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Critique of the Creative Journalistic Piece titled “山口幾多郎 Yamaguchi Kitarō”

Amateur reporter Zelin Wang’s creative journalistic piece titled “山口幾多郎 Yamaguchi Kitarō” is a work that aims to describe a fictional Kibei¹ Nissei² Japanese American character Yamaguchi Kitarō’s life as the executive chef and owner of Sushi Yamaguchi, an exquisite Japanese omakase sushi restaurant in the fictional city of Las Aires, which is supposed to mirror the city of Los Angeles in real life.

In Zelin Wang’s report, Yamaguchi Kitarō’s main life motivations are two-fold: 1) Yamaguchi’s pursuit of his American dream drives Yamaguchi to return to the US after receiving education in a rural Japanese city called Kushima. 2) Yamaguchi’s commitment to his Japanese/Japanese American community, depicted by Wang as being “sacrificial (10),” led Yamaguchi to volunteer to set up the Manzanar incarceration camps and to preserve and promulgate an elegant side of the Japanese culture through his profession as an omakase-style sushi chef.

First, Wang’s fictional piece creatively merges many of the key issues that the Japanese American community faced and, to a large extent, is still facing today: political affiliation, racial discrimination, ties with traditional Japanese identity, and identity as American citizens.

¹ Kibei, 帰米, literally “return to America,” is a term that describes mostly second-generation Japanese Americans who returned to the United States after receiving their education in Japan.

² Nissei denotes second-generation Japanese Americans.

Therefore, Wang's piece is a valuable fictional work that says meaningful things about the plight of an ethnic community in the United States.

Despite Wang's laudable attempt to construct a Kibei Nissei Japanese American success story, such a resolution might be too premature, if not entirely disastrous. First of all, Wang's narrative of Yamaguchi's success story is elitist and classist. While on the one hand, Wang draws the following philosophy from Yamaguchi's life: "it is not how much money you have that earns your respect from the Japanese community but how dedicated you are to your chosen profession." The statement almost sounds like a proletarian proclamation of the dignity of working for the sake of working. On the other hand, most examples of "success" and "aspiring social positions" listed in Wang's report are inextricably tied to the elite upper-class structure of the society. First, why does Sushi Yamaguchi have to be located in the "glamorous Caesar Boulevard" filled with European continental restaurants? Does Sushi Yamaguchi need to prove himself by being able to peer against those classy European-style restaurants? Why did Wang design the high-end French restaurant "the Bourdieu" as Yamaguchi Kitarō's first job experience in the United States? Similarly, why is omakase sushi, an exorbitantly expensive type of Japanese cuisine, the chosen profession of Yamaguchi? In other words, amateur reporter Wang's conceptions of "Japanese traditions" and "elegant culinary culture" are quite narrowly elitist. Despite his claim that money isn't a crucial consideration of Japanese *shokunin*'s professional work, in his narrative, this correlation between what is considered "good/valuable" and what is expensive is insidiously constructed.

Second, Wang's positive depiction of Yamaguchi's silence about Japanese American's historical suffering of racial discrimination is problematic. In "山口幾多郎 Yamaguchi Kitarō," Wang attempts to justify Yamaguchi's deliberate attempt to de-emphasize the US government's

unjust incarcerations of Japanese Americans after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The logic goes as the following: "Although Yamaguchi remains reticent throughout the forty minutes of the omakase session, his skillful presentation of the art of making sushi did successfully change my impression of Japanese culture." Similarly, Wang believes that it is reasonable to assume that while many second-generation Japanese Americans did not vocally remember their history nor protest against ensuing racial inequality, their silent actions as obedient members of the society did earn them the title as "model minority"

What is problematic about this justification of "model minority" is that it discredits past social movements against racial inequality. By extolling the virtue of remaining silent while bearing the brunt of racial discrimination, Wang is at the same time disapproving verbal protest movements as an illegitimate, unreasonable, or even childish way of asserting for themselves. More importantly, the supporters of "model minority" are innocently relying on the power of others to bring social changes. The subtext of the "model minority" narrative is that as long as Asian Americans remain silent, then the dominant white Americans will mercifully grant them additional rights. Yet "those additional rights" will never be so great that Asian Americans will be on the same level as white Americans.

In conclusion, although Wang's efforts to construct a success story for a Kibei Nissei that takes different sides of Japanese Americans' hardships into consideration should be complimented, Wang's piece is an extremely elitist/classist one that equates "what is expensive and upper-class" with "what is inherently good." Additionally, Wang owes an apology to the Asian American civil rights movement advocates for discrediting their efforts by justifying the model minority narrative.