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H. T. Tsiang: Literary Innovator and Activist

By Floyd Cheung

A Chinese exile in the United States, H. T. Tsiang (1899-1971) wrote several books in English that represent pioneer works in the canon of Asian American literature.[1] Following the principle of *nalai zhuyi*, or strategic appropriation from other writers, Tsiang created a new, hybridized literature by reworking formal and thematic elements from classical and contemporary Chinese literature, the proletarian works of 1920s and 1930s America, and western classics like the plays of William Shakespeare.[2] Although few know his work today, Tsiang is one of the earliest and most prolific innovators of Asian American literature, anticipating some of the appropriative methods, formal techniques, and critical strategies that have come to characterize the tradition. His published works—one volume of poetry, three novels, and one play—evidence a broadly educated, idiosyncratically imaginative, and politically engaged mind at work on the challenges of his time.[3] Yet what does it mean to think of Tsiang as an "Asian American" writer before the term itself was coined? What is his place in an Asian American literary syllabus? This essay argues that H. T. Tsiang is neither simply an outlier or merely an early example of what comes later. Undeniably, Tsiang was one-of-a-kind, a *sui generis* writer. His innovative and activist works, however, provide teachers and students of Asian American literature with rich opportunities to consider how a transnational sensibility could find expression, how cross-racial and class-based alliances could be forged, how literature could serve political ends, and how one minority writer could attempt to reach a broad readership—all at least thirty years before the Asian American Movement of the 1960s.[4]

Tsiang came of age during the Chinese Revolution of 1911, when Sun Yat-sen and his followers finally succeeded in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty, whose rule had lasted since 1644. Not long after this signal victory, however, China fell into decades of unrest, as the result of political infighting between conservative and communist factions in Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang or KMT), conflicts between warlords who fought to control their own fiefdoms within the vast country, and external domination by imperial powers including Great Britain and Japan. For a short time, Tsiang worked effectively within the KMT as an aide to Sun Yat-sen's secretary, but after Sun's death in 1925 and Chiang Kai-shek's rise to power thereafter, Tsiang's communist ideals clashed with his party's increasingly conservative politics. Hence, Tsiang fled to the United States to avoid arrest and possible execution.

Still committed to bringing about communism in China and dismantling capitalism everywhere, Tsiang found his calling in literature. While Tsiang occasionally

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spoke about politics and participated in protests in California and New York, he devoted most of his energy to writing. Through his books and stage productions, he hoped to inform and sway readers not only to support his vision of a worker-centered Chinese state but also to change U.S. society itself, whose capitalist economic system seemed to fail many Americans during the Great Depression.

Even during the last twenty years of his life, after political and economic conditions had altered in both countries, Tsiang persisted in his dedication to world revolution and its achievement via literary activism. Tsiang, who was an actor as well as a writer, continued to do radical political work by performing almost nightly in his own fifty-minute, one-man version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Casting himself as the lone tragic hero in an unjust world, Tsiang freely adapted the play to suit his revolutionary political purposes, incorporating anti-capitalist tirades into his soliloquies. "Shakespeare meant for this to happen," Tsiang once told an interviewer, "for his play to change with the challenge of time" (Drake). Tsiang faced many challenges during his time and met them with words—on the stage and the page—because he thought that words could inspire revolution. As a character in one of his novels declares, "With our paper bullets we shall change the direction of the wind" (*China Red* 90).

Tsiang was not alone in his belief that literature could effect such radical change. The early-twentieth-century Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao argued that "to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction," because he believed that fiction held "a profound power over the way of man" (qtd. in Wong 24). In 1920s and 1930s America, according to literary critic Cary Nelson, "writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action. . . . It strengthened the beliefs of those already radicalized and helped to persuade some not yet decided" (32-33). Regarding drama, historian Colette Hyman reminds us, "Didactic, polemical theatre has been part of many insurgent and revolutionary social movements in the twentieth century" (3). Having already imbibed new theories about literature in China and encouraged by fellow leftists and writers in the United States, Tsiang brought his knowledge of eastern and western traditions together to create a new and even revolutionary literature.

Although Tsiang grew up in an impoverished household as the son of working-class parents who both died before Tsiang turned fourteen, he managed to secure an excellent education through scholarships at the Jiangsu Tongzhou Teachers' School and Southeastern University in Nanjing, where he received his B.A. in 1925. Besides majoring in political economy and learning how to read and write both Chinese and English, Tsiang protested against, for instance, the practice of foot-binding and the infamous Twenty-One Demands issued by Japan. His activism against Chinese president Yuan Shikai's capitulation to the Japanese government's demands for special economic, legal, and territorial rights resulted in Tsiang's imprisonment, but he was released thanks to the efforts of his schoolmaster. (Jiang; Yulizi)

After Tsiang came to the United States in 1926, he continued his education and activism. Tsiang entered the country, in spite of U.S. laws against Chinese immigration, by invoking a provision of the National Origins Act of 1924 that made an exception for students.[5] While studying at Stanford University, Tsiang edited, managed, and wrote for two periodicals: the conservative KMT organ *Young China*, which he left, and the more radical *Chinese Guide in America*, which he helped found. In addition, Tsiang led rallies against Chiang Kai-shek's persecution of communist members of the KMT; once, the

Los Angeles police arrested Tsiang before one such rally could get under way. On another occasion, a mob attacked Tsiang while he was distributing leaflets critical of the Chinese government. Finding the west coast inhospitable, he moved to New York City, where leftists seemed more welcome. He continued his studies at Columbia University, taking courses in public law, economics, history, and literature.[6] Besides learning about Shakespeare from Ashley H. Thorndike and washing dishes at a nightclub in Greenwich Village, Tsiang spoke at venues such as the Thomas Paine Society, composed editorials for the *New York Daily News*, wrote letters to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and made comments on the radio.[7] In nearly every instance, he found a way to critique Chinese conservatism, Japanese imperialism, and U.S. capitalism.

Dubbed "leader of the radicals" by the *Los Angeles Times* as early as 1928, Tsiang's political activism eventually drew the ire of federal authorities ("Chinese Meet"). Consequently, the U.S. government repeatedly sought to deport him as an undesirable alien. While detained at Ellis Island, Tsiang appealed to public figures such as the painter and activist Rockwell Kent, to whom he wrote on available stationery: toilet paper.[8] The American Civil Liberties Union and American Commission for the Protection of the Foreign Born also came to Tsiang's aid on several occasions, hiring Ira Gollobin to serve as his lawyer. With characteristic humor and expediency, Tsiang considered himself "a frequent guest" of the U.S. government and took advantage of his free room-and-board to concentrate on his writing (Ferrand, *Question* 73-75). In this setting, he composed a great deal, including a series of poems entitled "The Pear" that was never published.[9] Two-liners like "Statue, turn your ass! / Let us pass!"—referring to the Statue of Liberty's literal and figurative stance toward immigrants such as Tsiang—survive only in the memoirs of fellow inmates.[10] Tsiang's Ellis-Island compositions certainly place him in a tradition of prison writers that counts among its most famous Asian American authors those anonymous Chinese detainees who etched poetry on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station, and poets, like Mitsuye Yamada, who wrote while incarcerated in Japanese American relocation camps during World War II. Unlike the many who never entered the United States or whose writing never saw print, however, Tsiang ultimately did win the right to remain in the country and publish several books.

Tsiang's first volume, *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* (1929), concentrates on the ongoing struggle for communism in China, but also argues that this revolution is related to a broader "world-revolution," as he put it in his foreword. In the poem "Shanghai," Chinese workers address their "Fellow workers in America," reminding them that "If you fail to raise your voice to help us / There can never be a dawning / That comes to us and to you." In addition to looking beyond U.S. borders, the volume directs readers to ally themselves with diverse workers already in America. While most Americans of the period hail from Northern and Western Europe, several of Tsiang's poems remind them that the U.S. hosts a workforce from many other regions of the world. For instance, "Chinaman, Laundryman" focuses on the little-known experience of Chinese American laundry-workers, while "Sacco, Vanzetti" reflects on the infamous trial of two Italian Americans, immigrant workers from Southern Europe. Since the American Federation of Labor, the Workingmen's Party, and the U.S. Congress frequently advocated nativist platforms and sometimes persecuted nonwhite workers, contemporary readers needed to be convinced that class unity ought to supersede

distinctions like place of birth or racial identity (Chan 86-87). In his poem "Gum Shan Ding," Tsiang conflates the Chinese idea of the Gold Mountain fool—an immigrant worker—with the Shakespearean idea of the denigrated-but-wise fool, who appears, for instance, in tragedies like *King Lear*. Workers from the east and the west, according to Tsiang, serve as fools within the system of capitalism, but soon, he claims, their seemingly oblique and often disempowered perspective will prevail.

As a Chinese American leftist writing extensively in English, Tsiang may have been unique, but his vision was shared by other poets. Guo Moruo in China called upon "all workers and peasants of the world," and Langston Hughes in America considered his blood "one with the blood / Of all the struggling workers in the world."[11] Aside from philosophical sympathies, Tsiang's poems also shared many formal similarities with writers of his time, from both sides of the Pacific. Tsiang's use of everyday speech instead of a lofty poetic language followed directly in line with poets of the May Fourth Movement in China, who advocated the abandonment of *wenyan*—the classical written language of traditional Chinese literature—in favor of *baihua*, or the modern vernacular. This shift, according to the literary critic Shu-mei Shih, subverted "the hierarchy and authority of the classical literary tradition, and, at least theoretically, debunk[ed] the elitism associated with it by recuperating the common language spoken by the masses" (68). Hu Shi, a Chinese theorist central to promoting this shift in 1917, credited Walt Whitman as a model.[12] Consequently, in Tsiang's poetry, as well as the work of his Chinese contemporaries, we find not only colloquial language but also other Whitmanesque techniques and devices such as free verse, anaphora, and repetitive phrasing. Of course, Whitman's work catalyzed U.S. poets, too, such as Kenneth Fearing, Joseph Freeman, Sol Funaroff, Michael Gold, and Langston Hughes—all of whom published in communist periodicals like the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, as did Tsiang.

While Tsiang worked within a community of Chinese and U.S. poets and shared much in common with them, his work sometimes engaged critically with theirs, participating in what Cary Nelson terms an "intertextual social conversation" (39).[13] For example, Tsiang's "Chinaman, Laundryman" converses with the work of the British poet Thomas Hood and the Chinese poet Wen I-to of China.[14] Hood's famous "Song of the Shirt" (1843) applied the language of sentiment to the plight of a laborer, specifically a seamstress: "With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / A woman sat, in unwomanly rags, / Plying her needle and thread." The lines "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, gusset, and seam, / Work, work, work, / Like the Engine that works by Steam!" from Hood's final stanza anticipate the mechanically repetitive style—blurring laborer and machine—that would characterize much proletarian poetry of the 1920s and 1930s. Tsiang's recurring use of the verbs "wash," "brush," "dry," and "iron" clearly echoes Hood's "seam," "gusset," and "band." Hood's "Song of the Shirt," however, unlike Tsiang's poem, does not present a call to action but merely inspires sympathy, as does Wen I-to's "Laundry Song" (1925). Like Hood, Wen aims mainly for sentimental atmospherics: "Year in and year out a drop of homesick tears; / Midnight, in the depth of night, a laundry lamp." Wen's poetic voice sighs, "There isn't much you can do with soap and water." Tsiang's persona, however, rejects this passivity by transforming the instruments of laundry-work into the weapons of revolution: "Here is the brush / Made of Marxism. / Here is the soap / Made of Leninism. / Let us all / Wash with the blood! / . . .

Then we shall have / A clean world." Later, the poet Joseph Freeman would echo Tsiang's conceit in the final stanza of "Four Poems" (1931): "let the workers . . . sweep the earth clean."[15] As this example demonstrates, Tsiang's poems reference and appropriate aspects from previous writers' work but also kindle a spirit caught by other leftist poets.

Aside from peddling his volume for twenty-five cents a copy at cafeterias and on the street, Tsiang found an audience for his poetry in at least two other venues. Along with thirty other poets, Tsiang posted his poems and stood by to discuss them at Washington Square in New York City on 21 May 1933 ("Village"). Also, the composer Ruth Crawford-Seeger set "Chinaman, Laundryman" and "Sacco, Vanzetti" to music. Her version of "Sacco, Vanzetti" premiered at Carnegie Hall on 6 March 1933, and "Chinaman, Laundryman" premiered at the Mellon Gallery in Philadelphia for the Society of Contemporary Music on 27 March 1933. One listener at Carnegie Hall thought that "Sacco, Vanzetti" was "a powerful work with a social conscience." In fact, the song was so powerful that the soprano initially hired to sing it demurred at the last minute for fear of appearing too politically radical (Tick 193). Continuing a family tradition, Pete Seeger later set to music Tsiang's poem "Lenin! Who's That Guy," which Tsiang had written for his first novel.[16] Although versification would always find a place in Tsiang's work, he turned next to writing fiction.

Tsiang's *China Red* (1931), an epistolary novel, draws from both Chinese and western traditions to trace the evolving political stances of two lovers separated by the Pacific Ocean during the late 1920s. Chi-Ku-Niang, who has remained in China to stay close to her extended family and make a living as a teacher, writes a series of letters to her fiancé, Sheng-Chin-Yeu—a fictionalized analog for Tsiang himself—who has traveled to the United States to pursue graduate studies at Stanford University. While Chi writes to Sheng in Chinese, and Sheng ostensibly replies in English, the novel presents only Chi's letters, which we read in English. Chi's missives are clearly love letters, many of them pining for Sheng's return, but the letters primarily record both the consequences of Chi's political ambivalence during a period of polarization and the development of Sheng's radical consciousness.

Epistolary novels enjoyed great popularity in China during the 1920s and 1930s. While China has its own tradition of *qingshu*—or collections of love-letters that "read like short epistolary fiction"—stretching back to the seventeenth century, Guo Morou's 1922 translation of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) inspired a resurgence of interest in the genre (Lowry 158). "Overnight," according to historian Terry Siu-han Yip, "Werther became a friend to many Chinese, and for years to come the novel remained the most widely read and appraised Western novel and 'the bible of modern Chinese youths'" (201). Between 1924 and 1937, Chinese writers produced many original epistolary novels after Goethe's model and the *qingshu* tradition (Findeisen 84).

In *China Red*, Tsiang appropriates this epistolary form to comment on Chinese and American politics and society. Even while seeming to meet love-letter conventions, Tsiang mocks them with his quirky humor. For example, when writing about their first kiss, Chi recalls asking Sheng "how they tasted. You said they were like chewing gum: at first very tasty; then just chewing; finally there was the need to change to a new piece." Upon receiving a photograph from Sheng, who has adopted an American hairstyle, Chi teases, "You need not worry about a fly getting on your head, for it is so smoothly oiled

that it would slide off" (47). Tsiang's sarcasm inserts in the apparently innocuous genre his view that romance and vanity distract people from more pressing concerns.

While Chi may get most of the good lines, the novel ultimately judges her political ambivalence and passivity with grave suspicion. A smart woman, Chi has a reputation for being independent and contemplative: "I am not a Nationalist—nor a Communist. Only, I keep my eyes open and use my brain always" (39). The novel chronicles the upheavals in China in 1926 and 1927, including the downfall of several warlords, the rise of Chiang Kai-shek as leader of the Nationalist Party, and Chiang's purge of communist elements from within the party. These upheavals ultimately overwhelm Chi, despite her perceptiveness, because she does not take a stand. Near the end of the novel, she delivers her mea culpa: "I have always dreamt of the free and beautiful society and thought I could have it without my own efforts" (155).

In contrast to Chi's passivity, Sheng becomes a leader of the radicals in the United States. Like his real-life analog, Sheng even publishes a "group of political essays disguised in story form, criticizing the inner affairs of the Chinese Nationalist Party" (65). Also, like Tsiang, Sheng targets conservative elements in both China and the United States. For example, Sheng compares women who bind their feet in China to women who wear high-heeled shoes in the U.S. (25); according to him, both practices express pernicious ideologies of gender and class. In addition, he berates Americans for their apathy towards world politics; according to him, they merely "go to dance halls and solve cross-word puzzles while riding on the subway. Every day, for two or three cents, they hire newspapers to do the thinking for them," rather than think for themselves or gather news from more critical sources (51). Unlike Tsiang, though, to whom allies ultimately rallied, Sheng gets deported back to China to face execution.

With the original release of *China Red*, Tsiang included a blurb by ally and fellow writer John Cowper Powys. Powys appreciated the novel's "wistful, sly and mischievous humour," and wrote that the "poignancy of the conclusion and its grim implications did not miss the mark either with me." At least one contemporary reader, then, was able to overlook the novel's occasional moments of awkwardness, catch its satirical elements, and understand its main message: Contemplative ambivalence, however innocent, may lead to disaster in times of political turmoil, and individual radicalism, however ardent, may not succeed without broad support.

In *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), Tsiang remains interested in questions of political consciousness, but shifts his gaze from China to the United States. Set in Manhattan, *The Hanging on Union Square* follows a character named Mr. Nut as he finds himself without enough money to pay for food at a cafeteria where he has just eaten; as he encounters other allegorically-named characters including Miss Digger, Miss Stubborn, Mr. Wise-guy, and Mr. Ratsky; and as he arrives at a consciousness of his class position and individual power, which enables him in the end to challenge Mr. System. Like the fools in Tsiang's poem "Gum Shan Ding," Mr. Nut begins as a beguiled figure but eventually becomes aware, sly, and empowered enough to revolt: "Nut was acting nuttily. His eyes, however, were expressing deep thoughtfulness. He was acting nuttily as a soldier off for a war. But he was thoughtful as a soldier when he turns his gun" (206).

To tell this story, Tsiang turned from the epistolary form that he employed in *China Red* to a much more experimental genre: the collective novel. According to Barbara Foley, author of *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian*

Fiction, 1929-1941, collective novels of the 1930s feature "the group as a phenomenon greater than—and different from—the sum of the individuals who constitute it" (400). Foley further describes the genre as one that experiments with the conventions of realism and "narrative technique by introducing unmediated bits of environmental buzz—slogans, songs, news-broadcasts, noise" (401). Finally, Foley observes, "many collective novels give the impression of having been cinematically conceived" (414). Adhering to these conventions, Tsiang's novel focuses not on the interactions of realistic characters but rather on the tensions between types. Also, experimental devices abound, such as the use of non sequiturs, the insertion of snatches of poetry, the quotation of newspaper articles, and the fact that each chapter represents one hour in the narrative. Tsiang even structures *The Hanging on Union Square* into four acts, conceiving—and eventually staging—the novel not only as prose fiction but also as drama.[17]

A darkly satirical text, *The Hanging on Union Square* dramatizes Mr. Nut's descent into the hell of Depression-era Manhattan and his Christ-like emergence in the end to defeat Mr. System. When we first encounter Mr. Nut in the cafeteria, he frets, "A ten-cent check. A nickel in my pocket—I'm in Hell" (44). Indeed, Mr. Nut's tour of Manhattan participates in a literary tradition of visits to modern underworlds like that described in Hart Crane's "The Tunnel" (1930), which takes the reader underground through the New York subway system. Although Mr. Nut travels above ground, he nonetheless observes scenes of hellish misery endured by the lower classes and equally hellish decadence enjoyed by the upper classes. An episode about a starving family whose matriarch offers sex to Mr. Nut in exchange for a few dollars sits jarringly next to another about rich men throwing coins at naked women on a stage, conjuring images of both Charles Dickens's descriptions of the poor in London and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's visions of debauchery in Paris. Tsiang's concept of hell, however, rests on the capitalist system, which unlike Dickens's underworld based on an inexorably rigid class system, can be changed and, even, overturned.

Like all of his works, Tsiang's collective novel experiments with ways to incite revolutionary thought and action. In this regard, Tsiang may have written *The Hanging on Union Square* to answer Albert Halper's novel *Union Square* (1933), which contemporary critic Mike Gold considered a book of "no real social passion." Gold further bemoaned, "Not a worker in the novel. Not a person who suffers as the masses suffer today. Not one bitter cry of rage against capitalism!" ("Stale" 29-30). Tsiang's novel shares much with Halper's in terms of form. For instance, both feature a perambulating protagonist, allegorically-named characters, and ironic humor. Halper's protagonist, Leon Fisher, walks around the Eleventh-Street neighborhood, crosses paths with characters named Mr. Boardman, a manufacturing executive, and Mr. Feibleman, a sidewalk-chestnut salesman for whom "[b]usiness had been pretty good today, on account of the riot" (6).

Aside from these superficial similarities, however, Tsiang's novel differs a great deal from Halper's. *The Hanging on Union Square* details much suffering, such as the illness of tenement dwellers and the eviction of Miss Stubborn's parents. Tsiang's protagonist, too, suffers: "Nut thought of all that had happened to him since two o'clock Sunday afternoon. Worry. Cold. Hunger. Being beaten. Misery. Wandering" (99). More importantly, Tsiang's novel offers a critique of the capitalist system and climaxes

with its titular event, its "cry of rage against capitalism," which Gold found missing from Halper's more placidly named *Union Square*.

In *The Hanging on Union Square*, Tsiang wryly describes Union Square—that famous site of labor rallies and political protests in New York City—as situated at the center of a triangle formed by the Empire State Building, Tammany Hall, and Riverside Church: "Business, Politics and the Holy Spirit formed a new Trinity" (204). Capitalism, Tsiang demonstrates in his novel, works as part of a system that both promotes and feeds upon political corruption, organized crime, religious practice, alcohol abuse, and, among other phenomena, sexual desire. While working as a dishwasher at the Howdy Club in Greenwich Village, Tsiang probably witnessed some of the sexually-provocative performances that he relates in *The Hanging on Union Square*, but the novel does not criticize the women who pick up coins with their vaginas. Although individuals may be implicated, Tsiang reserves most of his "rage" for the system itself. Miss Digger, a gold-digging type, entices men to speakeasies and motel rooms, and upstages all the other women by picking up bills instead of coins. The novel suggests that she acts as she does because the system is designed to reward, exploit, and ultimately discard her type. Miss Digger suffers less from an individual moral failing than from a structural unfairness in the system that affords working-class women few choices for survival. Book reviewers at the time noticed the "bawdy quality in the writing" but also granted that *The Hanging on Union Square* contained "more effectiveness than might be found in a dozen soggy novels about the same situations" (White 343, 344). Most effectively, Tsiang's novel concludes with a tour de force staging of "rage against capitalism," as Mr. Nut devises a radical Second Coming and Mr. System takes the final fall.

For his third novel, *And China Has Hands* (1937), Tsiang focused again on urban America but stressed the diversity of its workforce and connectedness to developments in the Far East. Set in and around New York City's Chinatown of the 1930s, *And China Has Hands* features two main characters: Wong Wan-Lee, an immigrant Chinese laundry-worker, and Pearl Chang, a half-black, half-Chinese aspiring actress from the U.S. South.

Again, Tsiang appropriates and disrupts the conventions of romance, in this case, those of the Chinese ghost-story. Before meeting her in person, Wong believes that he has met Pearl in a dream. Upon falling asleep while reading a book of ghost stories entitled *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, Wong dreams that he meets an "angel" who saves him from devils, lives happily with him for a while, and promises to wear red upon their next meeting. Published in 1766, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, or *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange*, by Pu Songling includes many tales of romance between a mortal man and an otherworldly woman. For example, in Pu's story "Liansuo," a mortal man named Yang "playfully put[s] his hand inside her bodice" and discovers that "the tips of her breasts were tender as newly shelled nutmeats" (Zeitlin 200). This simile may have provided the inspiration for Wong's observation that the tips of Pearl's breasts felt like lichee nuts. Yang's separation from and pining for his ghost-lover in "Liansuo" may also have served as a model for Wong's yearning for Pearl: "for more than a month, she did not return again. Yang longed for her till his flesh was wasted and his bones protruded, but there was no way he could pursue her and bring her back" (Zeitlin 203). But while Yang and his companion ultimately achieve a romantic union, Wong and Pearl meet again not in the bedroom but rather on the picket line. True

to the pattern set in his first novel, Tsiang appropriates the conventions of romance only to mold them to his own purposes. The magic between Wong and Pearl dissolves not only because they discover cultural incompatibilities but more importantly because Tsiang's novel forces his characters, like wayward readers bent on pursuing pleasure, to address more pressing concerns.

The couple's shift from romance to activism parallels their turn from bourgeois fantasy to working-class consciousness, hence making *And China Has Hands* a standard, if also highly inventive, proletarian bildungsroman. According to Barbara Foley, this genre features one or more "protagonists in the process of acquiring militant or revolutionary class consciousness" (327). She adds, "the protagonist is exposed to multiple instances of exploitation and abuse that reveal to him or her—or at least to the reader—the devastating physical and psychological effects of capitalism on the mass of producers" (329). This is certainly the case in *And China Has Hands*, as Wong encounters not only the unfairness of the capitalist system but also the sting of racism. Pearl, too, finds her multiracial background a liability. While Wong dreamed of becoming a successful entrepreneur and Pearl fantasized about performing on the silver screen, all of their hopes are frustrated by economic and social systems that deny them access. In the end, both realize that in order for systemic change to occur, individual desires must be subordinated to collective action. The otherworldly woman in red of Wong's dreams ultimately reveals herself to be Pearl, a fellow protestor and worker, whose politics have turned red, as has her dress from the blood spilled by Wong's assassin.

Wong's assassin, at first assumed to have been hired by the cafeteria owner, who hoped to disrupt the strike, turns out to be a "Japanese agent" who aimed to punish Wong for speaking out a few days earlier against Japan's imperialist aggression in China. This development would be curious if not for the book's original dedication: "To the Death of the Japanese Empire."[18] By 1937, Japanese forces had conquered much of northern China. Tsiang and others advocated widely on behalf of their embattled nation-of-birth. Wong Wan-Lee's real-life counterparts in the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York, which had 3,400 members in 1934, worked successfully in their efforts to gain public sympathy for China. Yet countries like the United States were hesitant to intervene. During the early twentieth century, Japan was one of the United States's most important trade partners.[19] To a significant degree, then, imperialism worked with capitalism. This symbiosis explains the presence of an anti-imperialist message in Tsiang's proletarian bildungsroman, a genre normally dominated by anti-capitalist concerns.

As in *The Hanging on Union Square*, Tsiang primarily critiques systems rather than individuals, whatever their nationality or race. Thus, despite Tsiang's startling suggestion in his dedication to *And China Has Hands* that "sixty million Japanese" might die in a war between China and Japan, his real target is not Japanese people but rather Japanese imperialism. Just as individuals of different races join together to march against the inequities of the capitalist system practiced at a cafeteria, so must individuals of different nations join together to oppose imperialism.

Tsiang's last published work, the play *China Marches On* (1938), effectively dramatizes this point: national loyalty ought not to prevent people of different national origins from cooperating to challenge injustice. And, like all of Tsiang's works, *China*

Marches On strongly suggests that individual desire and happiness must be deferred and subordinated to the greater goal of worldwide revolution against the interlocking systems of both capitalism and imperialism. Also characteristic of his style, *China Marches On* combines thematic and formal elements from both Chinese and U.S. literary traditions to tell his story.

Almost forty years before the woman warrior properly known as Hua Mulan appeared on the pages of Maxine Hong Kingston's breakthrough novel, and sixty years before Walt Disney Pictures animated her for the screen, Tsiang adapted her legend for his play.[20] Tsiang's woman warrior—Mu-lan Chung—does not learn kung fu among tigers in the snow, nor does she start an avalanche to defeat her cartoon enemy. Rather, as an infant, she is separated from her parents during the Japanese invasion of Shandong in 1914, and as an adult, she leads a suicide squad to resist the Japanese invasion of Shanghai in 1937. In *China Marches On*, Tsiang combines a Chinese legend with a true story. As U.S. newspapers widely reported, the 524th Regiment of the 88th Division of the Chinese army, in spite of receiving an order to retreat, resolved to defend a tactically important warehouse in Shanghai near the International Settlement zone, vowing to "fight to the last bullet" ("Chinese Fight").[21]

In Tsiang's version, the only female member of the regiment, Mu-lan, makes speeches advocating class-solidarity and gender-equality to inspire her "comrades" from her own unit, as well as interlopers from the Japanese and U.S. armies, to "Fight till death, / Every one!" (19). Interestingly, these interlopers turn out to be her foster brothers, one adopted by her mother, who had gone to Japan as a war-prize, and the other adopted by her father, who had escaped to the United States. At the besieged warehouse, with disaster looming, Mu-lan conflates the vocabulary of military attack with that of labor demonstration, reaching out to her brothers—one Japanese, the other American—and saying, "Hold together, hold tight, / Shake!— / And strike!" (28). All three prioritize resistance before their own lives and happiness; all three die in a blaze of sacrifice. Like the conclusion of Tsiang's *China Red*, the final, defiant words of *China* Marches *On* declare, in effect, "Labor may lose all the battles, but it will win the class war," as Mike Gold put it ("Proletarian" 203). Hence, beginning with the legend about a Chinese girl who takes her father's place in the army and becomes a great hero, Tsiang spins a melodramatic tale in which, contrary to the sixth-century version at least, filial piety means loyalty not necessarily to one's parents but rather to the working-class defenders of China, and affiliation derives not from race or nationality but rather from class solidarity.

Besides drawing from the melodramatic tradition of workers' theatre, Tsiang couched the story of his Mu-lan in the contemporary genre of the Living Newspaper, a form of theatrical presentation developed by writers of the Federal Theatre Project over dozens of productions between 1935 and 1939.[22] Often focusing on specific events in the headlines, these productions aimed to inform as well as motivate their audiences to act with regard to broader issues. Josephine Herbst and Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike Marches On* (1937) dramatized an ongoing strike at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan, but the play also critiqued factory working conditions and promoted labor organizing more generally. While Living Newspapers certainly dealt with real-world issues, they frequently eschewed realist conventions by experimenting with techniques drawn from avant-garde theatre, documentary filmmaking, and constructivism. For

example, Arthur Arent's *Power* (1937), which treated the problem of electric-company monopolies, experimented with the projection of giant symbols on a scrim, narration from an offstage "Voice of the Living Newspaper," character types, and multilevel staging—all in an effort to shape viewers' attitudes about power conservation, safety, and public policy.

Tsiang knew first-hand the potential for theatre to serve as an instrument of social change. In 1930, Tsiang acted in a production of Sergei Tretiakov's *Roar China!* (1926), which dramatized the struggle of a Chinese village against British colonialism. He also trained as an actor with the influential director of political theatre Erwin Piscator, while attending the New School for Social Research.

Unlike writing poetry and novels, however, producing a play usually requires rehearsal space, a performance venue, props, costumes, lighting, set design, actors, crew, and a director, among other necessities. With his usual resourcefulness and energy, Tsiang accomplished this mostly by himself and with minimal funds. In 1939, he could be found at eight o'clock every Monday night, standing at the corner of Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue in New York, inveigling passersby to attend his play. He charged employed customers ten cents and let in the unemployed for free. According to a *New York Times* reporter, Tsiang acted "as his own stage manager, electrician, and master of ceremonies. Nor is he too proud to turn on the electric fan in the surprisingly crowded room or to bustle busily about, moving chairs and setting up stage props. . . . Later he steps into the play in sundry small parts, as a Chinese general or wearing a mask to represent Death" ("Playwright"). For this production at the Irving Plaza, he had the assistance of several actors, but in many others, he worked opposite only one or two female actors. From 1939 until 1944, *China Marches On* graced stages in New York and Los Angeles from Carnegie Hall to the Headquarters of the State, County, and Municipal Workers of America. Sometimes, Tsiang's play enjoyed relatively lavish production values when sponsored, for instance, by the Chinese General Relief Fund Committee, but at other times, lack of funds forced Tsiang to put on his play without props or costumes. In every case, however, Tsiang seized these opportunities to educate and inspire his audiences.

Over the years, Tsiang would make a living as a film actor by playing generals and houseboys in features like *The Purple Heart* (1944) and *Oceans Eleven* (1960). He also made guest appearances in television series including *Gunsmoke* and *I, Spy*. But Tsiang never abandoned political theatre. In Los Angeles, Tsiang formed a guild with fellow Chinese American actors Benson Fong, Keye Luke, Richard Loo, and James Wong Howe to put on plays ("Chinese Actors"). Besides *China Marches On*, Tsiang regularly staged productions of his novel *The Hanging on Union Square*, his unpublished play *Canton Rickshaw*, and of course, his one-man version of *Hamlet*. Although Tsiang-as-Hamlet may have pondered the question of "to be or not to be," Tsiang himself never seems to have vacillated, choosing resolutely to take "arms against a sea of troubles" (Shakespeare III.i.55, 58). Embodying the isolated, intelligent, and misunderstood revolutionary who pricks consciences with his own play—*The Mousetrap*—and goes down fighting must have suited Tsiang's sense of himself.

Just as most American attitudes toward Chinese and Chinese Americans were improving as a result of the alliance between the U.S. and China during World War II, the establishment of the People's Republic of China under pseudo-communist rule in

1949 soured relations between the countries again. During the era of McCarthyism that followed in the United States, the demand for works such as Tsiang's dropped precipitously. With the Great Depression over, prosperity for the American middle-class on the rise, and the Red Scare in full force, Tsiang found it difficult to publish any more writing. Several poems now residing among the Rockwell Kent Papers at the Smithsonian Institution remain unpublished, and his novel-in-progress, "Shanghai-New York-Moscow: An Odyssey of a Chinese Coolie," has not yet been located.

While Tsiang's work—among that of many other leftist writers—endured a period of disrepute, it has gained new admirers and critics since the political climate in the United States broadened to make the study of such work acceptable again, especially after the civil rights, Asian American, and New Left movements of the 1960s to the present.[23] In 1996, Alan Wald listed Tsiang among a group of "craft-conscious, as well as class-conscious, writers linked to the 1930s . . . still awaiting rehabilitation" ("The 1930s Left" 16). In 2003, Bill Mullen and James Smethurst remarked, "Strangely, until recently," Asian American artists "were more or less invisible" even in studies of American literature and the left (4). Among other efforts, this essay contributes to the recovery of an important writer who, in some ways, represents an idiosyncratic anomaly and, in other ways, serves as a harbinger of contemporary Asian American literature.

Any reassessment of Tsiang, however, must address the issue of language. His contemporary reviewers routinely called his language "naïve," "childish," and "quaint." Some even questioned his command of English vocabulary: "H. T. Tsiang likes using big words, but doesn't always get the right meaning" (Hopper). Certainly, Tsiang sometimes wrote with nonstandard idioms that might be called mistakes. For example, in his poem "Rickshaw Boy," the term "loving boy" should be "lover boy." Yet, even during his time, some readers caught Tsiang's purpose. After reflecting on *And China Has Hands*, one of Tsiang's contemporaries "realized some of the shrewdness behind the book's ostensible naïveté" and rightly understood that Tsiang's "English was functional and surprisingly effective though not always 'correct'" (Ferrand 75; Ferrand, Letter). Tsiang fully understood the power of his persona as an "Oriental" writer, as he was sometimes perceived. He capitalized on most readers' taste for the exotic and their assumptions about his naïveté in order to entice them, entertain them, and ultimately, to get them to see the world in a different way. In this respect, Tsiang acted much like King Lear's fool pretending innocence or Hamlet feigning insanity.

Likewise, Tsiang sometimes made what appear to be curious choices in genre or form, for instance, combining the Chinese ghost-story with the proletarian bildungsroman. Through this method, he invited readers into his narratives in order to revolutionize their thinking. Although Tsiang was not always completely successful in his engineering of hybrid forms, his ingenuity still deserves acknowledgment. In this regard, Tsiang's work anticipates that of later Chinese American writers known for combining literary materials from different traditions, such as Marilyn Chin in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* and *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen.* Yet Tsiang simply may have followed the example of other Chinese writers of his time. For example, the influential early-twentieth-century authors Hu Shi and Guo Moruo drew from western models to rejuvenate and modernize Chinese literature. As Shu-mei Shih reminds us, however, this process of modernization worked in many directions—and through unexpected figures like Tsiang.

Besides recognizing Tsiang as an innovator who melded Chinese and western literary traditions, Tsiang deserves study as one of the only leftist authors of his time writing in English from a Chinese American perspective. His political awareness and bold use of literature as an instrument for social change places him among better known contemporaries like Carlos Bulosan, Mike Gold, and Langston Hughes, and anticipate later, very different writers like Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Kitty Tsui. Although today's readers may not always agree with Tsiang's politics, we can respect his ambition and appreciate him as a creative figure who worked independently but also within several traditions.

In spite of the many ways that Tsiang might be categorized—as a Chinese expatriate, an Asian American, or a proletarian—he ultimately stands apart. In every piece he wrote, Tsiang experimented with all of the literary and performative resources he could command, if not master. In every case, he produced a unique if quirky, bold if self-deprecating, and cleverly-crafted if not always grammatically correct work of art committed to his vision of world revolution. If Percy Bysshe Shelley is correct in stating that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators or the world," (90) H. T. Tsiang accomplished a great deal in both of his roles as a literary innovator and activist.

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Notes

[1] In all of his publications, he signed his name as H. T. Tsiang. His full name on official documents is Hsi-tseng Tsiang. The Library of Congress romanizes his family name as Chiang, and in the pinyin system, his full name is Jiang Xizeng.

[2] The principle of *nalai zhuyi* was promoted by the influential theorist of the May Fourth Movement in early twentieth-century China, Lu Xun.

[3] Boris and Lichtenstein, and Chang have reprinted some of his poems. A selection from Tsiang's novel *The Hanging on Union Square* appears in Watanabe and Bruchac. Ironweed Press reprinted Tsiang's novel *And China Has Hands*. Kaya Press plans to reprint the rest of his works beginning in 2012.

[4] On the emergence of the term "Asian American" as a sign of pan-Asian identity, see Espiritu. For a history of the Asian American Movement, see Wei.

[5] The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1892, 1902, and 1904 barred most immigrants from China, but students on temporary visas were excepted. In 1908, when the United States returned to China its share of the settlement for damages sustained during the Boxer Rebellion, the U.S. government stipulated that most of the money go to scholarships for Chinese students, who found in early-twentieth-century American universities a generally receptive atmosphere for discussing Chinese politics (Eber 11).

[6] Thanks to Assistant Registrar Gary Morrison of Columbia University for providing me with a copy of Tsiang's transcript. Thanks to Jocelyn K. Wilk of the Columbia University Archives for identifying Tsiang's courses and professors.

[7] Reporter Leonard Lyons tells us that after Tsiang published his first novel, the Howdy Club allowed him to give a reading there. Tsiang lectured on the question "Should the U.S. interfere in the Chinese-Japanese Conflict?" on 10 Dec. 1937, according to a notice the *New York Times* of that date. Transcriptions of Tsiang's editorials and letter to Stephen Early, secretary to FDR, are held in the private papers of Pierre Ferrand. The New York Public Library holds "The Arts in China Today," a transcript of Tsiang's piece for the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration; the program aired over station WQXR on 4 Jan. 1938.

[8] This correspondence is part of the Rockwell Kent Papers held at the Smithsonian Institution.

[9] "The Pear" and other writings languish among the Rockwell Kent Papers.

[10] For this and other compositions, Ferrand called Tsiang the "Poet Laureate of Ellis Island" (*Question* 74).

[11] Guo Moruo's phrase appears in "Qianjinqu" (March forward), which is quoted in Haft 3:118. Lines from Hughes's poem, "The Same," are quoted in Shulman 277.

[12] In 1917, Hu Shi (1891-1962) called for a "new literature" in the journal *Xin qingnian* (New youth). For more on the extensive influence of Whitman on Chinese poets, see Wang.

[13] For a reading of how Tsiang's poem "Chinaman, Laundryman" engages with the discourse of the Workingmen's Party, see Cheung, "Tsiang's 'Chinaman, Laundryman.'"

[14] Hood's poem appeared anonymously in an 1843 edition of *Punch* and under his name in *The Works of Thomas Hood*. Wen's poem is quoted in Hsu 78-79. "Laundry Song" appeared originally in *Ta-chiang Quarterly* in 1925.

[15] This conceit also echoes Joe Hill's in "Workers of the World, Awaken!": "Join the union, fellow workers, / Men and women, side by side; / We will crush the greedy shirkers / Like a sweeping, surging tide."

[16] Seeger's song appeared in *Workers Song Books* (1934), which was compiled by the Composers' Collective of New York (Tick 195).

[17] Well into the 1940s, Tsiang played the role of Mr. Nut at venues such as the Malin Studios in New York and the Rainbow Theatre in Los Angeles.

[18] The dedicatory statement reads as follows: "**To the Death of the Japanese Empire** whose soldiers are much superior in the art of killing, with casualties in the first four weeks of the undeclared Shanghai war, reported to be ten thousand as against twenty thousand Chinese, by which rate of killing (with their eyes closed to the fact that there might be a revolt of their masses and international conflict with the other Powers, and so forth), when one hundred and twenty million Chinese—little more than one-fourth of the Chinese population—should be killed, there would be sixty million Japanese—the whole Japanese population—killed, and thus no more Japanese Empire [remaining] **This Book Is Mournfully Dedicated**."

[19] In 1932, Japan was the fifth largest customer for U.S. exports, and the United States was Japan's largest customer ("Japan").

[20] Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* was published in 1976, and Disney's *Mulan* was released in 1998. See Dong for an analysis of the evolution Fa Mulan.

[21] Unlike Tsiang's version of events, however, the regiment eventually withdrew into the British section of the International Settlement, after having suffered heavy casualties. For more details, see Hsu and Chang 209-210.

[22] On the melodramatic tradition in workers' theatre, see Hyman, 111-112. On the Living Newspaper genre, see Browder 117-125.

[23] Scholars who have published on Tsiang's works include Cheung; Denning 237-246; Ho 239-57; Kim 109; Lai; Lecklider; Lee; Li 56-63; Palumbo-Liu 56-63; Song; Vials; Wald, "Introduction"; Wu 150-155; Yulizi; and Zhao.

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