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From Paper Sons to Asian Babies: Echoes of Familial Alterity From the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882-1943

This project draws attention to alterity at the moment of familial formation, taking it as a corrective index to sociopolitical justice especially in and for the “American” family which, I highlight, is ontologically compositional, a constitutional microcosm. To illustrate this point, I bring to the fore, out of relative obscurity and marginality, two examples and draw thematic parallels between them, focusing on how ethnorace, gender, sexuality and nationality intersect to reflect and impact the evolving concepts of the family: the early 20th century Chinese “Paper Sons” from the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the early 21st century Asian Babies adopted into American families.

Resituating in global and transhistorical perspectives those once detained and interrogated in the Angel Island on suspicion of ID fraud, I show that this “minor” irony of familial-ethnoracial alterity and identity anxiety, on closer inspection, provides a magic mirror into the current debates in the US on familial-national identity/security vs. transformation/hospitality, as relates to issues of global ethics, justice and economy, ranging from what to do with terrorist suspects or cheap foreign nannies lodged at the heart of American families, to how to understand the now trendy legal incorporation, familial welcoming, of Asiatic babies into typically non-traditional households.