**Fashioning Chinese America: Anti-Japanese Silk Stocking Boycott as Transpacific Consumer Politics and Incubator of Cultural Citizenship, 1931-1940**

(Former title: “More than it May “Seam”: Chinese American Women and the Silk Stocking Boycott of 1937-1940

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On June 16, 1938, the narrow, lantern-lit streets of San Francisco’s Chinatown pulsed with the movement of dancers, jugglers, fire-breathing dragons, and over three hundred thousand guests.[[1]](#endnote-1) This “Rice Bowl Party” was just one installment of a nation-wide string of events launched by the China War Relief Association (CWRA) in over two thousand U.S. cities and towns.[[2]](#endnote-2) As Bay Area residents made their way through the festival, they might have caught a glimpse of the Chinese Playground, where members of the Square and Circle Club displayed a visual timeline of Chinese dress from the Tang Dynasty’s “elaborate and picturesque gowns, glittering with sequins” to the cutting-edge couture of contemporary Shanghai. In their garments explicitly fashioned from Chinese-made fabrics rather than Japanese silks, these clubwomen invited visitors to join San Francisco’s Chinese Americans in a trans-pacific boycott of silk textiles sourced from Japanese adversaries in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).[[3]](#endnote-3) Chinese American boycotters used their fashion shows and lantern-strewn streets to exhibit their community’s capacity for collective action and establish their place in broader anti-fascist coalitions.[[4]](#endnote-4) Their protest was not performed alone. The predominantly white members of the League of Women Shoppers, centered in Washington, D.C., strut their cotton-clad legs down the runway, demanding an end to the atrocities of Japanese war crime with each step. Hollywood stars such as Loretta Lynn and Silvia Sydney and members of the American Association of University Women also staged their own silkless runway shows to protest Japanese aggression. All of these anti-Japanese fashion shows and the associated silk stocking boycott sought to awaken Americans to the millions of starving and brutalized Chinese suffering from Japan’s invasion.

The anti-Japanese silk boycotts reveal a larger political awakening for Chinese Americans. By claiming the consumer boycott as a tool for popular political action, Chinese American women demonstrated their aptitude for American cultural and political citizenship at a moment when the United States government placed severe limits on the rights of Chinese immigrants and, oftentimes, their children.[[5]](#endnote-5) Although previous scholarly interpretations have recognized the diverse array of Americans and Chinese Nationalists who participated in the anti-Japanese silk boycotts, none has treated the silk boycotts as a cultural and political staging ground that fostered the development of a distinctive Chinese American political and cultural identity in the midst of the Exclusion Era. Alice Fong Yu, a local schoolteacher who organized the Chinatown silk-stocking boycott with the aid of her fellow Square and Circle Club (SCC) members, used the boycott both to publicize the modernity of Chinese American women and to battle communism and fascism abroad. As they used language and inspiration from both the US and Nationalist China to seize the mantle of consumer patriotism, the SCC women remade the movement into something uniquely “Chinese American.” The boycott granted them opportunities to both operate within a bicultural political space and to articulate ethnic pride andto assert their relevance and presence within the US national community.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Previous interpretations of the Anti-Japanese Silk Boycott reveal important elements of the movement that merit further development. Historian Lawrence Glickmanpresents the boycott movement as a moment that made “self-denial” stylish among its white, middle class participants. By focusing primarily on Anglo-American women boycotters, however, Glickman treats the boycott as a predominantly western political tool in a way that obscures other important political meanings of the anti-Japanese silk boycott.[[7]](#endnote-7) When we shift our focus to the Chinese Nationalists and Chinese Americans who also played vital roles in the silk boycott, other layers of meaning rise to the fore. Women like Alice Fong Yu presented cotton stockings—the alternative to silk—not as stylish, but rather, as a meaningful way to display political consciousness and moral uprightness on the body. Further, the boycott politics developed across the pacific by Chinese Nationalists likely had a greater influence on Chinatown residents than American boycott tactics and rhetorical traditions. For this reason, the history of the silk stocking boycott is best told when unbound by America’s Pacific borders.[[8]](#endnote-8) Judy Yung, on the other hand, situates her analysis of the silk boycott within a more transnational frame. She demonstrates how Chinese Nationalist discourse and Chinese gender ideology shaped the conception and execution of the silk stocking boycott, but her account does fully not explore how the boycott created interactions between Chinese Americans and Chinese Nationalists in ways that inspired Chinese American women to reimagine their place in American society. I argue that these interactions enabled Chinese American women to embrace or imagine modern roles for themselves and claim a kind of cultural citizenship in the midst of the Exclusion Era (1882-1943).[[9]](#endnote-9)

Chinese American participants in the silk stocking boycott reworked a Chinese Nationalist vision of cultural modernity against a US backdrop in a way that displayed a cultural and political literacy of the American landscape. If understood as performances of cultural citizenship, the Square and Circle Club boycotts and fashion shows gain a political significance that has previously gone unrecognized. As Shirley Jennifer Lim has argued, such displays of “cultural citizenship” have the potential to politicize everyday life by communicating “the demands of disadvantaged subjects for full citizenship in spite of cultural differences from mainstream society.”[[10]](#endnote-10) By displaying a version of modernity through their fashion shows and boycott rhetoric, and by participating in a Protestant-Christian women’s group, a typically Anglo-American socio-political form, Chinese American women such as Alice Fong Yu could counter the mainstream image of the “inassimilable” alien and even claim spaces in local and national communities.[[11]](#endnote-11)

**Staging a Performance of Bi-Cultural Citizenship**

The deeply transnational Alice Fong Yu, president of the SCC, was well positioned to articulate an American identity rooted in both traditional and contemporary Chinese values. Born in 1905 in the small mining town of Washington, CA to a Chinese Nationalist father, Alice and her ten siblings were encouraged to make the best of their time in America by obtaining higher education. Eager to raise successful American children, her father Fong Chow named his three first born after Presidents (Theodore and Taft) or the daughters of presidents (Alice [Roosevelt]). [[12]](#endnote-12) Given her pride in her Chinese heritage, Alice considered visiting or relocating to China after receiving her teaching credential from a California college. However, immediately after she graduated from the San Francisco Normal Teachers College, a Chinatown elementary school offered her a position. Because it served an almost entirely Chinese-American student body, Commodore Stockton Elementary eagerly sought Chinese-speaking instructors.[[13]](#endnote-13) Alice chose to remain in America, then, using her position as a schoolteacher to fashion herself into a cultural bridge between her Chinese Nationalist parents and the customs of her American birthplace.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Much of Alice’s leadership took its form outside of the classroom. On the afternoon of June 15, 1924, Alice formed the SCC with a group of women from her Congregational Church. Alice and her friends hoped that the club would create new avenues for women’s civic engagement. The club, as described in its 1926 Constitution, aimed to “develop a spirit of cooperating and service by promoting and fostering philanthropic and community projects and to encourage the fulfillment of the club ideal: ‘In deeds be square, in knowledge be all-around.’”[[15]](#endnote-15) The clubwomen moved quickly to achieve their goals. In its first few years, the club developed a Widow and Orphan fund (1924) and donated to the Chung Mei Home for Chinese Orphans (founded in 1926 by Chinese missionary George Shepherd). In 1928, Alice joined the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party/KMT) in America, which allowed the club greater awareness of and connection to Chinese social and political issues.[[16]](#endnote-16) Her prominence in the transnational community continued to grow. In 1930, Alice received the title of Reporter of Propaganda/ Publicity of the KMT in America.[[17]](#endnote-17) By 1937, she had begun to write regularly under her Chinese Name, P’ing Yu (Jade Gate), in the local publication, the *Chinese Digest.* The monthly magazine kept its readers abreast of both American and Chinese events that might affect their wider, diasporic community. The *Chinese Digest* also attracted some readers in China, particularly those with family living in the United States. The monthly also aimed to articulate a Chinese American subjectivity, or, as one writer put it, to “kill the Celestial bogey [an Orientalized Other] and substitute a normal being who drives automobiles… and speaks good English.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Alice and other *Digest* authors sought to demonstrate the humanity and cultural literacy of the Chinese community without sacrificing their own ethnic identity. Though Alice briefly contemplated visiting China in the 1930s, her financial situation and limited language skills required her to stay in California, where her biculturalism became further entrenched.

Although the boycott of Japanese goods was a national movement, this article focuses on San Francisco’s Chinatown for two reasons. First, Alice Fong Yu’s leadership of the movement in San Francisco reverberated throughout the American Chinese community as well as across the Pacific in China. Second, San Francisco played a large part in directing the Chinese American diaspora. As the largest Chinese community in the United States, a number of national *huiguan* (community organizations) formed their central offices in San Francisco. [[19]](#endnote-19) In the early 1860s, six *huiguan* consolidated their efforts into the Chinese Six Companies, which would become not only an central voice in the anti-Japanese boycott, but also an essential social and cultural resource for Chinese immigrants and their families who struggled to survive in a sometimes vitriolic, anti-Chinese nation. San Francisco was also the locus of Chinese print culture in the United States. Its base of authors, intellectuals, and social scientists, including Alice, helped the community to make sense of and maintain its cultural identity.[[20]](#endnote-20) According to historian Yong Chen, it was in San Francisco that the earliest developments of a Chinese American consciousness took root.[[21]](#endnote-21) The silk stocking boycott of San Francisco fashioned both a rhetorical and material space in which Chinese American consumers and merchants might sharpen their awareness of transpacific politics and lay claim to U.S. cultural citizenship.

**The Development of a Chinese-American Boycott**

The anti-Japanese silk stocking boycott was set against a convoluted, triangular relationship between the United States, Japan, and China. From 1900 to 1912, American diplomats regarded Japan with some apprehension. Not only did Japan struggle against the United States for a larger share of China’s lucrative consumer market, but it was also becoming a “problem state” whose imperialist designs over China and Southeast Asia threatened the balance of power in the Pacific. Concurrently, China struggled to nationalize production and consumption after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and formation of the Republic of China in 1912. When the 1919 Treaty of Paris gave Japan greater power over China’s markets, an alliance of Nationalists and Communists staged their “May Fourth” protest, a product of the social and political ferment of the “New Culture” Movement (1915-1921).[[22]](#endnote-22) America’s diplomatic leaders worried that conflicts over economic control of the fledgling Republic of China could trigger another major war; as a result, the US would need to act as Japan’s partner to avoid inciting military conflict.

Despite potential Pacific complications, the United States remained close trading partners with Japan through the 1920s, taking nearly 40 percent of its exported goods, particularly raw silk. Japan’s attempt to control China quickly became more than economic. On September 18, 1931, Japanese troops invaded the Southern end of the Chinese province of Manchuria, which would remain occupied territory throughout the decade. The attack caught the weakened Republic of China in the midst its own challenges. After a period of anarchical control by a series of warlords from 1915-1928, General Chiang Kai-Shek overthrew the Beijing government and claimed China for the Nationalist Party, or the Kuomintang (KMT). After the KMT and Communist parties broke their former alliance in 1927, a continual civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party made Kai-Shek unable to resist the Japanese invasion. At the same time, the United States continued to overlook Chinese difficulties despite Japan’s rejection of its nonaggression agreement within the Nine Power Treaty.[[23]](#endnote-23)

International tensions escalated further on July 7, 1937 when Japanese Prince Konoe Fumimaro led Japanese troops into battle with Chinese nationalists on the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking.[[24]](#endnote-24) To minimize in-fighting and foster Chinese military unity, the KMT and Communist parties reformed an alliance by the end of the same year. Such complicity with communism made some Americans uncomfortable with supporting China. At the same time, any officially sanctioned boycott of Japanese goods could have turned Japan’s ire towards the United States, which, given Japan’s involvement in the Axis Powers, could incite a second world war. While US borders could not be officially closed to Japanese silk, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggested that individual Americans could “quarantine” imports from “militarily aggressive nations,” including Japan.[[25]](#endnote-25) Without more forceful government backing, however, it would be hard to for those with principled opposition to Japan convince the public of the boycott’s importance. According to a public opinion poll orchestrated by George Gallup, only 37 percent of Americans supported a boycott of Japanese goods, even though 59 percent of those polled sympathized with China (40 percent had no particular opinion and 1 percent actively supported Japan). Most of those 63 percent of Americans who did not support the boycott felt that the method was ineffective. Some cited the fruitlessness of popular boycotts of Italian goods during the Ethiopian war to give weight to their argument that “even an overwhelming popular boycott would not be effective unless supported by government measures.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Given this widespread skepticism, any successful grassroots movement would need to convince government officials that the power of the Japanese war machine was fueled in large part by revenue from silk sales.

Despite its limits, the boycott provided an opportunity for cross-racial organizing. It made space for the concerns of Chinese Americans in the agendas of participating labor unions, fraternal organizations, and women’s clubs. The *Chinese Digest* magazine proudly announced in November 1937 that, at its October 1, 1937 meeting with the Chinese Six Companies (San Francisco-based *Zhonghua Huiguan*), the AFL-CIO “voted overwhelmingly in favor of a complete boycott of Japanese goods in this country.” This decision followed the British Labour Party’s call to reject goods from “militarily aggressive nations,” but also revealed that the popular battle against fascism abroad allowed for a coalition between American laborers and the Chinese.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Many working-class Americans were willing to follow the AFL-CIO’s orders to forgo nearly all Japanese wares; however, silk stockings presented a major complication. Silk made up only a small majority (55 percent) of Japanese imports, even if 97 percent of the silk in the United States was sourced from Japan.[[28]](#endnote-28) However, because silk stockings were manufactured in the United States from raw Japanese silk, US textile workers lobbied to redefine these as American, not Japanese goods.[[29]](#endnote-29) The American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW) argued that a boycott against American-made hosiery fashioned from Japanese raw silk would hurt US workers more than Japanese exporters. By showing that a larger percent of the profit on a pair of full-fashioned silk hose went to factory workers in the US than to the Japanese economy, the AFHW complicated the meaning of a “Japanese good.”[[30]](#endnote-30) If most of the labor was performed domestically, the hosiery itself was not an import. As a result, while much of the Japanese boycott could be understood as a cross-class movement, the silk stocking boycott became associated primarily with upper- and middle-class women who had no personal stake in labor politics.

Though Euro-American women found it difficult to organize a broad based, cross-class movement around the boycott of silk hosiery, Chinese American women would not accept any argument that permitted the consumption of silks sourced from Japan. For them, the existence of any foreign capital or raw material was symbolically significant. Immediately after the invasion of Manchuria in September of 1931, the Chinese Six Companies called a meeting in San Francisco to determine how to organize Chinese War Relief in the United States. The Six Companies founded the Anti-Japanese Chinese Salvation Society on September 24, which promoted three central goals: a boycott of *all* Japanese goods, a propaganda campaign to raise awareness of Japanese war crimes, and a fundraising campaign to send money to General Ma’s troops in China.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The cry for war relief soon spread from San Francisco’s Chinatown across the Chinese American diaspora. The Chinese Women’s Association in New York made the first broad-based call to “Chinese Womanhood in the USA” in a February 18, 1932 letter to national newspaper editors. The association demanded that “Chinese womanhood must rise as ONE to put an end to these inhuman atrocities and wanton massacres” through Japanese boycotts and war relief donations.[[32]](#endnote-32) This exclamation indicates that, in 1932, these women understood themselves not as Chinese *Americans,* but as Chinese women living in America, or *Huaqiao* (“Overseas Chinese”). Diasporic ties with sisters across the Pacific defined their national identities. Even so, they began to show an awareness and embrace of their biculturalism through interaction with American newspapers and political processes.

The eruption of an anti-Japanese boycott occurred at a decisive moment for the *Huaqiao* community in the US. American-born Chinese who came of age in the 1930s were the first to collectively consider ways of melding their Chinese heritage with the socio-political rights offered by US citizenship.[[33]](#endnote-33) One Chinese language document penned in the 1930s suggests the awakening of such a Chinese American political consciousness.[[34]](#endnote-34) In the document, entitled “Proposal of Self-Defense Law among the *Huaqiao*,” Ge Cheng DeMing argued that a core problem among the Chinese community in America was its disinterest in US politics.[[35]](#endnote-35) DeMing called upon the *Huaqiao* to join either the Democratic or Republican party. DeMing’s suggestion that men should join the Democratic Party and women the Republicans likely reflected the author’s familiarity with the absolute control exercised by the then ruling, KMT party in China. DeMing’s suggestion seems to interpret American parties as seats of total political power rather than as groups supporting alternative social and economic platforms. By ensuring that the Chinese American community had strong representation in both parties, DeMing’s plan affirmed that the *Huaqiao’s* political aims would remain represented regardless of which way the country voted. While it may initially seem to reveal a naïve understanding of U.S. party politics, such thinking demonstrates a larger desire on the part of Chinese Americans to make their voices heard in the country of their birth or residence.

By using the term *Huaqiao,* authors such as Ge Cheng DeMing suggested that, in the early 1930s, some members of the Chinese community in America felt more closely tied to China than to the US.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, by the late 1930s, this was in the process of changing. Alice held DeMing’s paper in her personal library and perhaps referred to it for inspiration. Rather than working within party politics, however, Alice called for her community’s use of US political methods through consumer activism. For her, non-consumption served as both a visual declaration and a transformative political act. While wearing cotton drew attention to the struggle for China’s national survival by displaying this awareness on the body, the absence of silk also did economic and social work to deny funds to the Japanese “war machine”.

As early as 1931, the Six Companies began to work toward a consumer boycott of all Japanese goods. The earliest boycotts attempted to make Chinese American consumers more aware of the presence of Japanese goods, labor, or capital anywhere in the supply chain. For example, these efforts barred Japanese merchants from operating in Chinatown and limited the consumption of Japanese foodstuffs.[[37]](#endnote-37) On February 20, 1932, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that 20,000 residents of Chinatown had united in a boycott against local Japanese merchants and their products. Sporting huge banners distributed by the Chinese Nationalist party, the boycott enjoyed almost unanimous support from Chinatown residents as well as backing from Euro-American “Friends of the Republic.” These local consumers joined the effort to forbid Japanese goods, especially foods, in Chinese stores. The ban was so effective that, according to the *Chinese Digest,* “several Japanese stores are threatened with ruin”.[[38]](#endnote-38) Even if this boycott only harmed Japanese Americans and did not severely dent the Japanese “war machine”, it created a basis for a meaningful social movement.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Military aggression in Peking in July 1937 intensified the fervor of boycott participants, who developed a new focus on limiting the consumption of silk in particular. While the Six Companies conceived of silk boycotting as a way for women to find their own place in the effort, other factors might also explain the new emphasis on silk. The AFL-CIO’s rejection of the silk boycott may have forced the Chinese community to push the issue. Alternatively, the Chinese community’s interest in the silk boycott also coincided with the moment when white women in Hollywood began to reject silk stockings in everyday use.[[40]](#endnote-40) Increasingly, it seemed, Chinese political aims and methods became entangled with U.S. interest groups and U.S. political performance techniques.

In August 1937, the Six Companies established the Chinese War Relief Association (CWRA), lead by President of the *huiguan,* B.S. Fong. The Six Companies invited two representatives from the Square and Circle Club, among other prominent Chinese American women, to its War Relief Committee Meeting on August 20, 1937. Alice Fong Yu also served as a representative to the Federation of Chinese Clubs (FCC), a collection of community organizers that met monthly in Chinatown.[[41]](#endnote-41) In September 1937, the FCC suggested that the Square and Circle ladies help an upcoming community fundraiser by organizing a fashion show which would demonstrate a voluntary “minimizing of the use of silk, especially silk stockings, wherever practical and possible,” while “urging other Chinese women to do so” as well.[[42]](#endnote-42) The women agreed. They understood their club vow to “develop a spirit of cooperation and service by promoting and fostering philanthropic and community projects,” very broadly, even internationally. Thanks to Alice Fong Yu’s involvement, the silk stocking boycott in San Francisco Chinatown would come to play a larger role in the operations of the SCC than the women might have imagined at the movement’s onset.

Alice employed four major tools to heighten the consciousness of Chinese American women. First, she used her role as active contributor to the monthly magazine, *The Chinese Digest.* Yu’s “Jade Box” columns (which were a play on her Chinese name, *Ah Ping*, “Jade Gate”) published fashion tips and recipes, prescriptive essays about performing ideal womanhood, letters from KMT leaders, information about the War Effort, and, of course, appeals to boycott silk stockings. The interlocking messages of her publications stressed that Chinese women had the “power of giving and enriching life,” and, due to this maternal instinct, had the unique ability to be a voice for peace in wartime. While her husband sought “prestige and face” on the battlefield, the woman could be the “yin” to his aggressive “yang” by embodying “peace and love—the ideal of Chinese life.”[[43]](#endnote-43) In calling upon peaceful women to join the boycott, Alice combined the Confucianism of her parents’ household with Christ’s call to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” In doing so, she both reaffirmed and revised traditional gender roles in a way that she believed was empowering for modern Chinese women. She concluded, “fundamentally, woman is equal and complementary to man and the sexes should be so in life. In truth, however, woman is the fountain-head of life” who can “provide for that which man eternally seeks—the totality of life.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Women, she implied, were equivalent (though certainly not identical, and perhaps not even equal) to men.

Alice “Ping Yu”’s Jade Box presented the boycott as the perfect moment for middle-class, Chinese-American women to “show their stuff” by sacrificing a bit of beauty. At the same time, the boycott gave its participants an opportunity to promote international peace by “crippling Japan’s economic ability and staying the hands of her militarists.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Wartime demanded that each woman “register her moral protest by withdrawing her economic support of Japan’s atrocities and by getting others to do so.” Yu framed boycotts as nonviolent means of harming the enemy, which could bring an end to physical warfare if performed successfully. The boycott functioned as a call to personal economic austerity, which could have multiple politically useful results. Ceasing to wear expensive stockings would allow women to save money to contribute to the war fund. In this way, the funds would not just be denied to Japan, they would also be sent to China. Alice argued that women might also embrace their role as transpacific citizens and save up for this worthy cause by avoiding expensive cosmetics or hairdressing, just as she believed women in China were doing.

Alice mobilized her connections with the local community to generate support from friends in other organizations. Alice’s connections with the Federation of Chinese Clubs (FCC) gave her significant political capital within Chinatown. Most notably, Alice was in contact with Jane Kwong Lee, a fellow second-generation Chinese American woman who was the head of the Chinatown YWCA. Spurred by Alice, Lee wrote Chinese language plays to promote the movement, including *Boycott Silk Stockings,* a stage play in which two Chinese American women decide to forgo silk hosiery for the duration of the Japanese war of aggression. Alice successfully rallied other authors of the *Chinese Digest*, including fellow FCC member Lim P. Lee, to bolster awareness of the boycotting efforts. Lee framed the action of not consuming and wearing silk stockings as a meaningful, if symbolic, way of displaying humanitarian concern for relatives in China and avoiding hypocrisy. The local Chinese American press celebrated the use of economic boycotts as “an instrument of the people’s policy,” and used hopeful articles to inspire confidence in the movement.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Alice and the Square and Circle Club also staged silk-free fashion shows to draw attention to the war effort. These important commodity displays had a two-fold purpose. Not only did fashion shows showcase the beauty of garments that did not use Japanese silk, but they also spread awareness of China’s need for aid among multicultural attendees. Additionally, the fashion shows did important cultural work. By presenting exotic, traditional Chinese garments from the Tang Dynasty alongside sleek, modern Shanghai fashions, the Square and Circle Club demonstrated that China was not an antiquated, exotic nation, but a modern country, undeserving of the atrocities it suffered at the hands of Japanese troops. The fashion shows staged during the boycott were not the first of Alice’s productions. During the 1935 “Century of Commerce” festival, she organized a show designed to display “Chinese women’s apparel as dignified, modest, and beautiful” by presenting these as timeless qualities from “the dynastic down to the smart, fetching creations of today.”[[47]](#endnote-47) This kind of elegance, grace, and civility made up China’s cultural inheritance; now, such a culture was in dire need of protection from outside attack.

Alice Fong Yu’s particular finesse in framing Chinese cultural and political forms as compatible with Western modernity and American cultural citizenship contributed to the media attraction and political success of the fashion shows. Her intended image caught on. Ninon, a fashion editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* who was assigned to cover the first Rice Bowl party, reported that “the designers of Shanghai were responsible for each of these creations [that] have given modernity to their wearers.” Ninon pronounced “color, daintiness, and grace” as “the Chinese girl’s heritage.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Even if the Chinese models were implicitly Orientalized by white viewers, showcasing Shanghai’s haute couture gave a new edge to the ways in which American viewers understood China’s capacity for modernity and social progress.

Fashion shows may have displayed China’s modernity, but cotton stockings, the alternative to silk, seemed “terribly old fashioned” to many American women. In a sarcastic editorial piece, Alice wrote that “a great many [modern women] know what can be done to help stop this mad aggression, but most of us are just not willing to help in the one way that is open for us women. We *moderns* simply can’t take it!” [[49]](#endnote-49) To sacrifice the beauty and comfort of silk for the Chinese cause seemed too much to ask of self-centered women in an individualistic, American culture. By chastising this egocentric “modernity” and replacing it instead with the courage, group consciousness, and social action embodied by what she termed “spunky ‘oldenity’,” Alice called for a reexamination of the perceived social progress of American culture. Women with oldenity “know what they want and, best of all, are willing to fight for it!” If this kind of determination was outdated, she wrote, then “surely we can stand losing some of our namby-pamby modernity!” In this article, Alice criticized American consumer culture’s preoccupation with superficial beauty and contested this form of modernity. Alice avoided identifying the modern woman as a consumer of a particular set of commodities which typically included “lipstick, nail polish, … high heel shoes, cloche hats, and fashionable sexy clothes” always draped over legs enwrapped in silk.[[50]](#endnote-50) Instead, she implied that a steadfast will and unfaltering courage represented more powerful markers of women’s social progress. For Alice, a modernity defined only by corporeal adornments paled in comparison to a more robust vision of the contemporary woman as an assertive socio-political actor.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Even if Alice saw American attachment to silk stockings as mere spineless vanity, she understood the counter-boycott also had complicated political motivations. At the heart of this debate lay not only contested meanings of modernity and the use of corporeal adornments, but also the messy class tensions enmeshed in the silk stocking boycott. First, silk had an important cultural meaning for the global “flapper” figure in the interwar period. According to historians of the “Modern Girl” trope, such a fashionable commodity set allowed for new relationships both with the self and with others. They outfitted modern girls “with faces and bodies that emboldened them to cross the domestic threshold into the public sphere.”[[52]](#endnote-52) However, in the midst of the Depression of the 1930s, most women enjoyed only partial access to this aesthetic modernity and its associated public participation. Historian Kathy Peiss has made clear that, during the early twentieth century, working class women were only able to enjoy urban leisure through their male partners. Rather than seeing modern garments as purely liberatory, they invested their meager wages in attractive clothing in hopes of being “treated”: an exchange of feminine charms and sexual favors for a male-funded evening at the picture palace or carnival.[[53]](#endnote-53) While Alice understood her protest as a performance that enabled peaceful and noble women to gain admission to the public sphere, it would be incorrect to ignore ways that contemporary goods tailored to women’s bodies also permitted access, if often partial and complicated.

Global trade interwove production and supply chains in a way that made boycotting the output of a single nation difficult. American hosiery fashioned from Japanese silk offers a good example of this complexity. A scene narrated by Boake Carter for the *Wisconsin Post-Crescent* in 1938 provides a striking glimpse at the way the boycott impacted Midwestern workers in the midst of the Great Depression. According to his story, “a group of Washington debs strutted around a capital hotel ballroom showing their legs clad in cotton and rayon stockings,” in opposition to the Japanese war atrocities.[[54]](#endnote-54) Yet, outside, on the streets of Washington, “a long line of non-blue blooded American girls—silk hosiery workers” performed their own protest, wearing their American-made silk stockings. While “the blue-bloods inside were putting on their show for publicity, “the red bloods were parading to save their jobs.” Clearly, Carter felt that one of these causes was more valid than the other. He wondered why these “society women… make such spectacles of themselves in their craze for publicity?” Rather than hailing the women who gallantly cast off soft silks and donned inelegant rayon as heroes, the Post-Crescent chastised the “debs” as frivolous and selfish. The needs of the “red-blooded” Anglo-American girl and her family came first in a domestic economic crisis, not the welfare of the distant Chinese. Such ruptures in popular opinion encouraged Chinese American women like Alice to appeal more vigorously for the cause they believed would save their homeland.

Alice enlisted the power of peer pressure to enforce compliance with the boycott. In some cases, she called for surveillance of local women to ensure that they were not wearing forbidden Japanese silks. The Square and Circle Club not only chastised one member for appearing at a meeting in silk stockings, but also memorialized this embarrassment in their club records. Alice also applied social pressure to prospective sellers. In her essay in the Jade Box, “Each Individual Must Show His Stuff,” Alice happily announced: “Chinatown merchants as a group have submitted to the coercion of group consciousness and have openly stopped their trade with the Japanese.”[[55]](#endnote-55) Her dependence on “group consciousness” and “coercion” to heighten community awareness of the issue worked thanks to the strong Chinese ties of the community. Backed by the Six Companies, the Chinese War Relief Association (CWRA) and FCC, Alice’s cause held firm social and economic sway among local merchants. Most coercive of these was the CWRA. As part of its official boycott statement issued on October 1, 1937, the committee set particular quotas for donations (for example, $30 for each working adult) during fundraisers and “denounced” non-cooperators, parading them through the streets of Chinatown for public humiliation. The boycott committees blacklisted non-participating merchants, and any seller of Japanese goods would be fined $500. While it was difficult to enforce, individuals who consumed Japanese goods could be fined $5 or more per purchase if reported.[[56]](#endnote-56) Many Chinese and Chinese American merchants found that this ordinance had little effect on them, as they were willing boycotters who had already ceased supporting Japanese trade after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. However, the publically issued and enforced CWRA statement of boycott forced the Japanese bazaars to shut down in Chinatown.[[57]](#endnote-57) For those in compliance, fascism abroad had marketplace benefits at home. While explicitly driven by transnational political motivations, it is likely that the drive to eliminate domestic economic competitors offered an additional benefit to local Chinese merchants.

Given such tight social controls, it seems unlikely that a woman in Chinatown would risk social ostracism to consume silk stockings. Further, ordinances of the Six Companies and CWRA suggest that such a boycott would likely have been observed, at least in Chinatown, even without the SCC’s efforts to popularize the movement. Even so, Alice’s activity was not in vein. Her contributions to the movement worked to reaffirm yet revise Confucian-influenced gender roles, to increase the social prominence of her public service organization, to complicate American notions of modernity, and to situate local Chinese American women in a both a national coalition against foreign aggression and a global struggle for peace.

Alice’s inspiration for the development and organization of this protest did not come entirely from her San Franciscan neighbors. She was also the Secretary of Propaganda for the Kuomintang’s American branch. She carefully read and republished public letters from Madame Chiang Kai-Shek detailing the “mobilization of China’s women” and even directly received a note thanking the club for its work towards the Chinese War Orphan Fund. In the early 1930s, she received letters from her brothers Albert and Taft, who were studying abroad in Hong Kong and visiting their Uncle Kooey in Shanghai during his final days. Alice also maintained correspondence with a Chinese educator who made her acquaintance on a US trip and further inspired her activism. Alice’s interactions abroad reveal her work as part of a movement that strove to build coalitions not only with sisters abroad, but also with women across the color line in the United States. In doing so, Chinese women played a significant role in fashioning a modern Chinese American cultural and political identity.

**Women’s Boycotts in Nationalist China**

Energized and inspired by the work of their Chinese relatives, organizers of the American anti-Japanese silk stocking boycott interwove “Eastern” and “Western” traditions and political techniques to produce a bicultural movement. The concurrent boycott in China took its place amongst a long tradition of nationalist consumer politics. Such movements did not begin with the Sino-Japanese War, but instead have a longer history rooted in eighteenth-century battles to forcibly open Chinese markets to Western access.[[58]](#endnote-58) Even so, this particular boycott demonstrated the dynamics of a very specific historical moment. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, leaders of the Republic of China attempted to link Chinese identity with domestic goods. If stronger domestic markets meant a stronger nation, then patriots would easily be able to display devotion to the country through their China-made garments, foods, and home décor. [[59]](#endnote-59) However, government sponsorship did not initially back these consumer movements and boycotts China’s government was hardly unified enough for such a task. As was the case in the United States, the Chinese people needed to be convinced of the efficacy of this consumer protest. Such a task could not be accomplished, however, through rhetorical claims alone. Nationalist parades, fashion shows, and other vibrant commodity spectacles attempted to convince the Chinese people of the quality of national good. In effect, these performances not only inspired viewers in China but also reverberated across the Pacific.

Communication between China and the U.S. came from transpacific print media and personal correspondences. For example, on October 9, 1931, Taft Fong took a few moments from his busy day as an international student in Koowloon City, Hong Kong to write a quick letter to his sister Alice in San Francisco. “State of conditions here unsettled and at times quite serious as evidenced by the anti-Japanese rioting in various parts of Hong Kong and the Mainland,” he reported in scrawling hand. Given continual fights between the nationalists and the communists from 1928-1937, Taft pointed out that “China cannot face an outside enemy and continue to fight among ourselves”—even as Japan continued to “force the issue” by sending warships to Shanghai. Conditions on the mainland were too dangerous for the American-born siblings to face, but Taft and his brother Albert still encountered the effects of wartime in British Hong Kong. The brothers and those around them went without holiday celebrations but instead were expected to donate funds to General Ma’s troops. In a second letter, Taft pointed out that “the boycott of Japanese goods” was “China-wide” and practiced in Hong Kong. But, he asked, Alice “how about S.F.”?[[60]](#endnote-60) His February 15, 1932 letter called attention to China’s remarkable group consciousness and organized war relief efforts, noting that “a group of Hong Kong merchants” were working to solicit money “for the War effort. Response is good.” Again, he asked, “What about in S.F.?”[[61]](#endnote-61) Were the Chinese in America keeping up with wartime responsibilities?

Taft’s letters to his sister placed a premium on a diasporic Chinese identity rather than on a Chinese *American* political consciousness; however, given the different political structures and systems of organizing in the two nations, even a project inspired by Chinese example would translate into a hybrid movement displaying both Eastern and Western influences. Most of the influence traveled from China to the US rather than the other direction, though there were some exceptions. The very exercise of attempting to export this movement to the US required bicultural literacy, an awareness of both political systems, and clever social and linguistic translation work. It also required a patchwork of Chinese ideology and thought for inspiration. Indeed, Taft was not Alice’s only lien in China. Alice’s dedication and membership in the KMT enabled her to articulate Chinese political and social needs to American audiences, particularly those present at Rice Bowl Parties. The letters she received from Chinese friends and social workers shaped her own organizational strategies.

Although her communications had long crossed Pacific borders, Alice first found an opportunity to take her own transoceanic journey in 1933. On July 3, Alice Fong received a note from Chinese educator and social worker, K.H. Kiang, penned during his “lonely oceanic trip” on the S.S. President Grant enroute to Honolulu from Shanghai. During a brief conversation between the two in San Francisco, Kiang “felt that we have much in common in our asperations [sic] and ideas and that we may someday be co-workers for a great course [sic].” He pictured a three-year-long Chinese project, during which Alice would be able to observe and investigate conditions abroad. Alice’s “wonderful background and prestige,” as the first Chinese elementary school teacher in California as well as the Founder of the SCC, he surmised, would enable her to “serve either in China or in the States ten times greater than you do now.” He was certain that she could not be satisfied with her career schoolteacher due to her larger social goals. This trip would prepare her to “achieve [her] Life Aim”—but most of all, to serve the people in China, who were deeply in need.[[62]](#endnote-62)

In her response to Kiang, sent on July 27, 1933,, Alice reveals her attachments and ties to her dual nationalities . The “offer sounds very attractive,” she wrote, even if it was not financially feasible for her. She had an “insatiable desire to learn and to succeed.” Kiang was right that it was Alice’s life ambition “to be of service to both China and America—lands of my ancestors and my birth.” She desired to make herself a bicultural bridge, to “prepare myself to interpret intelligently the two countries which I represent to the two people of which I am a part, thereby helping to cement the bonds of friendship and understanding between the Orient and the Occident.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Yet, she was concerned that her tight finances would not sustain her for long and that her limited linguistic ability would make finding employment difficult. Further, her very basic language skills would allow her to help in only a very “simple” way. Instead, she desired to “echo, however, slight that which you have started” and to bring the Chinese effort to the San Francisco community that she served. This important interaction reveals Alice’s own opinions about the effectiveness of the transpacific Chinese war effort in the United States and indicates her desire to become proficient enough in both languages and cultures to build relations between them. In her effort to echo the effort of Chinese War Relief across the Pacific, she would draw inspiration from the work of Kiang and others. Soong Mei-Ling, popularly referred to in the United States as Madame [Chiang] Kai-Shek, offered particular fascination to Alice. Most broadly, she drew inspiration from Nationalist China’s commodity-based patriotism.

The National Products Movement in China, lead by the NPPA (National Product Protection Association) created a “nationalist visuality” in which allegiance to country could be displayed through products purchased for the home and the body. The NPPA located the “correct” products and built a nationalist consciousness by presenting the *nation* as the locus of economic loyalty and activity, not the region or town. [[64]](#endnote-64) Like the Six Companies and Federation of Chinese Clubs in San Francisco, the NPPA organized public festivities and events, including the National Products Week (July 1-3, 1928), which featured product exhibitions, parades, and rallies at which speakers proclaimed: “if Chinese [people] desire freedom and equality, then everyone must cherish and use national products!”[[65]](#endnote-65) Even if the government did not officially sanction the boycotts, General Chiang Kai-Shek’s speech at the start of National Products Week set the stage for the KMT’s active use of the movement to communicate its vision of a stronger China. The concept of the Nationalist fashion show, which displayed the progression of Chinese garments from the ancient to the cutting-edge, informed and inspired Alice. Her correspondences with the Hong Kong publication, the *Far Eastern Mirror*, reveal transpacific communication about the shows. The magazine’s editor applauded the efforts and offered to let Alice write about them for his Chinese magazine and send garments from China to dress the models.[[66]](#endnote-66)

As the National Product Movement gained ground under the auspices of the KMT, the NPPA deployed systems of social surveillance to coerce any Chinese residents who remained unconvinced by the pageantry. The China-wide boycott that so impressed Taft Fong was the work of the NPPA’s “National Product Standards” commission, which identified products that were nationally “pure” enough to be sold by Chinese merchants and ensured compliance with the boycott. The ministry and its watchdogs—community activists, often recruited from college campuses—could remove unsuitable goods from the shelves.[[67]](#endnote-67) If any woman somehow attained and attempted to wear foreign clothing or cosmetics, she would not get far. For example, the daughter of one merchant was sent home from school when she arrived clad in a garment made of Japanese silk in 1935.[[68]](#endnote-68) Further, the Chinese flapper could neither fashion her hair in marcel waves nor wear high heeled shoes due to a 1935 law that permitted only prostitutes to perform such sartorial acts of frivolity (and Western modernity).[[69]](#endnote-69) Hegemonic, nationalist coercion in the Chinese movement profoundly limited the agency of the consumers themselves.

Despite the forceful nationalist protests in China, the National Products Movement (NPM) did give a limited space for nationalist women’s voices, so long as they agreed with the movement’s aims and subordinated feminist goals to the needs of the nation.[[70]](#endnote-70) Since its inception in February 1934, the KMT’s New Life Movement (NLM) aimed to revitalize the nation through state-sanctioned moral reform inspired by traditional Confucian thought. It attempted to create citizens who were “healthy and rigorous in body and spirit, socially and politically conscious and committed, forward-looking yet rooted in the past.” [[71]](#endnote-71) The In doing so, it entrenched patriarchal discourses. The NLM legislated hetero-normative gender roles and constructed the woman as wife and mother. Indeed, a 1935 law gave married men legal rights to forbid their wives to work if they felt that this labor outside the home might “disrupt” the family.[[72]](#endnote-72) Even so, Japanese aggression forced the Communist and Kuomingtan parties to develop a unified front in 1937, which granted some agency to nationalist women’s organizations.[[73]](#endnote-73) As Pan Yihong argues, the Japanese attack gave women a space to unite against foreign invasion in such semi-autonomous organizations as the Shanghai Women’s Society for National Salvation.[[74]](#endnote-74) To gain approval from the KMT/ Communist front, these organizations could not promote feminist goals as ends unto themselves, but only as means to mobilize the energy of women for the wartime cause. In the process, this feminist nationalism did manage to push social reforms that ended compulsory foot binding, polygamy, child marriage, martial abuse, and concubines. While politically active did manage some limited successes, the NLM backdrop did not foster an environment open to radical social change.

Though it was strongly right wing, The NLM was not necessarily conservative. Instead, it attempted to develop a new vision of modernity grounded in tradition. The KMT-backed movement argued that flappers were “social fakes” who “misread modernity” by conflating *modern* with *Western*.[[75]](#endnote-75) It worked to recast Chinese garments and self-adornments as truly fashionable, while foreign goods were shameful and inauthentic. This vision of social progress inspired Alice to present cotton stockings as a marker of “spunk” and personal resilience. Not wholly unlike the KMT, she encouraged Chinese American women to elevate their dedication to China and the political collective above individual needs or expression. Perhaps Wisconsin resident Boake Carter would agree that women should place nation above selfish desire; indeed, the debs should have been more considerate of the needs of the American manufacturing class during the Depression. Given the many nationalities and interests of participants, the silk stocking boycott made dedication to “the nation” or “the collective” more complicated that it might seem.

As part of the NLM’s attempt to modernize and rationalize everyday life, the movement called women to consider the good of the nation both in their social roles as wives and mothers and in their economic roles as household “consumers.”[[76]](#endnote-76) Their market-based role had enormous political importance [[77]](#endnote-77) While the patriotic consumer advanced the nation’s interests, the vain consumer, who prized beauty over patriotic duty, threatened to drive the nation to ruin if not brought in line~~.~~[[78]](#endnote-78) Even if there were 570 different women’s groups during the war, feminists in China did not have freedom to steer the course of their own movements. Instead, the KMT-Communist front aimed to yoke these organizations to the larger national project.[[79]](#endnote-79) Further, deeply rooted patriarchal traditions promoted by the KMT denied women’s abilities to claim leadership in nationalist causes, which the party placed before women’s issues.[[80]](#endnote-80) The KMT hoped that most work done by women would take place in the home rather than in the public sphere. For example, to encourage women to spread four core NLM principles of orderliness, cleanliness, simplicity, and frugality., the KMT used propaganda, literacy campaigns, and financial relief to war widows,[[81]](#endnote-81)

By 1937, Soong Mei-Ling, the wife of Chiang Kai-Shek, took over and transformed the NLM. Alice Fong Yu idolized the woman that she referred to as the “First Lady of China, Mme. Kai-Shek.” She writes in the Jade Box that the inspiring woman “gripp[ed] the imagination of the whole world today” by “enlisting the will and determination of her 430 million people to fight as a unit to preserve her sovereignty.” [[82]](#endnote-82) This “national treasure” received her education in a Christian college in the United States before returning to China to wed the general in December of 1927, Alice saw Soong as “bolster[ing] the morale of China’s womanhood in this darkest hour of China’s rebirth” by supplying the “electricity which moves all of China’s crusades” in the NLM. While much of the boycott’s rhetorical inspiration flowed from China to America, the NLM also drew inspiration from the United States. While the movement drew significantly on “native morality”, or Confucianism, Soong’s American education and Christian conversion allowed her to weave Western religious thought into the creation of a new moral order and social philosophy. Even so, in her exaltations of Soong Mei-Ling, Alice subtly misread (or purposefully whitewashed) Chinese politics. For example, she did not mention national laws that forbade the use of permanent waves. Instead, she argued that valiant nationalists who prized the nation over personal beauty personally chose to wear simple hairstyles.[[83]](#endnote-83) Yet, Alice’s discussions of aggressive “yang” and peaceful “yin,” her strong views against selfish individualism, and her concept of a modernity grounded in a “native morality” harmonized with core NLM principles.

Nationalist tropes influenced and inspired the messages and performances produced by Alice and the SCC. Even so, it is incorrect to directly conflate the kind of activism practiced by the SCC with the concurrent nationalist boycotts enacted by women in nationalist China. Unlike Alice’s grassroots and fundamentally non-governmental social movement, the KMT in China called for a series of what Federica Ferlanti calls “semi-governmental spaces,” including the NPPA. These groups allowed for an illusion of popular control, but they were ultimately required to serve the aims of the KMT. State-sanctioned surveillance, state Confucianism, and nationally developed propaganda shaped discourses of gender and nation and did not leave as much room for the creativity of a group like the SCC. Even if she longed to fashion herself into a bridge and cultural interpreter capable of working in both China and America, Alice likely had a greater potential for individual influence against the background of American democracy, even if a boycott without state backing ultimately lacked economic impact.

Though grounded in the land of their birth, Alice and her friends had a stake in the outcome of the conflict in China. They felt concern for the safety of Chinese friends and family and experienced anxiety regarding the survival of Chinese cultural and material heritage. Though Alice did not refer to herself as a “Chinese American” in the 1930s, her efforts to translate between East and West as founder of the SCC and organizer of the silk stocking boycott movement marked a deeply significant emergence of a transpacific, bicultural consciousness amongst clubwomen and other Chinese Americans boycott participants.

**Limitations**

Alice Fong Yu conceived of herself as a part of a network of “peace loving women” whose silk-free wardrobes registered their moral protest and transpacific awareness.[[84]](#endnote-84) The coalition extended not only across the Pacific, but also eastward across the American continent. The Chinese diaspora’s boycott comprised only one part of a larger anti-Japanese consumer movement in the United States. While the inspiration for a general boycott and timeline fashion shows may have come from China, the League of Women Shoppers (LWS) inspired the SCC’s decision to make a spectacle of the silk-stocking boycott. The League of Women Shoppers (LWS), a Euro-American, middle-class group centered in Washington D.C, began planning their *Life Without Silk* shows in August of 1937. The spectacles demonstrated the ability of fashion to communicate socio-political consciousness. According to Judy Yung, Chinese American women were inspired to take the silk-free fashions of Hollywood stars, particularly Sylvia Sydney, Loretta Young, and Francis Farmer, to their own ethnic community*.* Yet, through use of the language and inspiration of Nationalist China, the SCC refashioned the boycott into a uniquely “Chinese American” movement. In this way, the boycott offered opportunities to both demonstrate ethnic pride and assert inclusion with the US National community.

Alice’s work on the silk stocking boycott hardly marked the end of the Chinese struggle to claim full social and legal citizenship rights in the United States. Rather, it highlighted a cultural and political work in progress. Although Chinese immigrants and their families did not secure full inclusion within American institutions until the repeal of Exclusion in 1943, the Chinatown community did win a series of important victories in the 1930s. The Rice Bowl Parties secured impressive donations from white citizens, along with enormous turnouts of white visitors, including San Francisco’s Mayor Rossi. These successes suggest that the Rice Bowl parties managed to politicize dormant white sympathy for war-torn China and monetize that sympathy into donations for a good cause. Alice’s appearance along with the Square and Circle Club in *Life* magazine also gave her movement a national stage. *The Nation* also took up the boycott story, calling, as Alice did, for “collective action on moral grounds.” The “people” would need to take matters into their own hands, as the “timid office bureaucracy” of the U.S. Executive branch failed to respond to Japanese aggression through the issuance of a state-sanctioned call to boycott. President Roosevelt feared a military entanglement if the state committed such a diplomatic action without direct provocation from Japan.[[85]](#endnote-85)

The movement created a strong potential for cross-racial coalitions, however, uneasy social tensions prevented the solidification of these alliances. . Alice writes in the February 9, 1938 “Jade Box” that the “anti-silk movement” was “daily gaining momentum across the country.” Other than the LWS, the American Federation of University Women voted almost unanimously to support the boycott in 1937. Many of the 1,200 female students of Stephens College and the 1,500 co-eds of Northwestern University became particularly vocal: these campuses organized special stocking bonfires and silk protests. Even more significantly, the Six Companies/CWRA made a “Declaration of Boycott” on October 1, 1937 at a conference attended by the AFL-CIO as well as six other labor unions and twenty-four Chinese and Anglo-American fraternal organizations. These groups bonded together in the “United Committee for Boycott Against Japan.” Though the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW) pushed the AFL to recognize silk stockings as a US rather than Japanese good, formation of this committee reveals that the boycott had major opportunities to spark a genuinely collaborative, cross-racial conversation.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Even so, to focus solely on this site of “cross-racial” potential obscures the troubling ways that American Orientalist ideology served to weaken the movement’s unity. All “peace loving women” could unite in the global fight against fascism and Japanese aggression; yet, many were affected by the “color line.” Indeed, in Alice’s words, “just as the world, the brilliant world, was getting nauseated with the patriotic purity purgings and the shameful spread of race hatred among the less democratic nations,” white clubwomen saw their involvement in the China Relief movement as separate from that of the SCC. Upon receiving the club’s application to join in 1937, the County and City Federation of Women’s Clubs quickly altered their constitution to “bar non-Caucasian clubs from membership.” With this move, the women in the confederation lost an opportunity to band together with Alice’s boycott.

This episode was most unfortunate for what it spelled out for Chinese-Anglo race relations more generally. The maternalist, white clubwomen said that “though they would be willing to work *for* colored women,” they would not work *with* them*.*[[87]](#endnote-87)Asian women needed to be uplifted, the clubwomen implied. White women could not work alongside them as equal parts of a coalition. Whether the LWS understood their activism in terms of such a condescending racial hierarchy cannot be verified; even so, the flippant, playful performances of women like the Washington, WI “Debs” revealed that they operated with profoundly different stakes than Chinese American activists like Alice Certainly, however, Alice’s rejection from the Federation revealed the way racist ideologies and Chinese Exclusion played out on the ground. While the SCC women remade their Christian, middle-class organization as a space to build ethnic consciousness, some of its activities revealed the limits imposed by what Emily Roxworthy refers to as the “myth of the performance-based conception of American citizenship.” Despite their conformity to the ideals of white middle-class womanhood and their demonstrated commitment to anti-fascist politics, both state and society enforced privileges of cultural citizenship unequally for racial minority groups.[[88]](#endnote-88) Even if the Japanese boycotts attracted attention and sympathy from white middle-class women, clear anti-Asian racism in mainstream America made Alice and her club unable to fully claim membership in the nation-state, perhaps making them hesitant to declare themselves Chinese “Americans” at this moment.

Even Alice Fong Yu struggled to articulate the full meaning that the silk stocking boycott and Chinese War Relief had for Chinatown’s residents. A massive protest at the San Francisco Docks against the exportation of scrap iron to Japan left Alice wonder-struck. There she witnessed the combined efforts of the community, from “men and women bowed with age” to “college rah-rah boys and…lisle-hosieried society matrons.” As a picket line gathered from 7am to 5 pm in February of 1939, Alice learned that she could not “describe spirit”—at least, not of this sort. The community responded to the loss of Canton and the Wuhan areas of China with increased consumer militancy. Chinese community in America rose from its burning disappointment over their torn homeland to register their protest against the United States’ complicity in the conflict. This scrap iron could function as potential war materials for their Japanese adversaries. Alice knew that this inexplicable “spirit” could win the war in China. At the protest, she both saw and felt the courage and dedication “that makes you want to wear lisle [cotton] hosiery, give generously to war relief, and sing Cheelai [a patriotic song praising the volunteer armies that opposed the Japanese in 1931].”[[89]](#endnote-89) In the moment of profound uncertainty from 1937-1941, Chinese Americans’ herculean war relief efforts built a lasting ethnic consciousness that prepared the community to participate more broadly in American political life after the repeal of Chinese Exclusion in 1943.

The cultural and political impact of the silk-stocking boycotts of the late 1930s proved far more significant than its economic impact on the Japanese textile industry. As Nathan M. Becker, a writer for the *Far Eastern Survey*, explained, U.S. production of cotton stockings increased by only 2% from 1938-1939 because American consumers considered cotton substitutes for silk hosiery “far from satisfactory.” Although U.S. consumption of Japanese silk decreased by approximately $3.4 million in the same period, the economic impact of the boycott fell hardest on American manufacturers who converted raw Japanese silk into stockings.[[90]](#endnote-90) Even so, as Lawrence Glickman’s *Buying Power* argues, historians should resist the temptation to write off consumer movements as wholesale “successes” or “failures” based on economic criteria without considering their often significant indirect accomplishments.[[91]](#endnote-91)

While it did not meet its larger economic goals, the origins and organization of the silk-stocking boycott demonstrate the role of transpacific consumer protest in the broader process of claiming cultural citizenship for a growing community of second-generation Chinese Americans. For Alice in particular, the silk-stocking boycott provided a chance to voice opinions about gender and modernity to Chinatown’s readers of the *Chinese Digest* and China’s readers of the *Far Eastern Survey* across the Pacific.[[92]](#endnote-92) The execution of the boycott as a woman-centered and community-driven element of Chinese War Relief may stand out as a clear social significance of the boycott. However, the transpacific relationships fostered by the rhetorical framing and political organizing of the effort and the contestation of the meaning of cultural modernity and political agency both made the movement more complex than it might have seemed. Further, the movement occurred against a backdrop of increased interaction between Chinese political groups and American labor unions, which stood together in a cross-racial rejection of fascism abroad. Complicated understandings of what made a good “Japanese” and racism among women’s organizations, however, undermined the effectiveness of a broader-based silk stocking boycott.

Most critically, the anti-Japanese silk boycott movement enabled Alice Fong Yu to articulate an ideal Chinese American womanhood and to develop bicultural styles of dress, manner, and political form. By presenting themselves as not simply exotic and “traditional,” but also sleek and “modern,” women in the SCC club fashion show performed cultural citizenship and new modern identities that stood betwixt and between Chinese and American. The entanglement of East and West at the Rice Bowl fashion shows paralleled the larger movement. The boycott enabled the women of Chinatown to declare themselves relevant participants within American political processes, even as they asserted their Chineseness.

1. “300,000 Throng Chinatown For Rice Bowl Fete,” *San Francisco Chronicle,* Vol. CLII, No. 154. Saturday, 18 June 1938, Box 1, Folder 8, Chinese Historical Society of America Reference Files (AAS ARC 2000/ 60), Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “1,000,000 to Attend Chinese Aid Fetes,” *New York Times,* 14 June 1938, Box 1, Folder 8, Chinese Historical Society of America Reference Files, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the June 22, 1938 meeting minutes of the Square and Circle Club, Helen Chan records that in the “Rice Bowl fashion show, most S & C [Square and Circle] girls, reminded girls to wear lisle stockings,” Minutes, September 1935 - November 1940, Box 2, Folder 21, Square and Circle Club Records, San Francisco Public Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, was the first US Act to deny entry to an entire ethnic group. It further declared Chinese “unnaturalizable aliens,” making them ineligible for citizenship. It allowed entry only to particular kinds of Chinese immigrants—students, merchants, and those with family residing in the US. It indicated a strand of anti-Chinese racism, particularly for Chinese laborers, and barred certain Chinese immigrants from the naturalization and citizenship process entirely, until its repeal with the Magnusen Act in 1943. See David Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History,* (Harvard University Press, 2010), Chapter 3 “From Chinese Exclusion to Post-Entry Social Control: The Early Formation of the Modern Deportation System.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Insert list of acts that limit citizenship rights. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These women demonstrated their rights as American citizens; indeed, Fong Chow’s daughter Helen’s Chinese name, “Also a Citizen”*,* suggested that not only the Fong family, but also Chinese Americans more broadly, long struggled to claim such an identity. Theresa A. Sparks, *China Gold,* 123 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A number of works have highlighted transpacific ties in immigration, drawing our attention to the strong Chinese ties of immigrants. See for example Mae Ngai’s *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America,* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010)and Sucheng Chan (ed) *Chinese American Transnationalism*, (Temple University Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 235. According to Yung, this was not an entirely middle-class, second-generation movement. Participating groups included the Women’s Patriotic Club (*Funu Ju Ri Jiuguo Hui)* made upof middle-class Chinese immigrants, the Women’s Council (*Funu Xiw Hui)* of working-class immigrants, and both the YWCA and the Square and Circle Club for second-generation, middle-class, Chinese-Americans. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian Americans Women’s Public Culture, 1930-1960,* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Theresa A. Sparks, *China Gold,* (Fresno, Calif.: Academy Library Guild, 1954), 119-123 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid,* 167 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. According to her correspondence with K.H. Kiang, becoming a cultural interpreter for both China and America was her central life’s goal. Letter from Alice Fong Yu to K H Kiang, 27 July 1933, Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Square and Circle Club Constitution, cited in Theresa A. Spark, *China Gold,* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954),175 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. “Membership Booklet of Yu-Ping,” Yuxuan Zhang, trans. Box 8, Folder 7, Alice Fong Yu Papers, SC 872, Special Collections, Stanford University, [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “Letter from Kuo Min Tang,” Jing Yu, trans., Box 8, Folder 7, Alice Fong Yu Papers, SC 872, Special Collections, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Editorial of *The Chinese Digest,* November 15, 1938, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Chen, Yong. *Chinese San Francisco: A Transpacific Community.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)*,* 50 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid,* 73 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid,* 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Christina K. Gilmartin, “Gender, Political Culture, and Women’s Mobilization” in *Engendering Chinan,* Gilmartin et al, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet,* 224 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Walter LeFeber, *The Clash: A History of US-Japan Relations,* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 131-181. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid,* 181 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Gallup, “Public Unwilling to Boycott Japan,” *Los Angeles Times,* October 24, 1937, p C7 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. American labor had a complicated relationship with Chinese coolie laborers: because their underpaid work threatened to devalue white labor in on the American West Coast, many labor organizations pushed for the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 1880s. See Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Did Your Stockings Kill Babies,* Boston: The Boycott Japanese Goods Committee of Greater Boston, 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Glickman, *Make Lisle the Style,* 582 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Glickman, pg 220 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Yung, *Unbound Feet,* 227 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid,* 231 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Gloria Heyung Chun, *Of Orphans and Warriors Inventing Chinese American Culture and Identity,* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000) [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. My paper adds to a growing body of literature that explores a burgeoning (and contested) bicultural identity among Chinese Americans. In her 1991 *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943,* Sucheng Chan writes that there is an absence of essays considering “the second, American born generation” and the “interracial conflicts” they experienced. Since the time of her writing, however, the literature has grown significantly.Her own work with K. Scott Wong, *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities During the Exclusion Era* (Temple University Press, 1998) explores Chinese immigrants and their families’ assertions of American-ness and defense of political rights in the period in which further immigration was halted. Him Mark Lai’s *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Community and Institutions,* (AltaMira Press, 2004) and *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American* by Shehong Chen (University of Illinois Press: 2006), further explore the development of this hyphenated American identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ge Cheng DeMing, “Proposal of Self-Defense Law among the *Huaqiao*,” Jing Yu trans., Box 7 Folder 7, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University.  [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *Huaqiao* is a term that refers to Chinese citizens in another country; they can be naturalized in that other nation, but the term suggests that they are closer either culturally or politically to their homeland of China. It is most typically translated as “Overseas Chinese.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. This complicates Glickman’s assertion that the movement began in August of 1937, even if it did intensify under the pressure of Japan’s increased military presence and force. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. “Boycott by City Hurts Rivals,” *San Francisco Chronicle,* February 20, 1932; Chinese Historical Society of America Reference Files, AAS ARC 2000/ 60, Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library, Box 1 Folder 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Article II of the Constitution of the Square and Circle Club, reprinted by Theresa A. Sparks in *China Gold,* 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Yung, *Unbound Feet,* 238 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. The federation included not only the SCC, but also the Chinese Patriotic League, several Chinese student clubs and fraternities, the Chinatown Progressive Club, the Chinese YMCA and YWCA, and the *Chinese Digest* newspaper. List of Federation of Chinese Club Members, Box 8 Folder 8, Alice Fong Yu Papers, SC 872, Special Collections, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Meeting minutes of Square and Circle Club, 17 September 1937, Box 2, Folder 21, Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. P’ing Yu, “The Jade Box,” in *The Chinese Digest,* June 1937, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid* [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. P’ing Yu, “For Prestige and Face,” *Chinese Digest,* October 1937, 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Lim P. Lee, “Economic Boycott as an Instrument of the People’s Policy,” *Chinese Digest,* March 1938, 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Clara Chan, “Vive La Belle Chinois,” *Chinese Digest* (November 15, 1935), includes handwritten notes from Alice Fong Yu in Alice Fong Yu Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Special Collections, Stanford [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ninon, “Chinese Girls Glamorous in Fashion Display, *San Francisco Chronicle,* 18 June 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Alice Fong Yu, “Lady Precious Stream,” in the *Chinese Digest,* February 1938, 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008),18. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. On feminist nationalism in the Republic of China, see Joan Judge, “Talent, Virtue, and the Nation: Chinese Nationalisms and Female Subjectivities in the Early 20th Century,” *The American Historical Review,* Vol. 106, No. 3 (2001), 765-803. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *Modern Girl Around the World,* 19 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York.* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. “A Run in the Silk Stocking,” *The Post-Crescent,* (Appleton, Wisconsin: Feb 8, 1938), 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *Chinese Digest,* November 1938, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Chinese Digest,* November 1937, 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. They also incited protests in front of the Japanese consulate. “Community Votes Boycott of Japanese Goods,” *Chinese Digest,* November 1937, 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. I refer mostly to the Opium Wars in the 19th century, but also 18th century attempts to negotiate access to Chinese Markets, including the British MacCartney Mission in 1793 and the Amherst Mission of 1816. Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003)*,* 36 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. For example, in 1925, Chinese author Li Jianhong voiced the opinion of millions of Chinese residents when he wrote that the “entire nation [of China]” must, through popular, unofficial means, “promote national products. As for their [Japanese] products, we must get rid of them completely and not buy any more. Gerth, *China Made,* 175 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Correspondence with Taft Fong, 9 October 1931, Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Correspondence with Taft Fong, 15 February 1932, Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Correspondence with K H Kiang, **3 July 1933,** Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Letter from Alice Fong Yu to K H Kiang, 27 July 1933, Box 17, Folder 2, AFY Papers, Stanford [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Gerth, *China Made,* 192 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. *Ibid,* 239 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. P.T.O., Letter to Ping-Yu from the Far Eastern Mirror, 21 December 1938. Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Gerth, *China Made,* 197 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. *Ibid,* 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Antonia Finane. *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 174 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Given the war crisis, many former Chinese feminists became more concerned with nationalism than with women’s rights: if the nation lost its sovereignty, there would be no feminist cause to fight for. As He Xiangning, a contemporary feminist, wrote in 1936, “the only right we should strive for is the right to save the country.” Cited in Pan Yihong, “Feminism and Nationalism in China’s War of Resistance against Japan,” *The International History Review,* Vol. 19, No. 1 (February 1997), 118 [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Arif Dirlik, “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution,” *Journal of Asian Studies,* Vol 34 (4), August 1975: 957. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Yihong, 117 [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Pan Yihong, “Feminism and Nationalism in China’s War of Resistance against Japan,” 115-130. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Yihong, 118 [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Gerth, *China Made,* 305 [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Finane, *Changing Clothes in China,* 286 [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. On the struggle to define Chinese womanhood, see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Yihong, “Feminism and Nationalism,” 123 [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Gerth, *China Made,* 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. At the same time, it is arguable that women involved in semi-governmental organizations gained a greater political consciousness, and, in some ways, may have increased their social status in the (albeit male-dominated) post-war period. See Fredrica Ferlanti, “The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province, 1934-1938,” *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 44 No. 5, (September 2010), 999 and Yihong, “Feminism and Nationalism,” 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Alice Fong Yu, “Mme. Kai-Shek, The First Lady of China,” Jade Box in *The* *Chinese Digest,* November 1937, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. *Chinese Digest*, “Women in War,” September 1938, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. *Chinese Digest,* March 1937, pg 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *Chinese Digest,* November 1937, 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. *Chinese Digest,* December 1937, 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. *Chinese Digest,* March 1937, 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Emily Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. *Chinese Digest,* February 1939, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009*,* 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Ibid, 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Articulated by a Chinese reader of Alice’s *Jade Box* in a personal correspondence to Alice, Box 17 Folder 3, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University. Alice also wrote for a Shanghai/ Hong Kong periodical, the *Far Eastern Survey*, as indicated by her correspondence with the editor, Box 17, Folder 2, Alice Fong Yu Papers, Stanford. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)