

Fitting In Space: Rose Hum Lee's Negotiation of Assimilation and Citizenship in America

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The Pages of History

In commenting on his own research in Chinese American history, Him Mark Lai, an important shaper of Asian American history said, "in spite of all the new areas that had been probed, there are still too many blank pages, and even more that are incomplete or poorly defined, that await further delineation."¹ One of these incomplete pages is the study of native-born Chinese Americans in the 1950s. Studies on Chinese Americans in the 1950s, like those of Jack Chen and Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, tend to emphasize a more general picture of Chinese American history. For example, in *The Chinese of America*, Chen provided information on the urbanization of Chinese Americans and the problems they had with the various immigration law changes from the 1940s to the 1950s.² Tsai, in *The Chinese Experience of America*, gave information on sex ratios of the Chinese population and the expanding opportunities that were available to the Chinese after World War II.³ However, away from these more general pictures of Chinese American history are individual lives that, when explored, can provide a key to better understanding the historical experience of the Chinese Americans in the 1950s. The history of Chinese Americans' individual negotiations of how to fit into America are missing from these pages of history, and a careful examination of these negotiations can fill in the spaces left empty by the more general narratives of Chinese American history.

In order to provide another angle to the general presentation of Chinese American history in the 1950s, this paper will perform a textual analysis of the correspondence from Rose Hum Lee to her daughter, Elaine Lee, and selected published writings by Lee.⁴ This limited study of a concentrated core of Rose Hum Lee's letters is meant to provide a glimpse into the past in order to better understand one angle in the historical experience of native-born Chinese Americans in the 1950s. A study of Lee's individual negotiation of the spaces represented by Chinatown and white America will shed light on how those negotiations resulted in her subsequent attitudes on assimilation and citizenship. Therefore, this paper will examine the way Lee negotiated the meanings of the spaces she occupied, how she comprehended who and which space was American or un-American, and how she understood assimilation and citizenship in relation to one's level of American-ness. Finally, this examination of Lee, with the guidance of Aihwa Ong and Lisa Lowe's contention of cultural citizenship, culminates in a direct critique of Jurgen Habermas' notion of a civil religion that would integrate people equally into the nation-state.

In his essay, "The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," Habermas notes that the term nation has "the connotation of a political community shaped by common descent, at the minimum by a common language, culture, and history."⁵ Habermas then argues that a nation-state, such as the United States, "can assume and maintain a republican form even without the support of such a culturally homogeneous population," if the legal protection of citizenship rights functioning as a civil religion took the place of the organic nature of the nation.⁶ This normative theory of the equal social integration of people into the nation-state based on legal citizenship is too simplistic. An examination of Lee's negotiation of American-ness and her subsequent preoccupation with assimilation will demonstrate that Habermas' theory of equal integration does not fully take into account the complications introduced by factors like culture, race, and ethnicity.

¹ Him Mark Lai, "Musings of a Chinese American Historian," in *Amerasia Journal* 26.1 (2000): 22.

² Jack Chen, *The Chinese of America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980): 196-213.

³ Shi-Shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986): 147-149.

⁴ Approximately 260 letters are in the collection of Rose Hum Lee's personal papers and the bulk of the correspondence begins in 1958 and ends in 1963. With the limits of this paper in mind, only a select few that best demonstrate the core of Lee's attitudes and perspectives will be used in this research. The bulk of the sample letters chosen for analysis are mostly from 1958 because that was when Lee first expressed, most strongly, her feelings regarding the spaces represented by Chinatown and white America in her personal letters. This was also the time when her trouble and paranoia with Chinatown harassment was starting to increase significantly so her feelings were even more magnified. Lee's published writings are chosen according to their relevance in showing Lee's attitude towards the difference between Chinatown and America and her ideas regarding assimilation and citizenship. Copies of this collection are in the possession of Henry Yu and the original collection is currently in the author's possession and being processed for library use.

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, "The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," in *Public Culture* 10 (1998): 399.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 405.

The Worlds of Rose Hum Lee

Born in 1904 in Butte, Montana, Rose Hum Lee was a second-generation Chinese American who came of age in the 1920s. After graduating from high school in 1921, she soon married Ku Young Lee, a China-born student at the University of Pennsylvania, and lost her US citizenship for marrying an alien who was ineligible for citizenship. She went with him to China after his graduation, and they lived mainly in the Canton area, but marriage and life in China proved to be an unpleasant experience for Lee. Her husband's family constantly criticized her for not being able to conceive a child, something they felt was her duty as a woman, and the marriage ended in divorce with Lee returning to the United States. Upon her return from the ten-year stay in China in 1939, Lee reenrolled in college, got her Bachelor's degree in 1942 from the Carnegie Institute of Technology, received a Master's degree from the University of Chicago in 1943, and finished her PhD in sociology there in 1947. Roosevelt College, a progressive institution that emphasized higher education for anyone regardless of creed or color, recruited Lee to join their sociology faculty, and Lee began her professorship there at the same time that the college opened its doors in 1945. Lee became the first woman and first Chinese American to head a department at an American university when she was promoted to the position of chairman in the sociology department in 1956, and she remained at Roosevelt College until 1962 when she went on leave to teach at Phoenix College. A prolific sociologist and a well-respected educator and lecturer, Lee did numerous studies on the Chinese in America, as well as other studies on cities and urbanization from the 1940s until her death in 1964.⁷

However, behind this profile, Rose Hum Lee had a very interesting experience that is relatively unknown to historians who write about her.⁸ In 1952, Lee married Glenn Ginn, a Chinese American lawyer, but Ginn's messy divorce from his China-born wife resulted in the ex-wife claiming the divorce was fraudulent in 1957. Lee complained that in helping the ex-wife obtain a fair settlement, Chinatown associations, especially those in Tucson, were using communist pressure tactics like monitoring her and Ginn's movement, intercepting their mail, and giving them unwanted phone calls. So, from 1957 to 1964, Lee and Ginn were continuously harassed by Chinatown, and the couple was forced to live apart in order to alleviate the harassment, with Lee in Chicago and Ginn in Tucson. In her personal letters and in the introduction to *The Chinese in the USA*, Lee indicated that she believed Chinatown used the divorce as an excuse to harass them for exposing details about Chinatown to outsiders like white Americans. According to Lee, the harassment was due to Ginn's unwillingness to stay quiet about Chinatown's dubious activities in Tucson and elsewhere in the United States. Her research and writings on the Chinese were also a suspected reason for the harassment because they were seen as a betrayal of the Chinese's secrets. This conflict caused Lee to reach a near state of paranoia about Chinatown activities and their threat to her life, as well as Ginn and her daughter's safety, and she was very unhappy with Chinatown for this disruption in her life. Consequently, Chinatown and the world outside of Chinatown became very distinct spaces for Rose Hum Lee.

Belonging to Space

In Rose Hum Lee's mind, there existed two distinct worlds that she was forced to repeatedly traverse: the world of America and Chinatown. "Mine is the 'marginal generation'...neither Chinese nor all American,"⁹ wrote Rose Hum Lee. Lee's use of the term marginality referred to the spaces and cultures represented by Chinatown and America, and her sense of belonging to those spaces. She felt that she did not fully belong to Chinatown because, even though she was Chinese and knew the language and customs, she did not conform to their lifestyle. Yet Lee did not feel that she fully belonged to America either because even though she legally and culturally identified herself as American, her placement in America was unstable due to her ethnicity. However, the harassment Lee experienced from the Chinese in Chinatown magnified her understanding of the difference between the spaces inside and outside of Chinatown, and consequently affected her attitude about Chinese assimilation and citizenship in America. Lee's dilemma of marginality in regards to cultural and spatial belonging is a contradiction to Habermas' belief in the equal integration of people into the nation-state based on a civil religion.

⁷ Biographical information on Rose Hum Lee was cited from biographical profiles from the materials in her collection of personal papers and Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

⁸ The only study to mention Lee's trouble with Chinatown from the 1950s to 1960s is Yu, *Thinking Orientals*.

⁹ Rose Hum Lee. Letter by author, 8 November 1955. Lee's personal correspondence is currently in the author's possession. Copies are in Henry Yu's possession.

The Space of Chinatown

Rose Hum Lee detested the existence of Chinatown and disliked its separatist construction. In her book, *The Chinese of the USA*, Lee wrote that Chinatown was different from other communities because it “attempt[s] to maintain a set of distinctive institutions, such as Chinese churches, tongs or Merchants’ Associations, stores selling curios...shops handling the few items of Chinese merchandise...and restaurants catering to a dwindling clientele.”¹⁰ Chinatown had its own associations, churches, businesses, and networks that required little contact with non-Chinese, and Lee detested this because she felt these were separatist actions that contributed to Chinatown’s isolation and inability to assimilate into American culture. If the Chinese continued separating themselves into these spaces, then their assimilation would never be possible. Thus, Lee saw Chinatown as a fermenting space for the unassimilated to seclude themselves in order to recycle their old-fashioned traditions and to avoid assimilation.

Besides being a haven for unassimilated Chinese, Lee also often painted Chinatown as a dangerous place without any respect for the law. In telling her daughter about Ginn being harassed by Chinatown, Lee wrote:

What got me worried was the dogging of his trail and that one or many of the men involved are Tong members. Pop’s life would be in danger and I had visions of his being shot and his freedom restricted. It is restricted and I do not sanction the Chinese taking the law into their own hands.¹¹

These images of tongs hunting them down and the paranoia over what the tongs might do appeared repeatedly in Lee’s personal letters. To Lee, Chinatown was a lawless place separated from the rest of America, and the people within that space had no respect for the law. Moreover, Chinatown’s seclusion from America, which hindered the Chinese’s assimilation, was the reason for the continual existence of the lawless tongs and their illegal activities.

To Rose Hum Lee, Chinatown was a lawless, separatist, and un-American place, but ironically, Lee was forced to return and interact with Chinatown for her research as a sociologist. Part of Lee’s value as a Chinese American sociologist, within a field dominated by white male academicians and white audiences, was her role as an interpreter for the Chinese to white Americans. For that reason, Lee had to study and interact with the Chinese in Chinatown in order to keep her value as the middleman. The majority of Lee’s research was based on the Chinese communities in America and she was often invited to do lectures on Chinese art and customs, the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), and, of course, the Chinese in America. Lee enjoyed her lectures on Chinese art and customs and made a lucrative career from them as well as from selling assorted Chinese curios afterwards.¹² What she disliked, however, were the Chinese in Chinatown who, in her opinion, were not making a good faith effort to assimilate into American society. She saw Chinatown as a space that was infested by “village women, recent arrivals from China who use tears—suicide threat tactics to get what they want, etc.” and tongs that did “their worst [through]...pressures, threats, extortion of money, and support of parasites.”¹³ Instead of assimilating and reforming their immoral ways, the Chinatown Chinese were holding onto their old ways and not changing their involvement in illegal activities like gambling, smuggling, and illegal immigration, and Lee felt that the arrival of new Chinese from China was aggravating the problem. With these new immigrants, Lee felt that “another generation has to go by before the children of these newly arrived families will be weaned away from Chinatown life.”¹⁴ Chinatown was the unprogressive ghetto that was reluctant to give up its attachment to tradition and immoral activities, and its salvation would only come through the American-born generation.

Although Lee disliked association with Chinatown, she was motivated to do her research on the Chinese in order to show America the difference between the Chinese that were inside and outside of Chinatown. In describing the ignorance of Americans, Lee wrote:

What makes it hard for Americans to believe is that the suave Chinese who stage operatic performances and spend such large sums on this can be gamblers or tong people...The Americans would think of what the Chinese cling to as exotic and quaint and they don’t look behind what is presented for them to see. A pity!¹⁵

¹⁰ Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese of the United States of America* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1960): 68.

¹¹ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

¹² Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 159.

¹³ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

¹⁴ Letter by author, 23 April 1958.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Again, Lee saw Chinatown as a place filled with conniving and scheming Chinese, but she also saw them as putting up pretenses to hide their vices from ignorant Americans. As a result, Lee saw her research as revealing “a side which the larger society does not see and the frustrated persons do not want the [Americans] to know.”¹⁶ (8 Jan. 1958). It was Lee’s mission to reveal to America that Chinatown was not simply a harmless exotic tourist attraction, but rather a place of many vices that were hidden from the average unsuspecting observer. “While a person who speaks the truth is unpopular and subjected to pressures, in the long run the others have to learn it’s better to come out with hidden practices,” wrote Lee.¹⁷ According to Lee, few Americans were suspicious of the reality of the illegal dealings of the Chinese in Chinatown, and as the middleman, Lee was obliged to reveal the truth to her audience. There was a sense of a noble mission in Lee because she felt that she had to take the lead in educating white America on who the Chinatown Chinese really were, and to make clear the difference between the assimilated Chinese of America and the unassimilated Chinese of Chinatown. Clarification of this difference was Lee’s way of marking the boundary between Chinatown and a white America to which she would belong. Chinatown was where the unassimilated Chinese dwelt, while the assimilated Chinese belonged to America just like white Americans. Thus, while Lee desperately wanted the Chinese to assimilate and wished to keep her distance from recalcitrant Chinese, she was also compelled to traverse the borders of Chinatown because her concern over revealing Chinatown’s vices and marking the difference between assimilated and unassimilated Chinese required her to do so.

Chinatown was Un-American

Rose Hum Lee’s comments about the Chinese of Tucson, Arizona’s Chinatown, encapsulated the way she saw Chinatown as un-American. Lee’s stepson, Gerald, was born and raised in China and in Lee’s view, Gerald was “behind” in assimilation and would have “many more problems to overcome” than those who were born in America. In order to show Gerald, “a whole new way of life—far removed from the narrow-thinking, tradition-bound Chinese he saw in Tucson,” Lee invited him to stay with her in Chicago.¹⁸ Lee saw herself as “more advanced” and therefore more fit to teach Gerald how to become a part of American culture instead of being held back by unprogressive Chinese in Tucson’s Chinatown.¹⁹ Lee saw the Chinese of Chinatown as narrow-minded because she felt Chinatown was a separatist space that shielded the Chinese’s illegal activities from America and fostered the Chinese’s continued reverence for oppressive traditions like patriarchy. Abhorrent of Chinese involvement in illegal activities such as extortion, gambling, and human and narcotics smuggling, Lee believed that “there will be a generation, at least, before the ideas of honestly earned money can permeate the [Chinese] here.”²⁰ In her opinion, it was “awful to be around a community that’s cursed like this one is.”²¹ Rose Hum Lee’s view of Chinatowns in general as being backward and detestable stemmed from her belief that the activities of the Chinatown Chinese were un-American and that they were extremely resistant to and unwilling to make an effort towards assimilation. Lee strongly detested the associations in Chinatown and the intrusive and restrictive traditions they operated by, but she held hope for native-born Chinese Americans to change Chinatown because they would be less influenced by Chinese tradition. Moreover, her hope for a native American-born generation to induce change in Chinatown demonstrates that Lee perceived the Chinese in Chinatown as foreign. Their foreignness was an explanation for their inclination to hang on to tradition and dubious activities, and was also an obstacle to their will and ability to assimilate.

Rose Hum Lee’s criticism of Ginn’s ex-wife, Yee Shee Ginn, was also indicative of Lee’s view that Yee symbolized the negative aspects of Chinese tradition and the foreign and unassimilated traits of Chinatown. In response to Gerald’s sense of responsibility and duty to Yee, Lee wrote:

I tried to explain to him then that these were not normal (ours here, anyhow) ways of repayment to parents. Neither should parents dangle and press their demands by mouthing these phrases; to do so gives evidence of basic insecurity. I am certain he never thought of the difference between giving of one’s energy, heart, and thought willingly without thought of repayment as contrasted to the kind he’s been accustomed

¹⁶ Letter by author, 8 January 1958.

¹⁷ Letter by author, 22 January 1958.

¹⁸ Letter by author, 8 November 1955.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Letter by author, 23 April 1958.

²¹ Letter by author, 8 January 1958.

to. [Ginn] is totally different, in that he expects none, but it took [Gerald's] contact here with me to drive the difference home.²²

Lee perceived Yee's desire for her son to support her and take care of her as abnormal because it was an un-American tradition. Yee demanded her son to support her because, being China-born, she was still attached to the restrictive traditions of China, and her demand was representative of the negative traditional ways of the Chinese. Having experienced criticism for being unable to fulfill her reproductive duty as a woman in her first marriage, Lee detested demands that were enforced by tradition, something she felt the unassimilated Chinese of Chinatown were prone to doing. For Lee, one should have the freedom to choose his actions and not be bound to do something simply because it is dictated by tradition. If one allowed the self to be bound by tradition, like Yee, then it only meant that insecurities lay underneath, and since "becoming a part of the [American] culture takes time" and "the willingness to...be insecure," then those who were tradition-bound would never succeed in becoming American.²³ Therefore, to Lee, Yee's attachment to tradition proved that, like the other Chinese in Chinatown, she was not an assimilated American and was not making an effort towards that goal.

Aside from recognizing the negative and restrictive traditions of Chinatown to be un-American, Rose Hum Lee also felt that the communist influence in the Chinatown community was oppositional to the freedoms of American life, and was further proof of its foreign and unassimilated character. In the context of the Cold War and the intense atmosphere of anti-communism in the United States in the 1950s, it was especially appalling for Lee to see the Chinatown Chinese engage in what she felt were communist tactics. In addition, her own experience with Chinatown's harassment reinforced her conviction that communism had permeated Chinatown. In explaining Chinatown's harassment over Yee and Ginn's divorce, Lee wrote:

Were this capable of being handled in the American way which I want—the matter would have been solved. But as they are using the Chinese secret societies and old-fashion village pressure tactics, plus (I think and am convinced of) Communist tactics, the whole situation is very complicated, mean, vicious, insidious, tyrannical, upsetting mentally and emotionally.²⁴

Evidently, to Lee, Chinatown was un-American because it did not use the American way to settle the messy divorce between Ginn and Yee. The American way was the superior solution because it would settle the divorce through a court of law rather than through a secret tong and its communist tactics. Additionally, communism during the Cold War period was seen as a foreign menace to the United States and the free democracies of the Western countries.²⁵ Through its engagement in communist tactics, Chinatown became one of the "evil forces" opposed to "the ultimate goodness and justness of life."²⁶ The secrecy and the communist tactics were all against the kind of freedom, justice, and openness that American society professed. Therefore, for Lee, her perception of Chinatown's use of un-American bodies like the tongs and engagement in communist tactics furthered her belief that Chinatown was indeed foreign and unassimilated.

Rose Hum Lee was also highly suspicious of the communist leanings of Yee and the immigrant women of Chinatown. Lee stated her fear of this in her letter:

The reason I say communist tactics are used is that [Yee], several years ago, despite [Ginn's] forbiddance, sent \$3,500 to the Communist Government...she could have taken up with such party members, although she may not be herself one. Also, many of the Chinese women coming in now grew up during a period when such tactics were used and they could have learned them.²⁷

It was suspicious to Rose Hum Lee that Yee had sent money to Communist China, and she theorized that Yee might have had close relationships with communists in China to risk sending remittances. Under the Trading with Enemy Act of 1939, the US government declared it illegal in 1950 to send remittances to Communist China, Hong Kong,

²² Letter by author, 8 November 1955.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion on how communism and the Cold War were perceived by people in the United States, see David Caute. *The Great Fear*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978; J. Ronald Oakley. *God's Country: American in the Fifties*. New York: December, 1986.

²⁶ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and other places that could otherwise transfer the money to China.²⁸ Yee's remittance incriminated her in Lee's mind because sending money to China was equal to trading with the enemy. Additionally, many of the Chinese women involved in harassing Lee were new immigrants and were therefore susceptible to Red China's influence. Lee believed that Yee and these immigrant women were apt suspects of communist affiliation because they were China-born and had been brought up with Chinese tradition. Before their arrival in the United States, they could have been influenced by communism and could have brought their communist tactics to Chinatown to further hinder the assimilation of the Chinatown Chinese. In analyzing the harassment, Lee speculated that "Tucson has a large number of them," and was "fully convinced that [Ginn] is being subjected to pressure tactics that resemble what have occurred in China" and that "forcing people to marry or stay married is a part of this line."²⁹ These women's background and activities concretely proved to Lee that they were not assimilated and that their China-born status was the cause for their attachment to traditions, repressive tactics, and communism. So, in Lee's mind, Chinatown once again came to symbolize the antithesis of a modern and free America when Yee and the women in Chinatown went against the American way of settling matters and resorted to using threats and tyrannical communist tactics to separate her and Ginn.

The Need for Cultural Citizenship

Cultural citizenship, as put forth by Aihwa Ong and Lisa Lowe, is used to give or deny people access to full membership into the nation-state because it is an implicit and hard-to-obtain requirement in addition to legal citizenship. As defined by Ong, cultural citizenship is "the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory."³⁰ Cultural citizenship is not a requirement put forth in the citizenship books of a nation-state like the United States. Yet, it is implied in society that, in order to belong to the nation, one must manifest outwardly the signs of possessing the cultural practices and beliefs that the dominating powers of the nation-state have put forward. Lowe, in complement of Ong's theory, also acknowledged that "it is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American.'"³¹ One may possess legal citizenship, but without the conferral of cultural citizenship, one would be seen as an outsider to the nation and would consequently be denied membership into it.

Hence, in taking Ong and Lowe's theory of cultural citizenship, Lee's preoccupation with the Chinese's assimilation was rooted in her consciousness of the fact that the Chinese needed to be seen as cultural citizens in order for them to belong to America. Lee's own experience with losing her citizenship and her awareness of the continuing discrimination of the Chinese in America made her conscious of the necessity for Chinatown Chinese to assimilate. The Chinese needed to erase their cultural difference in order to be accepted as Americans. That was also why Lee was so fixated on marking the boundaries between the recalcitrant Chinese and the assimilated Chinese Americans. She did not want America to confuse the fact that the Chinese inside and outside of Chinatown were different. She herself wanted to be recognized as a legal and cultural citizen, different from the unassimilated cultural and legal aliens in Chinatown.

Thus, while stressing the need for Chinatown Chinese to assimilate, Lee also pushed for the recognition of Chinese Americans who were assimilated. In an early article for "Survey Graphic," Lee emphasized that World War II was a "stepping stone toward complete assimilation" for Chinese Americans, and many of them "speak no Chinese" and "they live on close terms with their American neighbors."³² World War II was a stepping stone because it opened up opportunities for Chinese Americans to work and live outside of Chinatown, so the chance for contacts outside of Chinatown and assimilation into American life were increased. For Lee, this was an opportune time to point out that many Chinese Americans were just like other Americans.

Lee's obsession with assimilation was due to her recognition of the need for cultural citizenship in order to obtain full membership into the American nation. If Habermas' notion of a civil religion functioning to equally integrate people into the nation-state was true, then Lee would not have felt the need to be so obsessed with cultural assimilation. Many of the Chinatown Chinese that Lee criticized for not assimilating were actually legal citizens. If legal citizenship was enough, then why push for cultural assimilation? For Lee, legal citizenship was something that

²⁸ L. Ling-chi Wang, "Politics of Assimilation and Repression: History of the Chinese in the United States, 1940 to 1970" (Unpublished Manuscript. Asian American Library, University of California, Berkeley)

²⁹ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

³⁰ Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37 (December 1996): 738.

³¹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996): 3.

³² Rose Hum Lee, "Chinese in the United States Today," in *Survey Graphic* 31 (October 1942): 444.

could easily be taken away because the Chinese were perceived as foreign aliens. Cultural citizenship, on the other hand, was an outward sign of belonging, and if the Chinese were perceived to be a group that belonged to the American nation, then full membership would not be a problem. Therefore, as demonstrated by Lee's fixation on assimilation, Habermas' civil religion does not take into account how perceived difference in culture (and the ethnicity that culture is linked to) can complicate the integration of people into the nation-state.

The Space of White America

To Rose Hum Lee, Chinatown was a space that was symbolic of the negative traditions that Lee disliked, whereas the space represented by white America was much more attractive because Lee associated it with freedom and modern womanhood. Like many of the more affluent second-generation Chinese Americans of her time, Lee did not live in Chinatown and had spent most of her life outside of Chinatown; therefore, she was able to maintain an "intellectual and emotional distance from the Oriental community that she wanted so desperately to leave behind."³³ Lee was distanced from Chinatown by her position in society and by her ideals of assimilation. To Lee, the world outside of Chinatown was a modern world that was uninhibited by any traditional mores such as restrictive gender roles. As suggested by Henry Yu in *Thinking Orientals*, Lee's divorce and return to the United States is symbolic of her "repudiation of what she understood as the traditional roles of Chinese womanhood but also as an idiosyncratic attempt at Americanization."³⁴ America was a space that represented the exact opposite of everything that was Chinatown. Chinatown was narrow-thinking, tradition-bound, and evil, whereas America was just, liberal, and honest. This was the reason why Lee could not believe that one of her prime harassers was an American-born female. "What surprises me is that this dead dodo, an American-born female, would stoop to such tactics. She knows better," wrote Lee.³⁵ It was astonishing to Lee that a woman born and raised in America could be like the unassimilated Chinese because she should have known and respected the American way of life. That woman should not have practiced the tradition and tactics of the Chinatown Chinese; instead she should have respected Lee and Ginn's right to act as they pleased. Therefore, Chinatown was symbolic of patriarchy, meddling associations, and dangerous tongs, while the space represented by America was symbolic of freedom, modernity and unrestricted womanhood.

Although Lee was well-versed in Chinese history and culture, she was still completely committed to the ideal of the dissolution of all Chinatowns and the complete assimilation of all Chinese Americans into American society. Apart from positive cultural practices like cooking Chinese food or learning about Chinese art, both of which Lee also practiced herself, Lee's prescription for total integration into white America required that Chinese Americans aim to be like white Americans in every way. Certain Chinese cultural practices were safe and curious spectacles for people to learn about, but what she perceived as restrictive Chinese traditional ways must be replaced by American ideals like freedom and equality in order for America to accept the Chinese.³⁶ Hence, it was acceptable for Lee to exhibit certain Chinese practices that she had reason to be proud of in the American context, such as her knowledge of Chinese art, but to reject those she considered to be negative Chinese practices like socializing with Chinatown tongs.

A Real American

Rose Hum Lee distinguished herself as a successful example of assimilation and believed that anyone could assimilate if they made the effort like she did. "I learned to be different. No one is born the way one is now," wrote Lee.³⁷ However, Lee defined her American identity largely by her juxtaposition of Chinatown practices with American life, and she constantly negotiated the positive and negative aspects of both worlds in order to select which ones to highlight and which ones to shadow. She stressed the best of both worlds by highlighting her knowledge of positive Chinese cultural practices and presenting herself as a modern example of American womanhood through her achievements in America. "No doubt, too, the Chinese here are mad at Pop and me; we do not go to Chinatown. Often we are critical (quietly) of associational activities," explained Lee to her daughter. She disliked mingling with Chinatown's associations because "too many Chinese confuse public position with private

³³ Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 132.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁵ Letter by author, 8 January 1958.

³⁶ Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, provides an insight into the commodification of "Oriental" identity and the fascination with exotic Oriental things.

³⁷ Letter by author, 8 November 1955.

gain. The idea of community service, without profit to one's self, is foreign."³⁸ Hence, to Lee, it was American to be independent and to perform community service without gain for the self, whereas community service for personal gain was immoral and selfish, and was something that the un-American Chinese were prone to doing.

Another aspect to Lee's sense of modern womanhood was her achievement in America. In her letter to Elaine, Lee wrote:

I shall never forget the faces of the women in Chinatown when they heard me say I got my PhD. The look of envy and greed came forth and instead of congratulating me for having arrived after years of struggle and sacrifice and malicious gossiping about my 'loose ways,' they smirked. I guess, too, they're mad because I don't socialize with them... Well, I'll never do that now.³⁹

Lee understood herself to be wholly different from the women in Chinatown because they were unassimilated, and their pettiness was proof of that. In the 1940s, it was an extraordinary feat that Lee, a Chinese American woman, managed to obtain a PhD and a position in an American university when many Chinese Americans with college degrees were working as waiters in Chinatown's restaurants. Thus, Lee was her own proof of what hard work could bring. She understood herself to be an assimilated and modern woman, different from the Chinese women in Chinatown who were petty and jealous of her achievements. Lee believed that the Chinese women in Chinatown were envious and avaricious because she, as an assimilated and modern Chinese American, could do many things "the rest wish they could do, hate us for being able to, and yet refuse to admit they could if they tried."⁴⁰ Therefore, it was the Chinatown Chinese's own fault that opportunities were limited to them. If the Chinese in Chinatown made the effort like Lee, then they too would become assimilated in America and would be able to enjoy its positive attributes.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, Lee felt that if Ginn and Yee's messy divorce and Chinatown's subsequent harassment could be handled her way, "the American way," then everything would have been already resolved. Everything opposite of the Chinese was American, so in contrast to secret societies and pressure tactics, Lee would have utilized something she felt was honest and straightforward like the court of law. Again, Lee defined herself by what the Chinese were, so if the Chinese were sneaky and immoral, then she, as an American, was honest and upright. Lee may have lost her legal citizenship in the past, but her sense of cultural citizenship to the American nation was strong and continually invigorated by her constant juxtaposition of the negative aspects of Chinatown with the positive aspects of America.

Rose Hum Lee's continual reassertion of her own American identity reveals how she saw herself as a cultural citizen of the American nation. Following Ong and Lowe's mapping of the cultural citizen, it is obvious that Lee understood she must act, behave, and speak like a white American in order to attain full membership into the American nation. That was the criterion to belonging to the American nation. Without that cultural capital, Lee would have been no different from the Chinese in Chinatown. Again, Lee's understanding of this requirement complicates Habermas' normative theory of equal integration based on legal citizenship. As a state, America accepted legal citizenship, but as a nation, it also required cultural citizenship in order for national membership to be official, and Lee understood this reality.

The Ultimate American

Although Rose Hum Lee argued for full assimilation into white America and was extremely proud of her own success at assimilation, she was also conscious that she could never attain the ideal full membership into the American nation. One particularly glaring proof of that unattainable ideal was Lee's status as an interesting and exotic Oriental academic in the eyes of white academicians and white audiences. As a professor and researcher in sociology, Lee's value as a sociologist in academia should have been universal. However, Lee's professional capacity was based on her knowledge of the Chinese in America, and that capacity was in turn based on her Chinese ethnicity. Lee's authority and knowledge were thus not universal because she was specifically valued as an insider to the Chinese community, and her "insider" status was based on the perception that she had special access because she was Chinese. Furthermore, as pointed out by Henry Yu, it was always "the exotic and non-American part" that

³⁸ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

³⁹ Letter by author, 8 January 1958.

⁴⁰ Letter by author, 22 January 1958.

made the Oriental academic interesting.⁴¹ For example, it fascinated many of Lee's audiences that Lee could speak English flawlessly even though she had an Oriental body and was dressed in a *cheong sam* (a traditional Chinese long dress) when she gave her lectures. What was amazing was that this seemingly foreign and exotic body could speak English more perfectly than the average American.

Hence, due to her unique ability to understand the Chinese, Lee's value as an expert was also related to her access of white space in America. She was given more access to America because she had knowledge that whites valued; thus, she would be given continued access as long as she, as an Oriental academic, could be the cultural interpreter of the Chinese for America. Lee recognized that her ethnicity and knowledge of the Chinese and Chinese things were obstacles to her full assimilation, but she saw her ideal in her daughter Elaine.

Although Lee was proud of her relatively successful assimilation, she was also conscious of her belonging to the "marginal generation," where one knew of and was caught in between two ways of life. Yet, Lee did not see Elaine as marginal and had great hopes for her assimilation. In regard to Elaine's assimilation, Lee wrote:

All the studying and going out into American life during the past twenty years was to make sure you didn't have to be 'marginal.' It has paid off and for that I am thankful.⁴²

In commenting on the problem of the Chinese in Chinatown, Lee wrote:

I'm glad I decided you should not experience it; to this end I worked to let you know the life that is untarnished by such. Get your bearings with the people and the society to which you belong. If things are easier for you, my efforts are rewarded.⁴³

Rose Hum Lee was happy and relieved that Elaine was distanced from the Chinese and Chinatown. She saw herself and her husband as the "buffers to spare [Elaine]" from the pressures of Chinatown's oppressive traditions and meddling. Somehow, by sparing Elaine from having to learn about and associate with the Chinese, Lee felt that she had saved Elaine from being marginal and had given her the opportunity to be a full American. And if Elaine was saved from being marginal, then she would not have to deal with any knowledge of another way of life. Once Lee told Elaine, "You are an American now; the fact that your ancestry is Chinese is not important."⁴⁴ Elaine's ethnicity was not important because Lee felt that she had fully shielded Elaine from the negative aspects of Chinese culture and from association with unassimilated Chinese. Elaine would not be forced to choose between the different ways of life and thus be haunted by the fact that she chose one and denied the other. The only choice presented to Elaine would be the American way of life, so the decision would be easy and obvious. Consequently, Elaine's path to assimilation in America would also be smoother than the one Lee had to struggle with. Elaine would belong to America.

Yet Lee's hope for Elaine to be saved from marginality reflected her own feelings of being haunted by knowledge. Lee understood that her knowledge of Chinese things and Chinese people was an obstacle to her own erasure of marginality, which was a hindrance to her assimilation. And although Lee had tried to convince Elaine that her ancestry was not important, she realized that in America, her ethnicity was very important.

Rose Hum Lee was not naive about the reality of race and the role it played in keeping even cultural citizens from attaining complete membership into the American nation. In a later letter to Elaine, Lee wrote:

The fact that you can't lose your physical identity is something beyond my control...We've the added unpleasantness from the [Chinese] themselves which you don't have. You can go to concerts, live with your classmates, date a Caucasoid, etc.⁴⁵

Lee pushed for assimilation and the ideal of cultural citizenship, but she was not ignorant of the fact that racism was an obstacle to full acceptance in America. By 1956, Lee had already progressed from just advocating assimilation to the "eradication of all evidences (physical) of 'foreignness.'" "Ideally," Lee wrote, "the completion of the processes [of assimilation] includes the mixing of cultures and genes so that there are truly no 'dissimilar people.'"⁴⁶ It was

⁴¹ Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 160.

⁴² Letter by author, 8 November 1955.

⁴³ Letter by author, 8 January 1958.

⁴⁴ Letter by author, 13 August 1957.

⁴⁵ Letter by author, 22 January 1958.

⁴⁶ Rose Hum Lee, "The Marginal Man: A Re-Evaluation and Indices of Marginality," in *Journal of Human Relations* 4.3 (Spring 1956): 28.

obvious to Lee that cultural citizenship was not enough for national membership into white America and that only racial citizenship, in addition to cultural citizenship, could truly give one unlimited access to the nation. Since not all people could be considered white, the mixing of genes would produce a population of people with indeterminate racial or ethnic origins, so national membership would no longer be able to exclude people on the basis of physical appearance. Of course, both Lee and Elaine were excluded from this possibility. Nevertheless, Lee made the best of what she was given and encouraged Elaine, whom she felt was closer to the top on the ladder of assimilation, to do the same. Relations with Chinatown or restrictive Chinese traditions did not hinder Elaine, so Lee believed that, unlike herself, Elaine had the freedom to live life unbounded by gendered restrictions or the watchful eyes of Chinatown.

Again, Lee's recognition of racial citizenship as a criterion for full membership into the American nation represents a challenge to Habermas' contention of a civil religion that would promote equality. Besides being based on legal rules and culture, membership into a nation-state is also based on race. Therefore, even if the legal books of a nation-state profess to accept people by way of legal citizenship, the reality is that the perceived difference in people's culture, ethnicity, and race still forms a basis upon which a nation-state makes its membership exclusive.

Conclusion: Filled Gaps

Habermas' suggestion that a civil religion could effectively be the integration tool of a nation-state falls apart when one considers Rose Hum Lee's experience with assimilation and her individual negotiation of white America's criteria for citizenship. When Lee married Ku Young Lee, she lost her citizenship because the Cable Act of 1922 stated that women ceased to be citizens when they married an alien ineligible for citizenship.⁴⁷ Lee eventually regained her citizenship through naturalization when she divorced her husband and returned to the United States. But this incident in her life is indicative of how Habermas' civil religion left out the possibility of the nation-state using race and ethnicity as a means of giving or denying people membership into the nation-state.

Rose Hum Lee's subsequent and lifelong obsession with assimilation after her return to the United States was due to her attempt to attain cultural citizenship in order to solidify her claim to legal citizenship in the United States. As suggested by Ong and Lowe, the criterion to cultural citizenship is established by the nation-state, and it is through culture that one is ultimately legitimized as a real member of the nation-state. Legal citizenship could be taken away, but if Lee espoused the outward appearance of an American, then it would be beyond doubt that she was just like any white American. Therefore, Lee distanced herself from the space of Chinatown and repudiated all the Chinese aspects she felt were negative and restrictive like domestic gender traditions for women, intrusive clan associations, and scheming tongs. She was also critical of the Chinese who had dangerous communist leanings and who clung to Chinatown and its traditions. To her, they were not real citizens because they were not assimilated. Instead, Lee saw them as a kind of cultural and/or legal alien who stuck out like a thorn on the side of America. Lee repeatedly stressed that she belonged to the American space because of her American-ness. Her achievements in American society and the progressive principles that she possessed were proof of that American-ness. She also took the lead in hailing other Chinese Americans to follow her example and argued that anyone could achieve assimilation if they tried hard enough. So, contrary to Habermas, legal citizenship was not enough to integrate citizens into the American nation, which required individuals, like Lee, to obtain cultural citizenship before their integration could even be considered.

Lee was also conscious of the fact that she and Elaine (as well as the rest of the Chinese in America) would never get to the top of the ladder of assimilation. They all lacked one criterion: whiteness. Lee understood that, besides cultural assimilation, racial citizenship was the ultimate key to membership in the American nation. Since not everyone could be white, then the mixing of the races would produce a group of people of an indeterminate race. Thus, to Lee, if people could not be distinguished by culture or race, then everyone would be accepted equally into the nation. Hence, Lee's understanding of racial citizenship introduced another complication to Habermas' normative theory of equal integration. Besides culture and ethnicity, race was also a powerful factor for the nation-state in determining people's membership.

Finally, Rose Hum Lee's individual negotiation and subsequent understanding of white America's criteria for assimilation and national membership is an interesting and valuable addition to the general (and sometimes very statistical) history of Chinese Americans in the 1950s. It is important to know that the demographics and available opportunities of Chinese Americans changed after World War II, but even more fascinating are the different angles of historical experience that appear when one examines the individual's negotiation of the conditions in society.

⁴⁷ Sucheng Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women" in *Entry Denied* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991): 128.

Through Lee, it is possible to see and better understand what it was like for a professional American-born Chinese woman to navigate the maze of how to fit into an exclusive society based on legal, cultural, and racial belonging. Lee's experience provides a different kind of history to the record of Chinese Americans in the 1950s, and it fills in the gaps left by general histories that rarely offer a more personal and close look at the unique historical experience of certain individuals. Ultimately, it is through these individual experiences that history can continually be written and rewritten with the goal of completing blank and poorly defined pages.