REIMAGINING FATHERS AND SONS:
RACE, LABOR, ALIENATION, AND ASIAN AMERICAN DRAMA

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Abstract

“Reimagining Fathers and Sons: Race, Labor, Alienation, and Asian American Drama” analyzes how works of Asian American drama illuminate conflicted father-son relationships, labor, and states of alienation. Dramatic works by Asian American writers from the 1970s to the 2010s present key examples of the intersection of race and labor and the possibilities of father-son reconciliation. I look beyond previous scholarly approaches to Asian American literature and drama that focus only on the language and culture differences within families or explain the conflict between parent and child as an inevitable culture clash between different generations. This culture-oriented approach fails to consider how attitudes towards work affect the changing demographics and social expectations of Asian America. I argue instead that these conflicts are symptomatic of U.S. race ideologies that dictate the nature of Asian American working lives and alienation that excludes Asian Americans from more fulfilling forms of labor (what Marx called the “life of the species”). Borrowing from Marxist theories, my dissertation argues that Asian Americans have been exposed to capitalistic and racialized self-alienation from their earliest histories in the U.S., and they still continue to experience it in the contemporary world. I also contend that this Asian American self-alienation informs many dramas of father-son conflict. In these intergenerational plays, the legacy of alienation and alienating work is both inherited and resisted, giving rise to serious and often violent events.

Chapter One illuminates how Asian American father-son conflict is intertwined with the history of labor. I examine the historical origins of Asian stereotypes such as the “Perpetual Foreigners” and “Yellow Peril,” labor-based stereotypes about Asian
Americans that have been constantly reproduced in American popular culture. These representations reinforce the self-alienation of Asian Americans by confining them into particular social roles. In this context, I analyze Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988). This play presents two Asian American actors who have differing views on how the professional actor might take responsibility as a representational laborer. The play illustrates how agreeing to play a stereotype not only brings about one’s self-alienation, but also help to popularize stereotypical images in culture and media, which in turn affect new generations.

Chapter Two focuses on the alienation of Asian American men through their social roles in everyday life. Specifically, I illuminate how they are alienated from their masculinity by having to take on labor that defines them as emasculated. Frank Chin’s two plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), show how such gendered and racialized forms of work are accepted by father characters but resisted by their sons. Their defiance of their fatherly models signify a larger challenge against white America and how older immigrant generations have played into racial and ideological hierarchies. This chapter expands upon Chin’s concepts of the “real and the fake” in which he directed younger generation Asian Americans towards defying the dutiful acceptance of oppressive labor.

Chapter Three examines the “model minority” myth as another form of alienation that is formative to destructive Asian American father-son relationships. I argue that this myth, which pictures Asian Americans as hard-working, uncomplaining, and family-oriented contributors to the American economy, works as a form of colonial mimicry and a method of preserving white control over Asian Americans’ upward mobility and social
status. This myth was thus founded upon the presumption of compliance with racist, capitalist, and heteronormative regimes. In Chay Yew’s Wonderland (1999) and Julia Cho’s Durango (2006), older generations cope with the consequences and lack of self-fulfillment, while younger generations negotiate their autonomy. Both generations wrestle with compliance to work and heteronormative family structures. These plays show that even while a father’s specific job is not passed down to his son, the son still winds up inheriting the anxieties caused by these compulsory forms of compliance so foundational to the father’s mindset.

Chapter Four questions the ways that the racialized and gendered binaries of labor are maintained and challenged in the new century. If the binary of alienating labor and non-alienating labor is itself an arbitrary distinction, how can the cycle of alienating labor can be overcome? Julia Cho’s Aubergine (2016) provides an answer, suggesting that the cycle can be broken only with the deconstruction of the dichotomous views of work and home. In this chapter, I firstly analyze how culinary labor has been racialized, gendered, and undervalued for Asian Americans, and then move on to examine how Cho restores the original meaning of the labor of cooking. Aubergine portrays a son reconciling with his dying father through cooking as an act of love; Cho turns the father-son conflict caused by labor into a father-son reconciliation enabled by the value of work. By examining the simultaneous recuperation of working lives and father-son relationships, I illuminate how Asian Americans’ understanding of labor, alienation, and family may have evolved since the days of Frank Chin. I end with an epilogue that discusses how several other examples—Aasif Mandvi’s 1998 play Sakina’s Restaurant, Lloyd Suh’s 2015 play, Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery, and award-
winning 2020 film *Minari*—show the continued preoccupation of Asian American playwrights and filmmakers with these themes.
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Introduction

How race is defined has been a disputed topic. There is little consensus on the definition of race in academia, but one thing that can be ascertained is that it started as a biological taxonomy. According to Rebecca Blank and others, eighteenth century naturalists initiated the concept of race as a biological category. The term “race” itself was “used to distinguish populations in different areas on the basis of differing physical characteristics that had developed over time, such as skin color, facial features, and other characteristics” (26). This concept of race as a classification of phenotypic variations also helped shape the public understanding of Asian Americanness of the nineteenth-twentieth century America. Legally termed by the U.S. Senate in 1911 as “The Mongolian race” whose eyes were characterized to have “a fold of the upper lid at the inner angle of the eye” and heads to appear “short, or brachycephalic” (Reports of the Immigration 256), Asians in America were defined to be physically different from the Caucasian race, and this difference paradoxically defined and constructed its mirror-image of whiteness. As Karen Shimakawa points out, Asian Americanness was conceptualized as an “abjection” of Americanness/whiteness; whiteness was defined by the exclusion of everything that was “Asian.” Therefore, Asian Americanness have paradoxically “shaped the physical appearance of people in the United States [due to the law] limiting entrance to certain physical types” (National Abjection 4).

Biology-based concepts of race are now obsolete. Not only do many researchers1 deny that “meaningful distinction among contemporary human groups can be derived

1 See Cavalli-Sforza, Genes, Peoples, and Languages; Mead et al., Science and the Concept of Race; and Omi, Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.
from a biological notion of race” (Blank et al. 26), but many scholars have also established that race is no more than an “embodied social signification” (26) associated with different groups of people. In other words, even though race is in fact based on observable physical features of individuals, it acquires significant meaning only when the continued phenotypic categorization creates social beliefs and assumptions about those individuals, which then constructs the subjective reality that can have material consequences for the group. “Race as a social construct” has displaced “race as a biological category.”

But this social constructionist approach to race invites more questions. Who observes? What is observed? How are the beliefs and the assumptions created? How do these social beliefs construct the reality, and what are the possible consequences? And most importantly, do these conditions work differently for different racial groups? For example, how is the Asian American experience of racial formation different from that of whites? Many scholars in Asian American studies have explored these questions, and Ju Yon Kim’s study, The Racial Mundane (2015) offers valuable insights. She argues that the repeated ordinary acts and everyday behavior of Asian Americans, i.e., “the embodied everyday” (20), has marked Asians as culturally distinctive from other races in the American imagination and constructed Asian American racial difference. Kim suggests “the racial mundane” as a crucial site where Asian Americanness has been established and contested, offering interesting answers to the question of “who observes?” and “what is observed?” as white America observes the mundane, quotidian behavior of Asian Americans. How Asian Americanness as captured or imagined by white America through
the observation develops into ideological frames such as the model minority myth, constructing an oppressive reality for Asian Americans.

Kim focuses on minute habits belonging to the private realm, such as eating rice with chopsticks or pouring tea. However, these are not the only things that form the “racial mundane,” and repetitive quotidian acts can be found in the public realm of one’s work life as well. According to Tasha Oren, workspaces such as “the immigrant-run Asian restaurants [were] often the main (or only) arenas of contact between (mainly) white majorities and Asian Americans” (248) in the nineteenth and the twentieth century America. For many white Americans who didn’t have a chance to observe the trivial every day of Asian Americans in close proximity, these public spaces were the only channel through which they could observe and imagine the ‘the embodied everyday’ of Asian Americans. Then in discussing the “racial mundane” of Asian Americans, the working bodies and the workplace need to be considered equally important in considering how Asian Americans are seen and given racial identities.

This dissertation aims to illuminate the importance of labor in how Asian Americanness is conceptualized and represented. In a capitalist society, not many elements have as great influence as labor on the formation of individuals’ daily lives, social perception, and sense of identity. For Asian Americans, the historical significance of labor is particularly important to understanding race. As I will elaborate later, the influx of nineteenth century Asian immigrants occurred in the context of labor power importation, which means that most of them worked as manual laborers with repetitive and undistinguished tasks. The “racial mundane” that white majorities could observe at the time, therefore, might well have been the working bodies of these Asian immigrants;
their racial understanding of Asian Americans was inseparable from the labor these immigrants had to perform. In the late twentieth century, many more Asian Americans have climbed the social ladder as professional and skilled workers. However, even this work can fall into the questionable categories of repetitive tasks that cannot be avoided. In this thesis, I argue that the issue of “labor” is closely tied to various problems that Asian Americans have faced, such as social expectation, racial stereotypes, gender, and generational conflict. I also suggest how histories and theoretical formulations of labor can reveal a new approach to understanding these intertwined issues, especially in framing how they affect the inner consciousness and emotional lives of Asian Americans.

Cultural identity is heavily influenced by one’s sense of self-ownership; whether one sees oneself as a mere tool of capitalist production system or a self-conscious human being with autonomy, one’s understanding of purpose and place are all equally affected by the way the capitalist ideology, production, and labor define one’s race and social standing. Hence, this dissertation will examine how labor and Asian Americanness intersect, and how this intersectionality appears—though often overlooked—in other scholarship on Asian American issues.

For example, studies about Asian American stereotypes such as Rosalind S. Chou’s *The Myth of the Model Minority* (2008) analyze how stereotypes such as the model minority embody the logic of America’s systematic racism, and work to undercut cross-racial solidarity among U.S. minority groups. Though a correct analysis, Chou’s book does not address the history of labor upon which these Asian American stereotypes are built and leaves unexplored how labor enters into American racial ideology and its racialized and sexualized stereotypes. Similarly, Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *A View from the*
Bottom (2014), which analyzes homoerotic films starring Asian American male actors and explores how political ideologies racialize Asians’ gender to reproduce the myth of Oriental passivity, clearly shows how racial hierarchy and gender hierarchy intersect; however, Hoang does not pay attention to how labor had the influence labor on the establishment of the hierarchies in the first place. Hoang thus overlooks how the film performances of Asian American men have contributed to their feminization in the eyes of the white America. Lastly, a sociological study about Asian American generation gap, Angie E. Chung’s Saving Face (2016), shifts the field’s focus from the structural dynamics of immigrant families to the emotional dynamics felt by the second generation. Though this new approach successfully illuminates the neglected diversity of Asian American families, it also overlooks how such conflicted emotions of the subsequent generations have been socially conditioned through the kinds of work performed by its subjects. Racial ideology’s influence upon labor, and labor’s influence upon different generations are left unexamined in Chung’s study.

My study hopes to present labor and its resultant self-alienation as important factors that affect all the other Asian American issues discussed above. For that purpose, this dissertation will focus on texts from Asian American drama in which these different issues intermingle and together present a heterogenous selection of Asian American subjectivities. I choose dramatic texts because of theater’s immediacy and corporeality. Unlike other genres, theater shows the “working body” of an actor directly to the audience, making it possible for an audience to see how race, labor, and alienation intersect within the actor’s actions and body as presented on stage. Even in scenes in which physical labor isn’t involved, the audience can see the human complexity of the
characters demonstrated through actor’s own work and acting skills. However, in scenes in which the work of the characters—Asian American characters—becomes the focus of the play, the audience can vividly witness how actors present racialized bodies at work. The relationship between Asian American racialization and labor suddenly moves into the foreground as complicated characters are reduced to racialized working machines.

In addition to creating immediate impact, theatrical performance can actively invite and involve audiences in critical conversations. Unlike other forms of literature, theater delivers its content to the audience in a very corporeal way that creates its own sense of material reality; thus an audience’s absorption tends to be stronger than in other forms of literature presented through letters on a page. In turn, the deliberate choice to break an audience’s absorption has even more shock value, which is what Bertolt Brecht intended with the “estrangement effect.” Brecht argued that when theater violates the theatrical custom the audience is familiar with, it breaks the fourth wall and forces the audience to approach the play not with emotion but with critical reason, which will lead to the audience’s critical examination of the play as well as its source, the reality. Given the relative lack of Asian and Asian American playwrights and performers in American theatre overall, even the choice to cast an actor who looks Asian onstage can makes an important creative and political statement. If labor and self-alienation are problematic conditions of life plaguing Asian Americans, the dissonances produced upon the stage can both force a confrontation with the terms of representation and hopefully produce constructive conversation about who performs as well as what is being shown.

Telling a story through the bodies and efforts of actors is particularly meaningful for Asian Americans. Their theatrical representation of laboring bodies asks audiences to
think about how the performance of race, labor, and alienation intersect for Asian Americans. A comparison between a novel and a drama will help me demonstrate my point further. Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946) is a semi-autobiographical novel which depicts the harsh reality that Filipino American workers had to face in California of the 1930s. Portraying how painful the farm work was for himself and the other Filipino workers, Bulosan states:

> The lettuce heads were heavy with frost. I worked with thick cotton gloves and a short knife. When the lettuce season was over the winter peas came next. I squatted between the long rows of peas and picked with both hands, putting the pods in a large petroleum can that I dragged with me. When the can was full I poured the pods into a sack, then returned to my place between the long rows of unpicked peas…They were always drunk, and careless with foul words, shoving a bottle of whiskey into my mouth, and laughing when the choking tears came out of my eyes. (Bulosan 171-2)

Though the process of farm work is portrayed in detail here, the readers can hardly see the narrator’s race because the narrator’s visceral emotion as a human being blocks the race from the readers’ sight. The scene is delivered and filtered by the narrator’s view, which ironically adds a layer between the readers and the reality. In contrast, Lonnie Carter’s play, *The Romance of Magno Rubio* (2002) provides a different experience for the audience. The play is based on a short story by the foundational Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan that movingly depicts the hard lives of Filipino agricultural workers. Carter’s Obie-winning dramatization allows the audience to even more impressively see rather than read about the characters:
Nick: What quality of soul sustains a man

To have such faith in someone he’s not seen

What possibly can he be thinking?

(...)

from grapes to plums

from artichokes to cauliflower

from Washington potatoes and Idaho apples. (Carter 321)

In this scene in the 1930s fields of California, the audience can witness how an intelligent human being who is discussed as having a human “soul” can suddenly be diminished by his stoop labor into a racialized working machine who repeats monotonous actions. This discrepancy highlights and shocks the audience.²

This dissertation’s theoretical approach will draw not only on reflections on plays and theater, but also Marxist formulations of labor and alienation. The playwrights I examine are not primarily interested in exploring their plays’ liberating potential for the working class, and many Asian American scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Colleen Lye also have pointed out that Marxism does not fully explain the particularities of Asian American experiences. However, this dissertation still uses a modified Marxist approach to labor and alienation, since Marxist notions of alienation, that Capitalism separates a person’s creative consciousness from the working body, is

² To see how the scene is visually represented on stage, see Victory Gardens Theater’s performance at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcvhqK_af2o&list=PL225509946098CDA7&index=4.
still valid for Asian Americans’ daily experiences. That racialized working bodies are
 detached from consciousness has always been the foundation upon which “Asian
Americanness” was established. Thus, tracking how labor, alienation, and consciousness
has been represented on Asian American theater stages will also help us see how Asian
Americans’ artistic resistance to the alienation has evolved.

**Alienation and Sub-Humanization: The History of Asian Workers in the U.S.**

In a capitalist society, every human being exists foremost as a laborer. We all
equally sustain ourselves by trading our labor time for the monetary reward
commensurate with its exchange value, and form our self-identities primarily by the type
of labor we perform. In that sense, no concept would be more befitting than *homo
laborans* to explain the human mode of being in a capitalistic society; we are defined by
the work we do. However, Marx claims that such capitalistic labor for wage acquisition is
nothing but a degradation of pure labor, and thus this mode of work fails to allow for an
authentic mode of existence. According to Marx, capitalistic labor does not fashion
identity, but destroys it through self-alienation. In “Estranged Labor” from *Economic and
Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx categorizes the alienation of wage laborers into
four different types: 1) alienation from the product of labor; 2) alienation from the act of
production; 3) alienation from Man’s species being; 4) alienation of man from man (115).
Among these four types of alienation, the one that Marx deemed the most destructive was
the “alienation from man’s species being,” i.e., the self-alienation, as it essentially
degraded human existence to the level of an animal. Marx explains the fundamental
difference between animals and humans as follows:
The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists primarily in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on organic nature; and the more universal man (or the animal) is, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives. …The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his inorganic body. (Manuscripts 112)

Marx admits that men might not be different from animals in that both might live their lives in a state of organic and unordered nature. However, men recognize more “universal” value and transform the organic nature into inorganic nature through their conscious activities, which distinguishes their “species being” from other animals. In other words, while an animal seeks fulfillment of its immediate needs as its instinct dictates, a man looks beyond the immediacy and reconstitutes his surroundings according to his own will and consciousness in a creative way. Marx contends that this is the characteristic of human “species” that differentiates a man from an animal, and this is why free and consciously productive activity, the true and pure labor, is “the life of the species” and “life-engendering life” (112).

However, a capitalistic wage laborer is completely alienated from such “life-engendering life,” which is why Marx saw the “alienation from Man’s species being” as the most detrimental type of alienation. Though humans should engage in activities that restructure nature with free consciousness and free body, capitalism appreciates profitable labor power over creative consciousness. This confines human life to a capitalistic labor market in which workers are forcibly divided into an exploitable body and the surplus, unnecessary mind. To borrow Hannah Arendt’s term, the result of such
capitalistic division of self is the degradation of humanity to an “animal laborans” only concerned with sustaining itself through labor, “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process” (7). Work becomes something completely devoid of individual, conscious engagement and meaning. Hence, a capitalistic laborer ends up suffering an alienation from his species being, a human self. Worker are forced to experience a subhuman version of themselves:

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. (*Manuscripts* 111)

Reduced to a mere body, a wage laborer in capitalist economy leads a debased life that lacks agency. The human exists purely as a working body with instinctive desires, and the

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3 In her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt introduced the dichotomy of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* along with the distinction of labor and craftsmanship. In contrast to the *animal laborans* who is a slave-like, unfree laborer, *homo faber* is a free thinker who works to change and reconstitute the surroundings to better suit oneself. A human being equipped with craftsmanship, *homo faber* is capable of questioning the purpose of one’s labor, thus resist the instrumentalization of oneself and take control of one’s destiny (144-59). The dichotomy of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* is distinguished from the Marxist binary of alienated laborer and emancipated laborer in that Arendt’s concepts are synchronous and hierarchical whereas Marx’s concepts are sequential and teleological. However, the two sets of binaries also share similarities; *animal laborans* and alienated laborer equally suffer from the degradation of humanity caused by capitalistic mode of production, and *homo faber* and emancipated laborer are equally suggested as more ideal version of humanity to be attained. Here, I use Arendt’s term, “animal laborans” to emphasize the subhuman status of Marx’s alienated laborers despite the differences.
routineness of work and life constantly reinforces the status quo in which human self-consciousness is rendered tenuous. Self-alienation, in this context, refers to the loss of characteristics as workers are deprived of the ability to creatively reconstitute their surroundings, to which oneness of body and mind is an absolute necessity.

No wage laborer is free from this self-alienation. Even though the role of race is always secondary at best in Marx’s theorization of class struggle, the self-alienation is applied to many ‘racial others’ in America as well, since U.S.’s racial minorities not only live in the most capitalistic nation of the world, but also have their experiences deeply embedded in histories of labor. As Alexander Saxton argued, “a large segment of the history of the Americas could be bracketed within [the] context” of “a quest for labor to work the lands [European settlers] had laid open” (1). And after Emancipation, this “quest for labor” was fulfilled by the import of Asian workers into the United States. Lisa Lowe states in Immigrant Acts (1996) that “throughout the period from 1850 to World War II, the recruitment of Asian immigrant labor was motivated by the imperative to bring cheaper labor into the still developing capitalist economy” (12). White landowners, business managers, and other capitalists sought an affordable substitute for black slaves, which they found in immigrants from China, Japan, India, the Philippines, and elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific. These working men were seen as cheap manual labor that could solve the shortage of manpower, not immigrants who could potentially become the U.S. citizens. Treated as sojourners, their only worth lay in their working bodies.

This history of Asian Americans is multigenerational and interracial, and the complexity of Asian immigrant male workers’ plight has interested Asian American playwrights as well as historians. The characters of Jenny Lim’s play Bitter Cane (1991)
constitute the multi-ethnic workforce at Hawaiian plantations during the 1880s; in Scene 2, the audience sees a Chinese worker lamenting his dispirited life:

**Kam:** …You came to make money and return to the village rich. When your contract’s up, you’ll go home and pick a wife. That’s what we all thought. You’ll see. The seasons pass without fail. One day of work follows the next. You plant, you cut, you harvest, you haul and you don’t ask questions. Like a dumb plow ox. The only thing that breaks the monotony is gambling, opium or women…I’ll just spend whatever time I have left, playing, not praying. (Lim 63-4)

Lim’s depiction, though fictional, perfectly illustrates the Marxist concept of “alienation from Man’s species being.” Though Lim makes clear how racism and violence were at the heart of the early Asian immigrant workers’ lives during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, she also illustrates that what led them to such tortuous course of life was their function in the U.S. as labor power and their consequent self-alienation. Lim’s Chinese “coolies”—though they don’t use the term to call themselves—epitomizes how late nineteenth-century Asian workers were viewed by themselves and their white employers as sub-human. As the Chinese origin of the word “coolie”—“苦力”⁴ which means “bitter strength” or “hard labor” (Jeong 171)—implies, the coolies from China

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⁴ The word, “coolie” has disputed etymology, because the origin of the word can be traced to several different roots depending on the worker’s place of origin. It might have come from the Hindi word, “kull” which means “bonded labor”, or it could have originated from the Turkic word, “kuli” which means “a slave.” Filipino also has a similar word with similar meaning, “makuli” (Jeong 172-5). But for the Chinese coolies, the word could have originated from the Chinese word, “苦力” as well, which is read “ku-li.”
were often viewed as substitutes for the emancipated African slaves that had been vital for the labor-intensive industries of the nineteenth century U.S. (or in the case of Hawaiian plantations in Lim’s play, as replacements or substitutes for a native Hawaiian workforce depleted by disease or seen as inadequate to plantation labor). In theory, the coolies were “free” laborers who could choose their employer and negotiate contracts unlike the African slaves. However, in reality they were indentured laborers who had to endure grueling working conditions and miserable living standards. According to Ong Jin Hui, “the treatment of coolies was comparable to that of slaves in the earlier decades” (52) in almost every industry they worked for; and Eleanor Nordyke and others also similarly point out that employers of the coolies “looked them over and picked them for work in much the same way a horse was looked at before he was bought” (3). The coolies came over to America with hopes of freedom and success, but what they encountered instead was an economy which separated their body from their mind, and the racism which intensified this degradation.

A number of other Asian American plays also show these conditions of capitalistic self-alienation and racial discrimination as present for early Asian immigrant groups. In David Henry Hwang’s *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), we see Chinese railroad workers during the late nineteenth century falling into moral degeneracy. Exhausted by strenuous labor, they indulge themselves in gambling and slowly kill their soul away whenever they’re off the work, to which the play’s protagonist, Lone accusingly responds: “They are dead. Their muscles work only because the white man forces them” (Hwang 66). Similarly, as mentioned previously, Carter’s *The Romance of Magno Rubio* depicts Filipino workers in California farmlands during the 1930s who
suffer similar forms of dehumanization. The Filipino workers exploited by white employers turn to prostitution, theft, and violence against one another, and despite their shared circumstances, they belittle the protagonist of the play, Magno, comparing him to animals such as turtles, fish, gorillas, and pigs. In fact, Magno does live a degenerate life in which he wears “shreds of rag” and eats “companion of pigs and rotten goat meat” (Carter 316) along with his fellow workers in a filthy cramped bunkhouse. And lots of other Asian American plays also portray the degradation that earlier generations of Asian American workers were exposed to, such as Edward Sakamoto’s *Obake* (1995), Jenny Lim’s *Paper Angels* (1980), Wakako Yamauchi’s *And the Soul Shall Dance* (1977), and Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972).

In this sense, drama can be deemed one of the most fitting genres for the representation of the early Asian workers’ self-alienation. Other forms of literature has also been discussed to capture the marginalized and abject status of Asians in the U.S. and their “quotidian” performance of race (as suggested by scholarship such as Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, Karen Shimakawa’s *National Abjection*, or Ju Yon Kim’s *Racial Mundane*); however, Asian American theater offers the most direct illustration of the working conditions faced by Asian immigrants and their descendants. Not only do the actors plainly show the human bodies that are bogged down in the simplicity of the repetitive menial labor, but the events in the plays also acutely reflect the racial oppression that ever expands the gap between the characters’ mind and body, deepening their self-alienation. Many Asian American dramas are filled with visual reminders of the repetitive and menial labor that these Asian workers have to do. In the climactic scene of *The Dance* where Lone changes from a cynical bystander to a racially conscious artist, he
does “a dance of labor” which is choreographed to a song reflective of Asian history of labor: “Hit your hardest / Pound out your tears / The more you try / The more you’ll cry / At how little I’ve moved / And how large I loom / By the time the sun goes down” (82-3). And on the other hand, the dialogues of the plays inform the audience of the characters’ complex inner feelings and consciousness; though reduced to thoughtless working machines on the surface, the Filipino workers in *The Romance* secretly marvels at Magno’s incredible perseverance: “What quality of soul sustains a man / To have such faith in someone he’s not seen / What possibly can he be thinking? Can / He hold such hope when all about him mean / To tell and do tell him he’s lost his mind? (321).

The historical record, of course, abounds with many more examples: the Chinese miners of the 1880s; the Korean plantation workers of the 1900s; the Japanese farmers and cannery workers of the 1920s; all of them were the “cheapest” physical laborers in the U.S. whose wage rate was the lowest in the labor market, and they were all the same “living machines” (Hui 54) who were defined and consumed as physical labor power for the growth of the American economy. In this sense, self-alienation was the common experience for most early Asian Americans, the majority of whom were laborers whose daily lives were dominated by the merciless exploitation of working body separated from one’s consciousness.

Therefore, Asian American self-alienation cannot be fully discussed without considering this early history and its racial dimensions. If capitalism turned Asian American experience into a process of dehumanization, as workers were treated as
animals bereft of rational choice and consciousness, white America’s racial ideology
shaped the perspectives by which they were dehumanized as both useful and disposable. While all workers in a capitalistic society are equally reduced to tools for production, non-white workers suffered worse instrumentalization based on their skin color; this ideological instrumentalization was no less potent than economic exploitation. Chinese workers built much of the 1,912 miles of the Transcontinental railroad from 1862 to 1869. Though the exact number of Chinese workers that were involved in the construction is lost as “the 1906 San Francisco fire destroyed much of the information on Chinese workers” (Carson 81), many remaining records and testimonies suggest that “by the end of the 1860s, 90 percent of the railroad laborers…were Chinese” (84). However, they are still excluded from the famous photo commemorating the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads by a “golden spike,” taken on May 10, 1869. All of the one hundred and eight people celebrating the completion at ceremony in the photo are white; despite their labor, Chinese workers were completely erased from one of the most important moments of U.S. civil engineering. White America viewed Chinese immigrants only as disposable labor, not equal human subjects deserving of historical record.

Therefore, Asian American cultural works in the present, whether literary or dramatic, are compelled to represent and reimagine these workers. One scene from

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5 To borrow Stuart Hall’s words, ideology is: “those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspects of social existence” (271). And Asians in the U.S. have been reduced to certain “images, concepts, and premises” that will help maximize economic profits for the U.S.; that is, a tool for economic expansion. Then as Yen Espiritu points out, it is evident that those images were used as ideological tools for “brand[ing] subordinate groups as alternatively deviant, inferior, or overarching—and, in doing so, naturalize and normalize sexism, racism, and poverty” (14). The more instrumentalized and dehumanized Asians became in people’s minds, the easier it became to use them without any compunction as a tool for the U.S.’s economic expansion.
Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel, *China Men* (1980) reveals the Chinese worker as more fully human as well as lost to this dehumanizing process. As spring approaches after a harsh winter, the workers on the site witness how their dead coworkers buried under the snow are now revealed to the world:

> Spring did come, and when the snow melted, it revealed the past year, what had happened, what they had done, where they had worked, the lost tools, the thawing bodies, **some standing with tools in hand**, the bright rails…They lost count of the number dead; there is no record of how many died building the railroad. Or maybe it was demons doing the counting and chinamen not worth counting. (Kingston 138; emphasis mine)

The Chinese workers find in the melting snow not only their lost tools and the “thawing bodies” of their dead fellow Chinese, but also the two merged together, signifying the symbolic amalgamation of the Chinese workers and the tools for construction. The Chinese railroad workers were excluded from the commemorative photo because they were mere tools for white America’s construction: “[o]nly Americans could have done it” (145). But though they were left to be drifted into oblivion like the bodies and the tools buried in the snow, the Chinese American writer Kingston provides them, along with the surviving railroad workers, with a literary revival in cultural memory. And because such ideological sub-humanization is still an on-going issue in the twenty-first century American literature, Kingston’s resistance tactics in *China Men* which is literary re-imagination and historical reconstruction, continues to be adopted and adapted by younger generation Asian American artists.
Lightened Labor, Deepened Alienation: Continuing the Racialized &

Gendered Alienation of Asian Americans

To many Asian Americans in the present, the “alienation from Man’s species being” is not just the memory of the past but a living experience. Images of Asian Americans as the “model minority” or as affluent, educated, and urban professionals often obscure the manual labor performed by Asian immigrants of the recent past and by their descendants today. But even for later generations of middle- and upper-class Asian Americans, elevation in social status doesn’t mean that they fully have escaped from the terms of alienation. The remainder of this dissertation affirms how the Proletarian revolution, and the consequent restoration of “life-engendering life” that Marx envisioned, have been proven unrealizable. It looks at how “alienation from Man’s species being”—debilitating self-alienation, ideological dehumanization, and social instrumentalization—continues to be a problem for Asian Americans of the present, albeit in ways that are markedly different from the experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth century under the Asian exclusion laws. I will explore how dramatists depict Asian Americans in the late twentieth or the early twenty-first century as who have established themselves as middle class, educated, and seemingly escaped from menial labor and exploitation. Yet plays such as Frank Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988), Sung Rno’s *Cleveland Raining* (1994), Chay Yew’s *Wonderland* (1999), or Julia Cho’s *BFE* (2003) show how Asian American characters are still viewed and view themselves as a convenient and disposable tools, and this has a crippling influence on Asian American experience and psychology. Questions of work and labor dictate how these Asian American dramas represent
character, identity, and self-esteem. Their Asian American protagonists either get lost between what they want to be and what they are asked to be, or wander in hollowness and depression as a result of not finding what they truly want. Though what they do for a living is closer to immaterial and skillful labor than the physical and menial labor of the “coolie,” they are also tormented by self-alienation informed both by their conditions of work and their racial identities.

Also important in considering these matters is how gender and sexuality intersect with Asian American self-alienation. As Espiritu has pointed out, in the scholarship of the 1990s, both masculinity and heteronormativity were normalized to the exclusion of both female and GLBTQ perspectives (2). A considerable amount of scholarship as well as creative work has been done since then to correct this imbalance. However, the continued relevance of self-alienation to Asian American drama, whether written by heterosexual or gay, male or female playwrights, calls for special attention to how gender and sexuality enter the workplace and professional identities. For instance, Julia Cho’s play Durango (2006) focuses on closeted gay Asian American identities. Both the father Boo-Seng and his sons suffer the loss of love and intimacy through their denial of same-sex attraction, and this puts the emphasis on understanding this play as a story about lost love and intergenerational family conflict. However, another set of lessons—about the crushing demands of professional achievement and success under capitalism—are also prominent in the play. Durango illustrates a striking difference between the unhappy worklife of its middle-class manager Boo-Seng, and the bodily abuse suffered by Asian immigrant workers in Bitter Cane, The Dance and the Railroad, or The Romance of Magno Rubio. Yet self-alienation still plagues this present-day Asian immigrant
character, despite his air-conditioned working conditions. Boo-Seng worked for twenty years in his office without a complaint, but he is laid off two years prior the retirement due to his “less effective” (Durango 352) communication skills. He too loses his sense of identity and desire as a result of constant ideological instrumentalization. When asked whether he liked his work, Boo-Seng answers:

**Boo-Seng:** I did not like my work. But I did it. Every little thing have to be put into computer. Make a report and another report and another. All day long, every day, day after day…I did. And if I didn’t get laid off, I would still be there, doing. And I would feel…lucky. Lucky to have some place to go every day. But why? Why did I want so little? Where did I learn to want so little for myself? (Durango 361)

Dejected and forlorn, he ruminates on his life in which he did “[e]very little thing” as asked and was seemingly content with his instrumental role. Now he cannot understand why he wanted so little for himself; someone or something must have taught him to do so, but reduced to a body separated from the consciousness, he fails to figure out who or what it was. Hence when asked what he wants now, he ends up murmuring: “I don’t know. Not anymore. Too late. All of it. Too late” (362). While Boo-Seng’s denial of love for a male friend in his past, and his unfulfilling marriage to a now-dead wife, are the central secrets to the unfolding of the plot, his working conditions are much more obviously in the spotlight. His plight shows him as an instrument that works but does not think or want. Like so many Asian American parents, Boo-Seng imposes this self-replicating image on both himself and his sons in ways that separate the working body and consciousness, deepening his “alienation from Man’s species being.” As subsequent
chapters will explore, this ideological and psychological branding of capitalist labor alienation continues to happen in the present world where more flagrant displays of racism have often been suppressed into microaggression.

One particular aspect of these processes of alienation subsist in the insidious and powerful forms of racial stereotypes of the “yellow peril” and the “model minority.” According to Colleen Lye, these prevalent Asian American stereotypes are actually rooted in false belief that Asians are exceptionally efficient. Asians were believed to have immense capacity for hard labor as well as economic efficiency which suited them to capitalistic modes of production. In the late nineteenth century, Americans were impressed by Japan’s “unusual capacity for sudden development” (Lye 15), as well as fearful of its quick transformation into an imperial power. Japan’s modernization provoked the Western world’s fear that its dominance might come to an end as Japan’s influence reached Korea and then China (15-6). After Japan’s defeat in WWII, the desire for Cold War influence in Asia meant that the U.S. had to find a way to repress this fear, thus leading to the creation of “model minority” myth. As Lye relates, the U.S. wanted to import labor power from Asian countries while binding them to pre-modern status. Thus Asia’s “economic efficiency” was later translated to the “unfreedom of industrial workers” (39), and Asians were stereotyped to be embodying “both otherness and exemplarity” (55) which reflects white America’s desire to contain the racial others in “their place.” Asian workers were complimented only as long as they represented the “efficiency of average units” (53) that did not possess the “inventive genius” (53) of whites, or a “mediocre and intellectually sterile race” (53) who were best suited to the mechanical production process. Thus Asians in America were turned into the symbol of
“modernity’s dehumanizing effects” (11). In this context, we can understand in a new light why Boo-Seng in Durango was tasked with simple and repetitive works such as to “[m]ake a report and another report and another. All day long, every day, day after day” (Durango 361); he was stereotyped as an efficient but not inventive model minority, which contributed to his self-alienation.

As we shall see in Chapter one on Philip Kan Gotanda’s Yankee Dawg You Die, familiar racial stereotypes about Asian Americans continue to negatively influence Asian American mental health. According to Espiritu, many Asian Americans have internalized stereotypes of Asian American men in particular as asexual and emasculated. They also see Asian Americans as suited to careers relying on mechanical efficiency, such as engineering, mathematics, and computer science. Psychologists such as Alvin Alvarez even argue that younger Asian Americans report “significantly more negative perception of themselves relative to White students as indicated by lower levels of self-esteem, higher anxiety, and a stronger sense of being unpopular” (75), which lead them to the conclusion that “Asian Americans’ academic and economic success is not equivalent to

6 Citing Daniel Yoon’s column to Asian Week in 1993, Espiritu observes how young Asian American college students at Asian American Students Association complained that “Asian American men were too passive, too weak, too traditional, too abusive, too domineering, too ugly, too greasy, too short, too…Asian” (110). Espritu argues that such prejudice signifies Asian American communities’ unwitting acceptance of racist constructions. She also points out that intermarriage patterns in Asian American communities are high, with Asian American women intermarrying at a much higher rate than Asian American men (110).

7 According to Espiritu, Asians showed the highest proportion of college graduates of any race or ethnic group in the U.S. in 2005. Forty nine percent of Asians earned at least a bachelor’s degree while only thirty one percent of non-Hispanic whites earned the same degree. However, many Asian American graduates are concentrated in the engineering: Asian American engineers constitute over one-fifth of the U.S. engineers while Asian American population are about four percent of the U.S. total population, and similar pattern is observed in the field of mathematics and computer science as well (74-5).
their psychological well-being” (76). In fact, the stereotype of the model minority in particular is “extremely misleading” (71) since it deepens a sense of shame and failure. Also, the model minority stereotype is used to pit Asian Americans against other racial minorities, preventing interracial solidarity and leading to violence such as was seen in the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles following the beating of Rodney King (73-4). Just as Chinese workers during the intercontinental railroad construction were often used as strike-breakers,⁸ the model minority stereotype in the twenty-first century is still used to scapegoat immigrant workers and to foster divisions in interracial workers’ coalitions. In other words, stereotypes continue to brand Asian Americans as useful tools for capitalist profit. Asian Americans might have escaped from the enslaving coolie contracts of the past; however, “the afterlife of the ‘coolie’ experience” (Goffe56) still exist in the form of stereotypes.

Accordingly, lots of contemporary Asian American dramas that are set against more recent backgrounds still depict the self-alienation of Asian Americans, through exploring the issue of racial stereotypes. While they vary in topic and dramatic form, these plays all make evident how capitalist labor is still inseparable from Asian American social identity, and how alienation has created consistent problems for Asian Americans. In the twenty-first century, labor dominates not just the physical reality but also the mental reality of Asian Americans; characters actively contemplate and seek the

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⁸ In *The Production of Difference*, Roediger and Esch cite a railroad superintendent’s testimony to prove this point. One overseer recalls: “The Irishmen begged [him] not to have any Chinamen and resumed work” (76). Literally, Asian workers’ tendency not to organize became “a selling point justifying use of the Chinese” (76) in any job for any purpose. Non-defiant and cheap workers, their average wage was one sixth of white worker’s, and even white unskilled workers earned almost twice much than the most skilled Chinese workers did (76-7).
reunification of body and mind through which a sense of undivided self can be restored: the “life of the species” from which they have been excluded. However, this “reunification” is now made even more strenuous for Asian Americans, because their consciousness needs to be restored first before it can be reconnected to their body. Plays such as *Yankee Dawg You Die* suggest how many contemporary Asian Americans suffer constant exposure to the racial stereotypes of film, television, and media. This means that their consciousness is permeated with falsified racial images that further prevent the achievement of more genuine sense of self. *Yankee Dawg* shows how its characters that are professional actors might succeed in attaining “the life of the species,” but ultimately fail in reunifying one’s body with their consciousness. An Asian American actor might have a successful acting career, but what he/she would see in the mirror could be only the instrument that furthers white supremacy if that success was a result of enacting stereotypes. Hence capitalist alienation poses a two-pronged challenge to Asian Americans: they need to reunify their bodies and minds, but they also have to see past the distorted mask that has shaped their consciousness. Asian Americans are burdened with a kind of double self-alienation, in dealing with the divorce of the body from consciousness, and the divide between self and mask.

**Alienation and the Father-Son Conflict: A New Approach to Asian American Drama**

The pairing of the veteran actor Vincent and the Hollywood newcomer Bradley in *Yankee Dawg You Die* suggests that there is an important generational distinction to be made in looking at Asian American alienation. In subsequent chapters on Frank Chin’s
The Chickencoop Chinaman (1972) and The Year of the Dragon (1977), Chay Yew’s Wonderland (1999) and Julia Cho’s Durango (2006) and Aubergine (2017), I turn to a different aspect of this Asian American alienation as manifested in the dramas of father-son conflict. The father-son relationship is one of the oldest motifs in all kinds of literature, and it has been countlessly reenacted upon American theater stages as well to the point that it is almost a cliché. From classic examples such as Laius and Oedipus in Oedipus Rex to the characters of modern American dramas such as Ephraim and Eben Cabot in Eugene O’Neill’s Desire under the Elms (1924) and Troy and Cory Maxson in August Fences (1985), many defiant and ambitious sons in the Western literary tradition rebel against their fathers and ultimately overthrow them. The father—whether he is an immortal titan who literally created the world or a stubborn patriarch who rules the family with an iron fist—treats his own son as a potential threat to his domestic hegemony, and the son eventually rises to oust the father from power. In that sense, a classical father-son conflict can be defined as a power struggle that can be ended only when one of them is either subdued or eliminated altogether. However, in Asian American plays whose “central subject…is, arguably, the American family” (Wakefield 1), this conflicted relationship of father-son speaks less to some universalized notion of father-son struggle for power, than it does to a greater sense of alienation expressed by both Asian fathers and Asian American sons.

As we shall see in later chapters, Asian American plays use father-son relationships to explore and disclaim notions of Asian heritage. In many, Asian immigrant fathers exemplify worldviews that are culturally and psychologically incompatible with those of their American-born sons. Even if the father endeavors to pass
down his world to the son, the son fights against accepting this legacy; he neither wants nor understands his father’s world. Asian American fathers and sons don’t fight to take things from each other; they fight to avoid taking from one another, or even to give away what’s theirs. This difference can be understood better when what is renounced by the sons is related to Asian American alienation. According to Robert G. Lee, “[t]he family is a primary site in which labor power and class relations, gender and sexual relations, ethnic and racial identities are produced and reproduced” (7). Alienation affecting the intersecting and overlapping workings of labor, class, gender, racial and ethnic identity are “produced and reproduced” within the boundary of family and family drama. Then Asian American father-son conflicts can be illuminated in a different light; what is passed down or rejected intergenerationally reveals the layering of alienation itself. Some fathers might thoughtlessly pass down their alienation and the sons would revolt; or some other fathers might withhold the legacy while the inexperienced sons yearn to have it; or the fathers and the sons might equally misunderstand each other, locked in their own solidified self-alienation.

Whatever their scenario, one thing that these plays by Chin, Yew, and Cho all have in common is that they revisit the father-son conflict through questions of Asian American racialized self-alienation. These plays show how each generation of an Asian American communities might well have a different response to labor alienation, depending on their experiences and their historical context. This reflects how more generally the demographic composition of “Asian America” has gone through a substantial change. Until the 1970s, most Asian Americans in the U.S. were East Asians such as Japanese, Chinese, or Korean; they were either the first-generation immigrants
who came over during the early twentieth century as manual laborers, or their
descendants born around the 1930s-40s. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the
total population of Asian Americans in 1970 was 1,439,562, of which Japanese
Americans were 41% (591,290), Chinese Americans 30% (436,062), Filipino Americans
23% (343,060), and Korean Americans 4% (69,150); Asian Indians and Vietnamese in
America were so few that their number wasn’t even recorded (Xenos et al. 253). This
means that 75% of Asian American population in the 1970s were East Asians, many of
whom shared backgrounds directly relating to the history of coolie and similarly
degraded forms of labor. While the issues such as the emasculating labor and the
reproduction of work-related Asian stereotypes still plague the contemporary Asian
American immigrants, different kinds of problems resonated as the nature of labor and
immigration shifted into the 1970s.

Asian American demographics started to change after 1965 with the enactment of
Hart-Celler Act, also known as The Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished
the national origins quota system that had been the basis of U.S.’s immigration policy
since the 1920s. With the law taking full effect through the 1970s, the total population of
Asian America by 1980 had increased by 240% (3,466,421), and the number of new
immigrants also increased dramatically. According to the U.S. Census conducted in 1985,
of all foreign-born Asian immigrants at the time, 47.5% of Japanese immigrants, 60.4%
of Chinese immigrants, 64.1% of Filipino immigrants, and 84.6% of Korean immigrants
were newly arrived during the 1970s (qtd. in Xenos et al. 254). The Hart-Celler Act also
caused the diversification of Asian immigrants’ ethnic backgrounds. The Asian Indian
population increased by 55.3%, and many “post-1965 immigrants came from all over
India and Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal and settled in suburban America” (Paik et al. 16). Another element that contributed to the diversification was the Vietnam War, since “[m]ost first generation Southeast Asian immigrants arrived between 1975 and 1995 as political or economic refugees following the events of the Vietnam War” (ibid); 88.8% of the entire Vietnamese American population in 1980 was the new immigrants that arrived in the post-1965 era. In other words, the two historical events—the Hart-Celler Act and the Vietnam War—changed the East-Asian centered demographics of Asian America.

Along with the demographic change, Asian America’s level of education and professional skills were also diversified. The Hart-Celler Act not only abolished the immigration quota, but it also “gave preference to highly skilled professionals such as scientist, doctors, and engineers and their families; consequently, many post-1965 immigrants were college-educated, urban, middle-class professionals or students seeking advanced university training” (Paik et al. 16). The Vietnam War also played a similar role. Many first-wave Vietnamese immigrants were urban dwelling South Vietnamese who fled the war, and they were “disproportionately educated and affluent” (ibid). According to Kelly Gail, “38 percent of the refugees had completed secondary school and an additional 20 percent had university training” whereas “in Vietnam less than 16 percent of the population attended secondary school and less than 1 percent continued on to university” (141). This means that first-wave Vietnamese immigrants were “Vietnam’s technical, managerial, and military elite” (142). As a result, Asian America after 1965 experienced a gradual expansion of labor market; they had more academic capital than the pre-1965 generation, and their professional skills slowly granted “[Asian Americans]
to move more seamlessly into the labor market” (Paik et al. 31). This means that the post-1965 generation created a new version of Asian America which started to materialize from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. This Asian America consisted of heterogeneous communities with diverse ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds, and many of them had aspirations larger than the racialized and gendered labor to which they were often assigned. In the twenty-first century, now there are currently more than 34 Asian groups and over 300 languages in Asian America (Teranishi et al. 529), with each group having unique history and diverse backgrounds. Every Asian American community has a different experience of how labor, alienation, and identity intersect. The working world has changed, and Asian America has also changed.

It is striking that despite such increased heterogeneity within contemporary Asian America, the theme of conflicted parent-child relationship still equally fascinates many twenty-first century Asian American dramatists with different backgrounds. Young notable playwrights such as Lauren Yee, May Lee-Yang, Qui Nguyen, Chay Yew and Julia Cho are still placing the parent-child conflict at the center of their plays in which their respective ethnic communities are set as the background, and despite the ethnic

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9 However, the elevated educational level of the post-1965 generation does not necessarily define the “new” Asian America, since its demographics continued to change afterwards. The second-wave Southeast Asian immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia began arriving in the later 1970s and into the 1980s, and they were often hurled down to the bottom of the social ladder since they were relatively uneducated and unskilled refugees who could only take blue collar jobs (Paik et al. 17). Also, the 1980s saw a new influx of South Asian immigrants from mainly Bangladesh and Pakistan who were less educated and less fluent in English than their predecessors. They entered the U.S. through diversity visas and family reunification criteria, but their limited ability confined them primarily to blue collar jobs such as taxi drivers or store clerks (ibid 16).

10 They are respectively a Chinese American, a Hmong American, a Vietnamese American, a Singaporean American, and a Korean American. These new Asian American playwrights that
differences, they still similarly explore the issues of identity and representation in their ‘diversified’ Asian American family drama. Especially invested in such exploration is Julia Cho, whose plays will be explored in chapter 3 and 4. “One of the most prolific and frequently produced Asian American playwrights in the U.S.” (Woo 238), Cho tends to foreground the conflicted Asian American parents-children relationship in her works. In all of her four earlier works, *The Architecture of Loss* (2004), *99 Histories* (2005), *BFE* (2006), and *Durango* (2007), Cho portrayed “Korean immigrant parents [who] fail to establish a loving family in the new host country,” and the children to whom their heritage is always “unhomely and abject” (239), leading to serious parent-child conflicts. Also significant in her works is a theme in which children are fated to resemble their parents, but express a constant defiance.11 Despite obvious differences, the patterns of inheritance, similarity, and rebellion that dominated Frank Chin’s 1970s’ plays are still present in Cho’s plays of the 2000s.

11 In *The Architecture of Loss*, Catherine holds deep-rooted aversion to her Asian mother who was too timid to fight back Catherine’s tyrannous Caucasian father. But she in the end admits her resemblance to the mother by accepting her senile father’s illusion in which she is an incarnation of her dead mother. In *99 Histories*, Eunice, once a promising cello prodigy, tries to live differently from her mother who’s traumatized by the tragic loss of her husband. However, she also ends up becoming a lonely single mother with chronic depression and spits out bitterly: “I don’t inherit your language or culture, hell, I don’t even inherit your hair, your looks. I inherit a disease” (*99 Histories* 40). In *BFE*, a teenage girl Panny determines that she won’t squander her life obsessing herself with appearance and fantasizing a romance with white men like her mother does, but she also ends up taking a plastic surgery on her eyelids and bleeding from her bandaged eyes, crying over the lost opportunity to be romantically involved with a white boy. An Asian American child who defies their parent like Tam in *The Chickencoop*, but ends up resembling their parent like Fred in *The Year*; this motif is still apparent in Cho’s plays.
Asian American playwrights reveal both historical and present-day situations in which capitalist alienation—as doubled by the effects of race—affects characters in many ways. From Philip Kan Gotanda’s 1988 play to the works of Frank Chin, we move to other playwrights that provide the perspectives of both the 1990s and the 2000s: Chay Yew and Julia Cho. By examining the interconnected yet dissimilar patterns of alienation and conflict, this thesis will explore how Asian American understanding and attitudes towards labor, consciousness, and performance have changed over time.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter One illuminates how Asian American father-son conflict is inextricably intertwined with the history of labor. I examine the historical origins of racial stereotypes such as the “Perpetual Foreigners” and “Yellow Peril,” and argue that these labor-based stereotypes about Asian Americans have been constantly reproduced via American culture and media, reinforcing Asian Americans’ self-alienation. In this context, I analyze Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die*, a play which presents two Asian American actors who have differing views on the actor’s responsibility as a representational laborer. Agreeing to play a stereotype not only brings about one’s self-alienation, but also causes the popularization of stereotypical images which affect the younger generations from the early stages of life. Through exploring the conflict between the two actors from different generations, I examine the centrality of labor to the intergenerational conflict, and in extension, the father-son conflict in Asian American dramas.
Chapter Two focuses on the alienation of Asian American males. Specifically, I illuminate how they are alienated from their masculinity by gendered works that define them as emasculated workers. This chapter argues that Frank Chin’s two plays, *The Chickencooop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, nicely show how such gendered and racialized works are resisted by the sons. Their defiance against the father signify a challenge against the subject which controls the system of alienation, which, from Chin’s perspective, are the white America and the older generations that helped the U.S. solidify its ideological dominance. Each play delivers Chin’s message toward the younger generation Asian American audience and the contemporary Asian American artists respectively, and through analyzing them, this chapter explains Chin’s concept of “the fake and the real” in the context of Asian American labor.

Chapter Three suggests the “model minority” myth as another form of alienation that haunts the Asian American father-son relationship. I argue that the myth works as a form of colonial mimicry from Asian Americans’ end, and a method to control Asian Americans’ upward mobility from white America’s end. This myth is founded upon two prerequisites: compliance to a capitalist regime, and compliance to a heteronormative regime. And even though the fathers’ specific labor is not passed down to the sons, the sons still end up inheriting the compliances that were foundational to the father’s mindset. By analyzing Chay Yew’s *Wonderland* and Julia Cho’s *Durango*, this chapter explores how the younger generations negotiate their autonomy and compliance, upon which the stability of their family depends.

Chapter Four questions whether the racialized and gendered binaries of labor can be maintained in the new century. The binary of alienating labor and non-alienating labor
is itself an arbitrary distinction, thus, this chapter examines how the cycle of alienating labor can be overcome. Julia Cho’s *Aubergine* provides an answer: it can be surpassed only when one deconstructs the dichotomous views of work altogether. In this chapter, I firstly analyze how culinary labor has been racialized, gendered, and undervalued for Asian Americans, and then move on to examine how Cho restores the original meaning of the labor of cooking. *Aubergine* portrays a son reconciliating with his dying father through cooking, an act of love; Cho turns the father-son conflict caused by labor into the father-son reconciliation enabled by labor. By examining the simultaneous recuperation of labor and father-son relationship, I illuminate how Asian Americans’ understanding of labor, alienation, and family has evolved since the days of Frank Chin.
Chapter 1. Stereotypes, Acting, and Alienation:

Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die*

One of the most common racial stereotypes imagines Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.” Based on the idea that Asia and America are mutually exclusive binaries (A. Kim viii), the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype reflects the view that “ethnic minorities do not fit the definition of what it means to be American” (Huynh et al. 134-5) in the Anglo-normative society of the United States. With America constantly involved in conflicts with Asian countries throughout the twentieth century, the stereotype of the Asian as alien enemy has fueled numerous acts of violence and hate toward Asian Americans. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, for instance, raised national suspicion about Japanese Americans’ allegiance, and the ensuing xenophobia gave rise to the concentration camps in which roughly 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry were wrongfully incarcerated for up to three years. During the 1980s, after Japan became a powerful competitor to the U.S.’s automotive industry, precipitating the decline of Detroit’s Big Three, the economic rivalry also justified hate crimes. Many Japanese car brands were vandalized, and the murder of Vincent Chin by two white Detroit autoworkers demonstrated the extremes of anti-Japanese animosity. In the early 2000s, political tension with China offered another cause. According to Andrew Kim, sixty-two

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12 General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Stellantis North America are commonly referred to as the “Big Three,” the three largest automakers in the U.S. Their sales significantly declined during the 1980s with the import of Japanese cars, which accelerated the Detroit’s recession and further agitated the population of Detroit.

13 Vincent was killed simply because he looked Japanese, though in fact he was an American citizen of Chinese descent. According to Alethea Yip, Ronald Ebens who killed Vincent yelled at him: “It’s because of you little motherfuckers that we’re out of work.”
percent of people accused of economic espionage since 2009 have been people of Asian heritage (6); twenty-one percent of Chinese Americans charged with espionage have never been found guilty, which is “a rate twice as large as for defendants with a Western name” (10).

These acts of violence toward Asian Americans are undergirded by the idea that they are unassimilable aliens, or the “perpetual foreigners.” Similar types of xenophobia have been expressed in American culture as well. Asian representations on American media has been saturated with demeaning caricatures and racial mockery. The American film industry has long relied on the image of Asians as exotic and unassimilable “Orientals” who are either derisible fools such as Mr. Yunioshi in Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1961) and Long Duck Dong in Sixteen Candles (1984), or evil villains with mysterious powers such as Dr. Fu Manchu in Fu Manchu movie series (1924-2021) and Princess Ling Moy in Daughter of the Dragon (1931). Even prior to these film representations, American theater also had long been complicit in the systematic typecasting and exclusion of Asians in American culture, not only through presenting stereotypes, but also in the widespread practice of “yellowface,” a theatrical custom in which white actors in exaggerated makeup play Asian or Asian American characters. As Josephine Lee points out, yellowface performance is a “powerful way of conveying anti-Asian sentiment and reinforcing racial hierarchies” (“Yellowface Performance” 4) as it posits whites as the default race with the privilege to portray non-white roles, while defining Asianness as the grotesque antithesis to the norms of white bodies. From nineteenth century plays like The Mikado (1885) to more recent Broadway hits such as Miss Saigon, Anything Goes, or Thoroughly Modern Millie, American theaters have used yellowface
performances to bolster the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype, which has repeatedly labeled Asians in the U.S. as a racial Other that can be safely exploited and ostracized.

Of deep importance in considering the “perpetual foreigner” and other stereotypes is how each of them is shaped by the “afterlife of the ‘coolie’ experience.” (Goeffe 56). The “perpetual foreigner” is a myth deeply rooted in Asian American histories of labor, and it continues to have a profound impact upon many Asian Americans in the present. The beginning of many Asian stereotypes can be traced back to the bachelor society first formed by Chinese immigrant male workers in the 1870s and 1880s. The migration of Chinese workers to the U.S. at the time occurred in the context of post-emancipation labor importation, which means that the U.S. was not looking for naturalizable potential citizens but just alternative labor power for the freed slaves. Accordingly, there were specific requirements for the new manual laborers: they had to be young and able-bodied, but at the same time were prohibited from forming a family and taking roots. Concerns about Chinese settlement are reflected in the series of immigration laws that affected the Chinese immigrants; the Page Act of 1875 prohibited the entry of Chinese women, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 eventually prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers. Supported mainly by white working-class men who feared competition against Chinese workers, these laws intended to stop the Chinese workers from forming families and becoming a stable presence in the U.S. These circumstances led to the

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14 With economy in decline by the 1870s, Anti-Chinese animosity on the West Coast became politicized mostly by labor leaders such as Denis Kearney and his Workingman’s Party. Alexander Saxton points out that white working-class men’s anti-Chinese animosity was mostly driven by their economic difficulty rather than racist ideas. California’s economy was “more complex and commercialized than anything they had left behind” (13), which means that the former white artisans now found themselves in an industrialized society where their craftsmanship was obsolete. But the unskilled labor market wasn’t a great alternative for them either because then they would be “forced to compete with an ever-growing army of hungry foreigners” (14).
formation of bachelor societies among immigrant Chinese communities, and these newly formed homosocial communities were also seen as unprecedented threats to white manhood. Not only were Chinese male immigrants seen to be competing with working class white labor, they were also viewed as sexual deviants who “threatened white womanhood and white patriarchy” (Nguyen 90). In other words, the stereotype of “perpetual foreigner” is closely tied to the threat of the “Yellow Peril,” a stereotype in which Asians were seen as alien invaders; both images are related to the history of labor in which Asian workers were marginalized and excluded, and both of them reveal a white American consciousness in which “Asian” is viewed as incompatible with “American” identity.

The image of Yellow Peril started long before the formation of bachelor societies. According to Gina Marchetti, the root of the stereotype can be traced back to the “medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe” (2), and it started as a combination of “racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East” (2). In other words, the Yellow Peril is based on the deep-rooted fear the West has had for the incomprehensible racial other; unfamiliarity meant unpredictability, and unpredictability created fear in which Asia was imagined to have the “irresistible, dark, occult forces.” This racial stereotype based on fear continued into the modern days. As Yuko Kawai points out, Asia in the late 19th and the early twentieth centuries was viewed as a “menace that would threaten the domination of the White race” (112). The population size of East Asia, China’s potential military and economic power, and Japan’s rapid growth into an imperial power all threatened the white supremacy. In other words,
“the common denominator among yellow perilists was a fear of change” (Thompson 37). However, labor competition with immigrants in the U.S. displaced this fear from an external to an internal source, as white America projected that oriental invaders might be already in their nation. Alarm over the influx of Chinese workers led to legal restrictions on immigration and naturalization that were seen to re-establish the racial order. This, according to Gary Okihiro, gave rise to the new colonialist discourse in America which justified the “imposition of whites over nonwhites, of civilization/Christianity over barbarism/paganism” (138).

In racial stereotypes, this colonialist dichotomy also included distortions of Asian sexuality. Asian Americans have been portrayed as either oversexed or desexed as opposed to white normative heterosexuality. Asian masculinity was largely seen as either exaggerated lasciviousness or emasculated asexuality, as exemplified by the figures of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Fu Manchu is a sinister ‘Oriental’ who plots the destruction of Western civilization while expressing a desire for white women. Appearing in more than dozen books and 18 movie series,15 Fu Manchu was the pinnacle of Yellow Peril hysteria between 1850 and 1940, a time when, according to Espiritu, “in numerous dime novels, movies, and comic strips, Asians appeared as feral, rat-faced men lusting after virginal white women” (“Ideological Racism” 4). Fu Manchu established himself as the iconic

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15 Starting with The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu (1913), Sax Rohmer wrote the Fu Manchu series for 46 years, completing 13 books in total. Though the entire series was filled with racist representation of Chinese immigrants, the series was a huge success and made Rohmer one of the most financially successful writers of the 1920s and 1930s. The series was revived in 1984 with Ten Years Beyond Baker Street by Cay Van Ash, with the most recent novel being The Destiny of Fu Manchu (2012) by Patrick Maynard. Hollywood adapted the series into films since 1920s repeatedly: from The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu (1923) to The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu (1980), the character has appeared on screen again and again, perpetuating the stereotype of Yellow Peril. The character’s influence is still seen in the contemporary Asian villains in Hollywood movies such as Mandarin in Iron Man series.
'Oriental' villain who reflected America’s anxiety towards growing Asian American male population. Fu Manchu was also presented in ways that questioned heterosexuality, as suggested by the description given by Frank Chin and Jeffrey Chan:

> Dr. Fu, a man wearing a long dress, battling his eyelashes, surrounded by muscular black servants in loin cloths, and with his habit of caressingly touching white men on the leg, wrist, and face with his long fingernails is not so much a threat as he is a frivolous offense to white manhood (‘Racist Love’ 60)

Beneath the mask of Fu Manchu’s exaggerated heterosexual lust for white women is what Chin argues is a mockery of Asian American heterosexual masculinity: “the evil of the evil Dr. Fu Manchu was not sexual, but homosexual” (66). Though Chin’s account reveals his own homophobic perspective, it nonetheless provides insight into the lingering anxieties surrounding the “bachelor societies” of Chinese and other Asian that had been generated by labor demands as well as legalized exclusion and state laws prohibiting interracial marriage. As Espiritu points out, the homosociality of Chinese bachelor societies “eventually reversed the construction of Asian masculinity from ‘hypersexual’ to ‘asexual’ and ‘homosexual’” (“Ideological Racism” 7). The threat of Fu Manchu speaks to both the fear of foreign invasion and the anxieties about the potential deviance of male immigrant laborers. Fu Manchu is an exaggeration of Asian heterosexual desire, but simultaneously its negation.

The stereotype of Charlie Chan also speaks to anxieties about labor as well as Asian heterosexual masculinity. A stereotype of a harmless Asian man who is obedient and eager to please, Charlie Chan was at first conceived as an alternative to Yellow Peril stereotypes by Earl Derr Biggers in the 1910s. Biggers was “appalled by the maltreatment
and prejudice Asian Americans suffered” (Wei), and created Charlie Chan originally as an intelligent, heroic, and amiable Honolulu police detective that was the opposite of ‘Oriental enemy’ stereotypes prevalent at the time. The character soon became a huge hit, leading to the creation of six novels and over fifty Hollywood films; as William Wu argues, Charlie Chan was “the most important single image of the Chinese immigrants” in the early twentieth century American fiction (60). However, the character had an obvious limit of acting in the service of white authorities; he was portrayed to be honorable and smart, but he was also effeminate and subservient to the white leading characters, making him a prototype of the model minority stereotype. Various TV programs in the twentieth century modeled their few Asian characters after Charlie Chan and presented the stereotype of dutiful Asian men: many shows such as Bachelor Father (1957-62), Bonanza (1959-73), Valentine’s Day (1964-65), Star Trek (1966-69), and Falcon Crest (1981-90) all featured the stock Chinese character who provide wise advice to his white superiors while “perform[ing] traditional female functions within household” (Hamamoto 7). In other words, Charlie Chan was the other side of the Fu Manchu coin; though Charlie Chan was designed as a non-enemy type of Asian American image, he is equally rooted in the Chinese bachelor society where “feminine” type of works had to be done by males. And the psychological function they had for the mainstream Americans of the nineteenth-twentieth century is also identical; by warping Asian American masculinity and degrading it to an object of disdain and contempt, white America could use Asian male stereotypes to provide reassurance of white male superiority in the workplace. Asian Americans could play an eleven-year old Asian assistant Short Round,
but never Indiana Jones; they could play Sulu, but never Captain Kirk. Strong masculine roles have been denied to Asian Americans.

Stereotypes of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, as influenced by the Asian American history of labor, got constantly reproduced in American mass culture via literature and film. Asian American men were not able to reconcile their racial identities with the iconography of American heteronormative masculinity, as these stereotypes were a part of American mass culture and daily life. The values embodied by oriental stereotypes—the demonization and belittling of Asians—have penetrated American mentality. Asian Americans exposed to the negative psychological influences of these labor-based stereotypes experienced identity conflicts in which the ‘American’ side of their identity denied and rejected the “Asian” part of their identity. Borrowing from a young Vietnamese American’s testimony, Viet Nguyen records how Asian Americans in contemporary America experience self-denial:

Every day I was forced to look into a mirror created by white society and its media. As a young Asian man, I shrank before white eyes. I wasn’t tall, I wasn’t fair, I wasn’t muscular, and so on. Combine that with the enormous insecurities any pubescent teenager feels, and I have no difficulty in knowing now why I felt naked before a mass of white people. (qtd. in “Ideological Racism” 9)

This young Vietnamese American man experienced self-rejection when he saw his own image, because what he saw in the mirror was nothing but a negative caricature of his race which is “created by white society and its media.” Asian Americans are repeatedly inculcated with who they are supposed to be by the U.S. society and its media, and this inevitably marginalizing experience makes them “experience significantly more tensions
in their efforts to form a unified and integrated identity” (Huynh et al 155), because these pre-made images instill them “feeling of inferiority, discomfort, and isolation” (139).

Philip Kan Gotanda’s Yankee Dawg You Die (1988) provides a good example by which to explore the continuing intersections of racial stereotypes, social performance, alienation, and labor in the late twentieth century. Premiered in February 1988 by Sharon Ott at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in Berkeley, California, Yankee Dawg has been repeatedly staged by renowned Asian American theater groups across the U.S. Playwright Horizons at New York in 1989; InterAct Theatre Company at Philadelphia in 1995; East West Players at Lost Angeles in 2001; and Madison Theatre Guild at Madison in 2014. The play has been constantly loved by Asian American theater artists, partly because Yankee Dawg illuminates how American racial ideologies affect the representational labor of acting. The two characters who are Asian American actors find their employment and creative expression both seriously limited, which echoes the way in which stereotypes operate more generally as a form of self-alienation. Stereotypes affect Asian Americans’ identity formation process, like physical labor demanded for the coolies controlled their mode of being in the nineteenth century America. In a similar way, the labor of acting forbids the actors from breaking the characters. In most types of Western theater, showing aspects of inner self is prohibited when it interferes with the role of the actor. Actors of color thus face a particular problem when the role is a stereotype. Gotanda illustrates these insights to the audience through the two contrasting protagonists of the play: Vincent Chang, a Hollywood veteran in his sixties, and Bradley Yamashita, an actor in his twenties who has worked previously in small Asian American venues and now wants to try his luck in the industry. The older character of the two,
Vincent represents the established generation that lived through the mid-twentieth century. Vincent is a successful actor who was even once nominated for an Academy Award, and he is a great inspiration for the younger generations of Asian Americans who grew up watching him on TV. According to Bradley, Vincent to Asian American kids was a “hero” and “kind of an idol” (Gotanda 23) who represented them on TV when Asian American presence on mass media was a rarity.

Nineteenth-century Asian immigrants working in menial labor had few alternatives for jobs, and were bitterly reduced to the roles given to them. In contrast, the Asian American actors in Yankee Dawg have the illusion of choices in life as well as in character. On the surface, it seems as if they can choose between acting a stereotype and refusing to play stereotypical roles in favor of more complex characters. However, as the play illustrates, these professional and artistic choices start to be limited once they enter the commercial sphere of Hollywood. Asian American actors are shown as having little choices other than stereotypical roles favored by the American film market. As a result, these Asian American actors also feel alienated by their labor as they are oftentimes reduced to the roles given to them. Yankee Dawg You Die shows the audience how an actor’s so-called artistic freedom becomes degraded. It also shows how these individual problems affecting Asian American actors also perpetuates a larger social problem of racist representation. The work of film actors is to draw fictive images into the realm of reality through their bodily enactment, and these images are repeatedly reproduced and propagated by the cinema to the point the line between fiction and reality sometimes becomes blurred. Hence, the divide between Asian American actors and the stereotypical
role they play leads not only to their own alienation from self, but also affects countless other individuals.

What makes this play especially interesting is how both Vincent and Bradley are allowed to appear as multiple characters as well as offstage, reflecting upon and debating the nature of their work. Vincent claims to have chosen his career out of his love for performing. He started his acting career as one of the “‘orientals’ who for some godforsaken reason wanted to perform…for anyone who would watch” (40), and this voluntariness of his career choice and the resultant success makes him proudly declare: “And in some small way it is a victory. Yes, a victory. At least an oriental was on screen acting, being seen. We existed” (39). Therefore, to borrow a Marxist idea, acting seems to be the “life of the species” (Manuscripts 112) for Vincent; acting has always been his dream job, and it was through acting he could unite his consciousness with his body, freely reconstructing the nature according to his own will. In other words, that Vincent became an actor as he wanted and succeeded in the business seems to be indicating that he has successfully avoided the self-alienation caused by the capitalist mode of labor. He knows what he wants, and he works as how he wants.

However, looking into the roles Vincent took throughout his career suggests that he didn’t really work as how he wanted; he hasn’t been free from the self-alienation after all. Though it is true that he willingly chose his career, the characters he played were not exactly of his selection; most of them were racial stereotypes based on either Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan, and they were all “given” to him regardless of his will. Vincent didn’t have much choice; in fact, he started his acting career as a performer of “Oriental” shows at nightclubs such as “Forbidden City, Kubla Khan, New York’s China Doll” (Gotanda
25) because there were no other venues than these Chinese restaurant entertainments, called the “Chop Suey Circuit.” According to Arthur Dong’s 1989 documentary, Forbidden City, USA, these all-Chinese nightclubs of the 1930-40s enjoyed international reputation thanks to the talented Asian American performers. Though most of the performers experienced racism in forms of hindered career opportunities and blatant racial taunts even during the peak of their success, they also subverted the racial stereotypes placed on them by embracing and mastering the contemporary popular culture they grew up with. However, it is also true that these nightclubs were the only venues allowed for Asian American performers at the time, and they were commonly depicted as exotic spectacles featuring “oriental” singers who imitate American music to entertain white clientele. Though Vincent and his talented colleagues exerted their utmost effort and filled the show with “moments of extraordinary wonder, artistic achievement” (40), they are remembered by Bradley only as “Chinese Stepinfetchit” (32), meaning that Vincent cannot avoid harsh criticism just like Stepin Fetchit, as both of their career are filled with problematic and stereotypic representations of their respective race.16

Vincent’s early endeavor to achieve the “life of the species” ended up a failure; from the start of his career Vincent’s choices were seriously limited. And the situation doesn’t improve even after his success in the film industry. Winning an acting award for playing a Viet Cong killer, Vincent states: “Good or bad, the responsibility of an actor is to do that role well. That is all an actor should be or has to be concerned about. Acting.

16 A stage name of an African American vaudeville performer Lincoln Theodore Perry, Stepin Fetchit performed in numerous movies the negative stereotypes about Blacks, e.g., lazy, slow-witted, jive-talking “coon.” Though he is remembered as one of the first Black film stars whose historical significance cannot be underestimated, his stereotypical depiction of African Americans remains highly controversial.
Whatever is asked of you, do it. But do it with dignity” (34). But did he really “do it with dignity?” Many roles he took in Hollywood were a series of demeaning racial caricatures, and Sergeant Moto is the peak of the stereotypes he played; a Japanese officer with “snakelike lids of…slanty eyes” that is “spitting hate and bile” (4), Sergeant Moto in the opening of the play speaks to his imagined American prisoners:

**Vincent as Moto:** I speakee your language. I graduate UCLA, Class of ’34. I drive big American car with big-chested American blonde sitting next to…Heh? No, not “dirty floor.” Floor clean. Class of ’34. No, no, not “dirty floor.” Floor clean…

*(He moves his lips but the words are not synched with them, à la poorly dubbed Japanese monster movie.)* Thirty-four. Thirty-four! Thirty-four!!!

*(Gotanda 4)*

An Asian character characterized by exaggerated accent and ludicrous demeanor, Sergeant Moto is an opposite of “do it with dignity.” In addition, he is a mixture of the Yellow Peril and the Perpetual Foreigner stereotypes; he is an evil yet despicable oriental presence in the U.S., a patchwork of racial prejudices about Asian Americans. In that sense, Sergeant Moto represents all the negative stereotypes Vincent has played; not only did Vincent readily accept all these stereotypical roles, but he also enacted them without any alteration that might give them more dignity or nuance. He just performed as he was expected to without a question, consequentially alienating his working body from his consciousness. Later in the play, Vincent has a weird dream in which he is asked to “fuck [him]self” in a room where everyone is staring at him (74); Vincent’s labor, i.e., acting,
is not the “life of the species”; it is an alienating labor that has been degrading him to an
animal laborans.

Such alienating characteristics of Vincent’s work is also witnessed even in one of
the rare instances in which a movie supposedly has contradicted Asian American
typecasting. Facing Bradley’s harsh criticism that he has let the white America “cut off
our balls and make us all houseboys on the evening soaps” (Gotanda 42), Vincent points
out that he also played a non-stereotypical Asian male character in a 1959 movie, The
Scarlet Kimono. This is a reference to an actual film, Sam Fuller’s The Crimson Kimono
(1959), which portrayed two male police detectives—a Japanese American and a white
man—falling in love with a white woman. Fuller’s film starred James Shigeta as Joe
Kojaku, an attractive and heroic Japanese American detective. The Crimson Kimono was
a monumental film in the history of Asian American masculinity representation. Unlike
other movies at the time which uncritically reproduced the stereotype of emasculated
Asian men, The Crimson Kimono did not use any racial exaggeration in the
characterization of Joe Kojaku, and his heterosexual attractions ultimately were seen to
be more than those of his white detective partner. The play also points out that Vincent
also starred in Tears of Winter, a reference to The Sand Pebbles (1966) in which the real-
life actor Mako Iwamatsu played the role of Po-Han, a Chinese laborer who becomes
friends with the white protagonist. Though Vincent in his movie role might be more of a
Charlie Chan type character who’s content to be called “my little ‘nipper’” by “master
Abrams” (Gotanda 28), his impressive performance earned him a nomination at Oscar for
the best supporting actor just like Mako did in real life. Considering that Mako was also
an actor with keen sense of racial identity and that he co-founded the East West Players
(the first Asian American theater company), Gotanda’s attitude towards his own character Vincent seems ambivalent. Through Vincent, Gotanda criticizes the past of Asian American representation in which many actors played stereotypical roles; however, he also celebrates the often-forgotten achievement of Asian American actors through Vincent’s rare yet meaningful movies such as *The Scarlet Kimono* and *Tears of Winter*.

In other words, Gotanda makes the older Vincent not just any actor of stereotypes, but also someone who challenge them in notable ways. This is especially important given that Hollywood’s emasculating portrayals made “feminization a crucial issue that plagued Asian American male subjectivity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Eng 210). However, Gotanda also doesn’t forget to point out how such exceptions can be easily manipulated and forgotten when the racial ideologies of American film and television market intervene. Vincent boasts that he won the rivalry in *The Scarlet Kimono*, “got the woman” (42) and kissed the white woman on the lips. He asserts that he once presented an image of powerful Asian heterosexual masculinity; his career was not just a series of stereotypes. However, when the movie is shown on television, as Bradley remembers it, the one moment when Vincent achieves “the life of the species” through a full demonstration of his romantic potential is not shown to the public:

**Bradley:** Except, when I saw it you didn’t kiss her. I mean I would have remembered something like that. An Asian man and a white woman. You didn’t kiss her.

**Vincent:** TV?

**Bradley:** Late night.
(Bradley nods. Vincent makes the realization.)

Vincent: They edited it out. (Gotanda 44)

The only scene in Vincent’s entire career where he is allowed a physical demonstration of heterosexual attraction is edited out. Vincent’s attempts to deviate from the stereotypical image are thus censored in retrospect.

The play reflects upon the generational divides between the older Vincent and the more race-conscious Bradley, through illuminating how Vincent’s self-alienation can also lead to Bradley’s comparable alienation. Though Vincent has been playing stereotypical roles that were assigned to him by white America for a long time, he was still respected by the younger generations until they noticed how his consciousness had been distorted by repeated exposure to the self-alienation. Bradley grew up looking up to Vincent, and he considered Vincent as “someone [he] can feel comfortable around” (Gotanda 7) as a fellow Asian American until he meets him at a party for the actors. But soon Vincent reveals that he has internalized a warped perspective toward Asians; at the party, Vincent refers to his fellow Asian American actors as “oriental,” and mimics one of his female colleagues back-stabbing a person, associating her with a Dragon Lady image. This moment marks Vincent’s internalization not only of stereotypes of Asian and Asian American men (the main focus of the play), but also of women. One of the two most common racial stereotypes about Asian women, the Dragon Lady is an embodiment of

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17 Reduced to one-dimensional caricatures in the American media, Asian American femininity has been simplified to either predatory femininity or subservient hyper-femininity. The example of the latter is the “Lotus Blossom” which is deeply rooted in the history of Western imperialism. Often associated with passive qualities such as demure, diminutive, deferential, and obedient, the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype paints Asian women as submissive sex objects. According to Renee E. Tajima, the images such as the Lotus Blossom, China Doll, Geisha Girl, and Polynesian beauty
the predatory Asian femininity and a female counterpart to Fu Manchu; an image rooted in the notion that Asian women could “poison a man as easily as she could seduce him” (Espiritu, “Ideological Racism” 10). The Dragon Lady stereotype started with the Princess Ling Moy played by Anna May Wong in Daughter of the Dragon (1931). A treacherous Asian woman who aids Fu Manchu in his evil plan while plotting to seduce and murder the white heroes, Ling Moy was a fusion of “the evil male Oriental mastermind with…the Oriental prostitute” (10), and she offered a prototype of many Dragon Lady type characters that were played by the subsequent generation Asian American actresses. In other words, Vincent equates his fellow Asian American actress with one of the most persistent and pervasive racial stereotypes about Asian women are all the spoils of the last three wars fought in Asia (309). The U.S. established military camps for the occupation troops whenever they won the war in Asian countries, which naturally led to the appearance of red-light districts around the camps. In other words, the image of feeble Asian women who would do anything to be saved by white males is a fantasy created in the aftermath of America’s imperialist wars in Asia. Elain Kim also argues in her documentary, Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded (2011) that “the hyper-sexualization of Asian women in American culture is a direct legacy of U.S. wars in Asia…sex workers are not simple pleasure-seekers, but are usually driven into military prostitution by poverty. But the fantasy is that they’re sexual and servile by nature” (06:48-08:03).

18 Just like Fu Manchu, the Dragon Lady stereotype also cannot be explained without the Asian American history of immigrant labor. As pointed out earlier, one of the reasons that the U.S. prohibited the entry of Chinese women in late nineteenth century was because they wanted pure labor power that would not settle down; but at the same time, it was also because “many Chinese women were singled out as being unsanitary and immoral, deviant, for engaging in prostitution” (C. Lee 4). If America viewed the miscegenation between Asian men and white women as a challenge to white manhood, the miscegenation between Asian women and white men was viewed as a threat to the national morality. Thus, all Chinese females were unjustly stigmatized as potential prostitutes, which resulted in the illegalization of Chinese women’s entry and the formation of bachelor society. The Dragon Lady stereotype is also a byproduct of Asian American history of labor.

19 Contemporary examples abound: Tracy Tzu play by Ariane Koizumi in Year of the Dragon (1985), Wai Lin, a Chinese spy played by Michelle Yeoh in Tomorrow Never Dies (1997), and Lucy Liu’s characters in Charlie’s Angels (2000), Kill Bill (2003), Payback (1999), etc. What binds all these characters together is “exotic sensuality, sexual availability to a white man, and a treacherous nature” (Wu 197), which are defining characteristics of a Dragon Lady stereotype.
without any hesitation or remorse, which shows how he himself has internalized racial prejudices.

These references upset Bradley, and their generational differences start to surface. He attempts to correct Vincent to use “Asian” instead of “oriental,” and brings up the rumor that Vincent has had multiple plastic surgeries on his nose to look more Caucasian (Gotanda 7-15). The tension between them keeps escalating until later in the play when Bradley finds out that Vincent won an award at Asian American Actor’s Awards. Bradley resents: “What? An award for the best Asian American actor in the role of Vietnamese killer…This goddamn fucking business. And I can’t believe they gave that award to Vincent Chang. Vincent Chang!” (35). Bradley expresses both reverence and antipathy toward Vincent, which illustrates a generational divide in Asian American communities. The older generations represented by Vincent tend to see their enactment of stereotypes, even with their alienating effects on self, as a necessary evil that allows them to appear on screen and survive in Hollywood; thus, Vincent sees his career as a legacy to be respected rather than a shameful past. He asserts: “We built the mountain, as small as it may be, that you stand on so proudly looking down at me” (40). In contrast, the new generation of Asian American actors exemplified by Bradley see the perpetuation of stereotypes as an accumulated evil. Bradley goes as far as to say: “what good is it to lose your dignity? I’m not going to prostitute my soul just to…see myself on screen if I have to go grunting around like some slant-eyed animal” (41-2).

However, Vincent hasn’t had the alternative of Asian American consciousness and representation like Bradley has. Vincent, a man in his mid to late sixties, formed his
life experiences and career when the term “Asian American” didn’t even exist,\textsuperscript{20} and when “oriental” was used broadly. Vincent is seen as being of a generation that grew up witnessing the “internal difference among Asian immigrants preclud[ing] efforts at cooperation” (Liu et al. 18), because “each of the major immigrant groups viewed each other with suspicion and they sought to distinguish themselves from each other at critical junctures”\textsuperscript{21} (18). Accordingly, Vincent himself emphasizes individualism, competition (even with Bradley), and survival.

Bradley belongs to a markedly different generation. Born in the 1960s, Bradley spent his formative years when “a seismic shift in consciousness” (Ishizuka 70) was happening in Asian American minds. At least through much of the play, Bradley’s involvement in Asian American independent theatre and film informs the audience of his attitudes towards his acting career. He also adheres to a sense of pan-Asian solidarity, although ironically, he fails to recognize Vincent’s real heritage as Japanese (he changed his name to “Chang” on account of WWII anti-Japanese prejudice). This sense of being connected to other Asian Americans distinguishes Bradley’s approach to his acting from that of Vincent. What is more important than survival for Bradley, at least initially, is that as an actor his work bears a certain amount of social responsibility for other Asian Americans.

\textsuperscript{20} The term was coined in 1968 by Yuiji Ichioka, a founder of AAPA (Asian American Political Alliance), and this label provided Asian Americans with “an oppositional political identity imbued with self-definition and empowerment, signaling a new way of thinking” (Ishizuka 70).

\textsuperscript{21} Michael Liu et al. presents the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1924 Immigration Act, and the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act as examples of the “junctures” where the inter-ethnic conflict among Asian American communities were heightened. Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans were pitted against each other by America’s political concerns, which left little room for solidarity for them. Regional conflicts among their home countries were another reason for their dividedness: Imperial Japan’s invasion of Korea, China, and other Southeast Asian countries bred animosity toward people of Japanese descent, which limited cooperative efforts among Asian Americans (17-20).
Americans. Vincent remembers his past choices as part of his struggle for survival; though he had to play countless stereotypes, it was a sacrifice he needed to make. Hence, his past is remembered as a nostalgic memory full of “dead dreams, broken backs, and long-forgotten beauty” (Gotanda 40). But Bradley cannot accept this self-absolution. Accusing Vincent for taking stereotypical roles, Bradley denounces his behavior:

**Bradley:** Every time you do any old stereotypic role just to pay the bills, someone has to pay for it—and it ain’t you. *No.* It’s some Asian kid innocently walking home. “Hey, it’s a Chinaman gook!” “Rambo, Rambo, Rambo!” You older actors. You ask to be understood, forgiven, but you refuse to change. You have no sense of social responsibility. (Gotanda 41)

Bradley resents that the price for Vincent’s acceptance of stereotype is paid by someone else: an innocent Asian kid who never wanted a world where they can be called a “Chinaman gook.” Vincent has an individualistic tendency and thinks that his acceptance of stereotype can only lead to his personal self-alienation, a “dead dream.” However, Bradley’s Asian American consciousness makes him disagree; he worries that the ramification can be far more extensive and cause a collective self-alienation of the community in general. And the fact that Vincent is an actor makes this worry more valid. As pointed out earlier, the representational labor of acting can blur the boundary between fiction and truth, and it can affect the whole society when multiplied by the mass media. Therefore, what Bradley sees in Vincent’s acting is not just a personal self-alienation; it is a social expansion, and a generational inheritance of self-alienation.

When approached in this context, Bradley’s highly-personalized and strongly critical reactions toward Vincent are made easier to understand. To Bradley, Vincent is
not just an older actor who has an objectionable filmography. Vincent is a role model who has had a direct influence on Bradley’s life, work, and the community, and he is also someone whose legacy must be defeated in order to redefine what Asian American actors can do in the future. As Vincent can be read as a symbolic father-figure for Bradley, *Yankee Dawg You Die* can be related to my subsequent chapters’ explorations of Asian American father-son conflict, labor, and self-alienation. The conflict between Vincent and Bradley exemplifies how an older Asian American generation has formulated strategies that enable them to survive and even thrive, but that leaves them with traumatic degrees of psychological alienation. A younger Asian American generation rejects this inheritance, and dramatic conflicts and resolutions suggests the difficulty of overcoming these racial states of being and performing. In the end, *Yankee Dawg You Die* suggests a continued process of performing stereotypes and the entrapment of the actor in this representation labor. Tormented by his continued lack of acting opportunities in Hollywood, Bradley gets a plastic surgery on his nose, and he even accepts a stereotypical role as “Yang’s number one son” (a nod to Keye Luke’s performance of Charlie Chan’s “number one son”) in a sci-fi movie *Angry Yellow Planet* in which his character is “half Chinese and half rock.” (Gotanda 79-81). That Vincent was offered the Fu Manchu-type role of his evil father, suggests an even closer generational connection between the two. Gotanda underscores the resemblance between the two actors as Bradley loses his resistance to playing stereotypes; this ending is foreshadowed in the first image of Bradley in the Prologue as a young man with wings who cannot fly (3), and when Vincent states in Act II Scene 5 that in Bradley: “I see myself thirty-five years ago” (73). Like many rebellious sons, Bradley finds himself resembling the symbolic father he
once rejected and seems to succumb to the repetition of reenacting not only Vincent’s stereotypical roles but also his self-alienation.

However, *Yankee Dawg* in fact does not end with Bradley’s frustration, and Gotanda’s message ultimately leans more toward optimism than defeatism. Vincent is as much influenced by Bradley as Bradley by him; thus, the very moment in which Bradley succumbs to the social pressure is when Vincent escapes from it and starts to overcome his own alienation. He declares that he refuses to play any more Asian American stereotypes, and instead takes on a realistic Japanese American role that resembles his own father, working on an independent Asian American film with “everyone deferring pay” (Gotanda 81). The play suggests hope for the future in Vincent’s embrace of a future free from commercially driven film. At the end of the play, Vincent performs once again the character of Sergeant Moto which he played in the opening. But this version of Sergeant Moto is no longer just a repetition of an old stereotype. Switching midway to a completely different accent and acting style, Vincent shows the human being that’s been hidden behind the stereotype:

**Vincent: (Accent gone)** What? No, no, not “dirty floor.” The floor is clean. Class of ’34. No, no, not “dirty floor.” Listen carefully and watch my lips. Thirty-four. Thirty-four! Thirty-four! What is wrong with you? What the hell is wrong with you? I graduated from the University of California right here in Los Angeles. I was born and raised in the San Joaquin Valley and spent my entire life growing up in California. Why can’t you hear what I’m saying? Why can’t you see me as I really am?
Bradley watches Vincent, his future self in thirty-five years, perform a non-stereotypical character with genuine human emotions and openly admires his acting performance for the first time in the play. This suggests that a member of the older generation can pass down to subsequent ones something other than the repetitive labors and stereotypical performances. Though Bradley is ostensibly the only spectator within the fiction of the play, Vincent’s monologue demonstrates how an actor can realize human dignity, undistorted consciousness, and “life of the species” and suture together real self and character in his work.

Through the relationship between Vincent and Bradley, Philip Kan Gotanda seems to emphasize generational differences as well as the continued struggles of Asian Americans locked into a certain set of marginalized roles. Their efforts and alienation led to a rather bleak conclusion that seems to predict how even decades later, starring roles for Asian American actors are few and far between. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) was the first studio film with an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), and according to Christina Chong’s 2016 study which surveyed 2,394 actors and 500 popular Hollywood films, “Asians were only cast in 2% of lead roles and 3% of supporting roles” (33). Representation is still one of the most important issues that Asian American communities continue to face. However, Gotanda conveys through the ending of the play that the conflict of Asian American generational divides can lead to a relationship of mutual respect as both sides realize their shared legacies of oppressed work and self-alienation and envision a much more satisfying realization of what work for the actor might mean.
Chapter 2. Alienating Labor and Literary Resistance:

Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*

It is well known that Frank Chin’s reception in Asian American Studies was rather polarizing. Responding to his relentless criticism on Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), many critics such as Shelley Wong criticized him for being “specious, strident, phallocentric” (qtd. in Reed), and according to Chin’s own words, his fellow Asian American artists such as Ken Narasaki even asserted that he was “a poison determined to kill [his] fellow artists because they are not [him]” (“Narasaki”). On the other hand, other critics who aligned with Chin’s opinion saw him as “a formative influence on Asian American literary studies” (Chu 136), and deemed highly of his contribution as he “fundamentally shaped the critical lexicon of Asian American Studies” (D. Kim 127). However, there is one common ground that can be shared by both the supporters and opposers of Chin. It is that Chin’s two plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) played a pioneering role in the history of Asian American theatre. *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, directed by Jack Gelber at American Place Theatre in New York, premiered in May 1972, and then was re-staged in 1973 by Chin himself at Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco. *The Year of the Dragon* premiered in May 1974 directed by Russell Treyz at American Place Theatre in New York, and then was restaged in March 1977 by Chin, again at the Asian American Theatre Company.

Though it is true that Chin’s debate with Kingston drew enormous critical attention which ironically resulted in relative “institutional ignorance” (Li 211) of his artistic works, there is still no doubt that his two plays were “among the first dramatic
works by an Asian American playwright to be widely produced, in Asian American theatre companies and ‘mainstream’ theatres as well” (Shimakawa, “On Listening” 88). Chin published these two plays more than a decade before *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Broadway appraised him to be a “natural writer” who knew how to express “real vitality, humor and pain” (qtd. in McDonald xv). Though his notoriety is mostly based on his vituperative tendency as a literary critic, he was also an important Asian American playwright who left his footprints in the history of Asian American theatre.

What further establishes him as a ground-breaking figure is his attention to illuminating the historical context behind the fictive Asian American stereotypes, which had been left undisussed even by his fellow Asian American writers. Chin especially concentrated on the emasculation of Asian American men through exploring the protagonists of the two plays, Tam Lum and Fred Eng, commenting “both on the ways in which Asian American men have been castrated by a white racist society and on the ways in which they must reclaim their masculinity” (J. Lee, *Performing* 62). However, in Chin’s eyes, even more problematic than the symbolic castration of Asian American men was the fact that Asian American artists themselves were so indoctrinated with the stereotype of effeminate Asian men that they were reproducing the stereotypes in their own works. In “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” Chin states:

> The stereotypes—as moral, scientific, artistic, entertaining, and legal fact—taught, inspired, and haunted the first American-born, English-speaking generations of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans who would become the first authors of Asian American works in English…We expect Asian
American writers, portraying Asia and Asians, to have a knowledge of the
difference between the real and the fake. This is a knowledge they have
admitted they not only do not possess but also have no interest in ever
possessing. They are, thus, reflexive creatures of the stereotype. (140)

From Chin’s perspective, many acclaimed Asian American writers such as Kingston,
Hwang, and Tan do not and would not understand the difference between “the real and
the fake,” and this ignorance creates a serious problem which is that the historical context
of Asian American men’s occupational effeminacy is erased. As pointed out earlier, the
origin of the “effeminate Asian man” stereotype can be traced back to the bachelor
societies formed by early Chinese immigrant laborers during the early nineteenth century.
And as Chong-suk Han points out, the sexual homogeneity of the bachelor society forced
certain parts of the community to take “feminine occupations such as laundry workers,
domestics, and cooks,” which “contributed to the formation of a gendered Asian male in
the white imagination” (86). Furthermore, the politico-economic changes of the late
nineteenth century dramatically transformed the image of the Chinese immigrant, as
Robert Lee points out. As the mining industry declined and racial agitation against Asians
escalated on the West coast,22 the “masculine” field laborer thitherto turned rapidly to
“feminine” household service providers since the domestic labor was the market in which

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22 According to Alexander Saxton, Californians at the time had severe antipathy towards capitalists
and Chinese immigrant workers who were considered to be their accomplices. Depleting mines
required the use of machines that are more effective than human laborers, thus most of the
Californian mining industry was purchased by capitalists who preferred low-wage Chinese
immigrants to white workers. Naturally many blue collar, non-colored workers stricken with bitter
sense of deprivation and frustration formed an interest group from which Chinese workers were
excluded, and brutal hate crimes against them followed, leading to the displacement of Chinese
workers from job market (13-22).
they could avoid violent competition against white male workers. Instead, they competed against white women in their new market and eventually replaced them in many cases, which played a major role in creating the stereotype of asexual and possibly homosexual Asian men as cooks, domestic servants, and laundrymen (88-99). Chin argues that this historical context is erased in the works of first generation Asian American writers when they describe allegedly feminine Asian American men; these are versions of Charlie Chan that disseminate the false idea to the readers that Asian men are intrinsically effeminate. From the way Chin sees it, these writers’ unwillingness to know the difference between “the real and the fake” is essentially deleterious.

However, according to Chin, an even more serious problem is that the erasure was conducted strictly to the benefit of white America in the first place, and that Asian American artists are unquestioningly duplicating such purposeful expurgation, subordinating themselves to the appetite of white readers and deepening the self-alienation of Asian Americans. This distortion and deletion of Asian history is not new to the West; quoting a nineteenth century historian Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Chin says that the West considers Asian history simply as “nothing more than an enumeration of the various robber bands” (“Come All Ye” 142) which essentially “lacks moral greatness… [that] rouses the individual man to consciousness of his individuality” (141). As a civilization founded on the Christian belief, the West has seen Asia as a land of the heretics that are incapable of having ‘normal’ history, thus they have edited and concocted Asian history conveniently to their likings for centuries. And thanks to Asian American artists who have adopted autobiography—“a traditional tool of Christian conversion” (141)—as a method of artistic self-expression, white America can now easily
disseminate the false Asian history to Asian Americans themselves without getting their own hands dirty. Chin asserts that this is no more than “the racist stereotype….completely displac[ing] history” (154) with the help of Asian American writers who “have given up even the pretense of reporting from the real world” (154). It is in this context that Chin emphasizes the importance of presenting the “real” history and the “real” voice of Asian to the outside and their descendants, which is a job of “the fighter writer (who) uses literary forms as weapons of war” (“Autobiography” 112). And this “fighter writer” is exactly what Chin tries to be in his works, and what situates him again in the position of a pioneer. Differentiating himself from other writers he condemns, he writes to represent the real history, and he writes to betray the white America’s expectation and invigorate the Asian American readers’ spirit. And in that sense, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon* are examples in which his self-consciousness as a pioneering “fighter writer” can most clearly be seen as he relentlessly attacks Asian American stereotypes through the words and actions of his two protagonists, Tam Lum and Fred Eng.

Also important in these two plays is how Chin’s portrayal of different Asian American father-figures also addresses the subject of racial stereotyping. Through sociopolitical interpretation of rebellious sons, Chin visualizes a mode of resistance to Asian Americans’ racialized and gendered roles which are not clearly explained by the existing culture-oriented theories on father-son conflict. A number of researchers (Lee et al. 211; Sluzki 384; Szapocznik and Kurtines 402) focused on the language & culture differences to explain the conflicted Asian American father-son relationship. According to Lee et al., it is always the “acculturation differences” in an Asian American family that
“complicates the normal generation gap, resulting in greater misunderstandings, miscommunications, and eventual conflicts among family members” (211). They argue that there is a huge linguistic, cultural, and psychological gap between an Asian father who embodies Asia’s communal culture and an Asian American son who grew up in America’s individualistic culture, thus the conflict between them is an inevitable culture clash (211-2). This approach is grounded on the assumed cultural differences between the first generation and the second generation, and it definitely has merits since it can explain not only the father-son conflict but also other forms of generational divide that exist in Asian American in general. However, the limit of this approach is that it personalizes the issue of generation gap and attributes the problem only to the individuals’ cultural identities. Furthermore, this approach is making a critical mistake by defining Asian American parents to be Asians who are free from America’s influence. Much time has passed since The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, and many Asian American parents now are not the first generations whose cultural identity is dominantly Asian. Even if they are, their “Asianness” is not free from the U.S.’s control; the ‘Asian’ they’re labeled as has a high chance of being the distorted, degraded, and emasculated “fake” Asian that Chin criticizes.

In fact, Chin’s two plays about first-generation Asian immigrant families show us that the existing culture-oriented theories on Asian American father-son conflict cannot fully explain the strained relationship. Tam’s trauma in The Chickencoop is rooted in his feminized dishwasher father who fears white females’ gaze, thus his journey to overcome the trauma comprises the main plot of the play. And in The Year, Fred’s bitterness comes from his anger toward the father who constantly attempts to pass down
his job of self-humiliating, emasculated Chinatown tour guide. Then in these two plays which are “among the first dramatic works by an Asian American playwright to be widely produced” (Shimakawa Abjection 86-7), we can already see that language or culture is not at the center of the conflict. Though both plays portray the fathers as linguistically inept characters while the sons as extremely fluent English speakers, the Americanized sons perfectly understand their Chinese fathers. Tam is aware that his father had to live in the image of stereotypically effeminate Asian man in order to survive in the U.S., and this understanding leads to his self-doubt that he also might not be ‘manly’ enough, which potentially disqualifies him as a father. And though smoldering with anger toward his father who irrationally oppresses his life, Fred still partly sympathizes with his father’s fear that they can live only in Chinatown because “out there [they]’ll become nobody” (The Year 116). In other words, these sons are not incapable of understanding their fathers; rather, they have clear understanding of how defective, debilitating, and abject it must have been for their fathers to live as a stereotype, and it is precisely why they are fighting against their fathers to refuse their legacy of Asian American effeminacy. Thus, Chin’s thematic focus of ‘resisting against the stereotype’ is embodied on stage in a form of family drama; a father who passes down the “legacy of loss” (J. Lee 69), and a son who struggles to renounce the inheritance.

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23 Tam has actually fathered two kids, but he repeatedly expresses his skepticism about his qualification as a father whenever his children are mentioned: “Chinamans do make lousy fathers. I know. I have one” (The Chickencoop 23); “I don’t want to. I want’em to forget me” (25); “My back’s all that’s good for them. My front’s no good” (25); “They got a new, ambitious, successful, go-for-bucks, superior white daddy” (27). All these quotes reveal Tam’s fear that he might have inherited from his father the ‘unmanliness’ he despised so much. And this fear explains why he fails to embrace a seemingly white woman, Lee, even though he attempted to. He “takes on some kind of white or European accent” (25) after deciding not to embrace her, which is because white females remind “Asian American men of their inability to be real men” (J. Lee 73); this is exactly the anxiety Tam inherited from his father.
The play’s resolution of father-son struggle takes the form of a complete refusal of the father. Tam’s father was a timid man who worked as a dishwasher, and his job and personality was a thing to be embarrassed about for Tam, which makes him deny his relation with the father altogether. Tam states: “He wasn’t my father. He was…he was our dishwasher” (The Chickencoop 45). But this denial of Tam is in fact rooted in his painful perception of reality that there is no way he can truly sever the tie between himself and his father, and that he cannot but inherit his father’s fate to a certain degree. Though Tam, unlike his father, is portrayed as a character with linguistic mastery with which he actively fights against the white America that denominates him as a “Chinaman,” his anxiety still testifies his obvious resemblance to his father. When Robbie, a little Eurasian boy, asks why he is wearing a swim trunk under his pants, Tam answers: “it’s something I picked up from an old dishwasher who was afraid of white old ladies peeking at him through the key hole” (16). Though Tam detested his father for wearing a swimsuit while bathing as it was a sign of his emasculated Asian male consciousness ever afraid of sexual contact, Tam still “picked up” this habit from his father. This is a clear evidence that Tam fails to completely refuse his father’s legacy; he is averting his eyes from his own premonition that someday he might have to succumb to

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24 Similar to many family dramas focused on father-son relationship, The Chickencoop also minimizes female presence—especially the mother’s—in the play. Though one might interpret the absence of Tam’s mother to be demonstrating Chin’s alleged misogynistic tendency commonly associated with his focus on masculinity, the absence might be read differently when one considers Chin’s denunciation of Asian American writers who weren’t interested in the historical context of Asian American men’s occupational emasculation. Chin focuses solely on restoring the history and debunking the myth of effeminate Asian men; therefore, excluding Tam’s mother from the plot altogether and focusing on the father-son conflict revolving around the issue of “legacy of loss” might be Chin’s deliberate choice. Tam’s father has lost his masculinity, and this uncontextualized loss is about to be passed down to Tam; Tam’s resistance to this inheritance and endeavor to be whole as a human being by uncovering the forgotten history is the core of the play, which means that misogyny might not be the real issue here.
the fate that befell his father. In that sense, Tam’s denial of his father ironically betrays his cognizance of the resemblance between his situation and his father’s.

However, being a “fighter writer,” Chin does not let his characters yield to the fate, or even if they do, he doesn’t let them do so without exposing the systematic oppression behind it. Especially in *The Chickencoop*, Chin makes Tam confront and fight the fear, and one of the ways in which he does it is to make Tam film a documentary of Charley Popcorn, a black man who supposedly fathered a black boxing champion. The fact that an African American—another racial minority that was downtrodden by white America—raised himself to a gloriously masculine champion’s status, and that there is a black father who helped him with that achievement, serves as a beacon of hope for Tam. If there is a great black father, there also could be a great Asian father as “Asian American men and black American men [are] mutually supportive figures whose masculinities complement one another” (J. Lee 77). Therefore, what Tam is really doing when he films the documentary is actually a work of finding his own surrogate father figure; it is by documenting this great black father Popcorn that Asian American fatherhood can be recuperated and hope for the restoration of Asian American masculinity be sustained. This is why Tam persists in shooting the documentary even after Popcorn confesses that he is not the champion’s father. Tam would rather die than give up on the documentary:

**Popcorn:** You’ll never do it, man.

**Tam:** We built the fuckin railroad! Moved a whole Sierra Nevada over…
**Popcorn:** Watch out for my head now. Put me down. You’re gonna fall down and we’ll both die!

**Tam:** Never! Never!

**Popcorn:** Put me down, put me down! I feel your bones crunchin up on each other.

**Tam:** Never! *(The Chickencoop 53)*

Carrying Popcorn on his back over the stairs, Tam adamantly refuses to put Popcorn down no matter how heavy he is. In fact, he can’t put Popcorn down even if it kills him because he would rather choose physical death over spiritual death which will be the consequence of abandoning his quest. Without Popcorn, he will be left in the grim reality where he is still haunted by the image of his emasculated father, then his attempts at recuperating his own masculinity will eventually be thwarted. Therefore, he cannot give up on his documentary work; his masculinity can be restored only when he successfully severs the tie with his father, and filming the black father, Popcorn, is an absolute necessity in that process.

If so, we can see here that the play’s themes and actions are closely related to the issue of labor as Tam aims to restore his masculinity/fatherhood through his work. Tam is a documentary filmmaker which typically was a job for white males. And white males have always been the victors in the U.S.; the white America has characterized the whites as enterprising, rational, and masculine whereas it has branded Asians as everything opposed to themselves: backward, irrational, and effeminate. As Karen Shimakawa points out, Americanness has been defined by the exclusion of Asian Americanness, and
in that process, Asian Americanness—an “abject” antithesis—has been constantly pitted against American subject and then jettisoned (*Abjection* 1-3). In that sense, Tam recording/rediscovering the history and trying to restore an abject subject’s selfhood through reconceptualizing labor, is in itself a very subversive act. By choosing to produce cultural works that redefine history instead of choosing the conventional forms of work, Tam is striving to displace the stereotype and reconstruct Asian American men’s history and masculinity before the capitalistic disfiguration.

But more importantly, his work also breaks the cycle of alienating labor that was going to be passed down to him like a fate. Unlike his father’s work, Tam’s work could be seen as a liberating labor, “the life of the species,” where his body is reunited with his doubly alienated self-consciousness. Tam tries to recuperate the lost Asian American masculinity through his work of reality reconstruction, and this is exactly what Marx defined as “life-engendering life” in which a man reconstitutes his surroundings according to his own will and consciousness in a creative way. And in choosing this “life of the species,” Tam differentiates himself from his father while embracing him at the same time:

**Tam:** He wasn’t my father. He was just a crazy old dishwasher…When we got home he said he had to have a bath. He said I had to help him…I helped him into his bath, and he died. It was just lights out. He finished it. (*The Chickencoop* 17)

What is happening in this scene is more than the death of Tam’s father. Tam’s father spent his whole life as an emasculated dishwasher working for white people, and here he dies while being bathed by his son. So one possible interpretation of this scene is that
Tams’ father is being likened to a dish, and Tam is being equated to a dishwasher. In other words, what might be really happening here is Tam’s succession to his father as another alienated Asian American laborer, since dishwasher in this play can be read as a symbol of Asian American instrumentalization. Just like plates are a tool for holding up the food, Asian American men were also diminished to a tool for white America’s economic expansion and white men’s ego reaffirmation. However, when this fate of unmanly male ancestors visits Tam, he doesn’t deny it outright despite his long-held animosity towards it, because he is now firmly determined to work and live as a sort of historiographer. For Tam, his father is no longer a shameful object to be erased, but a sympathetic object to be vindicated, remembered, and represented correctly. Tam’s work ethic demands that he finds out what kind of person his father truly was and what reduced him to a deplorable status. Thus, the scene of Tam bathing his father is given a new meaning: Tam embraces his father with filial love, while symbolically trying to clear his name. And in this sense, the fact that Tam ends up returning to the kitchen at the end of the play does not signify his ultimate defeat. Even if he is actually locked in that physical space where Asian Americans’ history of alienation and effemination has been accumulated,25 he is still a documentary maker and he still works for the restoration of

25 Various kitchen utensils decorate Kenji’s kitchen: groceries in various sized bags, a Chinese round chopping block, a Chinese cleaver, a sharpening steel, a work, a wok cover, spatula, spoon, strainer, bamboo scrub brush, chopsticks, spices, packet, peanut oil, etc (The Chickencoop 52). Chin is very specific about the kind of utensils that need to be here, and this shapes a sharp contrast to other main backgrounds of the play where his background portrayal stays minimum. Even when Popcorn’s movie house is introduced, Chin offers no portrayal of the space other than it is “full of the juicy noises, moaning, whines, shrieks, grunts, creaks, bumps of the pornie soundtrack” (38). He does not mention any necessary props even though the movie house is where Tam finally encounters his long-awaited surrogate father figure. This curious contrast makes sense if it was Chin’s intentional choice; he is emphasizing the importance of kitchen as a place of feminine, alienating labor where Asian American males have been confined to for over a century.
history and Asian American masculinity. By this career choice, Tam bravely severs the cycle of alienation and emasculation that has plagued Asian American men for a long time.

Therefore, what Chin really might have wanted to convey with Tam’s character could be understood only when such context of Tam’s career choice is considered. He is not simply trying to replace his biological father with a surrogate black father; through documentary making, he is in fact exposing the subject who reduced his father without any context to an emasculated dish/dishwasher. And the subject that Tam presents to the audience is white America which is embodied by an imaginary frontier hero and a symbol of American progenitor, Lone Ranger. Though Tam as a boy attempted to recover his masculinity by envisioning Lone Ranger as a Chinese American hero passing as white, he is in fact a personification of “the whitewashed idealization of [frontier] era” (Shimakawa Abjection 94). The subject which expunges Chinese workers from the U.S. history and thus distorts it as if the intercontinental railroad was constructed purely by white hands; the subject that instrumentalizes Asian Americanness as an antithesis for the establishment of U.S. Americanness and consequentially renders Asian Americans abject, docile, and effeminate; that is Lone Ranger, an embodiment of imperial America’s racial discourses. Hence, when he says “Chinaboys, you be legendary obeyers of the law, legendary humble, legendary passive” (The Chickencoop 37), his statement does not only show his personal racial prejudice. It also reveals the general perspective of the white America in which Asian American males are diminished to emasculated beings who
never step out of line, such as an instrumental dishwasher in a kitchen. And this scarring perspective naturally drives Tam to exasperation:

**Tam**: My dear in the beginning there was the Word! Then there was me! And the Word was CHINAMAN. And there was me…I lived the Word! The Word is my heritage…Born? No! Crashed! Not born. Stamped! Not born! Created! No more born than the heaven and earth. No more born than nylon or acrylic. For I am a Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! (6-8)

“Chinaman” is not synonymous with ‘Chinese.’ If ‘Chinese’ means people from China who maintained intact self-consciousness due to having been shut off from the outside influences, “Chinaman” represents Chinese people who were given abject consciousness as their identities were twisted to the needs and tastes of white America. Clearly aware of the difference, Tam as a historiographer here resists this “miracle synthetic” Lone Ranger creates: “I curse ya honorary white!...We don’t wanna be honorary white!” (37).

Therefore, it is only natural that Lone Ranger eventually fires a gun towards Tam’s hand. Tam refuses to live an emasculated life as an alienated Asian male laborer, and his work—his method of resistance—is to actively excavate the truth and record the reconstructed history, which cannot be done without his hands. That is, Lone Ranger is

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26 Lone Ranger’s remark reduces Asian men to subservient manual laborers, but it also reduces them to a ‘model minority’ stereotype which is embodied by Tom in the play; Tam in fact expresses his disgust with Tom though his antipathy is primarily directed toward his father. Considering that Tom is a mildly successful middle-class Asian American writer whereas Tam’s father is a lower-class dishwasher, Tam’s undifferentiated animosity toward the two disparate characters might seem hardly explainable through the lens of Asian men’s occupational emasculation. However, the historical context of ‘model minority’ stereotype shows how ‘threatening’ Asian men have been made tractable and docile, thus Tam’s father and Tom are in fact not very different from each other in Tam’s eyes. Chin’s criticism of ‘model minority’ will be explored with more detail when this paper discusses his second play, *The Year of the Dragon*. 
attempting to disarm the rebellious Asian American worker; the white America just wants Asian Americans to be “Chinee monkeys, [which] Hear no Evil, See no Evil, Speak no Evil” (36). But neither Tam nor his father is a “Chinee monkey,” and Tam is going to resist Lone Ranger’s self-alienating order with his hands. Lone Ranger is left with no other option but to shoot him in the hands.

But Tam will not be defeated by Lone Ranger’s attack. Though his plan of documentary making is delayed and he eventually returns to the kitchen in a dejected status, he still does not stop his work of rebuilding the history and recuperating Asian American masculinity. In the kitchen, Tam recreates the oppressive frontier West of Lone Ranger into a space of recovery and regeneration where Iron Moonhunter—a glorified figure of Chinese railroad workers—is preparing to return. And in that reconstructed West, a Chinese is not “created” anymore. Tam says: “A Chinaman born, high steppin Iron Moonhunter, liftin eagles with its breath!” (The Chickencoop 65). In this new West, Chinese are now “born,” which means that they are born with an intact masculinity and unscarred self-consciousness. Even if Tam in reality might be driven to a dark corner of the kitchen, his mind never stops working as a historiographer so that a new Chinese could be “born.” The cycle of alienation and emasculation that plagues his people has to be stopped, and stopping it will be his new legacy for the future generations:

Lee: You see, Tam? You can’t turn your back on them. You don’t mean it when you say you want them to forget you.

Tam: I mean it. I mean, in case they don’t forget. I should leave them something…I should have done some THING. One thing I’ve done alone, with all my heart. A gift. (27)
Tam fears that he might not be a good father just like his own father wasn’t, but he still hopes to leave something he created with all his heart for his children; “a gift,” a legacy. And that legacy is Asian American men’s restored history where their masculinity is intact. This is why Tam at the end of the play envisions the world of Iron Moonhunter where his children can live as a “Chinese” instead of a “Chinaman.” And this is also what Chin himself, a pioneering figure, is trying to say to the future Asian American writers: “Fight against the Lone Ranger and keep creating the world of Iron Moonhunter where the ‘real’ Asian American voices displace the ‘fake’ stereotypes.” This is the message Chin tries to deliver via The Chickencoop Chinaman. By documenting the surrogate black father’s struggle, Tam exposes the white subject behind the oppression and emasculation of racial minorities in America. If African Americans could produce a champion despite the odds, Asian Americans, by choosing the liberating labor over alienating labor, could also turn Lone Ranger into Iron Moonhunter. Through the liberating labor of Tam, Chin is showing the audience how Asian American men’s emasculation and alienation could be overcome.

If so, how did the world change two years later in The Year of the Dragon? In this play which offers another conflicted Asian American father-son relationship, have Asian American sons come nearer to the world of Iron Moonhunter? Chin’s answer is a resolute “No.” While Tam in The Chickencoop successfully empowers himself by changing his job from an emasculated and helpless dishwasher to an active filmmaker who autonomously reconstructs the history, Fred in The Year fails to escape from his alienating work of a Chinatown tour guide who meaninglessly repeats putting on an “oriental” show for white tourists’ satisfaction. Even though he admits that he has been
“sick and dying for ten years” (*The Year* 90) working in the image of ridiculous Chinaboy, all he can do is just to embrace the emasculation which creates the anger and frustration burning inside him:

**Fred:** We’re come a Chinatowng, Folks! Ha. Ha. Ha…Hoppy New Year! Fred Eng, “Freddie” of Eng’s Chinatown tour’n’ travoo. “We tell Chinatown where to go.” Ha ha ha. I’m top guide here…I like to let my hair down. Drop the phony accent. And be me. Just me…You make me feel good. I like ya. Goong Hay Fot Choy…

*(Leaves cussing under his breath)*

Goddamn, motherfucking…(71)

In this opening scene of the play, Fred performs an oriental tour guide in which he shifts between the “fake” and the “real.” He is basically performing the stereotype of Charlie Chan, an innocuous, affable, and asexual Chinese man who speaks broken English. This “fake” disgusts Fred and he tries to “drop the phony accent” and just be himself at some point in this monologue, but he still has to complete this ‘performance’ with Chinese greeting for Happy New Year (“Goong Hay Fot Choy”), which immediately returns him to where he started; that is, the “fake” Asian for white tourists’ safe consumption, Charlie Chan. Here, Fred is experiencing complete alienation from himself, and since this is his livelihood, the audience can guess that this alienation must be repeated every day in his life, to the point where he explodes with swear words. Thus when Fred’s mother says that he sometimes looks “like a wild animal” (76), it does not only mean that he becomes wild like an angry beast, but also that he experiences severe self-alienation; as Marx pointed
out, a human being alienated from his consciousness can “no longer [feel] himself to be anything but an animal” (Manuscripts 111). Fred’s work keeps diminishing and alienating him while fanning his anger and “(self-)loathing” (Shimakawa Abjection 91). Two years after The Chickencoop, Asian American men are still living in the world of Lone Ranger.

Then why does Fred, unlike Tam, fail to escape the cycle of alienation? To put it simply, it is because Chin is characterizing the two fathers—Chin’s and Fred’s—differently. If Tam’s father is a victim who was compulsorily diminished to a stereotype by white America, Fred’s father is more like an accomplice who voluntarily reproduces and passes down the stereotype. Therefore, the ending of The Chickencoop where Tam resists Lone Ranger as a film maker after having embraced his father can be seen to be embodying Chin’s own determination to fight against the stereotype. On the other hand, the ending of The Year where Fred as a Chinatown tour guide flounders in humiliation after having surrendered to his father’s will can be read as Chin’s message for the Asian American readers; a warning against the consequences of accepting/passing down the stereotype, which is symbolized by Fred’s conflict and internalized defeatism. Talking to China Mama who can’t relay his words to others due to language barrier, Fred reveals his innermost thoughts: “I was gonna be somebody ‘special,’ not ‘spesul’ like pa says, but ‘special,’ see?...Just because we’re born here don’t mean we’re nobody” (The Year 115-6). In terms of their ideas on labor, Fred and Pa are as different as “special” and “spesul”; if Fred’s idea of work is a channel through which to realize his full potentials and become someone truly “special” as everyone living “the life of the species” should be, Pa’s idea of work is just a livelihood in which he has to exploit his selling points as much as
possible, even if it means disfiguring himself to fit the racial stereotypes that is profitable. It’s a deformed and degraded version of Fred’s idea, just like “spesul” is not the same as “special.” At the heart of Fred’s frustration and alienation, there is his father who controls the family like comprador bourgeoisie controlling the colonial state’s economy; servile yet powerful.

As a result, the father-son conflict in *The Year* is structured differently from the conflict in *The Chickencoop*. Though initially disgusted by the submissive father, Tam ends up embracing his father and resenting the white America which diminished him to an abject being. Tam strives to restore the history and Asian American men’s self-consciousness for this reason, and this effort is embodied by his search for a surrogate father figure in African American community that experienced similar oppression, and then by his attempt to reconstruct the past through which an Asian hero with intact masculinity, Iron Moonhunter, returns to the posterity. In other words, the father-son conflict in *The Chickencoop* paradoxically leads to the son’s attempts at recuperating the father. In contrast, *The Year* portrays a world where a father aggressively tries to bequeath his emasculating/alienating labor to his own son, which naturally leads to a broken father-son relationship with little possibility for reconciliation. Fred has “been expecting [Pa] to die for so long” (*The Year* 86) that when he finally confronts his father later in the play, he vents out all his enmity to the point he refuses to be his son any more:

**Pa**: You my son! (*Slaps Fred again*)

**Fred** (*shouts above the voice*): No!
Pa hits Fred again and again, shouting “MY SON!” Fred doesn’t resist. He only shouts “No!” to each of Pa’s shouts. They shout and fall and clash around the kitchen as the voice of the parade exults… *(The Year 139-40)*

Pa repeatedly and violently forces Fred to follow his footsteps, and Fred vehemently resists. Eventually when Pa dies of heart attack at the end of this fight, Fred stays outraged and just “slaps the man’s face and drops him” (140). Recuperation of the father is not the central issue of *The Year*; what Chin focuses on in this play instead is to stand up against the unjust father and overcome his compulsion. In that sense, the conflict structure of *The Year* might seem to be more fitting to the genre of realistic family dramas than is *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, since its father-son conflict is more predominant.

However, whether what Fred truly resisted against was his father or not demands a closer examination, because Pa could be read more as a symbol than an individual. And when approached this way, it becomes clear that this “family play” is in fact more allegorical than realistic, and its structure more similar than different to that of *The Chickencoop*. When finding out that his daughter married to a white man, Pa asks his Caucasian son-in-law to proofread his speech for the New Year celebration even though his own son, Fred, possesses perfect English skills and used to dream of being a writer. Fred protests, but Pa coldly ignores him: “What you know? No college graduation? Him Merican. Know da Engliss poofeck. You Chinese!” *(The Year 104)* Despite Pa being a Chinese himself, he believes that a Chinese such as Fred can never really master English as one’s linguistic ability is decided by ancestry. Furthermore, when Fred confesses that he wants to leave Chinatown so that he can live his own life unshackled from racial
prejudices, Pa mocks Fred’s wish and belittles his capacity: “Who ting you a man? Likee some spoil kit. Dorty ol’ clothe. Dorty hair...You never be famous. Wasting time!” (109)

In Pa’s eyes, Fred is nothing more than a spoiled kid with dirty clothes and dirty hair who is never going to be extraordinary, all simply because he is a Chinese. The way Pa sees Fred overlaps to a significant degree the distorted way that white America sees Asian Americans.

In this context, the remarkable similarity between Lone Ranger and Pa regarding their perception of Asian Americans doesn’t seem to be a coincidence. Chin’s denunciation of white America is still very direct and powerful in this “family play.” When Lone Ranger says “go thou happy in honorary whiteness forever and ever, preserving your culture” (The Chickencoop 37), Pa says “Promise me Chinatowng always you home...Where you always teck care of cuz you my son” (The Year 108). Fred is a shameful son to Pa like Asian Americans are no more than “honorary whites” to America, and Chinatown “always” has to be Fred’s home like Asian Americans have to preserve their culture “forever and ever.” In other words, Pa can be seen as a caricature of the older generation Asian Americans who are inculcated with racist ideas to the point where they end up reproducing the Asian stereotypes themselves, like Tonto, a blindly loyal Asian sidekick to Lone Ranger. Hence, Fred’s resistance to his father has to be understood in a larger context; he is not simply defying his father, but fighting against the entire white American perspectives—the shadow of Lone Ranger looming behind his father—that alienate Asian American men. Though Fred’s resistance does not lead to a struggle for the restoration of history, Chin in The Year is still portraying an Asian American men’s active defiance against American mainstream which has arbitrarily
defined and alienated Asian American males. Resisting the father’s legacy is still the same as resisting the white America in Chin’s second play.

However, it still doesn’t mean that Chin in this play concentrates solely on criticizing white American perspectives while exonerating fathers as racial victims. As pointed out earlier, Fred’s father is presented as an accomplice than a victim, thus Fred fiercely resists and antagonizes his father rather than forgiving and embracing him as Tam seems to do. When faced with his dead father, Fred slaps the dead man’s face and drops him on the ground. Pa is the character that Chin criticizes most harshly in *The Year*, through which he delivers his message for the fellow Asian American writers. Pa is completely different from Tam’s father in socioeconomic status. While Tam’s anonymous dishwasher father was located at the lowest rung of social ladder, Pa is portrayed as a self-made character who has achieved great socioeconomic success. He is the mayor of Chinatown as well as the owner of the largest touring company in it. But no success comes without cost. Pa still puts on “smiles and giggling charm in front of a white man” (*The Year 93*) even if that white man is his son-in-law, and he is excited at the thought of throwing Charlie Chan jokes to the public at the new year ceremony, even though he is supposed to be a dignified authority whose presence itself should disprove the Charlie Chan stereotype. Pa is a character whose success is in large part owed to his constant racial self-degradation and unquestioning commercial use of it. In fact, Pa is the only character in the play who voluntarily reinforces and spreads the Asian American stereotype exactly as intended by white America. Reading jokes written by Ross—the only white man in the play—Pa naively believes Ross’s comment that the Charlie Chan joke “means you’ve made it” (132). In other words, Pa is a model minority and he
believes that his model minority status couldn’t have been won had he not blindly
embraced the Charlie Chang stereotype, because this image of uncannily innocuous and
ever-docile Asian man is what white tourists always find themselves ready to accept. In
this sense, Pa is a literary embodiment of what Chin sees as “reflexive creatures of
stereotype” (“Come All” 140) just like many of Chin’s acclaimed contemporary Asian
American writers who subordinated themselves to the “fake” stereotypes pursuing
success granted by white America. Pa is actively embracing the stereotype without
realizing that it only brings ultimate degradation and alienation not only to himself but
also to his children. Through portrayal of Pa, Chin is delivering his warning as a “fighter
writer” to his fellow Asian American writers; in Chin’s eyes, what they are doing to
Asian American readers is not different from what Pa is doing to his son.

And by delineating the negative psychological effect Pa has on Fred, Chin makes
his stance on the role of Asian American artists even clearer. While Tam could safely
immerse himself in excavating the forgotten history and envisioning the recuperative
world of Iron Moonhunter, thanks to the absence of his father, Pa is alive and his
unquestioning pursuit of economic success through racial self-mockery gains more and
more influence on Fred’s consciousness. Consequently, though defiant toward his father,
Fred follows his father’s will and lives his life as a racial stereotype tailored to the white
tourists’ taste, which through daily repetition degenerates his self-consciousness to the
point where he “can’t even get pissed-off at a white man without [his] voice drifting off
into some movie, like a reflex” (The Year 122). His labor forces him to fit himself into
the profitable stereotype, and living as a stereotype demands him to deny his truer self
until the boundary between “the real” and “the fake” is dimmed. While explaining the rules to follow when working as a Chinatown tour guide, Fred says:

_Fred:_ You want me to be Chinese too, huh? Everybody does…You know how the tourists tell I’m Chinese? No first person pronouns. No “I,” “me” or “We.” I talk like that lovable sissy, Charlie Chan, no first person personal pronouns, and instant Chinese culture…ha, ha, ha. (114)

The first rule to remember as a Charlie Chan type tour guide is not to use the first-person pronoun. This is of course a device for emulating an “authentic” Chinese whose English skill is imperfect, but on a deeper level, it also signifies that to work in the image of a stereotype is to exist as a void whose self-consciousness is hollowed out; it is just a life for someone else. To put it differently, what Fred inherited from his father is none other than the racialized Asian American alienation; he lives most of his life as an Asian stereotype created to meet the needs of white America, and the alienation from consciousness he experiences every day through his labor blurs the boundary between his work and his life, ultimately permeating and dominating Fred’s private realms as well. This is why Fred eventually gives up on leaving Chinatown even when Pa is dead; when the time for mourning comes, Fred just “puts on a white slightly oversized jacket, and appears to be a shrunken Charlie Chan, an image of death” (141). Here, Fred is portrayed as a “shrunken Charlie Chan”—the persona he puts on only when he’s working—in the moment that needs to be most private. The alienation which wasn’t overcome can only be stronger and permeate the worker’s every aspect of life. So again, Chin’s message is clear: no matter how hard the sons fight against the white America’s attempt at emasculating and alienating Asian American men, it will be all to no avail if the fathers
don’t stop accommodating the model minority stereotype for their short-sighted economic gains and try to force it onto their sons. By portraying Fred’s suffering, Chins shows to his contemporary writers that the younger Asian Americans can hardly escape from the cycle of alienation without awakening of the older generation and the “successful” Asian American artists.

Read in this context, the hidden meaning of the play’s title, “The Year of the Dragon” becomes clear. On the surface, the title uses the Chinese Zodiac to set the background of the play while also foregrounding white America’s Orientalizing perspectives on Asian American community. However, one remaining question is “why the dragon?” Chin specifically chose the only mythic creature out of twelve different animals. One clue can be found in the speech that Pa was rehearsing. Commemorating the new year as the Chinatown’s mayor, he describes the dragon as follows:

**Pa:** Da dragger have a head like a pa mow, a camels, hairs like a lahng manes, body liking snakes, fin and’ tails like fish, foot like a tigers, clar like a eagles anna run dong Chinatowng on tennie shoe! (*The Year* 134)

Pa has achieved great success thanks to his conformity to the Asian stereotype, and that success gave him the greatest honor he can have in his life, which is to be the mayor of Chinatown and give a speech at the new year’s ceremony. But this speech is never delivered; he gets into an overheated argument with Fred during the rehearsal, after which he has a heart attack. So, in a way, his greatest achievement and greatest defeat happen almost simultaneously around this speech, and when that context is considered, Pa’s portrayal of dragon can be read as an allusion to the Asian American stereotype he spent his life embracing. Mixture of different animals’ body parts, a dragon can exist
only imaginatively as a hodgepodge of fetishes, just like Asian American stereotypes are no more than a concept constructed with apocryphal ideas. Then what Chin intended by choosing the dragon seems apparent now. No matter how mythic, gigantic, and powerful a dragon might look, it is in fact no more than a fictive creation, and in the same way, no matter how great and dazzling the promises of Asian stereotypes might look, they are nothing but fantasies that will vanish into thin air after all. If there is one thing that is not an illusion, it is death. And though Pa dies along with his vain dreams for the model minority, Fred is still living, and he is living in the year of the dragon like a ghost of his father: “a shrunken Charlie Chan, an image of death.” The father’s physical death is connected to the spiritual death of the son, thus the son is succeeding his father in a symbolic way after all. Therefore, the title of the play serves more than to set the background of the plot; “The Year of the Dragon” is “the year of the fantasy” and “the year of the succession.” With this connotative title, Chin is exposing the fictiveness of Asian American stereotypes, the futility of fitting one’s life to meet the needs of white consumers, and the inevitability of future generation’s alienation when the fathers comply with white America’s demand. Chin’s attack is more harsh and more rooted in reality, in The Year of the Dragon.

Roughly half a century has passed since Frank Chin delivered a warning in his two plays, The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon. His warning was twofold: denunciation of the white America for initiating the alienation of Asians by forcing them menial and emasculating forms of labor; and reprimand of the “fake” Asian American writers for glorifying and perpetuating the alienation by reproducing the evolved version of the alienation, the model minority myth. In other words, Chin engaged
in a literary battle where he stood against the White America and the comprador “fake” Asian American writers. His goal for the battle was to present Asian Americans with “better” forms of labor, and his method was to provide more “right” kind of representation, which was embodied by the imaginary world of Iron Moonhunter that Chin hoped to be the future of Asian America. And Chin’s pursuit of the world of Iron Moonhunter, despite the controversies around him, is succeeded by the later generations of Asian American artists such as Chay Yew and Julia Cho. Chin remains a pioneering figure in the history of Asian American drama.
Chapter 3 – Model Minority and Sexuality:

Chay Yew’s *Wonderland* and Julia Cho’s *Durango*

In 1966, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, William Petersen published a NY Times article that left a lasting impact on American popular discourse about Asian Americans. In the article, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” Petersen presented Japanese Americans as exemplary racial minorities, as contrasted with Black Americans who were believed to ruin their opportunities on their own because of their “self-defeating apathy or a hatred so all-consuming as to be self-destructive” (21). According to Petersen, Japanese Americans were not just “hyperefficient competitors” (20) to be feared as the Yellow Peril stereotype defined them; they were also the people who were “by any criterion of good citizenship that we choose…better than any other group in our society” (21) because of their remarkable determination to succeed professionally as well as academically. Petersen presented America as a country “whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero” (21), and referred to Japanese Americans as the type of people that “avidly prepared for that one chance in a thousand” (38) by persistently pursuing education, discipline, and self-denial of pleasure and expression. They were the “model minority,” and African Americans by contrast, were the “problem minorities” (20). Petersen’s article not only helped popularize the model minority myth assuming that “Asian” values suited the American Dream, presenting individual

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27 Horatio Alger (1832-1899) is an American writer of young adult novels who is renowned for his *Ragged Dick* (1867) series. The series has roughly 120 variations, and its sales record amounted to 20 million copies. Thomas Porter defines the general plot line of the series as follows: “The ragged urchin, bootblack or newspaper boy of humble origin capitalizes on his opportunities and, by pluck and luck, rises to the top of the economic heap” (130). Naturally, the series and its writer Horatio Alger became a symbol of American Dream, the myth of capitalist productivity and wealth acquisition.
discipline and the will to assimilate as a key to success, but also its disavowal of cross-racial solidarity among minorities in the U.S.

In addition to individual effort and discipline, Petersen also suggested another “Asian” characteristic as an equally significant reason for Japanese Americans’ success. Unlike the “problem minorities” whose dismal status such as “poor health, poor education, low income, high crime rate” was exacerbated by an “unstable family pattern” (21), Japanese Americans had “developed a family life both strong and flexible enough to help their children cross a wide cultural gap” (21). In Petersen’s view, traditional family values for Japanese Americans were “a means of both preserving elements of the Japanese culture and of reconciling it fully with the American one” (40), and they “transmitted such values from one generation to the next” (41) through a stable and heteronormative family structure. In other words, Japanese Americans ensured the survival of their Japanese heritage as well as the success-oriented values through their “Asian” family, which means that the structure of the heterosexual and child-producing family was crucial for the attainment and maintenance of model minority status.

Interestingly, Petersen points out how Japanese Americans’ way of life is “similar to what has been called ‘the Protestant ethic’ in Western culture” (41). Thus Peterson emphatically connects Japanese Americans’ diligence in work and heterosexual productivity to racial progress, which suggests how compliance to such Protestant values might act as a kind of colonial mimicry. 28

28 In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” (2000), David Eng and Shinhee Han point out that the way model minority stereotype works for Asian Americans is remarkably similar to how mimicry works for colonial subjects. If the essence of Bhabha’s 1984 essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” was that the mimicking colonial subjects are “almost the same, but not quite,” then Eng and Han’s argument similarly suggest that model minorities are
As Lisa Sun-Hee Park points out, “the notion of a model minority does not imply full citizenship rights but, rather, a secondary one reserved for particular minorities who ‘behave’ appropriately and stay in their designated secondary space without complaint” (135). The model minority stereotype was certainly an ideological creation of white America. However, from the viewpoint of Asian Americans, it was a much more preferable image to that of the yellow peril. It could also be a useful tool by which they could be awarded economic and social privileges and even recognized as more fully human. However, it also set its own traps, showing the impossibility of Asian Americans’ existential autonomy. Their compliance to the model minority values seemed to be a voluntary choice, but it was in fact a coercive process manipulated by the capitalist/Protestant regime of white America.

In that sense, Chay Yew’s Wonderland (1999) and Julia Cho’s Durango (2007) provide complex examples by which to examine how attitudes towards work and sexuality collaboratively influence Asian Americans’ model minority status. Both plays suggest how Asian American men and their sons experience a doubling of crises. In Wonderland, repetitive and meaningless work is justified by a sense of success based on the model family, but the father-son conflict arises as the two different modes of compliance—to a capitalist regime and to a heteronormative regime—are passed down to the younger generation. The son refuses to follow in his father’s footsteps by declining both capitalist labor and the heterosexual labor of reproduction. On the other hand, Durango portrays a world in which homosexuality is suppressed and meaningless work is ‘almost the same, but not white.’ They argue: “Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order to be at all” (677).
endured for the maintenance of the model family. However, the father-son conflict arises as the sons question the validity of compliance within both these systems of production and reproduction; the first son rebels, whereas the second son suppresses his ideal labor as well as his sexuality and mirrors his father’s self-alienation. Whether this compliance—to capitalist norms of success, to reproductive success, and to parental authority—is inherited or not, all of these compulsory conformities have negative effects on the plays’ characters. In combination, *Wonderland* and *Durango* show how the public and private dimension of Asian Americans’ lives are controlled by the model minority stereotype.

Chay Yew is a playwright whose works “commonly address queer Asian American experiences and associated themes” (Sohn 1), and he gained critical reputation mostly for exploring and disrupting the heteronormative boundaries of Asian American culture, as in plays such as *Porcelain* (1992), *A Language of Their Own* (1995), and *A Beautiful Country* (1998); sexuality is unmistakably at the center of Yew’s plays. But what Yew also attempts through these bold and experimental plays is to “call the stability of ‘Asian-American’ itself into question” (Román xi), which means that many of his plays also examine the limits of model minority myth, as it is based on the idea of stability—whether it is class, economic, political, or sexual—of Asian Americans.

*Wonderland* was premiered in September 14, 1999 by Michael Grief at La Jolla Playhouse in La Jolla, California, and is especially a great example in which the intersection of homosexuality and the model minority myth is explored. The play focuses on the familial conflict in a fifth-generation Singaporean American family, and stands out for its conflict between a middle-class father, “Man,” and a rebellious gay son, “Son.”
“Man” is a character who has lived his whole life as a model minority secretly dreaming of the ideal labor and a solid Asian American family, but he loses everything as he experiences conflict with his son who refuses everything he hoped for: a complacent middle-class status and heteronormative family. In other words, *Wonderland* focuses on how model minority is built upon the brittle fantasy of socioeconomic and familial stability.

*Wonderland* illuminates this speciousness of the model minority myth, primarily in the character of Man, who struggles to go beyond the stereotype’s limits. Though Man is acutely aware that living as a model minority is far from what he truly wants, he still accepts it as a tactical withdrawal, believing that utilizing the stereotype for his long-term ideal will help him achieve his “life-engendering life” in the long run. In fact, Man early in the play appears to have achieved more than what the stereotype permits. Man is different from his ancestors who arrived at the U.S. two centuries ago as “Chinese railroad worker (who) / made the very same journey / across the same ocean” (4). He is a fourth-generation Singaporean American who has already fully assimilated, and he embodies the American Dream as an educated architect who designs “new city centers / The future town squares of America / where people can come together / commune socialize fraternize” (Yew 10). If his ancestors suffered from self-alienating and underappreciated labor, Man seems to be enjoying a self-realizing labor in which his unified consciousness and body creates something meaningful as well as “American.” The malls he designs are multicultural places where anyone including Man himself can “feel right at home” (10); he elevated his social position higher than a “perpetual
foreigner” stereotype through his work, which seems to have the power of realizing the American Dream.

However, as the play progresses, Man’s seemingly self-liberating labor reveals its true nature as an entrapment, and Man shows his true position as an “ordinary” Asian American than a living embodiment of the American Dream. In fact, the fact that he is not even given a name other than “Man” suggests that his situation can be universally applied to all other Asian American individuals.29 Though being an architect does require more creativity and originality than other mediocre jobs, he is still anonymous and his work is in fact almost equally self-alienating as the earlier forms of menial labor, because he is not viewed just as an architect but an “Asian American” architect. Man wanted more than what the stereotype allowed him; he hoped to “revolutionize architecture” (Yew 11) and to make “contribution to history / A part of history” (12) with his ability, but what he was allowed to design was just characterless shopping malls to which there were “nothing special / nothing unique” (28), because the company believed that Man’s specialty was to build malls “cheap fast well” (63) as a typical Asian worker—dull and non-inventive, but fast and incredibly efficient. Even in his job where individual creativity and expertise is important, the Asian American stereotype reduces him to a racialized worker who is divested of personal traits and individual consciousness.

29 The dramatic style of Wonderland in general is very expressionistic. All the main characters are anonymous, most lines are poetically structured, and the scene changes are indicated just “by lights and sound” (Wonderland 1), giving the play a minimalist vibe. Due to this characteristic lack of detail, the characters in the play are oftentimes seen as a symbol or representative figures than an individual; and in the same way, the play is easily expanded from a story of a particular family to a tale of general Asian American populations.
However, almost three decades have passed since the days of Fred in *The Year*, and Man does not give in easily; he chooses to wait it out. Though the uninteresting malls intensify his self-alienation every day, he does not lose hope that catering to the company’s needs will someday make them recognize his true ability, and eventually earn him the freedom to design the buildings that are “gargantuan / towering over cities and peoples” (Yew 12). Therefore, Man accepts the model minority status, but with a purpose. He agrees to be, or rather, “perform” a model minority only to sharpen his skills “in secret / late at night / for many years” (12) like Vincent in *Yankee Dawg*. *Wonderland* presents a world familiar to many Asian Americans of the present: a world where they have to persistently seek the alternative, while performing stereotypes until the opportunity comes.

Then does Man’s tenacious effort yield a successful result? Does he overcome the alienation in the end and achieve his “life of the species?” The answer is “No,” and Man’s failure is symbolized by the pinnacle of his career and “the largest shopping mall in Southern California” (Yew 46), the Wonderland. The fruition of Man’s two years’ effort, Wonderland is likened to “latter-day Tower of Babel / Touching / Kissing the heavens” (46), and as foreshadowed by the word, “Tower of Babel,” it is destined to fall someday as Man’s oppressed desire reaches the tipping point. As Man finishes the gigantic project of Wonderland-building, he now argues that the time has come for the company to finally acknowledge his extraordinariness and reward him with freedom. Man states:

**Man**: Surely

after this
this Wonderland
the company will give me
their favorite son
on a silver platter
more responsibilities
more projects
more buildings
of stature
of rank
that join rank
rival those of
Gehry Wright and Pei
At long last
my place in history (Yew 46-7)

However, Man’s “place in history” is never created because what he has proven with the Wonderland is the fact that he is just a talented model minority. Though Man asks for an opportunity to build the “monuments skyscrapers concert halls” (63) now that he has proven his extraordinariness, the company gives him even more mall-designing jobs because he has proven with the Wonderland that mall-building is his “niche” and his “place” (63), like Vincent in Yankee Dawg who is constantly given stereotypical roles even after his academy nomination. Man’s effort to prove his creative capacity and to shatter the stereotype leads to an ironic result of proving the validity of the model minority stereotype, reinforcing the stereotype’s grip than weakening it. Man’s strategy
to attack the stereotype from the inside, therefore, is a failure; after the monumental completion of the Wonderland, he is left “in the shadow of the man / you thought you were meant to be” (66). Despite all the efforts, Man experiences self-alienation as a result of his labor.

In this context, the symbolic collapse of the Wonderland due to “structural failure / Shoddy construction” (Yew 83) at the end of Act I appears to be a natural consequence, since an achievement that is made through a wrong method is always precariously unstable. Man accepted the model minority as a method to overcome the model minority; he believed that the only way to outgrow the limitations of the stereotype was to temporarily accept it and take advantage of its full potentials. However, he overlooked that the stereotype was created not to boost Asian Americans’ upward mobility, but to bind them to the place where white America saw them fit. Seeking to achieve the “life of the species” through the alienating and repressive ideological tool is a “structural failure”; there is no escape from the system of thought that created the stereotype once you get affiliated with it for any reason. Everything one achieves after entering the system is attributed not to the individual’s ability but to the efficacy of model minority status; the more you achieve, the more you justify the model minority, paradoxically deepening your self-alienation.

Man’s suicide at the end of the play can also be connected to the fall of the Wonderland in the same context. What Man saw in the collapse of the Wonderland is his hope—the hope which helped him get through the alienating labor for years—dissipating in front of his eyes. Man at first did not give up on his “life of the species”; he persistently struggled to keep his consciousness and the ideal self-image untainted
throughout his career. However, it all turns out to be a futile dream when the Wonderland collapses. He realizes with the Wonderland that everything he has done to elevate himself was actually being used against him, and that he has imprisoned himself in the stereotype with his own hands, which shatters Man’s mind into pieces just like the Wonderland in rubbles. As a result, Man who started mentally healthier than many other father characters in Asian American drama ends up in a worse self-alienation and worse self-destruction; he kills himself. Wonderland shows that the model minority stereotype can hardly be overcome by appropriating it. Like many other stereotypes, the model minority is a powerful ideological tool created by a hegemonic society; hence, agreeing to perform it even for a strategic reason always runs the risk of internalizing the stereotype themselves. Man’s tragic downfall shows that it can deepen one’s self-alienation to the point of no return.

Another important thing about the fall of the Wonderland is that it happens shortly after the clash between Man and Son, which suggests that the generational conflict plays an important role in Man’s demise. Man spent a large portion of his life as a model minority though he didn’t intend to, and it naturally affected Son’s upbringing which can be summed up to the lessons that he “must be success” (Yew 34), and become “a doctor lawyer / engineer architect / Like what [his] folks want [him] to do” (69). However, Son grew up to be a completely different person, knowing that there always will be people who call him “ching chong chinaman” (52) no matter how hard he tries to assimilate. As a result, Son realizes what his father didn’t: becoming a model minority will only reinforce the stereotypes and leave him vulnerable to the racist mockeries:
Son: Why do you always do the right thing?

What’s with the right thing?
You’re always upright polite tight.
You don’t know
but people down the street
they nod laugh at you

Say you’re always the little nice Asian man. (Yew 54)

Son questions the legitimacy of “do the right thing,” because “the right thing” for his father was always determined regardless of his will, rendering him defenseless against the discriminations. This realization makes Son discard the model minority myth and dream about living a life free from any outside intervention, which explains why Son chooses to become an actor whose body “becomes a symbol of political autonomy, premised on self-determination and self-creation” (Wang 267). Being an actor will help him live “A full life / A complete life / Not some half life” (Yew 70), and sever the cycle of alienation-inheritance. Like many other sons in Asian American family dramas, Son in Wonderland is also a rebellious son.

However, Son is different from other Asian American younger generation male characters in that his resistance materializes differently in the realm of sexuality. Unlike Tam in The Chickencoop for example, Son in Wonderland does not envision an overtly masculine hero to fight the portrayal of emasculated Asian men. Rather, Son as a gay man goes against homophobia and challenges the heteronormativity that provides sexual foundation for the model minority myth. When Son comes out to Man at the beginning of
Part II, Man just coldly repeats the phrase, “Leviticus twenty thirteen” (107) until Son finally breaks down and asks its meaning. Man explains:

**Man:** If a man lies with a man

    as one lies with a woman

    both of them have done

    what is detestable

    they must be put to death

    their blood

    will be on their heads.”

Leviticus twenty thirteen. (Yew 107)

Man is repelled by Son’s sexuality not because he personally despises it, or his “Asian” values are against the idea. He finds Son’s sexuality unacceptable because his Protestant ethics does not allow it. As mentioned earlier, Petersen’s 1966 article showed that the model minority stereotype was founded upon the premise that “Asian” values coincided to a significant degree with the Protestant ethic, such as diligence in work and heterosexual productivity. Hence, Man’s allusion to “Leviticus twenty thirteen” shows that his self-image as a model minority—whether he wanted it or not—is also founded upon the idea of heteronormative model family that is favored by America’s Protestant ideal. Then why Man almost disowns Son after this scene is easier to understand now. By eluding heteronormativity and still resolutely pursuing his ideal labor, Son proves to Man that everything he has struggled to accomplish so far is built on a suspiciously unstable
foundation. One doesn’t have to be an obediently diligent and rigidly heterosexual model minority worker to achieve their “life of the species,” and in fact, one doesn’t have to be a model minority at all. This is what Son shows to Man, and this is why the Wonderland falls right after the scene where Son reveals his sexuality. The collapse of Wonderland shows how Man’s attempts at overcoming the alienating labor by accepting the alienation is a “structural failure.” But at the same time, it also shows that the stability promised by the model minority myth is like a sandcastle that can be easily wiped to the ground. Through sexuality and labor, Son breaks his father’s illusion about the model minority.

However, Son is also far from suggesting an alternative to the model minority stereotype. Though he disillusions Man and refuses to inherit the legacy of self-alienation, it does not ultimately differentiate him from other more acquiescent Asian American characters because he hasn’t fully escaped from the regimes either. The capitalist/heteronormative regimes do not only create the racist ideas, but they also retaliate against the people who try to desert them. As soon as Son renounces Man’s legacy of the model minority status and the values that constitute it, he experiences extreme poverty which gives him no other option than being a gay prostitute who sells his body to white men for a hamburger or a hot shower (130). This degradation of Son shows how work and sexuality still collaboratively operate to eliminate the sustainable alternatives to the model minority; as a result of refusing to be a compliant worker with heterosexual identity, Son faces an extreme poverty in which he is forced to sell his sex. Defiance to capitalist regime results in unemployment, and disobedience to heterosexual regime results in the abasement of homosexuality. Even when Son manages to escape from the unemployment and auditions for a Hollywood film pursuing his ideal labor, his
chances are narrow and the only roles he receives are stereotypically homophobic ones in which homosexual and effeminate are synonymous. At the audition, the producer suggests him a role of Vietcong who falls in love with an American soldier after being raped by him:

**Son:** Then after having sex with him

Because I feel tremendous love for him

And yet at the same time

Conflicted

Disloyal to Ho Chi Minh and my country

I disembowel myself with a large Samurai sword

Okay (Yew 149)

Though Son’s acting was supposed to be the ideal labor free from any exterior influences, the roles he is allowed to play are limited to the gay version of Lotus Blossom characters whose homosexuality is exploited to praise white men’s masculinity. Even when he later changes his job to a screenwriter so that he can create undistorted Asian American characters himself, the only reviews he gets is that his script is “too ethnic” and it has “limited appeal” (167); the capitalist market constantly warps his sexuality, menacing him with a threat of unemployment.

Through these mortifying experiences of Son, *Wonderland* shows that finding a healthy alternative to the model minority stereotype is a challenging task even for the younger generation Asian Americans. The interplay of work and sexuality not only constituted the conditions of the stereotype, but also hindered the imagination of life outside the stereotype. A decade after *Yankee Dawg You Die*, Asian Americans’ role in
the film industry is still dominated by racial stereotypes; and two decades after *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, the publishing market is still favoring “fake” Asian American narratives. *Wonderland* shows that one can hardly attain the ideal labor as long as the domination of white America’s racial ideology does not come to an end. Son refused to inherit the compliance to the oppressive regimes, but he failed to escape from the regimes that created his father.

In Part II of *Wonderland*, the audience is told about a red Monarch butterfly that flew in the house after Man’s career collapsed. Attracted by splendid lights in the house, the butterfly looks around the house for a while and soon tries to get out, but the windows are closed already and the butterfly keeps butting its head against the window until it breaks its own head. Eventually the butterfly lies dead on the windowsill with its head pointing toward outside, missing the outside where it came from. Considering that this butterfly first appeared in Part I with Man and his wife who were settling down in a new house, the red Monarch butterfly can be a symbol of Asian immigrants who established their living in the United States. If so, the butterfly’s repetitive butting against the window and the eventual death appear to be analogous to Man and Son’s constant yet unsuccessful efforts to attain their ideal labor. *Wonderland* portrays Asian Americans who were not engaging in the works as degrading as before. However, Yew diagnoses that they are still tantalizingly away from the ideal labor that would restore their species being. Like the butterfly in a fancy house that cannot fly outside, Man and Son fail to grasp their “life of the species” even though it is in plain sight; Asian stereotypes would not let them go free.
And seven years later, Yew directed the world premiere of Julia Cho’s *Durango* (2006) with Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. *Durango* approaches the *Wonderland*’s questions from a different angle. If *Wonderland* reveals how model minority is built upon the illusion of capitalistic/heterosexual stability, *Durango* shows that the illusion is still powerful and the repression of one’s labor and sexuality is still generationally inherited. Unlike Cho’s early plays which focused on Asian American families with often destructive mother-daughter conflicts, *Durango* focuses on a father-son conflict. Cho presents only three Asian American characters in the play: Boo-Seong Lee, a reticent Korean American father who gets laid off after 20 years of service, and his two sons Isaac and Jimmy, who resent Boo-Seng for being a callous and high-handed father. This somewhat typical-looking conflict structure appears to parallel *Death of a Salesman* as many critics point out, but *Durango* is distinguished from Arthur Miller’s 1949 play in that one of the story’s main conflicts arises from the secret of homosexuality. Both Boo-Seng and his second son Jimmy hide their sexuality from each other because they believe the truth will break their family, which led many critics to concentrate on the clash between the individual identity and the communal identity portrayed in the play (Shimakawa, 2000; Woo, 2013; Chung, 2017). One concern that escapes these previous analyses is how ideas of work, particularly as influenced by the model minority myth, is inseparable from the gender and sexuality ideas of the Asian American characters. Cho makes direct connections between her characters’ sexual desire

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30 *Durango* was also presented in Los Angeles on September, 2007, by the East West Players, and in Cincinnati on September, 2008, by the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park.

and their negotiation of the model minority myth; Boo-Seng spent his whole life as a quiet and uncomplaining model minority worker, and Jimmy grew up a high-achieving student anxious to satisfy the father’s expectation. That both of these characters hide their sexuality because it doesn’t match heteronormative and reproductive norms suggests that the intersectionality of work and sex is still at the bottom of Durango.

To begin with, Boo-Seng’s status as a model minority Asian American is evident even though play is set a bit later than Wonderland. He is portrayed as a compliant white-collar worker whose greatest strength and weakness is the accuracy. After suddenly losing his job supposedly for the lack of communication skill, Boo-Seng mutters:

**Boo-Seng:** I thought…I thought my accuracy will protect me. That I do a good job, no one else can do such a good job. But accuracy is not enough.

Twenty years and then gone.

**Jimmy:** What do you mean, gone?

**Boo-Seng:** I mean gone. Like my watch. (*He bares his naked wrist.*) What I’ve done. What I am. All gone. (*Durango 384*)

Boo-Seng was a very accurate worker, but he was only as accurate as a watch, a disposable and unprotesting tool for the company. As discussed earlier, one of the notions

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32 By the 1990s, that the model minority myth was just another face of the racial prejudices regarding Asian Americans was a common knowledge proven by many psychological and sociological researches, such as Arthur Hu’s “Asian American: Model Minority or Double Minority?” (1989), Endo and Della-Piana’s “Japanese Americans, Pluralism, and the Model Minority Myth” (1981), and Ronald Takaki’s “Asian Americans: The Myth of the Model Minority” (1996). Model minority as a social ladder was an outdated notion by the time of Durango. It was viewed more as a “political mechanism of control that alters one’s sense of reality to justify the unequal social order” or an ideological tool which perpetuated than weakened the “enforced and induced compliance” (Park 136) of Asian Americans.
that contributed to the formation of the model minority stereotype was the myth of Asian economic efficiency. White America saw Asians as “mediocre and intellectually sterile race” (Lye 53) that did not have the “inventive genius” (53) of white people, and therefore, Asian Americans were typified as a perfect tool for the mechanical production process. And this stereotype is what Boo-Seng conformed to for his whole life; a worker who is accurate but not inventive, a docile man who stays quiet when laughed at by his colleagues, a complacent model minority who feels “[l]ucky to have someplace to go every day” (Durango 361). Boo-Seng complied to the American capitalist regime through his work, and it labeled him an Asian American model minority.

And this model minority status of Boo-Seng leads to another compliance in personal life, which is to the compulsory regimes of heterosexuality. According to Karen Shimakawa, Boo-Seng’s old friend in Hawaii is his “former lover” (85), and the entire play depicts what happens after Boo-Seng decides to break off their relationship after his friend calls his marriage an act of cowardice (Durango 379). Boo-Seng represses his sexuality while he tries to maintain his model minority status; sexuality and labor in Durango are inseparably intermingled as much as in Wonderland. However, Durango is different in that the repressed connections between Boo-Seng’s malaise at work and in his personal life are suggested at the very beginning of the play. In the opening, the audience sees Boo-Seng’s first son, Isaac singing a song about a motel’s neon sign girl, which appears to be an allusion to the family’s forthcoming trip. However, the song reveals itself to be a reference to Boo-Seng’s mode of being when closely examined:

**Isaac:** The girl dives into a sign that says, “Vacancy.”

*You see her dive and then you just drive on.*
... 

Doesn’t she ever, doesn’t she ever get lonely? 

And doesn’t she ever, doesn’t she ever get bored? 

Doesn’t she ever get sick of what she’s doing?  

_I think she wants to hit the road._ (Durango 335-6) 

The neon girl is sick of the repetitive every day and “wants to hit the road,” and Boo-Seng, who confesses later to have been “bored out of [his] fucking mind” (360) in his work, plans a family trip despite Isaac’s opposition. This apparent overlapping between the neon girl and Boo-Seng is a hint at Boo-Seng’s sexuality. This song hides more hints at other aspects of the play: firstly, the neon girl’s diving, which is to be a leisurely activity of pleasure, always ends in the “vacancy” sign. This parallels Boo-Seng’s life as he dedicated his life to a job which doesn’t have any meaning to him; his personal life was sacrificed for his occupation. And secondly, in that context, it is significant to note that the neon girl always disappears into the “vacancy”; Boo-Seng’s alienating labor has not only sacrificed his personal life, but also forced him to hide his sexuality over and over. The neon girl metaphorically summarizes Boo-Seng’s difficult situation; what he repeatedly experienced with his work was not self-fulfillment or the reunification of consciousness and body, but dejected self-alienation in which mundaneness of labor gradually hollowed out his private life and sexuality until he could not recognize his own face anymore. Boo-Seng says: “Sometime, in the morning. I don’t know my face. Inside, I still feel the same, same as when I was young.” (337). While getting older, Boo-Seng has had to witness the gap between his true self and the alienated working self growing
larger every day, until he could not recognize his own reflection any longer. What Boo-Seng saw in the mirror was his body alienated from his consciousness and sexuality altogether; he is the neon girl diving into the vacancy.

The connectedness between Boo-Seng and the neon girl isn’t suggested just at the beginning of the play. During their depressed family trip to Durango, Colorado, Boo-Seng and his two sons drop by a motel where Boo-Seng falls into a swimming pool by mistake. At scene nine where rescued Boo-Seng is lying on the motel bed, the light of the neon girl diving into a pool falls on Boo-Seng’s bed, again emphasizing their similarity which is impossible to miss at this point (Durango 356-7). Particularly important in this scene is that Boo-Seng has been silently staring at the pool for hours before falling into it; he was staring at his own “vacant” reflection. In fact, Boo-Seng is truly a “vacant” man who’s lost everything at this point in the play. His loss of employment terminated his model minority status, abruptly bringing an end to everything he wanted to achieve even at the expense of sacrificing his life and sexuality: attaining a solid middle-class status, maintaining a model family, being a role model for his two sons, etc. But Boo-Seng cannot go back to his original self either, as his twenty years of labor has already diminished him to a “vacant” man who cannot even recognize his own image anymore. White America has neither accepted him as a fully “human” Asian American man, nor did it allow him to be a gay man that he was. He is caught in the hollow space between what he tried to be and what he wanted to be. Boo-Seng is like a neon girl that can’t stop diving into the vacancy even after the layoff.

In that sense, Boo-Seng’s encounter with a middle-aged white man, Ned, at the motel provides an insight into his inner turmoil. Ned is a satisfied retiree who is enjoying
the post-retirement benefits and freedom unlike Boo-Seng, and his presence constantly intimidates Boo-Seng; Boo-Seng hesitatingly accepts Ned’s suggestion to drink with him even though he didn’t want to, and he gets alarmed than pleased when Ned greets him in Korean (360-61). And most importantly, Boo-Seng “jumps to his feet” (362) as if he fears sexual molestation when Ned puts his hand on Boo-Seng’s knee just to be supportive. On the one hand, Boo-Seng’s response shows an internalized homophobia, perhaps coupled with twenty years of model minority type work, that instills in him an instantaneous response; but on the other hand, his anxiety also shows that he is now cast outside of the model minority’s ‘protection’ like Son in *Wonderland*, which means that for him, homosexuality has been degraded into feeble effeminacy. If Son’s homosexuality has been debased by confusion with a homoerotic passivity that justifies white men’s sexual domination, Boo-Seng’s homosexuality is translated into almost child-like asexuality ever fearful of sexual contact, like Tam’s father in *The Chickencoop* who was “afraid of white old ladies peeking at him through the key hole” (16). In Boo-Seng’s response to Ned, his conformity to heteronormativity and the ostracization from it are simultaneously observed; the scene captures his sense of sexual disorientation that is commensurate with his loss of model minority status.

In probably the most violent scene of *Durango* (one that is hardly discussed by scholars), sexuality and model minority status also reveal their hidden connections. In scene eight, Boo-Seng’s family accidentally runs over a dog, and while the two sons panic, Boo-Seng just takes a hammer out of the trunk and smashes the dog’s head. Though the scene’s brutality is unexpected and confounding, the fact that this scene is directly followed by Boo-Seng staring at the pool with “blood on his shirt from the dog”
(359) provides a clue with which to interpret this scene. As mentioned above, Boo-Seng at the pool was seeing his alienated hollow self reflected on the water; however, that reflection was actually smeared with the dog’s blood, which means that Boo-Seng’s image overlaps not only with the neon girl but also with the dying dog. Boo-Seng’s killing of the dog can be read as a symbolic action of self-destruction. Marx states that a man alienated from the life of the species “no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal” (*Manuscripts* 111). A man that is left only with his body separated from consciousness is no better than an animal, which is exactly what Boo-Seng has experienced for the last twenty years. Also, the fact that the dog was neither dead nor alive is important; as a gay man who lived his life in forced compliance to the “American” ideal of heteronormative nuclear family, his life was a constant repetition of self-denial in which Boo-Seng never lived as he truly wanted. In a way, Boo-Seng has never been truly alive as himself. Thus, a dying dog is an excellent metaphor for Boo-Seng’s self-alienation as a worker and a gay man. His accumulated regrets and self-hatred explode when he sees himself in the dying dog, and his killing the dog is expressive of his self-destructive confusion and desire.

If so, does Boo-Seng in the end overcome the self-alienation and jettison the model minority status? Does he, as a father, sever the cycle of alienating labor inheritance and finds an alternative he can pass on to his sons? Unfortunately, Boo-Seng ends up not going beyond the model minority though he understands that it ruined his life. He has been repeating these devotions to alienating labor for so long that he cannot imagine a different possibility and a different future for his children now; he just keeps reminiscing about the past, and forces his two sons to take certain career path regardless of their will.
At first, it seems out of his love for the children that he accepted his role as a model minority. When his friend asks why he chose his life in America, Boo-Seng answers: “You want to choose what you want to be, but that is not for our generation. You and me—we are just laying foundation. That’s all. Just laying foundation” (*Durango* 379). Boo-Seng thus justifies his work, even while knowing that it would carry him farther and farther away from his ideal self, because he wanted to create a foundation, a “model family” upon which his children could build a better future. However, his self-sacrificial act eventually turns into a problem when the twenty years of repeated alienating labor makes Boo-Seng forget his pre-model minority consciousness. When others ask him what he wants now after the layoff, he fails to remember what he originally planned and just says: “I don’t know. Not anymore. Too late. All of it. Too late” (*Durango* 362). The only thing Boo-Seng remembers is his compliance as a model-minority, and thus he tries to pass on to his sons the only thing he remembers. Though both Isaac and Jimmy hope to take an artistic career, Boo-Seng ignores their dream and forces them to take a stable career that will guarantee at least middle-class status. When Isaac protests how come he never asks what they really want, Boo-Seng shouts “I don’t have to ask” (380), because he believes that he already knows what’s best for them. Just like Pa in *The Year* who yells “You never be famous. Wasting time! Stay Chinatown” (*The Year* 109), Though three decades have passed since the days of Frank Chin, Boo-Seng repeats the paternal typecasting of fathers in both *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, by forcing his sons to inherit his compliance to the capitalist regime. Having been hollowed out for twenty years, he fails to see the alternative.
Accordingly, this forced inheritance of model minority type work creates serious father-son conflict, and the conflict is especially severe with Isaac. The more rebellious son between the two, Isaac drives the conflict to the extreme where he also reveals self-destructive desire. Isaac screams: “I’m useless, I’m an idiot. I’m hopelessly spoiled. You’re absolutely right. I should’ve never been born—you and Mom should’ve ABORTED ME WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE” (Durango 349). Isaac would rather die than inherit Boo-Seng’s model minority status; thus, when Boo-Seng arranges a medical school interview for Isaac where he only has to show up, Isaac chooses instead to watch pornography in a dark hotel room all night, refusing to take a pre-arranged path to the model minority type worker. Though he hesitantly agrees to attend another medical school interview at the end of the play, it still doesn’t mean that Isaac succumbed to the father’s will because he is still holding a guitar and singing a song at the closing of the play. Isaac’s resistance against the inheritance of self-alienation continues, making it hard to find the resemblance between him and Boo-Seng.

In contrast, Jimmy doesn’t rebel as much as Isaac, and his resemblance to Boo-Seng is unmistakably visible. “The golden boy” (372) of the house and Boo-Seng’s favorite son, Jimmy does his best to live up to the fathers’ expectation throughout the play; not only is he a complaisant son who always follows Boo-Seng’s decisions whether it is an abruptly arranged family trip or a long-term career plan for his future, but he is also a model student who is expected to “get a full ride anywhere [he] wants to go” (372). Unlike Isaac, Jimmy has definitely inherited Boo-Seng’s compliance to the capitalist regime which forces them a model minority type labor. But what is even more important is that he seems to have inherited Boo-Seng’s sexuality as well, though in a bit different
way. In scene twelve, while practicing swimming as Boo-Seng wanted, Jimmy realizes his sexual identity as a gay man after seeing a senior swimmer who happens to be a “perfect” white man. Identifying the white man with a superhero he created in his mind, the Red Angel, Jimmy feels fascinated and terrified by his presence:

*(The Red Angel appears. We see him as Jimmy must have seen him: golden in the light, sculpted, like a David come to life.)*

**Isaac:** Different how?

*(Jimmy can hardly breathe.)*

**Jimmy:** Different…perfect. He’s perfect.

*(…) I turned and ran.

**Isaac:** Why? Did he do something?

**Jimmy:** No. But he called me a, a—

**Red Angel:** Hey—you

**Jimmy:** —little faggot. **Red Angel:** —little faggot. *(Durango 375-6)*

The Red Angel in Jimmy’s imagination is an invulnerable being who is “like Superman except without kryptonite” (353). Therefore, the fact that the Red Angel is identified with the homophobic yet “perfect” white man, and that Jimmy feels sexually attracted to him, means that what Jimmy lacked and thus sought in a “perfect” being was the Phallic power of whiteness. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the “Phallus” is “the crucial signifier
in the distribution of power, authority and a speaking position, a kind of mark or badge of a social position” (125); and in the American context, this “Phallus” is coupled with the power of whiteness, which has been historically protected by law that “converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property” (Harris 1725). In other words, Jimmy’s homoerotic desire toward the white man/Red Angel can be read as a manifestation of his aspiration to acquire “the full citizenship rights” (Park 135) that has been denied to a second-class citizen. Jimmy’s homosexuality paradoxically proves that he has inherited from his father a yearning to be the model minority.

However, being a model minority demands that one comply both with heteronormative ideals and the Protestant work ethic. Therefore, Jimmy ends up succeeding his father once again; he hides his sexuality as his father did. In scene seventeen where all secrets are exposed, Jimmy still chooses to keep his secret unlike Isaac, and on their way back home in scene eighteen, he even throws away all his Red Angel sketches out the window to make sure the secrets stay hidden (Durango 386-9). However, right before he gets rid of all the sketches, he pictures the Red Angel one last time:

**Red Angel**: If I close my eyes, I can see it: the burning house.

**Jimmy**: One second the window seemed high above him and then suddenly

**Red Angel**: I’m gripping the frame, twenty feet off the ground.

**Jimmy**: He looked in the room and saw his parents, huddled in a corner. He picked up his father with one hand and with his other, he grasped his mother around her waist.
**Red Angel**: They were as light as children. When did they become so light?

**Jimmy**: As the house crumbled around them, he stepped onto the windowsill.

**Red Angel**: I put one foot out into the darkness

**Jimmy**: and jumped. *(Durango 387)*

Jimmy here identifies himself with the Red Angel, and the first and the last thing he does as the superhero is to save his family from a burning house, after which he loses his wings and disappears into the darkness as “just a guy with some scars on his back” *(388)*. This last moment of the Red Angel implies that Jimmy will live on with his sexuality buried in the past. He will live on pretending to be an ordinary, heterosexual model minority like a superhero without wings, and the reason he gives up on the wings is because family is more important to him. Like Boo-Seng who suppressed his “burning desire to see” *(382)* his former same-sex lover in order to be the “laying foundation” *(379)* for the children, Jimmy in this scene is bracing himself for the future where he will have to hide his sexuality for the family. Unlike Isaac who refused to re-enact Boo-Seng’s failure, Jimmy inherits from Boo-Seng both of the compliances: he will live as a model minority type worker, and he will reproduce a heteronormative family structure.

*Durango* portrays Asian Americans’ self-alienation at the turn of the century. Though these father characters in the past accepted the model minority status as a self-sacrificial act, decades later, they find themselves disoriented in self-alienation. Decades of compliance with the capitalist regime and the heterosexual regime result in the characters’ internalization of the model minority values, which means that the inheritance of self-alienation is still a reality for their younger generation sons of the early 2000s.
Julia Cho captures a situational reality in *Durango*; Boo-Seng passes down a doubled form of compliance as the only conceivable future to his sons, and at least Jimmy accepts this legacy and follows his father’s footstep. Though the play primarily portrays what happens during the family’s road trip, which is supposed to be a get away from the alienations that plague their life, they eventually return to their somber house. *Durango* is a dark portrait of Asian Americans in the early 2000s, in which the interconnectedness between Asian American male sexuality and their alienating labor is explored via the generational inheritance of model minority status.
Chapter 4. The Deconstruction of Alienating Labor: Julia Cho’s Aubergine

Whether domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for others are forms of alienating labor or not has been a disputed topic among feminist scholars. Linda Gordon argues that housework is “inherently less alienated and more creative than most other work” because “it offers a mother at least a semblance of control over her working conditions and goals” (125); domestic work might be accompanied by a sort of oppression, but it does not mean that domestic workers are necessarily alienated. In contrast, Ann Oakley writes: “The appropriate symbol for housework…is not the interminable conveyor belt but a compulsive circle like a pet mouse in its cage spinning round on its exercise wheel, unable to get off” (80). She contends that domestic work is always an alienating labor, because of its meaninglessly repetitive nature which prevents it from being a part of a larger and more significant task.

Even when examined via Marxist categories of capitalistic alienation, domestic work, whether as unpaid in one’s own home or paid employment in others, remains an ambivalent category of labor. In Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx presented four different types of alienation: 1) alienation from the product of labor; 2) alienation from the act of production; 3) alienation from Man’s species being; 4) alienation of man from man. The first and fourth categories support the argument that domestic work is not inherently alienating. An “alienation from the product of labor” occurs when the workers do not own or control the product which is “the objectification, the manifestation, the expression, of the worker’s powers, capacities, and ideas” (Kain 125). However, in case of domestic labor, the workers “would normally be in control of the product or result of their work” (126). Unlike products on a market, the material
results created by domestic work such as cleaning and cooking do not necessarily take on an autonomous life on their own and become fetishized. Therefore, domestic work is not always viewed as an alienating labor. Furthermore, the “alienation of man from man” means that workers must see other workers solely through a capitalistic lens, which destroys the grounds for their solidarity as human beings. However, the feminist movements of the 1960s proved that domestic workers were not necessarily alienated from one another. With Betty Friedan’s seminal book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the discontent of women surfaced and soon was foregrounded in the Civil Rights Movement. Though the solidarity achieved by the movement was imperfect,\(^{33}\) it still showed that female domestic workers were not completely alienated from other domestic workers.

In contrast, the second and third categories support the other side of the argument. “Alienation from the act of production” means that domestic workers often do not have control over their own activity in the process of producing the goods. In such situation, labor does not satisfy the need or serve the aims of the workers themselves; that is, labor becomes a coerced activity similar to Oakley’s idea of housework as “a compulsive circle like a pet mouse in its cage” (80). And in extension, “alienation from man’s species being” also defines domestic work as an alienating labor. Not only for hired workers such as nannies or domestics, but also for many wives and mothers, the duties of caring for

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\(^{33}\) The second wave feminism in the 1960s did not result in the ultimate female solidarity across class differences. As Eileen Boris and Annelise Orleck point out, even during the Civil Rights Movement, “working-class feminists struggled against middle-class feminists who focused primarily on achieving equality with male professionals and executives.” Though Friedan brought the issue of female houseworkers’ discontent to the public attention, it was limited in that she focused only on certain white college-educated housewives “who also [had] the leisure time to organize” (Muñoz).
others is forced upon them regardless of their will and consciousness, and they come to spend their time and know themselves as individual domestic workers whether they wanted to or not. Thus, they are estranged from their ideal self-image or “life of the species”; housework becomes “a worm eating away at one’s ideas,” and “a mindless task” (80).

Depending purely on which Marxist category of alienation is more emphasized than the others, domestic labor can be seen as either an alienating work or a non-alienating work. However, this ambivalent rating of domestic labor is lost when capitalistic value-estimation is involved. Irrespective of how an individual worker views his/her work, capitalism has deemed domestic work as a low value, “unproductive” labor, and thus doing it has had a negative influence on the worker’s self-esteem. In Theories of Surplus Value, Marx defines that productive labor is “wage labour which, exchanged against the variable part of capital, not only reproduces this part of the capital (or value of its own labour power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist” (148). In other words, productive labor is the type of work which produces goods that the capitalist can exchange for a value above the wage he/she must pay the worker. Unproductive labor is defined in contrast as the type of labor “which is not exchanged against capital, but directly against revenue, that is, against wage or profits” (153). Hence, by this standard, domestic work becomes unproductive labor, which does not create any surplus value exchangeable for capital in a market. Accordingly, domestic labor in a capitalist society has been constantly underappreciated; if patriarchy labeled it a feminine work, capitalism branded it as an unproductive work not deserving respect, reducing it to one of the most
“undervalued, underpaid, unprotected and poorly regulated” (ILO 1) occupations in the history.

This negative perception of domestic labor is important when considering the devaluation of Asian American male labor, because it offers a sociological context as well as a historical one. In the nineteenth century, most of the first Asian immigrants were young Chinese male workers who formed bachelor societies, and as Rosalind Chou points out, “since there were no women in these arrangements to do domestic, reproductive labor, these men learned to cook and do dishes and laundry” (16). In other words, Asian American men from their first entrance into the American labor market had to participate in domestic labor. The fact that some Chinese male workers took such “feminine” and “unproductive” occupations among themselves “bolstered the myth of the effeminate or androgynous Asian man” (Espiritu, Asian American 127). In addition, such labor-oriented racial prejudice continued to be reinforced by socioeconomic circumstances into the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. As Joan Wang points out, the economic development of the American West during the 1860s and 1870s created an intense competition in the labor market, which led to a rapid rise of anti-Chinese sentiments. As a result, Chinese immigrants were soon hindered from a variety of trades and prohibited from owning farms or land, and they were “compelled to confine themselves to ‘feminized’ jobs such as cooks, laundrymen, and domestic servants” (60). Since domestic works were considered unproductive and feminine, they were avoided by white males who sought more lucrative and less menial job, and taken by Chinese workers who tried to avoid competition against xenophobic and violent white men. Moreover, this form of employment subjected these men to charges of sexual deviance
and threatening white women in the home, as well as helped to foster the stereotypical image of the emasculated and effeminate Charlie-Chan-type man, which still remains as one of the most common racial stereotypes about Asian American men. Hence, the domestic labor of Asian American men came to have a meaning different from that performed by Black and white females. For Black women, domestic service furthered the precedent of racial subservience set by slavery. For white women, the performance of domestic tasks, though oppressive and underappreciated, was more ambiguous and not necessarily alienating labor. But for Asian American men, it was an oppressive, undervalued, and also a “feminized” labor, through which they were forced to experience a racialized and gendered alienation from themselves.

One form of domestic work—the preparation of food—elicits particular questions about the nature of labor, class, and racial alienation for Asian American men. Of all the commercialized domestic works, cooking was the most popular occupational choice for Asian American males. According to the 1920 census, of the 45,614 Chinese employed in the U.S., 11,438 (25%) were Chinese restaurant employees (qtd. in C Lee 57), and in the 1930s, 20 to 25 percent of Chinese American adults in East Coast cities worked in the restaurant business (qtd. in Liu 2), meaning that cooking was one of the most common occupations for Chinese American males in the pre-World War II period. However, Chinese cuisine was not favored by white America until the early twentieth century, because as Haiming Liu points out, “a century-old racist image of Chinese eating rats made many white Americans suspicious of the Chinese diet” (Canton 2). In other words, cooking done by Asian Americans was still one of the less productive industries even after the commercialization of Chinese restaurants. Though Chinese cuisine’s popularity
rose slowly after the invention of the Americanized “Chop Suey” in 1896, the Chinese food still “symbolized cheap exoticism in the eyes of many American customers,” and it success was as “mostly as a bargain ethnic food” (“Chop Suey” 3). America’s racialized environment did not allow Chinese food to be considered a high-class cuisine; rather, it forced Chinese cuisine to rely on the racial stereotypes for a success. According to Tasha Oren, cooking for Asian America has been “a source of persistent stereotypes” (247), because not only “Asian American stereotypes of foreign-ness are so thoroughly intermingled with food” (248), but also because the restaurants for Asians have been “the main (or only) arena of contact between (mainly) white majorities and Asian Americans” where Asian culinary workers had to partake in “the deliberate performance of difference and foreign-ness” (248). Just as the character of Fred in Frank Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon* introduces Chinatown restaurants to white tourists through putting on an exaggerated accent, the Asian American cooks and waiters served Asian food and culture tailored to the white capitalist palates in ways that fostered a sense of racialized and gendered alienation. As Fred relates, white America has always approached Asian restaurants and Asian food as forms of “food pornography” that fulfills their Orientalist fantasies. This continued even as different forms of Asian food became immensely popular in the global consciousness of the 1990s and after, with a number of Asian American culinary workers achieving financial success as entrepreneurs and even celebrity chefs.

In this context, Julia Cho’s *Aubergine* (2016) provides an interesting example. *Aubergine* was premiered in February 2016 by Liesl Tommy at Berkeley Repertory Theater in Berkeley, California, and then has been presented by various theater
companies throughout the U.S.: Playwrights Horizons in 2016 at New York, Everyman Theatre in 2018 at Baltimore, South Cost Repertory in 2019 at Costa Mesa, Park Square Theatre in 2019 at St. Paul, Minnesota. Aubergine not only presents Asian American characters who navigate the race-based dichotomy in labor of cooking, but also explores the interconnectedness between labor, race, and familial conflict in the twenty-first century Asian American context. Its protagonist, Ray, is a second-generation Korean American chef who is trained in classic French cooking. His choice to be educated as a French chef, and his ambivalent attitude towards the food associated with his Korean heritage, illustrates the disparate racial meanings ascribed to cooking. With the rise of capitalism, cooking transitioned into a food service industry from a part of domestic labor. And the work’s characteristic “unproductiveness” and “femininity” changed according to the laborer’s nationality or race. Ray embraces a distinctively European American identity as a chef, in which his professional world is marked by his hyper-masculine, imperialistic, and arrogant personae, rather than the humble and cheap “ethnic” food associated with Asian Americans. The play demonstrates how the perception of cooking, which becomes a menial and “feminine” labor when associated with Asian culture, turns into a “masculine” occupation when associated with European and particularly French haute cuisine. Quoting a French chef’s interview in a 1903 magazine, The Epicure, Amy Trubek analyzed that French chefs in general are characterized by arrogance, and that they have “the authoritative and dismissive tone of an imperial ruler” (137). The interviewed chef asserts: “it [is] absurd to talk about ‘French’ cookery. All cookery was French. So-called German, English cookery was not cookery at all. There only existed one ‘cuisine’—la cuisine—invented by France” (136);
the chef goes on: “rest assured that as long as the human species continue to live to dine, and not to feed like animals, la cuisine Française, will reign supreme” (136). Right after the quote, Trubek points out that such arrogance of the French chef is “highly reminiscent of late nineteenth century colonial characterizations of the natives as savage who do not possess their own culture and civilization” (138); behind the high-end status of French cuisine, there is an imperialistic aspect of Eurocentrism. French cuisine escalated itself to the position of an haute cuisine during the eighteenth and nineteenth century when imperialism and nationalism were at their peak. And by claiming that only French people can provide such refined dining, the figure of the chef demonstrates how cooking and race could be conflated in ways that are completely different from the production of Chinese cuisine. To borrow Trubek’s expression, “the ability to master French cuisine, which in another time or place could have been analyzed in terms of having the right noble patron, or sufficient technical proficiency, during this time of high nationalism was understood to require particular national origin” (139-40). If you’re a French, you can be a French chef. But if you’re a Chinese, you can only be a Chinese cook.

Cho’s Durango is not just interested in setting up these observations of professional culinary identity, but rather in exploring further the themes of Asian American father-son conflict characteristic of her earlier play Durango. Here these issues revolve around the possibilities of culinary labor. If labor can escape from the tensions between alienation and privilege, so can father-son relationship find a different and more positive dynamic. Similarly to her previous play, Durango, Aubergine again portrays conflicted Asian American father-son relationships. A first-generation immigrant in his 60s, Ray’s father—Jung-Sok Park—has a very obstinate perspective on cooking; he
believes that “it’s women’s work, it’s low class, it’s uneducated” (Aubergine 34), which ironically drives Ray to become a French chef. Recalling a memory when his father showed strong aversion to a French restaurant their family once visited, Ray says that it was the moment he decided to become a French chef: “…fine. You hate this place? Watch me fucking live my life there” (50). As she does in Durango, Cho is again portraying a disapproving father and a rebellious son; Ray is trying to live an independent life separated from the father. However, in Aubergine, both the older Jung-Sok, who is near death in the play, and his son Ray, are also quite different from the conflicted and repressed characters of Durango. The father-son conflict in Aubergine is not driven to the extreme where the son’s animosity toward the father comes near the verge of self-destructive desire. One of the largest differences between Aubergine and other Asian American plays depicting father-son conflict is that the conflict in Aubergine is not initiated by the father who forces alienating, “model minority” labor upon the son.\(^{34}\) Ray’s father is not interested in making Ray his successor; in fact, the play offers neither any information regarding Jung-Sok’s job, nor any pre-story in which he might have opinionated regarding Ray’s career choice. Rather, the differences between father and son arise out of basic tensions regarding familial nurture and, most importantly, food. Jung-Sok is recalled as simply a man who neither liked nor understood food. His

\(^{34}\) For instance, Frank Chin’s plays suggest the fathers as the ones that start the conflict out of their will to pass down the alienating labor. In The Chickencoop, Tam was supposed to be an emasculated dishwasher working for white people just like his father, and in The Year, Fred’s father was set on passing down to his son the stereotypical job of Chinatown tour guide for white tourists. Both were the type of jobs that not only have been racialized and gendered according to white America’s sociopolitical purposes, but also have necessarily entailed self-distortion and self-reduction of the workers for the benefit of the white America. In other words, what’s at the heart of the father-son conflict in Chin’s plays is the coerced inheritance of the jobs that accompany the racialized & gendered self-alienation peculiar to Asian Americans; the conflict always starts with the fathers.
preference for instant ramens to Ray’s eighteen-course meals (*Aubergine* 53) made Ray upset and disappointed but not infuriated. Their relationship is not ruined by the father who tries to pass down an alienating labor. In fact, the play focuses not on the conflict, but on the reconciliatory gestures from Ray’s end. Ray comes running toward his father’s side on learning that he is on the deathbed, and brings the unconscious father home for the hospice care which he can personally attend. In scene eighteen, Ray constantly recalls and enumerates the bad memories with his father, and complains how his father “never had a use for (food)” (50). Nevertheless, at the end of the scene, Ray admits after a long, painful silence: “I don’t want him to go” (51). The dominant emotion of the play is not rebelliousness and animosity, but filial love and reconciliation. Ray does not try to defy his father; rather, he tries to reconnect with his father.

In the play, this reconciliatory attitude of Ray is most clearly suggested by the transformation of his labor, as the act of cooking takes on different meanings through the course of the play. Though Ray rebelled against his father by being a chef, his reconciliation with his father is also enabled by his work as a chef. To be more precise, Ray reconnects with his father by being something other than a chef. The role of the chef is different from the those who toil on the lower rungs of restaurant service labor. If not elevated to a member of the “professional-managerial class” who no longer actually prepares food but supervises those who do, the chef who actually makes food is seen as a more artisanal and privileged culinary worker who not only “lives off his own labor but also off the labor of other workers” as “one portion of the petty bourgeoisie” (Hanagan 28). However, in the various scenes of *Aubergine*, Ray moves from a workaholic restaurant owner to a son who prepares food for his dying father, using all his skills to
prepare a meal that would “make him stay” (*Aubergine* 38). Ray now cooks all by himself, without any exterior help or utilization of his authority as a master of the kitchen. In other words, Ray seeks to be reconnected with Jung-Sok not as a professional commercial chef, but just as a son who is willing and able to cook a nutritious dish for the dying father. The shell of “productiveness” is peeled off from Ray’s identity as a culinary worker, which returns him to the pure labor of cooking. Confronted with a familial crisis, Ray is allowed to return to more basic functions of cooking before commercialization and the distortions of capital.

However, Ray’s dramatic journey in getting to this state of reconciliation is still conditioned by racialized and gendered assumptions about the labor of cooking. This explains why he was at first repulsed by what he had to make even though he agreed to cook for his father on a very personal level. Ray’s uncle from South Korea asks him to make a traditional Korean dish, “Ja-Ra-Tang,” a turtle soup. The uncle repeatedly emphasizes the soup’s healing qualities, but Ray adamantly refuses, protesting: “I’m not feeding that to my dad” (32). Ray’s aversion could be due to his skepticism towards the food’s medicinal effect, but his dialogue with Cornelia, his girlfriend, reveals that it could be also attributed to his discriminatory attitude towards Asian food. Ray expresses his suspicion for the food and the uncle at the same time:

**Ray**: Does he even know what hospice is? Does he even understand the concept?

**Cornelia**: He’s just having a hard time letting go.

**Ray**: And I’m not?

(...)


Cornelia: Like you haven’t made turtle soup at some point in your culinary career? Don’t they make it in France?

Ray: Does this look like France? (Aubergine 32-3)

Ray has made turtle soup before as a French dish without any problems. However, when it is a turtle soup as a Korean dish suggested by his Asian uncle who might not even understand the concept of hospice, suddenly it becomes a suspicious food he would not cook for his dying father. Here, Ray is revealing the sense of cultural superiority he internalized as a French chef, which in a strange way affirms the ties between himself and his father. A first-generation immigrant who’s internalized a racialized view on work, Jung-Sok depreciated cooking as “women’s work” (34). In a similar fashion, though Ray chose to work in the culinary business out of his defiance against the father, he still decided to become a French “chef” instead of an Asian “cook.” Ray did not inherit a specific type of labor from his father, but Jung-Sok’s dichotomous view on work was inherited for sure. Hence, Ray treats an Asian dish—even if it shares the main ingredient with the French version—as if it was a lowly food unworthy of making. Despite their differences, Ray and Jung-Sok share one view in common: they both accept that there is a national/sexual hierarchy in terms of food/cooking.

Ray escapes from this hierarchical understanding of cooking when his uncle tells him how his grandmother’s unpretentious food once made his father cry. One day the 1970s, Jung-Sok was about to emigrate to the U.S., and his mother cooked him a simple Korean dish on the night before the departure hoping that the dish would make her son stay. The dish was a bowl of “mugook” (radish soup) which was prepared with no special ingredients or splendid techniques; all she did was to boil the ox bones for days, and to
strain the soup until it glowed. And Jung-Sok who was well-known for having a small appetite, finished the whole big bowl and sobbed in front of everyone to the family’s surprise. He cried because he understood why his mother made the dish, and how laboriously she must had worked to make it (35-7). This story helps Ray realize the truth that what determines the value of a dish is not a cultural background of the dish or the person who makes it. Food is directly connected to the life itself; hence, no matter how splendid and luxurious it is, it is all meaningless if it does not make “any declarations of love” (40) to the person who eats it. In a sense, luxurious French cuisine is as alienated from the true form of cooking as Asian cuisine which is considered “a bargain ethnic food” (Liu, “Chop Suey” 3). Ray realizes that this was why Jung-Sok has never expressed satisfaction with what Ray made for him while he sobbed at the grandmother’s simple “mugook.” Remembering when he prepared an eighteen-course tasting-menu meal for the father, Ray recalls: “I was going to astonish, no, shock and awe. That’s what I was going for. And I was so proud of myself. So stupidly proud of myself” (53). The hunger that food has to satisfy is not just physical but also mental; therefore, whether certain food/cooking is alienating or privileging, inferior or superior, menial or high-end is no more than a meaningless and arbitrary distinctions which lose their meaning in front of a truly comforting dish. Lisa Lowe has argued that “in accepting the binary terms (‘white’ and ‘nonwhite,’ or ‘majority’ and ‘minority’)…we forget that these binary schemes are not natural descriptions” (“Heterogeneity” 31). The uncle’s story about the grandmother makes Ray see that he has been seeing the world in a needlessly dichotomous perspectives: productive labor and unproductive labor; alienating food and privileging food; feminine, Asian cooking and masculine, European cooking.
Therefore, Ray prepares the turtle soup with all his heart after the “mugook” story, through which he restores the labor of cooking in the original status. The grandmother once cooked for her son to whom she gave life to, and now Ray cooks for his father from whom he received life. And though Jung-Sok did not have a chance to taste Ray’s turtle soup after all, he asks Ray whether he ate—“Bap mo-goh-soh?” (Aubergine 12)—when he comes back to consciousness. And after Jung-Sok breathes his last, in death, he finally sees Ray in the eye in a long time and tastes Ray’s dish. They get eventually reconnected by food:

_A table with two place settings appears._

_A as Ray talks, his father appears and sits._

**Ray:** Somewhere—I won’t call it heaven, I don’t know if it’s heaven—a young man sits down for a meal. He sits at a small table with one chair. Opposite him is a mirror and in that mirror, he sees another man sitting. And this other man’s eyes are clear and calm.

_Ray sits opposite his father._

For Death is a meal.
Death is a mirror.
Death is yourself.

The two men take a good look.

And then they bow their heads and eat. (Aubergine 65)
In this last scene right before the epilogue, Ray and Jung-Sok have a meal together and realize that they look alike like mirror images. Though they spent a long time disconnected from each other, they are after all a family that sits at the same dining table; their severed family tie is restored through Ray’s cooking. Though Marx used the term, “life-engendering life” (Manuscripts 112) to refer to a self-realizing labor by which one’s mind and body are reunited, Aubergine is showing how cooking can really become a life-engendering work when it overcomes all the hierarchical binaries and regains its true nature; Cho is turning the father-son conflict caused by labor, into the father-son reconciliation enabled by labor.

This reconciliatory power of labor affects the interracial tensions as well as the intergenerational conflicts. When reproductive labor is restored to its original status of nurturing and caregiving labor, race stops being a meaningful marker for the racialized alienation. In this sense, the presence of Lucien, a Black character in the play, is very meaningful. A former refugee and a hospice worker who helps Ray take care of his father, Lucien becomes a good friend of Ray later in the play. Though their relationship is primarily mediated by Jung-Sok they have to nurse together, what also connects them together is Lucien’s work which falls into the category of reproductive labor as much as Ray’s work does. Lucien is basically a caregiver, which has been traditionally considered to be a “feminine” and “unproductive” work that belonged the realm of domestic labor similarly to cooking. However, Lucien is different from Ray because his work made him see that death comes to everyone regardless of race, gender, or status. He likens people’s lives to a frequency: “As humans, we spend the vast majority of our time feeling alone, apart, other. Vibrating at different frequencies. But when you are in the presence of death,
somehow all the frequencies become one” (58). If everyone is equal in death, so are they in life, and in their work. Lucien realized the meaninglessness of arbitrary binaries in work long ago; therefore, he congratulates Ray when he finally goes beyond the distinctions and resolves to make the turtle soup. Lucien says: “It is good you are cooking you know…Not for him. For you” (43). As someone whose work is also rooted in the “domestic work” in a traditional sense, Lucien understands Ray’s experiences.

It is in this context that the dialogue between Ray and Lucien about the “aubergines” becomes important. Lucien says that “aubergine” and “eggplant” are the same, yet also very different, because “aubergine” becomes “eggplant” when transplanted in the American soil:

Lucien: Oh no—yes, but not like this. This is an American eggplant. So big! So firm! You do not see anything like this where I am from. There, it is like this:

*He cups his hand.*

And so many colors! Green, red, white—that is how they all used to be. Before they lost their wildness…

*He indicates the eggplant in Ray’s hand.*

These are better. They are hardy. They are strong. They are large.

*(Aubergine 24)*

Though “aubergines” used to be all different in color and shape, they become the same “eggplants” once they are planted in America. And these eggplants are hardier, stronger,
and larger. Also, considering that Lucien and Ray at this point in the play are close to each other, Lucien’s words on the eggplants could be read as an allusion to the possibility of cross-racial solidarity between different racial minorities in America. The racial difference can be overcome if people can deconstruct the racialized alienation and hierarchical labor binaries, and form the camaraderie as fellow workers.

Or, this dialogue could be connected to Cho’s idea of diversity and self-autonomy if one focuses more on the fact that Lucien seems to appreciate aubergine’s beauty more than eggplants’ hardiness. Right after the quoted scene, Lucien insists that Ray calls the plant “aubergine” because “[t]hat starts to approach the beauty of the thing itself” (Aubergine 24), and “[t]hen they taste better” (24). Cross-racial solidarity is powerful and reliable, but acknowledging and maintaining the diversity is in itself a beautiful and de-alienating act. Hence, after restoring his labor of cooking to the pre-binary status later in the play, Ray cooks the multi-colored “aubergines” instead of “eggplants,” and hands the dish to Lucien who wasn’t expecting it. Ray says: “I just had a sense…that this is the way they wanted to be cooked” (57). Ray accepts the aubergines as a symbol of diversity and self-acceptance, and it is why he cooks the aubergines as the first dish he makes as a self-employed omakase chef. Unlike in the past when he worked as an employed chef at French restaurants, Ray does not either sell “oriental food tailored to the white fantasies, or try to enjoy the authority as a master chef who specializes in the European haute

35 “おまかせ” in Japanese, this phrase translates ‘leaving a decision to someone else.’ A commonly used phrase in Japanese restaurants, it means that you are leaving the choice of a meal to the chef. When you order an omakase, the chef has a full control over how the meal is comprised, cooked, and served.
cuisine. Instead, Ray cooks and serves whatever cuisine he is confident of as an autonomous chef who is free from such binaries. Therefore, “aubergine” makes a great title for the play; in addition to being an allusion to the father with whom Ray reconnects, it also becomes a symbol of occupational self-autonomy as well as racial diversity.

In the prologue of Aubergine, the audience hears a long monologue by a white female character who does not appear again until the epilogue. The character’s name is Dianne, and she talks about how she wants “a restaurant that could give [her] Los Angeles, 1982” (Aubergine 7). Though she was rich and had tried all kinds of “gastronomic gallivanting” (6) her wealth allowed, her hunger was never satiated, until one day in Los Angeles, 1982, her father cooked for her a simple pastrami sandwich in the middle of night. The sandwich was “like a letter. Addressed only to [her]” (8), and it was “the best thing [she] has ever eaten in [her] entire life” (8) despite its simplicity. Her father died three years later, and she ends the monologue by saying that she will never taste anything so good again. This prologue encapsulates the message of the entire play: cooking is not an effeminate, unproductive, and alienating labor, but a work which nurtures life and feeds the family. Ray realizes this truth of cooking by hearing about his grandmother, and restores the true meaning of his work by making a turtle soup for his father and aubergines for Lucien. There is no place for racial distinctions or gendered binaries in this de-alienated labor. Thus, in the epilogue, a rich white female, Dianne visits the restaurant of Ray, a middle-class Asian American male. And Ray serves Dianne a pastrami sandwich, as he perfectly understands what her soul craves for despite the differences in class, race, and gender. Through Ray’s growth as a cook, son, and a human
being, Julia Cho shows how Asian Americans’ work can escape from the alienation and the forced binaries.

In *Aubergine*, the audience witnesses how the issue of alienating labor and Asian American father-son conflict has evolved over a half century since the 1970s. *Yankee Dawg You Die* and Frank Chin’s two plays depicted the inheritance of alienating labor smeared with racial stereotypes, which caused fierce resistance of the younger generation. *Wonderland* and *Durango* portrayed the turn of the century when the grip of the model minority stereotype became stronger, and they focused on how capitalist regime and heteronormative regime intersected in Asian American’s self-alienation. And in *Aubergine*, the very discursive foundation upon which the binary of alienating labor and privileging labor is explored and challenged; the hierarchical discourses of race, gender, and capital are exposed of their hollowness, and overcome by the younger generation Americans. To claim that certain types of work still need to be avoided as they are associated with racial stereotypes created by white America, is not only untrue but also risky in the age of *Aubergine*. Such belief will only perpetuate the arbitrary connection between work and stereotypes, inadvertently reinforcing the status quo where Asian American workers are still alienated from themselves. The meaning of a job changes over time, but it is also changed by the workers who engage in it. Ray’s perspective on his work shows that there’s no absolute, non-personal standard which defines what labor is self-realizing and what is not. Fifty years from Frank Chin, Julia Cho’s *Aubergine* shows a new Asian American in which the dichotomy that dominated Chin’s perspective is dismantled. Tam in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* hoped for the arrival of Iron Moonhunter’s world where every Asian American could achieve “the life
of the species.” So, did that world arrive as Tam wished for? It did, but not in the way Tam anticipated.
**Epilogue: Looking Back from the Present**

This epilogue extends the arguments of the dissertation to look at three final examples of how labor, self-alienation, and family are all interwoven into the stories of Asian Americans. The first, Aasif Mandvi’s 1998 play *Sakina’s Restaurant*, shows the pan-ethnic range of these concerns. Even though Indian immigrants were among the first to migrate to North America, South Asians have only recently been seen as an integral part of “Asian America.” *Sakina’s Restaurant* suggests how restaurants continue to be a place of entrepreneurship and employment for Asian immigrants and their families, but like Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon*, the work of catering to primarily white customers involves unrewarding labor and broken dreams. A 2015 play by Lloyd Suh, *Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* suggests the continued impact not only of stereotypes, but also of Frank Chin and an earlier generation of Asian American writers on new drama. And finally, the award-winning 2020 film *Minari*, directed by Isaac Chung, shows how some of these issues of work and alienation might also help us understand the larger appeal of recent Asian American films.

As this dissertation has illuminated thus far, the issues of race, labor, self-alienation, gender role, and family dynamics are all intertwined for Asian American men. And though South Asians have hardly been viewed as a part of “Asian America” until recently, they are not exceptions from the apprehension that they would be worthless unless they prove their “usefulness” by actively engaging in a productive labor like other Asian Americans. Aasif Mandvi’s play, *Sakina’s Restaurant* provides a fine example by portraying a new Indian immigrant man working at a local South Asian restaurant. First produced at the American Place Theatre in New York in 1998, *Sakina’s Restaurant* has
had subsequent productions across the U.S. and in London, and inspired the 2009 film *Today’s Special*. The protagonist of the play, Azgi comes to the U.S. with naive hopes for the American Dream, but soon faces the racial reality of America and starts working as a stereotypical Asian server at an Indian restaurant. Though financially rewarding, his work makes Azgi experience serious self-alienation, which is symbolized by the dream he repeatedly has: “I am a tandoori chicken wearing an Armani suit. I am sitting behind the wheel of a speeding Cadillac. I have no eyes to see, no mouth to speak and I don’t know where I am going” (77). In his dream, Azgi is wearing a luxury suit and driving a fancy car, but what’s behind the wheel is not a human being but a tandoori chicken, and that chicken doesn’t have eyes, mouth, and sense of purpose, because economic success comes with a price. The play presents a typical self-alienation of an Asian American model minority, which is depicted in many other Asian American dramas this dissertation examined. Azgi in *Sakina’s Restaurant* is a South Asian version of Fred in *The Year of the Dragon*, Man in *Wonderland*, and what Ray could have been had he not realized the meaninglessness of the binaries. They all end up alienating themselves from their true consciousness while performing the role given to them seeking to prove their worth, and so does Azgi. Racialized self-alienation is a pan-ethnic problem that haunts all Asian Americans.

One of the few ways to escape from the self-alienation, after all, is to stop performing the racial stereotypes. Whether someone is useful or not, or rather, whether someone’s work is meaningful or not has to be decided by nobody but oneself. Failure to see this was one of the common reasons why many Asian American characters in other dramas performed the stereotypical roles given to them regardless of their true identity,
and this was why they were all alienated from themselves. Mandvi makes this point very clear by making *Sakina’s Restaurant* a one-actor play in which all different characters are played by a single actor on the stage. If Azgi in the play performs the role of a stereotypical Indian restaurant server, the actor of the play performs by himself the five characters with all different age, gender, and social background: a young male immigrant Azgi; a middle-aged couple that have long experienced self-alienation, Mr. and Mrs. Hakim; Americanized Indian girl who fail to understand her parents, Sakina; a young Indian American man being crushed under the pressure of model minority, Ali. With this multi-role performance of a single actor, the similarity and the dissimilarity between the performer and the roles gets repeatedly illuminated, and the tension arising from the interstices throws a question to the audience: is there any meaningful connection between the actor and the role, or are those connections arbitrary and transitory? Also, all the five characters are locked in their own unique self-alienation, showing that even if one performs a role and even identifies oneself with the role, it can never lead to the de-alienation of oneself.

Therefore, fear of being deemed discarded reveals its hidden irony in *Sakina’s Restaurant*. If you accept the stereotypical roles out of fear for the social abandonment, you will end up personally abandoning your true identity. “The story of the river stone” at the end of the play symbolically presents this point. A boy throws a perfect stone into the river believing that the sparkle of water will turn it into a diamond. But the stone gets carried away and ends up mixing with tons of other rocks at the riverside, at which the boy searches for his perfect stone for years until he becomes a man. One day he stops searching, “because he realized that the reason he could not find it was because he had
never really known what it looked like” (90). Analogy of the American dream and the disillusionment, this story of the river stone also shows how a “perfect stone” loses its true value when it spends a long time mixed with other stones. Repeatedly being seen as an ordinary pebble, or performing the role of a common stereotype for years, erodes the self away until it is completely replaced by the roles performed. *Sakina’s Restaurant* shows that racial stereotypes and performing of them are closely connected to Asian American self-alienation, regardless of the performer’s ethnicity.

In this context, Lloyd Suh’s play, *Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* provides another, more up-to-date re-examination of performativity and the meaning of Asian racial stereotypes in the 21st century perspective. Originally produced by New York’s National Asian American Theatre Company in 2015, the play presents the iconic Frank Chin as a character, and makes a bold choice of making him a son of Charlie Chan, the stereotype of Asian effeminacy that Chin spent his life attacking. So in a way, *Charles Francis* can be viewed as a contemporary take on *The Chickencoop Chinaman* or *The Year of the Dragon* where Chin portrayed conflicted father-son relationships. But the difference is that this newer play focuses more on the performativity of race. According to Judith Butler, gender is “the repeated stylization of body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (43-4); in other words, gender is not a natural state that pre-exists the cultural inscription, but an artificial idea that is performed and enacted. Suh’s play expands this idea of performativity to race. In *Charles Francis*, every actor plays two or more characters that are different from each other in many aspects including the race, meaning that the gap between the actor and the character is further explored. The audience witnesses how the leading actor oscillates
between Frank Chan—Frank Chin inheriting Charlie Chan’s last name—and a nondescript white detective, inspector Hastings. They also observe how Suzy, an Asian woman in her 20s, slowly transform into an eighty-year-old white woman right in front of their eyes. If David Henry Hwang in *M. Butterfly* demonstrated the performativity of gender by making Song Liling change his/her costume and makeup on the stage, Lloyd Suh in *Charles Francis* shows the performativity of race by making almost every character freely pass through the racial boundaries.

In fact, the only Caucasian male actor in the crew plays an Asian character, Charlie Chan, and uses heavily accented English throughout the play; in contrast, all the other Asian actors/actress of the show use standard English regardless of their character’s race, and they all act in a way that defies the racial stereotypes. As a result, the audience witnesses a white actor with yellow face locked in an Asian stereotype, while all the other Asian actors/actresses freely moving across the racial lines without any modification to their facial features. In other words, *Charles Francis* shows that race is no more than an artificially constructed role to be performed, effectively deconstructing the validity of racial stereotypes. If Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die* in 1988 showed how Asian American actors hardly had other options than playing the racial stereotypes, *Sakina’s Restaurant* in 1998 focused on how performance could stifle the performer’s actual identity. And in 2015, *Charles Francis* shows how race is no more than an artificial construct that can be “performed,” and by focusing on its performativity, it turns performance of race from a limitation of actors’ potentials to a tool for the liberation of racial ideas.
However, as implied by the play’s title, what Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s *Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* focuses on even more is the historical meaning of Charlie Chan, one of the most prevalent Asian American male stereotypes that was created by Earl Biggers a century ago, and how Asian America of the 21st century views the legacy of this age-old stereotype. Suh’s attitude toward Charlie Chan is ambivalent; he criticizes it as a symbol of Asian male humiliation and a progenitor of numerous emasculated Asian American stereotypes, including the model minority myth. In Suh’s perspective, Charlie Chan has outlived his lifespan and should have been discarded long ago. But at the same time, Suh also embraces Charlie Chan as he reconceptualizes the image as a symbol of the older generation Asian Americans who have survived the indignity and pain of the past. Therefore, Charlie Chan at the end of the play is transformed from a subservient model minority who interrogates Asian Americans in order to find the killer of Earl Biggers, to the culprit himself who actually murdered Biggers in order to avenge all the harms done to Asian Americans. A racial stereotype is a role created for a certain race, and thus can be extremely limiting to the person who performs it. However, by subverting the role of Charlie Chan, Suh shows that every stereotype is a re-writable fiction, and that there can be new possibilities even in the performance of images that have been considered stereotypical. Suh thus re-appropriates the stereotype of Charlie Chan.

Therefore, Charlie Chan in *Charles Francis* is given a new life and a new death. From a source of Asian American father-son conflict, based on the generational inheritance of self-alienating values, he changes to an icon of older generations that brings about the intergenerational reconciliation by self-sacrifice. In the last scene of the
play, Chan apologizes to Frank for being a bad influence, and gladly agrees to be killed by Frank to put an end to their misery and start a new Asian America. Chan states:

**Charlie:** I am so sorry, my son. Sorry for cause you so much shame.

**Frank:** Dad, I—

**Charlie:** But please understand why I was this way. What else could I do? I know I look funny, I know I talk funny, but this is how I talk, okay? Cannot change my face. Cannot change my talk any more than I can change whole world around me. Any more than I can change my fate.

**Frank:** Oh, Dad.

**Charlie:** But maybe I can change yours.

...

**Frank:** Let me write you a better death, father. I can do that, but not the way I thought I would, not to destroy you and the shame you carry, but to honor it. To accept it, to understand where it comes from and take it up as my own.

**Charlie:** Yes.

**Frank:** And then you can be…

**Charlie:** Yes, my son.

**Frank:** Asian American.

*Frank stabs him in the heart.*
Charlie falls, Frank cradles him in his arms. (Charles Francis 130-1)

With this symbolic death in which he is killed and forgiven, Chan changes from a shameful history to be forgotten to a humiliated history to be avenged and remembered. He is no more an obstacle to Asian Americans’ de-alienation and “life-engendering life,” but a helper who aids their awakening and their struggle for the better future. If roles could be re-created, so could the meaning of the roles. And if the chains of self-alienation that bound Asian American fathers and sons could be severed, their relationship also could be restored to the normal status. Suh’s play allows for this hope through a final scene of reconciliation, in which a monkey king, a symbol of Chinese culture and racial consciousness, tells Frank Chan that “the only thing that really matters, is the child” (135). All the sacrifices of the older generations, all the fights against the stereotypes, and all the conflicts in a parent-child relationship is pointless unless the focus is on the child. *Charles Francis* ends with an emphasis on the reconciliation and the future of the younger generations.

In this context, I’d like to think about the recent success of the film *Minari*. From Sicilian gangsters in *The Godfather* (1972) to the Pakistani comedian in *The Big Sick* (2017), Hollywood films about immigration have always fascinated American audience; as John Powers point out, “the history of film (for Americans) is inseparable from immigration.” In that sense, *Minari* is a quintessentially American story that captivated many American audience in 2020-21. Most kudos went to a seventy-three-year-old actress from Korea, Yuh-jung Youn, who became the second Asian woman to win the Academy Award for the best supporting actress since Miyoshi Umeki from *Sayonara* in 1957. However, critical accolades for *Minari* far exceed individual glory. As of May
2021, the film records 108 wins and 212 nominations from numerous prestigious film festivals such as the 2020 Sundance film festival, Critics’ Movie Awards, and the 78th Golden Globe Awards, rewriting the history of Asian America in the film industry. Even more importantly, Minari showed the world that the Asian stereotype of “perpetual foreigners” is a baseless myth, and that Asian Americans’ history of immigration is just as universal as that of any other races in America. The success of Minari was not only a cultural reaction to the Asian hate during the times of the pandemic, but also a nod to Asian American communities that have long struggled for proper recognition.

The film’s characters, a multi-generational Korean immigrant family, the Yis, hardly had a chance to enjoy such recognition. In the film, they are treated as strangers to the white Americans just as their Korean crops are seen as foreign to the Arkansan farmlands. They had to befriend white churchgoers who asked them why their face was so flat, and they had to till and irrigate the unwelcoming land no matter how futile their efforts seemed. And for Jacob Yi, the Korean immigrant man at the head of the family, the only way to earn the recognition as a human being and a man was to prove his worth as a laborer. In the movie, Jacob’s young son David sees smoke billowing from the smokestack of chicken-sexing hatchery, and asks his father a question:

David: What’s that?

Jacob: That? Male chicks are discarded there.

David: What is “discarded?”
Jacob: That’s a difficult word, huh? Male chicks don’t taste good. They can’t lay eggs and have no use. So you and I should try to be useful.” (Minari 08:15-08:42)

Short as it may be, this dialogue comments on the eugenicist thinking that resulted in the atrocities of the Auschwitz death camps as well as shows the desperate situation of Asian immigrant laborers in the U.S. In order for Asian men to survive in the U.S. society, they needed to work hard, and their work had to be deemed “useful” by American industry and agriculture. But even if their work entailed unconditional compliance to the capitalist value system and egregious self-alienation, these laborers are not necessarily rewarded. Jacob struggles with balancing the demands of work and the needs of his family. Despite the constant threat of his farm’s failure, he adheres to this motto of “You and I should try to be useful,” which works both as an optimistic hope for carrying on work to the next generation, and as a reminder of how Asian American fathers endure their own self-alienation and pass it along to their sons. Though the focus of Minari is more on the Yi family’s resilience and their struggle for the self-sustenance than Jacob’s self-alienation, the film does not miss either the sense of anxiety running underneath the male character’s obsession with proving one’s capitalistic worth. For Jacob, to be deemed useful was to be recognized—as a worker, as a human being, and as a man. In the 21st century, Minari recounts the past when the issues of race, labor, self-alienation, gender role, and family dynamics were all intertwined for Asian American men.

However, the accolades for Minari were not due to the film’s portrayal of self-alienation experienced by Asian American men, or the film’s holistic understanding of their complicated problems. The sentiment at the bottom of Minari is reverence for the
past generations who persevered with hardships of American life, like Minari the plant which survives every harsh environment despite being at the lowest rung of food chain. The film’s message of appreciation and admiration for the past generation resonated with the audience regardless of their race, which explains the unexpected popularity of the movie in the U.S. Also, Minari shows that familial love can be restored and crisis overcome when one focuses not on the alienation but on the resilience. The movie portrays David as a boy who cannot run because of a heart problem, but this limitation of physical and psychological freedom is lifted by his relationship with Soonja, the grandmother. Though his relationship with Soonja was awkward at first since he avoided her for smelling like Korea and not acting like a typical American grandmother, they soon become the best friends for each other, and her unconditional love miraculously heals David’s broken heart. Eventually, when the family falls into despair at the later part of the movie as their barn gets burnt down, David runs for the first time in his life to stop Soonja from killing herself, and saves the whole family. The oldest member of the family saves the youngest, and the youngest saves the oldest in return. Just like accepting Charlie Chan in Charles Francis resulted in the salvation of Frank, Minari shows that reconciling with the past generation can redeem the family.

In the epilogue of Minari, Isaac Chung shows the audience a stream bank covered with minari (Korean watercress), a metaphor for the Yi family’s resilience. Even though everything they have struggled to build was burnt to the ground, they will overcome the loss and stand up again like wild minari. And the source of such perseverance is not the productive labor by which one proves their usefulness, but the familial bond through which one’s self-esteem is restored and power to go on is
replenished. And when they are fully recovered, they will dive back into the everyday life as a laborer, in order to feed their family and approach their “life of the species.” Minari is a tribute to the past generation Asian Americans who endured self-alienating labor to build the foundations for the subsequent generations. What Minari in the 21st century teaches us about labor, self-alienation, and family conflict that have been a permanent issue for Asian Americans, is that we do not need self-alienating labor, let alone the generational inheritance of it, to prove our worth. Your family’s love is already a sufficient proof for your worthiness, and their support is a proof of your ability. The key to the recovery of labor and de-alienation of self is in the family.
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