

REDEFINING CHINESE AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

Madame Chiang and the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion Laws in 1943

Abstract: In 1943, after 60 years of exclusion, the ban on Chinese immigration to America was suddenly lifted with the passing of the Magnuson Act. The legislative change came shortly after Soong May-ling, wife to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, finished her three-month-long speaking tour in the U.S., during which she made numerous public appearances to appeal for more American aid for Chinese troops fighting in the Pacific theater of World War II. Interestingly, while much of the publicity surrounding Chinese exclusion repeal hailed Mme. Chiang as the catalyst for the campaign's momentum, in reality she never once broached the subject in any of her speeches. By examining the content of her speeches as well as the news coverage of her visit, this study attempts to piece together a timeline of the rise in support for exclusion repeal during Mme. Chiang's U.S. visit and probe her significance in a campaign that would redefine American citizenship.

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On February 18, 1943, Soong May-ling, the wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, became the first private citizen and second woman to address Congress when she spoke before first the Senate and then the House. Known affectionately to Americans as the “Missimo”, Madame Chiang dazzled the room full of white male legislators with her oratorical ability and her confidence, as she called for more American aid to China’s war in the Pacific. As *Time* magazine wrote, “The U.S. Senate is not in the habit of rising to its feet to applaud. For Madame Chiang it rose and thundered.”¹ At the same time, Mme. Chiang’s appearance before Congress—and her subsequent grand tour of the United States—represented a moment of irony. Under legislature passed by Congress since 1882, Chinese were largely barred from immigrating to the United States and from obtaining citizenship.² However, just as it was designed to improve relations between the United States and China, Mme. Chiang’s tour seemed also to inspire America to reevaluate its treatment of Chinese attempting to enter or already living in their country. Immediately after her speech before Congress, Rep. Martin Kennedy of Massachusetts introduced HR 1882 to repeal Chinese exclusion laws:

We welcome you also, as a daughter is welcomed by her foster mother, to the land where you received an American education.... I take this auspicious occasion, in your gracious presence, as an indication of my unbounded admiration of a nation’s courage which has amazed the world, to introduce this day a bill to grant to the Chinese rights of entry to the United States and rights of citizenship.³



Soong May-ling (c. 1942)

Source: San Diego Air and Space Museum Archive
(Wikimedia Commons)

Eleven months later, the 78th Congress voted to repeal Chinese exclusion laws, establishing annual quotas for Chinese immigrants and making Chinese eligible for naturalization.

While Rep. Kennedy may have symbolically linked the repeal of Chinese exclusion to Mme. Chiang’s visit, it is more difficult to pin down her legacy in advocating for

Redefining Chinese American Citizenship

the cause against Chinese exclusion. Even though she made dozens of public appearances during her tour, Mme. Chiang never once publicly addressed the issue. Despite the hopes of racial liberals that she would speak on behalf of minority peoples in America, Mme. Chiang conducted herself as a diplomat from China during her visit and steered clear of polarizing topics which would have been detrimental to U.S.-China relations. On the other hand, Mme. Chiang's visit undeniably coincided with a rise in support for the repeal campaign. As Senator Charles Andrews of Florida remarked during a Senate debate on the repeal, "Hundreds of editorials and news articles have appeared in the newspapers throughout the country since last May ... favorable to legislation of this kind".⁴ In fact, Mme. Chiang had concluded her tour of the U.S. in April 1943; the publication of these editorials—many of whom actually cited the Madame by name—certainly suggests her presence in the country had a galvanizing effect on the repeal efforts' momentum.

The following study examines Mme. Chiang's public rhetoric and persona to determine the interests Mme. Chiang acted on behalf of during her tour, and evaluate the extent to which her presence in the United States shaped the debate over exclusion repeal. In particular, this essay assesses the influence Mme. Chiang exerted in two key areas: The United States' wartime alliance with China and American public opinion of Chinese Americans. These issues are worth examination due to their importance not only to the exclusion repeal but also to Mme. Chiang's personal success in securing American aid for her husband's war campaign in China. This essay argues that the alignment of interests between the two causes allowed Mme. Chiang to advance the campaign for exclusion repeal without compromising her own agenda, accomplishing both objectives perhaps more effectively than otherwise possible.

REPEALING EXCLUSION AS WARTIME AID

When Mme. Chiang arrived at Mitchel Field in New York on November 27, 1942, she was greeted by Harry Hopkins, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's top advisors in charge of the Lend-Lease wartime program.⁵ This was highly unusual, as Mme. Chiang had come to the U.S. not as a diplomatic representative but rather as a private citizen, in order to be hospitalized for various debilitating health conditions.⁶ The nature of the visit did not, however, seem to deter the Madame's intent to secure diplomatic gains for China while she was abroad. Shortly before her arrival, Mme. Chiang had specifically asked that Hopkins be the first person she met with when she landed in New York. On the car ride to Presbyterian Hospital, despite Mme. Chiang's assurances that she had come only for medical treatment and rest, her conversation with Hopkins turned immediately to the war. Her objective was clear: to shift Allied focus from the European theater to Japan, and to obtain more material aid for China.



Madame China Kai-Shek (1945)

Source: *Unknown, Wikimedia Commons*

Unfortunately, it seemed this would not be accomplished easily. The White House seemed to be well aware of Mme. Chiang's intentions, having known for some time that the visit was coming. In a telegram sent from Washington to the British Foreign Office in the summer of 1942, Viscount Halifax Edward Wood worried that the trip would be "potentially dangerous as Madame Chiang may make no secret of her views on the [Far East] War to U.S. journalists who will be much more ready to believe her than us. If and when the visit becomes known officially to our Embassy in Washington, it might be well ... to indicate tactfully to Madame Chiang the danger to our common cause of immoderate criticism".⁷ The White House appeared to echo these views and resolved to deflect Mme. Chiang's attempts to secure promises from Washington. In February 1942, the House had just approved a \$500 million loan to Chiang Kai-shek for the war against Japan. Even though the ratio of U.S. Lend-Lease aid to China was only around 1.5 percent of the total from 1941 to 1942, rumors that corrupt Chinese officials were siphoning resources frustrated the White House.⁸ Upon hearing Mme. Chiang's direct appeals to turn Allied focus to Japan, Hopkins only replied that such a strategy would be "infeasible," making it abundantly clear that swaying Washington during this trip would require additional finesse.⁹

At the same time, news of Mme. Chiang's arrival in the U.S. had generated hope among left intellectuals and civil rights activists that her popularity could become a platform for advancing discussions of race relations in the country. Among them was Richard Walsh, editor of the liberal magazine *Asia*. Walsh would later serve as head of the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion, a group of well-connected white Americans who served as the primary advocates for the repeal campaign. Though the Committee would be formed in July 1943, efforts to rally support for repeal preceded Mme. Chiang's U.S. visit by more than a year.¹⁰ In February, Walsh published a memorandum by Charles Nelson Spinks entitled "Repeal Chinese Exclusion!"¹¹ As historian K. Scott Wong observes, the article argued that the Chinese were the only group excluded by a set of specific laws and that, since lifting the immigration ban would result in only about two thousand Chinese entering the country annually, Americans should support a repeal because "[the Chinese] have been entitled to [racial equality] ever since the United States first came into contact with their country."¹² Upon publication, the article received considerable attention and the base of support for repeal grew. China scholar—and advisor to Chiang Kai-shek—Owen Lattimore wrote: "It seems to me there could hardly be a better time for launching a program for the repeal of Chinese exclusion"¹³

In spite of the coincidence of her visit with burgeoning momentum in the campaign for repeal, Mme. Chiang did not seem keen to involve herself in the debate. Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), repeatedly sought to meet with the Madame during her stay in Presbyterian Hospital.¹⁴ With the help of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, White passed along numerous letters asking to set up an appointment, but each time was ignored. Meanwhile, Mme. Chiang entertained numerous other notable guests during her recuperation, making her lack of response to White appear to be a purposeful dismissal the cause he represented. Her actions make political sense in light of the diplomatic challenges Mme. Chiang faced in her campaign to secure Washington's support. In order to win American approval for more aid to China, Mme. Chiang would need to make a concerted effort to distance herself from an issue that might require her to critique the same administration upon whom she relied for help. Thus, her reluctance to engage controversial figures like White can be viewed as a realist approach to the diplomatic mission at hand.

However, even though Mme. Chiang never explicitly spoke on behalf of the ongoing movement to repeal exclusion laws during her U.S. visit, her public rhetoric of bolstering the wartime alliance between the U.S. and China seemed nonetheless to positively affect the repeal campaign's progress. In her Congressional address in February 1943, Mme. Chiang strategically positioned China not only as a

military ally to the United States but also as an old friend in need, while simultaneously criticizing the Roosevelt administration's refusal to increase aid to China:

We in China, like you, want a better world, not for ourselves alone, but for all mankind, and we must have it. It is not enough, however, to proclaim our idea[l]s or even to be convinced that we have them. In order to preserve, uphold, and maintain them, there are times when we should throw all we cherish into our effort to fulfill these ideals even at the risk of failure.¹⁵

As historian Laura Tyson Li writes, "[Mme. Chiang's] attack on American policy was cleverly camouflaged by a carefully worded appeal to Americans' deepest emotional need as a nation: to be admired, and—most of all—needed by weak, oppressed, and ostensibly less civilized people."¹⁶ In particular, Mme. Chiang highlighted the common ideals which the two countries—despite their racial differences—were both fighting for in the war, while affirming her belief "that devotion to common principles eliminates differences in race and that identity of ideals is the strongest possible solvent of racial dissimilarities."¹⁷ By emphasizing the shared ideological values between the U.S. and China, Mme. Chiang sought to challenge Washington's policy of focusing on its European Allies, with whom it presumably shared racial and cultural ties. In the process, she tied the success of the war effort to the maintenance of the "traditional friendship" between the Chinese and American forces, a notion that she would continuously reinforce in later speeches.¹⁸

This idea was quickly seized upon as a key argument in the debate surrounding the repeal. In his pro-repeal article in 1942, Rep. Spinks had made a moral appeal for repealing Chinese exclusion, arguing that "as our allies, the Chinese deserve racial equality now."¹⁹ A year later, Mme. Chiang's campaign for aid to China put further pressure on the United States to support its ally. Increasingly, these two issues of repeal and wartime aid became tied together in the public rhetoric. As Mme. Chiang's tour continued, abolishing Chinese exclusion laws became more than simply a symbolic gesture to a wartime ally, but rather in itself a necessary act to preserve Allied momentum in the Pacific. Advocacy groups ran newspaper ads urging citizens to write their Congressmen in favor of the repeal "as a measure of war expediency, to strengthen Chinese morale."²⁰

As the story of the repeal bill was picked up by American media, Mme. Chiang made more direct reference to the issue of racial equality in her rhetoric, even though she did not openly call for support of the legislation. When she spoke in Madison Square Garden, a few weeks after Kennedy had first introduced HR 1882 during her Congressional appearance, Mme. Chiang digressed suddenly in her enthusiastic speech

on the U.S.-China war effort to consider ancient history. “All the peoples in the Roman Empire could become citizens,” she said. “Other tribes of the so-called barbarian world of that day were accepted and welcomed as allies of Rome, and not as subject peoples. This broad and practiced concept of the Romans was, I think, the chief cause of the Roman Empire lasting over a thousand years.”²¹ It is possible these words were casually spoken. Nevertheless, Mme. Chiang could not have touched on a more timely issue. It is unlikely that Mme. Chiang was unaware of the burgeoning campaign for Chinese exclusion repeal, but her diplomatic status prevented her from engaging more openly with the issue. Thus, her innocuous remarks—addressed to an audience of more than 3,000—seem like nod to repeal, reinforcing a symbolic link between her tour and the movement’s momentum without openly critiquing U.S. policy.

women’s organization, fundraised over \$22,000 for Mme. Chiang’s charity for war orphans in 1943.²⁵ Though her insistence that the Roosevelt administration provide China with more financial support was not as successful, Mme. Chiang had successfully swayed the American public to act on behalf of her country.

SHAPING AMERICAN POLICY THROUGH PUBLIC OPINION

Though she was confident as an orator and a diplomat, Mme. Chiang arguably exerted the greatest influence upon the American public through her personal traits. Kennedy’s passionate speech dedicating his repeal bill to the Madame was by no means the only instance where call for repeal mentioned Mme. Chiang by name. Some even proposed repeal specifically as a tribute to the Chinese First Lady.²⁶ Her personality and charms were so infamous that, before

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As Mme. Chiang’s tour continued, the repeal campaign began to catch Washington’s attention. During Mme. Chiang’s White House meeting with Roosevelt in February, the President had carefully deflected her attempts to secure promises of more material aid to China.²² Upon embarking on her tour, Mme. Chiang unrelentingly pressured Roosevelt’s administration for support through her public speeches. The question remained: would Washington provide this aid—and where would it come from? Admiral Henry E. Yarnell, who served as Special Advisor to the Chinese Military Mission during the war, testified before Congress on the importance of “strengthening the determination of the Chinese Government and people to fight on until real and adequate assistance can be given... [by considering], by act as well as word, China as an equal in every respect with the other three Allied Nations.”²³ In other words, supporting Chinese exclusion repeal now represented an increasingly effective way to silence the Madame’s criticisms without damaging the relationship between China and the United States. In October, Roosevelt called on Congress to act prompting on the bill for repeal: “China’s resistance does not depend alone on guns and planes and on attacks on land, on the sea and from the air. It is based as much in the spirit of her people and her faith in her Allies. We owe it to the Chinese to strengthen that faith.”²⁴ For her part, Mme. Chiang utilized her influence on the public sympathies of Americans to secure monetary aid for China. Donations to China relief organizations saw a 200 percent increase during her tour, primarily from individual donors. The Order of the Eastern Star, a particularly conservative

Hopkins’ meeting with Mme. Chiang when she arrived in the U.S., the President had jokingly offered to provide his advisor with a bodyguard, warning him: “Watch your step, or before you know it she will have you wound around her little finger.”²⁷

Even as she was hailed as a symbol for racial liberalism during her U.S. tour, Mme. Chiang herself had deeply ambivalent feelings about America. During her time as a student at first Wesleyan and then Wellesley College (transferring in 1914), the discrimination Mme. Chiang faced left her both frustrated with American racism and insecure about being viewed as an outsider. Her Wellesley professor Annie Tuell noted that Mme. Chiang “did not love very many of us, or very hard.”²⁸ Even before she ever left China, Mme. Chiang was already deeply aware of how U.S. immigration policy perpetuated discrimination against Chinese. In 1904, her eldest sister Soong Ailing had been detained at the immigration station in Seattle, Washington, while on her way to enroll at Wesleyan College. Immigration officials did not believe Ailing was a student legally entering the country, even though she possessed all of the proper papers confirming her identity.

While touring the U.S. in 1943, Mme. Chiang insisted on top ceremonial protocol even though she had not been sent to the U.S. on a diplomatic visit. Her preoccupation with protocol may have stemmed from her desire for recognition in a country that had rejected her for her race decades earlier. Contrasting her visit with Winston Churchill’s in

April of the same year, a journalist remarked, “Why, it may be asked, was Churchill’s visit so hush-hush, and Madame’s so well advertised? Simply because Madame’s visit had to do with molding public opinion, while Churchill’s had to do with secret conferences over future United Nations war strategy. In the former there was every reason for publicity—in the latter every reason for secrecy.”²⁹

Though her demands on protocol made her a controversial figure among other diplomatic officials, Mme. Chiang’s high-profile tour was met with an unprecedentedly warm welcome from the American public. It was easy to see why. Having studied at two different American colleges, she spoke flawlessly in English. Her speeches often included allusions and anecdotes designed to show off her Western education, and Clare Boothe Luce once praised her ability to speak “flawless, tumbling, forthright *American*.”³⁰ Mme. Chiang was also a devout Christian. Simultaneously to her 1943 speaking tour, The Methodist Church published a testimonial account written by the Madame, entitled “I Confess My Faith.”³¹ Together with her educational background, her openly professed faith and values further established her in the public imagination as a success story of Americanization. As Leong writes, “Her image was both produced for American consumption and intended to appear American-made. Its true impact was not on China but on American attitudes toward China.”³² Moreover, Mme. Chiang’s personal image positively impacted public perception of Chinese Americans. A few weeks into her tour, Mme. Chiang arrived at Pennsylvania Station in New York and paid a visit the same afternoon to Chinatown. News coverage of the event described “flags of the two countries [U.S. and China] and draping colorful bunting” hanging from buildings, hailing the visit as a shared moment between Chinese Americans and the rest of the country: “It was Chinatown’s day, not as a city curiosity, but as a link to another nation that has suffered from Japanese aggression. The distance between Pearl Harbor and Pell Street grew small.”³³

Yet, for all her popularity in the country, Mme. Chiang was nevertheless barred under American immigration law from becoming a U.S. citizen—an irony that was not lost upon either the American public or supporters of the repeal. On Mme. Chiang’s Congressional address, Representative Will Rogers of California remarked, “I want you to know that many of us sitting in the House felt embarrassed to remember that by the laws of this country, this woman was legally not good enough to apply for citizenship in the United States, if she had wanted to; but we exclude her purely on the basis of race.”³⁴ Representative Walter Judd put a point on things even more colorfully: “Hitler could come in under a quota, Mussolini could come in under a quota, but Madame Chiang Kai-shek, or the finest type of Chinese people, cannot because we say they are ineligible to come here.”³⁵ The protest against exclusion



SPEECH OF

Madame Chiang Kai-shek

at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass.

March 7, 1943

Wellesley College speech poster (1943)

Source: Wellesley College (Wikimedia Commons)

on the basis of race had found in Mme. Chiang a perfect poster child; here was an individual who widely accepted by Americans as one of their own but was barred from legal naturalization.

The fact that Mme. Chiang was received publicly with protocol fit for royals and statesmen provided an even sharper juxtaposition, while positive public perception of Chinese Americans called anti-Chinese exclusion laws into question altogether. As historian Madeline Y. Hsu wrote, “The contradiction between the generalized racial discrimination embedded in the Chinese exclusion laws and the accomplishments attributable to outstanding, individual Chinese provided potent arguments for repeal.”³⁶ In her appearance during the House hearings on HR 1882 and HR 2309 (both of which were repeal bills), novelist and ardent internationalist Pearl S. Buck testified, “We have excluded not only Chinese coolies; we have excluded Chinese of the highest quality and attainment by our total exclusion laws.”³⁷ Buck was by no means the only support of repeal to make such an appeal. Representative Judd similarly pointed out that, despite the continued existence of discriminatory immigration laws, many Americans “have come to admire the Chinese for his industry, his intelligence, his patriotism, and his good faith, and we



Soong May-ling in White House Oval Office (1943) Source: *US Whitehouse Staff, Wikimedia Commons*

have come see, in the person of Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, the symbol of a truly great people”.³⁸ These sentiments were echoed by California Democrat Thomas Ford, who vouched for the Chinese as “reliable people ... and good citizens in every sense of the word. I am sure the Chinese will make a distinct and tremendously valuable contribution to freedom as conceived by democracy”.³⁹

However, while it is true that public opinion of Chinese Americans improved during Mme. Chiang’s tour, racist opposition to repealing the immigration ban persisted in debates surrounding the issue. William Green, president of the staunchly anti-repeal American Federation of Labor, dismissed Chinese as unassimilable to American society: “People from other countries are absorbed in a few years and you can’t tell where they came from. A Chinaman is a Chinaman”.⁴⁰ Representative Compton White voiced similar concerns: “I do not think we can take the Chinese with their habits and mentalities and ... bring them up to our standards of civilization.... Let us help the Chinese—but help them in their own country!”⁴¹

On the other hand, in seeking to improve American perception of Chinese, Mme. Chiang reinforced existing racism against Japanese that had been perpetuated by the ongoing war in the Pacific. In her speech in Congress, entitled “Japan IS First Foe”, she claimed to have seen American values of democracy displayed in the camaraderie between U.S. soldiers of all different nationalities but notably left out Japanese Americans. Her

argument that U.S. war policy must fight Japanese imperialism first found strong support particularly on the West Coast, where Pearl Harbor remained fresh in the public mind. In a way, this aspect of Mme. Chiang’s rhetoric also served to improve the American view of Chinese Americans by juxtaposing them with against the Japanese, thereby strengthening the case for repeal. A brief on the introduction of repeal to Chinese exclusion appeared—notably, in the *Manzanar Free Press*, a Japanese internment camp publication—directly underneath a story about lawsuits attempting to revoke native-born Japanese American citizenship.⁴² Time published an article claiming to teach Americans “How to Tell Your [Chinese] Friends from the Japs”.⁴³ Only by transferring the longstanding “Yellow Peril” narrative to Japanese in the U.S. could the American public consider Chinese as fellow citizens. Unfortunately, in their efforts to expedite repeal, some supporters played up this sentiment, arguing that failing to lift the immigration left the U.S. open to attack by Japanese propaganda. Senator Carl Curtis of Nebraska worried of the consequences Chinese and Japanese from joining forces: “I cannot see it any other way that the future is black if all the yellow and brown men of Asia turn against us. I believe one of the most important things we have to do is to see to it that our war in the Pacific does not become a race war”.⁴⁴ Others argued that only by passing the repeal could the Allies counter Japanese taunts. As effective as such a strategy was, it is nonetheless ironic that, in seeking to right a historical wrong, repeal supporters turned to racialized arguments against another Asian group as evidence for lifting the ban against Chinese.

CONCLUSION

By examining the rhetoric and public persona Mme. Chiang maintained during her tour, we are better able to evaluate her legacy with respect to the repeal of the immigration ban. In her campaign to bolster the Chinese-American war alliance and pressure Washington for more financial support, Mme. Chiang enabled supporters of repealing exclusion laws to co-opt her rhetoric for their own purposes, while motivating the White House to act on behalf of the repeal effort. Granted, minding her status as an Allied nation's first lady and informal diplomat to the Americans, Mme. Chiang never spoke publicly in support of the repeal movement in spite of the campaign's gaining momentum, in order to advance her primary objective of securing gains for China. However, though her rhetoric was carefully chosen to appeal to the sympathies of Congress, her emphasis on a special U.S.-China bond extending beyond a purely military alliance lent itself instead to the repeal campaign efforts by linking the success of China's war effort to the equal treatment of its citizens.

Mme. Chiang's second—and perhaps more important—contribution to the efforts to repeal of exclusion laws lies in her role in shaping public opinion during a crucial time in the legislation's progress through Congress. Her image, from her educational and religious background to her oratorical skills, was carefully constructed to fit American values and garner support for China's cause. Her high-profile reception and numerous celebrated appearances—at her own insistence—further increased her celebrity during the tour, despite the fact that her status officially remained that of a private citizen for the duration of her trip. While racial discrimination against Chinese remained a barrier, Mme. Chiang's personal prominence was strikingly effective in improving American perception of Chinese and advancing the case for repealing exclusion laws.

Though scholars have criticized her for her silence in public about racial discrimination, Mme. Chiang would ultimately announce her support for repealing exclusion laws shortly before the legislature was set to debate the bill in mid-May 1943, when she invited to dinner a group of the campaign's most vocal political supporters.⁴⁵ During the dinner, she reportedly urged the Congressmen to push the bill through while sympathy for China was at its height. If Mme. Chiang had acted earlier out of strategic considerations for her own diplomatic agenda when she had refrained from taking a stance on the repeal, her sudden openness on the subject in this particular instance seems to indicate newfound confidence in her tour's influence upon the American public—and a prevailing interest in seeing the repeal through to its resolution. Critics of Mme. Chiang might be right in claiming she was not selfless in her support of the repeal, but it is undeniable that she was a deliberate actor as well as a crucial agent in the cause's final success. 🏛️

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