SINCE ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES witnessed a paradigm shift from the domestic to the transnational in the mid-1990s, the critical reconfiguration of the field has represented the transnational as a space of liberation and cultivation of ethnic identities from multiple locations and with diverse contacts. As the new critical interest extends to earlier periods, more attention has been focused on early Chinese American autobiographical writing, which was often associated with what Roger Daniels dubs “negative history” (1988, 4), an unusable past representing Chinese Americans as objects rather than subjects of US history. Because of their cultural background and transnational sensibilities, this corpus of texts either became ethnic documents for the dominant US historiographers or were scrutinized as politically suspect through the lens of Asian American identity politics, which during its peak in the 1970s accentuated masculine resistance, ethnic authenticity, and literary vernacular as central to the field imaginary. In recent years, these texts—which include Wong Chin Foo’s polemic essays (1883 and 1887), Yan Phou Lee’s When I Was a Boy in China (1887a), and Yung Wing’s My Life in China and America (1909)—have been remembered as the cultural legacy of early Asian America and reexamined together with African American versions of subjectivity and Euro-American models of masculinity from the same period. These Chinese American authors have also been retooled from the “ambassadors of goodwill” (Kim 1982, 24) to “cultural defenders and brokers” for China in the late-nineteenth-century United States (K. Wong 1998, 3), a label change that reflects an increasing interest in exploring the Chinese dimension of the texts. However, as the scholarship continues to operate in the US national framework, it cannot fully capture the transnational dynamics of the texts, which would involve critical engagement with colonial modernity in China on the one hand and would entail vigorous critique of Western science and technology as well
as Western discourses in the nineteenth-century United States on the other hand.

Meanwhile, in the Chinese world on the other side of the Pacific, early Chinese American autobiographical writing has received unprecedented attention since the 1980s. As shown by the 1985 reissuing of Yung’s *My Life in China and America* in Chinese translation in a book series titled *Going to the World*, which featured the journal and travel writing on Western Europe and North America of the Chinese officials and intellectuals of the Qing Dynasty in the late nineteenth century, the early Chinese American authors have been rediscovered by the Chinese state media and academy as pioneering Chinese intellectuals and practitioners of what has now been officially established as the reformation and open-door policy. In the genealogy of this “post-socialist discourse” (X. Zhang 2008, 2), Yung and his Educational Mission students have figured as precursors of Chinese modernity, and their efforts in rebuilding a technologically advanced China have been construed as acts of patriotism by Chinese scholars in the humanities and social sciences. With the rise of China as a global economic power in the twenty-first century, the interest in Yung and his Educational Mission has gradually changed its focus from learning and absorbing Western science and technology to the current concentration on the ways in which the early Chinese American authors negotiated Western discourses and articulated their Chinese imaginaries in the West.

In calling attention to these different framings and changing receptions of early Chinese American autobiographical texts in their US and Chinese contexts, I seek to move beyond the national frameworks and situate the primary texts in the transnational context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which postcolonial critics in East Asian studies call “colonial modernity.” As the theorization of the fragmentary, multilayered, and multidirectional colonial formations in East Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial modernity as a historical condition and a critical concept would connect the lived experiences of the authors in the United States to the changing reality in China and shed light on Chinese American approaches to engaging Western discourses and appropriating Western science and technology. Writing provocative essays for major magazines and newspapers in the United States and returning to China to rebuild its material culture, these authors not only confronted what Walter Mignolo theorizes as the “colonial difference”—which had translated the nineteenth-century Western racial classification into hierarchical cultural values through the “coloniality of power” (2002, 60)—but also practiced what James Clifford describes as the “articulation theory” in rethinking the Chinese tradition in response to the Western military, economic, and
cultural dominance. During this process, these Chinese American authors, I argue, developed different visions and strategies for Chinese America in relation to China and the Chinese modernization process.

Colonial Modernity, Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism, and Alternative Epistemology

Postcolonial critics theorize Western colonialism as inseparable from Western modernity, a structural relationship that constituted the evolution of industrial capitalism. Similarly, the notion of colonial modernity offers an interesting way to theorize the transnational dimension of the early Chinese American writing. In her remapping of East Asian studies in a changing context of global capitalism, Tani Barlow articulates “colonial modernity” in terms of “a speculative frame for investigating the infinitely pervasive discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalizing impulses of capitalism” (1997a, 6) and represents colonialism as a constituting moment that manifests the complex field of power relationships in the expansion of global capitalism. Barlow’s loosely defined notion not only evokes a Foucauldian sense of power and self-reflexivity that addresses what she calls the “present deficiencies of criticism” (ibid., 3) but also points to a critical ontology that would foreground the production of geopolitical spaces under the effect of global capitalism. As a way to move beyond what she criticizes as the reified “India-England model” (ibid., 4–5) in postcolonial studies that privileges South Asian studies as its field imaginary, Barlow seeks to bridge the crucial gap between postcolonial theory and scholarship in East Asian studies, which resisted postcolonial theorization and—like us exceptionalism in a twisted sense—envisioned China as “an exception to all rules” on the ground that the Chinese nation-state had never been formally colonized by the Japanese or the Western imperialist powers (ibid., 8).

If colonial modernity serves as a framework for reconsidering colonial specifics in East Asia in the teleology of global capitalism, then its manifestation in China could be best captured by the term “semicolonialism.” In Shu-mei Shih’s theoretical repertoire, semicolonialism designates a complex formation derived from “the specific effects of multiple imperialist presences in China and their fragmentary colonial geography and control, as well as the resulting social and cultural formation” (2001, 31). To differentiate her usage of the term from that of Chinese Marxist historians and critics in their analyses of the semicolonial and semifeudal structures in China from 1840 to 1949, Shih accentuates the fragmentation and multiplicity of Chinese culture and society created through the less formal but more exploitative and destructive channels in the competing Western and Japanese spheres of
influence during the same historical period. Semicolonialism thus rendered economic penetration, racial discrimination, and territorial jurisdiction closer to neocolonialism than to formal colonialism as practiced in India or in the Philippines. What this means for Shih is that Chinese intellectuals in the semicolonial space and time had been afforded “more varied ideological, political, and cultural positions than in formal colonies where the ordinary Manichean division of nationalists and collaborators held sway” (ibid., 35). In other words, precisely because the semicolonial structure lacked a formal institutional infrastructure, it did not present the Western and Japanese imperialist powers as “the unequivocal targets of cultural resistance” (ibid.) for Chinese intellectuals or provoke a sense of urgency among Chinese intellectuals to reconfigure Chinese culture as a locus of resistance. On the contrary, because Chinese intellectuals had been granted a limited and often illusionary sense of autonomy in their cultural representation, they readily embraced Western and Japanese cultures with an openness they construed and celebrated as “cosmopolitanism” (ibid., 373). Using cosmopolitanism in domestic and local politics, these intellectuals deconstructed traditional Chinese culture and showcased their own intellectual abilities in embracing Western and Japanese cultures in contrast with the behavior of the impoverished masses. Shih concludes that such “openness” to Western and Japanese cultures in the specific semicolonial context of China inevitably “undermined cultural nation-building projects and became the locus of the willing colonization of consciousness” (ibid., 374).

Though Shih’s critical interest is focused primarily on Chinese modernist writing in the early twentieth century, her critique of colonial modernity in China and of the complicity of Chinese intellectuals with the colonizing powers offers a unique case study of the question of resistance and of the relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in a semicolonial context. In other words, if Chinese culture was totally deconstructed in Chinese modernist writing, then what could be reconfigured as a locus of resistance to the colonizing powers and colonial regimes in the transnational context? In what political and cultural circumstances would nationalism and cosmopolitanism constitute a binary opposition? In contrast with Chinese modernist writers, I argue that early Chinese American authors employed cosmopolitanism as a legitimate means of critiquing Western imperialism and racism in the transnational context and offered three different approaches to Chinese culture as locus of resistance. Appropriating what Pheng Cheah recently reinscribed as Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitanism, which he interprets as a prenationalist formulation as well as in opposition to statism rather than nationalism,10 the Chinese American authors vigorously fought anti-Chinese racism in US culture and society, reinvented Confucian human-
ism as an alternative epistemology and a new vision of cosmopolitanism in the transnational context, and articulated a China composed of new generations of subjects, who, I argue, would equally serve as ideal Chinese American subjects, equipped with Western scientific knowledge, humanistic sensitivity, and moral courage.

The first author I investigate here is Wong Chin Foo, author of the polemic essay “Why Am I a Heathen?” (1887). The publication of the essay had been occasioned by political and racial tensions in the United States as well as in China. On the U.S. side, the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed by Congress five years before, and the anti-Chinese movement and sentiment had become rampant, escalating from political debates to physical assaults with the aim of expelling Chinese laborers from the West Coast. On the Chinese side, with sporadic resistance and violence perpetuated against the Western missionary presence and establishment in China’s heartland, U.S. missionaries in the field had openly called for “an Anglo-Saxon armed assault” on China, which in their view “would create turmoil and weaken China’s institutional resistance to Christianity” (Miller 1974, 269). In such circumstances, Wong’s essay exemplified an educated Chinese American’s response to the anti-Chinese movement in the United States and reaction to the Western civilizing mission in China.

Wong begins by explaining how he had been attracted to the Christian faith, how he had come to the United States for higher education at the age of seventeen, and why he had remained a “heathen.” While he expresses confusion about the contradictory doctrines of different Christian denominations, he directs his attack at the commercial orientation of Christian organizations, the everyday practices of a technologically oriented capitalist society, and the imperialist theory underlying the Western civilizing mission in China. Publicly announcing himself as a heathen against the background of anti-Chinese sentiment, Wong dissociates himself from the missionary establishment and grounds his identity on the Confucian tradition. His enunciation of a heathen identity and cultural locality puts to the test what Kant articulated as enlightenment, which in its pure theoretical stance gave the individual freedom to question the dominant thought in a given culture and society and to present an alternative perspective on the subject matter to the general public for examination. Through this process, Wong performs what Michel Foucault calls the “limit-attitude” in his own reading of Kant’s enlightenment: “criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.”

It is precisely in this spirit of cosmopolitanism that Wong critiques the
Protestant work ethic, relating its need for “ceaseless action” to the capitalist mode of production, which has revolved around profit making and labor saving. He gives a concrete example: “If my shoe factory employs 500 men, and gives me an annual profit of $10,000, why should I substitute therein machinery by the use of which I need only 100 men, thus not only throwing 400 contented, industrious men into misery, but making myself more miserable by heavier responsibilities, with possibly less profit?” (1887, 173). Speaking as someone from a self-contained agrarian society, Wong invokes the grand vision of Confucian humanism, which—in privileging “the happiness of a common humanity” (ibid.)—has played a pivotal role in maintaining social stability and cultural prosperity in China for centuries. In an extensive critique of the insatiable desire of Western capitalism for markets and profits, Wong moves to the Western civilizing mission in China and condemns British gunboat diplomacy and the opium trade for gaining access to China’s port cities: “When the English wanted the Chinamen’s gold and trade, they said they wanted to ‘open China for their missionaries.’ And opium was the chief, in fact, only, missionary they looked after, when they forced the ports open” (ibid., 176–77). Wong conflates Christianity with imperialism and comments on the devastating effects of the British military intervention in China: “And this infamous Christian introduction among Chinamen has done more injury, social and moral, in China than all the humanitarian agencies of Christianity could remedy in 200 years” (ibid., 177).

Reading the theory and praxis of US Protestant capitalism in relation to British imperialism, Wong assumes the high moral ground and boasts of his own heathenness. He sarcastically alludes to racial relations in the United States: “we are so far heathenish as to no longer persecute men simply on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, but treat them all according to their individual worth” (ibid., 175). Wong also presents himself as morally superior because of his observation of “the great Divine law,” which varies from “Do unto others as you wish they would do unto you” to “Love your neighbor as yourself” in secular terms (ibid., 179). He ends his essay by calling on US Christians to accept his reasoning and embrace Confucian humanism as a new way of life: “This is what keeps me the heathen I am! And I earnestly invite the Christians of America to come to Confucius” (ibid.). Though often reductive and even essentialist, Wong’s essay nevertheless offers an interesting and powerful comparison of Christian Americans and Confucian Chinese.

As Wong critiques the connection between the Protestant ethic and the capitalist spirit, he reinvents Confucian humanism as an alternative epistemology and grounds his own ethnic identity in the Chinese tradition. It is in this sense that Wong exemplifies what Mignolo calls “a critical awareness of
the colonial difference,” which points to the important role of “indigenous epistemology” in the decolonization process (2002, 67). To Mignolo, the coloniality of being cannot simply function as a continuation of Western subjectivity but rather should effect a “relocation of thinking and a critical awareness of the geopolitics of knowledge.” In this light, “the densities of the colonial experience are the location of emerging epistemologies, such as the contribution of Franz [sic] Fanon, that do not overthrow existing ones but that build on the ground of the silence of history” (ibid.). What Mignolo suggests here is that the colonized should develop their own epistemologies as a locus of their identities and resistance and, in the process, negotiate and appropriate colonial modernity from these vantage points. The emphasis on indigenous epistemology marks a point of departure from Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” (quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998, 159–60) and makes possible a repositioning of Third World knowledge production vis-à-vis what Mary Louise Pratt calls “Europe’s ‘planetary consciousness,’” which had served as “a basic element in constructing modern Eurocentrism” (2008, 15).

As a matter of fact, Wong foregrounds this critical consciousness in his text: “Of course, we decline to admit all the advantages of your boasted civilization; or that the white race is the only civilized one. Its civilization is borrowed, adapted, and shaped from our older form” (1887, 174) In an earlier essay, “Political Honors in China,” Wong lavishes praises on the Chinese political system: “In no other nation upon the earth are political honors based upon scientific attainments in all branches of study as they are in China, wherein are illustrated the true principles by which talent and wisdom are honored and rewarded, literature, science, morals, and philosophy encouraged, and a nation’s happiness and prosperity secured” (1883, 300).

The hyperbolic description would not have made much sense in semicolonial and semifeudal China, the sovereignty of which had been constantly trampled on by the Japanese and Western imperialist powers, but it would have served the purpose of questioning and challenging the “colonial difference” in the transnational context.

Of course, what Wong did in the transpacific nineteenth century was not really to retrieve an original or authentic Confucian humanism or epistemology but, rather, to effect what Clifford redefines as “articulation theory” based on Stuart Hall’s model of articulation for political and ideological changes. Clifford foregrounds two important implications from his reading of Hall’s critical theory. First, articulation based on a specific ideology “offers a non-reductive way to think about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of ‘traditional’ forms” (Clifford 2001, 478). Second, the question of authenticity related to the object of articulation is
secondary, and “the process of social and cultural persistence is political all the way back” (ibid., 479). If we follow Clifford’s theorization, the invention of Confucian humanism in the transnational context as an alternative epistemology not only empowered Wong to challenge the anti-Chinese movement and the “colonial difference” but also enabled him to understand and articulate his Chinese identity and position in resistance to the colonial regimes and colonizing powers. Precisely because Wong’s articulation of a Chinese identity and position had been conditioned by the transnational space and time of colonial modernity, he chose to stay in the United States to further his political visions and cultural pursuits, starting the first Chinese American newspaper, the *Chinese American Weekly*, in February 1883; organizing the first Chinese civil rights organization in the United States, the Chinese Equal Rights League in New York City, in September 1892; and authoring over twenty articles for mainstream US journals and magazines on topics from the Chinese in California to the translation of classic Chinese literature for the US readers. Though Hsuan Hsu interprets Wong’s hyperbolic tone and contradictions in his polemic essays in terms of experimentation with a racial identity and a political position that characterized the flourishing periodical writing in the nineteenth-century United States, he nevertheless gives an adequate assessment of Wong’s contribution to Chinese American identity formation: “Wong’s periodical writings establish the groundwork for a Chinese American cultural identity by voicing indirect but insistent responses to leading discourses of racialization during the first, provisional decade of Chinese Exclusion.”13 Despite the fact that Wong’s thought-provoking essays and coverage of his political activities and cultural views frequently appeared in national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* during that period, Wong’s legacy has never been fully recovered by historians but remained what Qing-song Zhang calls “a forgotten chapter in the history of the American civil rights movement” (1998, 58).

*A Cosmopolitan Imaginary, Colonial Difference, and the Reinvention of a Cultural China*

When Wong’s provocative essay on heathenness attracted attention and generated interest among US readers, Yan Phou Lee, a converted Christian and a graduate of Yale College who had been part of the Chinese Educational Mission, responded by writing an essay titled “Why I Am Not a Heathen” (1887b). Through logical reasoning and rhetorical reflection, Lee took advantage of the public sphere, which Jürgen Habermas concisely defines as “people’s public use of their reason” (1989, 27), and created a critical forum
through which different Chinese American voices would be heard and understood.

In his counterargument, Lee evokes his own personal journey from being a heathen to becoming a Christian and reduces Wong’s critique of us racism and British imperialism to ethics at individual, institutional, and national levels. Redefining cosmopolitanism as an openness to all cultures, Lee downplays Wong’s articulation of Confucian humanism as symptoms of what historians today call “sinocentrism” (K. Wong 1998, 20) and bases his own advocacy of cosmopolitanism on the premise that “other nations are superior to her [China] in science and the arts” (1887b, 311). In a different approach to fighting anti-Chinese racism, Lee calls for a “real” Christianity as opposed to its “false” representation and envisions a Christian humanism as solution to social injustice and racial inequality in the United States: “I fervently believe that if we could infuse more Christianity into politics and the judiciary, into the municipal government, the legislature and the executive, corruption and abuses would grow beautifully less” (ibid.).

Lee’s invocation of cosmopolitanism in terms of Christian humanism and his critique of Confucianism as Sinocentrism should be interpreted differently in the Chinese and us contexts. On the one hand, in semifeudal and semicolonial China, Lee’s advocacy of Christian humanism rather than Confucianism was directed toward the dominant Chinese state ideology, which had been challenged by Western military and political power, and reinforced the argument that Confucianism had become an obstacle in China’s path to modernization and regeneration. On the other hand, against the anti-Chinese background of the nineteenth-century United States, Lee’s questioning of Sinocentrism and appealing for a Christian humanism served as a gesture toward assimilation, which Amy Ling interpreted as an emerging “Asian American consciousness” (2002, 285). The consciousness, however, would be problematic and contradictory in two ways. First, understanding the huge material gap between China and the United States, Lee internalized the colonial difference by rejecting Chinese culture as a possible locus of resistance and resorting to an optimistic view of Christian humanism as a potential intervention in Western racist or imperialist theory and practice. Second, because cosmopolitanism defined a moment of idealism in Western intellectual history, Lee could not sustain such ideals in the racial reality of the United States or the colonial modernity of China. Instead, he constantly found himself caught in the contradiction of simultaneously employing self-Orientalizing strategies in cultural production and questioning Orientalist representation of China and Chinese Americans. In this process, Lee resorted to the strategy of reinventing a cultural China vis-à-vis a technological United States, a practice that would constitute what I call the sec-
ond Chinese American approach to negotiating the technological empire of the United States in the late nineteenth century. It is precisely in this sense that I investigate Lee’s autobiographical and ethnographical work, *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887a), which has been considered as the first major work in Asian American literary history.

Solicited by the D. Lothrop Publishing Company in Boston for its book series on “foreign cultures perceived by their own youths,” Lee’s *When I Was a Boy in China* was the first book published in the series (Kim 1982, 25). Though the topics in the work might have been dictated by its publisher or editor, as Ling convincingly argued, Lee reimagined a cultural China and represented its everyday practice in terms of what I call cultural difference in relation to the technological West. In his introductory chapter, “Infancy,” Lee not only self-consciously addresses the privileged US reader as “you” but also describes the unpredictability of his own birthday in the Western calendar as “the uncanny” in the Freudian sense, because of its calculation based on the Chinese lunar calendar. Discussing the ritualistic practice related to the birth of a boy in a well-to-do Chinese family, Lee explains that the Chinese year was counted from the accession of the current emperor and that the Chinese month was reckoned by the movement of the moon around the earth. For that reason, he can identify his birthday only as on a certain day in the Third or Fourth Moon but cannot translate it into an exact date in a Western month. Humorous but self-Orientalizing, Lee establishes a pattern that constructs the West in terms of technological power, rationality, and individuality and articulates China in terms of traditionalism, mysticism, and collectivity.

When Lee describes the name-giving process in the same chapter, he continues to ground his narrative on points of difference: “The names given on those occasions are not like your ‘Jack,’ ‘Harry,’ or ‘Dick,’ but are usually words chosen from ‘the dictionary’ for their lucky import, or because they are supposed to possess the power of warding off evil influences in the child’s horoscope” (1887a, 9). Subjecting Chinese practice to the gaze of the technological West, Lee exaggerates the difference between China and the United States: “American mothers have no idea what impositions Chinese mothers suffer from physicians and sellers of charms, on account of their superstitious fears concerning the health and welfare of their children” (ibid., 13).

Lee’s depiction of the Chinese difference against the Western standard defines what Mignolo critiques as a “double bind” in his elaboration on the “colonial difference” (2002, 76). Following Robert Bernasconi’s observation of African philosophy in its encounter with the West, Mignolo postulates that African philosophy is either too similar to Western philosophy to make any contribution to it, or too different from Western philosophy to qualify as philosophy per se. Mignolo’s reading of this “double bind” cautions us against
Negotiating the Technological Empire

a possible colonization of the mind in subjecting ourselves to the Western standard and exemplifies the ways in which the coloniality of power functions and operates in its encounter with non-Western cultures and knowledge. Mignolo writes: “It is crucial for the ethics, politics, and epistemology of the future to recognize that the totality of Western epistemology, from either the right or the left, is no longer valid for the entire planet” (ibid., 86).

Interestingly enough, Lee was not only aware of the double bind, but he also tried to negotiate the Western frame of reference. In the chapter “Stories and Story-Tellers,” Lee first describes Chinese legends as “really beautiful” and “as interesting as a good English novel” and then provides an actual sample story titled “Sold,” through which he self-indulgently narrates the experience of a scholar involved in the annual imperial examination for would-be government officials and draws from an entirely different literary tradition and cultural sensibility. Moreover, Lee also buys into the dream that China would be regenerated through Western science and technology, a dream that he explicitly articulates in the last three chapters of his work. He describes Yung as a man “destined to exert a potent influence on the future of China”: “Dr. Wing [sic], indignant at the wrongs which China had suffered and was suffering at the hands of so-called ‘Christian’ and ‘enlightened’ nations, sought for remedy, and conceived the brilliant project of educating a number of Chinese boys in America for future service at the government expense” (1887a, 93).

Lee concludes his work by commenting on his fascination with San Francisco as the showcase of the technological United States in the late nineteenth century and by reflecting on the violence in that technological culture, exemplified by a train robbery the Chinese Educational Mission students had experienced in their transcontinental journey from San Francisco to Springfield, Massachusetts: “Pistol-shots could be made out above the cries of frightened passengers. Women shrieked and babies cried. Our party, teachers and pupils, jumped from our seats in dismay and looked out through the windows for more light on the subject. What we saw was enough to make our hair stand on end. Two ruffianly men held a revolver in each hand and seemed to be taking aim at us from the short distance of forty feet or thereabouts. Our teachers told us to crouch down for our lives. We obeyed with trembling and fear” (ibid., 107–8).

Lee finishes his description with sarcasm: “One phase of American civilization was thus indelibly fixed upon our minds” (ibid., 108). In dramatizing such an event at the end of his work, Lee casts critical doubt on the value of the material culture and leaves room for critical reflection on the colonial difference.

Lee’s critical awareness is most clearly manifested in his critical essay,
“The Chinese Must Stay,” written in response to the escalating anti-Chinese violence in the Western states and published in *North American Review* in 1889. Facing the increasing use of racist rhetoric that “the Chinese must go,” Lee vigorously defends Chinese laborers and fights the anti-Chinese movement, which had escalated to physical violence and was dominating politics in the Western states. With the sweeping generalization that “no nation can afford to let go [of] its high ideals,” Lee questions “this generation of Americans in their treatment of other races” and invokes the discourses of freedom, equality, and integrity in his intervention in the anti-Chinese movement (1889, 476). He details the laws passed by Congress against the Chinese and the anti-Chinese platform adopted by both political parties in “the Pacific states,” and he decides that Americans have been more “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created to prey on one another” than to following the principle of equality articulated by the founding fathers of the American republic (ibid.). With official statistics, logical reasoning, and rhetorical eloquence, Lee dismisses all of the eleven charges leveled against the Chinese as contradictory, misconceived, and malicious.

Continuing to operate within the framework of cosmopolitanism, Lee defends Chinese laborers in terms of their potential for progress, assimilation, and citizenship. In response to the fourth charge—“That the Chinese have displaced white laborers by low wages and cheap living, and that their presence discourages and retards white immigration to the Pacific states” (ibid., 479)—Lee argues that it was precisely because of “the application of Chinese ‘cheap labor’ to the building of railroads, the reclamation of swamps, to mining, fruit-culture, and manufacturing, that an immense vista of employment was opened up for Caucasians and that millions now are enabled to live in comfort and luxury” (ibid.). Now fully aware of the colonial difference that degraded Chinese laborers to the lowest position in the racial hierarchy, Lee cannot help asking rhetorically: “Machines live on nothing at all; they have displaced millions of laborers; why not do away with machines?” (ibid.). As if such bitter sarcasm is not enough to demonstrate his outrage at the unfair treatment of the Chinese in general and Chinese laborers in particular, Lee further challenges the racist reasoning: “Besides, are you sure that Chinese laborers would not ask more if they dared, or take more if they could get it?” (ibid., 480). At this emotional juncture, Lee the Christian almost sounds exactly like Wong the heathen in his language and emotional tone: “I maintain that a sober, industrious, and peaceable people, like the Chinese, who mind their own business and let others do the same, are as fit to be voters as the quarrelsome, ignorant, besotted, and priest-ridden hordes of Europe” (ibid.).

Though Lee endeavors to raise public awareness and dismiss the specific
racist charges against Chinese abilities to “evolve” to be fit for Western civilization, he still works within the logical parameters of the colonial difference. His argument becomes a case of what Audre Lorde famously describes: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, 110). Indeed, the colonial difference and the geopolitics of knowledge had played a crucial role in justifying and fueling the anti-Chinese movement in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Henry George, a well-known US economist of the period, had not only secured a reputation for his studies of the relationships between progress and poverty and between technology and corporate dominance, but he was also noted for his involvement in the research on the labor conflict between Euro-Americans and the Chinese on the West Coast. In his essays, from “The Chinese on the Pacific Coast” (1869) to “Chinese Immigration” (1883), the influential economist contended that China as a major Eastern civilization had historically achieved great material progress and cultural tradition, but it had fallen far behind the West in science and technology since the Industrial Revolution. George also argued that cheap labor had been the major factor in China’s technological stagnation. In discussing Chinese laborers on the West Coast, George questioned their willingness to accept low wages and standards of living, which would not only result in their eventually replacing white laborers but would also destroy technological advancement in US culture and society: “It is certain that in a country where the Chinese standard of wages prevailed, no such machinery would ever have been developed, and that just as wages fall toward the Chinese standard so must the spirit of invention and adaption be checked, and stagnation take the place of progress” (1881, 412). In this seemingly scientific and objective study of the connections between low wages and Chinese labor, and between low wages and technological advancement, George does not factor in the racial dimension of labor and wages or critique the nature of the capitalist mode of production that always seeks to maximize profits and expand markets. Instead, he blames and victimizes Chinese labor in an essentialist way, which would replace the class conflict between white labor and capital with the racial tension between white and Chinese labor, and which would—intentionally or unintentionally—rationalize and reinforce the anti-Chinese movement.

Precisely because of the colonial difference and the geopolitics of knowledge, which Lee had paradoxically complied with and fought against at different moments, he finally found himself caught in what Ling calls “the Asian American frontier,” which she defines as “a psychological and emotional state,” “a between-worlds stance,” and “the fluctuating double-consciousness of all racial minorities” (2002, 274). After fifty-two years of living in the United States and constantly struggling to find employment, Lee finally de-
decided to leave his beloved family and country of adoption (the United States) for his country of origin (China) in 1931. And in 1937 Lee started referring to “we Cantonese” in his correspondence with the Yale Alumni Office (quoted in Ling 2002, 279). This identification with the Cantonese not only reflected Lee’s deep disappointment with his experiences in the United States but also signified his final attempt to come to terms with his own culture and tradition—as a common Chinese expression has it, the fallen leaves always return to their roots of origin. Since his last correspondence with Yale University is dated March 29, 1938, Lee’s family in the United States has presumed that he was killed by Japanese bombs in what he had described as an “inhuman, brutal, and savage war” (quoted in ibid.). Since Lee’s autobiographical and ethnographical work and polemic essays represent the trajectory of an emerging Asian American consciousness, he certainly deserves what Ling describes as “an Asian American place of distinction” in literary history and cultural tradition (ibid., 285).

Negotiating Western Science and Discourse: A New Sense of Self, A New Vision of China

Yung Wing—whose autobiography, My Life in China and America, was published in 1909—was the first Chinese or Chinese American to graduate from Yale College, in 1854. He founded the Chinese Educational Mission, which officially started its operations in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1872. Unlike Wong (who sought to reinvent Confucian humanism as a Chinese American epistemology and an alternative to cosmopolitanism) or Lee (who recreated a cultural China vis-à-vis the technological West to negotiate the colonial difference), Yung developed a new sense of subjectivity with a thorough understanding of Western material culture and humanities. He envisioned a China rebuilt by future generations of Chinese subjects, equipped with Western scientific knowledge, intellectual abilities, and moral courage. As Western education was crucial to the new Chinese subject and the Chinese modernization process, Yung used his own experiences to exemplify and represent the performance of a Chinese subject, who would in fact represent the emerging Chinese American subjectivity.

While recent Asian American scholarship explores Yung’s sense of self in terms of masculinity and in relation to the Anglo-American model, scholars in China focus more on Yung’s vision of a new modern China, situating his thoughts and practices in the broader spectrum of modern Chinese history, which encompasses topics from diasporic experiences to Chinese state policy on overseas Chinese, and from the impact of Western education on China’s modernization process to the function of the Chinese imperial examination
system. Most Chinese scholarship defines Yung as a pioneering thinker in modern Chinese history, who persistently looked for a panacea to strengthen China and save it from feudal disintegration and Western colonization. Even the few Chinese scholars who do recognize Yung as a Chinese American intellectual still situate his work within what critics call China’s postsocialist discourse on reform and open-door (X. Zhang 2008, 2), which has brought economic prosperity to China at the expense of social disparity and environmental devastation. I argue that Yung’s advocacy of a new Chinese subject was based on his own experience as an emerging Chinese American subject, and that this subject—with a command of Western science and technology and the ability to reflect critically on Western and Chinese cultures—would be crucial to the regeneration of the Chinese nation-state. It is in this sense that Yung’s work constitutes a third Chinese American approach to negotiating the technological United States in the late nineteenth century.

In the beginning chapters of his autobiography, Yung explains explicitly why and how Western education has enabled him to perceive and understand the injustice and humiliation that China has suffered in its encounters with Western powers since the First Opium War in 1840: “All through my college course, especially in the closing years, the lamentable condition of China was before my mind constantly and weighed on my spirits. In my despondency, I often wished I had never been educated, as education had unmistakably enlarged my mental and moral horizon, and revealed to me responsibilities which the sealed eye of ignorance can never see, and sufferings and wrongs of humanity to which an uncultivated and callous nature can never be made sensitive” (1909, 40).

Alluding to the early 1850s, when the joint forces of Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, the United States, and other Western powers defeated China and forced it to sign humiliating treaties to consolidate their political and economic gains in the country, Yung argues that only Western-educated Chinese youths like himself could understand China’s humiliation and shoulder the responsibility of regenerating China. Western education at this point meant two different things for Yung. To begin with, it offered him an understanding of the political, economic, and cultural logics under which the Western powers had established the colonial world order. Moreover, it enabled him to reflect critically on the possibilities of resistance, which would help China protect its national interests and survive Western colonial exploitation and oppression. In this light, Western education is instrumental rather than idealistic: “I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful” (ibid., 41).
When Yung was looking for ways to fund his education at Yale, he was advised by his Anglo-American friends to apply for “the contingent fund provided for indigent students” and to sign a written pledge in which he would promise to “study for the ministry and afterwards become a missionary” (ibid., 34). Yung requested an exemption and presented his case before “the trustees of the academy” (ibid.) at Yale, arguing that missionary work in China would “handicap and circumscribe” his usefulness and that his goal was to have “the utmost freedom of action” to avail himself of “every opportunity to do the greatest good in China” (ibid., 35). He turned this hearing into a public forum, through which he articulated a vague sense of nationalism and enunciated a new Chinese American subject against the background of the Western civilizing mission in China.

When he wrote about the incident, Yung focused on his strong sense of critical reflexivity: “To be sure, I was poor, but I would not allow my poverty to gain the upper hand and compel me to barter away my inward convictions of duty for a temporary mess of pottage” (ibid., 36). His friend the Reverend Joseph Twichell called Yung’s decision “a costly conclusion” (1909, 254), the effect of which was still be felt two decades later, after Yung returned to China in 1854 and was serving temporarily as a comprador for Western businesses in Shanghai. An article in Scribner’s Monthly explained how Yung’s “refusal to become a formal missionary acted strongly to his disadvantage” in Western business and religious circles in Shanghai, both of which had “somewhat naturally considered him a sort of hopeless convert after all.”

In addition to this critical reflexivity, Yung also dramatizes two experiences he had in Shanghai to emphasize the moral courage of the new emerging subject. In the first case, Yung stopped a group of Western sailors from insulting and harassing Chinese pedestrians on a Shanghai street and wrote a letter to the ship’s captain to lodge a formal complaint, after which he received an apology. In the second case, when Yung was physically assaulted by a Scottish man at an auction in Shanghai, he fought back and defended himself. Asked by another European man if he was looking for trouble, Yung answered with dignity: “No, I was only defending myself. Your friend insulted me and added injury to insult. I took him for a gentleman, but he has proved himself a blackguard” (1909, 71). Yung devotes a good deal of space to the implications of the two incidents, from the physical to the intellectual and from the personal to the national:

It was the chief topic of conversation for a short time among foreigners, while among Chinese I was looked upon with great respect, for since the foreign settlement on the extra-territorial basis was established close to the city of
Shanghai, no Chinese within its jurisdiction had ever been known to have the courage and pluck to defend his rights, point blank, when they had been violated or trampled upon by a foreigner. Their meek and mild disposition had allowed personal insults and affronts to pass unresented and unchallenged, which naturally had the tendency to encourage arrogance and insolence on the part of ignorant foreigners. The time will soon come, however, when the people of China will be so educated and enlightened as to know what their rights are, public and private, and to have the moral courage to assert and defend them whenever they are invaded. The triumph of Japan over Russia in the recent war has opened the eyes of the Chinese world. (ibid., 72–73)

Teasing out the racial, political, and cultural implications of the two incidents, Yung demonstrates that only through understanding and appropriating Western knowledge could the Chinese defend their rights and confront Western colonial powers. In this case, Japan was an example to Yung in disrupting the colonial difference and fighting Western military powers.

In 1863, when Yung finally had the opportunity to discuss his vision of China’s modernization with Viceroy Zheng Guo-fan, one of the most important political figures in modern Chinese history, he was authorized to build Jiangnan Arsenal, “a mother machine shop, capable of reproducing other machine shops of like character” (ibid., 151). After he successfully completed the task in 1865, Yung delineated his blueprint for China’s modernization and presented four proposals to Zheng. In three of the four proposals, Yung sought to rebuild parts of the Chinese transportation infrastructure, such as the railroad and steamboat networks; to implement a system of joint ventures with Western transnational companies; and to protect Chinese sovereignty by prohibiting “missionaries of any religious sect or denomination from exercising any kind of jurisdiction over their converts” (ibid., 175). He even predicted that inexpensive resources and labor would make Chinese products more competitive on the global market.

It is in the second proposal that Yung explored the possibility of sending Chinese youths to the United States for Western education. During the nine years of the operation of the Chinese Educational Mission in Connecticut, Yung noted with delight the profound changes—both intellectual and physical—in the Chinese students: “Now in New England the heavy weight of repression and suppression was lifted from the minds of these young students; they exulted in their freedom and leaped for joy. No wonder they took to athletic sports with alacrity and delight” (ibid., 203). What ended the Chinese Educational Mission was precisely Yung’s privileging of Western studies over Chinese studies for these students.

Yung’s direct violation of the Chinese official code of “Chinese studies
for the essentials and Western studies for practical applications” (Desnoyers 1997, 138) I argue, should not be construed simply as a negation of Chinese culture, but rather should be interpreted as a major step toward the cultivation of a Chinese American subject. In Yung’s view, the new Chinese subject was identical to the emerging Chinese American subject, who would operate in the transnational space of colonial modernity and whose understanding of Western concepts of masculinity and nationalism would be far more important than any understanding of Confucianism, which had been used by the Chinese ruling class to regulate human relations in China for two thousand years. As Floyd Cheung observes, Yung’s work had drawn on the “discursive traditions established by autobiographers like Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington,” and Yung had tried to appropriate “the rhetoric of individual and national manliness popularized by Theodore Roosevelt to perform a problematic yet bold personal and political resistance” (2005b, 79). Such a resistance, I would add, was not directed just toward institutional racism and cultural prejudices in the United States but also to Western colonialism and imperialism in China. Like most Chinese Americans at that time, Yung subscribed to the idea that prejudices against Chinese Americans had been closely related to the weakened status of China as a nation-state. It was for that reason that Yung was outraged when he heard that “there is no room provided for Chinese students” at the US Military Academy at West Point or the US Naval Academy in Annapolis (1909, 207). Yung finally lashed out at racism, bigotry, and prejudices directed at the Chinese in the United States:

The race prejudice against the Chinese was so rampant and rank that not only my application for the students to gain entrance to Annapolis and West Point was treated with cold indifference and scornful hauteur, but the Burlington Treaty of 1868 was, without the least provocation, and contrary to all diplomatic precedents and common decency, trampled under foot unceremoniously and wantonly, and set aside as though no such treaty had ever existed, in order to make way for those acts of congressional discrimination against Chinese immigration which were pressed for immediate enactment. (ibid., 208)

Here Yung clearly related the incident to the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress and denounced racist laws together with the US imperialist approach to China. This also became the last straw for the Qing government, which would finally decide to abandon the Chinese Educational Mission and withdrew all its sponsored students from the United States in 1881.

From a new Chinese subject to a new vision of China, Yung not only implicitly addressed racism in US society and Western imperialism in semicolonial and semifeudal China, but he also related the well-being of Chinese
America to the status of China. What he sought was to create a new generation of Chinese subjects equipped with Western education, who would also serve as Chinese American intellectuals like himself. According to one Chinese historian, Yung exchanged letters in 1900 with Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, and volunteered to raise funds for Sun’s revolutionary project called “Red Dragon”—his attempt to overthrow the Qing dynasty and establish a modern Chinese republic. Yung was overjoyed to learn in 1911 that his dream had come true. He was invited to the Sun’s presidential inauguration, but his health deteriorated and he passed away on April 21, 1912.

**Rereading China, Rethinking Asian America**

By rereading early Chinese American autobiographical writing against the transnational background of colonial modernity in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, I suggest that Chinese Americans not only engaged the discourses of humanism and cosmopolitanism in the US context as a way to critique racism but also extended their critiques to semifeudal and semicolonial China as a way to save and modernize the Chinese nation-state. Such extended critiques of racism and imperialism marked the beginning of an Asian American consciousness as well as the emergence of Chinese American subjectivity in the transnational context. The political visions of Wong Chin Foo and Yan Phou Lee for a tolerant and multicultural US nation-state have gradually materialized as a result of the civil rights movements, including Asian American political activism, since the 1960s. Yung Wing’s dream of a new China has also been partially fulfilled since 1978, when the Chinese government announced its “reformation and open-door” (X. Zhang 2008, 2) policy and introduced Western science and technology into China. With the implementation of a capitalist mode of production and the integration of its economy into the US-centered global order, China has started playing a more important economic role on the global stage. However, as Arif Dirlik rightly points out, China’s modernity does not pose an alternative to global capitalism but rather serves as a hybrid model within the US-centered global order (2007, 144–45).

The recent paradigm shift in Asian American studies and the increasing Chinese interest in Yung and early Chinese American autobiographical writing both raise questions about how we should reconsider the interaction between the local and the global in Asian American literature and the transnational context of that interaction. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell redefine “American literature as world literature” (2007), and similarly early Chinese American autobiographical writing might serve as an example
of how ethnic American authors have tried since the late nineteenth century to negotiate Western discourses and to reinvent indigenous epistemologies as a locus of resistance to colonialism and capitalism on a planetary scale.

Notes

1. For essays on issues related to the paradigm shift, see Campomanes 1997; Koshy 1996; Mazumda 1991; S. Wong 1995.
3. For more on Lee and Yung, see Cheung 2005a and 2005b; Ling 2002; K. Wong 1998.
4. At Yung Wing’s suggestion, the Qing government established the Chinese Educational Mission at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1872 but recalled all the students in 1881. Yan Phou Lee was a student at the mission; Yung Wing served as its commissioner.
5. This book series was published by Yuelu Press in the 1980s.
6. At least ten books in Chinese have been published on Yung and his students by historians, critics, and journalists in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.
7. Tani Barlow (1997a and 1997b) proposed the notion of “colonial modernity,” and Shu-mei Shih (2001) further elaborated it as a critical concept to analyze the situation in China, roughly from 1840 to 1949.
8. See Mignolo 2002. He has now replaced the term “colonial difference” with a new one, “imperial difference.”
11. Kant wrote that “enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (1700, 54). He also wrote: “For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters” (ibid., 55).
15. See Kong 2007; Li Huaxing 2005.
16. See Bowen 1875, 108.
17. See Li Huaxing 2005.

Bibliography


