CHAPTER 6

CHINESE MATERNITY TOURISTS AND THEIR “ANCHOR BABIES”? DISDAIN AND RACIALIZED CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF NON-CITIZEN REPRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is a site of particularly potent discourses demonizing undocumented immigrants (Bloch, 2014; Flores-Yeffal, Vidales, & Plemons, 2011; Sohoni, 2006). Anti-immigrant discourses have long constructed Latina immigrant mothers as bearing “anchor babies” and burdens to the state. Representing a distinct case of non-citizen reproduction, online news sources began reporting on Chinese maternity tourism in 2011. This form of maternity tourism allegedly involves wealthy tourists visiting the United States to give birth to their children on US soil. In this chapter, I analyze online comments in response to Chinese maternity tourism. I ask, how do online commenters make sense of Chinese maternity tourism? I find that online commenters overwhelmingly demonize Chinese maternity tourism by including this practice into broader debates about “anchor babies” and the reforming of birthright citizenship. Some commenters also use race-specific tropes and malleable claims about class to construct the children of Chinese maternity tourists as a paradoxical asset or threat to the country, often comparing them to the children of undocumented Latina mothers. When commenters employ Asian-specific stereotypes,
some commenters offer a racialized conditional acceptance of maternity tourism, revealing that while citizenship is policed among the citizenry, it can also be expanded precariously and problematically.

**Keywords:** Chinese maternity tourism; birthright citizenship; Asian Americans; online discourse; anchor babies; immigrants

## INTRODUCTION

The Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution stipulates that children born on US soil qualify for automatic US citizenship. Nineteenth century elected officials debated the implications of birthright citizenship for other groups and determined that the children of immigrants, even those considered non-white, would be considered US citizens if they were born on US soil (Kendall, 2012). The 1898 case, *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark*, further established that the US-born children of non-citizens (and even subjects racially excluded from naturalization) would qualify as citizens by birthright (Haney-López, 1996, p. 29). Despite this legal precedent, birthright citizenship remains highly debated in the public sphere today.

In 2011 elected officials in both the US Senate and the House of Representatives proposed reforming or amending the Constitution to modify birthright citizenship to make the US-born children of undocumented parents ineligible for citizenship (Kendall, 2012). While both legislative policies were unsuccessful, the public fervor contesting birthright citizenship continues and symbolically casts non-citizens and their children as unworthy of belonging to the US (Rodriguez, 2016). Usually, in these debates elected officials and anti-immigrant groups cast racialized undocumented women’s reproduction as an increasingly urgent social problem and threat (Chavez, 2013; Cisneros, 2013; Kendall, 2012). This threat is predicated on the presumed social welfare costs attributed to undocumented reproduction (Fujiwara, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2008) as well as concerns over non-white cultural takeovers and non-white demographic shifts (Chavez, 2013).

Amid controversial immigration debates and proposed legal challenges to birthright citizenship, the term “anchor baby” resurfaced in popular debates (Cisneros, 2013). This derogatory term suggests that undocumented immigrant women who are often explicitly described as Mexican are birthing citizen children to be “anchored” to the United States and therefore secure residency or authorized status for themselves. The alleged phenomenon, however, lacks any supporting evidence and is instead a talking point to garner momentum for the reforming of birthright citizenship (Kendall, 2012). Ultimately, the debates concerning the children of non-citizens reveal a less than thinly veiled racist discourse about the undesirability of children born to racialized immigrants (Huang, 2008; Romero, 2011).

While the public debate and scorn of non-citizen reproduction focused largely on Latina undocumented mothers and their children, recent public discussions
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have fixated on the reproduction of presumed class-privileged Chinese nationals on US soil. Journalists have called attention to Chinese women's reproduction by reporting on what they call “maternity tourism” or “birth tourism” (Medina, 2011; Ni, 2011). Maternity tourists are said to visit the United States to give birth and have their child acquire birthright citizenship. The recent reporting of such cases typically involves the revelation of “maternity hotels” that are established as lucrative businesses to house tourist expectant mothers, a business practice not illegal for either parties. This service is reported as costing Chinese maternity tourists thousands of dollars (Medina, 2011). Reporters speculate that Chinese mothers intend to raise their children in China but have their children return to the United States for university training unencumbered by the red tape of immigration visas. If this speculation proves accurate, the children of Chinese maternity tourists are following a decades-long history of transnational reworking of citizenship in which elite Asian nationals travel to North America for university training to become competitive labor market candidates (Ong, 2006). Others suggest that Chinese mothers plan that their children would eventually sponsor their US legal permanent residency (Kim & Shyong, 2015).

While the rhetoric surrounding maternity tourism does not typically include discussions of undocumented women giving birth to “anchor babies,” the children of class-privileged Chinese tourists may still be constructed as such. Thus, while Chinese maternity tourists are indeed maternity tourists, the difference in rhetoric raises questions concerning how race- and gender-specific tropes intersect to construct or contest citizenship. Therefore, in this chapter, I engage in a content analysis of the online commentary responding to the reporting of Chinese maternity tourism. I ask: How do online commenters make sense of Chinese maternity tourism? How do online commenters articulate meaning as they construct the boundaries of citizenship?

While there is scholarship on birthright citizenship, some researchers have privileged the voices of elected officials or prominent social actors (Cisneros, 2013; Jacobson, 2006; Menzel, 2013). Other researchers have focused on specific policies or legal regimes (Huang, 2008; Oliviero, 2013). Therefore, there has been an absence of scholarship accounting for how citizenship is constructed and policed outside the legal frameworks in the context of these specific birthright citizenship debates. By examining online comments by largely, if not exclusively, non-state actors, I seek to remedy this intellectual gap by accounting for how civilians serve as instrumental to the non-juridical policing of citizenship. In this vein, I share the argument espoused by Glenn (2002) that the citizenship implicates questions of belonging by members of the community. Therefore, citizenship is not solely a legal designation but also a social category that denotes membership. Similarly, immigration restrictions have shifted their conceptualization of citizenship as needing to be “consensual,” meaning that the citizenry must consent to the admittance of new citizens (Jacobson, 2006). Public responses to non-citizen reproduction, then, are crucial for understanding how citizenship boundaries are defined and enforced.

This research demonstrates that online commenters overwhelmingly demonize Chinese maternity tourism by including this practice into broader debates about
“anchor babies” and the reforming of birthright citizenship. Some commenters, however, use race-specific tropes and malleable claims about class to construct the children of Chinese maternity tourist mothers as assets or threats to the country, often comparing them to the children of undocumented mothers that are explicitly marked as Latina or Mexican. When online commenters articulate neoliberal logics and Asian-specific stereotypes about Asians as model minorities, they offer what I term a “racialized conditional acceptance” of non-citizen reproduction, suggesting that non-citizen reproduction is not always unwelcomed.

THE ERA OF EXCLUSION (AND CLASSED INCLUSION)

Questions of citizenship during the middle and the later part of the nineteenth century are especially central to understanding the United States’ historical legacy of raced and gendered exclusion. Citing the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Parreñas and Tam (2008) referred to the late 1800s as the “period of unassimilability.” Following highly volatile anti-Chinese sentiments, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to restrict the entry of Chinese laborers to the country and was the first US policy to explicitly exclude a national group from immigrating to the United States (Calavita, 2000). However, Chinese merchants and other class-privileged Chinese nationals were allowed entry. Therefore, even in the context of extreme anti-Chinese sentiments, class at times superseded race (Calavita, 2000). Despite anti-Chinese sentiments, class as a social category was instrumental in denying or welcoming Chinese immigrants to the United States.

Despite the exceptions warranted to Chinese merchants during the Chinese Exclusion Act, anti-Chinese sentiments were ubiquitous and fueled a multitude of stereotypes about Chinese-descendent people. Within this context, a discourse of “Yellow Peril” was omnipresent; this flexible discourse casted Chinese laborers as a threat to white workers’ wages and work opportunities (Espiritu, 1997). The second strand of this discourse casted Chinese-origin people in the United States as threats to national security whether as invader “warriors” or “warriors-as-immigrants” bent on conquest of the nation state (Lyman, 2000, p. 690). This Yellow Peril discourse infiltrated popular culture and undoubtedly shaped the explicitly exclusionary social policies that would implicate Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century.

While the Chinese Exclusion Act was a classed and raced immigration policy, the law was also understood to apply to laboring men. The 1875 Page Act, on the other hand, prohibited the entry of women prostitutes to the United States, but the law’s core intent was to prohibit the entry of Chinese women (Huang, 2008; Hune, 2007; Parreñas & Tam, 2008). During this time, Chinese women were increasingly singled out as immoral, and while some Chinese women were indeed sex workers, sex work was much more common among white women (Yung, 1995). Despite anti-Chinese sentiments, Chinese men in the US west were sorely needed as a cheapened labor supply, but employers did not want laborers to be accompanied by their “unproductive members” of the family, which includes the
presumed wife and children (Espiritu, 1997, p. 17). By not allowing the entry of (potential) Chinese brides during this period of exclusion, the reproduction of Chinese families was made a near impossibility. Moreover, the racialized and gendered constructions of Chinese women relied on relationality to white women. Asian femininity was represented as diametrically opposed to the pure middle class Victorian mother (Parreñas & Tam, 2008). By enacting policies that would restrict the growth of Chinese families, the constructed idea of a “Chinese problem” – understood as a cultural, economic, and public health issue – would also be controlled.

Following the era of exclusion, Asian and Chinese immigrants would become a growing population in the United States, but their belonging into the US polity would continue to be up for debate, often fluctuating between being marked as model minorities or “forever foreigners” (Tuan, 1998). This concept of “model minority” first became popularized by mainstream media during the Civil Rights movement, and casted some Asian-descendent groups as hardworking and well-equipped to outcompete white Americans (Zhou, 2009). However, the continued treatment of Asian Americans as foreigners, or even suspect, demonstrate that historical constructions of Yellow Peril continue to color the Asian American experience (Zhou, 2009, p. 234). These contradictions, then, are ripe for analysis.

THE DIGITAL BIRTH OF “ANCHOR BABIES”

Contemporary debates over Latina or Mexican immigrant women’s reproduction should be understood within a historical context of policy change and racialized discourse. For instance, the 1990s-era politicians fixated on undocumented immigrants and Mexican undocumented immigrant women specifically by arguing that their reproduction was out of control and hurting the economic resources of the country (Gutiérrez, 2008). This discourse facilitated the passing of the Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and California’s Proposition 187, both of which sought to restrict undocumented immigrants from accessing social services (Gutiérrez, 2008). It is within this welfare reform context that conservative political pundits introduced the discourse surrounding “anchor babies” on Fox News and CNN programs in the 1990s (Chavez, 2013). The term “anchor babies” was later rebirthed in the 2000s in online blogs and forums (Ignatow & Williams, 2008). Discussions on “anchor babies” in digital spaces became ubiquitous stemming from what Ignatow and Williams (2011, p. 63) describe as a “bottom-up process of infection across networks of bloggers and their readers, and from there to the general public.”

This infectious process is partly promulgated by immigration restrictionist organizations, such as the Federation of American Immigration Reform, the Center for Immigration Studies, and NumbersUSA, which help disperse anti-immigrant rhetoric in online spaces (Flores-Yeffal et al., 2011). While no longer an active organization, Mothers Against Illegal Aliens argued that undocumented mothers and their children waste taxpayer money and steal resources
from legitimate American children (Romero, 2011). Indeed, anti-immigrant groups and individuals have been able to perpetuate anti-immigrant discourses in various online spaces (Bloch, 2014; Flores-Yeffal et al., 2011; Sohoni, 2006). Importantly, however, while anti-immigrant or hate group organizations may be responsible for promulgating anti-immigrant rhetoric, it is critical to address how a more generalist audience would respond to questions of non-citizen reproduction. Addressing these questions from a generalist audience can provide critical insights into how the broad US publics think through various logics to police or expand boundaries of citizenship for citizen children.

Analyzing Chinese maternity tourism can be instructive, since much of the anti-immigrant online rhetoric research has focused on how online commenters racialize immigration as distinctly Latino or Mexican (Bloch, 2014; Flores-Yeffal et al., 2011; Sohoni, 2006). Researching responses to Chinese maternity tourism, then, might reveal different logics when citizen children of non-citizens are imagined as Chinese Americans. In elaborating the alarmist discourse of undocumented women’s reproduction, Cisneros (2013, p. 290) has argued that the undocumented woman’s body is racially marked as the “perverse anti-citizen” in contrast to the unmarked “pure citizen.” This process is shaped by gendered and raced logics about the undesirability of Latina undocumented mothers invading borders and producing “alien” citizens when white women’s reproduction is often encouraged (Cisneros, 2013, pp. 299–300). However useful this dichotomy, the media coverage of Chinese maternity tourism leaves questions about the utility of dichotomy of the racialized anti-citizen and the racially white pure citizen. This begs the following questions: Are all non-citizens marked as already perverse anti-citizens? Would online commenters regard Chinese American children and their elite tourist mothers as perverse? These questions are particularly pertinent considering how Chinese women have often held a precarious presence in the United States.

**METHODOLOGY**

From November 2013 to February 2014, I employed a content analysis of online comments posted in response to the *New York Times* reporting of Chinese maternity tourism in the United States. Using the *New York Times* search engine, I performed a search by using the following search terms: Chinese anchor babies, Asian anchor babies, birthright citizenship, maternity tourism, and birth tourism. I included in my sample the sole *New York Times* article that focused on the case of Chinese maternity tourism. While there were other online articles on Chinese maternity tourism with publicly accessible comments, most were published in comparatively smaller localized papers or online news aggregators with much fewer comments compared to the *New York Times*. Furthermore, selecting the *New York Times* was ideal because of its wide readership and because the newspaper has long been established as a reliable data source (Hughey, 2012). Moreover, the *New York Times* was selected as an appropriate data source because of its broad readership (Pew Research Center, 2012).
On March 29, 2011, the New York Times reported on Chinese maternity tourism in an article titled “Arriving as Pregnant Tourists, Leaving with American Babies,” which yielded 406 reader comments. While the article neither contains the pejorative term in the title nor in the text, this article is one of the first results in the New York Times search engine when using “Chinese anchor babies” as a search keyword. I transferred these comments on a word document, which yielded 129 pages of data. By performing a preliminary analysis of the New York Times online commentary and exploring the broad range of relevant literature, I established a preliminary coding scheme. This coding scheme was informed by critical race feminist scholarship, Asian American feminisms literature, and feminist intersectional scholarship in Sociology. My coding strategy was in line with qualitative techniques and was both inductive and deductive to allow discovery and the uncovering of meaning and nuance to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, after an initial phase of open coding, I refined and modified new codes. Following data analysis, I selected passages that represent prominent themes found in the data.

The data for this study is not intended to be generalizable. In some respects, using a sample of online data represent some challenges that are common in using archival data, such as the inherent lack of demographic information for online commenters, unless they otherwise specified this information in their comments (Nugent, 2010). On the other hand, the pseudo-anonymity of online commenters also allows for a unique opportunity to access visceral reactions and more honest attitudes that may be less susceptible to social desirability bias found in survey and interview data. Indeed, online data are particularly useful in exploring public racial discourse because post-Civil Rights norms about public race-talk appear less relevant in cyberspace (Hughey, 2012; Hughey & Daniels, 2013). For these reasons, this sample of online data, while not generalizable, has the added benefit of providing an exploratory “lay of the land” to direct other research studies in this area (Nugent, 2010, p. 506). More importantly, the data are an entry point into understanding how commenters articulate meaning-making and varied logics concerning a case of non-citizen reproduction.

**FINDINGS**

By analyzing the comment section of the New York Times article, I outline the dominant themes in the data. I found that online commenters overwhelmingly made sense of Chinese maternity tourism by including the children of these mothers as part of the “anchor baby” category. In this sense, inclusion becomes another mode of exclusion and is articulated as a reason why birthright citizenship should be amended. Some commenters, however, used race-specific tropes and malleable claims about class to construct the children of Chinese maternity tourist mothers as paradoxical assets or threats to the country, often comparing them with the children of Latina-undocumented mothers. In these cases, online commenters made the sense of Chinese maternity tourism by articulating relational sympathies for the Chinese maternity tourists or undocumented women.
and their children. Using neoliberal logics and Asian-specific stereotypes about model minority status, some commenters accepted non-citizen reproduction. Consequently, such conditional acceptance reveals that citizenship can be precariously expanded when Chinese Americans are assumed to fulfill a need to the economically insecure US state.

EXPANDING EXCLUSION THROUGH INCLUSION: CHILDREN CONSTRUCTED AS LEGAL LOOPHOLES AND “ANCHOR BABIES”

Online commenters make sense of Chinese maternity tourism by articulating a vocabulary already shaped by opinions against birthright citizenship and “anchor babies.” No matter the variations in how or why online commenters demonized Chinese maternity tourism, what is apparently clear are the ways in which the practice is considered non-legal (although legal) and how the children of non-citizen parents are explicitly marked as unwanted into the national collectivity. As the following comments suggest, some commenters widened the category of the “anchor baby” to include all non-citizen women’s reproduction and subsequently demonize these mothers as a national threat, insult, and abuse to the country’s social services. For example, one commenter wrote,

This anchor baby phenomenon whether undertaken by rich Chinese women or poor Mexican ones is a slap in the face to every American citizen.

What is most apparent in this comment is the explicit way in which two distinctly raced and classed groups are positioned as partaking in a practice that is damaging to “every American citizen.” The statement also renders the citizen children of non-citizen parents as invisible, or seemingly non-citizens, for they are not marked as Americans in this comment. Another commenter not only offers a position but also a common suggestion for the reforming of birthright citizenship:

American citizenship should be confined to one group of people and one group of people only: those born to American citizens. If you are not an American citizen, you should not be allowed to give birth to an American citizen. This should apply to everyone. This includes Mexicans crossing the border, so they can use the baby to claim benefits from the American taxpayer and Chinese nationals seeking to use our laws as an insurance policy.

It was not uncommon for online commenters to universalize non-citizen reproduction as a problem that should be addressed by the reforming of birthright citizenship. In fact, this comment echoes the proposed policies of the time, such as Arizona’s Senate Bill 1309, and House and Senate proposals that proposed citizenship should only be offered to the children of US citizens (Kendall, 2012). Non-citizen people’s motives are already assumed and demonized. In this case, both the undocumented, explicitly and commonly identified as Mexican, and Chinese nationals are constructed as partaking in actions that abuse the American taxpayer. The next comment, while
expanding the “anchor baby” category, also elaborates on Chinese-specific stereotypes:

This story reminds me of the illegal immigrants and their anchor baby phenomenon. The Chinese, as much as the illegal Mexican citizens, have long taken advantage of the immigration system. This anchor baby phenomenon is just part of a long line of manipulative strategies they have used to evade immigration laws…. The United States may be able to restrict the green card quota for all those born in China, but the United States cannot keep up with the tactics of Chinese snakeheads…

While there are many more comments that seek to construct Chinese mothers as participants in the “anchor baby phenomenon,” commenters also use this case of maternity tourism as another call to reforming birthright citizenship, thereby engaging in an anti-birthright citizenship discourse that was previously more commonly associated with the children of undocumented mothers. What is also notable is how these online commenters mark the Asian and Mexican children of non-citizen mothers as explicitly unwanted. However, not all online commenters made sense of Chinese maternity tourism by including these cases into their now broadened disdain for non-citizen reproduction. Instead, online commenters used social categories and outwardly “reasonable” calculations about the number of non-citizen births to express sympathy or acceptance of one form of non-citizen reproduction over another.

**RELATIONAL SYMPATHIES**

As the case of Chinese women having children on US soil represents a divergence from the more common trope of the poor undocumented Latina abusing the social welfare system, some commenters untangled cases of Chinese maternity tourism by constructing relational belonging and sympathies. These sympathies or relative welcoming of non-citizen reproduction are shaped by assumptions about non-citizen mothers’ class status. It is the assumed class status assigned to mothers that then shapes whether online commenters see non-citizens as unfortunate people trying to get by, abusers of the social welfare system, or as wealthy cheats. For instance, one commenter provided the following response:

> I have more sympathy towards poor Mexican folks walking across the border to be in this country than rich folks jetting in for a free ride to the US Citizenship.

This comment is telling for several reasons. First, the undocumented population is racialized, specifically Mexican. Secondly, sympathies are afforded to the undocumented because they are perceived as poor. This statement suggests that class is of key importance, while the “rich” are abusing the system. Similarly, the passage below also suggests that Chinese mothers are abusing their class privilege in contrast to the children of undocumented parents who are constructed as having at least a partial claim to belonging:

> I actually find this far more odious than the children of illegals getting citizenship. At least the children of illegals attend American schools and intend to stay. These fly by night tourist births reduces what it means to be an American to some kind of grand travel pass.
Relational sympathies were granted to explicitly racialized Latino or Mexican undocumented immigrants when they were constructed as class-disadvantaged. Paradoxically, these very same points were also used to argue that the case of Chinese maternity tourists are comparatively less of an economic problem compared to the state drain and economic “ills” brought on from undocumented immigration:

This seems like a lot of misplaced consternation. A few thousand Asian tourists leaving with US-citizen babies represent a tiny, and harmless, part of the birthright citizenship problem. The much, much, much bigger is the 15 million illegal aliens living in this country, primarily from Mexico and Central America, who have multiple children to minimize their chances to be deported – which the government doesn’t seem to have the will to do at any rate. Those people stay here – illegally – and receive state healthcare, housing, food, education, and other benefits for their children and themselves. They hurt blue-collar Americans’ ability to get a job commensurate with their skills.

This commenter specifically demonizes Mexicans and Central Americans and casts their reproduction as purely opportunistic. This stands in contrast to the case of Chinese mothers, which is rationalized as less of a problem because of the comparatively small number of mothers that are reportedly partaking in maternity tourism. While the commenter makes sense of maternity tourism in relation to undocumented reproduction, in this comment the “blue-collar American” is placed as the “true citizen” that is in crisis because of “foreign” competition and the presumed social welfare drain caused by the presence of undocumented people.

Similarly, the next commenter evokes similar relational understandings of class and social welfare costs to favor the comparatively wealthy children of Chinese maternity tourists:

Like the article noted, these are perfectly legal, and the parents are wealthy and pay their way. They do not use social services nor occupy school seats. Usually they are well educated, and the “anchor babies” come back to the US for higher education or set up a branch of the family business. So economically, they generally contribute more resources than they consume. How is that worse than an illegal that came here just to make money (i.e., take US resources)?

This commenter relies on the common trope of the undocumented Latina’s reproduction as a burden on the state. However (un)sympathetic, online commenters evoke class comparisons between tourists and undocumented parents that forecloses an important opportunity for understanding how these two groups can exist beyond stereotypical extremes of class privilege or extreme poverty.

To online commenters, using the only information relayed to them by media outlets, they assume that Chinese maternity tourists are and will continue to be class-privileged, while the undocumented are automatically perceived as poor. In these constructions, it becomes almost inconceivable to consider that Chinese tourists and immigrants can be class-disadvantaged, and that Latino undocumented immigrants (some of which are formerly documented with tourist visas) can be class-advantaged. Indeed, the sense-making regarding Chinese maternity tourism reveals that online commenters’ use of relational categories oversimplify two racialized groups that could be very heterogeneous in terms of class,
migratory process, and (un)documented status. Aside from the general demonization of Chinese maternity tourism and the reliance on relational social categories, online commenters also employ Asian-specific stereotypes to welcome or fear Chinese women’s citizen children.

RACIALIZED ANXIETIES OR RACIALIZED CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE? YELLOW PERIL AND THE MODEL MINORITY

Chinese and Chinese Americans have always occupied a perilous racialized space in the US imaginary. Asian Americans may have a partial claim to belonging, as their racialized status may mark them as “forever foreigners” (Tuan, 1998). Consequently, despite the cultural, geographical, and historical differences among Chinese nationals and second generation and beyond Chinese Americans, it is possible that these two groups can be easily conflated. For instance, East Asian Americans are said to occupy a model minority status because of their high household incomes and group human capital characteristics (Chou, 2012). At the same time, China is often depicted as a growing super power with highly trained professionals. As online commenters construct the belonging of Chinese “anchor babies,” their comments seem to suggest a conflation of both Chinese-specific tropes. On the other hand, commenters also evoke a threat narrative, a modern-day Yellow Peril, which suggests that there is a very fine line between model minority status and threat. The following are a selection of comments that represent both ends of this spectrum:

Wake up. This is more about hijacking a country through population manipulation, because I assure you, it is not about WANTING to be an AMERICAN. People will raise their children in the tradition of their home country. Many despise our actual way of life and have no interest in the actual American Experience, because those who do, do it proudly in the open. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, I watched it go from anywhere USA to anywhere THIRD WORLD. Multiply that by every city in America and we WON’T be America anymore.

As US citizens, these children are constructed as foreigners within, and thus are constructed as embodying both foreign and domestic threat. As is evident in the use of the word “hijacking,” and sentiments that express a fear of takeover, this comment relies on vocabulary shaped by Yellow Peril discourse-strands of which often reemerge in the contemporary period (Lyman, 2000, p. 685). The threat of Yellow Peril also recalls a fear of cultural takeover. While no comparisons are made here, the commenter’s language against cultural takeover also parallels common claims made about Latino immigrants in the 1990s’ California reportedly overrunning the state to take back the land for “Latino Reconquista” or cultural takeover (Chavez, 2013).

The rather explicit mentioning of Los Angeles becoming “third world” quite clearly marks non-white groups as undesirable and may specifically refer to Asians and Latinos; both groups with a long history and community presence in Los Angeles (López-Garza & Diaz, 2001). The comment, shaped
by the commenter’s own anecdotal “data,” is further developed on only a partial understanding of the racial and ethnic demographic shifts in major cities. While the influx of immigration is usually depicted as an invasion, this shift can also be told as a story of white exodus, as white flight has contributed to the decline of white Americans in Los Angeles (Roberts, 1997).

Racialized threat can also be explicitly connected to fears of homeland security and the threat of Chinese infiltration for ulterior and dangerous motives, as described in the following comment:

It is my humble opinion that these babies will be schooled in China and indoctination [sic] in English and western studies by the Chinese government, and when they are of college age will be sent back to the USA to study and become sleeper cell spies. Face it, they are Americans being raised in China, they will be loyal to China, they will also be able to get government jobs and risk national security. This is not uncommon for the government of China, wake up Americans, you should be furious about this….

In the pseudo-anonymous online comments section, some online commenters rely on language that eerily mimics language employed by elected officials discussing their support for the Chinese Exclusion Act. For instance, nineteenth century elected officials expressed concern over Chinese American children because they believed children born of Chinese parents would be innately Chinese in beliefs, customs, and ideologies, and therefore, unable to be American (Jacobson, 2006). Indeed, the United States has long held the national belief that loyalty can only be kept for one country (Glenn, 2000). However, the ways in which Chinese and Chinese Americans have been marked as suspect, unassimilable, and foreign, is rather a group-specific.

The concern over Chinese Americans becoming spies and traitors to the nation is also shaped by a Yellow Peril discourse that paints Chinese communities as sneaky invaders bent on takeover. The association of spies and Chinese was evident in the 1999 case against Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-American scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, who was accused of stealing national nuclear secrets and sharing them with the Chinese government. While Lee was only found guilty of mishandling restricted data, Lee’s civil rights were abused, and the rhetoric surrounding this public case was considered a resurgence of Yellow Peril discourse (Lyman, 2000).

Some online commenters make comments similar to those expressed above, but they may draw from a Yellow Peril ideology less explicitly and instead use language descriptive of espionage and fraud to refer to Chinese maternity tourism. For example, one commenter wrote: “This is rampant fraud.” Such seemingly race neutral language is reminiscent of Chinese-exclusion era rhetoric, as it was not uncommon for nineteenth century American elites and religious travelers to reproduce and spread stereotypes about the Chinese as “dishonest, tricky, and sneaky” (Luibheid, 2002, p. 44).

On the other hand, it is precisely some of the stereotypes of “sneaky” or “tricky” that easily transform to more positive connotations of the valued character traits of being ambitious, or highly motivated. Indeed, these are the very traits that are typically ascribed to Asian Americans when they are marked as model minorities. Given the fears of a drained US state, some commenters use
neoliberal logics and Asian-specific assumptions to offer a racialized conditional acceptance of non-citizen reproduction:

I suspect that in the long run, the USA benefits from all of this, especially economically. You have to remember, for example, that the US is starved for highly trained professionals in fields like engineering and computer science, and that the immigration laws as they are cannot satisfy this economic need for intellectual capital…. I suspect that these kids will become those who we seek out in 20 years. They will be highly educated in the right fields and be Americans, so there will be no immigration laws standing in the way of our business interests.

As Chou (2012) has noted, the raced and gendered constructions of Asian Americans often change, but this change reflects the interests of white dominance, thus Asian Americans are accepted as honorary whites when they somehow can prove beneficial to white supremacy. In this case, Chinese “anchor babies” may be welcomed as model minorities that will boost the economy by filling highly skilled jobs and contributing as middle-class subjects. Another commenter suggested, “We need Chinese brains. Period.” This comment is particularly instructive because it suggests an almost model minority biological determinism by suggesting that Chinese brains are inherently smart and best equipped to take on the heavy task of lifting the United States in a competitive global marketplace.

Expectedly, Asian-specific stereotypes about Chinese children could also be extended to Chinese mothers. Another commenter, for example, focuses on the conditional welcoming and benefit of Chinese mothers who are constructed as ideal for raising productive citizen children:

I am certain that such highly motivated mothers will produce children who become outstanding [sic] American citizens. We should even encourage more such undertakings. Immigrants who are so highly motivated are typically highly intelligent and the best a country has to offer.

This commenter relies on the new trope of “Tiger Mother” that emerged out of the very publicly debated book, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, by Amy Chua (2011). The Tiger Mother has become a popular buzzword that describes a strict Chinese American or East Asian American mother that pushes her children toward academic and professional excellence. The issue with Tiger Mothers – and by connection – model minority status, is that it operates on a perilous seesaw that can tip to racialized threat very easily. Asian American Tiger Mothers may be lauded for motivating their children to succeed in a hypercompetitive marketplace, but for these very same rationalizations, some of the members of public also fear these “tiger” figures as rearing domestic threats (Wang, 2011). Indeed, whether Asian Americans are accepted in the national polity relies on easily malleable, and often contradictory notions about their presumed contribution or competition with white Americans.

**CONCLUSION**

As I have delineated, online commenters’ constructions of Chinese maternity tourism are embedded in contentious debates over the so-called “anchor babies” and rely on categories of race, gender, class, citizenship, and immigration status.
While the children born of undocumented women, and Chinese women visiting the United States are indeed legal US citizens, members of the public question the motives and ethics of these mothers, and the children are systematically marked as unworthy of belonging to the national collectivity. The reporting and subsequent responses to Chinese maternity tourism have been partially cast as another case in the “anchor baby” debate, but the public “enforcement” of citizenship for these children is both contested and conditional. Indeed, accounting for the ways in which the national community extends membership (or not) to US citizens remains important and would otherwise be missed if a focus remained solely on prominent social actors and juridical/legal mechanisms. Perhaps more than ever before, with the power and perils inherent in Internet technology, we can find spaces in which citizenship is embedded in powerful articulations of which groups “count” as citizens and which groups count as legal “loopholes.”

Aside from the general demonization of Chinese maternity tourism, I also find that online commenters do not make sense of non-citizen reproduction in isolation; sympathies, and opinions for or against Chinese maternity tourism were also constructed in comparison to undocumented Latina women’s reproduction. While these comparisons are constructed in differing ways, perceived class status becomes a pivotal reasoning as to why some online commenters find Chinese maternity tourism acceptable, or quite unethical, compared to raced undocumented mothers. In this regard, it would appear that some commenters use class as an indicator of moral reasoning to more readily accept the children of “poor illegals” or use neoliberal reasoning to tentatively accept the children of Chinese maternity tourists in the hope that they can boost the US economy. In this regard, it is possible that Calavita’s (2000) findings regarding the importance of class serving as a “trump card” for exclusion-era Chinese merchants may hold some relevance here and may be rearticulated in current understandings of Chinese maternity tourism.

This research has also demonstrated that not all non-citizen reproduction is automatically marked a social problem to be solved or penalized. The concept of racialized conditional acceptance developed here demonstrates that some online commenters do welcome non-citizen reproduction. However, even sympathetic and outwardly welcoming online commenters are still relying on problematic racialized tropes about Chinese and Chinese Americans. This conditional acceptance is also context- and historically specific; inasmuch as the nation is believed to be in urgent need of intellectual and economic resources, the children of Chinese maternity tourists will be welcomed – but they are precisely welcomed only if they meet the conditions of their assumed racialized traits (i.e., “Chinese brains”). On the other hand, the dominant responses to Chinese maternity tourism are highly nuanced, as these very same conditional characteristics can be manipulated into Yellow Peril discourse concerning Chinese Americans being too smart, too competitive, or too sneaky.

The inclusion of Chinese maternity tourism is also instructive for those interested in untangling the debates concerning birthright citizenship beyond a focus on undocumented women. Cisneros (2013, p. 303) argues that “alien maternity”
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is constructed through the dichotomous subject formation of the citizen and the perverse anti-citizen, a process she refers to as “backwards uncitizenizing.” I elaborate on this process, but also problematize this notion by suggesting that citizen and non-citizen maternity is not necessarily constructed as oppositional dichotomies; instead, citizenship and the acceptance of non-citizen reproduction can expand for racialized conditional acceptance. Those who welcome Chinese women’s US-born children are a case in point. Online commenters that create relational sympathies for Chinese maternity tourists over undocumented Latina women, and vice versa, also complicate the dominant reference point (white citizens) for inclusion.

This chapter contributes to discussions on citizenship, an area that is deeply contested, particularly in the context of racial/ethnic demographic shifts in the United States. Latinos are the largest minority group in the country (US Census Bureau, 2007, p. 15), while Asian immigrants are the fastest growing immigrant group (US Census Bureau Reports, 2013). Therefore, perhaps now more than ever, examining discourses on racialized non-citizen mothers and their US-born children provides productive insights to how citizenship is policed and transformed.

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