

❧ The Good Immigrants ❧

HOW THE YELLOW PERIL
BECAME THE MODEL MINORITY

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Advocates of repeal, including many church and missionary groups and internationalists, emphasized its necessity as a “war measure.” Layered onto these political rationales were admiration for Chinese war efforts; hopes of fostering economic cooperation and American advantages after the war; perceptions of strong similarities between Americans and Chinese; calls for immigration restrictions to consider individual merit over racial heritage; praise for examples of enlightened, assimilable, and economically contributing Chinese; and criticisms of the illogic and injustice that the meanest of Europeans might gain entry and American citizenship, whereas exemplary and talented Chinese, such as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, could not. These affirmations of American affinity and appreciation for Chinese could be expressed through highly limited immigration reforms that gestured toward equal treatment in admitting very small numbers of only Chinese, and not any other excluded groups, a gesture that “experts” on China nonetheless reassured the House committee would be acceptable to the Chinese government.⁴⁰

The repeal hearings reveal that beliefs in essentialized racial differences, and inequalities, had lost ground. Rather than evoking the inferiority, racial incompatibility, and unfair economic competition presented by Chinese and “Orientals” in general, and the dangers inherent in racial mixing that had compelled Asian exclusion, opponents of repeal predicted intensification and expansion of the problems of integration, coded as “social equality,” for different races. Representative Allen aired such concerns openly:

We have in this country a serious minority problem, occasioned by people having been brought here against their will, decades ago. . . . We in the South have had a lot of trouble with that problem. . . . Are you not afraid that if we let down the bars and let orientals [*sic*] generally come into this country, that we will have not only one minority problem, but perhaps several.

In response, the witness so questioned, the Reverend John G. Magee of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, affirmed his belief in both the merit of individual Chinese and compatibilities between Chinese and American civilizations while revealing his disdain for those Chinese already resident in the United States. “I think it would be an education for us to have some Chinese of the best cultural background in our midst, for the United States will occupy a new position in the future of the world. The Chinese in this country are mostly the descendants of coolies” (20). By enacting immigration reforms that admitted better kinds of Chinese, Congress could remove the embarrassment of exclusion while improving the caliber of Chinese in the United States. Although not all the witnesses espoused this differentiation of Chinese by class, future versions of immigration laws would come to enshrine this kind of selection principle.

Long-standing views regarding segregation and racialized conceptions of citizenship and national belonging came to the fore in Allen’s exchanges with the scholar and Indian independence activist Dr. Taraknath Das (1884–1958), a lecturer at City College in New York and a naturalized citizen.⁴¹ Das criticized American immigration policy by noting that “an ignorant street-sweeper from England” could become a U.S. citizen but not Dr. Sun Yatsen, the “George Washington of China,” or Chiang Kai-shek, Rabindranath Tagore, or Nehru. He quoted the eminent historian Arnold Toynbee’s observation that “the so-called racial explanation of difference in human performance and achievement is either an ineptitude or a fraud.” When questioned about the link between the “racial equality being claimed for immigration reform” and “social equality” within the United States, Das affirmed his belief in the “philosophy of social equality” and the right of Jews, Negroes, and American Indians “to even become the President of the United States” because “the political right and social right go hand in hand” (41).⁴² This statement enraged Allen, provoking him to angrily question whether Das thought that “we should dine with those of the Ethiopian race and accord to those people every social privilege?” (40). Das played into Allen’s hands by asserting that “it will do a man honor to dine with a man like Booker T. Washington, or Dr. Carver, as President Theodore Roosevelt did.” Allen, the leading voice of segregationists on the committee, jumped on this response. “I thank you for giving your views. You have done your cause more harm than anybody else.”⁴³ The bulk of other testimony and views of other committee members, however, would reveal that the sands were shifting away from Allen’s presumption of American commitments to a racially differentiated and segregated society.

The efforts of internationalists—missionaries, educators, business interests, and so forth—capped by China’s devastating wartime sufferings and sacrifices and the widespread effects of anti-Japanese propaganda had rendered opposition to Chinese entry on racial grounds impolitic in 1943. Traditional opponents of Chinese immigration, such as organized labor groups and veterans associations, carefully couched their reservations as stemming from economic considerations rather than race-based antagonisms. For example, L. S. Ray, the acting executive secretary of the National Legislative Committee of the American Legion, expressed admiration for Chinese war efforts but conveyed his belief that repeal would not significantly affect Chinese morale and that the subcommittee needed to be mindful to protect jobs for returning soldiers and sailors (168). Ray emphasized that the American Legion opposed repeal on economic but not racial grounds and wished to offer material aid but not admission (174), a view largely shared by S. E. Wilkins, representing the Veterans of Foreign Wars (176), and Lewis G. Hines of the American Federation of Labor (183).⁴⁴ Those who opposed repeal on openly racial grounds, such as Agnes Waters, the DC representative

of Crusading Mothers of Pennsylvania and National Blue Star Mothers, who cited “the invasion of the Asiatic race,” Kipling’s comment that “East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet,” and her belief that “practically all of the Chinese are Communists and when they come in here, they come in here to ruin this country,” was quickly silenced by committee members, some of whom asked that her testimony be stricken (184–86).

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), represented by Kermit Eby, changed its position altogether. Citing the history of organized labor’s support for Chinese exclusion, Eby noted that under wartime circumstances, the CIO was asserting “leadership which places public interest above group interest” and would support the Federal Council of Churches and Catholic churches in opposing “discrimination of people on the basis of their racial origin” and an appeal to “the abstract concept of justice” (97–98).

Other testimony echoed such idealism and pragmatism in international affairs. Senator Mary Farquharson, a past state senator in the state of Washington representing the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, proclaimed: “We are shocked to hear a statement such as was made here this morning that certain races are degenerate, certain races are immoral. . . . the Chinese should not be judged on the basis of race or nation, but on the individuals.” On more practical considerations, “we think immigration and naturalization laws in an interdependent world are of extreme importance if something is to be worked out that will not end in another war,” and “we are convinced that our self-interest cannot be considered apart from the self-interest of other nations” (88). Other witnesses testified to the need to remove racism from American laws. For example, Frank Campbell, pastor of the Methodist Church in Neoga, Illinois, described exclusion as “the grossest insult our country has ever tendered a friendly nation” (7–8).⁴⁵

One of the most famous of internationalists, Pearl Buck, testified as well. Buck cited her extended experiences of living in China for four of her five decades to claim authority in stating, “I know the Chinese people, I know how they live.” She stressed the high caliber and commensurability of educated Chinese with Americans. “Her people have high standards of ethics, of business ethics; we know that in our country” (68). However, it was not possible to appreciate the best of Chinese, for “Literate Chinese, great scholars, brilliant young men and women, famous Chinese citizens, were all held inferior to the most illiterate peasant of Europe.” Buck attacked the foolishness of the exclusion laws. “We have excluded not only Chinese coolies; we have excluded Chinese of the highest quality and attainment by our total exclusion laws. It is the injustice of the total exclusion that hurts the Chinese, the humiliation it puts upon them as a people” that was “more than injustice. It is a denial of our democratic ideals” (70). When baited by Allen to speak about broader reforms and “social equality among all the races,” Buck carefully limited her projections to the situation of Chinese (72–73).

Remaining focused on repeal as a necessary wartime measure to maintain America’s alliance with China, Buck avoided these traps and continued to emphasize that “the Chinese people are extraordinarily like us . . . in our democratic traditions, and in the way we behave and in our feelings toward family, and our realisms, and our practical qualities, and I attribute it to the fact that their country is so much like ours” (75).

Buck was far from alone in identifying with Chinese and asserting their suitability for U.S. citizenship. Madame Chiang’s triumphant speaking tour capped off years of positive publicity in underscoring exactly how deserving of entry quotas and citizenship rights select Chinese could be. As put by the Methodist Reverend Dr. Lloyd Worley, “We feel a particular kinship to China because it happens the Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek are co-religionists of ours.” However, Worley noted, even though she was “one of the great women of the world and . . . an outstanding Christian woman,” Madame Chiang could not receive U.S. citizenship (88). Will Rogers, the comedian and representative from California, described the embarrassment he and others in the House felt when “Mme. Chang [*sic*] Kai-shek spoke before the House of Representatives. Listening to this well-poised, highly educated world leader, an exquisite woman of great charm and wide intelligence, I want you to know that many of us sitting in the House felt embarrassed to remember that by the laws of this country, this woman was legally not good enough to apply for citizenship in the United States, if she had wanted to; but we exclude her purely on the basis of race.”⁴⁶ In a radio debate about repeal, Representative Walter Judd scored points by concluding with outrage, “Our exclusion of the Chinese on a racial basis also violates the finest traditions and the moral sense of the American people. Under our present laws, Hitler is admissible to our country and eligible for citizenship—Madame Chiang Kai-shek is not!”⁴⁷

The contradiction between the generalized racial discrimination embedded in the Chinese exclusion laws and the accomplishments attributable to outstanding, individual Chinese provided potent arguments for repeal. Witness after witness testified to their personal friendships and admiration for Chinese, emphasizing the many attributes they shared with Americans that would make them ideal citizens. Dr. Arthur Hummell, chief of the Asiatic Division of the Library of Congress, described Chinese as “a socially democratic people” who lived in “a classless society.” He claimed that “the Chinese is perhaps the most individualistic man in the world” and that “their ideals are very much like our own, in fact, more like our own than the ideals of some European nations that we know. There is nothing in their system of government that is antagonistic to ours” (24). Hummell stressed that if repeal took place and exclusion was replaced by a quota system, “if there are 107 to come in, most of them would be merchants, scholars, teachers, or students. I should not worry a bit about labor” (24). According to the

Reverend John J. O'Farrell, a Jesuit from New York, "The Chinese have consistently shown themselves to be an industrious and law-abiding group of people, and their offspring have contributed to the good of the community as far as racial barriers and prejudice allowed. Being democratic in spirit they have more in common with the American spirit than some other more-favored groups" (30–31). With such an impressive view of Chinese, it is little wonder that the Reverend Thomas B. Cannon, a fellow Jesuit, described repeal as "a pressing problem of interracial justice" (54).

The few Chinese Americans who testified also underscored the high economic value of the right kinds of Chinese. Dr. Min Hin Li, a resident of Honolulu, U.S. citizen, and past commander of the Hawaiian American Legion, testified that he served as an example that "the Chinese can be assimilated."⁴⁸ He described the upward mobility of Chinese in Hawaii, where "professional men have come forth from the rank and file of sons of former plantation laborers, and are today surgeons, physicians, dentists, lawyers, architects, and experts in Government agricultural experiment stations." In Hawaii men such as himself were in the ranks of veteran's organizations and served in both elected offices and the civil service (208–10). Chinese had become entwined into the fabric of everyday life in Hawaii as leaders and stalwarts of the economy.

The theme of Chinese usefulness and assimilability ran through other testimony. Paul Yee, an electronics engineer working in the War Department in Washington, DC, and a third-generation "American-Chinese," addressed fears of "coolie labor" by pointing out that many Chinese were in fact "specialists" with "special faculties." He described two Chinese engineers working as technical trainees for Westinghouse in special electronic work on "some of the most important secret radar work today, radar and radio equipment." The two top men in the RCA research laboratory were technical trainees from China. Yee pointed out that an annual quota of 107 could be used to bring in those with such developed skills while underscoring the assimilability of Chinese such as himself, noting that although he looked Chinese, he was actually American (203–4).

Witnesses testified that repeal was a necessity for building stronger international relations, a required building block for world peace, even as they sought to limit immigration reform to symbolic numbers. The Reverend O'Farrell described repeal as "a sane and workable internationalism based upon those necessary principles of international justice and charity, the only real guarantee of international peace," but he was also careful to distinguish it from the "racial equality" of repealing the laws without permitting "unlimited immigration" by Chinese. O'Farrell stressed "that fundamental equality of nations could be demonstrated by assigning, say, a quota of 100 or more a year, to the Chinese people" (30–31). According to the earlier testimony of Reverend Magee, "enlightened Chinese" understood sovereign

rights of nations to control admission to borders and did not expect mass labor migration that would disrupt the U.S. economy (15–16). In a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, Theodora Chan Wang, president of the Chinese Women's Association in New York, echoed these views and expressed opposition to laws that "would invite an influx of workers, from any nation, who would inevitably disrupt our labor balance, or otherwise disturb the economic equilibrium of this country" while supporting "certain measures which should be adopted now . . . that should token recognition of our equality in the newer, freer order of democracy." Laws that admitted "a limited number of Chinese" who "would be accorded the same welcome, and the same privileges being granted the Hebrew, the Negro, the Slave, and the numerous divers [*sic*] races who yearly seek refuge on our shores. It matters little if the maximum is 100, or 50, or even 10, so long as that privilege exists and can be made known to those in the conquered areas of China" (6–7). This willingness to accept limited concessions paved the way for an otherwise momentous shift in rationales regarding how America should enact immigration controls.

Navigating through this maze of heated and entrenched sets of fears and aspirations, Representative Judd applied a keen political instinct to forge acceptable compromises from the various constituencies debating repeal. Judd had extensive missionary credentials, having served as a traveling secretary for the Student Volunteer Movement and for ten years as a medical missionary in China (1925–1931, 1934–1938). Determined to gain a better platform to press for American support for China's war against Japan, he ran for office and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1942. Despite his deep convictions about the necessity of breaking America's isolationist stance, particularly with regard to nations in Asia, Judd was not nearly as concerned for domestic conditions of racial inequality, considerations that he often compromised in the process of skillfully negotiating symbolic gestures toward his foreign policy ends in ways acceptable to segregationist and labor interests. He proved to be exactly the facilitator needed to break the impasses around repeal of the exclusion laws.