Esther Don Tang's Home: Southern Arizona and Gender in the Construction of the Model Minority Myth 1950-1975

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Introduction

"We don't talk about ourselves as being minorities… if we live in a community, we should try our best to contribute to and become a part of it."[1]

Esther Don Tang in the *Tucson Daily Citizen* (1971)

In 1971 a local newspaper for the city of Tucson, Arizona published an article on the traditions and identities of Chinese Americans. Speaking on behalf of the city's Chinese community was Esther Don Tang (1917-2015), a Chinese American woman who led community organizations for decades and was Tucson's woman of the year in 1955.[2] In the article, Tang said that Chinese Americans in Tucson should not understand themselves as a minority because they should try their best to "contribute to and become a part of it [the wider community]."[3] Interestingly, this differed greatly from other Chinese American community leaders around the country featured in the article— a man named Lim from San Francisco said that Chinese Americans were a minority because Chinese Americans in San Francisco opposed the bussing of their children outside of Chinatown as part of school desegregation efforts.

While at the time the reporters may have seen these two viewpoints as equally legitimate, today's San Francisco is famed for its long Chinese American history while Tucson is not. However, Tang's opinions on Chinese American identity came at a crucial time as popular definitions of Asian American identity underwent a key shift between 1950 and 1975. In this shift, mainstream perceptions of Asian Americans went from the Yellow Peril paradigm to the model minority myth: from being understood as an unassimilable threat to White American society into a well-assimilated (yet unique), high achieving, and law-abiding minority that other non-White groups should model.[4]

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[1] "Newspaper Clipping on Chinese American Identity," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, July 10, 1971, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 2, Z, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[2] *Year's Man and Woman Honors Told*, 1955, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson; Ralph Mahoney, "Our Chinese-American Heritage," Arizona Days and Ways, *The Arizona Republic*, September 30, 1956, 6, Arizona Days and Ways Collection, Arizona Memory Project.
[3] "Newspaper Clipping on Chinese American Identity," *Tucson Daily Citizen.*
[4] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*, 1st ed., vol. 127 (Princeton University Press, 2015).

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Given this history, Tang presents an alternative perspective to Chinese American identity in which Chinese Americans were not minorities at all, which begs the questions of why and what she meant by that. Further, what exactly was her connection to the larger nationwide Cold War shift in perceptions to Asian Americans, and what can her story explain about that process?

Since the 1980s, scholars in Asian American studies have been critical of the logic behind the model minority myth. In a 1983 article, Evelyn Nakano Glenn challenged culturally essentialist explanations of Chinese American family structures, instead explaining them as historically contingent on political and social conditions in the United States.[5] Building on this critical discourse, Anita Mannur does not uncritically accept the concept of the model minority but rather uses it to describe how Chinese Americans can portray themselves as attractive and trendy.[6]

In addition to questioning the model minority myth, more recent scholarship has also tried to explain its origins and how people in history constructed it. Ellen D. Wu argues that Asian Americans around the country from the 1940s to the 1960s gradually constructed the model minority myth to promote Asian American civil rights and career opportunities.[7] Madeline Y. Hsu offers an alternate explanation when she argues that the origin of the myth comes from the way in which the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act limited Chinese migration to businessmen and students.[8] Besides explaining much about the origins of the model minority myth, the scholarship also contributes to larger historical discourses on race construction in the United States by challenging the black-white dichotomies in many American race histories through explaining how stereotypes of Asian Americans played into twentieth century definitions of blackness and whiteness.[9]

Yet, the scholarship also leaves two important historical aspects of Asian American race construction understudied: the role of local circumstances in shaping the lives of the Asian Americans who promoted their own civil rights, and the contributions of Asian American women in their local communities. This article addresses these two historiographical gaps and builds on previous work by arguing that the diverse setting of Southern Arizona and the changing gender norms of the 1950s and 1960s shaped Esther Don Tang's advocacy for Chinese Americans. Thus, Tang's story demonstrates how local circumstances and gender affected Cold War advocacy for Chinese Americans and the construction of the model minority myth.

This article will go through Tang's life chronologically from her childhood to the 1950s and 1960s when she would start advocating for the Chinese American community in the context of her community leadership, breaking up her life story into three parts. First will be Tang's childhood and young adult life, which demonstrate how the local circumstances and unique history of Chinese Americans in nineteenth and twentieth century Southern Arizona played into her drive to serve the community. Then, the story of Tang's community service in the 1950s illustrates how Chinese American women could actively advocate for their communities within

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[5] Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Split Household, Small Producer and Dual Wage Earner: An Analysis of Chinese-American Family Strategies," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 45, no. 1 (1983): 35, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/351293.

[6] Anita Mannur, "'Peeking Ducks' and 'Food Pornographers,'" in *Culture, Identity, Commodity*, ed. Tseen Khoo and Kam Louie, Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 23, 34, JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/stable/j.ctt130hh3x.6.

[7] Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, 2.

[8] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

[9] Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, 7.

the conservative gender norms of the time. Lastly, Tang's story and speeches in the 1960s and 1970s show how the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements of the decade both changed and enabled how she advocated for Chinese Americans during that time.

Tang's Early Life and Place in the Tucson Community, 1917-1950

Tang's upbringing and early adult life in Southern Arizona shaped the philosophy behind her community leadership and Chinese American advocacy. In 1997, when asked if she was active in the Tucson community primarily to advocate for Chinese Americans, Tang replied that her service was not primarily about Chinese American advocacy but rather to give back to the Tucson community, as it was her home.[10] Of course, Tang could only see Tucson as a home if early twentieth century Tucson was tolerant enough of Esther Tang and her family as Chinese Americans in the first place. In other words, to understand Tang's life of community service we must go into the diverse history of early twentieth century Tucson as well as Tang's own family and marriage background.

During this time, Southern Arizona was an exceptionally multilingual and multiethnic environment in which Chinese Americans played an important part. The region's population included significant numbers of Mexican Americans, Tohono O'odham Native Americans, and Euro-Americans, as well as Chinese Americans. Scholars writing on Chinese American histories in Southern Arizona have repeatedly emphasized the intimate and daily relations between Mexican and Chinese Americans. For instance, Chinese grocery stores were the only source of fresh vegetables in Tucson so Mexican neighborhoods and Chinese grocers had a symbiotic relationship, and Chinese merchants and Mexican property owners often had deep business relationships.[11] Also, considering how the actual population of Chinese Americans in Tucson was small, about 192 people in 1920, it is not a stretch to say that Chinese Americans needed interethnic relations in order to survive.[12]

Another factor behind Chinese Americans' integration in Southern Arizona was Tucson's position at the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. Many Chinese Americans in Southern Arizona migrated from Mexico after living for years in Spanish speaking communities there. For example, 350 Chinese received political asylum to live in the United States after the 1910 Mexican Revolution.[13] These Chinese migrants had the linguistic background to communicate with their Mexican American neighbors in the community from the beginning of their time in Arizona. While this did not specifically apply to Tang's family since they migrated through California, it is part of explaining the Southern Arizona community's overall tolerance of Chinese Americans.

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[10] Esther Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August," August 27, 1997, 15, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[11] Li Yang, "Lee Wee Kwon: Chinese Grocer in Tucson, 1917-1965," *The Journal of Arizona History* 51, no. 1 (2010): 33, 36–37, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41697263; Grace Peña Delgado, "Of Kith and Kin: Land, Leases, and Guanxi in Tucson's Chinese and Mexican Communities, 1880s-1920s," *The Journal of Arizona History* 46, no. 1 (2005): 33–54, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41696875; Priscilla M. Martínez and Grace Peña Delgado, "Beyond Border Spectacle: Oral History and Everyday Meaning in Chinese Mexican Tucson," *The Journal of Arizona History* 61, no. 3/4 (2020): 459–86, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45378965.
[12] Sandra Chan, "The Incredible Life of Ah One: Tucson's Chinese Sailor," *The Journal of Arizona History* 56, no. 4 (2015): 410, JSTOR.
[13] Delgado, "Of Kith and Kin: Land, Leases, and Guanxi in Tucson's Chinese and Mexican Communities, 1880s-1920s," 44.

Tang was born into this diverse environment in 1917, and she would grow up intimately connected with it. Her family owned multiple grocery stores and she would help out, giving her many experiences engaging with the Tucson community.[14] Tang would recall how she helped her father deliver groceries to Mexican migrants in Marana, a town nearby to Tucson, and how she became fluent in Spanish as she played with Spanish speaking kids.[15] In another interview, Tang recalled how she learned Papago, now known as O'odham, to communicate with Tohono O'odham customers in her father's grocery store.[16]

The reduced nature of anti-Chinese discrimination in Southern Arizona also led to Tang's embracing of Tucson as a home. Anti-Chinese discrimination in Southern Arizona was not at the level of other states such as California or Montana, as Chinese Americans were rarely the targets of overt violence or legislation.[17] Indeed, one of the reasons why Chinese Americans were in Southern Arizona to begin with was to flee violence in other states and later in Mexico. The integration of Chinese Americans in the Tucson community was not just a sign of comparatively lessened discrimination to begin with, but also a factor that sustained that environment as it made overt discrimination less politically and economically profitable.

This is not to say that there was no anti-Chinese discrimination in Southern Arizona; Chinese Americans were still second-class citizens, and Tang's story reflects this. In the same 1997 interview, Tang recalled how when she was a kid, community pools did not allow Chinese people, how the seller of a house her mother wanted to buy posted a sign saying, "No Chinks Wanted," and how Chinese Americans were socially isolated in her school.[18] In discussing the social isolation of Chinese Americans in school, Tang described how she mostly engaged with familial relatives rather than reaching out to others within the community.[19] Furthermore, this discrimination did not end in the early 1900s, but continued through the 1950s as Tang became a leader in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). According to Tang, other YWCA leaders were suspicious of her despite her being clearly qualified for the job.[20] Overall however, while anti-Chinese discrimination absolutely existed in Arizona, there was still room in the early twentieth century for Chinese Americans to have a great impact in the Tucson community and become an important part of it, as seen in the deep relations between Chinese and Mexican Americans.

Finally, Tang's marriage and family life shaped her link to Tucson's community. In 1942 Esther married David Tang, a Chinese American also from Tucson, before opening a grocery store together and raising three children in the city.[21] Esther was busy working for the store and raising her children, but her husband supported her ambitions and did a lot of housework

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[14] Elizabeth Shaw, *Nine Daughters and Son Honors Don Wah of Tucson*, 1949, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 2, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.

[15] Esther Tang and Pam Stevenson, "Arizona Historymakers Oral History Transcript: Esther Don Tang," March 20, 2001, 5, Transcript, Historical League, Inc., https://www.historicalleague.org/userfiles/file/Tang-OH-20185bcbb02a-4458-4393-85ee-7db60ffbff2b.pdf; Esther Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview June," June 17, 1997, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.

[16] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August."

[17] Lawrence Michael Fong, "Sojourners and Settlers: The Chinese Experience in Arizona," *The Journal of Arizona History* 21, no. 3 (1980): 227–56; Chan, "The Incredible Life of Ah One https://www.jstor.org/stable/45378965T: Tucson's Chinese Sailor," 411.

[18] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August," 7–9.

[19] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August," 9.

[20] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August," 12–13.

[21] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview June," 10.

himself. This support and her own passion for the community led to Tang's very active life as a community servant in the late 1940s and going into the 1950s.[22]

1950s Community Leader and Cook

In the 1950s Tang earned her place as a leader within the community organizations she served in. In 1952, she became president of the Salpointe Mother's Club, an association affiliated with the Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson. Then, in 1955, the local YWCA re-elected Tang as the first-vice president, proving Tang's value to their leadership.[23] Tang's beginnings as a community leader in the 1950s reveals how Chinese women could actively advocate for their communities despite the conservative gender norms of the time.

In becoming a leader for these organizations Tang did not just have more responsibility, power, and visibility, but also became an advocate for Chinese Americans in Tucson. While advocating for Chinese Americans in Tucson was not her primary intention, her presence in leadership roles helped advance Chinese American visibility because the leadership for organizations like the YWCA was exclusively dominated by White women.[24] Indeed, a 1955 Tucson newspaper featured a picture of the YWCA leadership which included all White women, except for Tang, meaning that the presence of a Chinese American woman in a position dominated by White women was widely seen.[25]

A combination of Tang's community service and leadership as well as her home life then led to her naming as Tucson's "Woman of the Year" in 1955. Being the city's model woman, reporters were interested in her home life and, as a result, there were two newspaper articles from 1955 and 1956 where reporters asked Tang about her home cooking habits. Both articles began with highlighting her role as a wife and mother first before discussing her community work as the reason for her 1955 Tucson's Woman of the Year award, pointing out how she helped out her husband in his grocery store, raised her three children, and cooked three meals a day in the home.[26]

In these articles on home cooking Tang was not just a model woman, but a model woman who was Chinese. In the 1955 article, the reporter writes, "She prepares one Chinese meal a day – usually dinner – but the other meals are 'strictly American menus.' We, of course, were anxious to have some of her Chinese dishes and menus." Tang herself then reinforced the dishes as ethnically distinct when she identified the dishes and cooking methods as "characteristic of Chinese cookery."[27] In other words, because Tang herself and the reporter ethnicized her cooking as Chinese, the articles were part of changing perceptions of Chinese Americans and Tang's inadvertent advocacy for Chinese Americans at the time.

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[22] Esther Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview July," July 8, 1997, 11, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson; *Untitled Newspaper Clipping on Tucson Community News*, ca 1955, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[23] *YWCA Names 1955 Officers*, 1955, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 14, Folder 9, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson. The collection did not contain documentation on when Tang was first elected to the YWCA leadership.
[24] Tang et al., "Esther Don Tang Oral History Interview August," 15.
[25] *YWCA Names 1955 Officers*.
[26] Helen L. Vaughn, "'Woman of the Year' Loves Chinese Cookery," August 17, 1956, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 2, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson; Charmaine, *Everybody Cooks... Fine Chinese Dishes*, 1955, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 13, Folder 2, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[27] *Everybody Cooks... Fine Chinese Dishes*.

Tang's celebration of Chinese food should not be overlooked as a kind of advocacy for the Chinese American community because Chinese food has historically been a prominent symbol for Chinese culture and people in America. In a July 1957 issue of the "Arizona Days and Ways," a Sunday Magazine by Arizona's largest newspaper at the time, the author reports on a third-grade teacher taking her students to eat at a Chinese restaurant to learn about Chinese culture, calling it a, "first-hand study of Chinese culture."[28] Tang's article was also a step forward in popular perceptions of Chinese Americans because it departed from the previous Yellow Peril paradigm. In this paradigm, Chinese people could not assimilate into mainstream American society, and Chinese Americans continuing to eat Chinese food was evidence of that.[29] However, by showcasing Chinese food as compatible within the dominant 1950s conservative standards for women's domestic labor, Tang was making that food and, as a result, Chineseness, less alien.

The place of Chinese food in White suburbia in the early Cold War also highlights the impact of Tang's promotion of Chinese food. Historian Padoongpatt explains that Asian and Pacific food was connected to the culture and identity formation of White suburban housewives.[30] After World War II, with US imperialism in East Asia, with the US occupation of Japan and permanent military bases in the region, the peace corps operating in Asia, as well as the expansion of air travel and tourism, White women gained new opportunities to eat and cook Asian and Pacific food.[31] This then translated domestically to a new way in which these women could construct their own identities in White suburbia as they could cook Asian and Pacific food to make themselves seem more interesting and cultured.[32] Therefore, Tang's promotion of Chinese food was not an isolated incident that no one paid attention to but rather part of a larger trend which had a real audience in the 1950s.

Lastly, a reading of the 1956 series, "Our Chinese American Heritage," which Tang was also in, illustrates how Chinese women in the 1950s could advocate for their communities. This was a three-week long series in *The Arizona Republic*, one of the state's biggest newspapers, on the history and experiences of Arizona's Chinese American community which tried to paint them as an integral part of Arizona. Many photos were taken for the series, photos which included Tang taking care of a pediatric patient at a hospital with the caption, "Mrs. Esther Tang, Tucson's Woman of the Year in 1955, with a child patient at Comstock Hospital, of which she is a director."[33] The magazine also included pictures of other Chinese women as professionals, such as Violet Yeung as the proprietor of an antique shop and Dr. Louise Chan Lim teaching mathematics at the University of Arizona.[34] With these photos, we see that even in the 1950s

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[28] "Phoenix Business News & Events," *The Arizona Republic*, July 14, 1957, Arizona Days and Ways Collection, 29, Arizona Memory Project.

[29] Jingfeng Xia, "Foodways and Their Significance to Ethnic Integration: An Ethnoarchaeological and Historical Archaeological Survey of the Chinese in Tucson, Arizona" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Arizona, n.d.), 197–99, https://www.proquest.com/docview/252175984/abstract/3342D2B4239C4321PQ/1.

[30] Mark Padoongpatt, "Oriental Cookery: Devouring Asian and Pacific Cuisine during the Cold War," in *Eating Asian America*, ed. Robert Ji-Song Ku et al., A Food Studies Reader (NYU Press, 2013), 187, JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/stable/j.ctt9qg92s.14.

[31] Mark Padoongpatt, "Oriental Cookery: Devouring Asian and Pacific Cuisine during the Cold War," in *Eating Asian America*, ed. Robert Ji-Song Ku et al., A Food Studies Reader (NYU Press, 2013), 197–98, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/stable/j.ctt9qg92s.14.

[32] Padoongpatt, "Oriental Cookery: Devouring Asian and Pacific Cuisine during the Cold War," 200.

[33] Mahoney, "Our Chinese-American Heritage," 6.

[34] Ralph Mahoney, "Our Chinese-American Heritage Concluding Chapter," Arizona Days and Ways, *The Arizona Republic*, October 14, 1956, 28, 30, Arizona Days and Ways Collection, Arizona Memory Project.

with conservative gender norms, Chinese women could also be known as professionals to advocate for their communities.

Changes to Tang's Advocacy in the 1960s and 1970s

Going into the 1960s and 1970s, Tang took an even more active role in Chinese American advocacy. While her primary goal was still to serve the community, she believed that part of that was through fighting racism and inequality. Tang's shift here reflected the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Movement, with the Civil Rights Movement providing the background for Tang's efforts against racism and inequality and Tang referencing the Women's Liberation Movement in a later speech.

Tang's belief that addressing racism and inequality was part of serving the community is best seen by her leadership of the Pio Decimo Center starting in 1966. The Pio Decimo Community Center was a volunteer organization that helped both adults and children in a poor area of town, most of which were Mexican Americans. Specifically, the Pio Decimo center taught practical skills such as cooking, sewing, English classes, and GED courses, in addition to providing childcare through kindergarten classes.[35]

Tang wrote about her commitment to fighting racism and inequality in a 1970 document for the University of Arizona titled, "The New Volunteer." In the document Tang primarily reflected on how the demographics and practices of volunteers have changed in recent years because of the growing awareness of what she describes as, "domestic deprivations, racial injustices, outdated systems, and affluence in general."[36] However, she also discussed her own volunteering with the Pio Decimo Center and working with Mexican Americans, writing that, "Not being educationally oriented… the parents not understanding our language do not read notes sent home… Until we learn about the Mexican family, which has not perceptively changed, the habits they or their families brought with them from across the border, we cannot involve them in activities beneficial to them – as well as giving them the opportunity to mold their own lives and compete with courage and competence in our Society."[37]

Tang made clear her opposition to racism and efforts to face it in that document even if she assumed the validity of some stereotypes of Mexican Americans. On the one hand, Tang describing Mexican families as "not being educationally oriented," or that they had "not perceptively changed," while overlooking structural barriers, reflected stereotypes of Mexican Americans.[38] On the other hand, Tang did not use those stereotypes to further exclude or attack Mexican Americans but, on the contrary, to push for further learning about Mexican American families to better serve them at the Pio Decimo Center.

Tang would then directly advocate for Chinese Americans with multiple speeches in the 1960s, but she did so through trying to explain Chinese culture, framing it as part of promoting multiculturalism and bettering society. In a 1969 speech about Chinese traditions to an audience in a restaurant, Tang first spoke about joining a State committee titled, "Disadvantaged

[35] "Pio Decimo Opens Heart to Neighborhood's Needy: Sets Remarkable Record During 2-Year Existence," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, August 10, 1968, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 14, Folder 4, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[36] Esther Tang, "The New Volunteer," Speech, n.d., Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 4, p. 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[37] Tang, "The New Volunteer," 5.
[38] Tang, "The New Volunteer," 5.

Multicultural Students."[39] In the committee, she argued against including the word "disadvantaged" in the title because she felt that she and people like her had benefited greatly from their knowledge of multiple cultures and languages.[40] At the end of her speech, Tang said, "It is only good sense and natural that each ethnic groups (sic) in our great country has adjusted to America, and retained some of their own customs."[41]

The Civil Rights Movement provided the background for Tang's speech about Chinese culture. This was because Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. popularized the idea that mutual understanding between racial groups would lessen racism.[42] Since Tang's speeches were not just based on the idea that multiculturalism was good but also that education about different cultures would help promote that, the Civil Rights Movement helped create an audience that was receptive to her message. This is not to say that Tang made this speech only because of the Civil Rights Movement; after all, Arizonan interest in Chinese culture predated the Civil Rights movement. Instead, the effects of the Civil Rights Movement built on an already existing interest.

As for what exactly Tang said to educate her audience on Chinese American culture, Tang would stereotype Chinese people as both law-abiding and industrious. In the previously mentioned 1969 speech about Chinese traditions, Tang said that "Statistics show that there is rarely a Chinese guilty of a crime, hardly any juvenile delinquency prevails – nor do they burden the welfare budget."[43] We can also see this in a speech Tang made to the YWCA about Chinese New Year in 1967 where Tang says that "the Chinese have always enjoyed the reputation of sustaining the lowest crime rates among the racial groups…the Chinese are keeping pace with both progress and their inherent traditions. It is this combination that will keep our American-Chinese outstanding examples of Americanism of today."[44]

Tang's descriptions of Chinese culture were reminiscent of the version of the model minority myth that became popular in that decade. As Wu writes, one crucial part of the model minority myth was that it was not defined in isolation but rather in relation to Blackness.[45] In the 1950s, Chinese and Japanese American leaders were already successfully promoting themselves as law abiding and well-adjusted to postwar conservative norms, and these stereotypes became even more mainstream in the mid-1960s as liberals and conservatives could use them to push back on the Civil Rights Movement. As Wu explains, when the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act ended de jure segregation but did not lead to a meaningful closing of the gap in power and wealth among White and Black people, participants in the Black Freedom Struggle called for profound changes to American capitalist democracy. This led to both a liberal and conservative backlash that utilized the model minority myth: liberals saw Chinese and Japanese Americans as evidence of minority social mobility, and conservatives viewed Chinese and Japanese American communities as models of lawfulness while blaming Black and Brown peoples for bringing a decline to law and order.[46]

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[39] Esther Tang, "Chinese Traditions - Speech," Speech, Four Seasons Restaurant, September 18, 1969, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 3, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[40] Tang, "Chinese Traditions - Speech," 1.
[41] Tang, "Chinese Traditions - Speech," 4.
[42] Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Fortress Press, 1981), 16.
[43] Tang, "Chinese Traditions - Speech," 3.
[44] Tang, "Chinese Traditions - Speech," 3.
[45] Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, 209.
[46] Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, 6.

Finally, Tang advocated for Chinese Americans in the 1960s and 1970s through trying to empower minority women in general. This was not just related to Tang's commitment against racism and inequality but directly related to the Women's Liberation Movement. In a 1974 speech she made to the Pima Community College about being a minority woman, Tang said, "The 1970s [is] an era of great strides and acceptance in the business and political world for women! Even so, it has been and still is an antagonizing struggle."[47]

To empower women, Tang emphasized the strength women had when they worked together. In the same 1974 speech, Tang said, "We can be victims, or we can be victors. Long ago we learned that only concerted action can bring about social change. We must, as minority women seek improvements in the quality of our lives in many ways… through political actions, through education, through group action."[48] Tang also recommended specific actions for women, such as in a 1968 speech at the University of Arizona where she argued for the case of women returning to the workforce after giving birth to children. Ultimately, these attempts to empower minority women counted as a kind of advocacy for Asian Americans because Tang identified herself with the category of minority women, using the collective pronoun we when also promoting minority women's career advancement in the 1974 Pima Community College speech.[49]

Conclusion

In 1975, Tang made a speech to Pima Community College graduates in which she expressed her pride as the first Chinese on the governing board.[50] While the election process itself was only a few months long, Tang's journey to get to that point involved decades of her community work and advocacy of Chinese Americans.

An analysis of Tang's life reveals that her advocacy of Chinese Americans was deeply connected with factors in local and gender history. Tang's upbringing in the unique multicultural aspects of the Arizona-Mexico borderland in which Chinese Americans were intimately connected with their neighbors grew her own drive to serve and build up the community, and it was in community leadership that Tang would advocate for Chinese Americans. Going into the 1950s and 1960s, Tang's advocacy shifted with changes in mainstream gender norms. In the 1950s, Tang advocated for Chinese Americans within the framework of the conservative gender norms for domestic labor in the 1950s. With the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Tang advocated for Chinese Americans by positioning them as minority women that could make a difference in society, and that also went along with her overall drive to fight racism and inequality in that era. Ultimately, understanding Tang's history gives valuable insights into how local circumstances and gender shaped Asian American race construction and, more specifically, the model minority myth in the Cold War era.

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[47] Esther Tang, "Minority Women in a Changing Society," Speech, December 3, 1974, Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 6, p. 1, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.
[48] Tang, "Minority Women in a Changing Society," 1–2.
[49] Tang, "Minority Women in a Changing Society," 1.
[50] Esther Tang, "1975 Speech to Graduates," Speech, n.d., Esther Don Tang Collection, Box 12, Folder 6, Arizona Historical Society - Tucson.