

Karen Fang

“Chinese Jesus” in a Broom Closet: The Many Archives of Tyrus Wong

Abstract

Disney Legend Tyrus Wong (1910–2016) has gained increasing prominence in the past two decades, but when the pandemic stalled research on his biography it also sparked insights about the peculiar importance and vulnerability of archives to Asian American history.

Like many contributors to this issue, my research faced considerable obstacles when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered archives and severely restricted travel throughout 2020. When the outbreak began I was deep into research on the life and work of Tyrus Wong (1910–2016), a Chinese American artist and illustrator best known for playing an instrumental role in the making of the beloved 1942 Disney film, *Bambi*. Because Wong was a centenarian and eclectic artist whose diverse career spanned Hollywood concept design, bestselling Christmas cards, commercial illustration and decorative arts, fine art drawing, painting and printmaking, and even award-winning kites, my research entailed an unusual variety of archives. His diverse physical record, which sprawls across corporate, institutional and government archives, community and private collections, and encompasses multiple forms and decades of media, demonstrates the many ways that the twentieth century is visible in the documentary traces of an artist and individual.

But if the pandemic’s sudden and prolonged cessation of access to physical sources posed a major research problem, it also helped highlight an aspect of Wong’s history that had always been relevant but which the events of 2020 poignantly reinforced. When Wong entered the United States as a young child in 1920, he was impacted by the discriminatory policies of American immigration law, as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion laws restricting the number and classes of Chinese and Asians permitted to enter the country were still in effect. As detailed in an award-winning 2015 PBS documentary that helped publicize his story, when Wong first arrived in San Francisco he was separated from this father

and spent nearly a month as the only child in an immigrant detention center on Angel Island.¹ This personal trajectory of triumph despite formidable odds gained additional publicity with Wong’s death in late 2016, as his obituaries provided a compelling counterpoint to the anti-immigrant vitriol by which Trump had rode into office.²

Yet by late 2019 and early 2020, as headlines regarding COVID-19 and its acknowledged origin in China exacerbated anti-Asian racism, Wong’s biography took on a newly reinforced topical currency. At the time I was waiting on files I had requested from the US National Archives and Records Administration, as part of my research into Wong’s immigration history, as well as planning return trips to Los Angeles to continue exploring production files on the films he had worked at Warner Bros. But while the pandemic had now delayed those files indefinitely, I also realized that in some sense those papers were no longer necessary, as I myself was experiencing something akin to the contrast between art and anti-Asian discrimination that had loomed large in Wong’s life.³

This essay is both a methodological discussion of the research challenges and workarounds that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a cultural narrative about the unique importance that archives and documentary access exert for Asian American identity and experience—particularly in the context of the 2020 pandemic and other related crises that year. For *Spectator’s* disciplinary readers, Wong’s multimedia career is a fascinating example of Hollywood’s below-the-line workers, particularly as skilled visual artists like Wong connect cinema with other markets

and practices in print industries, commercial and fine art. He also serves as a historical bridge into the racial, ethnic and class diversity that could be found in Los Angeles' creative circles of the 1930s-1950s, where immigrants and nonwhites connected with the white establishment through their shared work and training, and guild members mingled with A-listers because of mutual identity and cultural experience.

But in addition to *Spectator's* disciplinary interests another, occasionally overlapping audience will find also meaning in the archival implications of Wong's biography. For this audience—interested primarily in his ethnic identity—the barriers to access that stalled my research in 2020 also brought insights regarding the extradisciplinary importance of Wong's history, particularly how it illustrates the importance and vulnerability of Chinese American archives. While my archival needs are specific to biography and its retrospective inquiry into a singular individual, 2020's multiple crises and its impact on my research prompted a larger meditation on the sociocultural currency of archives. These insights emphasize the differences between individual repositories and the various uses to which they are put, particularly for the always emerging minority and community archives whose existence and survival may be most vulnerable to current events.

The Imperiled Asian American Archive

My personal research obstacles in 2020 actually began in the earliest weeks of the year, independent of COVID-19 and apparent long before the virus had captured American attention. In the final weeks of 2019 the Trump administration had quietly passed fee hikes that would multiply the cost of requesting historical files from the US Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS), tripling the cost from a maximum of \$140 to, in some cases, nearly \$600 per file.⁴ This fee hike would hit any file request made after December 2019, and would be particularly acute for the small but growing pool of amateur genealogists interested in Chinese and Asian American history. Unlike descendants of European and other immigrants whose US arrival was often uncontested and whose ancestors were able to pass on significant details about their origins and journey, the difficult circumstances by

which many Chinese entered the US often means that their descendants have little knowledge regarding their true heritage.⁵ As a result, past decades have seen a blossoming of workshops and classes teaching Chinese American amateur genealogists how to search US and Chinese national and regional archives. In the weeks leading up to the dreaded price hike, my e-mail and social media feeds were flooded with appeals to petition Congress regarding the coming fee change.

But while I was cushioned by research funding that most amateur genealogists lack, our shared fields of Chinese and Asian American history was dealt a further blow when New York City's Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) suffered a devastating fire in late January 2020.⁶ The museum, based in Manhattan's Chinatown near Mulberry and Grand, and a frequent collaborator with the neighboring Tenement Museum on the immigrant communities central to New York and American history, is an important repository and exhibition space for Chinese American culture and history. In fact, in 2015 MOCA had featured an exhibition on Tyrus Wong, which I had visited while working in the museum's reading room on a different project.⁷ My serendipitous encounter there with Wong's art was one of the experiences that led me to explore his biography further.

Tragically, the January 2020 fire lost or damaged about 85% of MOCA's possessions, leaving the future of this prominent Asian American cultural institution uncertain. Although the works created by Wong had long since returned to their primary owners, some of the other materials I had consulted in 2015 when I first visited MOCA were feared among the casualties. These were lobby posters, screening logs, sales records and other paraphernalia saved from Sun Sing Theatre, a Chinatown cinema popular in the 1970s, and which had been discovered by accident in the early 2000s as the building was being redeveloped. The materials are vivid glimpses into a nonestablishment film culture never widely visible in its lifetime (and certainly invisible now in the recent decades of declining theatrical viewing), so scholars like myself and Victor Fan were lucky to have been able to see and use them in the handful of years they were available at MOCA.⁸ Now because of a terrible

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accident, those documents—just recently recovered from history—might now be permanently lost.

I mention these unfortunate developments impacting Chinese American archives even before the US outbreak of the pandemic in order to give some depth to the cross-disciplinary relevance of Wong's history. While I was relying on these archives for my biographical research on a singular individual and his unique artistic career, Wong's life also exemplifies the importance and precarity of archives for Chinese American history and experience. One of the striking aspects about researching Wong is the fact that so much documentation exists about his life, independent of his art. In addition to the immigration files regarding him and his family—which, in Wong's case, includes a 4-page, 82-question interview transcript conducted when he was nine years old—his life is documented in interviews with him and his wife conducted in the 1980s, as part of a UCLA oral history project on the Chinese of Southern California.⁹ During this decade, as Asian American history became increasingly recognized by universities and cultural institutions—but fewer and fewer of Wong's contemporaries were still alive—Wong often was consulted regarding his Angel Island experience, or his memories of Los Angeles's original Chinatown, a pre-automobile district of cobblestone streets long since razed to make way for the modern metropolis of freeways, skyscrapers, and urban smog.

So while Wong's diverse biography offers multiple paths through his history, even despite crises like the USCIS rate hikes or the MOCA fire, the very presence of records regarding his life that exist only because of his ethnic identity also shows how important archives are in Chinese and Asian American history and experience.¹⁰ All ethnic, racial, and identity groups have their own documentary corpus, but the peculiar history in which Chinese Americans were subject to intense governmental surveillance means that bureaucratic records are both *evidence of* and *a medium with which* others can be educated about that injustice. Cultural and nongovernmental repositories such as MOCA and the University of California Los Angeles's Southern California Chinese oral history project do invaluable work by corroborating official histories, similar to Holocaust survivor oral histories in ensuring historical commemoration, as well

as LGBTQ archives in retrieving and protecting an identity and community often obscured from view. When these records and artifacts like those at USCIS or MOCA disappear, are damaged, or otherwise become inaccessible, Asian Americans are dealt a double erasure. More than a half century after the end of Exclusion, history still conspires to pretend we don't belong here, while also hiding the aggressive measures by which we once were prevented from belonging and entry.

Recovering Chinese American History in a Time of Anti-Asian Sentiment

The subsequent spread on US shores in early spring 2020 of the "Chinese" virus, followed by protests regarding police violence and racial justice that roiled the country throughout the summer, only put Asian Americans and their archives in further jeopardy. From the very beginning of the outbreak, ethnic Asians suffered a dramatic increase in race-based harassment. These attacks, which ranged from verbal harassment to outright violence, recalled Chinese Exclusion in their "violent scapegoating of a population for larger social ills," and in the early weeks of the pandemic media coverage often was helpful in connecting these two experiences.¹¹ Yet if this initial media attention helped highlight a history that still is not widely known, awareness of this Asian American experience soon had to compete with the racial justice protests that erupted after George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police. As coronavirus headlines increasingly jostled with racial justice news coverage, this brief, COVID 19-related sensitivity to Asian American experience faded behind media attention to the black/white dynamics of race in America. Whether it is an issue of demographics or because mainstream media practices tend to confer only limited coverage to perceived "minority" issues, the increasingly complex developments of 2020 also subsumed the Asian American predicament that they had briefly highlighted.

Archives, with their retrospective contents and definitional quality of being out-of-time, may not obviously be related to these pressing concerns of pandemic and social protest, but 2020's adverse impact on my archival research extended beyond the closures to access. More subtly but no less impactfully, another adverse consequence

of 2020 was how this general mood of anti-Asian indifference undermined interest among the audience to whom I hope to bring Wong's story. Since starting this project I have often met people intrigued by Wong's history. Sometimes these individuals already knew something about him because of the documentary, but just as often they become fascinated upon first hearing of him through a friendly conversation struck up during my research travels or in the course of some other topic.¹² But several months into 2020, however, these moments of empathic connection that Wong's story previously used to spark were becoming increasingly rare. "Too academic and of limited interest to audiences," said one book acquisitions editor, when declining a query I sent in May, deep into the nationwide lockdown. Later that year a fellowship reviewer shrugged off my application, noting that they were "not entirely convinced that the story is an urgent one."

Of course, it is pointless to suggest that COVID-19 was directly responsible for the lukewarm response my Tyrus Wong project was receiving in the middle of 2020, when the economy had tanked, infection rates were exploding, and most everyone was consumed with far more immediate concerns regarding livelihood and physical health. More likely it reflects the higher stakes of publishing and fellowship awards, as well as the tendency among media outlets and other arbiters of mainstream culture to imagine Asian American content as niche.

Yet the critical silence I was experiencing during the pandemic did not bode well for Asian American-identified projects such as mine, and during the lockdowns I began to worry specifically about less deep-pocketed community-based archives, like MOCA, on which my project draws. Just days after the MOCA fire, for example, *New Yorker* essayist Hua Hsu had mourned the catastrophe by noting that Chinese Americans are "precisely the population who need a place like MOCA," and given our long history of exclusion and marginalization, "self-archiving can feel like a waste of time."¹³ Rebuilding and restoring a repository like MOCA would be challenging at any time, but how would it be possible when funds for nonprofits and cultural organizations were evaporating and audiences were growing

indifferent—or even outwardly opposed—to specific subjects, communities, and issues?

Yet it is important to reiterate here that Chinese and Asian American archives are not only retrospective, nor meaningful only to a discrete population. By the time 2020's relentless crises barreled on to a contentious presidential election, Hsu was writing about Asian Americans as being possibly the "last undecided voters."¹⁴ His implication was that connecting with the rapidly growing Asian American population could have a huge political impact by swinging a highly contested vote, and that overlooking this diverse but often high income and highly educated demographic might come with its own risks.¹⁵ After all, as a number of activists, public health officials, and journalists pointed out, if Americans had followed local Chinatowns in early adoption of mask wearing, rates of COVID-19 infection might have been smaller and the pandemic's length and severity more confined.¹⁶ One reason for these communities' pandemic preparedness, reporter E. Tammy Kim further adds, was because of their engagement with East Asian news sources and social media, so expanding our purview of information consumption can only benefit populations at large—even as these changes redefine our understanding of the boundaries between Asian, American, and Asian American experience.¹⁷

Indeed, if there is any silver lining to the roadblocks that the pandemic posed to my project, it was that many individuals in possession of private materials often were willing to pass some of the long weeks of lockdown trolling through their collections. This outreach to personal and private archives has always been necessary given the diversity of Wong's production, dispersed as it is across commercial arts and ephemera. But when the pandemic put a stop to travel, my correspondence with individuals also had the advantage of continuing the intimate and personal connection by which Tyrus's story often gains outreach.¹⁸ Moreover, because most of Wong's career took place in the middle of the last century, this often meant that the current caretakers of these materials are descendants, second and even third-generation owners who in some case knew little of the works' history or context until I contacted them, sparking new or expanded interest.

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"I wonder if the locals here know about the history of this community," wrote Pete Jeakins, of a shrine left behind by the Chinese who settled in Salem, Oregon in the middle of the nineteenth century. City authorities had burned the district to the ground in 1903, and few residents were aware of this past until the shrine's remnants were found at the start of this century.¹⁹ Jeakins is the son of Dorothy Jeakins, a three-time Oscar-winning costume designer who had been Wong's friend since the two were teenage scholarship students at Los Angeles' Otis Art Institute in the late 1920s. Although he was familiar with Wong's name and his mother's long friendship with Wong, Pete was not aware of how Wong's biography intersected with monuments in Jeakins's own life.

Similarly, Cindy Soo is the granddaughter of Luis Mafong, a Mexican Chinese restaurateur in Tijuana whose family who had sheltered Wong in 1931, when the young art student and US alien unexpectedly found himself exiled for a month as a result of an ill-planned sketching trip across the border. Through her other grandfather Soo is also descended from Tom Chong-kwan, "Ah Quin," a nineteenth-century labor broker and real estate investor now recognized as one of San Diego's founding fathers. Given her family history Soo is already deeply knowledgeable about Mexican Chinese history and an active member of San Diego's community of Chinese genealogists and historians, but until she and I spoke neither of us fully understood the implications of her family's accidental intersection with Wong's idiosyncratic artist's biography. Both Ah Quin and Luis Mafong, for example, were key facilitators in local Anglo-Chinese relations, who invariably were consulted whenever Chinese individuals passed through their respective spheres of influence. Ah Quin in particular was a prolific diarist whose surviving writings historian Susie Lan Cassel notes "could be used to help reconstruct the Chinese census of early San Francisco,.. lost in the Great Earthquake of 1906."²⁰ Ah Quin's wife Sue Leong (Cindy's paternal grandmother) was a classmate of Wong's mother-in-law, Chin Mooie, as both had been among the first group of girls to be educated at San Francisco's Presbyterian Mission home, a landmark institution in Chinese American history (Chin Mooie herself would go on to become a pioneer in California's inland farming community of Bakersfield).²¹

So, in helping flesh out this fascinating but still little-known episode in Wong's biography, Soo also discovered additional dimensions of her own family history and its place in Chinese American heritage. Her family's roots, with its connections crossing regional and national borders from Tijuana to San Diego, San Francisco and Bakersfield, is part of a more diverse account of Chinese in North America whose historical documentation is still in its early stages.²² It also underscores how Wong's unusually bohemian career path—in some ways the antithesis of Asian American stereotypes of conformity and inscrutability—was meaningful as a path to middle-class prosperity and professional respectability, given that era of legal discrimination and economic marginalization.

In her influential meditation on archives, Carolyn Steedman describes this capacity to retrospectively shape future narratives in grammatical terms. "The tense of the archive," she writes, is the "future perfect," a realm where material is stashed away for the future under the hope that subsequent analyses will find an origin story suitable for the era in which that narrative is crafted.²³ This progressive, rehabilitative quality is possible among all kinds of archives and for all subjects and audiences. In the case of Tyrus Wong, for example, who had been let go from Disney during the notorious 1941 animators' strike, while *Bambi* was still in production, and subsequently listed incorrectly in the film's original credits only as a "background artist," the Disney archives are instrumental in correcting the very error they once had helped create. Although founded primarily as a means of protecting proprietary content, the Disney archives helped launch Wong's rediscovery when "Nine Old Men" animators Fred Thomas and Ollie Johnson shared his history in their 1990 book about the making of *Bambi*.²⁴ Subsequent research by leading animation scholars John Canemaker, Charles Solomon, and Michael Barrier also used the Disney archives to further publicize Wong's contributions, paving the way for Pamela Tom's documentary.²⁵

Moreover, although no one involved in Wong's recovery has ever suggested that racism is the main reason for Wong's Disney termination and miscrediting, the company's archives helped them preempt further criticism when Disney officially joined the rediscovery trend by naming Wong a

Disney Legend in 2001. Since then the company has continued to haul out from their archives numerous examples of Wong's beautiful concept work, using it both in their own publicity as well as cooperating with other promotional efforts by authorizing their reproduction.²⁶ These new documents and footnotes then expand the corporate archive and effectively burnish and rethink the past.

Less cynically, another aspect of archives' capacity for the "future perfect" is how various repositories reinforce and illuminate each other, often in unforeseen ways. With Wong's biography, for example, the variety of archives in which his legacy resides illustrates the diversity of his social network, which encompassed legendary cinematographer James Wong Howe, screen siren Anna May Wong, Disney Golden Age animators Marc Davis and Mary Blair, Los Angeles modernist architect Harwell Hamilton Harris, Oscar sculptor and Hollywood Bowl designer George Stanley, Disneyland Imagineer Fred Joerger (Figure 1), pin-up artist Fritz Willis, numerous interned Japanese American artists, and pioneering immigration attorney Y.C. Hong.

Tracking Wong's life through the interlocking traces of this eclectic social circle has been a fascinating exercise in the unexpected connections between major archives and what are sometimes considered niche interests or repositories. In the nearly fifty linear feet at the Margaret Herrick Library (Los Angeles) and the Harry Ransom Center (Austin, Texas) that collectively comprise the papers and photographs of James Wong Howe and his wife, the writer Sanora Babb, are scripts and treatments for several movie ideas the couple had about China, as well as correspondence with various Chinese and Chinese American organizations—remnants of an ethnic commitment that is almost always used to frame Tyrus Wong's story, but often underplayed in a major Hollywood figure like Wong Howe.²⁷ Similarly, the YC Hong family and legal papers in Pasadena's Huntington library show how the pathbreaking attorney and intrepid real estate investor and his polished wife, Mabel, used studied consumption and spending in aesthetic design to augment their cultural status among both Chinatown business elites and the white Los Angeles establishment.

Sometimes this simple reminder of the vast differences between individual repositories also

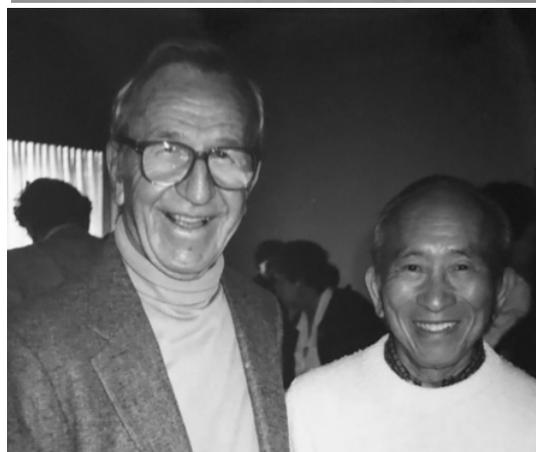


Figure 1. Top: Tondo painting by Wong, mounted among gilded plaster décor in the ceiling of Fred Joerger's private home, from the late 1950s or early 1960s (image courtesy of Raffy Krikorian; photo by author). Bottom: Wong and Joerger in the 1980s, when Joerger was field art director for Disney's newly opened EPCOT (image courtesy of Kim Wong).

demonstrates what larger archives might stand to gain from the unique skills and contextual information that certain smaller archives require. Language, for example, is a recurring issue in Chinese and other Asian American archives, as researchers and archivists must work through nonalphabetic information with inconsistent transliteration, as well as different date systems and surname customs. In my case, searching demographic data for Tyrus Wong and his family members—including both real and paper connections—usually required searching multiple spellings and guessing at possible variations. In the Hallmark archives his family and I found one design had been incorrectly attributed to him, despite a Chinese signature by an artist

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clearly not Wong, and in the National Archives' photos of Japanese internment, Wong's close friend, the artist Benji Okubo, who had run the Heart Mountain art school, is absent in the database due to a misspelling of his surname.²⁸

In the best of times, archives spark empathy and provide historical engagement, through which society discovers origins and meaning for their current situation. And even in the worst of times, archives are valuable sites of caching and preservation, whose very obscurity and neglect can be an asset, protecting objects and documents until some future population understands what to do with it. Although this moment of renewed ambivalence regarding ethnic Chinese and Asian bodies in American culture raises some challenges for Asian American-identified stories like Wong, his biography also reminds us how important even "minor" archives are to our shared culture and history. As the events of 2020 show, ignoring issues seemingly relevant to only a discrete portion of the population only undermines our collective humanity.

Archive and Activism

One of the culminating events in Wong's life exemplifies archives' capacity for the "future perfect." In 2013, Bay Area-based philanthropist and Asian American cultural activist David Lei was speaking at the Berkeley Chinese Community Church when he mentioned a mural-sized painting of an Orientalized Jesus that he recalled from his San Francisco childhood, when he and his family had attended the Chinese United Methodist Church on Washington Street. Lei—who is on the board of the Center for Asian American Media, cofounder of a series of workshops devoted to supporting Chinese American genealogy, and owner of an unique collection of costumes and theatrical materials relating to Chinese opera in American Chinatowns—mentioned the painting as an example of the need for minority communities to take the lead in preserving their past. Lei had long wondered about the colorful, fusion-style image that he remembered and which now in this twenty-first century, Obama-era perspective seemed prescient and *avant garde*.

Lei's mention of the "Chinese Jesus" painting had been spontaneous and was not the main focus of his remarks, but a woman in the audience raised

her hand to mention that she had seen such a painting stowed in the Washington Street church's broom closet. A quick follow-up by Lei found the very painting that he recalled from more than fifty years ago, and because the painting was unsigned and no one knew anything about its provenance Lei contacted San Francisco State art historian and gallery director Mark Johnson. In 1995 Johnson helped curate a pioneering exhibit on pre-1960s Asian American art, so he knew from the painting's age and style that it probably dated from the 1920s-1940.²⁹ Johnson also knew that Wong—103 at the time—was the last living member of the Oriental Artists group, a dynamic collaboration between Chinese and Japanese American artists active in California in the mid-1930s, and hence the most likely person to have any insights about the painting.

When contacted on their father's behalf, Wong's daughters immediately thought the painting might be a piece that their father had mentioned having been commissioned to do for a Los Angeles Chinese church back in the 1930s, and coordinated with Lei and Johnson to view the painting on site when they were to be in San Francisco within a few weeks for a retrospective of Wong's work organized by the Walt Disney Family Museum. Wong initially was reluctant to add this extra obligation in what would surely be an exhausting weekend, but when the lively centenarian huffed his way up the steep San Francisco hills and alighted on the church's second-floor landing he was surprised and moved to recognize that the fragile painting they hauled out of a dusty broom closet was his own (Figure 2).

Wong's "Chinese Jesus" painting was rediscovered just in time to be added to the Disney Family Museum exhibit, whose footage appears in the documentary, as well as at the documentary's Bay area premiere on opening night of the 2016 Center for Asian American Media film festival.³⁰ For Wong's admirers like Lei, Johnson, filmmaker Pamela Tom, and myself, the painting's serendipitous discovery is fitting culmination to a life of improbable fortune. However, the ramifications of the episode reach beyond the individual and disciplinary context of Wong's ethnic and artistic biography to also speak to the methodological and community interests who may be less interested in visual culture but who care deeply about demographic visibility, particularly at this time of heightened Asian



Figure 2. Tyrus Wong encountering his “Chinese Jesus” painting for the first time in nearly 80 years (photo courtesy of Kim Wong)

American vulnerability. For Lei and Lisa Lau, the woman at Lei’s Berkeley presentation who made the connection to Lei’s reminiscence, their role in the recovery of Wong’s “Chinese Jesus” painting is a treasured experience amidst their personal commitment to preserving Chinese American history and cultural heritage. It also is a particularly vivid reminder of how much undiscovered and lost history there is still left to recover in archives and repositories throughout the world.

In some ways the current moment’s racial reckoning recalls the late 1980s and early 1990s, when that era’s identity politics and critique of the canon agitated for expanded syllabi and a more diverse range of genres and makers of cultural content. It’s not enough to be nonracist, says the current zeitgeist; we must be anti-racist, and the numerous reading and viewing lists that proliferated in response to the 2020 racial justice protests are premised on the idea that change begins with intellectual inquiry. Although few manifestos specify archives as a necessary component of this enlightenment, are these sites not actually one of the most important parts? After all, if Exclusion’s terrible efficacy in

keeping America’s ethnic Chinese population to a minimum also helped obscure its injustice, the thousands of pages of surveillance documents produced as a result of Exclusion policy help expose and counter that legacy. As filmmaker Ric Burns said in explanation of his goal in making his 2018 PBS documentary on the subject, if “you don’t know the story of Chinese Exclusion, it would be like saying you want to know about race relations in America but you’ve never heard of slavery.”³¹

The need to protect and support archives is especially imperative for vulnerable identity and community archives such as the Asian American archives that are an important part of my Tyrus Wong research. As I write this essay in late 2020, coronavirus cases are still surging and most of the Los Angeles archives crucial to my project remain closed.³² But while I have no doubt that when the pandemic ends major archives such as Disney, Warner Bros., the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, and Los Angeles County will always continue their work and eventually reopen, I am less confident about the smaller Chinese and Asian American archives and artifacts like MOCA or the “Chinese Jesus” (which is still badly in need of restoration).³³ Even aside from pandemic closures, the many personal collections related to Wong that are still in private hands and homes are dependent on the resources and energies of their owners—many of whom are aging and, because so many are based in California, threatened by wildfire each year.³⁴ Wong’s life and the many other histories with which he intersected is a particularly vivid example of the vast unsifted content that continues to reside in repositories whose depths have yet to be plumbed and which—in some cases—have yet even to be found. But for the many other families, institutions, individuals and communities whose histories may not have as many alternate sources as Wong’s, what other stories still stuck in broom closets have yet to be discovered?

As scholars we sometimes think of archives only in terms of our individual research queries, and the difference between the various government, institutional, corporate and private collections we make use of may be obscured by the marshalling of information and analysis that is our stock-in-trade. But not all archives are created equally, nor are they put to the same kinds of uses, and while we help legitimate archives through the stories

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we eventually tell from their contents it also is imperative that we recognize our responsibilities to those archives most at risk of disappearing. If one of the racial justice movement's guiding concerns is how representation and inclusion can be advanced through education and information dissemination—as if bodies are tantamount to texts—this is especially true of archives, which remain long after bodies are gone. As the crises of 2020 and its aftermath reminds us, archives are not only retrospective and historical but also resonantly topical.

In summary, while we may not think of our solitary time absorbed in fusty archives as anything like the dynamic mobilization currently taking place in digital pathways and occupying urban streets, in their own way archival research and preservation are an important kind of civic activism. This is apparent not only in the final product that archives help us generate but also in the very acts of archival outreach, discovery, preservation and use. These intermediary processes are potent opportunities for education, empathy and consciousness-

raising, long before that final product, and sometimes among audiences and contexts who might not otherwise come to hear of that topic.

For me, one of the most rewarding and unexpected dividends of researching Wong's life has been discovering the extent to which his values were mirrored in the diverse circle of creatives that comprised his inner circle, and how that spirit of optimism and creative community continues among the people who survive him, as well as the many others who are touched by his story. This narrative has been especially sustaining amidst the hardship and isolation of 2020, and it is one where race and ethnicity are only incidental. But it in the overlapping circles of Wong's artistic biography and his experience as a Chinese American immigrant, documenting his life reinforces for me my responsibility to the more vulnerable archives to which Wong's biography also belongs.

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Karen Fang is Professor of English at the University of Houston, where she also chairs a college initiative in Media and the Moving Image. Her essay on Tyrus Wong's bestselling Christmas cards appeared in the December 2020 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Notes

1 *Tyrus*, directed by Pamela Tom, New Moon Pictures, 2015. Once acquired by PBS, the documentary is part of the channel's "American Masters."

2 Margalit Fox, "Tyrus Wong, 'Bambi' Artist Thwarted by Racial Bias, Dies at 106." *New York Times*, December 30, 2016. That piece was printed in color and took up half of the front page of the Arts and Culture section, and was followed less than a week later by Daniel DeDermon, "How 'Bambi' Got Its Look From 1,000 Year-Old-Chinese Art." *New York Times*, January 5, 2017. Other prominent venues to run obituaries or features on Wong in the weeks after his death included *CBS This Morning*, *NPR*, *Guardian*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

3 For my personal experience with pandemic racism, see Karen Fang, "Where are the Allies for Asian American Kids?" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 24, 2020. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/where-are-the-allies-for-asian-american-kids/>

4 Sydney Trent, "The genealogy boom has hit a roadblock. The Trump administration plans huge fee hikes for immigration records." *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/12/05/genealogy-boom-has-hit-roadblock-trump-administration-plans-huge-fee-hikes-immigration-records/>

5 As just one prominent example of a common Chinese American self-discovery through USCIS records, see the current essay film, *Far East, Deep South* (2020), about a Mississippi-based ethnic Chinese family whose American roots precede Exclusion. Raymond Chong, "Far East Deep South—A Poignant Story Chinese Families during Segregation Era of the Deep South." *AsAmNews*, March 5, 2020. <https://asamnews.com/2020/03/05/film-traces-chinese-american-familys-history-in-the-deep-south/>

6 Annie Correal, "85,000 Pieces From Beloved Chinatown Museum Likely Destroyed in Fire." *New York Times*, January 24, 2020.

7 "Water to Paper, Paint to Sky: The Art of Tyrus Wong." Museum of the Chinese in America, March 26-September 13, 2015.

8 See H.L.V. Fan, "New York Chinatown Theatres under the Hong Kong Circuit System." *Film History*, 22.1

(2010): 108-206

9 Transcript of Board of Special Inquiry with Look Tai Yow (#19817), Angel Island, January 27, 1921, Angel Island Historical Files, U.S. Customs and Immigration; Tyrus Wong interview, May 7, and 31, 1980; Ruth Kim Wong interview, March 21, 1983 (Interviews #96, 61); Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project.

10 Archives' importance for Chinese Americans and Chinese American history is as apparent in its absence as its presence. When fires caused by 1906 the San Francisco earthquake destroyed most municipal birth records, Chinese immigrants hoping to bypass Exclusion restrictions often invoked birthright citizenship (or familial connection to someone holding it), knowing those claims could not easily be proven.

11 See Sabrina Tavernise and Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety," *New York Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html>; Erin Donaghue, "2,210 hate incidents against Asian Americans reported during coronavirus pandemic," CBS News, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/>; Andrew R. Chow, "Violence Against Asian Americans Is on the Rise—But It's Part of a Long History," *Time*, May 20, 2020. <https://time.com/5834427/violence-against-asian-americans-history/>

12 One example is Joanne Dearcopp, friend and literary executor for the writer Sonora Babb, who was married to James Wong Howe. I had contacted Dearcopp in regards to Wong's connections with Babb and Howe, and although she was initially turned off by misleading descriptions of Wong as a "low-level animator" she grew deeply interested once she learned more about his stylistic fusion of eastern and western painting traditions.

13 Hua Hsu, "What We Lost in the Museum of Chinese in America Fire." *New Yorker*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-we-lost-in-the-museum-of-chinese-in-america-fire>

14 Hua Hsu, "Are Asian Americans the Last Undecided Voters?" *New Yorker*, October 26, 2020,

15 Marrian Zhou, "Asian American group once for Trump now says 'we made a mistake.'" *NikkeiAsia*, November 1, 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/US-elections-2020/Asian-American-group-once-for-Trump-now-says-we-made-a-mistake>

16 Mark Magnier, "Asians in the US least likely to get coronavirus infection despite racist assumptions of many, data suggests." *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3084947/asians-us-least-likely-get-coronavirus-infection-data-suggests>

17 E. Tammy Kim, "Transnationally Asian." *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 21, 2020. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/transnationally_asian.php

18 An interesting example here of how Wong's story grew through word-of-mouth is influential *New York Times* obituary writer Margalit Fox, who heard of the artist through her accountant, who had seen him on TV.

19 Capi Lynn, "Chinese shrine rediscovered at Salem's Pioneer Cemetery," *Seattle Times*, October 7, 2017; see also Salem Pioneer Cemetery Chinese Shrine Project, <https://www.cityofsalem.net/Pages/chinese-shrine-project.aspx>.

20 Will Bowen, "Ah Quin: A San Diego founding father." *San Diego Downtown News*, March 1, 2014. <https://sandiegodowntownnews.com/ah-quin-a-san-diego-founding-father/>

21 For Chin Mooie and the Presbyterian Mission Home, see Julia Flynn Siler, *The White Devil's Daughters: The Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco's Chinatown*, New York: Vintage, 2019, and Gregory Kimm, "The Story of Ng Hon Gim and Chin Mooie," unpublished, 2015.

22 Studies of ethnic Chinese in Mexico and their movement between Mexico and the US have only recently become common. See Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2010; Julia María Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910-1960*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012; Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S. Mexico Borderlands*, Stanford; Stanford University Press, 2012; Isabela Seong Leong Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home: Borders and the Worlds of Chinatown and Sonoratown in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History*, 41:1 (January 2015): 47-74; Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940*, University of Illinois Press, 2017; Fredy Gonzalez, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics Among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

23 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. Rutgers University Press, 2002, 7.

24 Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnson, *Bambi: The Story and Film*, Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1990. In a telling reminder of the importance of microarchives, however, Thomas and Johnson also made use of Wong's "personal collection." See Ollie Johnston to Tyrus Wong, March 2, 1990, Wong Family Papers.

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25 Michael Barrier 1979 interview with Tyrus Wong, <http://michaelbarrier.com/Interviews/Wong/Wong.html>; John Canemaker, *Before the Animation Begins: The Art and Lives of Disney Inspirational Sketch Artists* (Hyperion, 1996), 145-51; Charles Solomon, "The Art of Tyrus Wong," Walt Disney Family Museum, June 11, 2011.

26 In 2017, for example, as part of *Bambi's* seventy-fifth anniversary of *Bambi* and the release of a new DVD, the newsletter for the official Walt Disney Company fan club, D23, included a feature in which animator Paul Felix (*Mulan*, *Tarzan*) specifically names Wong as an influence. Jocelyn Buhlman, "Animator Paul Felix Shares Why *Bambi* is Still 'Deer' to Our Hearts 75 Years Later." <https://d23.com/animator-paul-felix-shares-why-bambi-is-still-deer-to-our-hearts-75-years-later/>

27 See James Wong Howe papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences; Sanora Babb papers, The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center.

28 On Benji Okubo at Heart Mountain, hear my radio story, Karen Fang, "Internment Camp Art Schools," *The Engines of Our Ingenuity*, Episode 3216. <https://uh.edu/engines/epi3216.htm>

29 "With New Eyes: Toward an Asian American Art History in the West," San Francisco State University Gallery, September 24-October 26, 1995, curated by Irene Poon Anderson, Mark Johnson, Dawn Nakanishi and Diane Tani.

30 The "Chinese Jesus" painting also was featured in a 2016 exhibit at San Francisco's DeYoung Museum of Asian Art.

31 Marina Fang, "How the Chinese Exclusion Act Can Help Us Understand Immigration Politics Today." Huffington Post, May 25, 2018. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chinese-exclusion-act-immigration-politics_n_5b06a90fe4b05f0fc84552cf

32 Luke Money, Rong-gon Lin II, and Soumya Karlamangla, "ICU availability in Southern California at 0%, and it's going to get worse, officials warn." *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-17/southern-california-out-of-icu-beds-amid-covid-19-surge>

33 Fortunately, the MOCA fire at least was not as severe as feared. Despite the pandemic, Kickstarter funding and a generous Ford Foundation grant are supporting MOCA salvage and restoration efforts, as well as a new digital platform, which can both grow interest and serve the public during pandemic closures and post-fire recovery. Livia Gershon, "You Can Now Explore 200 Years of Chinese American History Online." *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/museum-chinese-america-goes-virtual-180976822/>

34 After the 2017 Creek Fire in Los Angeles County, for example, Wong's daughter Kim—then in her late 60s—had to move many of her father's art and papers from his house in a wooded part of the San Fernando Valley to an urban storage facility. Similarly, Leslee Leong, cousin of bestselling novelist Lisa See and daughter of architect Gilbert Leong, and also of Kim Wong's generation, has been instrumental in preserving some of Wong's most interesting and important artwork and correspondence. Leong herself is a trained archivist who once worked at the Huntington library, so she not only understood the unique value of her family possessions but also the necessity of placing them with an institution both appreciative of their content and equipped to handle the preservation and conservation needs of artistic and architectural work. For more, See Daisy Lin, "Treasure Hunt: The Huntington Library Acquires Papers of Chinese American Family." *Reach/Further*, June 22, 2020. <https://www.eastwestbank.com/ReachFurther/en/News/Article/Treasure-Hunt-The-Huntington-Library-Acquires-Papers-of-Chinese-American-Family>