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The "strange affinities": early Chinese American Vaudevillians' blackface performance

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Abstract

At the first two decades of the early twentieth century, Chinese American vaudeville artists reinterpreted their appearances on stage by utilizing Black performative languages. As a consideration of commercial selection value and a direct response to American ethnic relations, Chinese American vaudeville performers picked black-themed cultural works to perform. The way in which the early performers portrayed Chineseness exploited the imposed stereotypical labels and indicated a self-consciousness among second-generation Chinese American on stage. However, these on-stage self-representations, though likely a response to Sinophobia, were more of a passive reaction than a conscious decision. Similarly to their African American counterparts, to succeed in vaudeville, early Chinese American vaudevillians had to negotiate between well-developed preconceptions and their own artistic desires, which required them to bear the burdens of the past's ugliness. Most of their performative languages, especially physical features, thus preserved the long-held stereotypes of Chinese people, such as the queue, the costume, etc.

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Introduction

Vaudeville, a theatrical genre with roots in Blackface minstrelsy, circus, and variety, became a well-placed entry point for such performers. As it evolved into variety performance, vaudeville likewise became more accessible for immigrant groups. Novelty was an essential attraction of the vaudeville performance; thus, native-born White, Black, and colored performers, could incorporate highly diverse musical and theatrical elements into their displays. Vaudeville shows, which first appeared in the 1880s, thus provided significant opportunities for immigrant performers to engage and introduce themselves within popular American venues.

At the first two decades of the early twentieth century, under the influence of Western educational background, second-generation performers embraced the American model of theater and music. The mode of vaudeville performance incorporated music, costuming, speech, impersonation, and dance. All offered Chinese performance a space of comparative racial tolerance, part of which resulted from nostalgia for Chinese opera. Before vaudeville theater accepted Chinese American actors, most Chinese American performers began their performance careers in community theater houses, expositions, exotic body displays, and acrobatic troupes (Moon, 2005). Even though unfavorable images and increasing prejudice prevented most Chinese performers from American stages, and even though some actors circumvented the strict laws, European-American audiences were not prepared for the presence of Chinese American actors on stage.

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Chinese American Vaudeville Pioneers

The vaudeville show primarily catered to urban working-class males, many of whom perceived the Chinese as alien labor competition. As a result, the novelty provided by imitations of "Oriental" voices and body languages satisfied White desire for exoticism, particularly when this performance reinforced stereotypical images of the Chinese community. The presence of Chinese American actors, on the other hand, had the potential to question racial attitudes at the time, and so ambivalence peaked when Chinese impersonated European Americans and sang American popular songs on stage.

The early Chinese American vaudeville performers faced such conflicting audience sentiment from the start. An assortment of Chinese impersonators, including the White and African American impersonators mentioned in the previous chapter, had already fulfilled the expectation of reaffirming the John Chinaman caricatures. Chinese newcomers were required to present a different level of novelty, one not limited to physical illustration of the John Chinaman figure, but which sought to entertain more creatively. Some of these early Chinese vaudeville performers succeeded, creating successful performances that satisfied the imagined caricatures of Chinese immigrants and expectations of conformity with American values.

As one of the earliest Chinese American singers on the vaudeville stage, Lee Tung Foo (1875-1966) paved the way for more effectively and creatively shaping Chinese Americans' cultural representations. While his body maintained the physical manifestation of anti-Chinese stereotype, he introduced the singing of operatic and popular songs and ethnic impersonations into his stage performance. From his first appearance on stage in 1905, his combination of singing and ethnic impersonations became the trademark of Lee Tung Foo, and subsequently for much other Chinese/Asian American vaudeville performance (Moon, 2005).

Performing race was central to Lee's act. The most avant-garde practice with which he experimented on the vaudeville stage was to subvert the image of the Chinese American and more directly address Chinese issues. A critic from *Variety* wrote, "appearing in his native garb…[he] presented a picturesque appearance" ("New Acts," p.8). Lee's act, the critic realized, generated a more appealing image of the Chinese than caricatures based on laundrymen, maids, or opium addicts. As Moon observes, Lee had sung highly virtuosic Western operatic works, such as "Pro Peccatis Suae Gentis" from Gioacchino Rossini's *Stabat Mater* (1837) and Carl Bohm's "Still wie die Nacht" (n.d.) (Moon, 2005). One of his signature vaudeville acts consisted of a Scottish caricature, during which Lee performed in Whiteface and sang traditional and popular Scottish songs as part of the comic impersonation (Slide, 2012, p.301, see figure 1).

Figure 1.

Lee Tung Foo in traditional Scottish Highlander costume, 1920s (Courtesy of California State Library)

But his innovations were challenged by both Chinese American and Euro-American audiences. Based on Lee Tung Foo's letter to Margaret Blake Alverson, while it was not uncommon to have Chinese American audiences during the 1910s, after watching Lee boldly singing Euro-American popular songs and impersonate other ethnic groups, community leaders' anxiety worsened (Lee, 1914). They feared that such bold representations might invoke even harsher anti-Chinese backlash. At the same time, there was critique which stemmed from bitter memories of the stereotypical Chinese image that Lee had presented on stage. Lee Tung Foo's vaudeville displays were likewise perceived to be a violation of White dominance. The presumed-incapable Chinese, who were both cultural and political outsiders, were impersonating Euro-American songs and characters.

Nevertheless, early Chinese American vaudeville actors inspired by Lee Tung Foo began to incorporate more elements of Western culture into their stage performances. The Chung Hwa Comedy Four, which included Lee Tung Foo's brother Harry Lee as a member, closely mimicked American barbershop style in clothing, dialect, and singing style. These performers also blended Christian doctrines and democratic values into their performances to cater to Euro-American audiences. Words from Christian doctrine, in particular, were frequently borrowed. At the same time, early actors deliberately retained stereotypical images of the Chinese culture, such as the caricatured accent, title and lyrics that suggested Chinatown, Chinese attire, and scene (Moon, 2005, p.155).

Despite such attempts at artistic compromise, Whites saw early Chinese vaudeville performers as a threat to the Euro-American-dominated stage, particularly those who pretended to be White. Such performance was viewed by Whites as undermining Anglo-Saxon values, and the situation deteriorated, when Sinophobia, sometimes known as the "yellow peril," became a national event

Figure 2.
Lee Tung Foo in Traditional Chinese Dress, 1921 (Courtesy of the California State Library)

The way in which the early performers portrayed Chineseness exploited the imposed stereotypical labels and indicated a self-consciousness among second-generation Chinese American on stage. However, these on-stage self-representations, though likely a response to Sinophobia, were more of a passive reaction than a conscious decision. Similarly to their African American counterparts, to succeed in vaudeville, early Chinese American vaudevillians had to negotiate between well-developed preconceptions and their own artistic desires, which required them to bear the burdens of the past's ugliness. Most of their performative languages, especially physical features, thus preserved the long-held stereotypes of Chinese people, such as the queue, the costume, etc. (see figure 2). The decision to sing

European and American music on stage was thus not based on personal taste, but rather on market forces and the preferences of Euro-American audiences.

Blackface Performance in Chinese American Vaudeville Shows

Chinese vaudeville actors were obliged to innovate and adapt their performance style. Worries about Chinese people's capacity to play and ridicule White culture on stage grew, and the performance style that mechanically integrated "Oriental" bodies with American popular tunes progressively lost its novelty. The turning point of the Chinese American vaudeville acts started from their revolutions in on-stage skin colors. As Homi Nhabha suggests, skin [onstage] as "a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible" (Nhabha, 1983). Skin color reinforced or contradicted stereotypes, and was important in conveying performative language both vocally and physically. As archival material shows, early Chinese American vaudeville artists were among the first non-White performers to vary their stage personas musically and theatrically by transforming skin color.

While Lee Tung Foo's Scottish impersonation of revealing Whiteface on stage was a commercially successful production, it was still a socially and culturally controversial work. As the racial and social status of European immigrant groups had improved, they were reluctant to be caricature by an inferior race. Furthermore, as the music can be regarded as a manifestation of civilization, for the marginalized Chinese to sing European tunes on stage, undoubtedly, was unacceptable. As an anonymous reporter commented on *Keith's News,* "everyone scoffed at the idea, for it is a well-known fact that the Chinese scale has only a few tones, and the music of China is a clash and discord that would be anything but acceptable to American theatergoers. Then how could we expect them to sing properly, or dance to the tune ("Baritone," p.3-4)?"

African Americans, however, were in a similar racial situation to the Chinese, and both were subjected to a rigorous racial politics. In literature, music, and theater works of the time, both colored groups were frequently compared and contrasted racially. The "strange affinities" were attributed to the two race groups, each used to demonize the other culturally and politically, reiterating racial differences, and asserting superiority over the other. Although largely driven and influenced by White bias, African-American artists and artists often chose to exploit the stereotypical image of the Chinese as a platform to emphasize their own racial superiority and to reinforce the Chinese's foreign attributes. Conversely, just as African Americans had done at the turn of the century, a number of Chinese American vaudeville actors subversively converted Blackness on stage.

As the daughter of the magician Ching Ling Foo, Chee Toy was one of the earliest Chinese performers to sing Black-themed coon songs. She debuted with her father's magic show in 1912, singing Robert E. Lee's plantation song "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee." According to *Billboard*, "The little Chinese Miss [Chee Toy] sung it with a purity of diction many American soubrettes may emulate ("Vaudeville reviews," p.10)." At her Philadelphia show the following year, George M. Young praised her performance: "The cute little Chee Toy, who sings coon songs; and instrumental quartet that is funnier than Buckle and Watsons's band (Young, p.27)." In addition to singing coon songs in her father's magic show, Chee Toy also did splendid performances by singing ragtime tunes, including the popular hits "Row. Row, Row" and "Hitchy Koo ("Performance," 1913)." *Variety* remarked Miss Chee Toy "was the only one of the troupes who made the last pilgrimage to this country with Ching [and] sang a rag song in English ("Ching," p.16)."

Following Chee Toy's use of coon songs and ragtime music in her father's magic performances, another group of vaudeville performers went even further in combining Black music and African American impersonation. From 1918 to 1927, Yen Wah performed Blackface impersonations on the vaudeville stage. In his early performances, he used a similar approach to Lee Tung Foo and Chee Toy's acts. Before making his mark as one of the first African-Chinese artists, Yen Wah was more likely to sing ragtime songs with traditional Chinese costumes. As a report in 1921 wrote:

Yen Wah la a Chinese, apparently about 18 or 21 years old. In native Chinese costume, he opens with a pop number, sung in perfect English, with just the slightest trace of Oriental accent. An announcement precedes a Chink lullaby sung in the Chinese language. Right here, the youthful Celestial overlooked a bet by not asking the audience to join in the second chorus with him. The suggestion is made for what it is worth, for a laugh. Another pop number of the raggy variety and a fast tempo pop song to close, both sung in English, with the second chorus of the closing song, sung in Chinese. Yeh Wah has a good voice as voices go with Chinamen, and sticks on the proper key throughout his numbers. He does a bit of talking here and there. That part could be amplified as he delivers talk well. A first-rate novelty turns for the small-time as it stands, with possibilities for development ("New acts," 1921, p.21).

Yeh Wah was able to intermix popular tunes in his show and also had the ability to employ the stand-up comedy format proficiently. Such performance delivered a typical image of the bicultural identity of the second-generation Chinese American. Yen Wah preserved the yellowface costume and appearance while performing songs outside the Chinese culture. Despite the novelty of his performing ragtime tunes in Chinese attire, critics in the same volume argued his performance "did little to gain attention." The reporter even said, "Yen secured some with his rag and jazz tunes, but the early part [of the act] was almost completely lost (ibid)."

Another article in the *New York Clipper* likewise gave Yen Wah a negative comment: "Apparently, Wah believes himself very funny, and in this regard; few audiences will care to share. He should appear a little less confident, inject some comedy into the routine, and confine his dress to the American style." This article also pointed out that Wah's performative language was outdated, insisting that "a Chinese dress is no longer a novelty. The "Oriental" performer wears the American clothes neatly. As the act stands now, it will do only for the average small-time house." As a result, Yen Wah, like Lee Tung Foo, was forced to update his performative language or risk being displaced by more ambitious peers. Though Wah billed himself as "the Chinese jazz boy," blending Chinese melodies with jazz and frequently switching between Chinese and American costumes, his efforts were frustrated in light of audiences' increasingly updated tastes (J.L, p.25).

From 1922, Yen Wah began to play on stage with Chan/Shun Tock as a duo. Wah decided to experiment with a new way of performing after receiving negative feedback on his solo show, and the duo began exploring with Blackface makeup and Black dance. In January 1922, a critic from *Variety* noted these shifts: "Two men of dark complexion, who wear Chinese togs and have some oriental appearance, do what amounts to a Negro specialty." The authenticity of the duo's Blackface performance and attempts to imitate Black dance were also discussed in the article, which acknowledged their "singing 'blues' numbers with a lilt and swing sufficiently authentic to mark them as colored men and executing a cakewalk ("New acts," 1922, p.21, see figure 3)." A report in the *New York Clipper* praised their attempts as "a novel offering and [suggested they] had no trouble in meeting with success ("Vaudeville," 1922, p.11)."

Figure 3.
"Shun Tock & Yen Wah" ("Shun," 1922, p.17)

The Chinese Minstrel

The Chinese minstrel show, as represented by Chung Mei's Blackface comedy, was a much more comprehensive and exact replica of Blackface minstrelsy. In the 1920s, the Chung Mei minstrels were lauded as "the only Chinese

Blackface troupe in existence" and were said to be strikingly true to the lives of southern Blacks (see figure 4 and 5). As a comedy group that mainly flourished on the West Coast California, the Chung Mei Minstrels comprised over forty Chinese students, mainly orphans or half-orphans sponsored and raised by the Chung Mei Home and the First Baptist Church of Selma in California.

Figure 4.
"Chung Mei Minstrels" ("Chung," 1928, p.5)

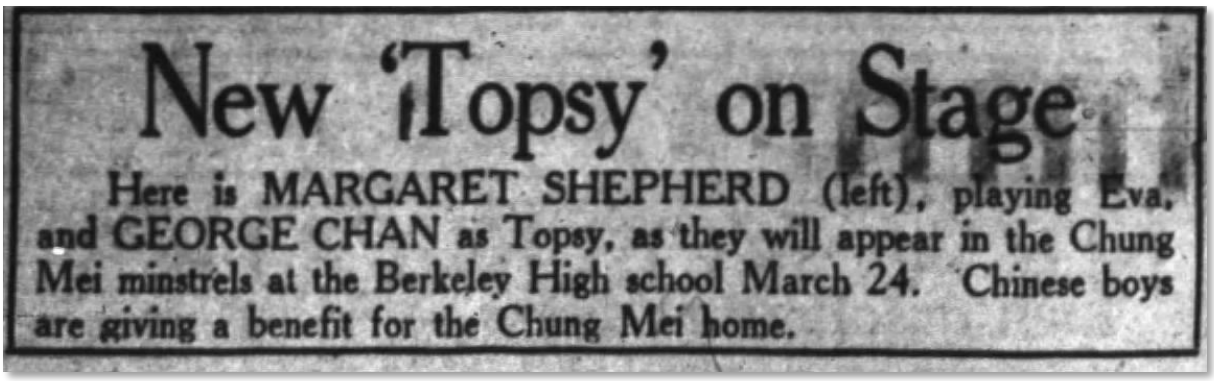


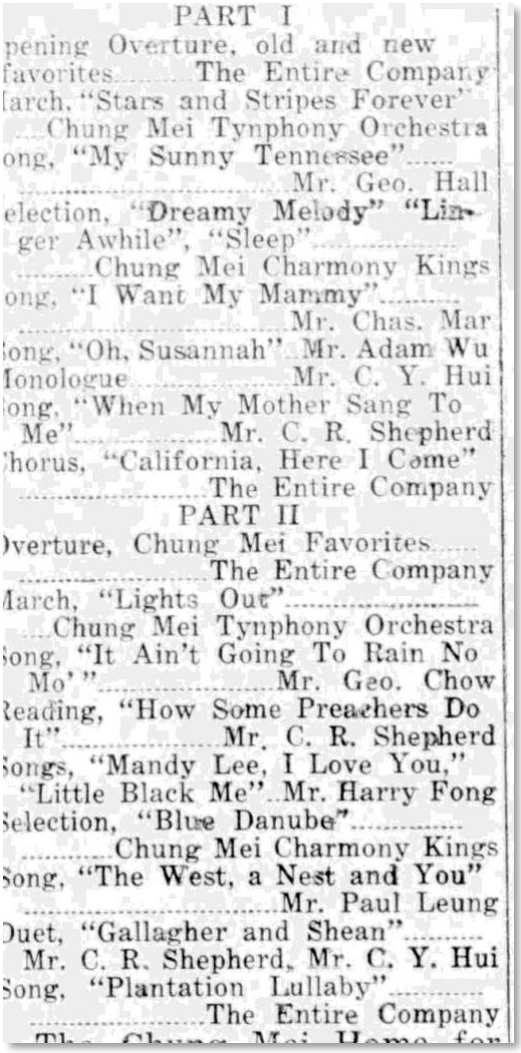
Figure 5.
"New 'Topsy' on Stage" ("Topsy," 1928, p.47)

The group started their performances in Rochester, New York in 1921. The bill described Chung Mei Minstrels' new "Oriental" production of *The Mikado* and suggested that their minstrel show had supplanted "the former circle of ebony-hued entertainers and their songs about Dixie land ("Blackface," 1921, p.4)." Chung Mei Minstrels' songs included a wide range of music types, especially Tin Pan Alley hits adapted with Chinese subjects.

Listen! Instead of the usual list of songs about longing for Ol 'Carolina' and 'Sunny Alabama,' the minstrel chorus of unenduring and coolie men sang. "Ching-a-ling Jazz Bazaar," "The Red Lantern," "So Long OO-Long," "Chinese Lullaby," "Chong," and "Ching-a-Ling." Miss Mary Swain sang "Tea Leaves," and Miss Beatrice Balliagner and Miss Louise Ramsbeck sang a duet, "The Rose of China." The setting was unique, showing the interior of a tea house. The background consisted of a number of attractive Chinese screens, and the chorus squatted around on the floor, sipping tea during the performance. After the last Chinese chorus was sung, there was dancing on the fourth floor of the association building (ibid).

After their initial success in New York, the Chung Mei Minstrels evolved into a more comprehensively "Black" minstrel group. During their performance in Hanford, California in 1928, the Chinese boys from a school in Berkeley presented Chinese "Blackface" songsters, including "Popular ballades, negro melodies and jokes constituted the first part of the performance." The second part of the show consisted of "pictured southern plantation life during the World War in a patriotic manner. And 'Do Re Mi' sung by 'Topsy and Eva' was the hit of the evening ("Chinese minstrels," 1928, p.4)."

Figure 6 reproduces the regular program schedule in two parts of the Chung Mei Minstrels' performance in 1925. The show consisted of songs, solos, duets, and ensembles accompanied by orchestra, as well as a patriotic musical sketch entitled "Stars and Stripes Forever," with the cast in blackened faces and "darky" costumes.



PART I

pening Overture, old and new favorites.....The Entire Company
larch, "Stars and Stripes Forever"
...Chung Mei Tynphony Orchestra
ong, "My Sunny Tennessee".....
.....Mr. Geo. Hall
election, "Dreamy Melody" "Lin-
ger Awhile", "Sleep".....
.....Chung Mei Charmony Kings
ong, "I Want My Mammy".....
.....Mr. Chas. Mar
ong, "Oh, Susannah"..Mr. Adam Wu
Ionologue.....Mr. C. Y. Hui
ong, "When My Mother Sang To
Me".....Mr. C. R. Shepherd
horus, "California, Here I Come"
.....The Entire Company

PART II

)verture, Chung Mei Favorites.....
.....The Entire Company
Iarch, "Lights Out".....
...Chung Mei Tynphony Orchestra
ong, "It Ain't Going To Rain No
Mo'".....Mr. Geo. Chow
Reading, "How Some Preachers Do
It".....Mr. C. R. Shepherd
ongs, "Mandy Lee, I Love You,"
"Little Black Me"..Mr. Harry Fong
election, "Blue Danube".....
.....Chung Mei Charmony Kings
ong, "The West, a Nest and You"
.....Mr. Paul Leung
)uet, "Gallagher and Shean".....
Mr. C. R. Shepherd, Mr. C. Y. Hui
ong, "Plantation Lullaby".....
.....The Entire Company

Figure 6.
The program of Chung Mei Minstrels ("Chung Mei," 1925, p.5)

Nee Wong

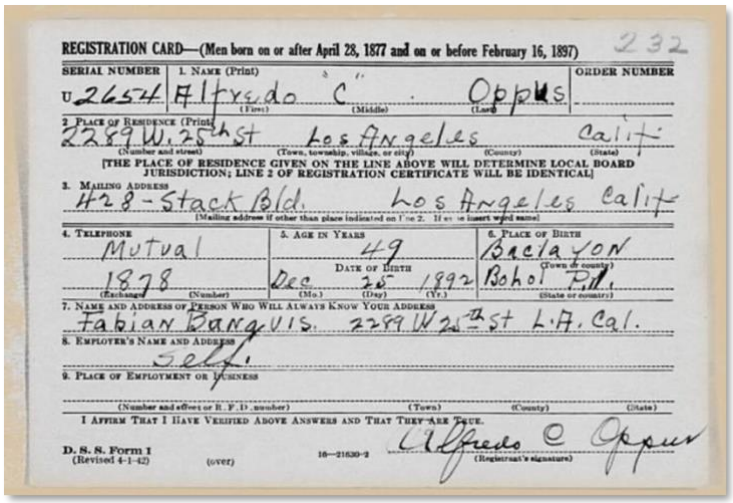
The most accomplished "Chinese" vaudeville actor to embody Black music on stage was paradoxically not Chinese. Nee Wong was one of the most active "Chinese" performers during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. He was called "The Original Chinese Ukelele Ike," "The Gentleman of the Orient," or sometimes "The Chinese Jazz Boy." Nee Wong had broadcast on a Hawaii radio station before he arrived New York, and before becoming a vaudeville actor in late 1925, Wong had toured in Beijing in a string of successful ukulele performances.

Yet based on a registration card that was found in 1942, he was in fact born in Baclayon, a province of Bohol in the Philippines, in 1892. The card also indicates that his real name was Alfredo C. Oppus (see figure 7). Alfredo Oppus had in fact been his stage name, until he changed it to Nee Wong, according to a 1938 article (see figure 8). Thus, Oppus was born in the Philippines and raised in Hawaii, until later in his acting career, he reappeared on stage as a Chinese.

Using other Asian groups to imitate and perform Chinese was not in fact uncommon during the early decades of the twentieth century. As Lee Tung Foo mentioned in his letter to Alverson, "some of these performers [so called

"Chinese American" vaudeville actors] were not really Chinese, even if they were or were of mixed heritage (Lee, 1915)." The trend of mixed-race figure in American culture was a staple in nineteenth-century cultural works (Williams-Leon and Nakashima, 2001, p.37). "Mulatto" (primarily Black/White), "half-blood" (Native American-White), and "Eurasian" (European/Asian) were frequently used to reflect certain social, political, and economic concerns of Americans (ibid, p.37). At the turn of the century, the mixed-race Asian figure (primarily Eurasian characters) were extensively utilized to illustrate the racial and cultural superiority of Whites over Asians, as well as the "unassimilability" of Asians. The purpose of such figure thus echoed the nationwide "yellow peril" sentiment. As some American expansionists stated, in the face of indisputable White American superiority, the inferior races would either die out or be eradicated (Horsman, 1981, p.247).

The same mixed-race trend can also be witnessed in theatre industry at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Moon, although the vast majority of Chinese American performers were second generation, a small proportion of vaudeville performers, who always billed themselves as Chinese, were the offspring of mixed marriages (Moon, 2005, p.146).



REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after April 28, 1877 and on or before February 16, 1897) 232

SERIAL NUMBER U 2654 | 1. NAME (Print): Alfredo C. Oppus | ORDER NUMBER

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print): 2289 W. 25th St. Los Angeles Calif.
(Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)
[THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE GIVEN ON THE LINE ABOVE WILL DETERMINE LOCAL BOARD JURISDICTION; LINE 2 OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE WILL BE IDENTICAL]

3. MAILING ADDRESS: 428 - Stack Bld. Los Angeles Calif.
(Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same)

4. TELEPHONE: Mutual 1878 (Exchange) (Number)

5. AGE IN YEARS: 49. DATE OF BIRTH: Dec. 25 1892 (Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)

6. PLACE OF BIRTH: Bacla yon (Town or county) Bohol P.I. (State or country)

7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS: Fabian Bang U.S. 2289 W. 25th St L.A. Cal.

8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS: Self.

9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS
(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.
(Registrant's signature) Alfredo C Oppus

D. S. S. Form 1 (Revised 4-1-42) (over) 16—21630-2

Figure 7.
The Birth Certificate of Nee Wong, 1942 (Courtesy of California State Library)

United Press Staff Correspondent

MANILA, P. I., Nov. 7 (1938)

Another Vaudeville Assistant

She alternates with Alfredo Oppus, who likes to tell about the youthful days when he changed his name to Nee Wong and appeared on an American vaudeville circuit with a ukelele and an imitation Chinese dialect.

Full-page advertisements in the Manila newspapers proclaim Moncado's campaign methods with full frankness.

Figure 8.
"Another Vaudeville Assistant" ("Assistant," 1938)

Figure 9.
The portrait of Nee Wong (Case and Sponable, 1924-25)

Nee Wong's economic and musical success was based on his Chinese character and impersonation. He was the first vaudeville actor that was labeled as "a Chinese minstrel ("Apprentice," 1925)." Yet despite the fact that it was billed as a Chinese minstrel show, Nee Wong's performance had little to do with Blackface, and instead focused on a performative manner that utilized the dynamics, but not the portraits, of minstrelsy. On stage he projected a classical image of a yellowface musician playing popular American songs (see figure 9). Through this portrayal, Nee Wong became one of the most well-known Chinese/Asian performers, landing him on the list of the most authoritative vaudeville magazine—the Yearbook of the National Vaudeville Artists, published in 1928 (see figure 10).

This combination of a Chinese figure with Black music on the vaudeville stage received a considerable number of endorsements, and music critics and reporters were impressed by the novelty of the exotic combination. The majority of accounts linked Nee Wong to music with African-American roots, including blues, ragtime, and jazz. At the same time, some reports focused on his distinct persona as a "Chinese." For example, a critic from *Exhibitors Herald* wrote,

Then we had Nee Wong, a flash Oriental who can give some of the best "blues" singers points. Wong's business is funny, and his singing is top-notch. After hearing him sing "Ukelele Lady" in English and then in Chinese, anyone who still doubts the strong Oriental seasoning in American jazz has Thomas outdone by many 'I wonder.' This boy can also pound a uke with the best of them. For an encore, he sang 'If You Knew Susie.' And the crowd hammered for more. He was the only extra performer encored ("Nee," 1925).

This report dates from the early days of his acting career, and clearly perpetuates prejudices against Chinese playing music which had been in place since the period of Lee Tung Foo. The writer dismissed Chinese musicians' musical abilities, but complimented Nee Wong as "one of the great blues singers" merely because he could play the classic jazz instrument, the ukulele.

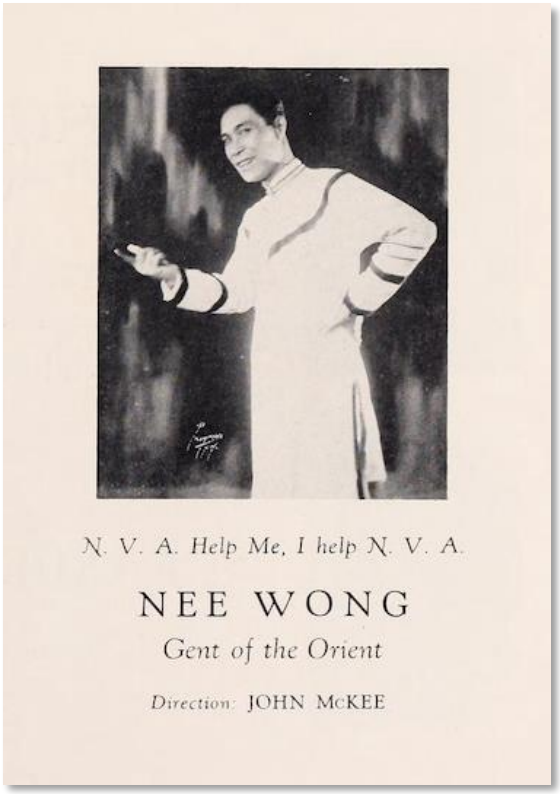


Figure 10.
Nee Wong in National Vaudeville Artists' Year Book ("National vaudeville," 1928, p.168)

A comment in 1927 echoes the repudiation of the musical ability of the Chinese community: "Chinese, as a rule, do not go in for comedy and singing." But it continued the description on the contrary side,

Nee Wong is a gentleman from the Orient…[and] the exception. He has a program of popular songs, one of which is sung in Chinese for comedy purposes only. Mr. Wong carries his accompaniment, a ukulele, which he handled as if he were born with it in his hands ("Nee," 1927, p.21).

In order to highlight the novelty and success of this cultural mixture, a writer from *The Kansas City Times* even differentiated Nee Wong from the nostalgic term "coolie" in order to stress his uniqueness,

In the first-class, one may place Nee Wong, a ukulele-playing Chinese who admits he is too lazy to be an acrobat or juggler. Nee Wong has an occidental fondness for satire and he neither spares the coolies back home nor the dance hall sheiks of the U.S.A in his impersonations of moon-catfish young men ("Nee," 1927, p.11).

These compliments on Nee Wong are paradoxical. A vaudeville actor who was acclaimed as "The Chinese Ragman" played "Chinese Blues" was not a Chinese in terms of nationality. And yet it was not unusual for Chinese audiences to attend his working class-based vaudeville show. As Lee Tung Foo had said, Chinese audiences were eager to see their cultural representations on stage, and Chinese American audiences were in fact most likely to attend one of Nee Wong's shows.

As the only extant video indicates, Nee Wong frequently added Cantonese and Chinese tones, while playing and singing American popular songs. Thus, if Chinese American audiences paid close attention, they would notice that the Cantonese tones or Chinese songs he used in the show were mere imitations, without the idiom of a native speaker. To put it another way, a Filipino was cast to play a Chinese character, with this fictitious character singing Black music, and the media praised and even promoted the mix, to Chinese-American audiences who were willing participants in the onstage fiction.

Conclusion

The link between African American and Chinese Diasporas in the United States has infrequently received attention from historians. But African Americans do appear and play a vital role in constructing the racial history and Chinese diasporic identity in North America. This article has sought to address the racial and cultural dynamics between African Americans and Chinese immigrants, as depicted in performance, in this period. Black cultural productions which appeared in diverse forms were employed and adapted by racial groups in different ways.

Restricted by racial position, political circumstances, and cultural barriers, Chinese Americans were rarely active participants in producing the exaggerated and expanded figure of Chinese in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Prior to the second generation of Chinese Americans, who consciously "performed" themselves on stage, the Chinese cultural products that appeared in mainstream American had been dominated by traditional Chinese theater. However, the values delivered by Chinese and Cantonese opera troupes were not readily accepted by American audiences. In response, the second generation of Chinese Americans chose to contest stereotypes by employing their bodies on the vaudeville stage. As a racially-based art form, the minstrel show's Blackface legacy was appropriated by Chinese American performers. Throughout Blackface performance and musical representation, Chinese Americans confirmed their capacity for inclusion by culturally assimilating American art forms and seeking to redefine and reshape the figure of the Chinese on stage.

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