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Commodified Desire: Negotiating Asian American Heteronormativity

By Paul M. McCutcheon

Credited as the "first fictional rendition of the bachelor society in English by a Chinese immigrant," (Kim 109), H.T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* tells the story of Wong Wan-Lee, a Chinese "paper son" living in New York's Chinatown, and his relationship with Pearl Chang, an aspiring actress who migrates from the U.S. South and who is of Chinese and African American descent. A Depression-era immigrant story of Wong Wan-Lee and his struggles against racism, nativism, and economic exploitation, *And China Has Hands* interrogates the myth of American mobility, the failures of capitalism, and the imperialist goals of Japan in China. Opening with a chance encounter that sees Pearl rescue Wong from the racist taunts of children, the novel focuses on their relationship as it leads to their actualization of the racial structures of capitalism toward the development of a revolutionary consciousness. Despite the novel's ambitious goals, literary scholars have generally dismissed *And China Has Hands* as a poorly written text that fails to conform to the literary conventions of the proletariat novel. Indeed, David Palumbo-Liu's analysis of the text is typical of the numerous scholars who consider the novel simplistic and stylistically flawed, remarking that it exhibits "the rather crude prose style of a social realist fable making all the gestures of political critique proper to the genre"(57). Alan Wald further criticizes Tsiang's aesthetics noting that Tsiang's "genre mixing, blurring of history and fiction, and his overall episodic construction may well be a consequence of his background in Chinese literary forms, as well as the difficulty of writing in a second language, or perhaps translating mentally as he wrote " (344). In a defense of the novel, Lynette Cintrón suggests, "the sporadic quality of Tsiang's prose reflects the chaotic rhythms of urban life while his cannibalizing of Western and Chinese traditions enacts a poetics of relation. In other words, Tsiang does not privilege one aesthetic tradition. This style suits his project of contesting capitalist and imperialist forces on a localized (U.S. / Japan) and global scale" (2). By articulating a transnational political critique of capitalism and imperialism through a hybrid aesthetic form, Cintrón suggests that Tsiang's novel posits a transnational and cross-cultural politics of identity that links revolutionary struggle with issues of race and gender inequality.

While I would agree with Cintrón's interpretation of the text's transnational aesthetic and political commentary, I argue that, underneath its ostensibly transparent political message, there rests a Marxian commentary on the transformation of intimacy and sexuality under capitalism. This should come as no surprise given Tsiang's well-established Marxist leanings. Migrating to the United States in 1926 to flee China's Nationalist Party's conservative backlash to leftists, Tsiang established himself as a political agitator and, after finding California inhospitable to his politics, moved to New York where he studied at Columbia University (Cheung 58-59). Encouraged by his professors at Columbia, Tsiang composed editorials, wrote letters to political officials,

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and eventually published work for the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses,* both prominent Marxist publications. "In nearly every instance," notes Floyd Cheung, "he found a way to critique Chinese conservatism, Japanese imperialism, and U.S. capitalism" (59). Tsiang's dedication to Marxism was so thorough that he reportedly offered a 75% discount to members of the Communist Party (Lecklider 94). These political commitments are central to understanding Tsiang's literary output. *And China Has Hands* works from the Marxist understanding of commodity production and exchange that is at once both material and ideological; capitalist production creates what Marx called a "phenomenological matrix" of cultural and social ideologies that shelter human relationships from the structures of production (159-80). Yet, where Marx suggested that commodity fetishism developed as an ideology of capitalist production, *And China Has Hands* posits it as the logic of culture itself. Provocatively suggesting that commodity fetishism had come to shape cultural understandings of intimacy and the sexual values of society, the text anticipates Georg Lukács concepts of reification and totality whereby commodity fetishism "stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world" (100).

While this theoretical understanding creates opportunities for Tsiang to interrogate the patriarchal logic of intimacy in Anglo America, he does so by mourning capitalism's disruptive effects on a presumed natural heterosexuality, thus naturalizing heterosexuality as a historically transcendent mode of social organization. This emphasis makes classifying the text as "a standard, if also highly inventive, proletarian bildungsroman'"(Cheung 65) that recycles the genre's emphasis on the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness through the sublimation of personal pleasures for the benefit of the good of the proletariat whole difficult, since its emphasis on sexuality and race make it something of an exception within the genre. Recognizing this, Aaron S. Lecklider considers Tsiang's literary output a part of what he calls "the proletarian burlesque" that incorporates "elements of performance and perversion to challenge, assault, and bait readers" (90). This may more accurately describe Tsiang's work. Yet, where Lecklider argues that "Tsiang strategically deployed an aesthetic and ethics of performance that both queered radicalism and radicalized sexual categories by emphasizing political, literary, and sexual performativity," which allowed him to refuse "the heteronormative expectations often assigned to proletarian literature" (88), I want to suggest that Tsiang's attempt to make clear connections between capital and heteronormativity ultimately rely on an ideological commitment to heterosexuality. Thus, where Lecklider reads Tsiang's active resistance to normative sexual ideology and his refusal "to affirm his heterosexual masculinity" (94) as part of Tsiang's queer performativity, my reading of *And China Has Hands* suggests that what Tsiang mocked was not heterosexual masculinity, but the effects of capitalism on what he perceived as an otherwise normal heterosexuality. Thus, what *And China Has Hands* challenges is not so much heteronormativity as much as it does the racial logic of capitalism that already rendered Asian American heteronormativity impossible.

Tsiang frames the impossibility of Asian American heteronormativity against P'u Sung-ling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, which Wong reads at the beginning of *And China Has Hands.* A classic in Chinese literature, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* includes a number of stories that explore heterosexual romance between mortal men and supernatural women. More than simply an interesting backstory, Cheung has

pointed to a number of interesting parallels between *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and *And China Has Hands*, including a story "Liansuo" which finds the protagonist Yang pining for the return of the female ghost and his lover to return and unite with him much like Wong will wait for over a month for his "angel" Pearl to return to him (Cheung 64). "But while Yang and his companion ultimately achieve a romantic union," notes Cheung, "Wong and Pearl meet again not in the bedroom but rather on the picket line." I find Cheung's comparison of these two texts quite compelling, but incomplete: pushing it further, we might read the use of *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* as an effort to establish a pristine and uncorrupted heterosexuality that is no longer possible. Read this way, Pearl and Wong's inability to forge a heterosexual relationship is suggestive of the pernicious effects of capital on heterosexuality itself. By casting Wong as a potential patriarchal figure who hopes to one day care for a family through his labor, Tsiang's critique of capital and heteropatriarchy depends on romanticizing this lost heteronormative world that has been poisoned by a commodity logic that alienates men from women. As Achille Mbembe recently suggested, the problem with this Marxian emphasis on the commodity fetish is that it tends to make "human emancipation dependent upon the abolition of commodity production," which "blurs the all-important divisions among the man-made realm of freedom, the nature-determined realm of necessity, and the contingent in history" (18). Consistent with this broader tendency within Marxian thought, Tsiang elides the dialogic relationship between modes of production and modes of social organization and frames the abolition of commodity production as the key to a utopic heterosexuality. Thus, this essay seeks to address key textual moments where power, sexuality, class, race and gender intersect to both critique and re-inscribe the social organization of capitalism and heterosexuality. In doing so, I suggest that, while replete with problematic assumptions, *And China Has Hands* nevertheless works to reveal the impossibility of Asian American heteronormativity in early twentieth century America.

It is precisely these strengths and weaknesses of *And China Has Hands* that make it such a useful text to intervene in present discussions surrounding the future of Asian American studies (and ethnic studies more broadly), specifically the call to transform the set of knowledges that inform the field into a "subjectless critique." As a mode of critique, Asian American studies must account for how racial discourses sustain white supremacy, but it must also account for how people negotiate and claim identity categories for themselves. A radical rethinking of identity may be necessary, but a total abandonment of identity means losing a fundamental category of political analysis. While I am sympathetic to Kandice Chuh's vision of an Asian American studies that abandons identity and, instead, "facilitates critical acknowledgment of the vast diversity of the relations and blockages of power that underwrite the construction and legibility of political and social subjectivities" (115-116), I want to maintain that a focus on ethnic identity can assist in "the endless pursuit of justice (148)." If we understand identity as an uneven but important way of seeing, emphasizing, and prioritizing certain forces in the world that, for other groups, would remain obscure, invisible, or secondary, we can begin to strategically deploy the category of ethnicity to work out the contradictory locations that people occupy.

And China Has Hands pushes us to understand the ways that different social groups are simultaneously circumscribed by some forms of power even as they are complicit with others. Because U.S. immigration laws depended on the gendered logic of capital that sought to expand its supply of specifically male laborers from Asia (while

overtly prohibiting Asian females through mechanisms like the Page Law), it was Asian men that became disproportionately represented in U.S. society. Yet, as Lisa Lowe and Yen Le Espiritu remind us, the very immigration policies that valued male laborers from Asia also depended on racialized and gendered assumptions that relegated Chinese men to "feminized" forms of labor such as laundry and restaurant work when not needed to fill labor shortages(Lowe 11). Although often married to wives in "split household" families that saw Chinese men live and work in the U.S. while their wives handled domestic duties while still in China (Espiritu 30-31), the gendered logic of immigration and the racist domestic policies encouraged the development of Asian bachelor societies that provided "domestic" labor for white society. In this context, Asian American men belonged to a pool of surplus labor that necessarily deviated from heteronormative domestic constructions of sexuality. Despite being married, the inability to form and maintain the type of heteronormative families that mainstream society had valorized as ideal at the turn of the twentieth century made Asian America the constitutive other to heteronormative coupling.

The material and discursive construction of Asian American men as the gendered and sexual "other" to the construction of proper subjecthood make it one possible site for certain types of critiques of the state and capital. Indeed, as Roderick Ferguson notes, "surplus populations become the locations for possible critiques of state and capital..[because they] do not rely on normative prescriptions to assemble labor" (15-16). Of course, these sites are not untethered to the workings of capital, but are instead unequally positioned within those networks. Thus, if the critiques made in *And China Has Hands* become structurally possible because of Tsiang's position within U.S. capital, we must read those criticisms with an understanding of his relationship and connection to other forms of oppression and knowledge. As one of the earliest criticisms of the positioning of Asian American men as the queer other to U.S. civilization, its usefulness rests both in its critique as well its disavowal of queer possibilities that undergird his vision of an inclusive heteronormativity. Using Wong's bachelor status and his relationship with Pearl Chang to explore capitalism's imbrications with heteropatriarchal hierarchies, Tsiang suggests that capitalism creates ways of seeing that reduce intimacies to exchange value and commodity culture. Wong, whose preferred literary name, I Pen Wan-Lee, means, "out of one investment, there will be ten thousand fortunes drawn" (19), embodies the capitalist ethos and false-consciousness that prevent him from sustaining a healthy relationship with Pearl. Although literary critic Julia Lee suggests that Pearl's name serves as metonym for exchange and "knowledge of the capitalist and commodity culture," (86) this reading elides a sustained engagement with the text's Marxist commentary. By understanding this subtext, it becomes clear that Pearl represents the ways that capitalism and commodity fetishism maps itself onto desire and serves metonymically for the ways that female bodies, heteropatriarchy, and commodity fetishism coalesce in U.S.-American capitalist discourse.

Under these contexts, Wong's internalization of the ideological workings of capital determines his understanding of masculinity and, as a result, the value of those around him. That we find Wong moving from work as a waiter to a laundry is perhaps telling inasmuch as it works to position him in "feminized" occupations, it is more telling that Wong views ownership as a way of claiming his masculinity. Because his position as a waiter is marked by a gendered alienation from his labor where numerous bosses control the pace and terms of his labor and deprive him of his ability to control

his own manhood, Wong views the acquisition of a laundry as an opportunity for him to reclaim his masculinity through labor. Indeed, Wong reasons, only by asserting control over his labor will he have the chance to earn his "ten thousand fortunes." Thus, as he leaves his job at the restaurant, he fantasizes that he will someday flaunt his wealth in front of the boss and the other workers by coming back and tipping exorbitantly. This consumptive claim to masculinity was, according to the text, a common strategy among many poor Chinese Americans who tipped servers well because "they were looked down upon by others and this was a way to show that they were equal. It was a sign of protest"(101). Already pointing to the fact that consumption is not merely economic, Tsiang's opening commentary already begins to point to the ways that the economic becomes intertwined with a host of other social issues, including Wong's sexuality. Indeed, the consumptive performativity of wealth is part of what Kevin Floyd broadly defines as the consumptive labor of masculinity through leisure (102-105) that Wong uses to protest the feminization of Chinese men and the devaluation of their labor.

Yet, as the novel suggests, these small acts of resistance to the racial subordination of Asian labor meant little since these types of displays failed to challenge the economic system that encouraged the diasporic flow of Asian labor into the U.S. and elsewhere. Far from simply a contradictory response to the structures of capitalism, protest that relies on the very medium that capital works through is, for Tsiang, a profoundly unnatural act. Like Marx, Tsiang frames the alienation of the laborer from his/her production as a profoundly unnatural process that changes the consciousness of the worker. Wong's turn to laundry ownership is thus as demeaning as his tenure as a restaurant server, because his labor reduces his hands to the mechanized motions of capital (27). Yet, just as his labor corporally disciplines his body to perform particular types of labor, his labor also transforms his consciousness in a way that encourages Wong to filter information through commodity logic. Thus, after relying on the expertise of Pearl to fend off the racist chants of local children, Wong points to his economic status in order to reassert his masculinity and to defend his decision to throw away his snacks. "Never mind the few cents," he exclaims, "I'm rich…these little savages will become my messengers and carry my messages to their old savages and their old savages will become my customers by and by" (30). This claim is particularly telling because Wong uses it to distance himself from the emasculation brought by his failure to deal with the local children.

Nevertheless, Pearl immediately rejects Wong's invitation into his home and business and quickly leaves Wong's storefront. What quickly becomes apparent is that Pearl's hasty retreat from Wong does not stem from a lack of immediate attraction, since she continues to fantasize about Wong and ultimately attempts to forge a relationship with him. Instead, Pearl's rejection of Wong must be read as part of a broader resistance to commodity fetishism in both her personal and professional life. It is no coincidence that Tsiang immediately contrasts Pearl's refusal of Wong's advances and his assertion that he was rich with an earlier moment in Pearl's life when she refuses work at a local art school because she has no desire to subject herself to the gaze of "young and queer looking" artists (33). That she views her resistance to that type of labor as an ideological resistance to commodification is made clear as she thinks to herself: "There were things that could be bought with money, but not things like this. There were people who could be bought with money, but not Pearl Chang!" (33-34). When read against Wong's attempt to position himself as an owner, Pearl's proclamation explains both her retreat

and her decision to distance herself from Wong. Indeed, as Pearl and Chang begin their relationship, Pearl refuses all of Chang's gifts and always pays her own way when they go out, suggesting that Pearl refuses to accept any gesture that might suggest that she is for sale (106).

Pearl's subtle refusal of the reduction of her body to a commodity fails to register with Wong, who has internalized a type of commodity masculinity that shapes his view of Pearl and his courting of Pearl. This logic so thoroughly shapes Wong's understanding that he transforms Pearl the person into what he imagines as the highest form of feminized commodities: a pearl. By reducing Pearl to a commodity, Wong is able to erase the oppressive class and social relationships that shape her life, leaving him with an image of a commodity that might be purchased through masculine displays of wealth and capital. Thus, after their initial introduction, Wong attempts to create an outward image of consumer power that will facilitate the seduction of Pearl. Wong cleans and decorates his shop/home with "authentic" Chinese goods, furniture, and treats hoping that they might impress Pearl. His consumptive display of masculinity culminates with the purchase of a coat that, though far beyond his budget, was sold to him as a commodity that would impress Pearl. To be sure, Wong resists purchasing the coat until the salesperson notes "If you happened to have a girlfriend, you might need a nice overcoat. It would help a great deal" (41). Julia Lee's reading of this scene is quite helpful. She suggests that "Wong's decision to buy an expensive and useless coat—imagining it will allow him to win over Pearl and become a successful businessman—reveals the extent to which, in embracing material objects as signifiers of his own worth, he has participated in his own capitalistic objectification and commodification" (85).

Yet, there is much more to this moment than what Lee's reading allows. Since, as Sara Ahmed suggests, "Heterosexuality is not then simply 'in' objects as if 'it' could be a property of objects…heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, how objects are arranged to create a background…we could say that heterosexuality functions as a background" (87), we need to understand how Wong's use of an object like a coat works alongside his attempt to clean and rearrange his apartment. Doing this allows us to consider how Wong's fetishization of the coat signifies his own alienation and objectification works in tandem with how the arrangements of objects become part of a capitalist/ heterosexual background based on consumptive heterosexuality. Indeed, while it is true that the coat in this scene signifies the type of alienation central to commodity fetishism, it is also central to Tsiang's critique of the ways objects themselves become intrinsic parts of the ways heterosexuality is known. Heterosexuality is not just embedded in the commodities; the commodities come together to create a heterosexual background. Wong's understanding of Pearl as another one of the commodities he might place in that background is central to the text's attempt to work through the conditions which underwrite the impossibility of heteronormativity for Asian Americans in the early twentieth century.

Thus, the central tension in the text revolves around Wong's imbrications within the ideological structures of capitalist consumption and his material struggle with the systemic and structural obstacles that keep him from accessing the heteronormativity. This tension becomes central to Wong's political awakening, since his occasional recognition of the way his objectification of women erases the exploitive labor conditions that undergirds their lives collides with his failure to do the same with Pearl.

Indeed, upon meeting a woman whom he would discover was a sex-worker, Wong thinks to himself that she "was beautiful. The eyes! The lips! The mouth! Everything!" Nevertheless, "She was not Pearl Chang. She was nobody" (42). This sudden conclusion is quite surprising. Given that Wong's initial encounter with Pearl had been as limited as his encounter with this woman, he had no reason to conclude that she was nobody and the text gives us nothing in terms of explaining his conclusion. One might conclude that her status as a one-dollar prostitute makes her an easy target for dismissing her as nothing more than a cheap commodity of no use to the formation of a heterosexual background, but this would elide the fact that he makes this conclusion before he knows her occupation. Once he knows her occupation, Wong moves from judging her value in commodity terms toward a real consideration of value in terms of labor. Indeed, he thinks, "the lady would have to work with as many customers as he ironed shirts. It looked as though she had to make a livelihood for three persons, support an automobile, and leave something over for the company" (44). The act of demystifying the surface markers of beauty through a consideration of the exploitive nature of her labor signals the beginning of Wong's political awakening. Although he still fetishizes Pearl's body in commodity terms, Wong interaction with the sex worker pushes him to move beyond commodity fetishism to consider, for the first time, not the value her body offers him as a potential consumer, but how her body was used to create profits for other people. Like the older gentlemen whom he meets in the next section (whose life had placed him as a miner, a gandy dancer, a railroad worker), the prostitute's labor supported other people's wealth and offers few opportunities for her to transcend her economic position.

Nevertheless, this realization also renders his behavior irrational to the woman who had propositioned him: within the network of capitalist consumption, the woman expected Wong to understand the value of her beauty in commodity terms alone. Indeed, his failure to exploit the commodity value of the sex worker's body prompts the woman to suggest that he read the tabloids so that he "wouldn't be so dumb" (44). This suggestion that the tabloids help do the work of transforming the body into commodity form marks a key point in the text; the accusation that tabloids do the ideological work of capital points to the ways that heteronormative conventions depend on the transformation of bodies into commodity form and hints to the ways that Pearl's fascination with tabloids and the glamour of Hollywood works against her political awakening. Yet, because systemic and structural obstacles placed Asian men into "feminized" occupations like laundries, any claim to normativity would ultimately fail. For both Wong and Pearl, their political engagement hinges on their ability to understand how the acceptance of heteronormative conventions works to support their subordinate racial positions within capital.

Yet, even as this actualization opens the path toward Wong's revolutionary awakening, it does so in fragmentary ways since he uncritically accepts the prostitute's suggestion that failure to understand the commodity value of desire makes one "dumb." Thus, in his first intimate encounter with Pearl, Wong echoes the prostitute's suggestion that he needed to educate himself with the tabloids by suggesting that Pearl's lack of understanding of his commodified performance of masculinity made her a little "Mo No" (or no brain). When read against his encounter with the sex worker, Wong's dismissal of Pearl's intelligence has less to do with her lack of knowledge of the cultural workings of Chinese people and more to do with Pearl's refusal to succumb to market seduction or Wong's commodity performance of masculinity. Indeed, Wong's

judgments do not come during the meal when Pearl reveals her ignorance of "authentic" Chinese dishes, but during a sexually tense moment when Wong, attempting to negotiate her sexual exchange value, begins comparing Pearl to his cat. Note, however, that his comparisons and conclusions have nothing to do with Pearl's lack of cultural authenticity, but with the very precise terms of exchange value and intimacy:

> Wong Wan-Lee thought that his cat had more brains than Pearl Chang.
>
> When the cat lay over his feet every night, he thought the cat was doing him a favor by being his hot-water bag. He now discovered that the cat had brains to use his feet to keep her warm.
>
> When he walked around, the cat ran between his legs to rub her body against his leg; he used to think the cat was doing him a favor by trying to amuse him. Now he had discovered the cat had enough brains to use his ankle as a back scratcher…
>
> On second thought, however, Wong Wan-Lee realized that Pearl Chang had more brains than the cat. With all the brains the cat had, she didn't know how to make any other sound besides "meow"; Pearl Chang could make more sounds than that.
>
> With all the brains the cat had, she could only make the center part of her eyes smaller during the day and larger at night, but she could not shift her eyes to the corner and needle your heart. Pearl Chang could. (55)

Like Michel de Montaigne, who famously rejected the *a priori* assumption of the superiority of human intelligence by asking "when I play with my cat, who knows whether I do not make her more sport, than she makes me?" (282), Wong initially concludes that Pearl's inability to make rational decisions based on exchange value makes her less intelligent than the cat. Although the cat may sometime deceive him, Wong reasons, the intimate exchanges between he and his cat are predicated on exchanges between two rational actors both interacting to extract value from the exchange of petting. Despite his best efforts to increase the value of their intimate exchange with "authentic" Chinese commodities, Pearl seems to reject the idea that intimacy should be understood through exchange value. Indeed, we learn later, Pearl's refusal to reduce intimacy to exchange value was so thorough that she consistently refused all of Wong's gifts, including any attempt to pay for their dates (106). Yet, because Wong works from a capitalist understanding of the exchange value of intimacy, he finds himself ultimately unable to maintain his position that his cat was more intelligent than Pearl because his cat could not increase the value of their intimate exchanges. Pearl could. Reading her ability to "needle your heart" with small affective gestures forces him to conclude that Pearl must be more intelligent than his cat. While Pearl's inability to understand the exchange value of those displays made her a little "Mo No," her ability to manipulate the value of exchange made her more intelligent than his cat. The irony, of course, is that the sex worker's earlier dismissal of Wong as

dumb for failing to understand the exchange value of intimacy is now the logic that structures his dismissal of Pearl as "Mo No." While Wong's fragmentary consciousness allows him to sometimes make steps toward the demystification of surface value by considering the labor that structures people's lives, his inability to do so with Pearl prevents him from understanding that Pearl wants nothing more than intimacy for its own sake, not for any material benefits she might gain from intimate encounters.

Predictably, Wong's internalization of commodity fetishism works to stifle his relationship with Pearl. In the following section, for example, Wong temporarily loses Pearl's interest while engaging in a performative display of consumptive masculinity at a Chinese New Year's party. Though Wong feels the need to impress Pearl by giving a generous sum of money to the bookkeeper who manages the party, he feels no need to accompany her during the party and eventually leaves her side to drink with the other men at the party (62). Like the coat that he purchased to impress Pearl (which has no more use value than his previous coat), Wong measures Pearl's value based solely on what her presence does for his status. To be sure, Wong's reaction to any display of affection in this context seems to be met with some level of discomfort because he thinks to himself that it "was nicer to let people guess and not let them know how it actually was" (59). While commodity logic clearly plays a role in this interchange, the text fails to address whether questions of status solely stem from commodity fetishism, or if heteronormative desire depends on the social organization of capital. Regardless, Pearl seems to understand that a certain type of capitalist performance, predicated on ownership of her body, is at play and she quickly abandons Wong at the party. Yet, Wong is as concerned with the loss of Pearl's photograph that night as he is with the loss of Pearl because, he thinks, the photo was of "original virginity and it was *holy* and therefore must be found" (emphasis added, 64). This pseudo-pornographic representation of Pearl comes to embody the commodity fetish as it manifests itself in mystical fetishism, since the object itself becomes an object that erases Pearl's identity by eroticizing her virginity while simultaneously ascribing supernatural power to an object that represents her virginal past. Wong views the photograph not as sentimental symbol of shared intimacy, but as a thing that is "abounding in metaphysical subtitles and theological niceties" that derives its value through "the misty realm of religion" (Marx 163,165). As a *holy* image, it becomes a thing that "transcends the sensuousness" (Marx 163) and allows Wong to construct an idea of Pearl that is detached from the structures of labor, racism, sexism, and oppression that shape her life.

Though Wong will continue to fantasize about Pearl for the weeks predating her return, his fantasies are not notably sexual, nor are they particularly intimate. Instead, his primary focus is on the fact that Pearl is a little "Mo No," which causes him to like her more (68-69). His fantasy of Pearl- her virginal innocence and her vague ignorance- all allow Wong to construct a patriarchal fantasy predicated on the ownership of her body. Pearl's refusal to act as a commodity to Wong actually supports his understanding of Pearl as a fine and elusive commodity that requires him to display his virility by demonstrating his purchasing power. Thus, after his store is robbed two weeks after Pearl's disappearance at the Chinese New Year's party, Wong is relieved to know that he still had his new overcoat on his back, losing only two new blankets and his old coat. Hinting to the absurdity of Wong's assessment of what he had lost, the text finds Wong concluding that the three items that he used to keep warm "were not worth very much" (68), even as he expresses his relief because he still had the overcoat that he purchased to impress Pearl. The new overcoat has no more use-value than that of the

three items that he lost in the robbery—in fact, when one combines the three items together, he would be warmer had he only lost his new overcoat. Wong's assessment of value is not based on use-value, but instead based on a fetishized notion of what the commodity might give him in terms of desirability and status. Because Wong fails to understand Pearl as a person with emotions and desires, he spends no time considering how he might apologize for hurting Pearl's feelings at the party, and thinks only of the coat's importance for gaining Pearl.

This understanding leaves no room for a fantasy involving love or intimate contact. Although Wong sits and thinks of Pearl for several weeks, he spends no time fantasizing about her in emotional terms. He wants Pearl, but only as an object for consumption. Thus, when Pearl returns after at least four weeks of no contact with Wong, he is unable to answer Pearl's direct question about his emotional feelings toward her. Moving oddly into this discussion by focusing on how the Chinese were weakened by vegetarian diets, Pearl disarms Wong's resistance to her advances because he "seems to interpret Pearl's questions about his eating habits as a direct assault on his sexual identity or prowess" (Lee 93). Afraid that Pearl will think him a vegetarian if he resists her touch, he sits nervously as Pearl affectionately pets his hair, ears, and neck. As she does this, she whispers into his ear and asks him if he likes her and then if he loves her. Although Wong's silence suggests that he does not, I would suggest that Wong's silence is less one of refusal so much as it reflects his inability to understand how he could love someone he only understood as a commodity. He could no more answer Pearl's question than had his coat asked him the same question. While his timidity ostensibly stems from his sexual naivety, his actions reveal a different understanding that grows from his understanding of women as commodities. Thus, rather than answer Pearl, Wong attempts to consume Pearl as if she was, indeed, nothing more than an object for consumption. This domination first leads him to filter Pearl's body and personality through a commodified lens (suggesting that her breasts were tennis balls and Lee Chee nuts) and then to physically treat her breasts as if they were actual commodities. This sexual encounter between Pearl and Wong relies on the assumption that his emasculation (or "vegetarianism") is caused by the capitalist position he is in, and his violent and unnatural reclaiming of his manhood is skewed by commodity logic. In a fit of rage, Pearl screams that her breasts were not actually tennis balls, and her nipples were not Lee Chee nuts. However, Wong does not understand:

> Wong Wan Lee had heard what Pearl Chang had shouted to him, but could not understand what really made her become so mad.
> The woman was changeable as the weather, he thought, and even more.
> The woman was the boss; what could he do? (79)

While Lee suggests that, "Tsiang's tone toward this extraordinary incident seems to be one of objective indifference, as if incidents like these should be expected between people from different cultures. The lack of direct or indirect commentary at this juncture indicates the problematic construction of sexuality in *And China Has Hands*: the sexual humiliation of the novel's two primary characters is completely detached from the book's political commentary" (93), I read this as the part of Wong's ongoing political awakening. Even as it suggests that the reification of commodity fetishism has fully skewed Wong's perception of sexuality and gender, the actualization that women have control suggests that Wong is beginning to understand that the heteropatriarchal

ownership of woman makes no sense because commodities control him rather than the other way around. Although Wong has not fully broken free from the idea that Pearl is a type of commodity, he begins to understand the complicated relationship between capital and consciousness, heteropatriarchy and commodity fetishism. This subtle critique of heteropatriarchy marks a clear narrative shift in Wong's thinking about Pearl. Indeed, as the text progresses, Wong no longer thinks of Pearl as "Mo No," but, instead, begins to think of Pearl as the one in control. Thus, as Wong watching his cat devours a mouse he returns to the proposition made so famous by Miguel de Montaigne and thinks to himself that Pearl "might make a plaything out of him as the cat did the mouse" (80). Although Wong does not yet understand that Pearl is not a commodity, his mental comparison allows him to see that it is not people who control commodities, but the logic of commodity consumption that controls them. This understanding, though skewed, opens the path to revolutionary consciousness.

It is worth stopping for a moment to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the text's interventions. While there is something compelling about Tsiang's effort to link the cultural logic of exchange value to intimacy in this section, *And China Has Hands* problematically posits Wong's gender performance as a sign of his alienation from a *natural* response to intimacy. Because the core assumption of the novel is that the commodity fetish hides what is *really* embodied in the commodity, Tsiang assumes a natural state of intimacy that commodity fetishism renders absurd. That assumption thus inscribes heterosexual relationships as a natural and universal truth that capitalism has made "queer." Wong's natural response to Pearl, Tsiang seems to suggest, would be to seduce Pearl through honest emotive interactions, but Wong assumes that the commodity transfer of food should suffice in gaining Pearl's affection (much like this exchange gains the affection of the cat). Because Tsiang's framework positions sexuality within the totality of capitalist production, his understanding of the reification of the commodity fetish relies on the assumption of a universal and heteronormative desire corrupted by capitalism. Thus, while Tsiang frames heteropatriarchy as perverse, it is only non-normative because it deviates from what he sees as the natural category of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Mourning only the loss of the type of the pristine heterosexuality found in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, Tsiang seems blind to the ways that heterosexuality becomes a privileged form of social organization. Because, as Rosemary Hennessy argues, heterosexuality depends on "disciplining human affect and sensation into discreetly gendered subjects and objects of desire," to reinforce "the sexual division of labor" we need a language to understand not only the ways that sexuality has been reduced to exchange value, but to consider "the reification of the human potential for sensation and affect into sexual identities" (104). *And China Has Hands* offers us no way to think about this less visible relationship between capital and sexuality because it fails to engage in questions surrounding the cultural-ideological privileging of heterosexuality that help secure the commodification of intimacy explored in the text. Indeed, the text is a product of the reification of heterosexual identity at the turn of the century.

What *And China Has Hands* does allow us to consider, however, is the material-ideological devaluation of certain bodies within the heteronormative structures of the U.S. Indeed, the text provides us an opportunity to consider how heteronorms helped secure "the sexual division of labor" against Asian workers who were systemically relegated to the domestic/feminized sphere. While the text attempts to reveal the ways that capitalism impacts people living in the capitalist system, Asian bodies that become

impossibly heteronormative. To be sure, much of the reason that Pearl is attracted to Wong stems from the fact that she admires that failure, believing that Wong might work outside of the capitalist logic that informs the heteronormative reduction of her body to commodity form. Envisioning him a prince of a mythologized China, Pearl soon realizes that Wong is "as tough as any white brat I ever met when I was in the South" (78). As we will see, Tsiang's message is that only by channeling her personal resistance to the commodification of her body toward a revolutionary struggle against the alienation of working people from their labor might her vision of intimacy triumph, but this struggle means sacrificing any hope of forging that kind of intimate relationship for herself. Yet, where the impossibility of Pearl's heteronormativity is communicated through her failure to secure intimacy through individual acts of resistance to the commodification of desire, Wong's acceptance of the capitalist logic of intimacy also renders his heteronormativity impossible. That critique is made apparent through the figure of Wong and how his participation in a heterosexual economy allows him to visit sex-workers, but still makes it impossible for him to construct the normative family:

> So, even if he had a few hundred dollars, he could only stay in China about one year and then go broke.
>
> He would have to come back to America again.
>
> When he would come back to America, he would be different from what he had been when he had gone back to China. For he would have gone a single man and returned married, with a family in China to support; and how could he think of being here himself and leaving his newly married one in China alone, and how could he think of the fact that one day he might hear from his relatives that his wife had a first baby nine months after he had left? Oh yes, that would be his baby. And another one two years after he had left-whose would that be?
>
> An American *citizen's* wife who is not an American and whose husband is of Chinese origin is not allowed to come to America, while a wife of a Chinese *merchant* is admitted.
>
> When all his thoughts were over, his action followed.
>
> He went to the place according to the directions on the announcement. (Italics in original, 97-98).

Wong's marginal position in U.S. society is further demonstrated when he arrives at the dance hall only to find that money alone cannot guarantee access to intimacy or sexual contact. Attempting to maximize his investment on the female entertainers, Wong finds that the "lower part of his body had become a problem: If he drew back too far then it would be a waste of money, and if he pushed to near- well one could never tell" (93). This fear of an erection, however, does not stop him from exploring the dancer's two "hot water bags placed where Pearl Chang had her tennis balls," nor does it stop him from asking the dancer for sexual favors after tipping the woman (93). Yet, despite his attempt to buy favor from the dancers at the dance hall, he finds that the exchange value of intimacy is as racialized as the structures of capital that relegated him to the lowest rungs of society. Disappointed that the dancers seem

uninterested in the sale of sexual favors, Wong finds that the women exchange affection for the time that the two dollars can buy. Giving up, Wong turns to a sex worker who agrees to exchange sex for money, but this exchange is anything but intimate. Indeed, we learn that her only thoughts are of the potential tip Wong might give her for her services (100).

These events remind Wong of Pearl's refusal of gifts he attempted to give her and how she insisted that she pay her own way while out, even though he wanted to pay. Although Wong does not yet understand why Pearl no longer wants to see him, he begins to understand that her worth is not measured in exchange value (106). Through this moment of clarity, Wong begins to awake from the cloud of false consciousness. That escape allows him to realize that capitalism has altered the way that he, and those around him, see intimacy and interpersonal relationships. To be sure, Wong's final step toward revolutionary consciousness comes when he realizes that commodity fetishism has transformed the networks of intimacy that extend far beyond the reach of his failed relationship with Pearl, and into the familial networks that linked him to other Chinese workers. As Wong struggles to hold onto his collapsing business, he attempts to tap into his network of cousins who all belonged to a family of immigrants that linked them together economically and socially. "Because of this intimate relationship," we are told, "they could get credit from each other"(110). Yet, Wong finds that, just as commodity logic had wrought havoc on his relationship with Pearl, it had turned the once intimate familial relationships into one where cousins might go so far as to kill each other over differences in exchange, as had recently happened between his cousins Skinny Wong and Fat Wong. While Wong does not meet the same fate, he finds that the intimacies of family that had once sustained his father's world no longer existed and his cousins are no longer there to assist him. In one final attempt to save his failing laundry, he visits a gambling house where he loses everything. All of Wong's hopes and dreams of success are smashed, but his failure allows him to develop a revolutionary consciousness.

Finally able to link the systemic exploitation of Chinese labor to his internalization of a capitalist ideology that destroyed his relationship with Pearl, he is able to lay claim to a political consciousness and begin to disentangle commodity fetishism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy. Claiming a political consciousness that links commodity fetishism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy, Wong, like Pearl, must put aside personal desires so that a utopian heteronormativity might come into being. That future is only possible when the capitalist ideology that justifies the systemic exploitation of Chinese labor, encourages the objectification of women, and commodifies human relationships is first abolished. Wong will never make his "thousand fortunes" and will never have a sexual relationship with Pearl, but he can begin to work with Pearl in a way that does not depend on the patriarchal subjection of Pearl. Similarly, Pearl comes to her revolutionary consciousness by abandoning her search for sexual satisfaction. Despite a long personal struggle to resist the reduction of her body to exchange value, Pearl's radicalization comes less from her political awakening so much as it does through the subordination of her individualized struggle for something different to the revolutionary potential of the future. No longer interested in carving out intimate sexual relationships in a capitalist world, she instead unites with Wong as a comrade in a struggle that links her struggles against the objectification of her body to the racial logic of the state, the imperial goals of Japan, and the oppression of labor under capitalism.

Indeed, *And China Has Hands* ultimate message is that the possibility for sexual intimacy between Pearl and Wong requires a complete transformation of the system of racialized capitalism that renders Asian American heteronormativity impossible. Thus, once Wong has finally achieved the transformation necessary to relate to Pearl, a Japanese agent shoots Wong shortly after the Japanese invasion of China. Though the two can never have a relationship, the concluding lines leave open a possible future for this type of relationship. "My dear Wong Wan-Lee- ten thousands of fortunes," Pearl asks, "what have *you* now?" (italics in original, 127). Pointing to a better future against capitalism, imperialism, racism, and sexism, Wong invokes the increasing success of the Chinese Red Party, and declares, "My dear angel…*I have no ten thousand fortunes, But* [sic] *I'll have China!*" (italics in original, 127). Situating Wong's death within the impossibility of heteronormativity for Asian Americans described in this passage allows for an understanding of how early twentieth-century heteronormativity depended on constructing sexual value for certain racial groups that already excluded Asian Americans from the privileges of heteronormativity and whiteness. While Wong can purchase heterosexual sex, he cannot lay claim to heteronormativity. Nor can he change the capitalist paradigm that informs heteronormativity. This only leads to death. The end of heteropatriarchal heteronormativity can only be achieved by transforming the racialized and capitalistic logic that sustains the exclusion of some bodies while elevating others. Thus, while the fact that the shot that ends Wong's life comes from a Japanese agent serves the obvious function of condemning Japanese imperialism and capitalist greed, it also works to link Wong's desire to networks that make his desires impossible. Only by understanding the ways that the text functions as a critique of Asian Americans within structures of capital, heteropatriarchy and imperialism does this seemingly odd conflation of revolutionary China and true intimacy between Pearl and Wong make sense. Pearl and Wong cannot have a future within the capitalist heteropatriarchal society of the West, but the kind of revolution being forged in 1930s China makes such a potential future possible.

There is something compelling about Tsiang's vision for a transformation of intimacy outside of capitalist accumulation and colonial subjugation of people of color. Indeed, the text's numerous invocations of China lends itself well to Kandice Chuh's suggestion that we must think about the "*transnational within the national*" (italics in original, 69-70) to understand the flexible affiliations that inform the Asian American experience that might allow us to transform Asian American Studies into a subjectless critical field. Pearl's biracial position as both black and Asian allows Tsiang to link the oppression of all people to colonial and capitalist systems of accumulation. Yet, if the text works as a subjectless critique of the racial logic of heteronormativity, it does so by inscribing a utopian heteronormativity into its social vision. Redirecting the queering of Asian American men toward the system of commodity production and racialized labor, *And China Has Hands* leaves intact certain heteronormative assumptions that would allow for the further stigmatization of same-sex sociability. In other words, *And China Has Hands* deploys a subjectless critique of the racial logic of heterosexuality by claiming heterosexual subjecthood. As a critique, it offers much in terms of revealing the ways that heterosexuality became used as a race-evasive language for maintaining the privileges of whiteness (Carter 75-117), and how this discourse positioned Asian Americans as the constitutive other to the heterosexual couple. Indeed, this critique is just as important as his problematic claim to heterosexuality. Yet "discussions that naturalize sexuality, allowing its penalties and power relations to slip from view,"

Jennifer Ting reminds us, "are themselves a privilege" (79). To approach *And China Has Hands* as simply a subjectless critique would allow us to consider "sexuality as a discourse of power" without a full consideration of how "power relations of sexuality are also exercised upon the bodies, desires, and subjects that it organizes" (Ting 79).

The subject thus becomes the key to opening a new understanding of race and sexuality in Asian American studies. Because Pearl's revolutionary awakening comes not through some sort of awakening of racial authenticity, but instead through an actualization of her positionality in a colonial and capitalist system of production, Tsiang is able to communicate a political critique not dissimilar from one forged by Third World Liberationists, the Asian American movement, and the Black Panther movement several decades later. Yet, just as these latter movements' radicalism depended on a type of logic "where queerness is devalued and disciplined so as to promote a revolutionary" consciousness (Keenaghan 155), Tsiang's vision of a pan-racial revolutionary consciousness romanticizes the patriarchal family as natural, even as it suggests that commodity fetishism has alienated men from women. In this way, Tsiang's vision of a transcendent intimacy resonates within the heteronormative underpinnings that informed the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which, according to Ting, believed that "an Asian American sexuality liberated from the repression and distortion of racism and capitalism would be restored to the realm of 'the universally human' and would therefore lose its historical and political specificity. That is, Asian American racial formation produces a logic in which *Asian American sexuality is authentic (i.e., is specifically Asian American) to the degree that it is repressed and distorted"* (italics in original, 78). Like the Asian American movement's claim to heterosexual subjecthood, Tsiang's positioning of an ahistorical heterosexuality matters inasmuch as critiques of power sometimes work to naturalize other forms of power. By recognizing that the totality of capitalist praxis and its impact on discursive truth claims is "both as total and as uneven as the differentiation of capital from labor" (Floyd 14), we allow ourselves room to consider how Tsiang's position within networks of capital allowed him to challenge some structures of social organization while he naturalized others. Put differently, the question would focus on how Tsiang enters heteronormative discursive space and what that says about how Asian Americans claimed, rejected, or negotiated heteronormativity against dominant discourses that ascribed non-normative sexual identities onto Asian Americans. In these terms, *And China Has Hands* points to the impossibility of heteronormativity for Asian Americans in the early twentieth century.

Although Asian Americans refuse simple categorization within a U.S. legal and cultural system that demands relative homogeneity, it is still worth considering how people claim and negotiate identity categories as a political tool. Like any political tool, identity can be used to unite with others or to distance oneself from others. *And China Has Hands* does both: it works through Chinese identity to find moments of possible cross-racial alliance to advance a utopian economic, racial, gendered and (ostensibly) sexual future and it actively distances itself from any homoerotic or queer formation to negotiate a heteronormative Asian American identity. Ethnic identity is not merely an exogenously imposed category meant to uphold white supremacy; it is a constantly negotiated and contested representational strategy used in complex and contradictory ways. As such, there is no essential "truth" of ethnic identity. As with all identity categories, it is a subjective position that allows people to emphasize certain things in the world that others may dismiss as unimportant. Acknowledging this means

rethinking ethnic identity as an analytical category so that we might deploy it to critique normalizing disciplines that seek to erase difference. But rethinking how we conceptualize ethnic identity does not necessitate abandoning it as an analytical category. Instead of revealing the "truth" of the experience of identity, it seems more useful to begin to ask how people have negotiated and claimed ethnic identity to contest, sustain, or otherwise engage political structures. In doing so, we might begin to fully consider *And China Has Hands* as a subject-full critique.

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