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## Performing Mahjong in the 1920s: White Women, Chinese Americans, and the Fear of Cultural Seduction

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Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Volume 37, Number 1, 2016, pp. 32-65  
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press  
DOI: [10.1353/fro.2016.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2016.0004)



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# Performing Mahjong in the 1920s

White Women, Chinese Americans,  
and the Fear of Cultural Seduction

ANNELISE HEINZ

On the cover of *Auction Bridge and Mah-Jongg Magazine's* 1924 September issue, a woman in gauzy faux-Chinese dress paints designs on a larger-than-life mahjong set.

Behind the delicate craftswoman and her embroidered slippers glows a golden Chinese dragon screen, at once alluring and ominous. The woman, however, is not portrayed as racially Chinese, for the elegant tile-painter is clearly white. Exemplifying the massive American cultural output inspired by mahjong, the illustration highlights the performative possibilities the game opened in America, the fad's ambiguous representations of China, and how the Chinese game and its accoutrements helped form a 1920s "Oriental" aesthetic. In this image as in the culture at large, mahjong represented far more than a commodity sold for mass consumption.

Mahjong, the Chinese game of skill played by four people with domino-like engraved "tiles," swept the United States in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> It resonated with a specific historical moment in American life and generated an outpouring of commentary and representations. Hundreds of thousands of Americans purchased game sets, and middle- and leisure-class women enacted representations of Chinese civilization through dress and entertainment. Mahjong was quite obviously—even desirably—Chinese, in an era when Chinese bodies were alien, exotic, and sexualized. While white women used mahjong as a tool to experiment with new boundaries of respectable femininity, Chinese Americans leveraged mahjong's popularity for economic opportunities and cultural authority. Negative racial stereotypes used by critics of the wildly popular foreign game not only targeted Chinese American mobility but also responded to changing gender norms for white Americans. Mahjong matrons symbolized social changes, including female independence and leisure, that destabilized traditional notions of white domesticity.

The mahjong craze that erupted in the early 1920s further symbolized key



Fig. 1. H. H. Warner, "Cover Design," *Auction Bridge and Mah-Jongg Magazine*, September 1924. Library of Congress. The mahjong phenomenon inspired an outpouring of cultural production, including art, plays, songs, and poetry. This magazine cover references the practice of white women dressing in Chinese costume. Representations of mahjong combined commentary about white women and Chinese culture, illustrating the co-construction of race and gender.

elements of Americans' heightened sense of the "modern": America's global strength abroad and its commercialized, cosmopolitan urban life at home.<sup>2</sup> Americans discussed mahjong as a connection to the luxurious and powerful ancient Chinese court, brought into the light of modernity through American entrepreneurial intervention.<sup>3</sup> Manufacturers and importers of the game capitalized on hand-carved Chinese images on natural materials to generate an impression of premodern cultural authenticity. Mahjong in fact was a modern game: it evolved in the mid- and late 1800s in and around Shanghai, spreading by World War I to other major urban centers in China.<sup>4</sup> A number of individuals, most famously a Standard Oil representative named Joseph Park Babcock, successfully brought mahjong to the United States via California in 1922.<sup>5</sup> By 1924 mahjong sets were the sixth largest export to the United States from Shanghai, China's largest port.<sup>6</sup> Americans had long followed Europe's lead in importing specific Chinese goods as markers of refinement. In this instance, however, American consumers led the way for a smaller-scale European mahjong craze as the United States became more directly engaged with East Asia after World War I.<sup>7</sup>

The game's wild popularity coincided with challenges to traditional white domesticity as more women gained economic opportunities and participated in urban forms of leisure such as boundary-crossing jazz dances and voyeuristic tourism to Chinatowns.<sup>8</sup> Popular culture was overtly sexual in new ways: films celebrated "sex appeal," as did the booming cosmetics and fashion industries, while popularized Freudian psychology valorized heterosexual sex.<sup>9</sup> Dressing up in exotic Chinese costumes to play mahjong provided white women—matrons as well as "modern girls"—a racial mask to help make new forms of public sexuality respectable.<sup>10</sup>

Orientalist consumerism was not unidirectional, however. By looking only at how the West viewed the East, examinations of white Americans' appropriation of Chinese culture have often ignored the concurrent uses by Chinese Americans. Within Chinatowns mahjong had a presence of its own that did not engage white Americans. In addition, the national mahjong craze created a cultural conversation to which Chinese Americans responded. While the bulk of evidence, and thus the focus of this article, concerns white uses of a Chinese game, it is important to understand how Chinese Americans capitalized upon the mahjong phenomenon and actively negotiated American ideas of Chinese authenticity. Thanks to the desires of white players, the mahjong market provided a real opportunity for Chinese mahjong instructors in a discriminatory economy as well as a platform from which to claim cultural authority.

The performance of these Chinese Americans, however, was fraught with pitfalls and contributed to sexualized stereotypes of the seductive power of

the game and of Chinese instructors. As the game spread across the nation, mahjong also unleashed criticisms of Chinese influence and women's leisure that linked female mahjong players with neglectful and self-centered domesticity. The history of mahjong demonstrates the necessity of approaching both material and popular culture through overlapping lenses of gender and race. It also highlights the importance of women's leisure activities and everyday objects often dismissed or overlooked as frivolous. The ways in which mahjong symbolized modern American culture, buttressed by Orientalist ideas of race and gender, allowed the game to stand in for debates over white femininity. Rather than merely a temporary foray into the exotic, mahjong came to represent the threats posed by changing gender, sexual, and racial encounters during the 1920s.

#### PERFORMING MAHJONG: RACIALIZATION AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

In 1922 the elite women's Ebell Club of Los Angeles hosted a high-profile philanthropic mahjong party. The club members posed in advance for pictures in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Examiner*, dressed in complete "Chinese costume," wearing elaborate beaded headdresses and embroidered silk robes. In an article titled "Dragons Clash at Mah-Jongg," the Ebell Club's women-only gala was heralded as "a great event, a sort of official coming-out party for mahjong in Los Angeles, where the elite of the city will gather to shake a wicked dice to help Ebell Rest Cottage Scholarship Fund." The female attendees, the press observed, were "determined to be desperately Chinese in action and dress" and so were "plotting to lay hold of their husbands' pajamas for the occasion."<sup>11</sup> While some purchased fine embroidered "mandarin" robes, others simply used pajamas to evoke the loose silk Chinese trousers familiar to Americans.

Performing mahjong involved a very literal sense of performance: intentional self-presentations in front of others, while clothed in or consuming representations of Chinese culture (as imagined by white Americans). Dressing up in Chinese costume, eating "Oriental" treats, and watching staged mahjong-inspired dance revues were all ways in which individuals—particularly middle-class and elite white women—transformed mahjong into a means of experimenting with different personae and demonstrating modern worldliness.<sup>12</sup>

In cities across the country, elites flocked to mahjong galas involving ballets where wealthy young ladies danced as mahjong pieces.<sup>13</sup> Movie palaces featured stage performances of a "Chinese fantasie in song and dance—the Mah Jongg Blues."<sup>14</sup> Stages were not always needed; for society matrons, per-

formance often took the form of elaborate costumes. Wealthy hostesses held garden parties with mahjong plays on the grass, and middle-class housewives hosted friends to eat Chinese food amidst paper lanterns. Language became playful as wordsmiths crafted mahjong songs and poetry, and players giggled at uttering foreign words such as “pung” and “chow,” words necessary to snatch discarded tiles and complete hands.<sup>15</sup>

It was not only at high-profile events or large parties that mahjong enthusiasts dressed in costumed regalia. In the early days of mahjong play, high-society and middle-class white women dressed in corresponding costumes for smaller parties in individual homes.<sup>16</sup> The *Atlanta Constitution* urged “smart women” to hold mahjong parties and serve Chinese treats while wearing mandarin coats.<sup>17</sup> A photograph of four fashionable young Seattle women playing this new and exotic game made the rounds of newspapers in the Northwest, from Portland, Oregon, to Walla Walla, Washington.<sup>18</sup> They did not wear conventional flapper dress; rather, they were covered with variations of elaborate “mandarin” costumes. These were generally completely divorced from actual Chinese fashions but reminiscent of Chinese opera costumes: feathered, embroidered, or beaded head-dresses and embroidered jackets, pantaloons, and slippers. Just as the Atlanta article encouraged readers to “mak[e] use of the Chinese note in entertaining,” the Seattleites immersed themselves in an Orientalist aesthetic of richly carved furniture and Oriental rugs.

In the United States, white players’ mahjong culture soon became feminized. The shift from male to female mahjong players during the early 1920s was neither obvious nor inevitable, as the game was originally steeped in a masculine gambling and courtesan culture in China and then associated with American businessmen. Men played in single-sex as well as mixed gatherings that overlapped with bridge games, and they published dozens of books as authoritative experts on the game.<sup>19</sup>

Mahjong became feminized due to the merging of American gendered ideas of Chinese culture with the strengthened association of women as archetypal consumers. By the 1920s advertisers for a wide variety of products imagined the typical consumer as female.<sup>20</sup> As the game evolved, the cultural associations of women with mahjong’s “flowery” aesthetic encouraged the increasingly disproportionate presence of female players.

Because the game became a stand-in for Chinese culture, it was similarly associated with the gender and sexual stereotypes that underwrote American ideas of “Orientals.” Fueled by the growth of anti-Asian sentiments in the nineteenth century and building on Orientalist frameworks that projected a feminine character on “the East,” ideas of Chinese men were characterized especially by a lack of masculinity.<sup>21</sup> Notably, in contrast to the legions of white

society women in Chinese costume, very few white men were ever pictured in Chinese “mandarin” dress. The few exceptions featured a wrestling star, a World Heavyweight Champion, and an internationally renowned billiards professional: icons of white masculinity.<sup>22</sup>

Marketers riffed on a core fiction to promote mahjong: that it was a game of an ancient Chinese elite. In this way they removed the contradiction between Orientalist consumerism and anti-Asian exclusions. The cover of *How to Play Ma Jong: Played by Confucius 2200 Years Ago, the Rage of Today*, features a solitary Confucius-as-mandarin in complete regalia: necklace over a coat embroidered with a dragon, topped with a mustache and button hat. Playing mahjong in front of pagodas, he is separated in time and space by the Great Wall from a table of elegantly dressed Western players.<sup>23</sup> Confucius himself was often used as an emblem of Chinese culture marked by hierarchy and unchanging tradition.

Manufacturers and distributors fought to claim the “genuine” version of the game played by ancient royalty rather than by modern-day working-class laborers.<sup>24</sup> The Pung Chow Company, an American-based manufacturer of plastic mahjong sets, generated an origin myth revolving around languid courtesans in the Confucian-era “Court of the King of Wu.”<sup>25</sup> Pung Chow founder Lew Lysle Harr insisted that his New York factories could literally manufacture an authentically Chinese game associated with the courtly tradition—while making it superior to the sets coming out of China of “modern coolie” origins. Advertisements connected mandarins, courtesans, and Confucius with mahjong’s origins, creating a route to imagined Chinese personae without associating with the coolies (degraded Chinese laborers) and laundrymen predominant in American stereotypes.<sup>26</sup>

Authenticity, or the idea that mahjong captured some untarnished Chinese cultural essence, was at the heart of American mahjong culture. On the surface, “authenticity” simply meant real or genuine. However, inherited ideas of what defines the realness of a particular place and time meant that authenticity became a constructed framework, often resting on hierarchical ideas of tradition, modernity, and progress. As a rich scholarly literature on the construction of authenticity in modern American life argues, the “authentic” has been defined as a connection to the primitive, to what has been lost in industrialized modern society. The search for authenticity has taken many forms, from medieval Anglo-Saxon historical romances in the 1890s to rugged 1910s Camp Fire girls in Native American dress and, in the 1920s, a craze for a supposedly ancient game of the Chinese court.<sup>27</sup> As the *Los Angeles Times* explained, “Half the fascination about the game is the quaint ‘Chinesy’ al-about it [*sic*].”<sup>28</sup> Manufacturers and importers of the game repeatedly relied on Ori-



entalist elements to generate an impression of cultural authenticity: origin myths that linked the game to Confucius and the ancient Chinese “mandarin” court; images hand-carved on natural materials; and references to assumed characteristics of a premodern Chinese essence. Newspapers introduced “Mah Jongg—as quaint as the Chinese queue, as old as time and as entrancing as a woman’s wiles,” simultaneously evoking timeless premodernity and sensuous Eastern luxuries.<sup>29</sup>

China existed in a unique position in the American imagination to represent the past. Long-held understandings of China painted the national character as fundamentally opposite of the United States: backward-looking and inscrutable.<sup>30</sup> Americans also held contradictory views of China and Chinese people, who could simultaneously signify ancient advancement and modern stagnation; innocence and treachery; passivity and cunning. By stressing the game’s connection to an ancient Chinese civilization, mahjong marketers emphasized China’s early advanced status “when our own [European] ancestors were living in caves.”<sup>31</sup> Players who dressed as fanciful royalty could connect with an earlier era of luxury and power.

In fact, old Confucian mandarins had far less to do with the development of the game than did the very modern and international milieu of Shanghai from which the global fad emerged. Imperial China had been gone for over a decade by the time the game hit American shores. Despite this reality, courtly references emphasized the game’s elite associations, distanced it from the despised contemporary “coolie” laborer figure, provided a foil for Americans to project their own self-conscious modernity, and simply added to an Orientalist aesthetic based in pleasure and exotic beauty.

At the same time, an identification with the esteemed advancement of ancient China linked modern American global leadership with the glories of a Chinese past. Drawing a sharp and hierarchical distinction between Chinese past and present, Americans wrote that contemporary urban China was not truly “*Chinese*” thanks to modernization efforts by “Christendom and Japan.”<sup>32</sup> Rather, authentic Chinese culture could be found in the mahjong of the misty past and “a version [of the game] nearer the original played in unchanged corners of China.” Despite being mahjong’s actual birthplace, modern China was irrelevant in this conception.

Because the game’s aesthetic and materiality were so strongly associated with China, it fit into the established vogue of *chinoiserie* and, more broadly, Orientalist consumption. Mahjong built on long-term American interest and infrastructure for Chinese goods, though the geopolitical dynamics between the two nations shifted significantly over time. Beyond the mainstay of tea, the historical American fascination with Chinese luxury goods stemmed



from European consumption of affordable but refined goods, from spices to porcelain, silk, and furniture.<sup>33</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Bedouin scenes and Japanese prints prevailed in art and consumer goods, European nations had used their military power to extort new trading relationships from China, and waves of Chinese immigrants entered the ranks of exploited and denigrated laborers in the American West.<sup>34</sup> With the expansion of Chinese imports, Western-made *chinoiserie*, and lavish paintings of the Arab world came “cosey corners” wherein Americans draped fabric in living rooms for their own harem feel.<sup>35</sup> As with Orientalist imaginings of the Near East and Japan in the late nineteenth century, mahjong held an appeal that promised the authenticity of a primitive past overlaid with the exoticism of the Far East.<sup>36</sup>

The mahjong market was built in part on class aspirations magnified by elite consumer preference. However, mahjong was not exclusive to the wealthy, despite the possibility of significant expense. Its appeal spread across lines of class, race, and region, and its varied forms made the game available to the masses. Costumes and decorations could be ornate or more homespun, as the *Atlanta Constitution* advised readers to “use whatever you have in the way of Chinese knickknacks and make the simplest sort of party interesting.”<sup>37</sup> Mahjong performance emerged from an immediate context of the 1920s, when the growing consumer culture facilitated frequent costume parties and self-conscious performance.

The racial performance of white players dressed as Chinese women and men related to a much longer and pernicious history of white actors dressing as caricatured African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans.<sup>38</sup> By the 1920s blackface had grown past its early roots with working-class and immigrant vaudevillians to become a ubiquitous and mainstream form of entertainment. However, Chinese costuming at mahjong parties was also a social practice engaged in by individuals across the country, not only official performers onstage. It generally involved dressing “up” as royalty, not as denigrated coolies in yellowface.

Participating in the mahjong craze as a whole may have held special appeal as a way of demonstrating upwardly mobile assimilation and respectability for ethnic groups on the edges of whiteness, such as second- and third-generation German Jews.<sup>39</sup> However, there is scant evidence of Chinese costuming by Americans marked as ethnic, and none at all by nonwhite players. African American clubwomen in the urban North and Midwest created the “newest elite clubs” to play the game, but there is no mention of costumes or particularly Oriental atmosphere.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, upwardly mobile German Jews, descendants of earlier Jewish migrants than the East Europeans of the late nineteenth century, were more integrated into mainstream white mah-

jong culture.<sup>41</sup> The urban areas home to the hottest centers of the fad also held significant Jewish populations, especially New York. An elaborate “Ma-Jung Fete” in the Plaza Hotel, complete with a ballet of costumed dancers including members of the rich and famous, served as a fundraiser for the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish Big Sisters Organizations.<sup>42</sup> To the very limited extent that there is any record of Jewish-specific costumed events, they are virtually indistinguishable from the broader white American culture.<sup>43</sup> Costumed mahjong matrons could venture into new and exciting modern territory while cloaked in premodern feminine flair.

The search for “authentic experience” could serve not only as an escape from the dissatisfactions of modern life but also as a way of acculturating to it.<sup>44</sup> For white women, going beyond an “oriental note” to dress as Chinese women was playfully titillating and expressed modern sexualized sensibilities. Mahjong’s popularity was in many ways less about any engagement with modern China in a “consumer’s imperium” and more about American women using ideas of China to cross cultural boundaries within their own society.<sup>45</sup> “Many a timorous lady” described in the *Los Angeles Herald* “still quakes a little” at the thought of joining the “illusive atmosphere of the Chinese game.”<sup>46</sup> Stereotypes of Chinese women were built on assumptions of exploitable sexuality, from the passive “lotus blossom” to the elite concubine and the Chinatown prostitute.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, however, the racial performance remained always an obvious masquerade. At a time when fashion magazines frequently featured primitive masks, white female models encouraged readers to consume products like cosmetics and Asian-infused clothing that allowed them to put on, and necessarily remove, a racial mask.<sup>48</sup>

Matrons as well as modern girls participated in Orientalist performance that evoked sexuality and cosmopolitanism. The magazines, film, and popular fiction that promoted self-expression by “the modern girl” of the 1920s—distinguished by “bobbed hair, painted lips, provocative clothing, elongated body, and open, easy smile”—also made sexualized portrayals of mahjong available for mass consumption.<sup>49</sup> While urban youth engaged in petting parties and went dancing at jazz clubs, their parents’ generation and their elite counterparts performed sexual and gender subversion through the more respectable route of mahjong.<sup>50</sup> Elite New Yorkers could display their more genteel performances in an elaborate mahjong ballet at the Plaza Hotel and still attend the risqué 1924 *George White Scandals* revue “Mah Jongg.” The renowned Art Deco artist Erté designed extravagant and revealing costumes for the dancing girls embodying mahjong pieces.<sup>51</sup>

The new cultural lore of mahjong was infused with racial connotations that were themselves predicated on notions of gender and sexuality. In a cartoon

by the iconic Jazz Age artist John Held Jr., “The Ancient Chinese Game According to the More Modern Generation,” a white American couple lustily illustrates mahjong terms, as a game that begins with a “pung is a kiss on the cheek” climaxes with a full embrace: “Ah! My friends to Mah Jong, is to Mah Jong.”<sup>52</sup> In game parlance, to “pung” was to take a discarded tile to complete a hand, and to “Mah Jong” meant to make it, to go all the way and win the game. As depicted in the comic, the “modern generation” ascribed an erotic meaning to the very name of the game. Introducing its readers to mahjong, the *New York Times* compared the name to “a novel swear word” with its “emotional twang.”<sup>53</sup>

Held’s mahjong cartoons revealed the range of performance the game facilitated: the consumption of exotic goods that spread to other consumer items for self-display, such as clothes and jewelry; and the interconnectivity of race, gender, and sexuality evident in the culture of the game. In one illustration, a bobbed blond flapper looks askance at a Confucius-cum-samurai-mandarin, with long fingernails and elaborate armor, who seems to have appeared in her dressing room.<sup>54</sup> “If Confucius should return,” the comic asks, “what would his reaction be to the new Mah-Jongg underthings?” The décolleté flapper displays her mahjong-inspired lingerie with faux Chinese writing hemming the slip to the martial Confucius and to the magazine reader.<sup>55</sup> Other figures include dragon-adorned bathers sharing a cigarette with a young man in a distinctly suggestive manner.

The positive or negative tone of cultural crossings promised by the game depended upon the gendered form of Chinese representations. If advertising exotic allure, the game was transposed onto female Chinese characters. When authors and marketers created characters named “Mah Jongg,” they were consistently female, in effect literally objectifying Chinese women. The *New York Times* dedicated a lengthy article to a new type of womanhood embodied by the young Chinese American flapper, whom the article dubbed “Miss Mah Jong.”<sup>56</sup> “She has charm, allure. There is nothing as saucy on the face of the earth,” the article went on: “The Chinese flapper, American-born, is the East and the West in one, and so eternally exotic.” George Gershwin spun a tune he named “Mah-Jongg,” full of musical tokens that evoke ideas of Chinese music to a non-Chinese audience (such as the high, rapid chords in the well-known piano ditty “Chopsticks”).<sup>57</sup> In the humorous song the lovesick gentlemen “Pung” and “Chow” serenade the “charming maid, who answered to the name, Mah Jongg.” With the opening line, “From the sly Chinee, many years B.C.,” lyricist B. G. DeSylva began the story by referencing the ancient mahjong origin myths. He also joined other mahjong descriptions in echoing popular perceptions of the Chinese as wily and inscrutable, as in Bret Harte’s

long-lasting 1870 poem known as “The Heathen Chinese.” The erstwhile Pung and Chow cap their plea to Mah Jongg by calling to her, “Lovely little Oriental witch, in the boxes down at Abercrombie and Fitch! Mah Jongg! Mah Jongg! From Tibetan ridges, you’re as nice as Bridge is, my Mah Jongg!” Thus, Mah Jongg, the imagined Chinese woman, is directly commodified into the game and sold for mass consumption. Access to love-object Mah Jongg might be bought with a song, but play-object mahjong required cash.<sup>58</sup>

Images of sexually vulnerable and available Chinese women could have particular appeal as white women’s sexuality became more public, advertised -- and independent. In performing sexuality through Chinese cultural expression, white women in turn normalized their tamer forays into the erotic. Respectable consumers did not need to engage explicitly in such sordid matters; contextual allure was enough. In the introduction to his mahjong rule book, distributor Ezra Fitch of Abercrombie & Fitch posited himself as at the vanguard of “cultured people all over the world,” who welcome mahjong as “after thirty centuries, Ma-Jung has emerged from the walled palaces of princes and mandarins—as interesting from the artistic side as a piece of old sun-glow pottery—as attractive and entertaining as an almond-eyed girl from Canton.”<sup>59</sup> Elite white women became “modern” through the newly mainstream tools of mass consumerism and heterosexual allure, and their ability to evoke the primitive emphasized both. Mahjong stoked the flames of desire for markers of Chinese authenticity for white Americans; racial masquerade held more appeal when affiliated with something tangibly Oriental.

#### PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

In July 1922 the mahjong craze was heating up in California. White Angelenos flocked to the Ville de Paris department store to watch and learn how to play and to buy sets. As described by the *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, this crowded department store illustrates a spectrum of performance by Chinese Americans: while “William Wong, a Chinese expert” taught “Los Angeles girls how to play Mah-Jongg” in the store’s basement, daily “throngs” congregated before the store’s window “to watch three wrinkled Chinese play the game to which they became devoted when lads in China.”<sup>60</sup> Literally on display along with goods for sale, the players in the window became just as commodified as the game, both merged in *chinoiserie* consumption. Wong wore a Western suit, while his teaching partner from the “Far East” wore his “working costume” of a mandarin button hat. It was rare, however, for Chinese American representatives of the game to be pictured with Western garb. Their supposed authenticity was demonstrated by wearing outfits reminiscent of the Chinese

courts. Two years later a young woman in Los Angeles would publicly claim Chinese Americans as the inheritors of mahjong's ancient royal past.

These examples reveal a range of Chinese American performances that leveraged beliefs about Chinese authenticity within a severely limited set of dominant cultural assumptions. First, costumed and silent mahjong players in a store display window performed a restricted set of "authentic" cues based on white Americans' preconceptions; second, a Chinese mahjong expert in Western dress created a kind of hybrid performance; and third, a college student's assertion of mahjong's authentic heritage claimed cultural authority for modern Chinese Americans. The history of mahjong contributes to the growing scholarship of how, in historian Karen Leong's words, "orientalized subjects' engage orientalism."<sup>61</sup> Borrowing from the field of performance studies, it is useful to consider how performance is itself constitutive, rather than merely reflective of a pre-existing truth or identity.<sup>62</sup> Individuals engaged in constructing the "authentic" by reinforcing American ideas of China. However, they simultaneously created new possibilities when they subverted expectations by wearing Western clothes or speaking fluent English with an American accent, within a Chinese body that carried presumed foreign authenticity.<sup>63</sup>

In contrast to widespread assumptions, in all probability most Chinese Americans learned the game in the United States.<sup>64</sup> Mahjong only became well known outside major urban centers in China when the American fad exploded in the early 1920s; it spread rapidly and across generations among Chinese Americans as well. Most Chinese migrants came to the United States before the game spread, and these immigrants originated from more rural regions and provinces, which were outside mahjong's initial range.<sup>65</sup>

Many Chinese American mahjong demonstrators and instructors were of the second generation, who came of age in the 1920s. In the late nineteenth century severe anti-Chinese immigration restrictions had initially targeted women as potential prostitutes and then banned the entry of Chinese laborers, while exempting merchants and close family relations of citizens by birth.<sup>66</sup> By 1920, however, the majority of Chinese youths had been born in the United States.<sup>67</sup> The stereotypes that shaped characters in popular fiction dogged these young Chinese Americans as they sought to break out of racialized low status and labor-intensive occupations. Their presumed skill of playing mahjong was more marketable than their individual academic and professional skills honed in American universities, just as their assumed authentic selves remained stereotypically Chinese: foreign and homogeneous.

For a brief period during the mahjong vogue, mahjong instruction and demonstration provided real opportunities in an economic desert for second-generation Chinese Americans. "Teaching society folk how to play 'Mah Jong'

is helping Chinese students in Columbia University defray college expense,” the *New York Times* reported as the craze took off in 1923. As the *Times* explained, “The Chinese game, which is rapidly superseding bridge, has proved a veritable godsend to some of the students.” While other students found work “in a score of other ways,” Chinese American students could rarely gain access to jobs open to whites, and mahjong instruction continued to provide money for school through the fad years.<sup>68</sup> Both male and female Chinese American mahjong promoters engaged in racial and cultural performance that fit American ideas of authenticity, especially references to an imperial Chinese court.

Being marked as Asian and foreign was both a liability and, within a constrained set of options, a possible advantage in service work and entertainment designed to appeal to a white customer base.<sup>69</sup> Individuals navigated a slippery and often painful path in trading on cultural commodification. As a young Chinese American woman reported to the sociologist Pardee Lowe, “As a senior in college, I have no intention of clerking in a curio shop, or of hiring myself out as atmosphere in a would-be Oriental establishment, not that I feel above such work, but the advantages of a college education have brought obligations as well, obligations to my family, my college and even to myself. I must accomplish something; I must find a worthwhile place in the world.”<sup>70</sup> As the American-born generations came of age and formed an increasingly large segment of the Chinese American population, many of these young Americans faced difficult choices. The broader public continued to view them as perpetual outsiders, even as they often felt alienated from their parents and from traditional Chinese culture. Despite their education, fluent English, and career goals, second-generation college graduates faced a grim economic landscape.<sup>71</sup>

Economic pressures helped determine whether being costumed and on display felt like a choice for individual Chinese Americans. Non-Chinese Americans rarely hired Chinese American graduates, who were then pushed into nearly the same low-paid jobs their parents occupied, working in family businesses such as restaurants or laundries, or hiring out their services in Chinatown curio shops. For young women who would have preferred to participate in the “modern girl” aesthetic construction and self-styling, their options were instead limited to more stereotyped performance.<sup>72</sup> A social worker described the lack of opportunities offered to young Chinese women who “find positions in the American community as ‘figure-heads’ as the girls themselves say, where they wear their Chinese costumes. And oh, how they hate to wear them! But they know they would not be wanted except for the costume.” Chinese Americans’ marketability as human props remained, whatever clothes they wore on their own time. When marketing an exotic good like mah-

jong, stores desired the appearance of authenticity through Chinese American instructors and salespeople. Notably, white salesgirls could still market the exotic when dressed in appropriately Chinese costume, though they were probably less of a draw.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, Chinese Americans could not advertise standard American or Western qualities. Both white and Chinese Americans could perform “Chineseness,” but only whites could pass back into the privileges of whiteness.

More often than “wrinkled” men, Chinese women were displayed as emblematic of the game’s Oriental beauty and exotic appeal. The *Los Angeles Examiner* featured three Asian American young women dressed in “Oriental garb” gathered around their mahjong student, a famous Italian wrestler, with the suggestive caption “Wrestling Training!”<sup>74</sup> In San Francisco two “belles of the Chinese quarter” worked as in-store instructors while dressed in elaborate silken robes with jade bracelets.<sup>75</sup> Behind their photograph, the newspaper layout artist added paper cutouts of lanterns and cherry blossoms. Commanding more respect than the usual anonymity or caricatured names of “John Chinaman” or “Lotus Blossom,” however, these instructors were named respectfully as Miss Tue Tom and Miss Tsuey Ha, individuated as was William Wong.

Some played with the edges of authenticity in their performance, negotiating a gray zone of cultural commodification and resistance.<sup>76</sup> By combining elements of Chinese “authenticity” and Western fashion or American speech within a modern moment, Chinese Americans inherently challenged a bifurcation of Eastern traditionalism and Western modernity.<sup>77</sup> Chinese American entertainers often adopted royal stage names; the popular short instructional film of 1924, “Mysteries of Mah Jong,” starred the Eurasian actress known as Princess Nai Tai Tai.<sup>78</sup> An American context defined Chinese authenticity as outside Western modernity in either a degraded present or an esteemed past. It thus becomes a significant choice that the Ville de Paris instructor William Wong marketed himself as an expert in a Chinese game while wearing a Western suit. Notably, his unnamed fellow instructor more closely played the part of an “authentic” Chinese figure. Regardless of how strategic their paired presentations, both men would certainly have been aware of the expectations for demonstrated authenticity on the part of their white customers. The possibility of subverting such expectations would have been dependent upon individual economic vulnerability and the cultural authority that came with perceived authenticity.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, such hybrid performances may have held some appeal for white customers as a way of crossing boundaries rather than erasing them.<sup>80</sup>

When mahjong manufacturers overreached their claims on authenticity, they faced the angry reactions of Chinese Americans. Because it was im-



portant for Chinese Americans that the game retained its connection to esteemed elements of Chinese culture, mahjong manufacturer L. L. Harr's claims proved particularly galling. He had explicitly argued that contemporary Chinese people knew only the "modern coolie" game, and that his company sold the sole ancient and aristocratic version.<sup>81</sup> In a public argument with transpacific coverage, the *China Review* devoted a cover-page editorial to debunking Harr's claims. The *Review*, a journal published by the China Trade Bureau based in New York, angrily refuted Harr: "The misrepresentation of China and things Chinese in this country, particularly if it serves any selfish commercial purpose, is something which all fair-minded Americans deplore and justly condemn." Further, "It is something which the Chinese have the right to resent and the privilege to correct."<sup>82</sup> The editorial used mahjong controversies to address the broader issue of the simultaneous commodification and denigration of Chinese culture. It also appealed directly to Americans' self-concept as "fair-minded" while asserting a uniquely authoritative platform for Chinese Americans.

The game's established Chineseness helped reinforce its use as a tool for cultural authority. Eleanor Chan, the "bobbed-hair spokesman" of the Chinese Students' Club at the University of Southern California, sparred publicly with preeminent mahjong businessman Joseph Park Babcock when he claimed that he was the sole inventor of mahjong and that the game was in fact "foreign to China."<sup>83</sup> "We have not only played Mah Jongg years before Mr. Babcock ever visited China, but our Chinese ancestors also have played the same game," Chan argued. Drawing directly from the game's mystique, Chan went on: "Furthermore, this same game provided entertainments for the royal courts of China 1100 years ago."<sup>84</sup> Mahjong was one of the few arenas in which a young Chinese American woman could directly challenge a wealthy white businessman and be taken seriously by mainstream media. Voices like Chan's asserted the importance of Chinese Americans as a link between white Americans and authentic Chineseness. Cultural authority bolstered economic opportunities for those, like mahjong instructors, who could ostensibly provide a cultural bridge. Chan and the *China Review* undercut the dominant discourse by claiming a modern Chinese American heritage for a powerful Chinese past.

Chan's references to ancient China that echoed the game's marketers may also have reflected her personal belief in and attachment to an esteemed Chinese culture. Chinese Americans could genuinely hold many of the same romantic and Orientalist ideas of the East. After all, they were surrounded by the same American discourses and had their own reasons for holding fast to positive portrayals of Asia, however reductive.<sup>85</sup> Actress Anna May Wong, for

example, held preconceptions of timeless Eastern simplicity and spirituality until she traveled to China and was surprised by the urban modernization she found there.<sup>86</sup>

A modern Chinese authenticity steeped in philosophical wisdom and ancient roots indicated both a positive contribution to the world and a position of authority from which to speak specifically as Chinese Americans. In importer Ly Yu Sang's mahjong book *Sparrow*, he linked the game to philosophical symbolism from the *I Ching*, the ancient book of divination.<sup>87</sup> He also asserted the rational and mathematical elements of the game. Sang and other Chinese rulebook authors subtly claimed an authentic Chinese modernity marked, like the West, with rationality and power, while retaining Chinese character and history.<sup>88</sup> While lacking in historical and philosophical accuracy, Sang's argument appealed to both white and Chinese American readers in its reinforcement of lofty Chinese culture.<sup>89</sup> When the *New York Times* intimated that the game was not actually Chinese, a Chinese American reader wrote in protest and cited the popular rulebook by Ly Yu Sang.<sup>90</sup>

The cultural authority conferred onto Chinese American mahjong instructors raised their status and challenged the more accepted role of Chinese servants or exotic curio clerks. Even as they were discussed as quaint and foreign, in practice Chinese American instructors were closely affiliated with the American marketplace and directly facilitated the game's marketing and distribution. For white customers, they could prove authenticating and alluring but remain in the store's safe remove. Yet Americans continued to look askance at those who destabilized neat categories, particularly at Chinese men who entered, or who were imagined to enter, the white American home. In practice, instructors frequently positioned themselves in public: at department stores, galas, and large events, but the other main locale of learning—in the home with individual instruction—was a frequent focus in popular culture.<sup>91</sup> Providing a path into domestic space indicated a direct route to intimacy.

#### PERFORMING CULTURAL SEDUCTION

In reality the vast majority of independent mahjong instructors were white women, but the fictional archetype that emerged was predominantly Chinese. Sexualized depictions of mahjong could be enticing or lighthearted when associated with white men accessing "Oriental" women, but Chinese men became the representative mahjong instructors. With white women as the most closely associated consumers of the game, in popular fiction and commentary mahjong instruction became a site of Chinese cultural—and potentially sexual—inroads.

As mahjong instructors developed an outsized cultural presence, fears of both boundary-crossing Chinese men and a backlash against white women embracing non-domestic pursuits combined in darker depictions of mahjong. In the process, a new Chinese stereotype of a faux-assimilated charlatan emerged, as did an additional arena of Orientalist consumerism: cultural seduction. Rather than donning a racial mask such as costuming that she could play with, consume, and discard at will, the woman exposed to cultural seduction risked transforming on a more intimate, physical, and lasting basis. Without outside intervention on the part of a stronger white man, she might lose the ability to remove Oriental features. The mask would then become fundamentally transformative.

Fears of cultural seduction echoed earlier concerns about physical contagion, but they applied more to social than to bodily mobility. Earlier twentieth-century public health officials decried the supposed predatory spread of syphilis among white men and boys by Chinese prostitutes, and newspaper commentators cautioned against white female missionaries entrapped by wily Chinamen.<sup>92</sup> The predominant focus of fear centered on opium. Political cartoons, sensationalistic postcards, and popular representations of opium featured white women lying amidst men, insensate at the pipe.<sup>93</sup> When associated with a specific urban geography, insidious Chinese influence could be contained in Chinatown, and white women could be warned away or actively prevented from entering.<sup>94</sup> However, by the early 1920s a growing population of second-generation Chinese Americans and “modern” Chinese foreign students disrupted easy containment and categorization. H. D. Fong was one of many New York undergraduates who found ready employment as an “expert” mahjong instructor shortly after he memorized the game from Joseph Babcock’s rulebook. Teaching customers at the Gimbel Brothers department store meant that he “came into contact with members from the opposite sex frequently.” Fong later recalled that he responded to the attentions of a young white “flapper” with romantic letters and poetry. Although she never responded, Fong’s attempts illustrate the boundary-crossing possibilities of interracial encounters through mahjong. At the same time, more white women were entering Chinatown as “slummers” and tourists out for a thrilling time. They were also bringing mahjong and the people associated with it into their homes.<sup>95</sup>

Mahjong provided a new entree for Chinese culture, and male instructors, into the sacrosanct feminized white American domestic space. In response, popular literature sought to maintain racial boundaries by identifying Chinese assimilation as chicanery and male mahjong instructors as tricksters. Whether harmful or merely exploitative, they were depicted as snakes in the grass.<sup>96</sup> In one line of thought, working-class Chinese Americans conceptual-

ized only as laundrymen, cooks, and domestic servants could not have known the game because it was supposedly the province of mandarins: “Of course, a Chinese laundryman doesn’t really know anything about Mah Jong. If he had played it in his youth in the old home town his head would have been cut off.”<sup>97</sup> Chinese servants cut absurd figures among the gullible white elite, as a fashionable matron in *Harper’s* invites a caricatured laundryman to “join us for a game.”<sup>98</sup> In an article subtitled “Cooks Have Been Lured from Kitchens to Instruct in Native Game That Has Reaped Fortune,” the writer described how “certain soft-footed, slant-eyed denizens of the kitchen have for the first time in their American career been introduced to the parlors, where, garbed in brocades, they have presided as teachers of the game.” The “exorbitant rates paid for lessons,” only added “to the popularity of the ancient game.” In one short story, even a white male mahjong instructor used a manufactured Eastern mysticism to seduce a woman described as the “loveliest of morons.” Women were vulnerable to men under the guise of mahjong.<sup>99</sup>

In mahjong-inspired popular fiction such as *The Green Dragon Emerald*, a mystery play performed in California high schools, and in the comical *Saturday Evening Post* piece *Punk Pungs*, the Chinese villains are marked as dangerous because of their ability to perform smooth, fluent English.<sup>100</sup> The portrayal of Westernized Chinese men as nefarious tricksters echoed fears from the 1910s of supposedly Christianized Chinese men seducing, murdering, or otherwise ruining naïve female missionaries.<sup>101</sup> Signs of assimilation were seen as a dangerous and misleading masquerade.

Not all Chinese presence in the household was threatening, but the danger lay in interactions in which nonthreatening “authentic” foreign elements—such as faithful and heavily accented servants—were replaced by westernized Chinese men whose assimilated façades opened dangerously egalitarian doors to a perpetually alien core. American notions of contemporary Chinese authenticity were based on caricatured depictions of working-class laundrymen, cooks, or servants; thus an alternative persona, especially if powerful or Westernized, became de facto a malicious ruse.<sup>102</sup>

*The Green Dragon Emerald* perfectly encapsulates the thrilling and hazardous exoticism associated with Chinese culture transported into American homes via Chinese men and mahjong sets.<sup>103</sup> The thriller revolves around an American family living in late-1920s Peking. A shadow hangs over the family as unwilling possessors of a cursed ancient mahjong set that emits ghostly specters to lure the father to touch a poisoned emerald tile, the “green dragon.” The daughter Corinne, engaged to an upright young American man, is nearly seduced and eventually captured by a suave and Westernized sinister genius “Manchu prince,” Sang Wu, who seeks to transform her into a “Manchu prin-

cess." After venturing into the Chinese city with Sang Wu and possibly enjoying opium, Corinne drinks a potion that brings out her secret heritage as the product of a white American father and deceased Chinese mother. Reflecting ideas of race that conflated biology and culture, the elixir draws out her latent tendencies to make her physically and mentally Oriental. She feels a "yellow devil that's feeding upon my soul"; with narrowed eyes, she develops stealth, cunning, and cruelty.

Not surprisingly, Wu is behind the whole creepy business, as the dramatic ending reveals his scientific capabilities to manipulate the mahjong set through "some very clever electrical experimenting," radio, and his own fantastical contribution to science: projecting "thought vibrations." A Harvard psychologist-cum-scientist saves the day, and the stalwart young fiancé gets a rehabilitated, rewhitened Corinne. Sang Wu commits suicide by clutching the poisoned tile after praising "my illustrious ancestors, and the Green Dragon Mah Jong set!" Although two loyal Chinese servants lose their lives in the hubbub, their sacrifice is all part of a happy ending. The "Mah Jong game is ended," the psychologist tells the father in the play's closing line, "and *you* have won!"<sup>104</sup>

The character of Sang Wu epitomized the risk posed by Oriental power cloaked in seductive people or goods that promised unwary white consumers, especially women, luxury and pleasure. For a white woman to become Oriental meant degradation. Because of long-held sexual stereotypes of nonwhite women, and because of associations of smooth-talking Chinese men as sexual predators, becoming Oriental for a white woman meant becoming more sensual and sexually available. After Corinne drinks the potion, Sang Wu croons, "tonight, my lovely one, you are wholly of the orient. Yes, you are as beautiful as one of my own Manchu ancestresses; green eyes glittering like serpents; red, wanton lips, begging for kisses."<sup>105</sup> In the ultimate sign of her transformation, Corinne allows Sang Wu to kiss her. In *The Green Dragon*, the pairing of a Chinese man with a white woman suggested a female sexual availability and male power far more threatening than the interracial union of Corinne's own parents, of a white man with a Chinese woman.

Mahjong did not require the presence of a Chinese man to pose a threat to American women. The object itself could possess seductive powers that, overlaid with Oriental sensuous luxury, could transform a white woman in fundamental ways that destabilized the mahjong player's home. Media described legions of mahjong-addled "addicts" in terms that smacked of opium.<sup>106</sup> The long-held associations of Oriental luxury tinged with depravity imbued goods themselves with symbolic power.<sup>107</sup> The ways in which white women particularly engaged with the game—emphasizing costumes,

Chinese-inspired food, and “Chinesey” atmosphere through carved furniture and hanging lanterns—highlighted the spectacle of female domestic luxury.<sup>108</sup> The Oriental goods enabled displays of women’s consumerism, sensuousness, and nonproductive labor.

Mahjong in particular highlighted the possibility of cultural seduction. Biting critiques of white female victims of cultural seduction reacted not only to Chinese mobility but also to white women’s leisure: Chinese culture was the vehicle, but the result meant disrupted white American homes. As portrayed in the popular press, when women developed “mah-jong-itis,” or an “excessive tendency” for the game, they disrupted the household through becoming “Chinese” in certain imagined ways, neglecting domestic duties, and providing an entry point for the subversive foreign element, the Chinese male.<sup>109</sup> Newspaper articles across the social spectrum linked mahjong to women’s frivolity and excessive consumption, emphasizing female lack of self-control as “naturally lazy.”<sup>110</sup> Although couched in often humorous song lyrics or prose about a seemingly superfluous topic, the anxieties expressed about mahjong reflect more generalized anxieties over changing gender roles, immigration, and race.

In cultural seduction, consumption of luxury goods associated with the Oriental preyed upon a white woman’s assumed desire for consumer goods. After becoming too close to mahjong and its trappings, a woman could actually shed certain gendered features of whiteness—specifically related to domesticity. Rather than transgressing racial boundaries in urban geographies through slumming or temporary costuming, which reaffirmed the individual’s whiteness, these white female consumers’ domestic transgressions risked more permanent (and inevitably disastrous) racial crossings.<sup>111</sup>

A hit song, “Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jong,” popularized by comedian Eddie Cantor in 1924, depicted how a mother’s infatuation with mahjong dramatically disrupted her family.<sup>112</sup> The song’s narrative focuses on familial upheaval through gender disorder and the father’s attempt to remove the outside threat of the “Chink.” The bouncy refrain cries:

Since Ma is playing Mah Jong  
Pa wants all “Chinks” hung.  
We get rice chop suey each night,  
Chinese cooking you should see how Pa is looking.  
Ma wears a kimona  
She yells “Pung” and “Chow”.  
Ma left dishes in the sink  
Pa went out and killed a “Chink”  
Ma plays Mah Jong now.

The many encroachments of stereotypical Chinese elements encourage the audience to sympathize with long-suffering Pa. Significantly, while he desires the eradication of all “Chinks,” it is not until Ma actually neglects the domestic task of dish washing that he is pushed over the edge into lethal violence. As in other popular literature, the song’s comedic frame defused the real violence that plagued Chinese Americans by transforming it into a reassuringly humorous enactment of white patriarchal authority.<sup>113</sup>

Cultural commentators across the political spectrum decried women’s focus on the game over their familial responsibilities. Social reformer Miriam Van Waters critiqued women’s distracted self-absorption. Juvenile delinquency was to be blamed on “the modern phenomenon of groups of women playing bridge and mah jongg while groups of boys and girls have ‘petting parties,’ or expeditions to steal automobiles,” she admonished.<sup>114</sup> Just north of Seattle, Vancouver men advocated for a Husband’s Protective League “as a means of protecting themselves and of asserting their authority over their fair partners” because “mah jongg parties are cutting in on wives’ time so seriously.” Poor hardworking husbands, the article complained, “expecting a hot supper and a little human companionship,” were met instead by a tardy wife with her head still in the mahjong game, a cold meal of convenience foods, and an obligatory mahjong game with another couple. Early in the fad, women bringing the game into the home could be seen in a positive light of domesticating husbands, as a California man described: “It beats anything I know of to keep father and the boys home nights.” Yet when the game was played among women, as it increasingly was at its peak popularity, it risked drawing their focus away from the domestic to pleasure and peer-oriented unproductive leisure.<sup>115</sup>

Critiques of women’s self-focused pursuits and desires reflected discomfort with increasing female independence and a broader social ethic of individualism. The new ideal of companionate marriage was one way to contain the search for personal and sexual fulfillment within heterosexual bonds. Yet companionate marriage also involved a renegotiation of the power dynamics between men and women. In 1920s popular media, men often depicted themselves as at the mercy of their strong-willed wives. Mahjong humor poked fun at women who irresponsibly spent their husbands’ money on mahjong sets or forced them to play the game.<sup>116</sup>

The ways in which Ma takes on a Chinese identity illustrate the combination of actual and imagined cultural elements that were woven together in a fabric of stereotypes that could be used in racial performance. Like many white American mahjong players who engaged in masquerade with Chinese costuming, “Ma wears a kimona [*sic*],” as does the woman illustrated on the



sheet music cover who holds a wooden mahjong case. The woman's image clearly drew from traditional Japanese portraiture; it is unclear if she was supposed to be an "Oriental" woman (who would not be Chinese in any case), or if Ma had actually become Oriental, even down to the cartoonish slanted eye lines. The song portrayed the results of adopting stereotypical foreign characteristics, from cooking chop suey to growing long fingernails, as potentially dangerous in gendered ways. Eddie Cantor sang, "China you're poison to me, / You broke up my whole family" as Ma succumbs to the game's temptations.

The jazzy tune became a hit, tapping into the 1920s fox trot dance fad, fueling sales of sheet music and records.<sup>117</sup> In June 1924 the Oakland chapter of the Native Daughters of the Golden West presented a "burlesque" of racial performance in a cross-dressing revue devoid of modern-day sexually explicit connotations. The chapter's "bobbed-hair members" competed against their longer-haired counterparts as "twelve members in full masculine attire" performed to the "Oriental specialty, 'Since Ma is Playing Mah Jongg,' [as a] chorus of ten in varied Chinese costumes, with knives and guns."<sup>118</sup> The performance by these nativist white American women personified the underlying tensions of gender upheaval and violence that resonate throughout the popular tune.

For all the hubbub and warnings, both serious and flippant, Americans eagerly purchased hundreds of thousands of mahjong sets and devoted many evenings to playing with friends and spouses. For a variety of reasons, including the proliferation of rules and playing styles, mahjong's fervor passed by the late 1920s. It quickly became a hallmark of "the gay twenties" for the next few decades before the national fad faded in cultural memory, even as it grew within Chinese communities and eventually took new form among Jewish American women in particular.<sup>119</sup> Although Jewish women shared in the mahjong craze of the twenties, it would not be until the late 1930s and particularly the postwar era that they developed a unique mahjong culture. Mahjong's edginess, its attractive flirtation with imagined dangers, and its exotic performativity helped Americans transition through profoundly consequential social change during the Jazz Age. If mahjong-obsessed women were not, in fact, becoming Oriental like Eddie Cantor's Ma, then perhaps the song helped release anxieties and normalize racially transgressive entertainment at least as much as it humorously advertised its dangers.

The real and imagined participation in the American fad of Chinese mahjong instructors made them a proxy for cultural conversations about domesticity and social change within the United States. Chinese Americans in actual practice and in popular culture gained economic, social, and sexual footholds through a consumer item that had been exoticized and sexualized.

As Chinese men's reputations as experts and teachers gained currency, popular culture generated a new stereotype of a faux-assimilated trickster. Commentators and writers used the figure of the male Chinese instructor as a racial boundary against modern threats to domesticity and changes in home life. A chiding chorus against women's use of unproductive leisure portrayed white women as deluded and frivolous mahjong fans. In contrast, many white women eagerly embraced an imagined Chinese past for their own purposes of playing with newly accessible forms of racialized sexuality. The culture that white women created as consumers and players of mahjong provoked a powerful reaction intended to contain the very mobilities of race and gender that mahjong had inspired. Long after the 1920s fad, mahjong would continue to provide a rich historical marker of social change and cultural contestation.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go to Estelle Freedman, Allyson Hobbs, Gordon Chang, Tom Mullaney, Judy Wu, Katherine Marino, Natalie Marine-Street, Andrew Robichaud, Katie Krummeck, members of the Stanford Department of History, and the anonymous *Frontiers* readers for their comments. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, the American Historical Association Annual Conference, and the Stanford US History Workshop. Thanks also to the many librarians and archivists who made this work possible, especially Arlene Balkansky at the Library of Congress and George Burtch, who held the keys to the Parker Brothers archives at the Hasbro factory.

#### NOTES

1. H. H. Warner, "Cover Design," *Auction Bridge and Mah-Jongg Magazine*, September 1924, Library of Congress. The spelling of the magazine's title varied from "Mah Jong" to the trademarked "Mah-Jongg." On American shores, mahjong has been known by a wealth of monikers. The different names emerged through attempts at standardization, trademark battles, and complications of transliteration. "Mahjong" remains a relatively neutral spelling.

2. For more on modernity, nostalgia, and encounters with an Asian Other, see Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Karen Kuo, *East Is West and West Is East: Gender, Culture, and Interwar Encounters between Asia and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

3. “1923 Mah-Jongg Sales Company of America Catalog,” Mah Jong Museum, <http://www.mahjongmuseum.com/mjsca1.htm> (accessed September 13, 2013); “Put and Take’ Fails,” n.d., Mah-Jongg Sales Company Scrapbook 1, Parker Brothers Archive (hereafter cited as MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; now the Hasbro Archive); Louise Jordan Miln, *The Soul of China: Glimpsed in Tales of Today and Yesterday* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), 202–33.

4. Michael Stanwick, “Mahjong(g) before Mahjong(g): Part 2,” *Playing-Card* 32, no. 5 (2004): 206–15; Hsi-yüan Chen, “Cong Madioo Dao Majiang 從馬吊到馬將—小玩意與大傳統交織的一段歷史因緣 [Madioo and Mahjong in Popular Culture and Elite Discourse],” trans. Luke Habberstad, *中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊* [Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica], March 2009, 137–96; Andrew Lo, “China’s Passion for Pai: Playing Cards, Dominoes, and Mahjong,” in *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*, ed. Irving Finkel and Colin Mackenzie (New York: Asia Society, 2004), 218.

5. Chinese Government Bureau of Economic Information, “The Rise of Mahjongg,” *Chinese Economic Monthly*, January 1924; R. F. Foster, *Foster on Mah Jong* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1924); Joseph Park Babcock, “Game” patent (Tsinan, China: Assignor to Mah-Jongg Company of China, of Shanghai, China, a Corporation of Alaska, September 22, 1925).

6. “Commerce with China: Mah Jongg Sets Sixth in Value of Imports from Shanghai,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1924.

7. “Queer Chinese Game, Invented Centuries Ago, Is Society’s Latest Craze: Mah-Jongg, Intricate Pastime, Built Around Great Wall of the Orient,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 1922, sec. F. For more about the historical American China trade, see Kariann Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Christina H. Nelson, *Directly from China: Export Goods for the American Market, 1784–1930* (Salem, MA: Peabody Museum of Salem, 1985); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

8. Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 132–33; *Chinese Sparrow Game or Mah Jongg: The Ancient Game of China* (Boston: Chinese Mah Jongg Company, 1920s).

9. John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), parts III and IV; Clarence G. Badger, *It*, 1927.

10. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1–24.

11. “Big Costume Benefit Plan of Ebell Club,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, November 5, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; Myra Nye, “Mah Jongg and Music in Club Circles: Women’s Work, Women’s Clubs,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; The Neophyte, “Dragons Clash at Mah-Jongg: Chinese Game Played in Time of Confucius Full of Intriguing Combinations,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1922.

12. Explicit performance thus became a vehicle for more subtle kinds of performance. Performance studies encompass myriad ways in which individuals create and communicate their social position in a matrix of identities and categories, including gender, race, class, and sexuality. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31; Erin Striff, “Locating Performance Studies,” in *Performance Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1–13.

13. “Mah-Jong Ballet by Society Girls,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1923; “Youthful Dancer,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 29, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; “Mah Jongg Tea Dancing by Society Girl,” *San Francisco Call and Post*, July 15, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

14. Columbia Theatre, “Columbiagram: Around the Mah Jongg Table,” 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; “Photograph: Granada Theatre,” September 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; “[Snippet about Mah Jongg Blues],” *Moving Picture World*, December 2, 1922, Moving Picture World Collection, Library of Congress.

15. Constance Grenelle Wilcox, *Mah-Jongg: The Play of One Hundred Intelligences, in a Prologue and One Act* (Boston: C. C. Birchard and Company, 1923); James J. Montague, “More Truth Than Poetry: Mah Jong,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 1923; A. L. Wyman, “Practical Recipes: Mah Jongg Luncheon,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1924; Amaizo Oil, “Advertisement: Mah Jong Cakes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 5, 1924; *Mah Jong Maid*, Holograph piano score, 1925, Richard Rodgers Collection, Library of Congress, Performing Arts Library; *Mah-Jong*, Manuscript piano score (New York, 1920s), Von Tilzer/Gumm Collection, Library of Congress, Performing Arts Library; L. M. C. and Mah Jongg Sales Co. of America, “The Mah-Jongg Blues,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 16, 1922.

16. "Mah Jongg Party for Army Folk," *San Francisco Call*, October 6, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; Ladies Home Journal and Genevieve Jackson Boughner, "Catering for the Mah Jongg or Pung Chow Party," in *Women in Journalism: A Guide to the Opportunities and a Manual of the Technique of Women's Work for Newspapers and Magazines* (New York: D. Appleton, 1926).

17. "Chinese Parties Are 'All the Rage,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1923.

18. "Mah-Jongg, Ancient Game of China, Is Fast Becoming Popular in America," *Oregonian*, *Published as Morning Oregonian*, September 3, 1922; "Latest Indoor Sport," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 20, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; "Look Out, Bridge! Mah Jongg Is After Your Title," *Walla Walla Bulletin*, n.d., MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

19. Emanie N. Sachs, "China's Fascinating Super Game," *New York Times*, September 3, 1922; Lord and Taylor, "Advertisement: Mah Jong," *New York Times*, October 22, 1923; "Mah Jong Hands Displayed: Unique Decoration of Walls at Bachelors' Dance in Newport," *New York Times*, August 17, 1923; "Pledged Their Troth at Game of Mah Jong," *New York Times*, August 2, 1923. For a small sample of rulebooks, see Joseph Park Babcock, *The Laws of Mah-Jongg: 1925 Code Revised and Standardized by Joseph Park Babcock and an Associated Committee, Containing Also the New Game Du-Lo* (Salem, MA: Parker Brothers, 1925); Foster, *Foster on Mah Jong*; Philip Naftaly, *How to Play Ma Jong: Played by Confucius 2200 Years Ago, the Rage of Today*, 1922; Arthur Julius Israel, *How to Play Mah-Jong: Rules Which Govern the Play in the Principal American, European and Chinese Clubs in Shanghai, Hongkong and Peking, as Well as in the American and British Fleets in the Far East* (New York: Oriental Export Company, 1923); Lew Lyle Harr, *Pung Chow: The Game of a Hundred Intelligences, Also Known as Mah-Diao, Mah-Jong, Mah-Cheuk, Mah-Juck and Pe-Ling* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922); Elmer Dwiggin, *White Dragons Wild and How to Win at Ma Jong* (Los Angeles: Phillips Printing Company, 1924).

20. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

21. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Gina Marchetti, "American Orientalism," *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (May 2004): 299–304; Holly Edwards, "A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930," in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930* (Italy: Princeton University Press and Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000), 11–58; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

22. "Photo Standalone," *New York Times*, February 24, 1924; "Wrestling Training!," *Los Angeles Examiner*, September 14, 1922, sec. 1, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

23. Naftaly, *How to Play Ma Jong*.

24. Joseph Park Babcock, "Advertisement: Mah-Jongg Its Authentic Source," *Vogue*, December 15, 1923.

25. Harr, *Pung Chow*; Pung Chow Company, "Advertisement: Why the Queen of Norway Sent to America for a Chinese Game," *Vogue*, September 15, 1923.

26. Examples abound, including Piroxloid Products Corporation, "Advertisement: The Ancient Game of the Mandarins," *China Review*, May 1923; E. Ellicott, Esq., "Ancient Game of Confucius Now Confuses Us," *Washington Post*, July 29, 1923; Naftaly, *How to Play Ma Jong*; Wah Chuck Card Company, "The Ancient Mandarin Game 'Wah Chuck,'" Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles, 1920s. For more on "coolie" as a term and a stereotype, see Lee, *Orientalism*; also *Chinese Immigration: The Social, Moral and Political Effect of Chinese Immigration. Testimony Taken before a Committee of the Senate of the State of California*, 1876, Stanford University Special Collections.

27. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Piroxloid Products Corporation, "Advertisement: The Ancient Game of the Mandarins."

28. Neophyte, "Dragons Clash."

29. "New-Old Game Fascinates," *Seattle Times*, October 19, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB; "Now Comes Mah Jongg Out of the Orient: Fascinating Game Hails from Old China [Edited by Mah Jongg Sales Co.]," *Oregon Sunday Journal*, November 19, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

30. Kuo, *East Is West and West Is East*, 12; Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (New York: John Day Company, 1958); Donald W. Treadgold, "The United States and East Asia: A Theme with Variations," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 1 (February 1980): 1–27; Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*.

31. Edith McConn, "Town Mah Jongg Mad; Society Stacks Tiles: Newly Introduced Chinese Game Spreads," *Evening News*, November 27, 1922.

32. Miln, *The Soul of China*, 205, emphasis in original.

33. Yokota, *Unbecoming British*; John E. Willis Jr., "European Consumption and Asian Production in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lorna Weatherhill, "The Meaning of Consumer Behaviour in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 206–27; Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*; Carole Shammas, "Changes in English and Anglo-American Consumption from 1550 to 1800," in *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 177–205; Nelson, *Directly from China*.

34. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom, eds., *Asian American Art: A History, 1820–1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Edwards, "A Million and One Nights"; Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, "Colonialism and China," in *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and*



*the World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–22; Adam McKeown, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (May 1999): 306–37.

35. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 16.

36. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 110–12; Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace*.

37. “Chinese Parties Are ‘All the Rage.’”

38. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*; Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, New Left Books, 1991); Deloria, *Playing Indian*; Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 1 (February 1995): 1–20; Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*.

39. Melissa J. Martens, “The Game of a Thousand Wonders,” in *Mah Jongg: Crak Bam Dot* (New York: 2wiceBooks, 2010), 8–21.

40. “Forms Mah Jong Club,” *Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1924, national edition; “With the Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1924, national edition.

41. For relevant context, see Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 111; Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

42. “Ma-Jung Fete of 1923: Album of Photographs,” 1923, Stanford University Special Collections.

43. In 1923 a Los Angeles Reform synagogue sisterhood held an “unusual social meeting,” where incense and Chinese costumes made for a “decidedly Oriental” ambience. “News and Notes of Sisterhoods,” *Jewish Chronicle*, April 6, 1923.

44. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xiv; Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*.

45. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*.

46. “[Untitled Clipping: Ebell Club],” *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, November 15, 1923, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

47. Lee, *Orientalism*; Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”*; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Ezra H. Fitch, “Introduction: The Ancient Game of Chinese Scholars and Gentlemen,” in *Snyder’s Ma-Jung Manual*, by Henry M. Snyder, ed. Rob-



ert F. Foster (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), ix–xi; John Held Jr., “and the Twain Shall Meet,” *Auction Bridge and Mah Jong Magazine*, May 1924, Library of Congress.

48. Alys Eve Weinbaum, “Racial Masquerade: Consumption and Contestation of American Modernity,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, 120–46; Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*; Moon, *Yellowface*; A. A. Vantine and Company, “Vantine’s” (New York: A. A. Vantine and Company, 1920s), Trade Catalogs, Winterthur Museum Library, <http://archive.org/details/vantines02aava>.

49. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device,” 2.

50. D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 240.

51. Erté (Romain de Tirtoff), *Costume Design for “Mah-Jongg,”* gouache and metallic paint, 1924, Drawings, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The costumes that came to life were somewhat less fantastical and revealing than Erté’s original vision. (See photos of costumes in “Mah-Jongg on the Stage,” *Auction Bridge and Mah Jong Magazine*, September 1924.) Wilcox, *Mah-Jongg: The Play*; “Mah-Jong Ballet by Society Girls.”

52. John Held Jr., “The Ancient Chinese Game According to the More Modern Generation,” *Auction Bridge and Mah Jong Magazine*, June 1924, Library of Congress. The cartoons were published in a specialty magazine, but Held was an artist with national reach. His magazine covers helped define the flapper image.

53. Sachs, “China’s Fascinating Super Game.”

54. John Held, Jr., “If Confucius Should Return,” *Auction Bridge and Mah Jong Magazine*, August 1924, Library of Congress.

55. The cartoon lingerie referenced the wealth of mahjong-inspired fashions, including silk stockings, dresses, and jewelry. Peggy Paige, “Advertisement: There’s an Easter Dress for You Among These New Frocks by Peggy Paige,” *Vogue*, April 15, 1924; Eastern Sales Company, “Mah Jong Ring,” *Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1924, national edition; “Decries Activities of Press Agents: Silk Group of Dry Goods Association Discusses Effect of Mah-Jongg on Styles,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1924; Helen Koues, “Fashions,” *Good Housekeeping*, July 1924, Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (HEARTH), Cornell University; “Mah Jong Wields Influence,” *China Review*, September 1923; “Vogue’s Fortnightly Wardrobe,” *Vogue*, November 1, 1926.

56. “Flappers of Chinatown: East Meets West in Piquant Fashion in San Francisco,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1923.

57. Moon, *Yellowface*. Moon examines how the characterization of Chinese music as “noise” influenced larger perceptions of assimilability and social evolution.

58. *Mah-Jongg*, Copyist manuscript piano-vocal score (New York, 1923), Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress, Performing Arts Library. Although Bret Harté’s poem, officially titled “Plain Language from Truthful James,” was intended as a satirical jab at anti-Chinese sentiments attributed to working-class Irishmen, it quickly

circulated in anti-Chinese circles and entered popular culture. For decades after, the “heathen Chinese” was a cultural reference point in media and was used to taunt Chinese Americans on the streets. Harte later called it “trash.” Gary Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark”: Appropriations of Bret Harte’s ‘Plain Language from Truthful James,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 3 (December 1996): 377–99.

59. Fitch, “The Ancient Game of Chinese Scholars and Gentlemen.”

60. “L.A. Society Takes Up Mah Jongg, Chinese Game,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, July 26, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

61. Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6. See also Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards: The Life of a Wartime Celebrity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture, 1930–1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Anthony W. Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Moon, *Yellowface*.

62. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 65; Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”; Striff, “Locating Performance Studies.”

63. “New Chinatown: Modernity Creeping into Section,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 19, 1936, Pardee Lowe Collection, Box 125a, Hoover Archive, Stanford University. The article describes “the embarrassment of a smartly dressed middle-aged American woman as she asked, in patronizing, mutilated English, ‘You make jade bracelets?’ She shrank a couple of inches into her fur coat as the Chinese clerk replied in perfect English. ‘Step over this way, madam; we keep some of our finest jade bracelets in this case.’”

64. Chinese Americans learned from friends, neighbors, and instructors in shops. Instructors who were university students and Chinese nationals may have learned the game in China’s urban centers. See also C. & T. Importing Company, “Advertisement: MA JONG We Give Free Lessons to Every Purchaser,” Conference Program: “The Twenty-Second Conference Chinese Students’ Alliance Western Section—U.S.A.,” 1924; Pardee Lowe, *Father and Glorious Descendant* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1943), 219.

65. Chinese Government Bureau of Economic Information, “The Rise of Mah-jongg,” 4; Stanwick, “Mahjong(g) before Mahjong(g): Part 2”; Chen, “Madio and Mahjong,” 15; Mr. Quan, interview by Genny Lim, Judy Yung, and Him Mark Lai, August 29, 1975, Angel Island Oral History Project, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.

66. Erika Lee, “Defying Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants and Their Strategies during the Exclusion Era,” in *Chinese American Transnationalism*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 1.

67. Wendy Rouse Jorae, *The Children of Chinatown: Growing Up Chinese American in San Francisco, 1850–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 47.

68. “Students Teach Mah Jong,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1923. “Colleges Report on Summer Jobs,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1924.

69. Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 97–102; Leong, *The China Mystique*, 57; Haiming Liu, “Chinese Herbalists in the United States,” in *Chinese American Transnationalism*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 148; Moon, *Yellowface*, ch. 6.

70. “Institute of Pacific Relations: Preliminary Paper Prepared for Second General Session July 15–29, 1927” (Institute of Pacific Relations, 1927), 15, Pardee Lowe Collection, box 97, Hoover Archive, Stanford University.

71. Jorae, *The Children of Chinatown*, 211; “Institute of Pacific Relations, 1927.” See also Pardee Lowe’s sociological notes and interviews, boxes 96, 97, 99 in Pardee Lowe Collection, Hoover Archive, Stanford University.

72. For more on cultural citizenship through consumerism, see Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*.

73. Frank C. Elliott, *Mah Jongg Section*, Photograph, October 11, 1923, Bullock’s Department Store Collection of Photographs, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

74. “Wrestling Training!” For additional depictions of attractive and flirtatious Chinese female instructors, see Held, “and the Twain Shall Meet”; Norman Jefferies, “Mysteries of Mah Jong: Film Copyright Descriptive Material,” 1924, Copyright Descriptive Material, microfilm, Library of Congress, Motion Pictures.

75. “Mah Jongg, Orient Game, Replacing Bridge in S.F.,” *San Francisco Call*, June 23, 1922, MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

76. Moon, *Yellowface*; Leong, *The China Mystique*; Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*; Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Shehong Chen, *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Anthony W. Lee, “Another View of Chinatown: Yun Gee and the Chinese Revolutionary Artists’ Club,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture; A City Lights Anthology* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 163–82.

77. Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*, 50.

78. Jefferies, “Mysteries of Mah Jong.” For other examples, see Moon, *Yellowface*, ch. 6.

79. Some voices in popular media explicitly undercut Chinese Americans’ mah-jong authority by questioning whether contemporary working-class Chinese people would know anything about an ancient royal game. See James J. Montague, “Fire! And ‘Fore!’” *Washington Post*, December 16, 1923.

80. Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 101.

81. The Pung Chow Company, “Pung Chow: The Most Beautiful Game in the World,” n.d. (1923), Mah Jong Museum, <http://www.mahjongmuseum.com/pc.htm>.

82. Editor, "Mah Jong and Spiritism," *China Review*, June 1923. See also "Books and Authors," *New York Times*, July 1, 1923, sec. BR. They were aided in their attacks by Lew Lysle Harr's brother, John Harr, who was angry over being ousted from the Pung Chow Company once it became profitable. "Brother Attacks Harr's Claim of Games with Li Hung Chang," *New York World*, reproduced in *China Review*, September 1923.

83. "Mah Jongg King Arrives in City: Game Originator Frightened, but Not Ashamed; J. P. Babcock Admits Latest Craze Foreign to China; And He Is Blond, Native of Hoosier State," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1923.

84. "Chinese Students Peeved," *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1923.

85. For discussions of sincerity in performance, see Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520; Striff, "Locating Performance Studies," 5. Striff draws from Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

86. Leong, *The China Mystique*, 88, 91, 188.

87. Ly Yu Sang, *Sparrow: The Chinese Game Called Ma-Ch'iau* (New York: Lent and Graff Company, for Long Sang Ti Chinese Curios Company, 1923).

88. See also Julius Su Tow, *The Outline of Mah Jong: How to Play and How to Win, the Real Chinese Methods* (New York: J. S. Tow, 1924); W. Lock Wei, *The Theory of Mah Jong: Its Principles, Psychology, Tactics, Strategies, and Fine Points, Including the Complete Chinese Rules of Play* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1925).

89. Sang's book enjoyed wide circulation and suffered from plagiarism as well, as in *The Dragon Rule Book for Sparrow Ma Ch'iau* (New York: Loring P. Rixford, 1924).

90. "Topics of the Times: Have All of Us Been Misled?," *New York Times*, February 9, 1924. The *Times* dismissed the letter as a possible marketing ploy by Ly Yu Sang.

91. Lawton Mackall, "Tiles on Parade," *Auction Bridge and Mah Jong Magazine*, May 1924, Library of Congress; Jean Knott, "Penny Ante: Girls Take Up Mah Jong," 1923, Mah-Jongg Sales Company Scrapbook 2, Parker Brothers Archive (hereafter cited as MJSC Scrapbook 2, PB; now the Hasbro Archive).

92. Shah, *Contagious Divides*; Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); *Chinese Immigration*.

93. I. W. Taber, *White Women in Opium Den, Chinatown, S.F.*, Photograph, May 31, 1892, Album of views of California and the West, Canada, and China, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA; Clement Wood, *The Truth about New York's Chinatown*, Little Blue Book 1057 (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius Company, 1926); Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

94. Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*.

95. H. D. Fong, *Reminiscences of a Chinese Economist at 70* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1975), 22. With thanks to Elizabeth LaCouture for this reference. For Chinatown tourism, see Heap, *Slumming*.

96. In *Oriental*, Robert Lee identifies six alienating Asian stereotypes: the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook. I see

the faux-assimilated trickster figure as an additional stereotype, predominant in the 1910s–1930s. Lee, *Orientalism*, 8.

97. Montague, “‘Fire!’ And ‘Fore!’”

98. G. B. Walker, “Cartoon: The Yellow Peril,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, November 1923.

99. “Queer Chinese Game”; Mackall, “Tiles on Parade.”

100. Lucy Alsanson Cuddy, *The Green Dragon Emerald: A Mystery Play in Three Acts* (San Francisco: Banner Play Bureau, 1928); Sam Hellman, “Punk Pungs,” *Saturday Evening Post*, November 3, 1923, MJ Scrapbook 2, PB.

101. Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*.

102. As in *Birth of a Nation* and other mainstream post-emancipation white supremacist media portrayals, the dangerous and uppity upwardly mobile nonwhite threat is juxtaposed against the figure of the simple servant who did not threaten the racial hierarchy. See Jack Temple Kirby, “D. W. Griffith’s Racial Portraiture,” *Phylon* 39, no. 2 (Qtr 1978): 118–27.

103. Cuddy, *The Green Dragon Emerald*; “Senior Class of Mariposa High to Give Play,” May 14, 1931.

104. Cuddy, *The Green Dragon Emerald*, 84–85, 88, 89.

105. Cuddy, *The Green Dragon Emerald*, 23.

106. “American Who Invented Mah Jongg Discovered,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, n.d., MJ Scrapbook 2, PB; “Mrs. Edwin S. Webster,” *Town Topics*, February 15, 1923; Harriette S. Stevens, “How the Mah Jongg Fiend Scores His Victories,” *Vogue*, n.d., MJSC Scrapbook 1, PB.

107. Demonstrated in colonial-era “Japanning” lacquered furniture designs, Orientalist consumerism, and popular media such as D. W. Griffith’s “Broken Blossoms.” See Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*; Edwards, “A Million and One Nights”; Mae M. Ngai, “American Orientalism: Review of New York before Chinatown,” *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 3 (September 2000): 408–15; Marchetti, “American Orientalism”; Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*; Kirby, “D. W. Griffith’s Racial Portraiture,” 119–20; Lee, *Orientalism*, ch. 4.

108. For additional examples, see Auto Vacuum Ice Cream Freezer, “Advertisement: Play While the Ice Cream Freezes,” *Good Housekeeping*, June 1924, Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (HEARTH), Cornell University; R. H. Macy and Company, “Advertisement: ‘How Ma-Chiang Saved My Life,’” *New York Times*, February 25, 1924; “Now the Game Is Mah Jongg,” *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, January 7, 1923, sec. Magazine.

109. Josephine M. Burnham, “Three Hard-Worked Suffixes,” *American Speech*, February 1927, 244–46. A linguist in 1927 identified the creation of a new term: *mah-jongg-itis*. Borrowed from the medical suffix meaning “inflammation of,” popular use of *-itis* came to mean, “excessive tendency to.” The author included *mah-jongg-itis* with

Charlestonitis, flapperitis, crosswordpuzzleitis, and [Ku Klux] klanitis, revealing 1920s cultural preoccupations ranging from hobbies to white supremacy.

110. "Woman Must Return to the Corset," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 27, 1923, microfilm, San Francisco Public Library (SFPL); Mildred Adams, "A Maker of Heirlooms," *Woman's Journal*, January 27, 1923.

111. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device"; Heap, *Slumming*.

112. *Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jong* (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1924), Sam DeVincent Collection, National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Washington, DC. Eddie Cantor was a popular comedic Jewish entertainer who successfully transitioned from vaudeville to film. He often performed in blackface, including in partnership with the African American vaudevillian Bert Williams. His humor also included ethnic humor based on Jewish stereotypes, but he was simultaneously an early pioneer in embracing his Jewish heritage in front of mixed audiences.

113. See also Hellman, "Punk Pungs."

114. Miriam Van Waters, *Youth in Conflict* (New York: Republic Publishing Company, 1925), 274.

115. "Mah Jongg and the Husbands' Protective League," *Vancouver Sun*, November 11, 1923; McConn, "Town Mah Jongg Mad."

116. Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *New York Times*, December 23, 1924; Edgar A. Guest, "Just Folks," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1924; "Comic Strip: The First Hundred Games of Mah Jong Are the Hardest," *New York Evening Mail*, October 2, 1923, MJ Scrapbook 2, PB.

117. *Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jong*; Billy Jones, *Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jong: Fox Trot*, 10 in. 78 rpm, mono (Columbia, 1924), Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford University.

118. "Native Daughters of the Golden West," *Grizzly Bear Magazine*, August 1924, SFPL.

119. George R. Clark, untitled drawing in series, accession name *The Gay Twenties I*, publication date 1936, Caroline and Erwin Swann Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs; Kotex, "Advertisement: Can You Date These Songs?," *Vogue*, August 15, 1943.