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Negotiating the Public/Private in Racial and Gender Essentialist Advocacy at the San Francisco Chinatown Branch Public Library

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Abstract

Public libraries are a wonder—they are institutions that invite you to linger at no expense. Often, they are built as if to anticipate your needs before they even register. Although not part of their job description, community branch librarians frequently take on the roles of local educators, resource advocates, and cultural navigators. The San Francisco Chinatown Branch librarians embodied this invisible history of labor, particularly through their advocacy to revitalize the physical space of the library in the 1970s-1990s. I deploy methods of close-reading with specific theoretical frameworks on community formation and culture to analyze the librarians' work in the service of their public branch libraries. I analyze print material and local ephemera: coalition circulations, programming and exhibition flyers, pamphlets and surveys, and newspaper and magazine articles from the San Francisco Public Library archives. I argue that libraries are not only physical community centers, but critical centralized hubs of community knowledge and culture that librarians cultivate, that are vital to combatting and reshaping narratives of who and what Asians and Asian Americans are, against dominant forms ascribed by the nation-state.

Negotiating the Public/Private in Racial and Gender Essentialist Advocacy at the San Francisco Chinatown Branch Public Library

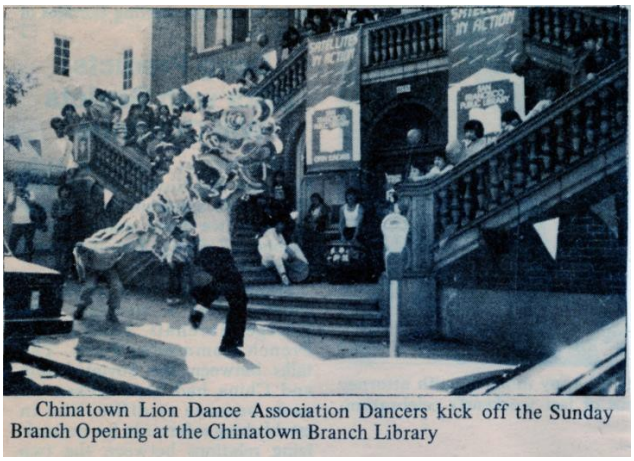

Figure 1. Mary Castagnozzi, "C'town Library Welcomes New Sunday Schedule," *East/West*, November 4, 1982, pp. 1–4. Retrieved from Chinatown Branch Library, Chinatown Subject File, San Francisco Public Library.

On November 4, 1982, over 1,000 people lined the steps and streets of the San Francisco Chinatown Branch Library, watching the lion dancers swivel and leap to the beat of the wide standing drums. Photographs published in the English/Chinese bilingual newspaper, *East/West*, captured scenes from the celebration of the branch's new Sunday hours. Looming banners strung across the two-story brick facade showcased the theme of the event, "Satellites in Action." The theme highlighted how the branch served as a satellite of the city library system and an autonomous central body for community action (Castagnozzi, 1982, p. 4).

This public showcasing of the Chinatown Branch came in a time of massive budget cuts for public institutions. At the national level, the economic conservatism and resistance to government taxation, which fueled the Reagan administration, led to inflation that eroded public funding budgets from the 1970s to the late 1980s. At the state level, California passed Proposition 13 in 1978, a bill which lowered state property taxes by 55% and would gut funding for libraries into the 1980s (Bourne, 1981, p. 736). The San Francisco Public Library would only reach budget stability in 1994, through a city proposition that created a dedicated

library fund (San Francisco Library Commission, 2007).[1] In 1982, the city slated a number of library closures. For most branches across the city, these decades were a lean period of struggling for survival. How was it then, that the Chinatown Branch not only survived these budget cuts, but in fact expanded in services during this time?

This article explores how, building off the Asian American movement of the 1960s-1970s, the Chinatown Branch librarians navigated the library's position across public and private categorizations and mobilized racial and gendered strategic essentialisms to advocate for their library.[2] For the Chinatown Branch, the librarians serve as important subjects of historical research for understanding the politics of effective grassroots advocacy during the 1970s-1980s. But how did the Chinatown Branch librarians' advocacy role come to exist? How did the librarians advocate for their libraries? Why and how was their advocacy successful?

San Francisco Chinatown Branch Public Library

San Francisco is a crucial site for Chinese American history. Outside of Asia, San Francisco's Chinatown is the oldest, largest, and most well-known Chinese enclave. Beginning in the 1850s, Chinatown has been "a residential neighborhood, business community, and cultural center for generations of Chinese Americans" through decades of discrimination, racial hostility, and exclusion laws (Yung, 2016). San Francisco has also been the center for organizing, resistance, and coalition building for Chinese Americans, from civil rights battles to protests and strikes (Louie & Omatsu, 2001, p. 276; Omatsu, 2007, pp. 59–60).

[1] Proposition E established a dedicated fund for the Library Department requiring the city to maintain funding levels and hours of library service for the 1994-2009 fiscal years. This proposition was renewed again in 2007.

[2] Not all librarians at the Chinatown Branch library were initially Chinese American or women, but this demographic quickly came to represent the leadership of the branch, and I refer to this specific subset as the Chinatown Branch librarians in alignment with media coverage of the time that does the same.

During the 1970s and into the present, the San Francisco Public Library has been a Department of the City and County of San Francisco. The city mayor typically appoints a seven- member Library Commission to establish policy and in turn select the City Librarian to implement policy and manage resource allocation (Lambert & Wardell, 2018, p. 17). According to a report by City Librarian John Frantz published in 1978, the Main Library housed central administration as well as the ordering and processing of English-language books for the system, while the affiliate neighborhood branches ensured that "no resident [was] more than a mile away from one of the libraries in the system." The branch libraries were intended not as "miniature versions of the main library," but were meant to "add to the characteristics of the local community" and "absorb into their design the needs and interests of those who use them" (Frantz, 1978). Each branch was open 40-50 hours a week, with a head librarian, adult librarian, and children's librarian as well as additional library assistants and technicians (Schaffer, 1983, pp. 2–3). Becoming a librarian necessitated a one- to two-year-long Master of Library Science degree, which entailed training in how to navigate the U.S. education system, the types of information classification, and the practices of equitable information dissemination (Rubin, 1998, p. xi). In San Francisco, the city centrally managed hiring for librarianship positions in the different branches.

At the time of their local branch establishment, however, San Francisco's Chinatown was not characterized as a community worthy of city public service due to systemic racism. The Chinatown Branch Library was constructed in 1921 as a Carnegie funded library, significantly, under the original name of the North Beach Branch (*Chinatown Library: Branch Profile*, 1987). Though geographically accessible to the residents of Chinatown, they were not the primary community the branch was built to serve. In the mid-to-late 19th century, U.S.

industrial labor needs and the uncertainty of China's economy under European imperialist pressures led Cantonese villagers from Southern China to immigrate to the U.S. in a time of rampant racism and violence (Lai, Lim, & Yung, 1991, p. 71). Anti-Chinese sentiment was nationally codified in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, while other discriminatory laws in California denied civil rights to Chinese immigrants (Lee, 2015, p. 90). In this context, historian Nayan Shah argues, San Francisco's Chinatown was a product of segregation and state-sanctioned neglect, resulting in crowded and filthy housing conditions. Ascribing these conditions to lack of moral worth, white Americans reviled Chinatown as a hub for "danger, deviance, and epidemic disease" (Shah, 2001, p. 249). This racialization was contingent upon white perception of Chinese Americans' pathologized sexual deviation from respectable white heterosexual family dynamics, ignoring the effects of immigration and labor policies as well as violent racism through the early 20th century (Shah, 2001, p. 12).[3]

By the mid-20th century, however, the image of Chinatown shifted to that of a sanitized ethnic enclave that could no longer be ignored in the allotment of public resources (Shah, 2001, p. 225). During World War II, the U.S. and China became allies, which had significant cultural impact through wartime propaganda (Lee, 2015, p. 256). As Nayan Shah asserts, during this time many second-generation Chinese Americans obtained college degrees and learned the "language, customs, and political strategies necessary to enlist assistance [and] seek government intervention." However, Shah continues, most could not find work or housing outside of Chinatown due to ongoing racial discrimination, and thus were particularly motivated to improve local conditions. These second-generation Chinese

[3] San Francisco's Chinatown during this time was largely comprised of male Chinese laborers, who were unsurprisingly reluctant to create settlements and start families in the U.S. Chinese bachelor men faced characterizations of depravity in terms of drug use, brothel frequenting, and gambling, while the few Chinese immigrant women faced accusations of concubinage or prostitution.

Americans coordinated media and public health efforts to shift the image of Chinatown to no more than an exotic tourist destination. As a community of assimilable citizens, they were then able to justify access to public housing funds (Shah, 2001, p. 226). The same was true of other public resources, including the local branch library. Second generation Chinatown residents agitated to improve their neighborhood branch in 1956, coordinating the initial donations of Chinese language materials and the creation of community spaces for exhibits, meetings, and programming (Wiegand, 2015, p. 188). In 1958, the branch was renamed the Chinatown Branch to more accurately reflect the population it was intended to serve, one finally deemed respectable enough to deserve public resources (*Chinatown Library: Branch Profile*, 1987).

This article begins in the 1970s, when changes in immigration policy and the organized advocacy of the Asian American movement steered the branch to serve the Chinatown community in more than name. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act dismantled racial immigration quotas and sparked a wave of mass migration from Asia to the U.S. (Lee, 2015, p. 285). In 1970, the majority of Chinese Americans in San Francisco lived and worked in Chinatown, with the largest group comprised of working class families of recent immigrants or first-generation Chinese Americans. As these growing populations joined local advocacy for the Chinatown Branch to hire its first bilingual Chinese American librarian and pushed for the formal development and integration of the Chinese Language Collection for public access, the Chinatown Branch became a central facet of the community and a critical subject for analysis.

Literature Review and Methods

The U.S. public library system, from pre-1850s social libraries to the bookmobiles of the present day, has been and continues to be a vital and beloved institution for the communities it serves (Rubin, 1998, p. 5). The public library is an essential provider of information, reading, and physical space that fosters communities and a sense of belonging in American society. Despite discourse predicting the decline of public libraries to modernization, in 2015, two of three Americans frequented a public library at least once a year and nearly that many were registered borrowers (Wiegand, 2015, p. 6).

The scholarship on public library history and librarianship, however, is relatively limited and has only in recent years expanded to examine categories of feminist librarianship and service to communities of color (Goedeken, 1998, p. 420).[4] Even among historians of women, as Suzanne Hildenbrand notes, until recently "scholars have shown little interest in the so-called women's professions: nursing, elementary school teaching, and librarianship," instead preferring "to study women pioneers in so-called male professions" (Hildenbrand, 1996, p. 5). With the turn of the 21st century, library history scholarship has expanded considerably in conceptualizing the public library and the work of public librarians in terms of their social contexts and political impacts. In 2017, *Libraries & Culture* was joined by the second ever academic journal on libraries, *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society*, a reflection of the growing body of library scholarship focusing on the roles that public libraries and librarians have played outside of strict library and information science (Goedeken, 2018, p. 111).

[4] Starting in 1968, *Libraries & Culture: A Journal of Library History* was the only academic journal for publications on public libraries for roughly fifty years. The biennial publication of the "Literature of America Library History, 1995-1996" in *Libraries & Culture* included the section "Women in Librarianship" for the first time.

In the case of Asian American librarians and libraries serving Asian American communities, scholarship has until recently been mainly circulated through journal articles, conferences, and newsletters of regional affinity groups of the American Library Association ("About | CALA - Chinese American Librarians Association," 2015; "About » Asian Pacific American Librarians Association," 2019).[5] Building on the networks of the Chinese AmericanLibrarians Association and the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, however, the first full-length book covering Asian Pacific American librarianship was published in 2018, recognizing the intentional work that librarians have contributed to these evolving communities (Clarke, Pun, & Tong, 2018).

Continuing in the direction of the field of library history, this article examines the Chinese American woman librarians at the San Francisco Public Library's Chinatown Branch, tracing an account of their advocacy as a part of the social and political developments in San Francisco during the 1970s-1990s. This project is based on an archive built by the librarians themselves: the "Chinatown Subject File," a collection with hundreds of local documents dating from 1970-2013 on the history of San Francisco's Chinatown as well as the issues and concerns of Chinese Americans living in Northern California, all available for public access at the San Francisco Public Library. Within this collection, the librarians created an archive of their own labor: internal circulations, surveys and questionnaires, newspaper article clippings, informational pamphlets, presentations, advertisements, and annotated ephemera from festivals, community meetings, and other events. The current archivists maintained that the collection was the joint efforts of multiple librarians clipping and saving relevant materials

[5] In 1973, the Mid-West Chinese American Librarians Association was founded, expanding to have Northeast, Mid-West, Atlantic, Southwest and California chapters by 1979. In 1980, the broader Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) was incorporated in Illinois.

over time. This article takes the librarians' efforts to represent Chinatown and Chinese American interest at the library and to create a record of this work as political acts. Rather than examining intent and lived experience, this project centers close readings of representation through the lens of the archive, leaving further areas to explore such as the collection of oral histories.

Impetus for Chinatown Branch Advocacy

Alongside the power movements, civil rights struggles, and women's liberation activism, the 1960s-1970s was a time of intense advocacy for Asian Americans, particularly in San Francisco. For the predominantly working class immigrant community in Chinatown, grassroots efforts included housing and anti-eviction work, job and social service campaigns, and defense of education rights (Omatsu, 2007, p. 59). Activists built community power in part through reclamation of knowledge, looking toward not only concrete resources, but also cultural representation by and for the community (Louie & Omatsu, 2001, p. 305). These goals came together in projects like the building of the Chinese language collection and hiring of Chinese American librarians in the San Francisco Chinatown Branch Library.

Advocates demanded bilingual collections and services by and for Chinese Americans, eliminating barriers to public privileges and countering the societal estrangement of Chinese Americans as immigrants and ethnic minorities.[6] The Association of Chinese Teachers was one prominent group among Chinatown Branch advocates that represented library patron concerns, both their own and their students. In 1970, over fifty percent of the city's Chinese American population was below the age of 21, but local high schools lacked

[6] Within documents cited in this work, writers use Chinese community, Chinese American community, and Chinatown community interchangeably to refer to both Chinese Americans living in the Bay Area and San Francisco Chinatown proper. In my own writing I attempt to differentiate between distinctions of diasporic Chinese and Chinese Americans as well as the specifics of that population within Chinatown.

bilingual teachers who could communicate with immigrant students and had an acute shortage of Chinese American teachers who taught "any treatment of American Chinese history and the experience which makes up the daily reality of students living in the ghetto" (Chin, 1975, p. 1). Chinese American teachers argued that the unprecedented rise in suspensions and dropouts was "evidence of the growing alienation of Chinese students from the public school system" (Nee & De Bary, 1973, pp. 14– 15). Linguistic access and representation had direct impact on success outcomes for their students and the Chinatown Branch was a point of intervention (Chin, 1975, p. 2).

Chinese American library patrons strongly supported the existing Chinese language collection and expressed near consensus in hoping to see its expansion. In 1960, the original donated Chinese language holdings came to a meagre total of 245 volumes. Under community pressure, the number of Chinese language books steadily increased to roughly 5,000 volumes by the early 1970s. However, these 5,000 books still represented only 20% of the branch's total holdings and in documentation of charge slips tracking book usage per day, 48% of the branch's patrons used the Chinese collection (Poon, 1973, p. 16). Nearly half of all patrons were sharing the 20% of Chinese language books, reflecting the popularity of this small collection. Matched with the growing population of Chinese Americans in San Francisco in 1970, these usage rates translated to a ratio of roughly 1 book for every 12 people (Poon, 1973, p. 18). Furthermore, the Chinese language collection at the Chinatown Branch was the only collection of its kind in San Francisco offered free to the public (Poon, 1973, p. 30). The community demand for Chinese books far outpaced the growth of the collection. In response to a 1973 survey question to branch patrons, "Do you think there should be a Chinese Language Collection at S.F.P.L., Chinatown Branch?," 98% of the 186 respondents said "the Chinese

language collection should be expanded and improved in all fields" (Poon, 1973, p. 36).

The Chinese American patrons also demanded that representatives of the library branch be accountable to the needs of the Chinatown community. In 1974, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' Budget and Governmental Efficiency Committee slated $50,000 of general revenue funding to potentially be allocated to Chinatown Branch renovations--a significant sum particularly given the beginnings of budget erosion for public funding during this time.

According to press coverage from Chinese/English newspaper *East/West*, as the meeting progressed, the City Librarian Kevin Starr was not prepared to account for any of the library projects that the funds would be supporting, beyond physical expenditures. Instead, the "Chinese faces [that] were conspicuously visible at the hearing" stepped up to speak about the need for student counseling and skill building programs ("Supervisors Release Library Funds," 1974).

The reporter even goes so far as to assert, "Perhaps, if persons from the Chinese community...had not been present, funds earmarked for Chinatown's public library would have gone the route of other library projects--down the drain" ("Chinatown library renovation in limbo," 1974). Chinese American patrons pushed for community accountability from library representatives involved in critical political decisions.

The city library administration responded with the part-time hiring of the first bilingual Chinese American librarian at the Branch to oversee the Chinese language collection and serve as a connection to the Chinatown community. The San Francisco Public Library "temporarily borrowed a position from another library outlet...to place a third librarian at Chinatown Branch," creating Judy Yung's position in 1969. The administration recognized,

"We are especially fortunate in that Miss Judith Yung, who has been assigned, is Chinese and we know will be a real assistance to us in that community because of her language facility" (San Francisco Public Library Staff, 1969, p. 2). The hiring of Judy Yung specifically addressed the continuing need for a bilingual professional librarian to manage the Chinese language collection and facilitate its use for patrons. Her hiring was also overtly valued as bridging a connection with the Chinatown community.

The first Chinese American librarians in San Francisco's Chinatown Branch held a commitment to community advocacy. While librarians typically apply for open positions under Civil Service requirements in the city system, the creation of positions like that of Judy Yung's through advocacy generated a special responsibility to community expectations of the library's role in the community. In 1971, Yung was joined at the Branch by Stella Chan, who served as branch head librarian until 1980. City administration initially gave no guarantee for continued bilingual Chinese American leadership, but after community outcry, Chan was ultimately succeeded by bilingual Chinese American librarian Elsie Wong ("Call to Recruit Bilingual Branch Librarian for Chinatown Library," 1980; "Chinatown Library Staff Should be Bilingual," 1980). The statements which the librarians gave in representing the local community, whether to local newspapers like *East/West* or publications with wider readership like the *SF Chronicle*, thus always carried the weight of political advocacy. Outside of the strict boundaries of their official work, the Chinatown Branch librarians were responsible for representing and responding to the demands of the community, resulting in the development of their role as community advocates.

Strategies for Chinatown Branch Advocacy

Chinatown Branch librarians advocated successfully for increased library resources under the argument of the Branch as a private space, defined as the assumed-feminine locus of domestic life and intimacy (Briganti & Mezei, 2000, pp. 5, 11).[7] The Chinatown Branch librarians were critical representatives, translators, and advocates for the visibly coalescing Chinese American community around the Chinatown Branch Library. From the 1970s to early 1980s, the librarians negotiated against reductions to opening hours during extensive budget cuts and managed external donation campaigns to grow the Chinese Language collection (Castagnozzi, 1982; "S.F. Chinatown Library Asks for Subscriptions," 1984). Growing patron use drove further expansion, including a community garden and Children's' Room (*Chinatown Library: Branch Profile*, 1987, p. 2; Wiegand, 2015, p. 206). With the effectiveness of the librarians' advocacy and efforts to meet community needs, library patrons accessed the Chinatown Branch resources and space more than ever before. By 1990-1991, annual circulation was 345,873 books and the number of patrons at the Branch every open hour had doubled in less than two decades ("Chinatown Branch Second Home for Patrons," 1974, p. 3). As the culmination of decades of labor, the branch librarians, with the support of the city administration, were then able to create a compelling application for state funding, resulting in a $2.5 million comprehensive renovation grant (Herbert, 1994; Picache, 1992). From the 1970s-1990s, the Chinatown Branch was busier than ever as a community mainstay.

The librarians recorded unmet patron needs through qualitative surveys, the results of which reflected internal tension and dissatisfaction with the branch overall. In 1977, the

[7] I use the term private space and domestic space interchangeably, as describing the overlapping spaces "of/belonging to the home, house, or household."

Friends of the San Francisco Public Library wrote a survey to assess the strengths and weaknesses of branch libraries across the city. The Chinatown Branch staff ensured distribution of the survey for adult and child patrons in both English and Chinese. The survey responses from adults highlighted how uncomfortable and under-resourced the branch was: "the library is too noisy and too crowded (many said this!); the peaceful atmosphere that a library should have is destroyed; the adult section is too small, the children's section is too big, too noisy and often empty [...]" (Chan, 1977). The parenthetical librarian notes included in the aggregate responses signal the frequency at which these responses came up, since the full list of complaints is roughly three times longer than this excerpt. The adult patrons believed the library branch should be quiet and undisturbed and raised tensions between the needs of adults and children. Even among child respondents, the library for some was a "comfortable place to socialize with friends," while for others, the library was "noisy, too hot, too crowded" (Chan, 1977). The responses point to an inconsistency in experience, with some positive experiences coming at the expense of others.

The adult and child patrons expressed dissatisfaction with the conditions of the library and disagreed over what role the library should play, whether academic hub or social space.

The Chinatown Branch librarians, however, represented the library in contradiction to the tension and dissatisfaction of the patrons, instead portraying the branch as a happy home for the community. In 1974, a library newsletter published an article titled, "Chinatown Branch Second Home for Patrons" based on a quote from head librarian Stella Chan describing how the branch was "bursting at its seams with eager community participants who have come to regard it as a second home." She focused on this positive reading of the library branch rather than bringing up how the branch was overcrowded, understaffed, and

underfunded as an arm of the public city

infrastructure. She acknowledged, “We have probably the noisiest library in town because it has become a gathering place where people socialize,” but diverted by saying, “Chinese people are very tolerant, though” and praised “the family-type atmosphere at her branch where small children and the noises they bring are accepted and expected” (“Chinatown Branch Second Home for Patrons,” 1974). The overflow of complaints and mixed expectations of how the library atmosphere should in fact be tranquil and academic stand at odds with her positive assessment of the atmosphere. Nonetheless, the librarians asserted an unproblematic cohesion of the Chinatown community and the branch’s position as a central home for that community.

The dual assertions of the Chinatown Branch as a public or private space strategically coexist in different arguments and advocacies. Scholar Susan Gal engages with this idea of the private and public, a distinction that has its origins in the patriarchal nineteenth century European and American conceptualizations of “separate spheres.” This distinction relies on binary gendered assumptions. The public sphere, where rational thought, politics, and commerce occur, is essentially male. The private sphere, where emotion, intimacy, and family care occur, is essentially female. Gal posits that these distinctions are neither completely arbitrary nor simply descriptive, but that they function as argumentative tools “to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations” (Gal, 2002, p. 81). As a form of strategy rather than simple dichotomy, the private and the public form multiple nesting distinctions that can obfuscate strategies of social change. Community-embedded branches of public libraries exemplify these layers of argumentative multiplicity. The Chinatown Branch is under the San

Francisco Public Library city department, funded through state and city grant allocations, and staffed through civil service requirements like any other department (parks and recreation, municipal transportation, waste management, etc.) However, because a branch library serves a specific community, processes like collection-building carry a level of responsiveness to subsets of the city population. Within the space of the Chinatown Branch, there are community rooms, culturally-specific activities, and specialized care for children and the elderly, which bring the library further in conceptual alignment with the private and domestic. At every level, this rationale of public and private categorizations form the implicit backdrop for how the library is governed, influencing decisions on issues from funding to linguistic access.

Effectiveness of Chinatown Branch Advocacy

The framing of the library branch as a private space was politically effective because of the essentialist racial and gendered position of the Chinatown Branch librarians as Chinese American women in the specific context of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1970s-90s. From the origins of the American public library system in the latter half of the nineteenth century, women's organizations have played a significant role in shaping and establishing local library branches in their communities (M.S.I, 2005, p. 45). American librarianship has since evolved into a largely feminized profession, alongside professions like nursing and primary school teaching (Hildenbrand, 1996, p. 5). As a profession in which women play an outsized role, librarianship carries the expectations of gendered responsibilities of domestic care, such as the nurture and development of children (Douglas & Gadsby, 2017, p. 9). In 1970, city library administrator M. Moses described the growing importance of the Chinatown Branch librarians' work in dramatic terms for the children who access the library: "The importance of service to these pre-school groups cannot be over-emphasized. Unless library awareness is

planted and developed at an early age *we may lose these children*," emphasis hers (Moses, 1970, p. 2). Moses does not clarify whether she means the loss of children as library patrons or the loss of their interest in books, instead opting for an emphasis on the dire stakes of failing this generation of children. In the development of American branch libraries, women have played significant roles, wielding a level of authority in this context as the expected curators and guardians of a domestic space.

Furthermore, the context of the Asian American movement primed public acceptance of the Chinese American woman librarians' authority over the Chinatown Branch. Male Asian American activists in the 1970s resisted being labelled as perpetually foreign, sexually deviant, or passively bourgeois--stereotypes reiterated in state exclusion of Asian Americans from American citizenship. They instead fought for a vision of Asian American enfranchised citizenship, neither assimilative nor ghettoized. Building on the work of feminist and queer scholars, David Eng highlights how this resistance problematically supported a cultural nationalist project centered on identity-based politics prescribing an ideal true Asian American: "male, heterosexual, working class, American born, and English speaking." He links male Asian American activists' assertion over the public space of the nation state with their assertion over the private space of heterosexual home and family at the limitation of the feminine and queer from public politics (Eng, 1997, pp. 33–35). Asian American activism coalesced in the 1970s around the linkages between cultural nationalism, claims over the nation-state, and compulsory heterosexuality.

In the context of previous denial of "home and nation-state through the domestic and the heterosexual," Chinese American women were able to harness a specific avenue of heteronormative representation for public political organizing (Eng, 1997, p. 43). With the

changes in immigration policy from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the demographics of Chinese Americans shifted dramatically to include large numbers of women, physically allowing for the largescale Asian American masculine recuperation of heterosexual nuclear family structures (Bao, 2003, p. 287). In 1977-1982, female garment factory organizers for daycare services in New York's Chinatown projected "an apolitical image of themselves as concerned and responsible mothers and wives…to galvanize the broadest possible support in a relatively conservative community split by political factions" (Bao, 2003, p. 297). Considering a similar timeframe to San Francisco Chinatown Branch advocacy, Xiaolan Bao theorizes the efficacy and strategic value of mobilizing Chinese American motherhood. The organizers presented an essentialist heteroproductive frame to their political work that effectively built on the Asian American movement's championing of heterosexual home and family. While government-supported daycare services have wide-ranging impacts, the choice to forward the image of these working women as mothers and keepers of domestic spaces effectively leveraged the circumstances of the Asian American movement.

For the Chinatown Branch librarians, the shift of the library from a public space to a private space and the essentialist reframing of their Chinese American womanhood as authority over that space via self-portrayals of respectability and figurative motherhood built a strategic appeal for library resources. Strategic essentialism was a term coined by theorist Gayatri Spivak for the critical use of universalizing feminist discourse in activism. Spivak asserts that any application of concepts and labels, like woman or Asian American, has a certain commitment to oversimplification and reduction, and thus proposes a careful negotiation of the uses and limits of essentialism for strategic purposes (Spivak, n.d., p. 13). Given the nuanced information that the Chinatown Branch librarians had at their disposal,

their choice to characterize the branch as a family-centered domestic home space in publications and media statements marks their essentialist rhetoric as intentional strategy (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993, p. 20).[8] When fighting against a Monday night closing of the branch in 1979, Stella Chan lobbied the Chief of Branches and listed four populations that such a change would impact. The first three she described had needs which were easy to understand in terms of time constraints: patrons in service jobs who worked on the weekends, adults hoping to find a quiet library environment in the evenings, and Chinatown students looking to study after school. However, Chan wrote at length about the bachelor elders who had specific and historically rooted needs: "Chinatown has a high proportion of single elderly men, victims of anti-Chinese immigration laws which excluded their wives and children from admission to the U.S. They live in poverty in bare studio- apartments, without television or radio or adequate light for reading. Their evening hours are very lonely, and they look upon the library as their real home" (Chan, 1979). Up until the 20th century, the image of Chinatown as a bachelor society of men had been the locus of pathologized immorality and sexual deviancy (Shah, 2001, p. 225). Chan explained how the literal social structure came to be, establishing the men's distinct history of racialization, but quickly established that outside of these discriminatory laws, these men would have had wives, children, and a home. She built upon a narrative of recuperating the heterosexual nuclear family structure for elderly Chinese American bachelors, echoing Asian American activist rhetoric and establishing a Chinese American respectability legible to white middle class Americans. Chan argued the library as a private space for these men and the librarians as surrogate mother figures addressing the

[8] Spivak has since expressed frustration to the scholarly use of the phrase "strategic essentialism" as a reductive ticket for essentialism, with little focus upon the possibilities and meanings of the strategy. In successive interviews she has explained how she has given up on the term, though not the project itself. Acknowledging this tension, I have attempted to give examination to the Chinatown Branch librarian's strategies as intentional projects.

men's lonely evening hours. The Chinatown Branch librarians crafted a moral appeal in line with the broader Asian American activism of the time, positioning their role as supporting a respectable heteronormative Chinese American community.

As a direct corollary of the mobilization of motherhood and the private sphere, the librarian's advocacy also appeared to be largely apolitical, strategically masking the actual progress and change being accomplished (Gal, 2002, p. 95).[9] In an article published in 1990, Chinatown Branch librarian Elsie Wong argued for the expansion of the branch: "The community depends on the library not only for the printed word, but as a social, family and daycare center as well." She spoke about the library in terms of its impact upon families, even going so far as to situate the library in the domestic sphere of a daycare for children. This tactic was legible on multiple levels for a politically diverse community, drawing attention from their ambitious bid for $2.5 million of state funding--much more ambitious than a daycare center, by any measure (Ohnuma, 1990). The Chinatown Branch librarians were able to reach the same political goals of bringing knowledge and resources to their communities under the apolitical guise of a responsible Chinese American mother-figure's care.

In the context of the Asian American movement's push for community-based power against the historic ghettoization and marginalization of Asian Americans, advocates for the San Francisco Chinatown Branch Library demanded relevant bilingual materials and community accountability. In response, the central San Francisco Public Library brought on the first bilingual Chinese American librarians to the existing staff. The librarians argued the

[9] Gal argues that using the private sphere in argument masks actual change. She explains in her work how socialist visionaries in Hungary denied that they were initiating radical changes in the Hungarian economy by couching their plans as within the domestic sphere, when in reality they were introducing broad forms of market economy.

Chinatown Branch's position as a domestic space of community cohesion, an effective media-facing strategy in the librarians' campaigns for expanding library resources, from successfully extending opening hours to physical renovation. The essentialist framing of their positions as maternalistic in the domestic space of the library aligned with the feminized nature of librarianship and the gendered heteronormative lines of Asian American organizing of the time, thus appealing to a wide audience. This tactic obfuscated their work from appearing political in nature, not only advancing the political goals of community empowerment in the Asian American movement overall, but also ultimately contributing to the invisibility of the archive of their work.

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