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US *Hostipitality* through the Lens of Chinese American Drama

Abstract: The concept of hospitality at the global level has long been inseparable from the phenomenon of migration as a permanent feature of human history. Academics within different fields of study have used hospitality as a metaphor “to describe the often inhospitable, and even hostile, treatment by the state of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers” (Lynch and al. 15). Jacques Derrida’s portmanteau term ‘hostipitality’ emphasizes that hospitality always entails its opposite (hostility), since acts of hospitality toward some often exclude others. In the dramatic narrative of Chinese experience in the US, both the initial relative hospitality of the 1850s and the swift shift to violent racial politics culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act were rooted in the vicissitudes of global capitalism and America’s expansionist aspirations. This paper explores how these moments of the official (un)welcome are represented in Chinese American drama, aiming to re-memory (and, hence, negotiate) the traumatic past through its stage re-enactment. The discussion focuses on three plays: Genny Lim’s *Paper Angels* (1980), David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1980), and Lloyd Suh’s *The Far Country* (2022). Lim’s play relies for its effect upon the unique socio-cultural fact—the poems inscribed by Chinese detainees on the walls of the West Coast immigration center on Angel Island; Hwang scrutinizes the uneasy relational dynamics between second-generation and more recent immigrants; Suh complements the dramatization of the ordeal of passing through strict immigration control with a transcontinental perspective. Each in its own way, the plays seem to bear out Lisa Lowe’s dictum that the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site results from the state’s distancing Asian Americans from the terrain of national culture.

Keywords: “hostipitality,” immigration, Angel Island, “paper sons,” Chinese American drama, stage re-enactment

At the global level, the concept of hospitality (commonly understood as the relationship between a host and a guest, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill and welcome) has long been inseparable from the phenomenon of migration, a permanent feature of human history. In this context, it is “the behaviors of nationstates as political actors towards migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in terms of ethics, human rights and citizenship” (Kunwar and Khanal 1) that come under scholarly scrutiny. Academics within different fields of study have used hospitality

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as a metaphor “to describe the often inhospitable, and even hostile, treatment by the state of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers” (Lynch et al. 15). To stress the fact that hospitality always entails its opposite, hostility, since “acts of hospitality framed as welcoming to some often exclude others” (15), scholars often use Jacques Derrida’s portmanteau term ‘hostipitality’. Derrida draws attention to “the troubling analogy in their common origin between hostis as host and hostis as enemy, between hospitality and hostility” (15), since any act of hospitality requires treating a person as a stranger, distancing them from oneself. So, violence and exclusion characterizing the treatment of unwanted guests “enable us to understand how a discourse of hospitality is often marshalled in support of what are, in reality, failures of hospitality” (Lynch et al. 15).

In the woeful narrative of Chinese experiences in the US, both the relative hospitality of the 1850s and the swift shift to violent racial politics culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act were rooted in the vicissitudes of global capitalism and America’s expansionist aspirations. While the business elites welcomed the arrival of Chinese immigrants as a condition *sine qua non* for their own penetration of Chinese markets, the grass-roots white hostility exacerbated by racial prejudice saw them as dangerous competitors for jobs and a threat to the nation’s ‘moral integrity’. Manifold anxieties of the US nation-state construed “Asian laborers immigrating to the United States from the nineteenth century onward as a ‘yellow peril’ threatening to displace white European immigrants” (Lowe 4). As a result, Lew-Williams argues, through a continuous process of exclusion at the local, national, and international levels, “the Chinese migrant became a quintessential alien in America by the turn of the twentieth century” (8). Constructed as a race of aliens, Orientals represented a danger of pollution based on the concept of the alien as “a polluting body perceived to be out of place” (Lee 2).

This article explores how the acts of the official and public (un)welcome are represented in Chinese American drama, aiming to re-memory (and, hence, negotiate) the traumatic past through its stage re-enactments. Focusing on crucial topoi in early Chinese American history (the Angel Island Immigration Center, “paper sons,” interrogation scenes) this drama speaks eloquently to the present because “the ‘common understanding’ that Asians are an alien presence in the America, no matter how long they may have resided in the United States nor how assimilated they are, is still prevalent in American culture” (Lee 4).

One of the playwrights discussed in the article, Lloyd Suh, defined his aim in writing a play on early Chinese American history as proving how “memory becomes hereditary because of the way it lives in the body” (qtd. in Morgan 3). A character in his play articulates the same idea:

Even if you forget for a moment, you cannot long forget the pain, because the body remembers. Your body remembers, it is in your hands, your calloused hands, it is in your legs, your tired legs, it is in your back, your unbendable back grown uncommonly strong from all it has carried. And it’s in their [her children’s] bodies too. The pain is there, it’s in their blood and in their hearts, it’s in their memory too because it all passes down, if I know anything from motherhood I know this, that everything we are, everything, it passes down. (Suh 80)

The role of physical and/or psychological trauma as a potent memory intensifier has long been discussed in memory studies. As early as 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche observed that “pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics” because “only something that continues to hurt stays in the memory” (38). Contemporary inquiry in the field of cultural memory studies positions the traumatized body as an immediate surface for encrypting the lived experience (Assmann 252). The anthropologist Valery Podoroga links the emergence of individual and group identity to “numerous mnesic traces left on human bodies” (24). From this perspective, the traumatic experiences of early Chinese immigrants embodied on the present-day stage contribute to stabilizing their group memories.

At the same time, theoreticians of hospitality stress that “(t)he power relations embedded in the hospitality encounter are often negotiated around embodied markers of difference, such as race, class, gender, sexuality and age, which intersect to shape the practice of hospitality (or hostility) in distinct ways” (Lynch et al.15). Racialized (in this case, Orientalized) bodies bear cultural meaning, where “yellowface marks the Oriental as indelibly alien” (Lee 2). Thus, theater, with its emphasis on actors’ and audience’s physical presence, appears the perfect medium for revitalizing embodied memories. As the leading expert on theatre theory Patrice Pavis observes, “the actor is the ultimate spokesman of the dramatist and director since he speaks the text by incarnating it on stage and conveying it through his body” (Pavis 99). Still, “(a)ny symbolization or semiotization [on stage] runs up against the difficult-to-codify presence of the actor’s body and voice” (34). Multiracial bodies bringing long-neglected Chinese American history to life on 21st-century US stages are instrumental in reviving the past so that it might meaningfully speak to the present.

Even though anti-Asian/anti-Chinese sentiments had persisted in the US for a long time, taking many shapes, the article focuses primarily on the initial stage of newcomers’ sojourn in the foreign physical, cultural and mental space. The chronotope² of transition/border-crossing may be described as “pausing on the threshold,” a liminal state, a sort of a limbo, where an individual is subject to transfiguration into a new persona, still retaining many characteristics of the old one. When one first sets foot on the strange territory, the signs of (in)hospitality extended to them as (un)desirable aliens leave the deepest mark on their psyche largely determining the modes for their future interactions with the new environment (social, economic, cultural, and psychological). Due to specific historical circumstances, for Chinese Americans the limbo tended to turn into a purgatory or even an inferno. The discussion focuses on three plays capturing the Chinese immigrants’ first encounters with America: Genny Lim’s *Paper Angels* (1980), David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1980), and Lloyd Suh’s *The Far Country* (2022).

The plays, understandably, have many similarities as they all thematize, among other issues, the traumatic arrival of Chinese immigrants in the New World. The dramatists share basic feelings permeating their plays—the indignation with US “hostipitality” towards Asians, sympathy

2 The term introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin to define “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84).

and empathy with the Chinese men and women exposed to degrading immigration practices, pride in the Chinese American community's resilience and vitality, and anxiety about its future in the conflict-torn America of today and tomorrow. By seeing his play "as part of our country's current reckoning with its complex history," Suh may be expressing a view held by all three dramatists. Explaining the relevance of historical plays for our time, he refers to them as "part of our accounting on where we've been as a culture, and where we might go from there" (qtd. in Ellis). For Genny Lim, herself a daughter of former detainees, working with this material became a deeply personal experience providing insights into her family history. Before delving into the story of the Angel Island she did not understand her parents' reluctance to talk about their background that made her feel alienated from them. Getting to understand what they had to go through became a bonding experience for her (12). Hwang, in his turn, is intent on inscribing his play into Asian American literary tradition. In the Playwright's Note preceding *FOB*, he assures his readers that the roots of the play are thoroughly American, it being inspired by two figures of American literature: Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father's place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers (and, he adds, the adopted god of Chinese America), from Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop* (both dating back to 1976). For Hwang, "these books testify to the existence of an Asian-American literary tradition" (6). This statement bears out Lisa Lowe's dictum about the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site resulting from the state's distancing Asian Americans from the terrain of national culture (176), while at the same time seems to have been written somewhat tongue-in-cheek since instead of being "thoroughly American" these origins testify to the hybrid nature of Chinese American cultural tradition.

In terms of differences, the three plays differ in their plots, perspectives, dramatic techniques, and idiosyncratic styles. Based on historical evidence and written in the wake of the sensational discovery of Angel Island graffiti poetry, Lim's *Paper Angels* provides broad strokes of the Chinese experience in the immigration center. The author is straightforward in her depiction of the Center's daily routine, reconstructed from period sources and oral histories, in short, naturalistic scenes alternating with more symbolic sequences in which the characters give voice to their thoughts and emotions. The motley array of characters differing in age, gender and life stories are fictional, but as a group they stand for the whole body of Chinese immigrants. For this reason, the playwright is not so much concerned with spelling out peculiarities in individual behaviors and mentality, as with presenting a plausible socio-psychological cross-sectional portrayal of the Chinese migrant contingent in the early 20th century. The collective protagonist of the play includes four male and three female Chinese characters opposed by the white American figures of the inspector, the warden, and the guard embodying the unfriendly receiving end of the immigration process. Unlike Chinese detainees, American civil servants are devoid of names and are treated as impersonal instruments of state power. The *dramatis personae* list is completed by two intermediate characters—a Chinese American Christian convert acting as an interpreter ("sympathetic to the immigrants," but loyal to her job), and a white Methodist female missionary

“fanatically determined to eradicate heathenism and prostitution” among Chinese women (Lim 18–19). The play follows the stories of detainees, some ending in tragedy, others with relatively ‘happy ends’ as their protagonists gain admission to the US.

FOB, David Henry Hwang’s first play, is a more imaginative piece of drama than Lim’s play, featuring only three characters and engaging with Chinese (American) mythology. Its exploration of in-group conflicts within the Chinese American community also encapsulates its unofficial history in a series of brief flashes, corroborating Lisa Lowe’s vision of Asian American culture as “an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulacy” (6). In the play’s contemporary (or rather timeless) scenes, characters’ identities oscillate between down-to-earth, quotidian selves and their mythological counterparts, thereby enhancing the significance of Chinese American elements in the US cultural fabric.

Lloyd Suh supplements the arrival story with spatial and temporal extensions. The action takes place not only in the US but also in China, where the “new” Americans of Chinese descent return home to recruit additional volunteers for the trans-Pacific crossing. To pay their debt for the help in becoming Americans, Chinese peasants brought to the verge of extreme poverty actually agreed to become indentured laborers to their “benefactors”—even with this arrangement in place, the money they could still send their families would be enormous as compared to what could be earned at home. The last of the play’s three acts presents a leap in time, set in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1930s, so that we can trace the fates of the characters forcefully brought together by the prerequisites of the US restrictive legislation.

All the plays engage in language games, playing, in particular, upon the bilingual situation that unfolds during interrogations. Much of the dialogue in *Paper Angels* is in Chinese, and interrogations often include onstage interpretation. This technique serves to expose the audience to a strange language, defamiliarize the scene, and stress the cultural singularity of Chinese immigrants. Lloyd Suh renders the interpretive process without recourse to Chinese by having his characters repeat what is said twice to simulate interpretation. Instead, he uses Chinese characters in writing to denote Chinese names. Hwang relies upon a different strategy: *FOB* contains only a few Chinese words and notions (chong you bing, da dao and mao, Gwan Gung, Mei Guo (“Beautiful country,” a Chinese name for America)). His linguistic prowess, however, is evident in the way his character, Steve, switches between varieties of English (as will be discussed later). The playwrights also demonstrate America’s linguistic “hostipitality” towards Asians through racial slurs (chink, slant, gook), demeaning the Chinese Other out of antipathy, fear, or deeply seated anxiety about white superiority.

Hospitality as a Tool of Social Control

The main feature three plays have in common is that they are all dealing (to various extents) with the point of entry where the American adventure started for many Chinese immigrants – the Angel Island West Coast Immigration Center, densely mythologized in Asian American cultural history.

The action in Lim's play is confined within the walls of the center; in Hwang's *FOB*, it appears in a single scene; and Lloyd Suh uses this setting for two scenes in Act I and an episode in Act 2. The entrance scenes are set in 1915 (*Paper Sons*), 1909/1910 (*Far Country*), and an indeterminate historical moment in *FOB*, with a clear understanding that the Chinese Exclusion Act was already in force. This period saw the transmogrification of the original American hospitality towards Asian immigrants into more or less overt hostility. Stating that "America was originally eager for Chinese immigrants," Michael Luo asks, "What happened to change this positive attitude into violence and bigotry?" (Luo). The complex answers provided by interdisciplinary scholars take into account economic, social, racial, and cultural factors ranging from perceiving "the coolie race" as competitors for jobs with potential upward mobility to objecting against "yellow peril" on the grounds of Chinese ostensible moral degeneracy. As Mae Ngai explains in her book, the "Chinese question" as an epitome of racial politics was whether Chinese were a racial threat to white, Anglo-American countries, and should Chinese be barred from them (Ngai). At the same time, Beth Lew-Williams claims that "(t)he Chinese entered America as migrants and were made into aliens, in law and society" (Lew-Williams 8).

In her pioneering *Paper Angels*, Lim takes pains to lay bare the attitudes towards Chinese immigrants prevalent in the early 20th-century USA by giving the floor to people supposed to administer hospitality to them during their first steps upon the American soil. In striking contrast to 1850, San Francisco authorities extended a hearty welcome to a small group of Chinese immigrants (see Luo). Representatives of state power in the play find their duties as "hosts" increasingly irksome, and their uninvited "guests" less than agreeable. While the Inspector enjoys his sense of power and is ideologically motivated by what he deems his "personal mission to stem the Yellow Peril," the Warden is just "trapped in the system" feeling "frustrated by his dead-end position," and the Guard is "a working-class redneck who hates his job," who takes his prisoners' hostility personally and abuses his power (Lim 18). Their life credos are revealed not solely in their interactions with detainees but also in soliloquies that alternate with multi-person scenes in the play's architectonics. In scene 6, Inspector seems to address the inmates standing in their dorms but they are "suspended in time" and all but "inanimate"—dehumanized and objectified:

The Chinese question. It's my guess that a good 95 percent of the Chinamen coming through here are bogus. That's right. They come thinking they can pull the wool over the white man's eyes, figuring we can't tell 'em one apart from the other. And you know, for the most part you can't! But I give 'em a run for their money. It's like outwitting a fox. (story of a smart boy). But the law is the law. I have my job to do. You've got to have a system! Because if you don't, they'll take advantage and next thing you know, not only will you have droves of illegal aliens swarming into the country, but they'll be bringing about their wives, children, sundry aunts, uncles, and relatives, not to mention the little yellow ones they'll be propagating all over the US. I mean you've got to be systematic about it. If they are coming fraudulently, we've got to do our best to keep them out! (Lim 37)

The Guard Henderson acts as a mouthpiece for the uneducated and prejudiced populace segment whose resentment of “the chinks” is visceral rather than rational (scene 8):

I’ve been on this island ever since it opened in 1910. I’m so sick of Chinamen. I could put a match to this place! Every time I walk into this stinking room I feel a hundred slanted eyes boring into me like skewers. I know they despise me—because I despise them. They’d kill me if they could. One of these days they just might try.

If I had my way, I’d ship the whole lot of ‘em back to China. Goddamit, America is for Americans, they don’t belong here, if they keep coming there will be no jobs left for decent men. We’ve got to protect what’s ours. The Chinamen will take what they can get. Do you think they give a damn about our country? Do you think they’d fight for Uncle Sam? Hell, no. If they want our jobs now, what do you think they’ll want next? Our homes, our land, our money, our women? I got a daughter, you know? She’s the most precious thing I got in this world. If any slimey Chink ever laid a hand on her, I’d cut off his balls! (43)

It was the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that necessitated establishing an immigration facility on the scale of the Angel Island Center. The Act was the first document in American history to place broad restrictions on immigration, thus running counter to the democratic principles of free trade and free labor. Plus, it was the first to target a specific ethnic and national group. Since only a few categories of Chinese entrants (such as diplomats, clergy, students, and merchants,) were exempt from the Act’s pronouncements excluding Chinese laborers from entering the US for the period of 10 years (later extended ad infinitum), the state needed a working system for filtering and curbing the growing contingent of new arrivals so as to let only the “desirable aliens” through the mesh. The internment facility on Angel Island was established in 1910 expressly to enforce the Act. The system’s more or less smooth operation over three decades attested to efficient, though pretty inhumane, solution to this problem. The isolated location virtually excluded escapes; any communication with the outer world was forbidden; new arrivals were sorted out according to nationality; male and female detainees were kept separately; strict health control was implemented; and, last but not least, grueling interrogations were an integral part of the admission process. The detention period might have lasted from several weeks to several months or even years if the evidence the authorities wanted was hard to get and often ended in the applicant’s deportation back to China.

Both Lim and Suh address the abominable physical conditions in the Center, emphasizing its unsuitability for human beings. Lim does so through a fragment from a real-life document (an official report) quoted in her play:

The lavatories and toilet rooms are poorly ventilated. The floors have no drains and the wood-work is soaked with urine and fecal matter. . . . The offensive smell in the rooms is a sufficient

proof that they are failures from a sanitary standpoint. The amount of air space in these rooms is totally inadequate for the number of berths therein The windows are barred and locked and there is only one exit for all the dormitories. Built of most inflammable material, destruction of the building in the case of a fire would be a question of minutes. In a comparatively short time these rooms will be unfit for living by reason of vermin and stench. (Lim 46)

In the text of *Far Country*, the unsavory details surface during the dynamic exchange among several characters—former detainees, most of them unnamed, set somewhere in “liminal space”: The southernmost room on the second floor is for men; it can hold as many as 144 men, but often holds more than that, typically all Chinese, all men” (Suh 37); “in the men’s barracks there are twelve poles, with twelve beds attached to each pole . . . Four beds below, four beds in the middle, four beds on the top . . . The outdoor recreation area is enclosed by barbed wire fencing . . . Armed sentries are posted at guard towers on either side” (38). The intentionally factual descriptions stripped of any emotions evoke an image of a depersonalized prison or, rather, Bentham’s/Foucault’s Panopticon as a vital component of the state’s disciplinary system of surveillance and punishment.

Of still worse nature, though, was psychological damage inflicted upon the detainees that thwarted Chinese Americans’ quest for a wholesome identity—a challenge for all migrants. Any construction of identity, Sheng-Mei Ma remarks concerning Asian Americans, “requires a reconfiguration, sometimes rather violently, of one’s psyche and history” (Ma xi). Due to unique (and tragic) historical circumstances attending the formation of this ethno-national community, the shaping of Chinese American identities was subject to especially grave trials. As is well known, any action is bound to provoke a reaction. It is no wonder, then, that immediately upon the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, would-be immigrants started to seek ways to bypass its restrictions. This abnormal situation gave rise to the phenomenon of “paper sons,” that is, persons who assumed false identities to pass as blood relatives of legal resident Chinese Americans and thus gain entry into the country. With this end in view, thousands of Chinese peasants and laborers had to leave behind their past, commit to memory new elaborate biographies, and, therefore, ironically, become the genuine “new Adams” in America, thus fulfilling the Pilgrim Fathers’ prophecies in an unforeseen manner. Stephen Sumida observes that in this process, “the relationships of the parties were literary creations,” initiating the genre of autobiography in the nascent Asian American literature (Sumida 401). The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and ensuing fire destroyed the main body of the city records, further contributing to this practice and opening a loophole through which many Chinese entered (Takaki 79–131). For reasons of security, in many cases the deception had to be held on to for the rest of immigrants’ lives. Their former identities had to be buried, and, as a result, “the real family histories of ‘paper sons and fathers’ . . . are often difficult if not impossible for their descendants to tell” (Ibid.) The loss of their true identities pursued Chinese Americans for generations, intensifying their confusion and misfortune caused by socio-economic pressures and discrimination.

The need to create a fictional identity for strategic purposes is an issue for all the three dramatists. Looking back at this crucial moment in the history of Chinese America from the distance of many decades, the playwrights emphasize its devastating impact on the victims. Lim's and Suh's dramatic pieces draw largely upon the "paper relationships" phenomenon, with the title of Lim's play directly alluding to it (*Paper Angels*). She has one of her characters, Lee the poet, directly express his outrage at the necessity to enter the land of his dreams under false pretenses: "I am Lee Sung Fei, not this Moi Fook Sing or whatever his name is! I am from Shekki not Sunning, I am a scholar not a merchant's son!" (Lim 22). Another inmate's bitter comment exposes geopolitical realities underlying this humiliating practice: "If China wasn't so weak, we wouldn't be excluded from coming. We wouldn't have to be paper sons" (21).

In *Far Country*, the trope of a fake identity underlies the plot, enabling the main characters (first Gee, and then Moon Gyet) to turn it into a source of profit by virtually "selling their names" to their poor compatriots desperate for a new chance in America. It is done, though, at a high cost to their own self-respect and dignity. The character of Moon Gyet's mother, Low, a Chinese farmer, acts as a mouthpiece of indignation and protest against this breach of any human being's birthright to ancestry, name, and identity. When approached by Gee with the proposal to take her son to the United States as his "paper son," she responds: "Do not assume that everyone wants to go to America; some of us have pride in where we come from, pride in our names, we do not sell them to strangers or trade them for another, some of us find dignity in knowing we will be buried in the same ground we were born from" (Suh 17). The family's desperate condition compels her to agree, but when Moon Gyet, in his turn, comes back on the same errand, Low declares that she has no future and no son who has sold his name. Her son, however, succeeds in convincing her that he honors and cherishes his name, but has to make this sacrifice for the sake of the future. He finds his dignity in "what he is prepared to sacrifice for a dream of the future." "I know my name," he claims, "even as I keep it unspoken. I am your son. You are my mother. And I do have a future if you will let me finish my work" (60).

Hwang demonstrates the detrimental effect of enforced refusal from one's identity through Dale, a Westernized Chinese American, suffering from an inferiority complex and portrayed with bitter irony verging on grotesque. Referring to his parents (first-generation immigrants) as "yellow ghosts," Dale blames them for trying to cage him up with "Chineseness when all the time we were in America. So I've had to work real hard—real hard—to be myself. To not be a Chinese, a yellow, a slant, a gook. *To be just a human being, like everyone else.* I've paid my dues. And that's why I'm much better now. I'm making it, you know? I'm making it in America" (Hwang 33, emphasis added).

Obviously, Dale accepts the WASP identity as a norm, and being Chinese as a deviation from it. This dichotomy was summarized by the doyenne of Asian American literary studies Elaine Kim as the "nonchoice" offered to Asian Americans by the dominant culture—"between being either different and inferior or the same and invisible, between eternal alien and assimilated mascot" (xi). Until the naturalness of whiteness was called into question over the past decades,

it was the view imposed by Eurocentric America upon its multiracial and multiethnic populations. As Valerie Babb remarks in her 1998 study *Whiteness Visible*, “like other racial categories, whiteness is . . . largely an invented construct blending history, culture, assumptions, and attitudes” (10). However, it did not emerge as a value-neutral concept: as it took shape, it drew heavily on hierarchical binaries (civilized/savage, Christian/pagan, free/enslaved), with “white” characteristics increasingly associated with the first, privileged members of these oppositions. Positioning universal (positive) human qualities as racial traits possessed exclusively by whites through recurrent verbal and visual representations concurrently denied non-whites their basic humanity. Early 20th-century immigration practices that included depriving Chinese entrants of their identities helped perpetuate this damaging fallacy.

Dave’s faulty identity exemplifies the stratification of Chinese Americans, with second generation immigrants looking down upon newcomers. American “hostipitality” here assumes the form of internalization of anti-Oriental and sexist prejudice and vicious stereotypes by “established” Chinese Americans. Hwang’s play starts with Dave’s metatheatrical explication of its title:

F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy. FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. . . High-water pants. Floods, to be exact. Someone you wouldn’t want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn’t want to marry. That assumes we’re talking about boy FOBs, of course. But girl FOBs aren’t really as . . . FOBish. Boy FOBs are the worst, the pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABS—oh, that’s “American Born Chinese”—of all ABC girls. (Hwang 7)

When the new immigrant Steve is trying to find out the meaning of FOB, Dave replies: “It means you. You know how, if you go to a fish store or something, they have the stuff that just came in that day? Well, so have you” (20). To Steve’s inability to understand his metaphor, Dave retorts: “Forget it. That’s part of what makes you one” (29). The last scene of the play mirrors the first one, attesting to the longevity and vitality of internalized white middle-class racial and cultural norms within US minorities.

Concomitantly, contemporary perspective allows for charting the trajectories taken by Chinese American communities to survive and overcome the trauma of lost identity. *Paper Sons*, limited in its temporal and spatial span to ‘now and here’ (the Angel Island Immigration Center in 1915), provides but glimpses of the detainees’ possible futures in the land of promises. Hwang’s play capitalizes upon the trope of performed/enacted identity by presenting the protean nature of one of its protagonists as an advantage in the immigrants’ struggle for survival. Steve is capable of donning different masks, speaking in various voices, and becoming many things – from a fresh-off-the-boat immigrant of the title to all other Chinese American avatars and to the mythic Gwan Gung (the warrior god of Chinese folklore and “the adopted god of Chinese America” [Hwang 6]). He thus becomes an archetypal incarnation of Chinese immigrant experience over decades (from a scene set in China with “white ghosts” promising gold to poor peasants, to

an episode with parents making a young man go to America, to the Angel Island interrogation, and to a scene depicting poverty, starvation and depredations in the US). No wonder that Steve claims “having been here before, many times. This time, I said I will have it easy. I will come as no Chinaman before—on a plane, with money and rank.—And?—And—there is no change. I am still treated like this! This land . . . has no right. I AM GWAN GUNG! (48). Steve’s metaphorphoses are linguistically reinforced by shifts in his speech registers, from poetic and brutal language of mythology, to correct standard American English, and to broken English (stereo)typical of fresh-off-the-boat immigrants. His gaining upper hand at the play’s end symbolizes Chinese Americans’ capability of surviving and prevailing against terrible odds

Suh incorporates a vision of the future into his play’s orbit, with its last act set in 1930 San Francisco Chinatown. It focuses on the “paper” family’s resilience in their commitment to creating a future for their progeny by prioritizing inter-generational ties and determination to pass over to the children not only their fake names, but – which is of much greater consequence – their true notions of themselves. Both Moon Gyet’s and his (at first “paper,” then actual) wife Yuen’s decision to have children who could do what their parents could not, signals the play’s orientation towards the future heralded by Yuen’s fertility. In response to Gee’s repeated pronouncement that “names are important” (Suh 78), she is determined to find the right balance between telling her girls the truth and inventing their future so that they would carry on their collective memories, both familial and ethnic.

Interrogation as the ‘Primal Scene’ in Chinese Immigrants’ American Experience

The authenticity of the immigrants’ fictive life stories was subject to testing during long-lasting and excruciating interrogations at the Angel Island Immigration Center. To cheat the interrogators’ intent on exposing their lies, prospective immigrants had to memorize every minute detail of their new biographies so as not to be found out and deported back to China. As Stephen Sumida specifies, one member of the “family” would be interrogated at the Angel Island, while the other would be summoned out of detention and asked the same questions to verify that his answers match the first one’s (401). In addition to routine inquiries about the extended family’s names, ages, addresses, and trades the officials would ask “about the details of daily life in China” (401, for instance, “On what days of the week and month is the village marketplace open? What direction does the market face?” (401), or, as in Lim’s play, “How many steps are there leading to your doorstep?” (The same question is reiterated in Lloyd Suh’s *Far Country*). The three plays under discussion contain several scenes of interrogation exemplifying this exhausting and humiliating procedure, but treat them by means of varied dramatic techniques.

Genny Lim, the first Chinese American playwright to dramatize the Angel Island story, wrote *Paper Angels* under the immediate impression of the then recent sensational discovery of the unique socio-cultural phenomenon—the hieroglyphic poems written and carved by Chinese detainees on the walls of the West Coast immigration center on Angel Island in San Francisco

Harbor. Regarded today as the earliest samples of Chinese American literature, these poems recorded the hopes and frustrations, disappointment, and anger of the people awaiting the decision of the US immigration service. The story of their discovery in 1970, followed by the efforts of, first and foremost, Asian American communities to bring them to light as part of the national historic and cultural heritage, has since become widely known. Lim, a poet, performer, and civic activist, was involved in achieving this goal as a co-editor of the book *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980; updated and expanded edition, 2014), widely regarded as the finest and most comprehensive source on the subject. A few of the poems, along with fragments from official records and interviews, were incorporated into her play, written in the wake of these events. The title of the play contains multiple allusions.

To begin with, it implies the concept of “paper sons” discussed above. The word “angel” refers, first of all, to the name of the island; however, it may be also interpreted as a tribute to thousands of Chinese immigrants who have suffered and sometimes died there, with their spirits haunting the premises. It makes even more sense as an opposite to “white ghosts”—a common phrase to denote Euro-Americans in Asian American popular culture. Finally, due to a curious coincidence, there is still another Angel(l) in this story—an American diplomat who gave his name to the 1880 Treaty with China restricting, but not completely prohibiting Chinese immigration to the US, known as the Angell Treaty.

The play’s primarily documentary nature proves Lim’s intention to make it a revelation for the American public regarding the dramatic early period in Chinese American history, which was very little known in the 1980s outside the Chinese American community. Therefore, interrogation scenes in the play keep close to facts, aiming at outlining for the readers/audience members the extent of inhumaneness, cruelty, and absurdity to which Chinese immigrants were subjected as a primary act of “hospitality” in their new (step)motherland.

Lloyd Suh begins his play with special thanks to Genny Lim and her colleagues, who “made it their life’s work to uncover and document and share this history” (Suh n/p). Not only does he, in turn, include excerpts from the Angel Island poetry in his text, but he also acknowledges his broader indebtedness to Lim, thereby ensuring continuity between older and younger generations of Chinese American artists. His treatment of interrogation scenes is more nuanced. In particular, he demonstrates differences between the interrogation of Gee, which took place in 1909, before the Angel Island facility was put into operation, and the interrogation of his “paper son,” Moon Gyet, two years later, within the center. The first scene, though presented as strictly formal and replete with racial stereotypes, adopts a more humane attitude toward the interrogee. The white interrogator has a name (Harriwell) to demonstrate his humanity; he is not devoid of a sense of humor, the (Chinese) interpreter tries to help, and Gee, who is a “paper son” himself, passes the test with relative ease. On the contrary, Moon Gyet’s interrogations demonstrate that the institutionalization of the procedure at the Angel Island center deprived it of any human dimensions. The interrogator is nameless; he is just an Inspector, a cog in the state mechanism. The interpreter is also a Euro-American male (Chinese interpreters were banned

from the center). The questions are not only absurd and repetitive, but sadistically mocking, Jesuitical, and casuistic. They relentlessly bombard the detainee, so that the whole scene acquires a distinctly Kafkaesque quality (or else Ionesco's absurd drama). As becomes clear later, Moon Gyet has to spend seventeen long months on Angel Island before he is admitted into the "promised land." By hyperbolizing the absurdity and lending the scene its surreal atmosphere, the playwright draws attention to the inhumanity of the immigration disciplinary machine, turning its Chinese "raw material" into subaltern subjects.

Though written much earlier, David H. Hwang's play relies on a similar technique, carrying the caricature ad absurdum. In an episode of *FOB*, the dramatist has Steve, his Proteus-like protagonist, present his grotesquely exaggerated evidence before an imaginary panel of interrogators. Claiming that he had been rejected entrance four times already, he pleads with them to listen to him: "I tell you both my parents, I tell you their parents, I tell you their parents' parents and who was adopted great granduncle. I tell you how many beggars in hometown and name of their blind dogs. I tell you number of steps from my front door to temple, to well, to governor house, to fields, to whorehouse, to fifth cousin inn, to eighth neighbor toilet . . ." (Hwang 21).

Remarkably, it was not only the refusal to provide answers or the lack of correspondence in "father's" and "son's" testimony that might have caused the denial of admission. The prospective immigrants' ability to answer glibly also raised suspicion, signaling their possible reliance on so-called coaching books or papers containing the material to be memorized. With demand generating supply, such "cribs" providing helpful information to prospective immigrants appeared in abundance and were widely circulated among detainees. Naturally, they were strictly banned in the Center, and their users, transmitters, or carriers were subject to sanctions up to deportation. Both Lim and Suh acknowledge this practice in their plays. In *Paper Sons*, keeping a coaching book causes a conflict between the warden and a detainee with grave consequences to the latter. Suh's character Moon Gyet implies their existence, enumerating the trials in store for him if he wants to make a new start:

I know I must study and memorize documents. A biography. A map. Exacting details that you will provide of the person I am to be, and that I must internalize them all without error, so they are as familiar to me as my memories, my feelings, and my dreams. I know that I must recount these details perfectly, to men on the other side of the world, who will test me with their utmost power. (Suh 23)

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the early history of Chinese Americans is exceptionally rich in human drama, stemming from its unique circumstances which have a direct impact on the hospitality industry in the United States. When describing the lexicon associated with hospitality, Jacques Derrida cites the most frequently used words as "invite," "welcome," and "receive "at home,"" with the host regarded as "master of one's own home and the threshold" (6). As illustrated by the history of Chinese America, these words have been operative within

relevant discourse; however, their meanings have undergone significant transformations, at times reversing their original connotations. This reversal of positive connotations justifies the adoption of the ambiguous term “hostipitality.” The plays discussed earlier address this phenomenon as it manifested in real life.

The phase of American “invitation,” that is, the recruitment of cheap Chinese labor force without any rights or social guarantees, figures in each of the plays, and is well exemplified in a passage from Hwang’s *FOB*:

Yes, I will go to America. “Mei Guo”. The white ghosts came into the harbor today. They promised that they would bring us to America, and that in America we would never want for anything. One white ghost told us how the streets are paved with diamonds, how the land is so rich that pieces of gold lie on the road, and the worker-devils consider them too insignificant even to bend down for. They told us of a land where there are no storms, no snow, but sunshine and warmth all year round, where a man could live out in the open and feel not even discomfort from the nature around him – a worker’s paradise. A land of gold, a mountain of wealth, a land in which a man can make his fortune and grow without wrinkles into an old age. And the white ghosts are providing free passage both ways. All we need to do is sign a worker’s contract. Yes, I am going to America. (Hwang 37)

Experiences of hard labor, poverty, and deprivation exposed this “narrative of welcoming plenty” as figment of imagination (Lin and Ling 4). “But,” the scholars continue, “as a ‘founding myth’, the trope of the ‘Gold Mountain’—Gum San—is perhaps as powerful as that original founding myth of the new world—a city on a hill—that brought the Puritans across the Atlantic” (4).

As to the crossing of the threshold, as well as the welcome and reception extended to Chinese immigrants in the USA, this article has dealt with these phases at some length, looking at their representations in three plays in the scenes set at the Angel Island Immigration facility. While all of them reimagine these historical episodes as instances of blatant “hostipitality,” dramatists employ various strategies and dramatic techniques to accomplish this task. Genny Lim in *Paper Angels* alternates naturalistic episodes involving, as a rule, a group of the station’s Chinese inmates and white officials with more intimate and, at the same time, metatheatrical sequences where individual immigrants (or staff members) voice their internal anxieties, desires or persuasions. Owing a lot to her play, Suh’s *Far Country* written half a century later imbues similar scenes with stronger symbolism broadening their scope to encompass a whole group’s experience and zero in on transnational/global dimensions of early 20th century Chinese immigration in the US. By interspersing present-time scenes with flashbacks to principal nodes in Chinese American history in his one-acter, Hwang achieves a palimpsest effect of condensing the past, present, and future in the scenic “here and now.” The mythical timelessness of the events is emphasized by the play’s “contemporary” characters’ doubling as folklore personages. All three playwrights stress the relevance of reenacting history for the present and, especially, for

the future, in the hope that America, Mei Guo, the Beautiful Land, will finally, though belatedly, recognize former “undesirable aliens” as her worthy and welcome residents.

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