From "Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women," Beacon Press 1989

Roy Barnes recoiled from the pitiless knowledge in her eyes. He saw her clearly now, but it was too late. His mouth opened and closed, but the gush of words had gone dry. He seemed to age before her eyes, like Urashima-taro who opened the precious box of youth and was instantly wrinkled and broken by the unleashed tide of years.

"You'll have to leave now, Mr. Barnes. I'm going in to fix lunch." Emiko's smile was quiet as unsheathed steel. "Tell Mattie I hope she's feeling better."

She watched him pick his way across the dirt, avoiding the puncture vine and rusted tin cans, and looking as gray as the rags that bleached beneath the fierce sun. Jenny stared past him and the small houses of their neighborhood, to the desert sand beyond, glittering like an ocean with shards of mica.

"Do you think we might ever find gold?" she asked.

They gazed together over the desert, full of unknown perils and ancient secrets, the dust of dreams and battles.

"Maybe." Emiko stood tall, shading her eyes from the deceptive shimmer. "Maybe."

Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women

RENEE E. TAJIMA

In recent years the media have undergone spectacular technical innovations. But whereas form has leaped toward the year 2000, it seems that content still straddles the turn of the last century. A reigning example of the industry's stagnation is its portrayal of Asian women. And the only real signs of life are stirring far away from Hollywood in the cutting rooms owned and operated by Asian America's independent producers.

The commercial media are, in general, populated by stereotyped characterizations that range in complexity, accuracy, and persistence over time. There is the hooker with a heart of gold and the steely tough yet honorable mobster. Most of these characters are white, and may be as one-dimensional as Conan the Barbarian or as complex as R. P. McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Images of Asian women, however, have remained consistently simplistic and inaccurate during the sixty years of largely forgettable screen appearances. There are two basic types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (a.k.a. China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu's various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames). There is little in between, although experts may differ as to whether Suzie Wong belongs to the race-blind "hooker with a heart of gold" category, or deserves one all of her own.

Asian women in American cinema are interchangeable in appearance and name, and are joined together by the common language of non-language—that is, uninterpretable chattering, pidgin English, giggling, or silence. They may be specifically identified by nationality—particularly in war films—but that's where screen accuracy ends. The dozens of populations of Asian and Pacific Island groups are lumped into one homogeneous mass of Mama Sans.

Passive Love Interests

Asian women in film are, for the most part, passive figures who exist to serve men, especially as love interests for white men (Lotus Blossoms) or as partners in crime with men of their own kind (Dragon Ladies). One of the first Dragon Lady types was played by Anna May Wong. In the 1924 spectacular *Thief of Bagdad* she uses treachery to help an evil Mongol prince attempt to win the Princess of Bagdad from Douglas Fairbanks.

The Lotus Blossom Baby, a sexual-romantic object, has been the prominent type throughout the years. These "Oriental flowers" are utterly feminine, delicate, and welcome respites from their often loud, independent American counterparts. Many of them are the spoils of the last three wars fought in Asia. One recent television example is Sergeant Klinger's Korean wife in the short-lived series "AfterMash."

In the real world, this view of Asian women has spawned an entire marriage industry. Today the Filipino wife is particularly in vogue for American men who order Asian brides from picture catalogues, just as you might buy an imported cheese slicer from Spiegel's. (I moderated a community program on Asian American women recently. A rather bewildered young saleswoman showed up with a stack of brochures to bleed and Mama-sans who do not struggle. These women filmmakers—most of whom began their careers only since the 1970s—often draw from deeply personal perspectives in their work: Virginia Hashii's *Jenny* portrays a young Japanese American girl who explores her own Nikkei heritage for the first time; Christine Choy's *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976) documents the lives of women in New York's Chinatown; Felicia Lowe's *China: Land of My Father* (1979) is a film diary of the filmmaker's own first reunion with her grandmother in China; Renee Cho's *The New Wife* (1978) dramatizes the arrival of an immigrant bride to America; and Lana Pih Jokel's *Chiang Ching: A Dance Journey* traces the life of dancer-actress-teacher Chiang. All these films were produced during the 1970s and together account for only a little more than two hours of screen time. Most are first works with the same rough-edged quality that characterized early Asian American film efforts.

Women producers have maintained a strong presence during the 1980s, although their work does not always focus on women's issues. And when it does, the films vary in style, approach, and quality. *With Silk Wings*, a videotape directed by Loni Ding and produced by San Francisco's Asian Women United, contains profiles of Asian American women in various nontraditional jobs. In 1981 the Asian Women United group in New York collaborated with director Jon Wing Lum to create *Ourselves*, an introspective study of young activists within the group. (Wing managed to edit the hour-long piece with only forty cuts.)

Also in this decade veteran filmmakers Emiko Omori and Christine Choy have produced their first dramatic efforts. Omori's *The Departure* is the story of a Japanese girl who must give up her beloved traditional dolls in pre-World War II California. Unfortunately it feels incomplete at approximately fourteen minutes in length and leaves one wanting more. In *Fei Tien: Goddess in Flight*, Choy tries to adapt a nonlinear cinematic structure to Genny Lim's play *Pigeons*, which explores the relationship between a Chinese American yuppie and a Chinatown "bird lady."

Perhaps the strongest work made thus far has been directed by a male filmmaker, Arthur Dong. *Sewing Woman* is a small, but beautifully crafted portrait of Dong's mother, Zem Ping. It chronicles her life from war-torn China to San Francisco's garment factories. Other films and tapes by Asian men include Michael Uno's *Emi* (1978), a portrait of the Japanese American writer and former concentration camp internee, Emi Tonooka; the Yonemoto brothers' neonarrative *Green Card*, a soap-style saga of a Japanese immigrant artist seeking truth, love, and permanent residency in Southern California; and Steve Okazaki's *Survivors*, a documentary focusing on the women survivors of the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All these filmmakers are American-born Japanese. *Orientations*, by Asian Canadian Richard Fung, is the first work I've seen that provides an in-depth look at the Asian gay community, and it devotes a good amount of time to Asian Canadian lesbians.

Our Own Image

These film and videomakers, women and men, face a challenge far beyond creating entertainment and art. Several generations of Asian women have been raised with racist and sexist celluloid images. The models for passivity and servility in these films and television programs fit neatly into the myths imposed on us, and contrast sharply with the more liberating ideals of independence and activism. Generations of other Americans have also grown up with these images. And their acceptance of the dehumanization implicit in the stereotypes of expendability and invisibility is frightening.

Old images of Asian women in the mainstream media will likely remain stagnant for awhile. After sixty years, there have been few signs of progress. However there is hope because of the growing number of filmmakers emerging from our own communities. Wayne Wang in 1985 completed *Dim Sum*, a beautifully crafted feature film about the relationship between a mother and daughter in San Francisco's Chinatown. *Dim Sum*, released through a commercial distributor, could be the first truly sensitive film portrayal of Asian American women to reach a substantial national audience. In quality and numbers, Asian American filmmakers may soon constitute a critical mass out of which we will see a body of work that gives us a new image, our own image.

The standard of beauty for Asian women that is set in the movies deserves mention. Caucasian women are often used for Asian roles, which contributes to a case of aesthetic imperialism for Asian women. When Asian actresses are chosen they invariably have large eyes, high cheekbones, and other Caucasian-like characteristics when they appear on the silver screen. As Judy Chu of the University of California, Los Angeles, has pointed out, much of Anna May Wong's appeal was due to her Western looks. Chu unearthed this passage from the June 1924 *Photoplay* which refers to actress Wong, but sounds a lot like a description of Eurasian model/actress Arianne: "Her deep brown eyes, while the slant is not pronounced, are typically oriental. But her Manchu mother has given her a height and poise of figure that Chinese maidens seldom have."

Invisibility

There is yet another important and pervasive characteristic of Asian women on the screen, invisibility. The number of roles in the Oriental flower and Dragon Lady categories have been few, and generally only supporting parts. But otherwise Asian women are absent. Asian women do not appear in films as union organizers, or divorced mothers fighting for the custody of their children, or fading movie stars, or spunky trial lawyers, or farm women fighting bank foreclosures; Asian women are not portrayed as ordinary people.

Then there is the kind of invisibility that occurs when individual personalities and separate identities become indistinguishable from one another. Some memorable Asian masses are the islanders fleeing exploding volcanoes in *Krakatoa: East of Java* (1969) and the Vietnamese villagers fleeing Coppola's airborne weaponry in various scenes from *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Asian women populate these hordes or have groupings of their own, usually in some type of harem situation. In *Cry for Happy* (1961), Glenn Ford is cast as an American GI who stumbles into what turns out to be the best little geisha house in Japan.

Network television has given Asian women even more opportunities to paper the walls, so to speak. They are background characters in "Hawaii 5-0," "Magnum PI," and other series that transverse the Pacific. I've seen a cheongsam-clad maid in the soap "One Life to Live," and assorted Chinatown types surface whenever the cops and robbers shows revive scripts about the Chinatown Tong wars.

The most stunning exceptions to television's abuse of Asian images is the phenomenon of news anchors: Connie Chung (CBS) and Sasha Foo (CNN) have national spots, and Tritia Toyota (Los Angeles), Wendy Tokuda (San Francisco), Kaity Tong (New York), Sandra Yep (Sacramento), and others are reporters in large cities. All of them cover hard news, long the province of middle-aged white men with authoritative voices. Toyota and Yep have been able to parlay their positions so that there is more coverage of Asian American stories at their stations. Because of their presence on screen—and ironically, perhaps because of the celebrity status of today's newscasters—these anchors wield much power in rectifying Asian women's intellectual integrity in the media. (One hopes *Year of the Dragon*'s Tracy Tzu hasn't canceled their positive effect.

Undoubtedly the influence of these visible reporters is fortified by the existence of highly organized Asian American journalists. The West Coast–based Asian American Journalists Association has lobbied fo affirmative action in the print and broadcast media. In film and video the same type of political initiatives have spurred a new movement o independently produced works made by and about Asian Americans.

Small Gems From Independents

The independent film movement emerged during the 1960s as an alternative to the Hollywood mill. In a broad sense it has had little direc impact in reversing the distorted images of Asian women, although some gems have been produced. One example is Allie Light and Irving Saraf's documentary portrait *Mitsuye and Nellie*, about two contemporary poets Mitsuye Yamada and Nellie Wong. The biggest disappointmen has probably been *Nightsongs*, produced by Marva Nabili and Thoma Fucci for public television's "American Playhouse" series. The lead character is a delicate Vietnamese refugee who speaks barely a word, excep for her rather breathy recitations of rather syrupy poems.

But now Asian American independents, many of whom are women have consciously set out to bury sixty years of Lotus Blossoms who do no

French and South Vietnamese patrol on a mission to destroy a Communist munitions dump. The American demolitionist just happens to be the man who deserted Dickinson and their child. In the end, the Eurasian nobly sets off the explosion and dies, following in the footsteps of Anna May Wong. Twenty-nine years earlier, in *The Toll of the Sea,* she walked into the surf after she and her biracial child were spurned by American in-laws.

Noticeably lacking is the portrayal of love relationships between Asian women and Asian men, particularly as lead characters. Instead, as in Machiko Kyo's case in *Teahouse,* the man often loves from afar, but runs a distant second to the tall, handsome American. Asian men usually have problems with interracial affairs too—quite often they are cast as rapists or love-struck losers.

The 1984 version of the blonde-crazy Asian male in the teen feature *Sixteen Candles* shows how Hollywood dresses up age-old stereotypes in contemporary rags. This time a sex-starved Chinese exchange student dresses in samurai garb and yells "Banzai!" in his libidinous pursuits. So much for normalization.

Generally Asian male roles reflect the state of U.S.–Asia relations at the time a movie is made. Thus, during the Yellow Menace period of the early 1900s, World War II, and the McCarthy years, the number of Asian lechers lusting after white women on the screen increased appreciably. During the early 1950s the prototypical, sex-starved Chinese was the Communist commander in *Shanghai Story,* quite a bit more malevolent than the exchange student in *Sixteen Candles.*

The post-Gandhi interest in India, which earned a cover story in *Vanity Fair,* has managed to dredge up more than one tired cinematic motif. The BBC series "Jewel in the Crown," which aired on American public television, and David Lean's *A Passage to India* represent the height of what critic Salman Rushdie dubbed "Raj revisionism"—the Brit's neocolonial catharsis replete with brown rapists lusting after white female victims.

Neither has the made-up Asian been retired. In 1984 Amy Irving appeared in DRAG (Downright Retrograde Asian Get-up) as the Indian princess of "The Far Pavillions," one of television's more embarrassing moments, produced by Home Box Office. Even mainstream critics had to chuckle at the brown shoepolish make-up and exaggerated boldface eyeliner worn by Irving.

One film that stands out as an exception because it was cast with Asian people for Asian characters is *Flower Drum Song* (1961), set in San Francisco's Chinatown. Unfortunately the film did little more than temporarily take a number of talented Asian American actresses and actors off the unemployment lines. It also gave birth for awhile to a new generation of stereotypes—gum-chewing Little Leaguers, enterprising businessmen, and all-American tomboys—variations on the then new model minority myth. *Flower Drum Song* hinted that the assimilated, hyphenated Asian American might be much more successful in American society than the Japanese of the 1940s and the Chinese and Koreans of the 1950s, granted they keep to the task of being white American first.

The women of *Flower Drum Song* maintain their earlier image with few modernizations. Miyoshi Umeki is still a picture bride. And in *Suzie Wong* actress Nancy Kwan is a hipper, Americanized version of the Hong Kong bar girl without the pidgin English. But updated clothes and setting do not change the essence of these images.

In 1985 director Michael Cimino cloned Suzie Wong to TV news anchor Connie Chung and created another anchor, Tracy Tzu (Arianne), in the disastrous exploitation film *Year of the Dragon.* In it Tzu is ostensibly the only positive Asian American character in a film that villifies the people of New York's Chinatown. The Tzu character is a success in spite of her ethnicity. Just as she would rather eat Italian than Chinese, she'd rather sleep with white men than Chinese men. (She is ultimately raped by three "Chinese boys.") Neither does she bat an eye at the barrage of racial slurs fired off by her lover, lead Stanley White, the Vietnam vet and New York City cop played by Mickey Rourke.

At the outset Tzu is the picture of professionalism and sophistication, engaged in classic screen love/hate banter with White. The turning point comes early in the picture when their flirtatious sparring in a Chinese restaurant is interrupted by a gangland slaughter. While White pursues the culprits, Tzu totters on her high heels into a phone booth where she cowers, sobbing, until White comes to the rescue.

promote the Cherry Blossom companion service, or some such enterprise.) Behind the brisk sales of Asian mail-order brides is a growing number of American men who are seeking old-fashioned, compliant wives, women they feel are no longer available in the United States.

Feudal Asian customs do not change for the made-for-movie women. Picture brides, geisha girls, concubines, and hara-kiri are all mixed together and reintroduced into any number of settings. Take for example these two versions of Asian and American cultural exchange:

1. It's Toko Riki on Japan's Okinawa Island during the late 1940s in the film *Teahouse of the August Moon.* American occupation forces nice guy Captain Fisby (Glenn Ford) gets a visit from Japanese yenta Sakini (Marlon Brando).

Enter Brando: "Hey Boss, I Sonoda has a present for you."

Enter the gift: Japanese actress Machiko Kyo as a geisha, giggling.

Ford: "Who's she?"

Brando: "Souvenir . . . introducing Lotus Blossom geisha girl first class."

Ford protests the gift. Kyo giggles.

Brando sneaks away with a smile: "Good night, Boss." Kyo, chattering away in Japanese, tries to pamper a bewildered Ford who holds up an instructive finger to her and repeats slowly, "Me . . . me . . . no." Kyo looks confused.

2. It's San Francisco, circa 1981, in the television series "The Incredible Hulk." Nice guy David Banner (Bill Bixby a.k.a. The Hulk) gets a present from Chinese yenta Hyung (Beulah Quo).

Enter Quo: "David, I have something for you."

Enter Irene Sun as Tam, a Chinese refugee, bowing her head shyly.

Quo: "The Floating Lotus Company hopes you will be very happy. This is Tam, your mail-order bride."

Bixby protests the gift. Sun, speaking only Chinese, tries to pamper a bewildered Bixby who repeats slowly in an instructive tone, "you . . . must . . . go!" Sun looks confused.

Illicit Interracial Love

On film Asian women are often assigned the role of expendability in situations of illicit Asian-white love. In these cases the most expedient way of resolving the problems of miscegenation has been to get rid of the Asian partner. Thus, some numbers of hyphenated (made-for-television, war-time, wives-away-from-home) Asian women have expired for the convenience of their home-bound soldier lovers. More progressive-minded GI's of the Vietnam era have returned to Vietnam years later to search for the offspring of these love matches.

In 1985 the General Foods Gold Showcase proudly presented a post-Vietnam version of the wilting Lotus Blossom on network television. "A forgotten passion, a child he never knew. . . . All his tomorrows forever changed by *The Lady From Yesterday.*" He is Vietnam vet Craig Weston (Wayne Rogers), official father of two, and husband to Janet (Bonnie Bedelia). She is Lien Van Huyen (Tina Chen), whom Weston hasn't seen since the fall of Saigon. She brings the child, the unexpected consequence of that wartime love-match, to the United States. But Janet doesn't lose her husband, she gains a son. As *New York Times* critic John J. O'Connor points out, Lien has "the good manners to be suffering from a fatal disease that will conveniently remove her from the scene."

The geographic parallel to the objectification of Asian women is the rendering of Asia as only a big set for the white leading actors. What would "Shogun" be without Richard Chamberlin? The most notable exception is the 1937 movie version of Pearl Buck's novel *The Good Earth.* The story is about Chinese in China and depicted with some complexity and emotion. Nevertheless the lead parts played by Louise Rainer and Paul Muni follow the pattern of choosing white stars for Asian roles, a problem which continues to plague Asian actors.

Other white actresses who have played Asian roles include Katharine Hepburn, sporting adhesive tape over her eyes, in the 1944 film *The Dragon Seed,* Jennifer Jones as a Eurasian in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing,* Ona Munson as Gin Sling, the "Chinese Dietrich" in Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Gesture,* and Angie Dickinson in Samuel Fuller's *China Gate.* Dickinson plays a Eurasian in Southeast Asia who guides a