, as contestants' narratives reveal, this segment generally fostered a strong sense of self-confidence in revealing themselves to the gaze of others that was perceived as empowering.

To compensate the excessive nudity and oversexualization of their bodies, contestants got to put on their evening gowns for the next segment. This time only music was playing, the emcees silently withdraw. The evening gown is a segment that almost every beauty pageant feature, probably because the symbolism it represents is highly adaptable to the norms and values that are embraced by different beauty pageants. As Chiu put it: "The elaborate gowns are symbols of the economic, political, and social/cultural assent of imagined communities. The evening gown, which is a visible element of contemporary mainstream fashion, is a site upon which, in a capitalist economy, the desire and fantasy for wealth materializes."¹⁴³ As such, they also contribute to the display of the Chinatown establishment's affluence.

The question and answer portion was conducted while contestants still had the elegant gowns on. It is a recurring theme in beauty pageant literature what contestants wear when they get to this portion. Often times it is bikinis that is at once challenging but if successful it truly

¹⁴² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papi_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papi_(song))

¹⁴³ Mignonette Chiu, "Beauty Unit (Es) and Contests: Ethnic Chinese Beauty Pageants and a Global Chinese 'Nation'" (Columbia University, 2010), 243.

embodies the “whole in one package”¹⁴⁴ narrative that is often cited throughout this round, since this is the part of the pageant when contestants can showcase their intelligence. On Chinese pageants it is usually the *qipao* what they wear, explained as it is the q/a when contestants should ritually enact their Chineseness. However, in MCU 2018 it was the evening gown that served to project the image of an elite and knowledgeable Chinese woman.

The questions themselves were quite unusual to beauty pageants, as half of them directly tackled social issues concerning the Chinese in America, such as: “Who is the most influential person in the Chinese community, who would you like to meet, or have met, and why?” or “Even in 2018 America, where Chinese people are in every corner of society, there are still many misconceptions about them. What do you feel is the biggest misconception, and how would you help educate on this?” Questions evolving around the politics of the community render the queen of MCU a political role, also implied by her title of “goodwill ambassador” for the community. The indirect political nature implied by the questions signals that women are assigned a role in the transforming political sphere of the Chinatown establishment. The qualities possessed by MCU clearly include leadership skills, which is not characteristic of other beauty pageants. The necessity of these skills is justified by her tasks as “goodwill ambassador.” Having an attractive looking politician boosts the social capital of the entire community.¹⁴⁵

The female presence on stage was prevalent throughout the whole event. The stage was set for women for the whole night: all guest performers were women. Compared to the other pageants mentioned above this is a significant difference.¹⁴⁶ One of the most distinctive characteristic of the pageant was the unusual amount of opportunity for contestants to speak for

¹⁴⁴ The “whole in one package” is synonymous with “beauty and brains.”

¹⁴⁵ This argument draws on Allport’s Contact Hypothesis. Behind the inception of MCU as a representative of Chinese for the mainstream society lurks an amatoerish psychological assumption that having a representative who pleases the mainstream society eventually improves the mainstream society’s attitude towards the Chinese in general.

¹⁴⁶ Chiu for example reports in the case of MNYC that contestants have to dance around male celebrities.

themselves. Apart from the introduction and Q/A portion, they also provided personal narratives about their talent performances, which were announced by the MC's before the performances. The Q/A session was also more encouraging than on other pageants. Contestants could take as long as they wished to – unlike in other pageants, where an intimidating sound constantly reminds the contestants that they have to finish at any moment. Considering the pageant as a whole, it promoted an empowered, independent, agile, and successful image for Chinese women, for which it provided as much time and space as needed. All together this confirms the hypothesis about women's changing role in the Chinatown establishment.

The *qipaos*, which is the common denominator of all Chinese beauty pageants, did not miss from MCU either. According to Chiu, the *qipao* “is the one element that is common to all ethnic Chinese beauty pageants and is incorporated as the most defining element in the pageant of ethnic Chineseness.” The *qipao* became the “the garment of choice for self-marking as a Chinese” during the heightened Chinese nationalism during the 1920s-1930s. The modern *qipao* was a part of “the Republican discourse of the “New Woman” and “[b]oth the qipao and its wearers were stitched into the rubric of... modernity”¹⁴⁷ as symbols of Chinese national identity.¹⁴⁸ According to Ling, the *qipao* served to represent an emerging middle class with some education and financial independence, as well as social and cultural awareness. “Those women wearing their qipaos were significant in the creation of a progressive China and were co-opted by the state as Republican icons.” After the Republican government came into power and intended to severely regulate *qipaos*, the dress also became a site for popular resistance and female empowerment. Despite its rich and colorful history, today's *qipaos* do not bear more meaning than being the self-markers for Chinese women, and this was their role in MCU 2018 as well. The MCU contestants only put on their *qipaos* for the grand announcements, after

¹⁴⁷ Wessie Ling, “Chinese Clothes for Chinese Women: Fashioning the Qipao in 1930s China” (1st Global Conference: Fashion: Exploring Critical Issues., Mansfield College, Oxford, 2009), 6.

¹⁴⁸ Chiu, “Beauty Unit (Es) and Contests,” 209.

which they do not talk or move again. Therefore, the *qipaos* were the costumes to perform a radically Chinese notion of femininity, subsuming to complete reservedness.

Albeit the pageant did not require performances of Chinese femininity before, and provided a lot greater space for performing American femininity, one CCC member said: “It’s also how you embody Chinese beauty, everything a young Chinese woman should be, it shouldn’t just be beauty, it’s also an awareness of culture, an awareness of Confucian values, knowing kind of – *how to behave*, right?” What CCC member K formulated as “knowing how to behave” is something that Omi and Winant call “racial etiquette”, the appropriate modes of conduct rendered to certain races. It is a big question whether someone, who is Chinese, can embody anything else then Chinese beauty. According to CCC member K the body has to be matched with appropriate cultural knowledge and goes beyond to single out Confucius. A good introduction to this racial etiquette is provided by former MCU Crystal Lee, in a blog post titled *So You Want to Be Miss Chinatown?* Here she shares eight useful tips, among which is tellingly only one, that encompasses everything what needs to know in order to be successful:

6.) Study up on Chinese etiquette (accept red envelopes with both hands.) I've been trying to teach my caucasian boyfriend this and we have a way to go before it's a habit. He has a pass because he's white but if you're Asian and reading this, you have no excuse. Accept all red envelopes and business cards with two hands.¹⁴⁹

While “whites have a pass” from this piece of etiquette, “Asians have no excuse,” thereby Crystal herself defines this custom in racial and not ethnic terms. It is also interesting that she singles out this one piece as the most significant one. Apparently, there were only two contestants this year, who either read Crystal’s blog, or picked it up from home, but the other twelve contestants carefreely accepted the envelopes on stage with only one of their hands – among them Crystal’s sister, who took the crown home. Most likely the majority of judges were not aware of this etiquette either.

¹⁴⁹ “So You Want To Be Miss Chinatown?”

Conclusion: Crowning the queen – of what exactly?

The symbolism of donning the *qipao* for the crowning is obvious. It is also symbolical that after they put on the *qipao*, contestants do not talk again, not even the queen. They freeze into Chinatown postcard-like postures, beautiful Chinese women in their “traditional” *qipaos*- the unchanging image of Miss Chinatown for sixty years. The crowning ceremony, like most beauty pageants deployed tropes and the discourse of the monarch, throne, scepter, queen, princess, court and the titles were “bestowed.” Albeit the mobilized tropes are not unique to Miss Chinatown, the embodied objects invited a quite unique symbolism. The gem crown for the queen was purportedly designed after the crown of the Statue of Liberty’s that was once installed on the head of the Chinese coolie saying ‘filth,’ ‘immorality,’ ‘diseases,’ and ‘ruin to white labor.’ The crown therefore deployed deeper meanings and symbolized the queen not only as a citizen, but the epitome of citizenship. Countering the crown, the robe, which is the same piece of garment that Miss Chinatown 1958 worn, was a symbol of tradition and continuation. Adorned with an embroidered dragon motif, it opened the interpretation to see the queen as Chinese, the queen of China. Thus, Miss Chinatown, the queen of Chinese America was *both* the queen of America *and* China.



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The crowning of the queen can be interpreted in different ways. For Chiu, it “represents not only the maturation of an ethnic community but as the symbolic mother of that community, is a metaphor for an ethnic community coming into being. But even more, the desire to re-cite a Chinese “queen” speaks to the historical denial of sovereignty to China (state) and Chinese’ (subjects).”¹⁵⁰ Even though I agree with the argument pertaining to the whole show, as the production and consumption of it does undoubtedly produce a community, I do not read the symbolism of crowning the same way. In my view, the crowning symbolizes the success of the Chinese as an ethnic group within the mainstream American society. It symbolizes that the Chinese belong to America, but always remain different – not as if they had another choice. It symbolizes that nevertheless, they are capable of achievements the larger society can only be jealous of. But the larger society is not in the theater, so this remains a secret, that knits the community even closer.

Nonetheless, besides the rich symbolism, MCU serves quite pragmatic ends as well. The ritual is more of a spectacle, behind which the Chinatown establishment solidifies its networks. Albeit norms and values do get negotiated on the surface of the spectacle, the real significance of the pageant lies in the networks that come across each other here thereby forming stronger and more potent networks. At the end of the day, the power accumulated in the nodes of the networks can serve the real needs of Chinatown. Inviting the president of the Housing Authority Commission to the judges’ panel suggests that the establishment has such considerations. Regardless of the pragmatic connotations behind the curtains, the show that goes on the stage involves real individuals, who have a different perspective of the happenings. Albeit the pageant as a framework shapes their narratives to some extent, but their narratives also shape the general framework in turn. In the next chapter I will turn to discuss the micro dimension of the pageant.

¹⁵⁰ Chiu, “Beauty Unit (Es) and Contests,” 95.

Just Like Balancing in Heels – Individual identity constructions

To discuss the logic of contestants' identity constructions, I will adopt Jenkins's notion of the entangled relationship between ethnicity and race discussed it in the theoretical chapter with extending it to gender and class. Jenkins' main argument that self-identifications are inseparable from externally imposed categorizations will form the core of the discussion, combined with Goffman's theorization about the presentation of the self. Goffman differentiates between the signs that are given and the signs that are given off while the self is performed. The signs all of us involuntarily give off are race and gender, deriving from the indispensable corporeality of our selves. The time and space specific expectations towards these signs, the sociocultural meanings with which they are endowed are at the center of attention of scholars of race and gender. Scholars who argue that both – and all other – features of our body become realities through the act of their performance draw attention to the agency individuals have in dealing with these "fixed" signs, but also point to the limits of freedom posed by the prevalence of expectations. Thus, expectations provide both a structure and a framework within which race and ethnicity can be performed. At the intersection of Jenkins' and Goffman's theory lies an argument elaborated by Butler, namely that these constrained performances in turn become incorporated and shape individuals' identities, perpetuating the expectations.

The pageant with its direct and indirect, assumed and real expectations described in the previous chapter provides a palpable framework, within which contestants perform their identities. It offers an interesting site for analyzing the dynamics of self and presentation discussed above because it provides a fixed setting. In this chapter, I will analyze how variously – this supposedly and purposely homogenous group of – contestants perceived these expectations which in turn lead to a wide range of differences in their strategies to present

themselves, which, in turn resulted in different outcomes the experience effected their identities. In my work, I attempt to show how the contextuality and processuality of their identities and performances over write the seemingly fixed structures. This example shows that albeit ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’ are a product of place and time but are not fully determined by them. Through the interviews I have gained an insight to how individual contestants perceive their raced, ethnicized and gendered selves, and how they perceive their selves being perceived by others. In addition, I have also learned how they cope with these perceptions, how they strive to construct their identification in harmonious ways, and what their strategies are to reach a state of harmony. This account also confirms the necessity for focusing on the micro perspective, proving that “personal accounts often give an entirely different and more holistic view of race,”¹⁵¹ complementing with ethnicity and gender.

Motivations

Albeit the group of contestants was homogenized in the sense that they all had the “prospect of representing” the Chinese American community “well,” meaning they all carried the prospect of projecting the model minority image, their motivations for entering the pageant already spoke about a great diversity within the group. The diversity in motivations resulted from different backgrounds that translated to different conception of what one meant by “heritage,” “roots” and “culture”.

As noted earlier, contestants exemplified a great range in the “gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences.”¹⁵² As a nation-wide event, contestant backgrounds ranged from third generation San Franciscans through second generation Houstonians to recent immigrants from

¹⁵¹ Clara E. Rodríguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census and the History of Ethnicity* (NYU Press, 2000), xi.

¹⁵² Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 148.

New York.¹⁵³ Naturally, they fostered different hopes in, and had different expectations towards entering the pageant.¹⁵⁴ To illustrate how wide the range is I will begin the discussion with the two ends of the spectrum. While a recent immigrant to New York said “[my] main motivation for this pageant was that I feel like I’m very representative of the Chinese American community because I was an *immigrant*” and went on discussing that what “qualifies” her is her strong grasp of “Chinese culture.” (Contestant LL) As a contrast, a third-generation San Franciscan contestant said she always knew that she wanted to compete in Miss Chinatown, “because my father was born here, and Miss Chinatown was a *big deal* in the Chinese community.” (Contestant CL)

Contestant LL identified the cultural component without hesitation with China, with Chinese language in particular, which she found the most important quality of Miss Chinatown USA. However, her understanding of Chinese culture did not meet Miss Chinatown’s agenda, thus she expressed strong disappointment with the results, saying that “the Chinese culture itself was not very well measured.” She said that albeit MCU 2018 “is a very capable and good person” but she still feels “like she doesn’t speak Chinese well, and she has a very basic understanding of Chinese culture,” unlike herself, who as she said “have a much better understanding of Chinese culture just because [I] speak the language perfectly and understand all the history, and the proverbs.” Her understanding of “Chinese culture” with its strong emphasis on Mandarin language reflects the PRC’s current understanding of Chinese culture, especially its transplantation overseas,¹⁵⁵ and it does have little in common with the pageant organizer’s

¹⁵³ I struggle with a conceptual uneasiness here because the people I refer to are usually labeled as second-generation Chinese. Despite its advantage of easily describing someone’s Chinese ancestry, I find the term problematic for several reasons. Most importantly because it strongly suggests that these people are migrants themselves and reinforces the idea that they are foreigners even though they were born and raised in the country they reside in. For this reason, I will stick to relating the generation to their Americanness. A second-generation San Franciscan therefore refers to someone, whose grandparents immigrated to San Francisco.

¹⁵⁴ The ratio of Mainland Chinese contestants (3:14) was significantly underrepresented in the group, far from reflecting their actual constitution of the Chinese American diaspora. To discuss the reasons behind this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁵⁵ As carried out by the Confucius Institute for example.

intention, as the previous chapter shows. What she means by “history” is also quite different from the history the pageant organizers have in mind. MCU 2018 did indeed have a very good understanding of both Chinese culture and history that was assessed and acknowledged by the judges, but that was a quite different culture from the one Contestant LL expected the pageant to be. It is a history of Chinese Americans, the history of Chinese in San Francisco and the pageant more precisely.

The perspective illustrated by Contestant CL, who entered the pageant because of her desire to be part of a local tradition was a closer match with the organizers’ vision. Contestants therefore, who grew up in San Francisco looking up to Miss Chinatown as a role model themselves had greater odds for winning the crown. The title also meant something different for them than for contestants from other cities in the US or China. Contestant LL for example wanted the title in order to boost her political capital being the ambassador for the Chinese community entailed, in order to further her aspirations to “eventually become one of the politicians in the San Francisco government or California government.”

For those contestants, who grew up being aware of Miss Chinatown as an important figure, and as little girls thought “Oh, wow. Miss Chinatown seems like a really cool figure,” (Contestant SW) participating in the pageant meant taking part in the tradition, and “admittedly share the same memories and experiences as all of the women of the last sixty-one years did.” (Contestant CL) As Contestant SW pointed out, the pageant also served as an initiation ritual to this history, since “as a kid, you just know that Miss Chinatown is an *image* that you look up to, (...) But you don’t really know what goes into it.” Through the course of the pageant, especially the follow-up week with the association visits contestants are given a “chance to really embrace themselves in this sort of Chinese community and visit the associations, visit the elders, learn all about the history of the pageant” thus make them “realize, okay, there are lot of existing relationships and history and traditions associated with this.” (Contestant CL)

For them, history first and foremost meant “the long-standing history of Chinese Americans coming into San Francisco,” while they all identified the family association visits as the “cultural component” of the pageant.

Association visits

Consisting mostly of elderly males, these associations seek to preserve “authentic Chinese culture” which they perform on large banquets that serve a dual function, catering to the needs of all range of the contestants. These banquets provide those contestants an opportunity to get familiar with traditions that might be new to them given that they live outside of ethnic burbs and lead what I would call ethnically American lives. As Contestant SW put it: “Honestly, it exposed me to a lot more Chinese culture than I expected, conversing with them in Chinese improved my Chinese language significantly, and really seeing all the tradition and the customs that people go through in these large banquets [brought me] a lot closer to my heritage” Her heritage therefore meant a profoundly Chinese American heritage, and did not reach back to China. Meanwhile, the association visits also allow those contestants, who are familiar with these customs given their experiences as either growing up in ethnic burbs or in China to “feel more at home” by “revisit things that are common in [their] heritage.” (Contestant KC) KC moved to the United States to pursue higher education. The contest therefore provided her an opportunity to get involved with the local community and find a piece of home away from home.

As a former contestant argued, “with all that history, there is somewhat of a Chinese cultural aspect to the pageant, because it’s formed around, visiting all these associations, (...) so it’s very, very centered around this whole deep community aspect in San Francisco which I didn’t realize until I did the pageant, that there was this much vibrancy in Chinatown here.” Thus, Contestant CL’s perspective echoed Contestant SW’s point in the sense that the pageant served as an initiation ritual which made her realize not only where she comes from, but also

where *she is* at the moment. The revelation of the existence of a close-knit community in her proximity that welcomes her with open arms was not a unique experience of CL but was echoed by many other contestants I interviewed, saying “a lot of these contestants, myself included have never heard about these family associations or visited them before.” (Contestant JL) Contestants voiced a general surprise about “the current status of how connected we are here,” (Contestant SW) having different takes on what this opportunity meant for them. While some contestants highlighted the emotional aspect of discovering this community hidden in “holes in the walls”¹⁵⁶ scattered across Chinatown, others were more pragmatic considering more so the potential this belonging entails.

Albeit most contestants expressed doubts about the factual relation between them and their respective family associations, even the most skeptics were moved by the support these associations demonstrated. As one contestant expressed: “I felt so honored, you know, these people don’t *know* me, and I barely know them, but yet, even before meeting me, and even before winning they agreed to meet with me, and they honored me with a necklace called a *gampai*, (...) a really beautiful and symbolic gold medal, and it’s very kind of them to help me and give me this great gift and honor me, even though they barely knew me.” (Contestant JL) According to the contestants, the associations assured them about their unconditional support both verbally and symbolically, therefore they ritually accepted them to the symbolic corpus of the family. As another contestant summarized: “we are probably not related, or maybe related thousands and thousands of years ago, but it was still very nice to have almost somebody, who supports you like your family, even though you are not necessarily related. So that support was very nice.” (Contestant KC) Having a symbolical family served an emotional function for some, and an opportunity for the other.

¹⁵⁶ Contestant J, interview with the author.

The family associations apart from the traditions also demonstrated their power and influence within today's Chinatown. Mayor Ed Lee's name occurred on more occasions in relation to the Lee family association, as many contestants found it to be a convincing illustration to explain the current significance of these associations. Ed Lee was the head of the Portland Lee family, who, according to one contestant "were very influential in securing a large Chinese American voter base for him." (Contestant JL) The success of Ed Lee therefore is attributed to the political potential of the Lee association. His success gains symbolical significance because it is a success outside of the Chinese community but resulted from the efficiency of its closely-knit networks, and also it is highly esteemed on the terms of the mainstream society as well.

Thus, the family associations exhibited both cultural heritage preservation and power in today's America, making them attractive sources of social capital. A former contestant summarized her revelation "about the overall community aspect of it": "I didn't know the extent to which the associations were involved in their own organization and the benefit of our community as a whole. Helping (...) young Chinese Americans with scholarships, trying to push different agendas politically, that would help our community. I mean having a SF mayor that's Chinese, just different things like that." (Contestant SW) Of course, having the support of such powerful organizations is not merely symbolic pride, but can be easily translated to personal advancement, as Contestant LL put it: we are able to meet a lot of ... successful people within the community, a lot of Chinatown associations' leaders, so this definitely does help in the future."

The model minority community

This narrative leads us to the one feature that was common to most motivations contestants named on both ends of the spectrum: all contestants sought to establish a network, "kind of a

community area” around themselves as Contestant KC put it. Therefore, the pageant provided an opportunity for incorporation, regardless of how Chinese or American a contestant was. As Contestant RL explained that when she did MCU, it “made [her] realize that there was a network of people, who were supporting [her]” and when she moved to New York and wanted to find “that same environment in New York,” she strategically decided to enter MNYC, as a proved and tested form of incorporation. Even though I emphasized the more pragmatic side of accumulating social capital thus far, a discourse of “sisterhood” was conspicuously interwoven in contestant narratives. Many of them either directly sought the pageant in order to form friendships, as MCU has a reputation for offering a site to bond or referred to finding friends as a pleasant surprise. An account by Contestant SW illuminates what makes MCU such a prime site for forming friendships: “we were easily able to form bonds because... the thing is that people in this pageant are generally very accomplished individuals, who are in higher education and have jobs, so it’s like nice, because you can connect with someone *on your level*, we all have our own ambitions and pageantry is just something that we do on the side.”¹⁵⁷

As discussed in the previous chapter, the preliminary screening of contestants leads to the selection of those, who represent the Chinese as model minority. Albeit the model minority stereotype is deservedly criticized for a number of reasons, for concealing those Chinese who do not conform to this notion and struggle with crucial social problems still salient in Chinatown just to name one, in this context it appears as a positive site for belonging, a site where a “we” is produced. Since the model minority myth has been in the air for more than half a century, similarly to other stereotypes it does operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy and did produce a significant number of people for whom to be a model minority member is a lived reality indeed. In today’s America, which is getting further and further from the fantasy of a colorblind society,

¹⁵⁷ Former contestant S, interview with the author.

this source for identification still provides an empowering opportunity for those of whom it is available. It also perpetuates and expands the divide between those for whom it is not.

It's okay not to be white

To shift the focus from the content to the form I will now discuss how contestants experienced the racial corporeality of their bodies that was in the center of spotlight for an entire evening. As a third generation American discussed, “being Chinese is something that I was embarrassed about for a while (...) ‘cause I always thought that being American defaults into being white.”¹⁵⁸ As she explained, this feeling is not something palpable, since she did not have concrete experience of discrimination, but it is “something that kind of sweeps right into American culture, regardless of what do people consciously think about it or talk about it.” As I learned from another contestant, not long before MCU she attended a mainstream American pageant, and lost, which explains her heightened emotions about the raciality of her body.

Albeit today's Miss America do not apply explicitly racialized criteria neither for admission nor for judging, Chinese and other Asian contestants rarely achieve titles.¹⁵⁹ As another contestant shared with me her point of view “traditionally it's really hard for a Chinese girl to win in American pageant[s] because, America is very diverse, but then, ultimately I think the people who win are white people, or occasionally some black girls win, but Chinese Americans, our body shapes are not the same as Westerners I believe, because we are not as curvy or tall usually and also our facial features and our noses are not as pronounced.” Contestant LL, a Mainland Chinese contestant had a completely different understanding of racial difference. She perceived the two beauty standards as parallel universes on their own

¹⁵⁸ The contestant required special confidentiality for this part of our discussion.

¹⁵⁹ The highest title ever earned on Miss America was the first princess, that went to Crystal Lee in 2014. Her example was absolutely unprecedented and has not been followed with any brakethrough ever since.

rights and felt that she has better chances in entering the one that is ascribed to her. MCU therefore provided an alternative site, where the phenotypic features of Chinese Americans are not a disadvantage, but the norm. This appeared also in the form of a strategy for example in the case of Contestant CL: “the main reason [for entering] was I was Chinese American, and I thought, well, if this pageant is only for Chinese contestants, that narrows down the pool a little bit, so it gives me a higher likelihood of placing.” Albeit no explicit discourse of racism appears in this excerpt, it still relies on the presumption that as soon as the “pool” is more diverse, Chinese are put in a disadvantaged position. Given the homogeneity of contestants, Chinese bodies were measured one against the other, thus successfully eliminating race as a meaningful category. As a result, MCU offered contestants a stage on which they could feel empowered within their (de-racialized) bodies.

The subtle racism described in the excerpt as “sweeping right into American culture” is circulated by popular culture, which was mostly captured in relation to working in the field of entertainment during other interviews. Working in the entertainment industry with the possibility to earn instant fame and celebrity status, an epitome of the American dream was an attractive but ambiguous ambition fostered by some of the contestants. Albeit all those who foster such aspirations identified America as their final destination, some felt that that the way would be less rough through making a roundabout in Hong Kong, where they would be more welcome on the screen. As Contestant LL argued “I guess as a Chinese American it is really hard to become famous in the US. Or at least that’s the feeling that I got. I know that we are very underrepresented here and I’ve heard stories about Hong Kong actresses becoming more famous in Hong Kong and then gradually they will be invited to Hollywood to become actresses and star in movies.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ For example the Grand Marshal of this year’s New Year parade was internationally acclaimed actress Michelle Yeoh, who paved her way to international fame from Hong Kong. It would have been very interesting to discuss the pageant within the larger frame of the New Year and analyze how the meaning of the Grand Marshal title, originally conceived for World War II veterans has shifted until 2018, when an actress received the honorary title.

These “stories” are very much part of Chinatown public discourse, embracing the few exceptions as role models. As the queen of MCU has the opportunity to participate in MCI, that is not only held in Hong Kong, but officially rewards the queen with an acting contract, MCU was a strategic entry point for this contestant. A former MCU on the other hand, who also earned the title of MCI this year on the other hand is reluctant to sign the contract offered to her. She has a different take on her possibilities in America: “I think if I do wanna go into entertainment industry, I kind of wanna do it in America, because (...) there is this call for diversification in Hollywood, and about having more ... minorities on the screen, so, if I were to do it, I would rather do it in a place where I feel like I would have more impact, which is America.” (Contestant RL) These two strategies reveal two antithetical racial experiences of being Chinese. While Contestant LL feels excluded from the industry, Contestant RL sees a particular opportunity reflecting on the “call for diversification in Hollywood,” not only for herself, but as hinted by evoking a discourse of “impact,” also for boosting the image of Chinese through American popular culture. However, not all contestants fostered such aspirations. When I asked MCU 2018 about her prospects going forward to MCI, she laughed and said: “I don’t have much of a desire to become an actress in Hong Kong, ‘cause I like what I am doing here in Silicon Valley, being a software engineer.”

While all the contestants who had experiences with TVB pageants agreed that what they look for is “the actress type,” MCU clearly looked after something else, as Contestant RL put it “they are looking for a girl that they feel like deserves a scholarship award.” And indeed, contestants who aspire for advancing in their studies are proportionally outweigh those, who aspire to be actresses. As MCU offers a 10.000 USD scholarship it is seen by some contestants as a good opportunity to cover some part of their tuition fees, as Contestant CL said, “I figured,

Michelle Yeoh by the way is an interesting role model, because she did not earn her fame with her beauty, but by performing her own stunts in demanding actions movies, something she insisted to do and rejected roles when directors did not allow her to do so.

you know, that would be a great way to get some scholarship money.” Betty, the emcee a former queen seized the opportunity when Jeff asked her about her memories in taking part in the pageant to promote this aspect: “thanks to Miss Chinatown USA I was able to be debt free within a year at UC Berkley.” However, offering scholarship was not among the pageant’s main attractions, since, as already discussed taking part requires and presumes a certain level of affluence. As all contestants came at least from middle class backgrounds and the higher one’s socioeconomic standing is, the higher the likelihood of placing high suggests a certain malposition of the award.

The most revealing portion of the segment, the swim-suit, also belongs to this section because of its body-oriented theme. Only one experience will be discussed here, which belongs to the same contestant who wrestled with “a desire to be white” growing up because as she said in America “being beautiful meant as white as possible, so, you know, having bleached skin, having big eyes, having big boobs, having brown, or blond hair.” For this contestant, the swim suit was the most enjoyable part of the competition because the production team adopted a more American style, which also earned her a higher placement. She said “I think I got lucky that the production team, their style is a style that I like, it’s more American. (...) you want to be very sexy, very confident, very bold, and I like that.” She contrasted it with the Asian style swim suit competitions which are “more “kittsy,” you know, less about sexiness, just more about being cute, and demeanor, I don’t think I would have placed as high.” Albeit she felt uncomfortable in her racially Chinese body because it was not American enough, on the stage of MCU she happily enacted the most American notion of femininity, for which she was rewarded. Albeit MCU offered a site for the display of racial Chinese bodies, it did not require them to be performed “Chinese,” but encouraged to perform an ethnically American femininity instead.

This is probably the greatest contradiction in MCU that causes confusion in both the audience and among the contestants. Officially authentic performances of Chinese and American femininity are just as antagonistic as the bodies themselves. As one contestant summarized: “our standard of beauty is different overall, and also personality-wise I think that the American pageants prefer a more extroverted and super energetic personality, but I think as a Chinese girl, we were brought up to be more reserved and quiet because those are qualities that Eastern cultures value more.” (Contestant LL) This contestant also voiced concerns about MCU 2018’s looks besides her lack of knowledge of Chinese proverbs. “Jasmine has had pretty dark skin I guess, for Chinese standards, she would not have been fair skinned enough to be a typical winner.”

As the majority of jury (4:7) were non-Chinese, the jury encompassed a great diversity of possible beauty standards. Contestant LL assumed that MCU would operate within the universe of Chinese beauty standards since “it is a Chinese pageant,” and however distracting her experiences were, she did not give up on this presumption. She only made vague references to that she was not satisfied with how “the Chinese part was assessed.” Overall, she found that the queen does not represent neither Chinese culture nor Chinese beauty. What she did represent then, what qualified her to be a queen was that “she came from a *family*, you know, she has been to other pageants before and all that, and they were very familiar with the *community*, and she is well-*educated*”¹⁶¹ as a CCC member summed up. What made Jasmine the queen in 2018 had almost nothing to do either with performing femininity or with performing ethnicity. It was not a matter of China or America, but a matter of Chinatown. It was a matter of her network value, that derived from her family and not quite unrelatedly, her education. Jasmine pursues a career in software engineering and works for Microsoft at the moment.

¹⁶¹ CCC member N, interview with the author.

Another contestant had a quite different understanding of the panel of judges and said, “I think usually they try to be fair and have both Eastern and Western individuals.” (Contestant KC) Whether she meant the CCC by “they,” in the compilation of the panel, or the contestants was confusing and remained open to interpretation, but it got cleared up as she went on saying “they try to be fair with both, you know Chinese aspects and American aspects of a person.” Thus, what Contestant LL was reluctant to admit, that this pageant is not Chinese, but Chinese American, and what they want to see in the would-be-MCU is not either-or, but both. As a 1992 titleholder discussed: “There were times growing up trying to find my identity was very, very difficult to be proud of one over the other. But, we are a melting pot within ourselves. And we can bring all that with us, and never be ashamed. So, I think the important thing is to find the balance in all that. Just like we do balance at heels.”

Conclusion: Melting pot within ourselves

The well-tailored metaphor of balancing in heels encompasses many contestants’ experiences. As they wrestle on the stage in their heels and swimsuits, they wrestle with not knowing whether they are American or Chinese and how should all they perform all that on the pageant. While Contestant LL was quite certain about who she was and what she wanted to perform but felt offended for not being awarded, contestants from the other end of the spectrum of mixed-up differences voiced different concerns. Contestant A for example worried about “losing her American side,” because she wanted to “be able to have both sides of [her] upbringing,” thus decided to perform an American song as her talent, for which she compensated in the introductory part she tried to speak more Chinese. Others adopted different strategies for balancing, Contestant JL for example “made sure that [her] talent, [her] dance was very Chinese, but also made sure that other aspects of the competition, like swimsuit was more American.”

Thus, they all found their calculations for presenting both sides of their personality, given that the stage provided spacious room for maneuvering. Contestants varied in their reasons and compulsions for and consciousness of balancing with their identities, but they all went through the process of doing so which impacted the ways they perceived themselves afterwards. Queens' and titleholders' narratives must be very different from those who did not gain reward for their performances, so I have to note beforehand that the excerpts used in the following section of analysis came from titleholders.

For a former queen, winning the title helped her "to reconcile [her] cultural pride and being an American at the same time." As she explained, she was ridiculed for doing Chinese dance in Middle School, which caused significant damage to her ethnic identity as a Chinese. She did not have concerns about herself being too Americanized, as some contestants did, because she grew up with her Chinese grandparents. Thus, a clash between her private ethnicity image and public image occurred, what she narrated as "kind of dichotomy, like having cultural pride but being lambasted for it is something that is hard to cope with as a child." MCU provided her a stage in which her private and public image could be reconciled, which had a general impact on her life in coping with how she is seen and how she sees herself: "this experience has definitely brought me closer to my heritage, and I'm really proud of it. I've always been, but now I can be openly really proud of it to everyone around me." (Contestant SW)

Racial identity was in the center of another queen's experience. As she said, she grew up with wrestling the salience of white beauty standard around her, which profoundly changed after winning the pageant: "I feel more empowered [as a Chinese woman], I feel like it's okay to not be white, it's okay to accept my culture and my history and all the Chinese that come before me to this country, make a living for themselves." Interestingly, she does not narrate the shift in her racial experience in bodily terms, but attributes it to the often-mentioned initiation ritual associated with the family association visits. For some reason, learning the history of

hardships her ancestors went through and managed to set foot in America helped her to reconcile her self-esteem in racial terms. She said, “I recognize that “Hey, you know, I should love being Chinese.” This emotional dynamics has been echoed by a Facebook post of MCU 2011 as well: “[Being crowned MCU was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life where I learned to truly embrace my roots and my heritage as a Chinese American woman. I spent a lot of my younger years trying to assimilate to American culture, but through this pageant, I found the courage to be proud of who I am and where I come from.” The “roots and heritage” clearly refer to the history of immigration, that provides contestants a site for belonging as well as having pride in the progress of the Chinese as a community in America.

A third example is cited from a queen who did not struggle with either her racial or her ethnic image as she grew up. As she said, she had grown up deeply embedded within the Chinatown community, where her parents, immigrants themselves had a classroom in which they “help other immigrants do business through lifestyle, like health and beauty.” Eventually she picked up so much in this classroom that she never had any conflict between her public and self-image. When I asked whether anything had changed through the course of the four pageants she had entered and won (MCH, MCU, MCNY, MCI), she said, “if anything, it’s made more proud of being bicultural, being both American and Chinese because I think you use a lot of that within the pageant, and you also get to know this community better, and I think it just makes you more appreciative of those facts that you have these two worlds, you kind of live in.” Her narrative of claiming both China and America, instead of hanging between the two is analogous with what the other contestant formulated as “a melting pot within herself.” (Contestant RL)

As noted earlier, this reconciliatory effect was mostly characteristic of those contestants, who earned a crown. The crown is a symbolic recognition of their public image, which in turn reconciled their self-images. However, no other contestants invited discourses on

marginalization because they all perceived they gained something from the pageant in lieu of the crown. One recurring narrative for example invited the long-term benefits of practicing stage performance, as Contestant JG said: “I think overall, I am happy that I did it, because it was a good experience to kind of learn about how to perform on stage, how to walk and how to talk, overall just have more confidence in myself.” Even though her self-image was not acknowledged publicly by a reward, the sheer experience of gathering the courage to go on stage and show herself was something that improved her self-image, narrated as gaining more confidence.

Another common narrative between these contestants concerned the pageant as a source of social capital. Besides making friends, expanding their “network” was highlighted as a beneficial outcome of the pageant. This network constitutes of leaders of different Chinese organizations and other organization independent, but nonetheless “hyperconnected” people, usually showing up as contestant sponsors. These connections are a good entry point for many for entering the “closely-knit” net of the vibrant Chinatown community, therefore provide an efficient mean for incorporation. Albeit the “class” of MCU 2018 displayed uncertainty regarding where these connections would actually lead them, the retrospective perspective by former contestants suggested that they do materialize in one way or another. Many of the former MCU’s reported of fostering strong connections with community, Contestant A for example “came back to serve the Chinese community,” even though before the pageant she “probably didn’t step into, you know, Chinatown.” Our conversation took place in the basement of a building in Chinatown, apparently her school for fifteen years, where she teaches Chinese kids math and reading.

Appendices

Appendix 1. List of Abbreviations

CACA	Chinese American Citizens Association
CCBA	Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
CCC	Chinese Chamber of Commerce
INS	Immigrant Naturalization Service
MCE	Miss China Europe
MCH	Miss Chinatown Houston
MCI	Miss Chinese International
MCU	Miss Chinatown USA – refers to both the pageant and the queen
MNYC	Miss New York Chinese
PRC	People's Republic of China
Q/A	question and answer
ROC	Republic of China, Taiwan
STEM	Science Technology Engineering Mathematics

Appendix 2. Interview information

1. Contestants

Former contestants:

1. Contestant CL: MCU 2010, duration 30 mins, location: a community place in the building she lives at
2. Contestant KC: Miss Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 2013, duration 25 mins, skype interview
3. Contestant A: MCU titleholder 1992, duration 20 mins, location: the basement of her school in Chinatown
4. Contestant SW: MCU 2016, duration 40 mins, skype interview
5. Contestant RL: MCU 2015, duration 47 mins, skype interview

This year's contestants:

6. Contestant LL: duration 30 mins, skype interview

7. Contestant JL: duration 30 mins, skype interview
8. Contestant JL2: duration 45 mins, skype interview
9. Contestant JG: duration 50 mins, skype interview

2. Organizers

1. CCC member K: duration 50 mins, location: office in her own business
2. CCC member N: duration 45 mins, location: meeting room in the building of CCC
3. Housemothers: duration 20 mins, location:
4. Escort: duration 40 mins, location: Far East Café, MCU Press conference

Appendix 3. Panel of judges (emcees' introductions)

male		female	
Chinese	Non-Chinese	Chinese	American
Dr Raymond Lee	Mr Joaquin Torres	Mrs Graddie Louie	Dr. Elisa Stephens
David Tai			Miss Don Kleagen
			Miss Sandra Zuniga

Mrs Graddie Louie:

Director of the Louie foundation, currently serving as a city commissioner, foundation trustee, secretary on the executive board of the Asian Art Museum. She was a governor on the board of San Francisco symphony, and the vice president. She was also commissioned by Mayor Ed Lee, RIP, to serve as trustee on the board of SF War Memorial and Performance Arts. She obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts and design from UCLA.

Dr Raymond Lee:

Pediatrician, with a private practice over 45 years. He is the first doctor from Hong Kong medical school to start a practice in SF. He is the past president of the Chinese Hospital board of trustees, and board member for 15 years. And also, the president of CCHSA for 3 years and board member for 6 years.

David Tai:

Chairman, president, and chief executive officer of Bank of the Orient. Prior to joining Bank of the Orient, Mr. Tai served as a cofounder and president of Metro Bank. Mr. Tai holds an MBA from Murray State University, a BBA from Fujian Catholic University and an ABA from

the Stonia School of Banking. Mr. Tai is a founder and active on the boards on numerous organizations including the Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce of North America, the Houston symphony, and the Fujian University.

Miss Sandra Zuniga:

Director for the city of SF, she was appointed by Mayor Ed Lee in 2016, to lead his clean and safe neighborhood promise initiative. Prior to her appointment she worked for public works for 8 years and most recently as central operations manager

Mr Joaquin Torres:

Deputy director of the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce development, in 2013, he was appointed by Mayor Ed Lee as president of San Francisco Housing Authority Commission

Dr. Elisa Stephens:

President of Academy of Art University since 1992, a third generation Stephens to lead the university founded by her grandfather at 1929. Under her leadership, the Academy of Arts University has become one of the largest accredited private university for art in the US, with over 90000 undergrad and grad students, and students online. Dr Stephens has pioneered the online education programs in art and design, which just propelled the Academy of Arts University to its primer position in digital education in the world.

Miss Don Kleagen:

General manager of Thunder Valley Casino Resort in Lincoln, California. She is a 36-year-old veteran in gaming and hospitality industry. In 2016 she was recognized by one of the Sacramento business journals as women, who mean business. As well as one of the national top 100 women watchlist, which was compiled by bus women, she was also featured in Forbes magazine night years when California's women business leaders, she also serves on the Rockland Chambers of Commerce board of directors, and 2015 chairperson, as well, the chamber named her as the 2013 business person of the year and she received the 2016 chairman's award.

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