Impossible Politics

Grounded Optics of Chinese Restaurant Life from Chinese Immigrant Hip-Hop Videos

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Abstract: What is the significance of Chinese immigrants making hip- hop YouTube videos to tell stories of their working lives in the US? This article examines three non-commercialized hip-hop videos made by Chinese immigrants to elucidate class, gender, and racial dynamics within the Chinese restaurant industry that are largely invisible to the public. These dynamics reveal many contradictions and ambiguities that do not fit neatly in normative American politics, thus culminating into a condition of impossibility. This condition makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive how Chinese immigrants can move forward in broader struggles for socio-economic justice.

INTRODUCTION

As of September 2024, the Chinese hip-hop video "General Tso"1 has been viewed over twenty-three thousand times on YouTube, the most popular video sharing platform on the internet. This is miniscule compared to the Western mainstream hip-hop videos that garner views in the tens of millions. However, what makes the "General Tso"2 video unique are three features—first, in contrast to the abundance of 1.5/2nd generation Asian American hip-hop videos online, the video is entirely written, produced, and performed by a Chinese immigrant and linguistically targeted at Chinese-speaking viewers. Second, "General Tso"3 is raw and unfiltered in that it is not affiliated with any music labels staffed with high power production and marketing teams. Lastly, the content of the hip-hop video—everyday life working in Chinese take-out restaurants— speaks to those who are familiar with the tens of thousands of Chinese take-out restaurants that have proliferated across the eastern United

States during the past three decades.4 What can this and other hip-hop videos created by Chinese restau- rant workers tell us about Chinese immigrant lives in the US? Moreover, how do these everyday work experiences shape broader Chinese immigrant politics in the US? To address these questions, this article examines three Chinese hip-hop videos produced and performed by young Chinese restaurant work- ers on YouTube. Chinese hip-hop made by immigrant workers is a unique and powerful lens to understand the condition of the Chinese immigrant community because, first, unlike traditional methods of knowing in the social sciences such as interviews and surveys, organic hip-hop is an unfiltered and unprompted way of self-expression that offers grounded optics. Further, the Chinese/Asian restaurant industry (hereafter the industry) has been one of the few industries that have employed a significant number of Chinese immigrants during the past four decades.

In examining the grounded optics offered in the three videos, they reveal a set of social relations, specifically with regards to class, gender, and race, that is largely invisible to the general public.5 Abstracting from Ngai's conception of "impossible subjects,"6 this article's main argument is that the class, gender, and racial dynamics in the industry produce what we call a "condition of impossibility" in that the politics revealed are messy, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory. Unable to fit neatly into the normative progressive-conservative spectrum in American politics, it is therefore impossible to conceive how Chinese immigrants can move forward in broader struggles for class, racial, and gender equity. By exploring hip-hop videos produced by Chinese restaurant workers on YouTube, three class, gender, and racial dynamics are revealed respectively. First, the songs reveal what we term "dislocated alienation" to describe the ways in which workers experience the Marxian notion of alienation in their work but do not necessarily associate their discontent with their employers. Second, gendered division of work in the restaurant and impossible expectations of familial responsibilities cultivate "gender resentment" that sometimes manifest into openly sexist and misogynistic attitudes among Chinese male workers. Lastly, the videos also reveal "racial contradiction" in that while biases against Black people continues to be present in the Chinese immigrant community, workers have racial awareness that could mitigate antagonistic racial relations. Collectively, dislocated alienation, gender resentment, and racial contradiction not only offer grounded insights into the working lives of Chinese restaurant workers in the US, but they also reveal the messiness and often contradictory politics that make it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive ways of moving forward in normative American politics. The structure of this article is as follows—first, we briefly outline our study methodology. Second, we introduce the conceptual underpinning of impos- sible politics and how hip-hop has served as an important medium to elucidate the grounded optics of marginalized populations. Third, the article reviews the literature on how class, race, and gender issues have been studied in hip-hop, especially within Chinese and immigrant communities. Fourth, the authors analyze the three hip-hop videos on YouTube to reveal key class, gender, and racial dynamics, namely dislocated

alienation, gender resentment, and racial contradiction. We conclude with a brief discussion on how these insights may impact Chinese immigrants' place in broader national politics.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we sought to understand young Chinese immigrants' experiences of working in the Chinese restaurant industry in the United States as conveyed in hip-hop music. Along with Rose, who stated that ". . . hip hop's anger is produced by contemporary racism, gender, and class oppression; and.. . a great deal of pleasure in hip hop is derived from subverting these forces. . .,"7 we consider the class, gender, and racial realities embedded within the lyrics and aesthetics from three hip-hop videos posted to YouTube. As alluded to in this article's introduction, four criteria are used in guiding our selection of videos for this study—1) it is created and performed by a first generation and/or recent Chinese immigrant; 2) it is non-commercialized; 3) it is linguisti- cally targeted at Chinese/Chinese-speaking viewers; and 4) it focuses on the experiences of Chinese immigrant restaurant workers in the US. The first three criteria were specifically used to distinguish the videos used for this study from the more commercialized 1.5/2nd generation Chinese and Taiwanese American hip-hop videos such as those by L.A. Boyz, China Mac, and MC Jin. Based on these criteria, three videos were selected for our analysis including "General Tso"8 posted by a user named Enjay, and "Pity Man"9 and "Fu Zhou Rap"10 posted by a user named Danny Wang. "General Tso"11 has the best production values of the three with the incorporation of actors, live action, and pre-written scripts and scenes. From the streetscape seen on the video, it was shot in New York City. Both "Pity Man"12 and "Fu Zhou Rap"13 was sung in Fuzhounese, a southern China dialect. This is noteworthy because many in the Chinese immigrant com- munity in the US will be familiar with the Fuzhounese migration over the past three decades and how they have expanded the Chinese restaurant industry in the US14 This linguistic specificity coupled with the fact that the two videos look like they were "homemade" with lyrics and a beat dubbed over photographs further support their capacity to illuminate grounded optics of the industry.

It is important to note here that "General Tso" was sung in Mandarin while Danny's two songs were sung in Fuzhounese. Despite the difference, all the songs refer to the phenomenon of Fuzhounese immigrants "taking over" the Chinese restaurant industry from other Chinese and Taiwanese groups over the four decades, from the 1990s to the present. Acknowledging the specificity of the Fuzhounese migration during this period, we choose to use Chinese and Chinese immigrants throughout this article because the Fuzhounese consti- tuted a majority of the Chinese immigration to the US during this period and to non-Chinese communities, they continue to be representative of the Chinese immigrant community.

Regarding the division of labor for this study, the first author undertook the translation, analysis, and overall framing of the article, while the second author

conducted and wrote the literature review and performed copy-editing tasks. The first author is a 1.5 generation Chinese American whose research has primarily focused on the expansion of Chinese restaurant industry in the US during the past three decades and has conducted ethnographic studies of Chinese restaurant workers. The second author, with a background in music, worked with the first author as research assistant for this study.

IMPOSSIBLE POLITICS AND HIP-HOP

This article's main argument is that the class, gender, and racial dynamics in the industry revealed through hip-hop videos made by Chinese immigrant workers produce a condition of impossibility full of contradictions and ambiguities. The conceptual underpinning of the condition of impossibility stems from the seminal work Impossible Subjects15 in which Mae Ngai interrogates the formation of the "illegal alien" in modern America. Ngai argues that modern policies on immigration restriction simultaneously created illegal immigration and the illegal alien subject. The illegal alien is therefore a legal-political subject that is at the same time a social reality and a legal impossibility. In other words, the illegal alien is deprived of citizenship and rights but is nevertheless interlinked in the socio-economic affairs of the nation-state. Thus, for Ngai, the illegal alien and illegal immigration represent a paradox or "a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved."16 Implicit in this formulation is that the socio-economic dimensions are in contradiction to the legal-political arena creating a condition of impasse, unable to conceive ways of moving forward under normative American politics.

Ngai's formulation of "impossible subjects" is helpful in thinking about the condition of politics and the state of impasse caused by contradictions.17 In the context of the industry, the contradiction between the legal-political and socioeconomic realms also exists in that it employs a significant population of undocumented immigrants and that many restaurants operate outside the purview of labor laws. Thus, a significant sector of the industry operates on the margins of the legal-political realm but is nevertheless embedded in the nation's socio-economic realm by selling food to the public. Beyond this dilemma though is that contradictions also exist within the socio-economic realm. It is therefore necessary to extend Ngai's formulation to conceive the condition of impossibility beyond the legal-political production to include socio-economic realms in producing states of impasse, ambiguity, and the impossibility of moving forward. Towards this end, this article focuses on class, gender, and racial dynamics within the Chinese restaurant industry that condition broader Chinese immigrant politics in the US.

To uncover the dynamics within the industry, this article focuses on the use of hip-hop as this genre of music and its predecessors have long served as a medium to elucidate the socio-economic dynamics of marginalized populations. Woods18 argues that the blues, an earlier form of hip-hop, is an epistemology

that captures the experiences of enslaved people under the socio-economic structures of the plantation economy. Rose argues that hip-hop "is a social form that voices many of the class-, gender-, and race-related forms of cultural and political alienation, and "race-related forms of cultural and political alienation. . . ."19 Despite hip-hop's importance, inadequate research has been done on Chinese American hip-hop and Chinese American music in general. Therefore, this article addresses a gap in the literature by analyzing Chinese immigrant hip-hop and the socio-economic dynamics it reveals. The next section reviews the literature on the emergence of hip-hop and how it has been studied in relations to class, gender, and race.

EMERGENCE OF HIP-HOP AND ITS INTERSECTIONALITIES

Hip-hop emerged in the 1970s out of urban African American neighbor- hoods in the Bronx a burough of New York City, with significant contributions from Caribbean and Latino communities.20 DJ Kool Herc, an immigrant from Jamaica, is widely credited with pioneering hip-hop's early development through the practice of DJing and the emergence of breakbeat culture, which laid the foundation for rap and other elements of hip-hop.21 Jamaican sound system culture, particularly toasting, directly influenced hip-hop's vocal style, blending with African American traditions of storytelling and resistance.22 Puerto Rican youth also played an essential role, particularly in regard to graffiti art and break- dancing, with artists such as Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew helping define the physical and artistic elements of the culture. Flores highlights how Puerto Rican and Latino identity in New York City intersected with hip-hop, fostering creative collaboration and cultural expression.23 The multi-ethnic collaboration in the early development of hip-hop highlights its shared roots in marginalized urban communities, providing an outlet for creative resistance against racial and economic oppression.24

Messages embedded in hip-hop have traditionally contained themes of resistance and narratives related to identity (class, gender identity, and race/ethnicity), politics, culture, place, and labor—specifically nonparticipation in the formal economy.25 As such, hip-hop has been said to resonate with lived experiences related to racism, marginalization and social injustice, alienation, unemployment and poverty, limited opportunities for social and economic mo-bility, political and educational disenfranchisement, drug use, multiple forms of violence, and materialism.26 Skinner and Masuda suggest that hip-hop provides "a commentary on the intensifying racial, class, age, and gender disparities imposed by neoliberalizing urban space."27 Simultaneously, hip-hop contains messages about creativity, community and alliance building, social justice, and solidarity.28 As such, hip-hop can express aims related to social inclusion, representation, and shared consciousness, while engendering collective social identities related to place and culture.29 Hip-hop artists "perceived their lyrics as being in opposi- tion to pop, which was claimed to be repetitive, obedient and

mainstream with lyrics dealing with love, passive romance and nature, which did not relate to the lifestyle, concerns and sentiments of minorities."30

Although hip-hop originated in the US, the genre has spread globally due to American domination of music markets, which Rose31 calls a form of "cultural imperialism." Hip-hop's themes especially resonated among those living in urban and impoverished environments.32 As musical styles spread globally, transnational networks of affiliation formed, which has also been observed in some diasporic networks.33 The result is that Western musical styles, such as hip-hop, merges and is recontextualized with local musical styles. At one level, this process is described as the appropriation of African American hip-hop culture, wherein one culture exploits and disregards, in this case, African American hip-hop culture, for their own benefit.34 There is also the process of localization at play, wherein hip-hop is translated, both in terms of language and culture, into a cultural and symbolic hybrid of musical forms.35 For example, participants in Wang's36 study understood African American and Chinese hip-hop as similarly fighting against exclusion and violence and advocating for social inclusion and change.

Localization is said to result in authentic hip-hop that better appeals to local preferences and contexts.37 Authenticity in hip-hop was conceived as expressing the difficult realities of being Black and living in urban spaces,38 while the localized everyday authenticity for Chinese rappers has been described as embedding messages related to people's lived experiences and daily struggles into the creation of hip-hop in a way that strategically navigates social, professional, and personal roles and identities.39 Such authenticity reflects the global popularity of hip-hop, with its local, Chinese histories. For Chinese immigrants to America, authenticity may also include the use of words from their first languages (e.g., Cantonese).40

In China, hip-hop culture was popularized much later than in America. While many Western brands, like McDonalds and Pepsi sponsored shows featuring Chinese hip-hop,41 hip-hop has faced myriad barriers in gaining mainstream acceptance in China. One barrier was Western domination of the hip-hop market.42 Another barrier was the 2015 blacklisting and later, 2018, unofficial ban of Chinese hip-hop due to the perceived promotion of immoral values; however, Chinese hip-hop grew in popularity to the point whereby the government began adopting hip-hop as a means of spreading its own messaging.43 These efforts extended to social media, and, according to Wang, "the overall aim remains to balance the promotion of official ideology and suppression of dissent with maintaining popular media's fan bases, audience ratings, and profits." Wang concludes that the localization of Chinese hip-hop results in less overt practices of everyday resistance that are creative, ambiguous, and sometimes unconscious. These everyday practices also intersect with ("lower") class, (male) gender, and (Black) racial identities, three social categories that have shaped hip-hop and around which authenticity therein has been constructed.44

HIP-HOP AND CLASS

Themes in hip-hop speak to social and cultural alienation due to race and class. Hip-hop has been stereotyped as related to lower socioeconomic status and "low culture."45 Hodgeman goes so far as to claim that Black "has become socially equivalent to being lower class."46 Equating hip-hop with 'low culture' is common outside of the West. In China, hip-hop has been referred to as 'dirty.'47 Recent scholarship has argued that Chinese consumers of hip-hop reject ele-ments of hip-hop, such as vulgar language, that are associated with "low culture." Interestingly, this rejection has helped make hip-hop more appealing among China's middle- and affluent classes.48

Asian immigrants to the US have faced similarly stereotypes, having been racialized and othered, and feeling pressured to fit into the Black/white racial binary that has dominated American social hierarchies.49 As such, some Asian immigrants may experience social pressures to embody either the stereotypical white, middle-class or Black, lower-class, one example being the expression of hip-hop aesthetics.50 Such ideologies also influenced immigrants' social roles and expectations, with those who have been Blackened, thus embodying hip- hop and Black culture stereotypes, as "at risk" for poor outcomes (for example, increased delinquency and crime).

As the popularity of hip-hop grew among white, middle-class youth in the 1980s, the meanings ascribed to "Blackness" changed to being "cool" and street-wise.51 However, the mainstreaming of hip-hop meant that the working-class messaging of non-commercially produced underground hip-hop, ,52 failed to resonate with the growing listenership.53 Still, working-class struggles remained a prominent feature in hip-hop music and culture. Such themes related to working-class alienation and marginalization have been said to resonate across racial, ethnic, cultural, and (inter)national divisions.54 Such is the case in Chinese hip-hop, where rappers complain about their low wages and difficult bosses,55 as well as unskilled laborers in Chinatown, San Francisco, who live in overcrowded and low-quality housing.56 In the latter example, these individuals identified with hip-hop's urban and working-class messaging.57 However, working-class and unskilled labor conditions vary by sector. Thus, there is a gap in the literature as to how hip-hop resonates with individuals, broadly, and Chinese American immigrants, specifically, who work in the Chinese restaurant industry.

HIP-HOP AND GENDER

Gender divisions and gender exploitation have been central themes in hip-hop, reflecting the sexism within societies.58 Gender divisions have also been found in language choice and dialect in Chinese hip-hop.59 Herein, depictions of men are generally aligned with hegemonic masculine ideals, such as being tough and economically privileged, and women are stereotypically depicted as obedient and objects of sexual desire.60 In hip-hop, such division and exploita-tion are embodied in misogynistic and sexist messaging, as well as in sexual

aggression and violence.61 Weitzer and Kubrin62 classified misogynistic themes in hip-hop lyrics as sexually objectifying women, distrusting women, shaming women, legitimating violence against women, and dividing genders by prostitutes (women) and pimps (men).

It has been said that misogynistic messaging is still prevalent in Chinese hip-hop, thus reflecting patriarchal values embedded into Chinese culture,63 with some scholars noting that there are notable cultural differences between Western and Chinese forms of hip-hop.64 For instance, McTaggart and O'Brien65 describe Asian American stereotypes in hip-hop, "The narrow and exaggerated images of Asian American men and women in passive and obedient roles fuel the notion that Asian Americans are the antithesis of hip-hop, which often prides itself on its oppositional nature and display of hypermasculinity. Asian American men in hip-hop are dismissed and Asian American women are not taken seriously and objectified." They argue that Asian American men may therefore embrace hip-hop's hyper-masculine ideals as a pathway for redefining gender stereotypes. This is evident in the work of MC Jin, who tries to counter "the emasculated Asian/Asian American nerd" stereotype.66 Women in hip-hop culture, however, are often said to be hypersexualized and objectified, with Asian American women being sexualized based on ethnicity, which has contributed to gender- and racial-based violence.67 To combat the image of women being docile, some Chinese hip-hop artists, such as Cheng Lin, invoke themes of feminine resistance against masculine domination.68

Masculinity may be expressed in workplace and relational dynamics, but also through the medium of hip-hop. In the context of immigration and labor, there is a small body of literature that acknowledges the importance of considering the relationships between gender and immigration in the global labor market.69 It is worthy to note that gender differences and division in labor participation and workplace dynamics have been observed between Chinese cultures, from which the hip-hop artists and restaurant workers in this case study grew up, and the US, to which these hip-hop artists and restaurant workers immigrated.70 However, there is a gap in the literature that examines gendered relationships in the American Chinese restaurant industry as expressed in hip-hop music.

HIP-HOP AND RACE

Much has been said about hip-hop and the politics of race. In the early days of hip-hop, lyrics espoused by Asian American hip-hop artists emphasized solidarity with Black Americans with regards to political and economic issues.71 Asian American artists also emphasized their skills, rather than race, as a mean toward authenticity.72 Indeed, recent literature suggests that Chinese hip-hop has moved beyond ascribed categories and racial binaries, to consider achieved skills. For example, Wang states, "Similar to how a female rapper may downplay their gender by assuming a masculine person, Chinese rappers de-emphasise the fixed categories of race and class in favour of interpretive categories such as

showing off skills, staying true to oneself or grounding creations in personal struggles." 73 However, Lin and Zhao maintain that Chinese hip-hop is a hybrid musical form that is a site of struggle within the politics of race. They cite one example of a Chinese American rapper who was criticized for embodying white and western ideals.74

Not only are the racial politics of hip-hop evident in countries outside of the US, but also within subcultures in the US. Recent immigrants to the US are said to be divided between a nostalgia for the culture of the countries from which they immigrated and a desire to fit into American culture.75 Children of immigrants to the United States have been described as being drawn to American musical forms, including hip-hop, as opposed to the music of the countries from which their family migrated.76 As such, musical preferences can denote a symbolic ideological and ethnic cultural boundary dividing immigrants and their children.77 Hip-hop culture in particular appeals to racialized youth,78 who, when they feel disconnected from their elders and the cultures from which they immigrated,79 "turn to hip hop, most fundamentally, because it is key to marking their belonging in the multi-ethnic, urban landscape."80 This may be true of Chinese Americans who use hip-hop as an outlet for social criticism, to share their lived experi- ences as Chinese American immigrants, dispel stereotypes, and resist white supremacy. Herein, Chinese Americans view hip-hop "as oppositional musical expression distinguished from white mainstream culture and a cultural identity that may empower them. Furthermore, they identify with black culture because of the similar marginalized history, experience, and struggles."81

The production of music, such as hip-hop, by Asian immigrants to American cities is part of what Khubchandani calls a "diasporic cultural production."82 Since cities are composed of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it has been said that cities provide a transnational soundscape. Music, according to Connell and Gibson, "in the diaspora, is a product of synthesis and hybridity. Genres such as … hip hop, have been largely created in the cities of diaspora, but have links with more or less distant 'sources.'"83 This hybridity can demonstrate belonging, but also alienation. For example, Chinese American rappers Bohan Phoenix and MC Jin use hip-hop to express feelings of alienation from both American and Chinese cultures and reflect a hybrid identity of the two cultures as an immigrant.84

The localization of hip-hop into Asian immigrant communities and cultures not only distinguishes Asian immigrants from the white American majority, but also from African Americans. For instance, immigrants to Chinatown who fused hip-hop with the "fresh off the boat" stereotype characterizing these immigrants as outsiders into the reappropriated 'fresh oriental boyz' (or FOBby).85 Alim calls this an agentive act wherein youth use hip-hop to identify themselves at the intersection of local and global.86 Maira also asserts that Asian American immigrants' production and localization of hip-hop speaks to racial politics, overshadowing larger political issues, within the US's "racialized labor economy."87 Such is the case of the Chinese restaurant industry in America, which MC Jin

speaks to in his hip-hop, "Jin recounts how the family seemed always to fall short on rent and alludes to the failing of his family's restaurant. Jin links this socioeconomic struggle, as well as the false promise of the American Dream, to the struggles of other disenfranchised communities. "88

A more in-depth examination of the use of hip-hop in the working-class American restaurant industry can thus extend our understanding of the racial and socioeconomic politics in the United States.

GROUNDED OPTICS OF CLASS, GENDER, AND RACIAL DYNAMICS
DISLOCATED ALIENATION

The condition of impossibility begins with an examination of the class dynamics in the industry. The "General Tso"89 video opens on a sunny morning with a middle-aged man pulling a chain to open the metal gate that protects a shop's glass front. Zooming to the front window signage, the neon sign flashes on to spell "Chinese Food," a phone number, and "Free Delivery." The video quickly fades to the main performer and the poster of the video, Enjay, standing in front of the signage gazing at the busy city street to catch the morning rays. The blue bus stop posts and the red and white parking signage hanging on the metal lamp post make clear to those who are familiar that this Chinese take-out restaurant is in New York City.

During the past three decades, Chinese restaurants, particularly the ones that operate as fast-food shops (as seen in the "General Tso" video) have proliferated across the United States, dotting strip malls, airports, and urban neighborhoods. These restaurants' capacity to cook food quickly at afford- able prices have made them a popular meal choice, especially in lower income neighborhoods. Rather than romanticizing the food as a working-class staple, the song makes clear that work in these restaurants has unfavorable physical and psychological consequences for workers. Specifically, the song lays out the various forms of disassociation that underpin the classic Marxian notion of alienated labor.90 While Marxist theory of alienation is grounded on mechanized factory-style work during the industrial revolution in Europe and the West, its conceptual framework is still relevant in the context of work in Chinese fast-food restaurants. Marx describes four forms of alienation—alienation from the product, alienation from the labor process, alienation from each other, and ultimately alienation from oneself.

Starting with its opening chorus, "fried dumplings, General Tso, Kung-pao chicken, this is my every day," it points to how workers become alienated from the food that they cook. Workers are weary and desensitized to having to cook these same dishes every day. Next, several verses throughout the song illuminate alienation from the labor process in fast-food restaurants.

(Excerpt from "General Tso")91

8 lb wok, shake and shake, that's my everyday 13 hours, six days, that's my work.

Boss is pissed cuz I put in too much beef Only number 1 or 2 (slang for needing to urinate and defecate), I can take a break My boss's eagle eye doesn't want to see me idle

These verses point to the different elements of the labor process including time-motion, work schedule, and employer surveillance that workers must cede control to employers. Lastly, a latter verse describes the transience of the industry in which workers constantly relocate to new restaurants in search of better pay and to break the monotony of work in these restaurants.92

Indeed, workers do not stay in any location long enough to make meaningful social connections with others. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the geographical expansion and dispersion of Chinese and Asian restaurants to destinations across the US. Further, transience has become normalized to the point where workers question their own self-worth and identity in the absence of social connections but accept its reality.

(Excerpt from "General Tso")93

Who am I when my co-workers come and go?
Forget it, forget it these years I've seen it all, seen it all

In sum, "General Tso" vividly captures Chinese working-class politics characterized by various forms of labor alienation and a culture of transience in the industry.

While labor scholars often conceive alienation as the basis for workers to build antagonism towards employers and a step towards class consciousness, the reality in the Chinese restaurant industry does not align with such theorization. In this industry, employer-employee division is often blurred because many workers aspire to become the next owner of a restaurant. For many workers, their stint in these restaurants is seen as "buying time" and they are working to save enough capital to start their own restaurant. Further, workers who move out of New York City (NYC) for jobs rely on employers to provide shelter and food as part of the work arrangement.94 As such, employers are often cast as co-ethnic protectors helping workers navigate all the obstacles of living and working outside of the traditional social hub in NYC. These obstacles include how to hire an immigration lawyer, how to file taxes, and how to apply for healthcare insurance. This dependency creates a blurring of the employer-employee division in which workers are not necessarily antagonistic towards owners. This blurring of owner-worker division is made apparent in the video "Fu Zhou Rap"95 posted by Danny Wang in which he openly sympathizes with employers:

(Excerpts from "Fu Zhou Rap")

Some bosses have to work seven days a week, only taking one day off on Thanksgiving.

Nowadays, people [workers] are getting lazy.

They either do Buffet-style restaurants or Japanese,

Everyone is afraid of take-out restaurants, working 11 or 12 hours is normal, and can't even ask workers to work 30 minutes extra.

Nowadays, employees are very nasty. Want high salary and good meals.

Don't even look for stores without WIFI. One is lazier than the next.

Complain about not having enough time and keep running to the bathroom all the time,Lie about going to take a dump, hiding in there reading a newspaper. Lie about being in the kitchen cutting pepper, in reality is chatting on QQ [Chinese mobile app].

Busy here and has no time but he sits there playing Facetime.

Want to become a boss, be patient.

Before becoming a boss, I always wanted to be one. After becoming a boss, I find out it is not easy.

Some bosses must work half and look after employees like infants.

In this dynamic, we are met with the impossibility of changing exploitative prac- tices if workers do not associate their discontent with their bosses.

GENDER RESENTMENT

Beyond dislocated alienation, gender dynamics also reveal impossible conditions. As the camera follows Enjay walking around the rectangular island in the middle of the kitchen, the video ("General Tso" 96) is interrupted by clips of a young boy in a blue striped long sleeve and army-style pants, carrying a black school bag on his back, bopping to the beats from his oversized silver headphones. The young boy takes a seat at a makeshift table next to the kitchen and begins to scribble on a piece of paper. This scene captures the reality of Fuzhounese families who have turned Chinese restaurants into de-facto after school childcare spaces. It is commonly known within the Fuzhounese immigrant community that many young children whose family owns a take-out restaurant spend their time after school in the restaurant doing homework, watching television, and engaging in other children's activities until closing time, often as late as 10 or 11 pm at night.

The fact that kitchens and restaurants have become spaces of social reproduction for the Fuzhounese community raises issues of gender roles within the restaurant as well as in the broader context. Within the restaurant, the gendered division of labor is reinforced along the lines of "hard" and "soft" labor wherein men serve as cooks and perform menial labor while women serve as cashiers and watch over the child/ren in the restaurant. This division cultivates the expecta-

tion within the Chinese community that men should "eat bitterness" (吃苦)97—a Chinese colloquial term to endure hardship, especially for migrant workers—and perform the physically demanding work for the benefit of the family. While this setup is considered a general norm, it nevertheless can produce tensions and conflicts between partners.

Beyond the gendered division of work within the restaurant, gender divisions become more pronounced and sometimes manifest into sexist and misogynistic attitudes. In one song, Danny raps:

(Excerpt from "Pity Man")98
It would have been great if I was a woman, I can be a boss lady once I come to America
Someone can repay her debt, this and that, have nothing better to do Contemporary society is very competitive
Why is it always the men who are sacrificing?

(Excerpt from "Fu Zhou Rap")99
This song is for all the Chinese men, who have been working hard for so many years,
But people around him don't appreciate his hard work [Chinese] Men in America is very pitiful, work everyday
[Chinese Men] Don't get appreciated and get blamed for everything

While these lyrics may speak to Danny's desire to establish his hyper-masculinity, they also point to a social context that cultivates gendered resentment. In par- ticular, the lyrics spotlights the uniqueness of the Fuzhounese migration that has fueled the proliferation of Chinese restaurants in the US. In this migration pattern, a sizable number of Fuzhounese immigrants migrate through extralegal means and they take on tens of thousands dollars in debt to pay smugglers to plan and pay for their journey. Families often send their male children in hopes that they open their own restaurant, become financially stable, obtain immigration status, get married, and apply for the rest of the family members to immigrate to the US. Fuzhounese men are expected to again eat bitterness and follow this predestined path. In most cases, marriages also means that husbands are the primary breadwinner in that they incur the collective debt of individuals, includ- ing their wives, who have taken on significant debt to come to the US. These expectations of performing physical labor and taking on the responsibility of repaying family debt can be seen as impossible for some male workers and they thus cultivate resentment as expressed in Danny's rap songs.

RACIAL CONTRADICTION

Beyond class and gender dynamics, these hip-hop songs also tell ambiguous and sometimes contradictory stories of race relations and racial attitudes. During

one scene in the "General Tso" video,100 a young Chinese delivery man wearing black pants, a red-black plaid shirt, and a backwards looney toon baseball cap locks his bike around a lamp post, grabs the packaged food and proceeds to drop off a delivery. As the delivery man enters the front courtyard of a red-bricked apartment building, he walks by another man standing at the entrance wear- ing a black hoodie and black vest. The man standing at the entrance, with only his back shown to viewers, taps the Chinese delivery man as he walks by. Not knowing the meaning of this tap, the Chinese delivery man acknowledges him with an awkward nod and keeps on walking. Immediately following this interaction, the Chinese delivery man walks on and finds himself flanked on both sides between two other men. These men can be visually identifiable as one Black and one Brown individual. The Black man pats the Chinese delivery man on his back while the Brown man holds out a fist to solicit a fist bump—a common gesture used to signal camaraderie. Again, unfamiliar with American urban culture, the Chinese delivery man awkwardly gives the fist bump and continues his way into the red-bricked apartment building. As the scene unfolds, the accompanying vocals describe a common scenario for the thousands of Chinese workers making food deliveries in New York City:

(Excerpts from "General Tso")
My bike goes everywhere in any season
These Americans on the streets yap like they know me
No idea what they're saying yee yee ha ha I just make guesses Always carry a small weapon in case of danger Spring and summer, rain or shine,
Fall and winter, wind or snow, four-digit income is dependent on that $2 tip

This scene points to the reality that many Chinese restaurant workers rely on making deliveries, regardless of weather conditions and location, to eke out a living. These deliveries often involve workers traversing neighborhoods that are predominantly Black and Brown and associated by the Chinese immigrant community with crimes such as robberies and assaults. Within the Chinese immigrant community, the Fuzhounese are known to be industrious and fearless because they are the only ones willing to open restaurants in what many perceive as "dangerous" neighborhoods. These scenes speak to anti-Black/Brown sentiments within the Chinese immigrant community.101 This is made apparent in the lyrics of one of Danny's songs.

(Excerpt from "Fu Zhou Rap")102
Black people order chicken wings with extra hot sauce and extra duck sauce.
That low life is very stupid and annoying.
But one cannot be too arrogant, otherwise you will fail.

Anti-Black sentiments are further provoked by sensational stories on Chinese social media outlets of crimes perpetrated by Black people against Chinese immigrants. It is therefore unsurprising to find that these hip-hop songs by

Chinese restaurant workers speak of the racial antagonisms between Chinese immigrants and Black communities.

However, anti-Blackness is only a part of the story as the videos also point to possibilities of racial consciousness and sensitivity that extends beyond biases and hate. The Chinese delivery man scene in "General Tso"103 suggests that the basis of the antagonism between Chinese and Black communities is cultural misunderstanding in which Chinese immigrants mistakenly understand urban culture (street banter, fist bumps, and friendly taps) as inappropriate and aggressive behavior. This is made apparent through the reactions of the Black and Brown men after the Chinese delivery man had passed between them. The two men reacted by looking confused, which could suggest that the Chinese delivery man did not understand their friendly motions, indicating to viewers that the delivery man's fear of the neighborhood, the people, and the spaces was groundless. Moreover, whether the Chinese delivery man's fear is justified or not is not nearly as important as the fact that Enjay, the maker of the video, made the conscious decision to highlight alternative explanations of the antagonistic relationship between the Chinese and Black communities. It demonstrates that Enjay is aware of the anti-Black discourse in the Chinese immigrant community but does not want to reinforce this narrative. The fact that the rap video is sung in mandarin Chinese clearly illustrates Enjay's inten- tion to speak directly to Chinese-speaking viewers and reframe the antagonistic Chinese-Black relations. Even Danny's denigration of Black people is followed by a quip, noting his arrogance. Both Enjay's awareness and Danny's reflection on the arrogance might point to the contradictory racial attitudes among some Chinese restaurant workers.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we set out to grapple with the significance of Chinese restaurant workers creating hip-hop videos to tell stories of their working lives in the US. Hip-hop has continued to be a grounded method of knowing a social reality for marginalized people. By analyzing hip-hop videos created by first generation Chinese immigrants, we find three important class, gender, and racial dynamics that are largely invisible to the public outside of the Chinese immigrant community. Specifically, workers experience dislocated alienation due to the restaurant ownership path afforded to workers that blurs the employer-employee division; that impossible work and familial expectations placed on Chinese immigrant men cultivate gender resentment; and that anti-Blackness and racial awareness can co-exist in the Chinese immigrant community. These dynamics collectively contribute to the condition of impossibility in that they contain contradictions and ambiguities that make it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive how Chinese immigrant workers can move forward in their struggles for class, gender, and racial equity.

It is important to note here that while class, gender, and racial dynamics are discretely analyzed in this article, workers experience them holistically in real

life. This means the interplay of these dynamics needs to be further stud- ied. Given the contradictions and ambiguities identified, they prompt broader inquiries into how Chinese immigrant workers can navigate their socio-political realities. For example, the blurring of employer-employee divisions raises concerns about how Chinese immigrants participate in organized labor, especially as labor union membership continues to decline nationally and because immigrant workers face systemic challenges to inclusion. Similarly, gender dynamics among Chinese immigrants warrant deeper exploration, particularly in the context of conservative national shifts and the erosion of women's reproductive rights in the U S. Finally, the complex interplay of anti-Blackness and racial awareness highlights the need for strategic navigation of socio-political movements such as Stop Asian Hate and the Movement for Black Lives, given the historically tension-filled relationship between Chinese immigrant and Black communities. The findings in this article point to many concerns to the aforementioned questions but they also offer some guidance on ways to move forward. From our class-based analysis, the blurring of employer-employee division should compel labor organizers to look beyond traditional methods of organizing that center employers as the enemy. As many Chinese restaurant workers are looking to become the next owner of a restaurant, they are less likely to be motivated by the demonizing of employers. In terms of gender politics, the debt-dependent migration system should be spotlighted in attempts to address sexist and misogynist attitudes among Chinese male workers. Lastly, the recent spate of violence against Asians that sparked the Stop Asian Hate Movement have intensified the antagonistic relationship between the Chinese immigrant and Black communities. Perhaps though, it is through "raw" cultural productions in the form of Chinese immigrant hip-hop videos that we find racial awareness and sensitivity needed to begin to mend a strained relationship.

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