

(DE)TRACKING SINOCENTRISM

*Mathematics Education + Racialized Electoral Politics
in San Francisco*

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Abstract. In 2024, San Francisco voters approved Proposition G, requiring 8th-grade Algebra 1 for public school students and restores “tracked” course sequences that sort students by their perceived intellectual abilities. Proposition G’s proponents mobilized anti-Asian American racist essentialism, and proximity to whiteness, targeting San Francisco’s large Chinese American electorate. We argue, using Asian Critical Race Theory and critical race discourse analysis, that Proposition G proponents’ arguments mobilized covert anti-Asian American essentialism and Sinocentrism to undermine racial justice discourses in educational politics. We consequently propose an analytic of “(De) Tracking Sinocentrism,” which disentangles Sinocentrism from Asian American panethnic racialization processes.

“IT ALL STARTS HERE”

In March 2024, voters in San Francisco, California, approved Proposition G (Prop G), which proponents claimed reinstated “tracking” in mathematics and required Algebra 1 in 8th grade. Tracking creates a hierarchy of academic ability by sorting students based on perceptions of their intelligence in a given school subject, which reproduces racial inequities in education. Prop G reversed San Francisco Unified School District’s (SFUSD) decade-long policy that “detracked”

mathematics. While a local ballot measure, two facets of Prop G have larger national importance. First is Prop G's setting in San Francisco, a "deep blue" city "mythologized as a land of . . . progressive politics, and picturesque cosmopolitanism."¹ Second is how Prop G's supporters mobilized race to court Chinese Americans. For example, one group, GrowSF, credited "Chinese . . . parents and grandparents who organized their community to vote for the first time" as grassroots heroes whose "energy and power . . . is not reflected in many of San Francisco's Asian American elected officials."² Yet, this statement minimizes Chinese Americans' political, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, especially in San Francisco's Asian American community which is among the U.S.' oldest and largest.³ Much like Goodwin's critiques of Asian American as a limiting and "homogenizing label,"⁴ we problematize exceptionalizing political narratives about Chinese Americans' identities while erasing their activism within Asian American (AsAm) communities nationally.

San Francisco is a microcosm of Chinese American and AsAm diversity in which communities highly contest the boundaries and utilities of both identities as these coalitions negotiate a more unified political voice illustrative of national conversations. Far from a monolith, San Francisco's highly ethnically, socioeconomically, and ideologically diverse AsAm communities are a majority of racialized San Franciscans.⁵ Like other AsAm communities nationally, rapid population growth reveals sociopolitical divisions within these highly sought after constituencies alongside the racist assumptions or dominant ideologies baked into how politicians mobilize or engage AsAms.⁶ For example, AsAm San Franciscans have organized to resist racist educational policies like segregated "Oriental schools" and English-only instruction, supported Black-led resistances during the Third World Liberation Movement, and currently advocate for ethnic studies.⁷ Simultaneously, other AsAms organized against affirmative action and tout the multiracial coalition that recalled three progressive Board of Education Commissioners of color.

These moments of San Francisco AsAm organizing remind us that labels and stereotypes like the model minority myth enable the creation of a "monolithic . . . mythic Asian American Model Minority student [who] can then be idealized/stereotyped."⁸ This mythology, consequently, presumes and confines AsAms to being academically high achieving, which impacts how stakeholders craft and sell educational policies that impact AsAms in schools. Tropes like the model minority myth underscore the deep impacts of racism imposed by white supremacy in shaping "Chinese Americans' understanding of racial equality and . . . their ethnic identity."⁹ Yet, leaders of Chinese American groups, like the Chinese American Democratic Club (CADC), made arguments that sought proximity to whiteness in favor of Prop G, which led us to study (c)overt appeals to "Chineseness," or

Chinese identities, related to Prop G. Studying how people come to identify as “Chinese” spans multiple disciplines, and presents a compelling analytic because, we argue, “Chineseness” (and “anti-Chineseness”) operate throughout AsAm racialization and essentialization processes beyond a local ballot measure in San Francisco. Centering these nuances reveals asymmetrical ways that essentializing tropes impact AsAm communities. Chineseness’s flattening and embeddedness within AsAm identities also complicates Asian Critical Race Theory’s (AsianCrit) *strategic (anti-)essentialism* tenet and shapes how Asian American studies scholars “read” activism as strategic, or not. San Francisco is far from the only city navigating the confluence of multiple political agendas claiming to be “equity” work, and the confluence of flattened political discourses about Chinese Americans and mathematics education reveals an interplay between subtle essentialist discourses, which mask diverging aims of policies that nominally support racial equity and justice. What we learned from our analysis of arguments in this San Francisco election illustrates the danger of, even subtly, positioning Chinese Americans as a bellwether for all AsAm communities.

In this paper, we answer the question: “How do print political arguments in favor of Proposition G essentialize Chinese identities?” We analyze arguments related to Proposition G “Offering Algebra 1 to Eighth Graders” in San Francisco’s Voter Information Guide (the Guide) overseen and distributed by the San Francisco Board of Elections to all registered voters to which people can submit arguments for or against ballot measures. In this paper, we augment Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) with a focus on “Sinocentrism”—political centering of Chineseness—and critical race discursive analysis¹⁰ to argue that pro-Prop G print political arguments embed and embrace Sinocentrism to support tracking in mathematics education. Our analysis shows how Chinese American leaders’ embraces of these tropes upholds anti-Black educational policies that co-opt discourses of social justice to undermine them. We show how pro-Prop G messaging ultimately used *unstrategic* essentialism of Chinese Americans and advance an analytic of “tracking” and “detracking” Sinocentrism to argue that Sinocentrism is inimical to stronger panethnic solidarity insofar as white supremacy oppresses AsAm communities despite AsAm’s racialized proximity to it.

To begin, we will review literature to situate our study in San Francisco’s history, tracking in mathematics education, and anti-AsAm discourses in mathematics education. Next, we outline our analytical lens that merges AsianCrit with a focus on Sinocentrism that draws from both Asian and Asian American studies literature. After detailing our critical race discourse analysis methodology, we present two thematic strands of findings: (1) how white public figures reproduce racialized narratives about STEM success in San Francisco; and (2)

how Chinese American leaders reinforced these narratives. Finally, we use these findings to present an argument for the analytical utility of both *tracking* and *detracking* Sinocentrism in Asian American studies.

WHY[,] SAN FRANCISCO?¹¹

Yelamu/San Francisco, and its public schools, are sites of fierce historical and contemporary political contestation and reflect broader discourses about antiblackness and racism in the U.S. from which many national precedents emerged, from ethnic studies itself to linguistic equity in schools.¹² Many of San Francisco's street names (e.g., Page, Phelan, Serra) evoke their namesakes' racist policies and history of colonization, which haunt people's everyday movements through the city. For example, the 1875 Page Act, which preceded the Chinese Exclusion Act in prohibiting Chinese migration to the U.S. San Francisco's social geography and socioeconomic promises, Shange argues,¹³ then and now, made San Francisco a destination for transpacific migration and the Great Migration, at points catalyzing "the refocusing of racial animosities from Asian communities to Black ones,"¹⁴ which impacted racialized children's access to public schools before *Tape* and *Plessy*.¹⁵ Well into the twentieth century, few wealthy San Franciscans of color could leave these enclaves further constricting access to SFUSD schools.¹⁶

Yet, the Chinese Americans label can flatten nuances of who can claim to be Chinese American let alone the "vast socio-economic intragroup divisions between the middle-class minority and the poor majority,"¹⁷ visible in San Francisco's social geography and shaped their early political actions. Au writes that "[e]arly Chinese Americans traveled two parallel educational paths as they negotiated the contradictory tensions of Asian American racialization,"¹⁸ both of which appear in San Francisco's political history. These two paths divided those who wanted equal public school access, and those who wanted "refuge in . . . privately funded Chinese language schools that could teach their children Chinese culture"¹⁹ in the event of expulsion under the Chinese exclusion acts. Post-*Tape*, the public "Oriental" schools suffered chronic mismanagement, and some early Chinese Americans felt ambivalent about pursuing integrated schools fearing anti-AsAm racism and perceptions that attending white schools might strip Chinese American children of their "Chineseness."

Ripples of this ambivalence trickled into subsequent debates as Chinese San Franciscans negotiated a diversity of political thought in their organizing. Two subsequent cases, *Lau v. Nichols* wherein the U.S. Supreme Court found that

SFUSD violated Title IV of the Civil Rights Act by failing to offer students access to non-English-medium instruction and materials, and *Ho v. SFUSD* a settlement of which blocked an ethnic quota scheme in SFUSD wherein no school could have more than 45 percent of students of one ethnicity, reveal how these two paths to educational access diverge.²⁰ In these efforts, Chinese American leaders emphasized “proximities and potential alignments while managing contradictions in order to cohere a social force strong enough to win meaningful change.”²¹ However, San Francisco’s social geography reveals intragroup divisions, which Zou describes as “[t]he poorer and working-class Cantonese-speaking new immigrants continued to settle in the Chinatown and North Beach areas, whereas the middle-class families spread out in the city’s western districts such as Sunset and Richmond” neighborhoods.²² San Francisco’s history presents a unique context that also mirrors global power structures like antiblackness, Orientalism, and racism, and reveals how differential racialization can create appearances of alignments with white supremacy but perhaps for reasons informed by an individual community’s experiences under white supremacy.²³

(DE)TRACKING (IN MATHEMATICS)

In education, tracking is “the process where by students are divided into categories so they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes.”²⁴ Although this practice can involve sorting students within the classroom into groups based on their perceived ability or achievement level, this is *not* the form of tracking we discuss. When we describe tracking, we refer to the systemic practice of sorting students into different classes based on *perceived* intelligence, which is widely implemented and studied across subject areas.²⁵ Tracking can be traced to the early 1900s in response to increasing access to American public schools and reactionary fears of immigrants in American schools, necessitating a way to segregate schools in the South following reconstruction.²⁶ By the 1950s, the rise of IQ testing positioned tracking as a scientific and meritocratic way to assign students to leveled school curricula.²⁷ Tracking appeared an efficient way to manage America’s academic resources post-Sputnik as American politicians reoriented education toward a pipeline to maintain its global dominance.²⁸ Tracked courses in public schools led educational researchers to explore the impacts of tracking on students and how it replicates educational inequalities.²⁹

Tracking replicates inequities in many ways. First, tracking has been shown to maintain within-school segregation³⁰ with students of Color and those from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds often in lower track classes.³¹

Although supporters of tracking argue low-track placements help struggling learners and that grouping students heterogeneously diminishes the learning of high-achieving students,³² there are differences in instructional quality between tracks, with lower instructional quality taking place in lower tracks.³³ Tracks are rigid, often preventing students from moving between tracks after eighth grade due to having to move more quickly through the curriculum.³⁴ Additionally, Terrin and Triventi conducted a meta-analysis of studies related to tracking and found “the mean effect size of tracking on efficiency is null, whereas it is positive for inequality.”³⁵ Literature shows tracking contributes to differences in student achievement instead of being an efficiency tool for teachers.

Mathematics education has a unique place within tracking debates, given how this sorting potentially impacts students’ socioeconomic futures. Battey demonstrates how tracking disproportionately results in students of color tracked into “traditional” as opposed to “advanced” mathematics courses like calculus.³⁶ This segregation of students of color from advanced mathematics classrooms has led to mathematics education researchers and activists describing mathematics tracking as “academic apartheid.”³⁷ Ngo and Velasquez found through tracking, a majority of students were caught in the “math trap” of having to repeat math courses in college.³⁸ Additionally, scholars highlight the racialized, gendered and ableist ways children are placed within the mathematics education hierarchy.³⁹ These practices of determining where children belong in the mathematical hierarchy position students as not belonging in mathematics—either as incapable mathematicians or excluded for exceeding perceived ability “standards.”⁴⁰ Segmenting students directly impacts students’ opportunities to learn mathematics by providing less access to “enriched content and cognitively demanding experiences.”⁴¹ Further, Boaler found that students’ experiences in higher tracked courses were “so stressful and debilitating they were unable to learn any mathematics.”⁴²

Responding to inequities that students face in tracked mathematics class, mathematics education scholars advocate to detrack mathematics classrooms.⁴³ This process creates mathematics classrooms of heterogeneous abilities. Algebra 1, for example, has long been used as a gatekeeping mechanism in education,⁴⁴ and as a site of activism around increasing educational equity.⁴⁵ Based on this advocacy, scholars continue to research the implications of detracking mathematics classes on students. In England, a three-year comparison of detracked and tracked schools found that students in the detracked school scored higher on national exams.⁴⁶ In the U.S., Burris and colleagues⁴⁷ found that students in detracked classrooms took more advanced classes and passed state testing at higher rates than students in tracked classes. Additionally, researchers showed, through an analysis of 800 high school students across the U.S., that while all

students benefited from detracking the mathematics classes, students in detracked schools from the highest achieving groups increased their achievement the most and performed significantly better than their tracked peers.⁴⁸

Implementing this research, SFUSD detracked their 8th grade mathematics program beginning in the 2014–2015 academic year. SFUSD’s detracking reform aligned with the mathematics standards, provided at least one pathway to calculus for students, and offered various decision points related to mathematics classes responding to students’ interests.⁴⁹ As Torres and colleagues describe, the transition process to a detracked mathematics program was a thorough and consultative one, involving many stakeholders, research partners, teachers, and district leaders. Additionally, once SFUSD detracked mathematics classes, the district continued to monitor student performance and respond to community concerns, such as by adding more decision points and pathways to advanced mathematics (e.g., calculus). SFUSD’s 2023 analysis of longitudinal data for five graduating classes found there was “an increase in all [racial] groups of students earning [required] math credits by the end of their junior year.”⁵⁰ Additionally, after adding increased pathways, 40 percent of graduating SFUSD students accessed some type of pathway to advanced mathematics.⁵¹ SFUSD’s decade-long detracking policy, while an unexpected “culture wars” site, (de)tracking is important to this study because of how mathematics can covertly racialize students through normalizing and reinforcing racialized stereotypes about students’ mathematical intelligence within classrooms.

ANTI-ASIAN AMERICAN DISCOURSES IN MATHEMATICS

In this paper, we name and explicate harmful stereotypes in order to critique them. We ask readers to suspend judgment while we invoke stereotypes in order to critique tacit perceptions of Chinese ethnic chauvinism. We position Chineseness relative to AsAm identities, echoing Poon, where “Asian American does not include the toxicity of self-interested ethnic chauvinism, which has resulted in a complicity with White supremacy undergirded by antiblack ideologies.”⁵² We distinguish between stereotypes imposed by white supremacy and cultural identity signifiers, which some AsAm families embrace and claim. These stereotypes claiming that AsAm’s “innate” values or disposition toward science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) essentialize and racialize AsAm communities grounded in nineteenth- and twentieth-century-U.S. policies that privileged “highly skilled” immigrants in STEM professions,

which allegedly indicated “smartness.”⁵³ These tropes became embedded into educational policy, such as Robles’s work showing how Chinese San Franciscans embraced the model minority myth to resist affirmative action in *Ho v. SFUSD*.⁵⁴ Zou writes that “many middle-class and wealthy Chinese families welcomed and internalized the cultural rhetoric,” and discourse that Chinese Americans’ ethnic traditions brought to the U.S. enabled their disproportionate admission to elite universities and subsequent socioeconomic success.⁵⁵ Model minority success narratives, Zou argues, are also classed and embraced by some wealthy Chinese San Franciscans. This narrative, while aligned with white supremacist discourses about the model minority, also suggests how stereotypes can shift to impact non-Chinese AsAms.

Although mathematics is often used in service of other STEM fields,⁵⁶ mathematics classrooms often replicate and reinforce model minority logics especially when policies like tracking separate students based on perceived ability.⁵⁷ Mathematics curricula has also been used to separate students and contribute to achievement gaps that replicate racial hierarchies through narratives such as “Asians are good at math,” which scholars like Shah argue dehumanize AsAm communities.⁵⁸ Although many AsAms are in the top end of the achievement paradigm, I and colleagues⁵⁹ note that this positioning threatens white dominance and results in mobilizing various stereotypes to exclude AsAms from mainstream discourses. Additionally, this positioning of “good at math” is not equitably extended to all AsAm communities and results in the erasure of South Asians who are often underserved by mathematics classrooms.⁶⁰

Extending achievement gap arguments, the dehumanization of AsAm communities through being perceived as good at math connects to the culture of exclusion in mathematics.⁶¹ This culture is grounded in framing “legitimate mathematical activity . . . as rote practice, involving memorization of established procedures and repetitive computation.”⁶² This narrow view of mathematics in conjunction with the narrative surrounding AsAm students in mathematics led Shah to argue that this narrative reduces AsAm community members’ personhood and portrays them as being “capable of calculation, but not rational thought.”⁶³ This positioning of AsAms highlights how despite being lifted up by white supremacy as the model minority and a “natural disposition to STEM”, they are consequently dehumanized in the process. AsAm students feel dehumanization and described how these racialized narratives led to them to internalize pressure to excel in STEM as part of a cultural or racial identity.⁶⁴

CHINESENESS, SINOCENTRISM, AND ASIANCRIT

Our analytical lens in this paper disentangles layers of essentialization that construct a singular perception of “Chineseness” within a paradigm of white supremacy drawing from critical race theory (CRT), Asian American studies, and critical China studies. We analyze how Orientalism and white supremacy *construct* and *essentialize* Chineseness to maintain a racial hierarchy which, we argue, centers and embeds essentialized discourses of Chineseness into AsAm racial formation. Chineseness is important to our analysis of Prop G given the large and diverse Chinese American majority of San Francisco’s AsAm coalition that defies some stereotypes, like being majority Cantonese speaking, not Mandarin.⁶⁵ Rather than reproduce the erasure of non-Chinese AsAms, our analytical lens unpacks layered essentialism that perpetuates that erasure.

Chineseness, like other socially constructed identities, signifies many simultaneous and contradictory things—one person’s Chineseness may differ from another’s. Asian American studies scholars also read into Chineseness a flexibility to include, and signify, many different people. For example, Louie refers to Chineseness as an “inclusive and exclusive concept, empowered as racial discourse, used to reinforce a sense of rootedness,”⁶⁶ whereas Chun reads the slippages of Chineseness as indicative of “probably little else to unite them as Chinese, except in contrast to non-Chinese.”⁶⁷ While Chineseness is neither a monolith nor static, Louie and Chun both assert that Chineseness is a product of Asian contexts being flattened by Orientalism, and then further flattened as Asian migration to the U.S. catalyzed xenophobic fears and created a racialized other. We focus on how Chineseness is essentialized and mobilized for political purposes in our study because of how essentialized discourses emerge from western anti-Chineseness (Sinophobia) and “Yellow Peril” that racializes non-Chinese AsAms. We refer to centering of Chineseness in AsAm racialization as *Sinocentrism*.⁶⁸

Two uses of Sinocentrism commonly appear in Asian studies research. First, Sinocentrism refers to the geopolitical and discursive centering of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Asia, as “counter” to the West.⁶⁹ Second, Sinocentrism refers to “ethnocentrism of the Han society and culture or to the modern concept of *Zhonghua minzu*, translated as ‘Chinese nation’ or ‘Chinese race,’”⁷⁰ which the PRC mobilizes to racialize and maintain a concept of Hanness as a dominant sociopolitical ideology.⁷¹ Sinocentrism adds analytical nuance to understanding Chineseness in diasporic contexts by centering how hegemonic discourses work simultaneously to flatten Chineseness, at the intersection of white supremacy and Orientalism, and impact AsAm racial identity formations.

Sinocentrism, therefore, centers the layered abstractions and flattening of Chineseness that elevates “Chineseness as quintessentially Asian, which has implications for the [re]racialization of other Asian Americans.”⁷²

Shifts to equate Chineseness to a *racial* identity are a needed conceptual starting point because of the multiple “pathways” people take to Chineseness appropriated by state discourses. These state discourses, in various ways across time, worked to revise and assert “senses of racial distinctiveness if not chauvinism.”⁷³ Duara, similarly, refers to state discourses that mobilize multiple “identifications into a Chineseness that eliminated or reduced internal boundaries . . . , and hardened the boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese”⁷⁴ to compel inclusion or exclusion of people and communities into Chineseness. Essentialism imposed by Orientalism and white supremacy, impose a racialized “essence” in order to “consolidate the coherence”⁷⁵ that affirms white western dominance of the racial caste system. While originating in discrete epistemological traditions and projects, simultaneously consolidating Asianness into an Orientalized other amplifies how white supremacy tries to impose racial fixity on “Asian Americanness.” Within these layers of essentialism, Chineseness by virtue of Chinese migration to the U.S. escaping U.S. imperialism in China, became initially conflated with the “Oriental” label, such as in San Francisco where the segregated “Chinese” School in 1859 would be renamed “The Oriental School” in 1906, a generation after *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) as the U.S. started to include other ethnic groups within the “Oriental” label.⁷⁶ The “Oriental” School’s long presence in San Francisco’s Chinatown, now named for Gordon J. Lau, made it synonymous with being a Chinese American school, even as the racial label expanded to include more people.⁷⁷ We, next, outline the conceptual synergy between *Sinocentrism* and AsianCrit’s Asianization and (strategic) (anti-)essentialism tenets.

AsianCrit, extending CRT and Asian American Critical Legal Studies, centers the unique needs of analyzing AsAm experiences of differential racialization and endemic racism in American life.⁷⁸ American legal exclusion targeting largely East Asian newcomers concretized AsAm racialization that relied on a tangle of xenophobia and exceptionalist narratives that grew out of white Americans’ early discrimination against AsAms.⁷⁹ Extending CRT’s core tenets, AsianCrit’s tenets are (1) Asianization; (2) transnational contexts; (3) (re)constructive history; (4) strategic (anti-)essentialism; (5) intersectionality; (6) story, theory, and praxis; and (7) social justice.⁸⁰ Together, AsianCrit nuances U.S. racialization discourses, and the impacts of imperialism and colonialism on AsAm communities.⁸¹ In education, AsianCrit’s tenets center AsAms’ racialized hyper (in)visibility in American education, mindful of “tensions between . . . collective struggles and the diversity that exists”⁸² within AsAm communities that have been understudied

in educational research. We focus on two tenets—Asianization and (strategic) (anti-) essentialism—augmented with Sinocentrism to analyze how political interest groups embraced exceptionalist discourses about Chineseness in support of Prop G, elevating them to a position to speak *for* (rather than *with*) other AsAms.

Asianization describes how AsAm communities are racialized and “become ‘Asian’ because of white supremacy and the racialization processes it engenders.”⁸³ Asianization is a vehicle by which white supremacy manifests into policy, law, and practice.⁸⁴ The intersections of Orientalism and white supremacy both contribute to Asianization by consolidating newcomers to the U.S. from Asian contexts within a fixed, catch-all identity marker, subsequently reclaimed by Yuji Ichioka and the Asian American movement. We extend this tenet to expose how Sinocentrism, both imposed by white supremacy and embraced by some AsAms, persists in larger AsAm racialization narratives. Asianized stereotypes drawing from racism against the early Chinese Americans extends to people from communities beyond the Chinese and East Asian majority of early AsAms.⁸⁵ Yet, Asianization persisted in subsequent decades of misunderstanding and miseducation about essentialized “Chineseness” that centered East Asian American identities, erasing non-East Asian AsAms in curriculum.⁸⁶

We differentiate between panethnic solidarity (strategic [anti-]essentialism) and panethnic flattening (essentialism).⁸⁷ In *AsianCrit*, (*strategic*) (*anti*-)*essentialism* weaves between solidarity and flattening,⁸⁸ foregrounding how AsAm communities build sociopolitical coalition.⁸⁹ Iftikar and Museus differentiate between essentialism imposed upon AsAm communities and *strategic* essentialism where AsAm communities “actively intervene in the racialization process,”⁹⁰ which emphasizes AsAms’ sociopolitical agency. This tenet’s “grammar” is important because *strategic* (anti-)essentialism can become “unstrategic,” toward the goal of panethnic solidarity when individuals or communities embrace tropes imposed on AsAm communities by white supremacy and Orientalism. We take up this tenet’s tensions alongside Sinocentrism to complicate what gets to be “strategic” (anti-)essentialism to “encourage analysis of the ways in which certain groups might be marginalized along class, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual orientation lines within Asian American activism.”⁹¹ We contribute to literature on AsAm racialization by arguing that *AsianCrit*’s (strategic) (anti-)essentialism, and Asianization tenets both benefit from an analytical focus on Sinocentrism to sharpen a conceptual lens to focus on the transnational social forces acting on AsAm racialization. We, using an *AsianCrit* lens with a focus on Sinocentrism, call attention to exceptionalist narratives about Chinese Americans; both those *imposed* by white supremacy (e.g., “model minority as racial wedge”)⁹² and those *embraced* by some Chinese Americans who compartmentalize their racialized experiences from others racialized within AsAm communities.⁹³

WHY US? WHY THE GUIDE?

We first share our researcher positionalities given how our lived experiences inform our analysis, followed by our methodology.⁹⁴

Kyle

I am a Taiwanese and Japanese American transnational adoptee raised in a politically active and ideologically diverse sixth-generation Chinese American family in San Francisco. This paper reflects tensions I hold in my own experiences with AsAm politics and San Francisco. My (living) ancestors' family-owned medical practices and accomplishments, including being the first Chinese American principal in SFUSD and being among the first AsAm graduates from Stanford, which allowed my family members to accumulate substantial cultural capital and cultural wealth (within Chinatown).⁹⁵ Their economic capital allowed my family to profit while "the passage of time had softened some of the harsh anti-Chinese attitudes, and discrimination had lessened"⁹⁶ and become among the first Chinese American families to live outside San Francisco's Chinatown—which historically classes us at some distance from other Chinese Americans and other AsAms.⁹⁷

My ancestors' pursuits of survival can be read as reinforcing the myths of the American dream and the model minority myth. At the same time, I resonate with Poon's descriptions of her research participants who reminded her "lot of my parents, uncles, and aunties—deeply human and imperfect elders whom I love"⁹⁸—whose life experiences led them to have strong and fundamental political views. Poon ponders these political differences by refraining from questioning the sincerity of their commitments but also leaving space for how "they resented the ways policy debates about race and education felt dismissive of their struggles and experiences."⁹⁹ This framing extends needed grace to my own view of my ancestors and community by centering their lived experiences within a paradigm of white supremacy and sincerely held feelings that contemporary pushes for social justice dismiss, amplifying ideological tensions within my family.

Sheila

I am a white woman and critical mathematics education scholar whose lived experiences are primarily in the midwestern U.S. Prior to becoming a mathematics education scholar, I was a high school mathematics teacher in a racially and ethnically diverse urban school. As a mother-scholar and mathematics education scholar, I disrupt exclusionary practices in mathematics classrooms, including

the practice of tracking. Recognizing research on AsAm racialization processes in the U.S. can be simultaneously coastal- and East Asian American-centered,¹⁰⁰ I bring the perspective of someone who taught tracked courses and saw first-hand how tracking policies marginalized students of color and contributed to the dehumanization of AsAm students in mathematics.

Data Selection

We analyzed paid print political arguments gathered in the City and County of San Francisco Department of Elections *Voter Information Pamphlet* for the March 05, 2024, Election,¹⁰¹ related to Proposition G (Figure 1).¹⁰² San Francisco has produced Voter Guides since at least 1907 and, after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, distributed in multiple languages. There were eighteen arguments in favor of Prop G and zero opposing arguments in the Guide, meaning that voters only received arguments in favor of Prop G. As a pamphlet the City and County of San Francisco provided to every registered voter (digital or print) in the language of a voter's choice, it is a uniquely accessible text.¹⁰³ While limiting our analysis to the Guide may seem to center a limited set of ideologically aligned arguments,¹⁰⁴ and since we cannot infer why there were no anti-Prop G arguments in the Guide, the Guide lets us examine ideological nuances underlying seemingly aligned arguments. The Guide's financial disclosures reveal when an argument was paid for by a coordinated campaign that selected spokespeople as signatories. We chose to focus on single-authored and self-funded arguments because these arguments were less explicitly connected to a campaign and therefore potentially more reflective of the author's views.

Analysis

We use a critical race Discourse analysis (CRDA),¹⁰⁵ which explores the relationship between "language as a social practice,"¹⁰⁶ with implications that can replicate identities and power structures.¹⁰⁷ We situate the Guide as a political and policy text because it features political arguments and Prop G's proposed legal text. Analyzing a single text reveals how tracking and Chineseness are constructed "as a political rationality . . . related to broader political aims and initiatives."¹⁰⁸ These political arguments also reveal "the discursive power relations asserted by government documents."¹⁰⁹ We draw from CRDA, given our AsianCrit lens, situating the social practice of language to reveal how "issues of race and racism permeate society."¹¹⁰ Doing so reveals the discursive struggle over what "equity" work in education is, or can be, in San Francisco and how (c) overt antiblackness permeates political discourses.¹¹¹

G – Offering Algebra 1 to Eighth Graders

Shall it be City policy to encourage the San Francisco Unified School District to offer Algebra 1 to students by their eighth-grade year and to support the School District's development of its math curriculum?

YES	☐
NO	☐

This measure requires 50%+1 affirmative votes to pass.

Figure 1. Text from Proposition G Ballot Initiative.

We noted assumptions about students, assumptions about mathematics, access, and arguments about San Francisco. We coded for moments in which paid political arguments essentialized Chineseness, or mobilized essentialized discourses about Chineseness within the Guide, guided by our framework that augments AsianCrit's (strategic) (anti-)essentialism and Asianization tenets with Sinocentrism, to make arguments within the Guide, such as arguments mobilizing tropes like students' predispositions toward STEM as evidence of racialized targeting that mobilizes "racist rhetorical positioning."¹¹² Next, we coded the Guide to discern key lines of argumentation across Prop G's stakeholders. We used an inductive and interactive process informed by AsianCrit and CRT literature to locate the mobilizations of anti-AsAm tropes in the Guide, and organized those mobilizations by how they draw on (1) Chineseness relative to Asianness; (2) racialized hierarchies in mathematics discourses; and (3) these discourses and curricular implications for upholding essentialized constructions of the model minority myth.

RACIALIZING STEM SUCCESS IN SAN FRANCISCO

To answer our research question, we first show how white public figures reproduce racialized narratives around who is successful in STEM before transitioning to how Chinese Americans mobilized their own community. We begin here because these white community leaders' arguments mobilize cultural narratives around STEM success that are grounded in white supremacy.¹¹³ These same arguments are then taken up by Chinese Americans in ways that embrace and reproduce stereotypes to position tracking as a racial equity issue.

Across the guide, many of the references to the need for a strong successful STEM curriculum in San Francisco is linked explicitly to the technology

As an executive at LinkedIn, I built systems which helped millions of people get jobs, and I have seen firsthand how essential a strong education is for success later in life. That's why I'm advocating for better education for our kids.

This proposition would overturn a policy created 10 years ago which currently stops students from taking Algebra in 8th grade and makes them wait until 9th grade. I, and many other education advocates, have analyzed data from before and after the policy change, and found that this policy has hurt roughly 19,000 students who would have passed Algebra in 8th grade over the last 10 years. In other words, 53% of all students who were in San Francisco public schools for 8th grade should be ahead of where they are.

Restore Algebra to 8th grade now. Vote yes.

John Jersin

**The true source(s) of funds for the printing fee of this argument:
John Jersin.**

Figure 2. John Jersin's Argument.

sector. In a self-funded argument, John Jersin, who ran for San Francisco school board in 2024, connects the technology sector and mathematics education in San Francisco (see Figure 2):

Jersin tacitly equates mathematics education with “strong” education, which positions Prop G’s prioritizing of Algebra 1 earlier in the curriculum as a ‘restoration’ rather than a shifting of a curricular requirement. Alluding to neoliberal and white supremacist logics, Jersin positions mathematics as a vehicle to socioeconomic mobility without interrogating how mathematics can be a gatekeeping mechanism. Instead, Jersin’s argument focuses on students impacted by the policy, sidestepping the ideologies and educational inequities tracking reproduces. Consequently, Jersin’s argument isolates mathematics as a vehicle to a better life. In his argument, Jersin implicitly leverages his STEM expertise as an executive in the technology sector, aligning his own success narrative with expertise to speak about educational policy and student success.

Jersin's argument notes an undefined "53%" of students who should be "ahead," but without defining "where they are," in terms of their academic success, thereby leaving two assumptions unsubstantiated. Simultaneously, Jersin argues that 53 percent of students should feel entitled to the "success" that was *taken* from them because SFUSD required Algebra 1 in 9th grade, rather than 8th, playing to some Chinese Americans resentments that social justice progress in education has left them behind, mirroring the affirmative action debates.¹¹⁴ Jersin, as a result, implies that SFUSD's current policies are keeping students in mathematics courses below what this majority of students is ready for by suggesting Prop G's reintroduction of tracking catalyzes "strong education" defined as socioeconomic mobility.

In another argument, Christine Linnenbach, a local parents' rights organization leader, echoes the STEM career economic mobility argument by advocating for students to take the most advanced courses of mathematics as early as they can (Figure 3). Linnenbach's argument reproduces narratives about mathematics as a defined sequence (e.g., Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2, PreCalculus, Calculus) that can only be accessed by those who are deemed ready.¹¹⁵ Linnenbach's argument, however, does not discuss creating supports for all students to be able to access Algebra 1—the ways Moses and Cobb describe Algebra 1 in 8th grade as an equity or civil rights issue.¹¹⁶ Instead, Linnenbach describes reverting to policies that reproduce existing inequitable educational outcomes about who gets to be seen as successful in mathematics classrooms, and contributes to the dehumanization of AsAm students by discursively placing them within the "calculator" stereotype Shah identifies, instead having agency in mathematics. While Linnenbach's argument mirrors Jersin's in the desire for socioeconomic mobility, she also adds an implicit appeal to neoliberal competitiveness by pitting SFUSD in competition for "revenue"—sidestepping an existing issue where property taxes and social geography contribute to inequities within SFUSD. Linnenbach's role as a parents' rights organizer associated with the elite Lowell High School, the only test-based school in SFUSD, masks discourses of readiness in the language of opportunity, rather than access, rhetorically suggesting that the *possibility* of students' success in mathematics outweighs the *probability* of that success.

While neither Jersin's nor Linnenbach's arguments talk about housing inequity, both cite contributing factors, such as families being priced out of San Francisco, as problems for SFUSD but without solutions. In a third argument, Judge Quentin L. Kopp (Figure 4), argues that the students in SFUSD are falling behind as suburban districts push children into more "advanced" mathematics earlier to prepare them for competitive college majors and futures in STEM.

Vote “yes” to restore opportunity to all students in San Francisco’s public middle schools. Today, at least **a quarter of San Francisco’s children attend private school, compared to only nine percent throughout California.** Public school students must be given the option to take algebra in middle school, and the SFUSD must develop a math curriculum that not only competes with but exceeds the offerings of private middle schools.

San Franciscans must resoundingly decree that we will neither accept nor tolerate failed SFUSD policies that have steadily led to a **significant decline** in enrollment, which in turn reduces SFUSD revenue. The SFUSD must attract families to our city by creating a stellar public school system.

San Franciscans entrust our most precious resource, our children, to the SFUSD. Demand that the district do the maximum, **not the minimum**, to prepare students to take the most advanced math courses they can, **as early** as they can. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are profoundly important for our students, and voting “yes” opens the door of opportunity to all.

Christine Linnenbach
President
*Friends of Lowell Foundation**

*For identification purposes only; author is signing as an individual and not on behalf of an organization.

The true source(s) of funds for the printing fee of this argument:
 Christine A. Linnenbach.

Figure 3. Christine Linnenbach’s Argument.

Jersin’s and Kopp’s comments also play to inequities within San Francisco that Zou and Shange cite, which historically separate poorer and richer Chinese San Franciscans.¹¹⁷ Discursively, Kopp’s and Linnenbach’s comparisons between San Francisco and suburban districts suggest that neither perceives how economic inequities in the Bay Area are directly connected to how public schools are funded. Yet, San Francisco’s white flight being among the most acute in the U.S. suggests the “decline” in enrollment Linnenbach cites, or the “advance” in STEM education Kopp mentions in their respective arguments are tied to whiteness and maintaining racial hierarchies in mathematics education.¹¹⁸ This move, and references to private schools, also follow patterns of private school enrollment in San Francisco among Chinese Americans, further cementing the covert appeal. Merging Chinese Americans’ aggrieved political discourse with these appeals to tech careers and economic success aligns with Shange’s argument about refocusing anti-Black racial animosities since SFUSD serves one of the largest AsAm communities in the U.S.

San Francisco Taxpayers Association says Bring Algebra Back; Yes on G

When City Hall doesn't listen to the citizens of San Francisco, bad policies are born. The same is true when the School Board ignores parents.

One of the worst decisions the School Board has made in my 53 years of observing them was ending Algebra in middle school in 2014. They felt that not enough students were doing well in Algebra so instead of improving instruction, they stopped offering it to any student until high school. Meanwhile, suburban school districts continued to advance their children from middle to high school mathematics to prepare them for competitive college majors and future careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

Proposition G makes clear what San Francisco families have said all along. Improve math curriculum for the younger students so that they are better prepared to take Algebra in middle school if they so choose. And bring back 8th grade Algebra.

More education, not less. It's that simple.

Judge Quentin L. Kopp (Ret.)
San Francisco Taxpayers Association

The true source(s) of funds for the printing fee of this argument:
San Francisco Taxpayers Association.

Figure 4. Quentin L. Kopp's Argument.

CHINESENESS AND THE POLITICS OF MAKE ALGEBRA A "GATEWAY" AGAIN

We next turn to the only self-funded arguments in the Guide written by AsAms—Eddie Chin, former San Francisco Board of Education commissioner and former CADC president and opponent SFUSD's detracking efforts (Figure 5), and Laurance Lem Lee (Figure 6), then a candidate for the Board of Education in 2024. Chin and Lee make arguments that cite Chineseness and nod to their experiences of historical and contemporary Sinophobia alongside other manifestations of anti-AsAm racism, which guide them toward their views in support of Prop G and tracking as a pathway toward educational equity.

Chin and Lee both cite Chinese Americans' histories as immigrants to the U.S. in their arguments for institutionalizing tracked 8th-grade Algebra 1 in the public school system. Chin and Lee align themselves with what Au calls-political strategy meant to ensure equal public-school access for Chinese Americans. Both discursively connect Chinese immigration narratives to tracked 8th-grade Algebra 1, which Chin calls a "gateway," to what Lee calls "a 21st century career" and implicitly conflate Algebra 1 with all 8th grade mathematics education, and

"Yes" on Proposition G provides access to an education that is fundamental to our future.

As Chinese American parents and community members, we know education has always been the gateway to freedom and success. In San Francisco, Chinese families arriving in the 1800s fought for schooling for our children. Fifty years ago, young Kinney Lau went all the way to the United States Supreme Court challenging the San Francisco School District's failure to provide equal educational opportunity for limited English proficient students. That victory set an important nationwide precedent for immigrant children and families.

Today, we stand with all communities supporting Proposition G, which is a declaration of policy that states Algebra should once again be taught in 8th grade. This ensures that math education will be improved for all students, grades, schools and communities.

As San Francisco plans to be a world leading high tech center, we should prepare all San Francisco children to assume their roles in that future. Since 2014, we've been told "No" to have Algebra taught in 8th grade. Proposition G says "Yes" to Algebra for students ready for it and "Yes" to increasing math instruction opportunities in all grades.

Eddie Chin, Former School Board Commissioner

The true source(s) of funds for the printing fee of this argument:
Self funded - Eddie Chin.

Figure 5. Eddie Chin's Argument.

Vote YES on G.

Let's tell our school district they need to bring back 8th grade algebra! I am a child of Chinese immigrants who took algebra with Ms. Rueda at Presidio Middle School. Let's give today's students this opportunity to prepare for a 21st century career.

Laurance Lem Lee

The true source(s) of funds for the printing fee of this argument:
Laurance Lem Lee.

Figure 6. Laurance Lem Lee's Argument.

access to mathematics with the ability to access the curricular content of *all* school subjects. Lee's and Chin's arguments that access to Algebra 1 a year earlier could enable longer-term benefits for students, like calculus by 12th grade, which they both argue enables STEM careers, frame Prop G as a matter of equity.

Lee, for one, names his own SFUSD experiences of taking Algebra 1 in middle school to position himself as an *insider* and implicitly as a success story, while also situating himself as an *outsider* by identifying as a "child of Chinese immigrants."¹¹⁹ Using overtures to "21st Century" STEM careers, Lee's argument, in the context of San Francisco and its technology sector, emphasizes Chinese Americans' economic mobility aligned with national narratives such as the American dream. This positioning subtly draws on model minority logics as a result, by suggesting to voters that 8th grade Algebra 1 will prepare students to be exceptional or successful like him. Lee's framing of Algebra 1 as an "opportunity" guides readers to position SFUSD's detracking as taking Algebra 1 away from students who are otherwise "ready," like we analyze above. Using an Asianization lens, Lee's argument "validates US hegemonic ideologies such as color-blindness and meritocracy"¹²⁰ and thereby positions Chinese Americans' immigration experiences as uniform and exceptional, reinforcing Sinocentric stereotypes and the model minority myth, which Lee turns into an "opportunity" for other students.¹²¹

However, Lee confines "opportunity" to STEM careers, which Chin calls a "gateway to freedom and success" for Chinese Americans, and other San Franciscans of color. Yet, Chin explicitly limits access to "freedom and success" to "students ready for it,"¹²² implying that Chinese American students are ready

to access this “gateway” before others—thereby framing SFUSD’s detracking policy as civil right taken away from Chinese Americans.¹²³ In context of the exceptionalist narratives within the model minority myth, Chin’s argument diverges from mathematics education scholars like Bob Moses whose organization The Algebra Project advocates for access to Algebra 1 as a civil right and creates spaces where every student has access to algebra and cannot “continue a tradition of separate tracks for some students.”¹²⁴ Chin’s use of “ready for it” and Lee’s positioning of 8th-grade Algebra 1 as a key economic opportunity further reify racial hierarchies in mathematics by exploiting perceived differences in intellect between Chinese and non-Chinese San Franciscans of color. Pairing Chin’s argument that Chinese Americans set a “precedent” for other racialized communities with Lee’s focus on opportunity further reinforces this hierarchy within the AsAm coalition and imposes coherence on both Chinese-ness AsAm racial formations.¹²⁵

Chin’s argument discursively positions himself (using “we”) as a spokesperson for Chinese Americans—emphasizing proximities and alignments among Chinese Americans, rather than their ideological diversity. By positioning legal and electoral interventions as a “gateway” to freedom and success, Chin argues that the American dream is attainable by incrementally working within the legal and political system, which can lead some to see current pushes for social justice unfairly punishing Chinese Americans.¹²⁶ However, using AsianCrit, Chin’s positioning further attempts strategic essentialism by trying to impose consensus amongst Chinese Americans and emphasizing the universal benefit of prominent legal precedents set by Chinese Americans like in *Tape* and *Lau*.¹²⁷ Rather than mobilize (strategic) (anti-)essentialism to challenge tracking, which privileges white and some AsAms, Chin frames access to 8th-grade Algebra 1 as a civil rights issue for Chinese Americans. While algebra access as a civil rights issue has been argued by mathematics education activists, Chins’ argument aligns with CADC’s previous advocacy against policies that safeguarded equitable access for students of color to elite public schools, as in *Ho*, by framing these policies as anti-Chinese American.¹²⁸ By connecting Prop G with *Lau* in isolation, Chin conflates 8th-grade Algebra 1 with a civil right by aligning Prop G with the legacies of Chinese Americans’ activism and creating discursive distance between citizens and immigrants by positioning Chinese Americans as setting a precedent that benefits all “immigrant children and families.” Citing *Lau* also attaches Prop G to model minority undercurrents wherein Poon argues that Chinese Americana made for “sympathetic plaintiffs”¹²⁹ and exemplifies López and Sampson’s argument that, in San Francisco politics, Chinese Americans can appoint themselves as spokespeople for all AsAms.¹³⁰

However, without considering *Lau* in the context of *Ho*, Chin's argument skirts explaining why Chinese Americans are disproportionately represented in elite public schools, like Lowell High School.¹³¹ Despite Chinese Americans' national advocacy for *Lau*, getting into these elite San Francisco public schools in the first place is harder for Black and Brown students because of *Ho*, given how the settlement primarily privileges wealthier Chinese Americans.¹³² While we refrain from minimizing the "victory" in *Lau*, Chin focuses less on the substance of *Lau* than Chinese Americans' setting of a national "precedent for immigrant children and families." Within AsianCrit's Asianization tenet, Chin's argument challenges the forever foreigner trope by highlighting Chinese Americans' political participation. Lee's and Chin's arguments show the interplay of Sinocentrism in AsAm racialization in how they position themselves closely to their Chineseness with selective proximity to immigrants. Chin's argument, as a result, mobilizes "unstrategic" essentialism by erasing of *Ho* to discursively position Chinese Americans as united and vanguards of other AsAm and immigrant communities. Beyond San Francisco, Chin's argument highlights what An calls "the oppressive nature of pan-ethnicity"¹³³ within white supremacy and how Asianization without coalition negotiation can preserve intra-community power dynamics that impact whose needs or stories are represented in schools.

Both Lee's and Chin's arguments, analyzed using AsianCrit's Asianization and (strategic) (anti-)essentialism tenets alongside Sinocentrism, mirror how other Chinese Americans nationally can embrace and distance themselves from these layers of essentialism—even as they attempt to build a broad political coalition. Chin's logic particularly flattens ideological diversity within Chinese American communities and tacitly elevates Chinese Americans as more socioeconomically mobile than other immigrant communities. Foregrounding Sinocentrism also underscores the fine line between strategic essentialism and Asianization in building political coalitions. Asianization, as a racialization process imposed by white supremacy, constructs AsAm identity *around* (anti-)Chineseness by implying that non-Chinese immigrant communities do not have agency to intervene within their own racialization, despite literature that suggests the disproportionate benefits of affirmative action, despite cases like *Ho* or *SFFA*, to Chinese Americans across educational contexts.¹³⁴

Our analysis complicates how political arguments in the Guide mobilize essentialized tropes about Chinese identity to extract generalizations about Algebra 1 as a civil right for communities of color far beyond San Francisco. Next, we extend our findings to argue for the utility of "(De)Tracking" Sinocentrism to resist the interplay of Sinocentrism and Sinophobia to constrict AsAm racialization.

TOWARD (DE)TRACKING SINOCENTRISM

Our findings show the perniciousness of the model minority myth at one of its “sources”—mathematics education—given how dominant ideas of “success” in mathematics set unrealistic, racist, and ableist expectations for students.¹³⁵ The evidence we present above of Sinocentrism and ideological diversity within San Francisco’s Chinese American communities, however, is not solely a product of San Francisco’s racial or social geographies, but is made visible because of its context. The implications of our analysis extend far beyond San Francisco and suggest augmenting AsianCrit’s (strategic) (anti-)essentialism and Asianization tenets with a focus on Sinocentrism to analytically nuance panethnic identity negotiation and coalitional resistance possibilities. We argue that Sinocentrism *aligns* with white supremacy in that Sinocentrism preserves oppositional dynamics between ethnic and racialized communities, even within the AsAm coalition, by highlighting Chinese exceptionalist narratives. As a result, we propose analyzing these tensions by “tracking” and “detracking” Sinocentrism to critically but sensitively push for more strategic analyses and resistances to foreground how Sinocentrism can simultaneously lead some AsAms to resist equity-focused policies, even as they cite racial justice and equity such as in the case of Prop G.

“TRACKING” SINOCENTRISM

“Tracking” Sinocentrism traces how Sinocentrism protects model minority discourses and selective Sinocentric Asianization. Tracking Sinocentrism, our analysis shows, situates contemporary political discourse around mathematics education in a complex and understudied history that impacts contemporary AsAm racialization. Doing so, we argue, makes visible some of the (c)overt moves that contributors to the Guide mobilized, such as legacies of Chinese migration to the U.S., or legal and political victories that centered Chinese Americans such as *Lau* (but not *Ho* or *Tape*). These Chinese American contributors’ political discourses about mathematics education, therefore, revealed some of the underlying logic that justified embracing racist stereotypes and mobilizing their racialization relative to whiteness even at risk of imposing these tropes upon other AsAm communities. By tracking Sinocentrism throughout AsAm racialization processes, our goal is to build consciousness to the interplay between coalitional racialization and racialized coherence imposed by white supremacy that allows for Sinocentrism to persist. White supremacy also amplifies Sinocentrism by mobilizing racist anti-AsAm stereotypes that originate in xenophobic

fears (“Yellow Peril”) about Chinese immigrants to the U.S. as proof of concept for assimilationist and model minority logics. This, Poon argues, is one source of some Chinese Americans’ aggrieved political discourses that social justice and contemporary civil rights activism has left them behind, which contextualizes some rhetoric in the Guide that signals something of a “novelty” to Chinese Americans’ advocating for other AsAm communities and for themselves, such as in San Francisco.¹³⁶

This “novelty” that we coded in arguments made by Chinese Americans like Lee and Chin reveals a renewed consciousness and serves as a painful reminder that the model minority myth persists, even as Asian Americanists critique it ad nauseam. Our findings, therefore, further underscore the genuine fears some Chinese Americans feel toward the rapid resurgence of anti-AsAm racism since the COVID-19 pandemic, and a refusal to let that happen again. At the same time, these experiences of renewed racist violence against Chinese Americans and other AsAms also breaks a perhaps deceptive myth that “overcoming” racism is a linear process, or a possibility at all—a logic that seems to lurk beneath the surface of the model minority myth.¹³⁷ In showing how Chinese Americans’ political discourse in San Francisco continues to be lifted up in ways that reward and reinforce Sinocentrism and essentialism, our call to track Sinocentrism attempts to navigate a tension that persists between (strategic) (anti-)essentialism and Asianization in AsianCrit.

Tracking Sinocentrism within the sociohistorical contexts of Asianization in Asian America necessitates analyses that call attention to the multiple layers of panethnic identity negotiation within AsAm discourses. Sinocentrism, we caution, cannot become a mere consequence of majoritarian discourses about AsAm communities, which are each unique in demography and scale. To the contrary, tracking Sinocentrism decenters singular discourses of Chinese identity within AsAm racialization processes by carefully identifying the moments in which Asianization leans on racist and xenophobic fears about Chinese migration to the U.S. to sustain a stable coherence of an otherwise diverse panethnic coalition.¹³⁸ As a result, engaging Sinocentrism as part of critical analysis of Asianization means centering harms perpetuated by members of the affected community repeating these hegemonic narratives in context of the broader challenge wherein white supremacy and antiblackness rely on eroding intra-community solidarities.¹³⁹

“DETRACKING SINOCENTRISM”

Similarly, our analysis suggests ways to “detrack” Sinocentrism by resisting Sinocentric constructions of AsAm communities, despite demographic majoritarian centering of Chineseness in political discourse, and examine how centering Chineseness can impose a narrow set of racialized possibilities on all AsAm students in schools. Asian American studies and education research must consider how political discourses draw on Sinocentric logics, and the stereotypes that emerge from it, to justify and reinstate inequitable educational policies like tracking. The consequence of “tracking” Sinocentrism, is ultimately an effort to “detrack” it, moving toward stronger AsAm panethnic solidarities by examining how Chineseness and Sinocentrism imposed upon AsAm communities manifest across social contexts.

With the context of Sinocentrism, analysis of AsAm racialization and politicization processes can decentralize Chinese identities and essentialism (strategic or otherwise) on the basis of Sinophobic racism. The problem of Sinocentrism, we show, remains that it creates a comparative, and therefore oppositional, basis from which to marginalize other AsAm people. Relationality to Chineseness in AsAm racialization processes selectively mobilizes the model minority myth in mathematics education to uplift fractions of AsAm communities without meaningfully challenging whiteness (or ableism) centered therein by creating “good Asian Americans,” and those who are not.¹⁴⁰ In detracking Sinocentrism, therefore, we call for Asian Americanists to resist narratives that ultimately uphold white supremacy by legitimizing “good” racialization grounded in essentialized ideas of student achievement in school subjects like mathematics.¹⁴¹

Our argument for detracking Sinocentrism seeks to extend how AsianCrit scholars theorize strategic essentialism, especially in how AsAm communities intervene in our racialization. Detracking Sinocentrism challenges how monolithic constructions of a single AsAm panethnic racialized identity, can interfere with the political imperative to grow solidarity and coalition,¹⁴² and defy a curriculum of violence against AsAm communities that extends far beyond the official curriculum of what young people learn in schools.¹⁴³ In response, continuing to detrack Sinocentrism in research and political discourse can preserve the solidarity building parts of coalitional resistances,¹⁴⁴ whilst foregrounding the difficult national conversations needed within AsAm communities about how we can claim further agency in (resisting) our shared racialization. The trap of Asianization, to extend our analysis, is that white supremacy transacts our proximity to whiteness with complicity in antiblackness that manifests in policies

like tracking. While AsianCrit literature considers the ways “white supremacy informs laws, policies, programs, and perspectives the dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans,”¹⁴⁵ detracking Sinocentrism, extends the analytical possibilities of understanding Asianization and resisting the racist rhetorical positioning of AsAm communities in and beyond political discourse that treats AsAm people as sympathetic racialized mouthpieces, or plaintiffs.¹⁴⁶

While San Francisco is an opportune place to witness presumed Sinocentrism of AsAm communities, this is but one example of national discourses that restrict the sociopolitical agency of increasingly diverse AsAm communities, such as some communities’ insistence that spring festivals remain uniformly *Chinese* new year. However, San Francisco’s political discourse surrounding Prop G uniquely reveals how political stakeholders subtly mobilized Sinocentrism and selectively drew on the model minority myth to conflate Chinese Americans’ “success” with AsAms, when non-East Asian Americans frequently lack equitable supports in schools.¹⁴⁷ Rather than simply asserting a demographic imperative, these discourses rely on ubiquitous multilingual messaging to Chinese Americans suggesting that justice and academic rigor were mutually exclusive.¹⁴⁸ Extending Poon’s reflections on Chinese Americanness, some Chinese Americans’ political discourse suggests that success and racial capitalism, is justice, or at least a form of cultural wealth.¹⁴⁹ Coupled with some Chinese Americans’ embrace of performing as racialized spokespeople for participating in the paradigm of white supremacy, detracking Sinocentrism must center how non-Chinese AsAm communities do not equitably benefit when policymakers and stakeholders think that all AsAms are all being “helped” by tracking. Our analysis of the Guide complements Poon’s findings where some Chinese Americans advocate for detracking Sinocentrism, then, is not about decentering Chineseness, but building consciousness to AsAm communities’ needs that are decoupled from histories that memorialize only the worst things that have ever happened to AsAms.

Resisting *Sinocentric* Asianization, as a result, must include analyzing Sinocentrism’s impacts on the sociopolitical contexts of U.S. politics and education and how Sinophobic stereotypes can mask as “representation” of Chinese and AsAm communities. (De)Tracking Sinocentrism contributes a needed dimension to AsianCrit and Asian American studies by focusing how sociopolitical discourses about Chinese Americans can be taken as proxy for all AsAms, despite asymmetrical support for non-Chinese AsAms.¹⁵⁰ The interplay of Sinophobia and Sinocentrism we show above suggests the asymmetry of racism that leverages Chinese American communities’ resistance to laws and policies that targeted Chinese Americans as proof all AsAm communities “overcame” racism. In doing so, we also extend Shange’s concept of carceral progressivism in which policies and practices, “particularly those that target inequities in communities of color,

can perpetuate antiblack racism even as they seek to eliminate it” by co-opting progressive rhetoric and its *assumed* supporters.

Ultimately, capturing the simultaneity of (de)tracking Sinocentrism alongside Sinophobia encourages disentangling whiteness and neoliberal ideologies from the sociocultural connotations of Asianness, “success,” and STEM. This analytic is for those within AsAm communities, and those in other communities because racialized discourses in mathematics continue to shape the racialized perceptions of AsAm people elsewhere.¹⁵¹ Without it, we risk continuing to theorize and research *around* the sites where the model minority myth is most visible and impactful on young people’s racialized experiences rather than disrupting the harms that can otherwise be siloed to teacher education discourses.

Dear San Francisco,

In this essay, we used AsianCrit to look at how proponents of San Francisco’s 2024 Proposition G mobilized essentialized ideas of Chinese identities to advocate for tracking in mathematics and reinforce racist stereotypes. Using critical race discourse analysis, we show how arguments in San Francisco’s March 2024 Voter Guide draw on essentialized Chineseness and Asianization to make moving Algebra 1 up by a year a social justice issue. Our findings show the urgency of analytically “tracking” and “detracking” Sinocentrism to further nuance how researchers and communities think about AsAm identities and coalitions as fluid, and a product of multiple transnational systems of power—but, 80 percent of San Franciscans passed Prop G. It’s also true that San Franciscans heard little opposing Prop G and the consequences of this election include signatories and contributors to the Guide now serving on the Board of Education and others who must now implement Prop G in SFUSD as policy. This conclusion, therefore, is a lament and a loving caution for colleagues to consider who they/we mean when we talk about uplifting “Asian Americans,” and the sometimes inescapable Chineseness we can be essentialized into.

Our analysis showed some Chinese Americans sincerely believe they were left behind by social justice discourse, where AsAms do not sit cleanly within a Black-white binary, and the politics that emerge from that perceived abandonment. We showed how some contributors to the Guide cited *Tape*, *Lau*, and the Third World Liberation Front. Yet, Uncle Ling-Chi’s seminal call for a multiracial coalition to resist the structures of dual domination are being diluted by groups muddling social justice discourse such that San Francisco’s progressivism allows sorting kids based on their perceived intelligence. San Francisco is a needed context of our analysis because voters in this “deep blue” city are calling for the same things as the “reddest” places in the U.S.—just dressed in justice rhetoric

we (re)learned after the racist violence of Atlanta and Monterey Park. San Francisco's Chinese communities, in their complications and contradictions, are also integral parts of the city's identity. We, therefore, offer a loving caution that expanding who is "good at math" or "successful" isn't about performing a stereotype—but digging into how and why some AsAms come to embrace tropes that underpin our racialization. These conversations can interrogate why it's so easy for "academic rigor" in public education to repeatedly come at the expense of ethnic studies.¹⁵² In fact, San Francisco's largest teachers' union said Prop G "isn't the issue because . . . this measure is only advisory in nature and doesn't require anything of the district. In other words, Prop G is about performative politics, not meaningful policy."¹⁵³ We agree that Prop G had little to do with quality mathematics instruction—San Francisco teachers are already great at that. However, we add that Prop G's not just performing a politics but also pushing AsAm voters to conform to and perform one essentialized kind of Chineseness.

We, of course, do not minimize Chinese Americans' history of civil rights victories, in San Francisco and nationally, won by working with the system as sympathetic plaintiffs, but that cannot be the only methodology of resistance.¹⁵⁴ While education policy is set locally, our study of one voter guide in one election in one city reveals how San Franciscans weighed into a national backlash against racial justice reforms in education with deep implications for how AsAm communities negotiate how we come to our identities within this constrictive label. By "tracking" and "detracking" Sinocentrism, we hope colleagues can take up how centering Chineseness in AsAm racial formations nationally reveals more than how a local ballot measure about algebra in San Francisco used Chineseness to uphold carceral progressive politics. We hope to sharpen analyses of Chineseness within white supremacy's construction of AsAm identity in *refusal* of these ideologies. In these refusals, we hope, are possibilities where histories and identities are not so easily appropriated to advance narratives that AsAms and other people of color must be complicit in our own oppression just to take algebra a year earlier.

In solidarity,
Kyle and Sheila

NOTES

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