

MOVING THE IMAGE: ASIAN AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING 1970-1990 RENEE TAJIMA

It was almost ten years ago. A small group of us perched on the rickety chairs at the old Collective for Living Cinema loft in Manhattan got a first glimpse at a low-budget, black-and-white feature by then experimental filmmaker, Wayne Wang. The appeal of *Chan Is Missing* (1981) went beyond its social relevance or the familiarity of the characters and themes. There was something original about the film, and something very Asian American.

You could barely talk about Asian American film as a genre then, or even grasp the individual sensibilities of the handful of filmmakers who had produced more than a single film: animator Arnie Wong, experimental filmmakers Taka Iimura and Al Wong, documentarians Christine Choy, Loni Ding, Sonny Izon, Jon Wing Lum, and the Visual Communications collective among them. An overview of the Asian American filmmakers who emerged in the 1970s would have looked more like a census count than aesthetic critique: most were Japanese or Chinese, college educated, lived in California or New York, earned low incomes. And most shared a passion for changing the way America looks at Asians.

To this day, whenever described as a group, Asian American independent filmmakers are made out to be saints or schoolteachers, rarely artists. Sociology passes for film criticism, and the work continues to be defined by thematic, not cinematic, significance. Asian American filmmakers have begun to transform the image of Asians but to what extent have we changed the way America sees?

The Eclectics of Culture and the Search for Asian American "Soul"

I believe that it is due time to start talking about Asian American filmmakers in a serious way as artists, and to reengage in the debate over our role in American culture. Asian American filmmaking has evolved parallel to a great cultural transformation. Increasingly, the definable center, white, male, heterosexual, is evaporating. Note the desperate, reactionary attacks on everything from 2 Live Crew to the National Endowment for the Arts. The mainstream press has been more sanguine, with *Time Magazine*, the harbinger of American social trends, sounding this alarm last April 9, 1990, "America's Changing Colors: What will the U.S. be like when whites are no



longer the majority?" And artists and intellectuals are trying to make sense of the void at center with the notion of cultural multiplicity.

Asian Americans fit this new cultural demography in certain obvious ways. We're from a fast-growing ethnic minority, so eventually there will be more of us. But I also believe that we, along with other artists of color, can play a role in profound ways. By default of our "marginal" existence we understand first hand the meaning of cultural plurality. And we have learned to express this dichotomy as dimensionality, or, in Toni Cade Bambara's vision, "the Patois that breaks through" the conventions of English, French or Castilian Spanish, "when something vital must be expressed."

If, for example, I traced the conscious cultural references that Christine Choy and I drew upon for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), it would include Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1951), the television police series "Hill Street Blues," and Motown. In our last film, *Best Hotel on Skid Row* (1990), it was Charles Bukowski and bebop. Coco Fusco, the critic and film curator, identified a similar hybrid sensibility among the Black British film workshops, the Sankofa Film and Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective:

Theirs is a poetics of an era in which racial, cultural, and political transitions intersect. It is no surprise then, that their works contain references to sources as varied as Ralph Ellison and Louis Althusser, June Jordan and Jean-Luc Godard, Edward Braithwaite and C.L.R. James. On this very sensitive point I must insist that this is not a rejection of the goals of Black consciousness. This "eclecticism," aimed at theorizing the specificity of race, reflects the mixed cultural, historical, and intellectual heritage that shapes life in the Black diaspora.¹

Fusco's defense of eclecticism is a crucial point for Asian Americans, for whom the development of a distinct, "national" culture has been elusive. The notion of plurality as the fabric of our own cultural identity contradicts our need for cohesion, our search for Asian American soul. In 1974, the editors of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* bemoaned the dualistic tendencies (East and West) in Asian American literature, and called for a singular and original literary voice. Like Wittman Ah Sing, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1988)—"Where's our jazz? Where's our blues? Where's our ain't-taking-no-shit-from-nobody street-strutting language?" Asian American artists have scrambled for an Asian equivalent to African American and Latino cultural forms, themselves hybridizations.

The answer, then, lies within Asian America itself, with cinema as mirror and provocateur. Louis Chu's novel, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), later turned into a movie (1989), is so rooted in Chinatown life that its pages literally sing with the distinct language of the Toisan bachelor community.² The same literate power is evident in Curtis Choy's emotionally-charged documentary, *The Fall of the I Hotel* (1983), and more poignantly, in Visual Communications' *Pieces of a Dream* (1974). By the same token, Wang's *Chan Is Missing*, on the surface, seems like a cultural hodgepodge, with traces of film noir, Italian neo-realism, the languages spoken being English, Mandarin, Cantonese, a combination of two or more of the above, the title song from Rodgers & Hammerstein. It is eclectic, and it is essentially Asian American.



(Top) *WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN?* (1988),
RENEE TAJIMA (left) AND CHRISTINE CHOY (right)
(Bottom) *THE FALL OF THE I HOTEL* (1983)
Jim Dong

Defining a Framework for Asian American Cinema

Can the eclectic nature of the Asian American cultural experience be reduced to a singular aesthetic? Film critic Clyde Taylor, probably one of the most knowledgeable observers of the various Third World cinemas, has proposed that the bourgeois western concept of the aesthetic is becoming an anachronism, and should be discarded altogether. However, given the need for some basis for looking at cinema culture, I will venture a broad framework for looking at Asian American cinema:

- a socially committed cinema;
- created by a people bound by 1) race; 2) interlocking cultural and historical relations; and 3) a common experience of western domination;
- characterized by diversity shaped through 1) national origin; and 2) the constant flux of new immigration flowing from a westernizing East into an easternizing West.

This framework addresses both the process of acculturation (not assimilation) as we have settled here; as well as the ever-moving tides of new cultural forms through Asian immigration. It takes into account our diversity, which is as varied as the Hmong, Koreans, Taiwanese Chinese, Mainland Chinese, Cuban Chinese, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Thai, and a dozen more, all bonded under the political term Asian American, and whose most potent commonality may be the fact of western domination. So in her one-woman performance, "Coming Into Passion: Song for a Sansei," Jude Narita does not create the composite Asian woman. Rather, she takes on the lives, attitudes, sensibilities of different Asian women as they are: a Vietnamese prostitute, a Filipina mail order bride, a shit-talking Sansei teenager, and a lilted Nisei secretary. The thread is sexism from without, survival from within.

Our heritage of aesthetic sensibilities from Asia are as varied, and has its own internal dynamic that continues today. Note the contemporary Kabuki artist, Ennosuke, who has incorporated elements of Chinese opera, even Russian folk dancing. In discussing his years with the Asian American International Film Festival, Daryl Chin noted,

We often got discussions of spare, ascetic, streamlined aesthetics, as if the haiku, Noh drama, and Ozu movies defined Asian aesthetics. But what about Indian sculpture, the Peking opera, and Cambodian dance, to mention only three examples of rather ornate forms of art? Kurosawa is still called the most Western of Japanese directors, as if the kinetic expressionism which characterized so much of his work, as in *Rashomon* (1951), *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Throne of Blood* (1957), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Sanjuro* (1962), had no correlation to traditions of Kabuki, Awaji puppetry, and Japanese drumming. What this means is that any definition of Asian-American (sic) aesthetics must be ipso facto partial, because the idea of Asian aesthetics must be pluralistic.³

Consider, then, the reality of our lives as diaspora people who have settled across America. Beyond the duality of East and West, many of us grew up at the demographic axis of mixed communities like Crenshaw, Queens or the northside of Chicago, as whites were on their way out and African Americans and Latinos were coming in. I remember being called a "Black-Jap" as a teen-

ager, for the way I danced and the way I talked, feeling as much at home with the Delphonics as the Shigin; even closer to the Black Power movement than the Cultural Revolution. So it seems to me the natural order of things, as a filmmaker, is to use jazz and rhythm & blues in films about Asian Americans, as it is to draw from the style and sensibilities of the German-born Bukowski, who wrote about the neighborhood milieu where my mother grew up.

You can read the experience of cultural plurality in the poetry of Lawson Inada or Chicano writer Gary Soto; in the performances of Spider Women Theater—three Native American sisters who grew up in Red Hook, Brooklyn; the plays of Amerasian writer Velina Hasu Houston; you can see it in the lower Eastside paintings of Martin Wong; or hear it in the music of McCoy Tyner and the rhythms of the Texas Conjunto, with its Mexican, Eastern European, and country & western roots. While the modernist view of art has western culture disjoined into meaningless fragments, what is now referred to as multiculturalism tries to make sense of those fragments. And the plurality of cultural influences has always defined the Asian American experience, shaped as it is by a core of ethnic traditions, whether transmitted by family, community, or intellectual affinity. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto described this aesthetic development, “Rather than flowing from a monolithic, unifying aesthetic, our art forms arise from strategic necessities, what the Mexican writer Carlos Montavais has called *la cultura de la necesidad*—the culture of necessity. This implies fluid, multi-vocal exchanges between cultural traditions.”⁴

The Other is Us

Given our explosive cultural heritage and future, will we articulate the meaning, history, and future of this experience ourselves, or will we let others take the lead? Beginning several years ago, artists of color who regularly make the speaking circuit were amused, then alarmed, to receive a deluge of invitations from academia and both alternative and mainstream cultural venues to speak on issues of “the representation of Other,” “multiculturalism,” and so forth. Our response was one of skepticism for institutions who had previously responded to the participation of people of color with, at best, benign neglect. And there was suspicion. This new interest was considerably oiled by new monies from public and private funders for audience development and eventually, for promoting multiculturalism.

For a number of years, we drifted through these conferences, sometimes with anger. I couldn’t even understand the language they used. When asked to speak on a panel regarding the existence of a canon, my only response to the organizers was: “What’s a canon?” Asian American filmmakers certainly weren’t agonizing over questions of the psychoanalytic basis on the theory of the spectator. We were worried about financing our films, getting a decent airdate on PBS. And we were more than a little surprised to learn that “the Other” is us.

“Multiculturalism” is, itself, a term that seems to have fallen from the sky. As commonly used, it embraces (white) women and (white) gays and lesbians, as well as people of color. To what extent does this definition strengthen or dilute our own analysis of race and cultural oppression? Having lost the clarity with which we defined “minority-slash-Third World” struggles in the past, we have accepted this definition, almost by default. Regardless of the ultimate resolution of this debate, we have forfeited the debate itself—the process by which we shape the agenda ourselves, and in our own language.

How a Hundred Flowers Bloomed

I believe Asian American cinema has gone through two stages of development. The first was the early promise of the late 1960s and 1970s, when an urgent, idealistic brand of filmmaking embodied the energy of the Asian American political movement and sought to be a voice for Asian American people. It had its counterparts worldwide, in the movement for a Third Cinema, and its variations, led by activists from Havana to Little Tokyo, East Los Angeles to Manila, Detroit to London. At home, Asian American filmmakers were linked to a highly productive triad of artists-activists-scholars that infused the work with social meaning and a grounding in community life. While this political ethos gave Asian American cinema its birth and *raison d'être*, Asian American filmmakers would ultimately reject the spectre of art by decree and, as it were, let a hundred flowers bloom.

This second stage, throughout the 1980s, was a period of institutionalization, pragmatism, and skills attainment, as filmmakers focused their sights on a mass audience. The tenor of the work was determined to a degree by the marketplace, and the marketplace was public television, still the most viable outlet for Asian American films. The political movement changed as well. These were the go-go years of the Reagan Age: activists began to focus on electoral politics, community groups became more professionalized, and it was even rumored that one Marxist-Leninist formation was scheming to buy out American Express. In the arts movement, in the midst of a dehomogenizing cultural shift, debate over notions of quality, art versus politics, content versus form, sharpened. Rather than to embrace this confusion, Asian American filmmakers tended to moderate it, taking tentative steps into narrative and feature filmmaking, paying more attention to our right of access than the meaning of access.

The 1960s & 1970s: Cultural Workers from Berkeley to Beijing

Asian American filmmaking during the late 1960s and 1970s was irreverent, even subversive. The Newsreel Collective, predecessor to Third World Newsreel, introduced its logo with a machine gun staccato. Visual Communications, borne out of the struggles against the Vietnam War and for ethnic studies, adopted the acronym "VC," as homage to the enemy of choice. It was an era in motion—the San Francisco State Strike, the Young Lords, the Black Power movement and the emergence of a new black cinema; the Chicano school blow-outs, the 1970 moratorium against the war, and the birth of the Chicano arts movement. The Asian American arts movement as a whole was fueled by this ethic, and driven by this energy, taking its cues from Beijing as much as Berkeley. My own early introductions to the scene consisted of essays on art and culture via Chairman Mao; not Sarris or even *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Screen*.

Particular characteristics in the Asian American film movement developed at this time:

- 1) As socially committed cinema, Asian American filmmaking had a dual heritage. It emerged in the same political climate and with similar ideology to African American, Latino and Native American filmmakers, influenced by variations on the movement for a Third Cinema in Latin America, and developed in parallel to American independents. And more specifically, the independent cinema was conceived as an organ of political/community activism

of the Asian American, parallel to ethnic studies, community health care, legal aid, and the like.

2) Early Asian American cinema was a direct result of affirmative action battles waged by people of color. Many of the filmmakers themselves came out of the student movement, and mirrored the predominance of Chinese and Japanese Americans. In the area of media education, a key development was the affirmative action program, Ethno Communications, at the University of California, Los Angeles. In the professional sphere, independent producers and media activists challenged segregation within the public television establishment, and some efforts at multicultural educational programming resulted.

3) Asian American media institutions took the form of community-based, activist-driven media arts centers that developed parallel to the Asian American movement—Asian CineVision (New York), King Street Workshop (Seattle), Third World Newsreel (New York) and Visual Communications (Los Angeles), later the Asian American Resource Workshop (Boston) and the Film News Now Foundation (New York).

The political basis of the early independents shaped the nature of their work. To an extent, it was a reactive cinema. Entitlement and affirmative action (in the media industry, access to the means of production), the redress of present and past injustices (stereotypes, yellowfacing, revisionist history), and advancing political struggles were on par with creative concerns. At the time, the cinema was still too young to steep itself in aesthetic considerations; it was enough to tell the stories, and record the images, of a people otherwise rendered invisible.

Oral History

Thematically, Asian American cinema chronicled the lives of ordinary people, not elites, and reconstructed their histories, drawing from the ideology and productivity of the Asian American studies movement. These topics ranged from the new immigrant experience, as in *The Filipino Immigrant* (1974) and *The New Wife* (1978) to the perspectives of young Asian Americans in *To Be Me: Tony Quon* (1974) and *The Dragon Wore Tennis Shoes* (1975).

Many of these earlier films took the form of documentary oral history. The 1960s–1970s was crucial to Asian American history, as the Manong, Issei, bachelor-society sojourners and other pioneers were beginning to age. Filmmakers and scholars alike were in a race to beat the chronological clock. Thus, the only filmed interview of the Nisei actor, Yukio Shimoda, conducted just before his death in 1981 by writers Akemi Kikumura and Karen Ishizuka, formed the basis of *Yukio Shimoda: An Asian American Actor* (1985) which filmmakers John Esaki and Amy Kato completed several years later.

Among the most prolific sources of pioneer histories was the public television documentary series under the direction of executive producer Noel Sonny Izon entitled “Pearls”—aptly named because the stories uncovered were treasures for young Asian American filmmakers: *Emi* (1978), Michael Toshiyuki Uno’s chronicle of a Nisei woman’s pilgrimage back to the World War II relocation camp where she spent her teenage years; Uno’s *Fujikawa* (1979) which traces the contributions of Japanese Americans in Southern California’s fishing industry through a tuna fisherman named Fred Fujikawa, and Deborah Bock’s portrait of Al Masigat, a 74-year-old Filipino housing activist, in the documentary *Pinoy* (1979).

"Pearls," and its predecessor "Pacific Bridges," were a part of the new breed of multicultural educational programming, much of which was a direct result of lobbying by Asian/Pacific, African American, Latino and Native American groups for a greater presence in public television. "Pearls" itself was not groundbreaking in the tradition of "Black Journal," the WNET-produced public television series that initiated the careers of William Greaves, St. Clair Bourne, Stan Lathan, and others. But the cumulative impact of these new multicultural programs was strong: they produced the likes of Renee Cho and Jim Yee from WGBH's *Rebop*; Loni Ding and Michael Chin via "Bean Sprouts"; early funding for Visual Communications came from the Office of Education through the Emergency School Assistance Act (ESAA) Program.

As educational programming, the political scope of "Pearls" was restricted. It did, however, succeed in portraying Asian American culture and working class life: By elevating oral history and positioning the filmmaker as a committed, partisan observer, Asian American filmmakers went against the grain of standard journalistic practice.

Building a Cultural Mythology

Lest Yellows continue to live and have their being in this fog of false consciousness, the task that lies before us continues to be the proper recovery of Asian American mythology—that is, history, culture, and sensibility.⁵

Benjamin Tong, *Amerasia Journal* (1989)

Beyond affirmation of the image, Asian American filmmakers began to do just that—to make the leap from the realm of documentary history to mythmaking. There have always been mainstream critics who minimized the capacity for artistic ingenuity in people of color, and are notoriously colorblind to the distinction between recording reality and creating art.

But it is the embrace of the imagination that brings real life to the level of cultural mythology—the element that fires Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* and David Henry Hwang's *F.O.B.*, the reason why Mine Okubo's World War II internment camp sketches articulated, rather than recorded, the era. And so early Asian American cinema was at its best when it captured the pulse of the awakening Asian American movement, and began to forge a new style and attitude on film. The gritty Chinatown documentaries, fast and furious in style, captured San Francisco's burgeoning "Chonk" Chinese American street culture in Curtis Choy's *Dupont Guy: The Schiz of Grant Avenue* (1975); in *Save Chinatown* (1973), Jon Wing Lum fuses provocateur filmmaking with the Philadelphia Chinatown community's fight against redevelopment; and Christine Choy's documentary about community struggles on New York's lower Eastside, *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976), expresses the confluence of Third World political culture.

Early Asian American cinema released rather than contained the raw energy that infected young Asian Americans, both politically and artistically at the time. One epic production from that time is *The Fall of The I Hotel*, completed by Curtis Choy in 1983, but begun seven years before by Choy and his former partner Christopher Chow. Behind the camera, scores of Asian American artists and activists are listed on the credits (nine cinematographers, eight sound recordists, five interviewers). Before the lens, *Fall of the I Hotel* documents one of the most remarkable moments in movement history.



In the ongoing struggle for neighborhood control, and in the cultural mythology of the Asian American movement, the battle for the International Hotel stands out. Choy's documentary recorded the dramatic confrontation between the city's real estate interests and the hotel's elderly Filipino residents. It culminated on August 4, 1977, when the remaining residents were forcibly removed in a pre-dawn raid by over three hundred city marshals. Choy's cameras captured the eviction and the moving demonstration by thousands of protestors who formed a human wall around the hotel. As collective memory, *The Fall of the I Hotel* is poetic and powerful. In one beautifully composed sequence, a camera travels through the lonely corridors of the hotel, lit only by a bare bulb and moving to the cadence of Al Robles' poem to the manong.

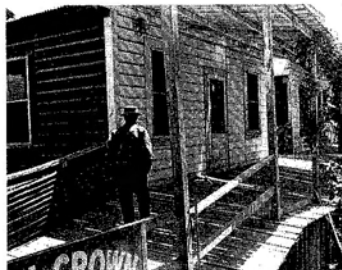
manong, the rice harvest is ready
 come out of your room
 let the ifugao women cook *bangkodo*
 over the little fires, balancing pots
 sunk in a bed of tribal ashes

The camera reaches a window and then looks down on startling scenes of thousands chanting "We won't move." The film culminates with mounted police storming the human barricades that had mobilized overnight, through a remarkable feat of community organization that tried to protect the hotel. On one door a sign is posted: "Felix Ayson: Deaf. In case of emergency, help him out first." And we wonder what happened to Felix Ayson.

Two short classics from Visual Communications that capture the cultural motion of the movement are *Cruisin' J-Town* (1976) and *I Told You So* (1974). Based on poet Lawson Inada's poem by the same name, *I Told You So* is a street allegory of downtown Fresno, its graffiti, the local bars, the Nisei barbershop, told to the rhythm of the poet's work. It is a journey back to Inada's youth, growing up in a Chicano neighborhood and knocking around his aunt's Fresno Fish Market, where she asks, "All this identity thing. What is it you're looking for?"

Cruisin' J-Town, a documentary on the jazz-fusion band, Hiroshima, is probably the closest thing so far to the definitive Sansei film, apart from *Beacon Hill Boys* (1985). Heavily influenced by Afro-Asian-Latin culture, Hiroshima is largely comprised of Sansei musicians who grew up among these melodies and rhythms. The film documented the musical and political influences that shaped the original Hiroshima sound, with the koto (a string instrument) and taiko drums at the heart of the band, and Asian America's socio-political milieu at its soul.

These early films drew on the sense of beauty, organization of space, and way of seeing in Asian American life. In composing interviews, Christine Choy, who is also a cinematographer, searches for and celebrates the clutter of Chinese American households to contextualize the subject. Like John Akomfrah of the Black Audio Film Workshop, who uses ornate and stylized backdrops to elevate the interview frame, Choy's composition employs a complex interplay of light and objects in the backdrop. The camera, however, stays up-close probing the interior life of the subject resulting in a masterful economy of a single frame. In Visual Communications' beautifully crafted *Pieces of a Dream* (1974), a documentary on the Sacramento Delta, the cam-



(Top) *CRUISIN' J-TOWN* (1976)

Visual Communications

(Bottom) *PIECES OF A DREAM* (1974)

era caresses apples lining a conveyor belt, the contents of an old man's bureau—snapshots of his brothers back in the Phillipines, a carton of Quaker Oats, an English language book.

This visual lyricism is most pronounced in the work of Robert Nakamura, a VC founder. *Wataridori: Birds of Passage* (1976) describes the collective history of the Issei (first-generation Japanese Americans). In it, Nakamura conveys the beauty that Issei and Nisei managed to nurture from any piece of earth, whether the Imperial Valley, or the lifeless expanses of Heart Mountain and Tule Lake. See, also, Nakamura's lyrical *Conversations: Before the War/After the War* (1986) a narrative documentary on World War II relocation camps.

Experimental Films

During this early period, animation and experimental films also covered the front, shaped by the alternative political and social culture of the time, such as *Tourist Bus Go Home* (1969), *To Serve the People* (1979), and *Acapulco Gold* (1972), a hilarious animation piece by the irrepressible Arnie Wong. The avant garde, in particular, has been largely overlooked by observers of Asian American cinema, including myself. The notable exception is critic Daryl Chin, from whom I draw much of my references to experimental films in this section.

Conceptual artists like Taka Iimura, however, were already known in the avant garde by this time. Iimura has remained one of the most prolific, beginning with *Eye Rape*, *Dada62*, *Junk*, and *Iro*, made in Japan as early as 1962, that combined formal concerns of poetry and surrealism. Iimura's sensibilities are closer to the European avant garde; but his approach to the *eiga* (reflected cinema) is based on a fascination for the physical qualities of this western invention, through a Japanese perspective. As Iimura explains in the essay "On 'Reflected Cinema'":

I recall a lantern which I saw at a village festival in Japan in my childhood. A lantern covered with screens on which shadows of paper fishes revolved. It was the first time I saw a "movie." In fact, the word "reflected picture," I believe, is deeply rooted in the traditional shadow-picture which had (and has) existed in the East long before movies were invented. In Chinese, "movie" is literally called "electric shadow picture." That explains where movies came from for them. But in Japan, the term "reflected picture" seems to put more emphasis on a state.⁶

The Contradictions of Anti-Slick

In formal terms, Asian American films of the 1960s and 1970s were often raw by necessity and even, consciously so. Political filmmakers scorned the notion of "perfect cinema" that Julio García Espinosa, director of the Cuban Film Institute, described in his 1969 essay "For An Imperfect Cinema." "Nowadays perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema," wrote García Espinosa. This anti-slick ideology influenced the arts movement as a whole, and is evident in the poster art created out of Japan Art Media in San Francisco, the design and prose style of *Gidra*, the Brechtian style in political theater groups like El Teatro Campesino, the new literature influenced by Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones, Frank Chin, and others, and the driven power of Hiroshima's early sound, in unrecorded cuts like

“China,” before their style was neutered by a producer and a label. Therefore, it is a mistake to attribute the rough-edged quality of early Asian American cinema as technically haphazard, or immature alone. Filmmakers grasped these new Asian American cultural forms in their raw state, and they moved swiftly towards building it whole.

Certain contradictions emerged from the political ideology of the cinema’s first decade, which influenced the field during the 1980s. First, the struggle for entitlement was inherent to the movement. Victories that were won in the 1980s such as access to funding and mainstream venues had an effect of co-opting the work. Second was the notion of filmmaking as social change—versus the artist as individual—which extended to the production process itself. Through collective principles, filmmakers challenged the elitist, hierarchical basis of cinema practice. But there were inherent dangers in the ideological conception of these films, and in some cases, they were unsuccessful in execution.⁷

Entitlement

Asian American filmmakers demanded access to government grants, public television carriage, theaters, film festivals, film schools, library collections. Asian American filmmakers were small fish in a small pool, and even the Film Fund was considered a bastion to conquer. I can remember our inaugural reception at the PBS Program Faire in 1981. So that we could introduce the newly-formed National Asian American Telecommunications Association to program directors in style, we snuck cartons of *lo mein* and six-packs of Tsingdao into the Washington Sheraton. We couldn’t afford the in-house catering costs. Hell, we couldn’t even afford the cost of admission, and Steve Tatsukawa’s lone registration pass multiplied severalfold, as if by immaculate conception.

These were gatekeepers to mainstream acceptance, and we wanted in. But the new structures of finance and distribution would change the nature of the work. A number of factors converged at the juncture of the 1970s and 1980s which moved the Asian American cinema closer to the mainstream. First, Asian American cinema needed to broaden its audience and base of support to survive. Ironically, the guerrilla filmmaking ideal of the Newsreel-Students for a Democratic Society era, often perpetuated middle class elitism. “Trust-fund babies” were in abundance. True to the art world, poor and working-class people could not afford to make art and live on air. During her years as executive director of the Pacifica Foundation, Sharon Maeda was often criticized by those in the community radio foundation who distrusted her solicitations of corporate funders. But Maeda wanted sufficient funds for salaries, so that women of color could afford to work in community radio. Although the bulk of Asian American filmmakers came from middle-class backgrounds, few had the independent wealth and access to resources to work as full-time artists without subsidies.

In the final analysis, the power of the image was not enough, even in a marketplace in which Asian Americans were the consumers. The Asian American community itself could not, and would not provide the sufficient financial basis to support production. There was a political schism between the youthful filmmakers and their parents’ generation, who represented the community establishment (JACL, CCBA, etc.), uncool assimilationist tendencies, and controlled the concentration of wealth in the community.

Our audiences also needed a way to see the work. During the late 1970s, independent filmmakers were beginning to create new distribution venues for their work. In this sense, *Hito Hata* (1980) was a groundbreaking event. Visual Communications devised its own barnstorming strategy, by working with coalitions of local community organizations to sponsor fundraising screenings of the film. They did this at sites, from San Jose to Washington, D.C., and by the end of the tour, Visual Communications had literally forged an entire grassroots media network across the country. Individuals and organizations became involved in Asian American cinema as never before, and these broad coalitions undoubtedly strengthened the redress and reparations efforts that began crystallizing about that time. Today, this barnstorming strategy is still in force, although taken to a broader professional level by the Asian American media arts centers who have taken the lead in programming.

Noteworthy also is the coalescence of the Film News Now Foundation, a multicultural service and production center based in New York City which came into being in the 1980s. The FNMF, an offshoot of Third World Newsreel, assists film and videomakers of all backgrounds, from African Americans to Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, Palestinians, and European Americans.

The 1980s: Quality Time

Years before, in their 1969 essay "Toward a Third Cinema," Cuban filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino critiqued the nature of "permitted protest" intrinsic to the Second Cinema, or alternative film production:

This alternative signified a step forward inasmuch as it demanded that the filmmaker be free to express himself in non-standard language and inasmuch as it was an attempt at cultural decolonization. But such attempts have already reached, or are about to reach, the outer limits of what the system permits. The Second Cinema filmmaker has remained "trapped inside the fortress," as Godard put it, or is on his way to becoming trapped.⁸

This is a good description of Asian American filmmaking during the 1980s, a period of formal and technical improvement for filmmakers now even more beholden to the structures of mainstream media production. Barnstorming and the nontheatrical market provided exposure for the work to target audiences, but filmmakers quickly realized that the television and theatrical markets were the viable frameworks for financing production, and reaching respectable numbers. During this juncture at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s a number of developments made possible an Asian American push towards the mainstream: 1) Two national conferences and the birth of NAATA laid the groundwork for coordinated advocacy to funders and PBS; 2) public funders shifted priorities to general audiences; 3) the first wave of Asian American filmmakers were reaching a level of maturity, and were ready to take on more ambitious projects; 4) a second generation of quasi-"yuppie" independents emerged. This is a group I would include myself in, along with Arthur Dong, Lisa Hsia, Mira Nair, and Lise Yasui. Like their college peers who stormed Wall Street in the early 1980s these filmmakers were pragmatic and entrepreneurial in their approach to production; 5) Ronald Reagan is elected President of the United States of

America. Ironically, Asian Americans would make their greatest strides towards entitlement under the anti-entitlement president.

Asian American cinema had always been socially committed, not revolutionary. By 1980 the Asian American movement itself had changed. It broadened: The Chol Soo Lee case, the redress and reparations movement, and the Vincent Chin case crossed the lines of class, generation, ethnicity, and geography in the greater Asian American community. And the movement became more institutionalized: arts centers, legal aid, public health centers, and advocacy groups got offices, professional staffs, and boards of directors. Certain activists, who ten years before got out of the classroom and into the factories, were now getting out of the factories and into business school.

As Asian American cinema became more market-driven, filmmakers paid attention to technical accomplishment. Anti-slick was dead. Three styles emerged which characterized the 1980s: 1) documentaries made for public television; 2) low-budget feature films with limited theatrical release; 3) film school product with considerable technical promise, and a diversity of themes.

Documentaries

The overwhelming sensibility of Asian American documentarians is to position themselves from within. The greatest achievement of the Asian American documentary may be its intimacy. Cameras rarely stray far from the subject, and there is little of the visual remove of a wide-angle lens, or the attitude of remove of cinema veritists and old-style broadcast journalists. This empathy is evident in the personal diary films which developed parallel to and merging with the women's documentary genre. The first to make an impact was *China: Land of My Father* (1979), a chronicle of Felicia Lowe's poignant return to her family village in Canton, and an anecdote to the Sinophile frenzy that followed normalization. Given the standard of Asian American documentaries at the time, *Land of My Father* was refreshingly well-paced and coherent. It was followed, seven years later, by Lisa Hsia's *Made in China*, a journey of cultural awakening that begins with her parents' first date at a Harvard-Wellesley mixer, extends to the homes of distant cousins in Beijing.

The personal diary films are remarkably tight and engaging in execution. As social statements, they are nonconfrontational, but illuminate a different depth from the more aggressive, investigative style of conventional journalism.

The construction of closely held, empathetic Asian American worlds sometimes eluded direct confrontation with white America. Films about the Japanese American experience, for example, have conveyed the breadth and depth of the internee experience, but are almost void of testimony from the white architects and proponents of World War II relocation, many of whom are dying off with the Issei. Who are they? How did they think? What were their motivations?

By the end of the decade, Asian American independents were producing technically accomplished documentaries for the Public Broadcasting Service that are on par with any others: Loni Ding's *Nisei Soldier* (1983), Arthur Dong's *Forbidden City* (1989), and Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering* (1988) for the series "The American Experience"; and Steven Okazaki's *Days of Waiting* (1990) for the series "P.O.V." (*Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) also aired on "P.O.V.") The stable of PBS producers have largely been a continuum of film-



makers who came out of multicultural education and local public television producers—Deborah Bock, Renee Cho, Loni Ding, Felicia Lowe, Steven Okazaki, among them—and the new crop of second wave independents. Of the first generation of political filmmakers, only Christine Choy and Bob Nakamura have moved into PBS production. Curtis Choy, Jon Wing Lum, and Michael Chin (*Inside Chinatown*, with David Goldstein, 1975) have concentrated on technical specialties; and Visual Communications' Duane Kubo and Eddie Wong left filmmaking, though Wong recently completed a video documentary on Chinese American music.

Although socially conscious, Asian American documentaries reflect the constraints of television conventions and tastes, positioned largely in the realm of history, cultural documentaries, and personal forms. Let me add that my own work has embraced these approaches. My last documentary, *Americajin no Tainichikanjo no Tatemae to Honne* (1990), literally, "America's True Feelings Toward Japan," produced for Fuji Television, dealt with the Asian American experience through diary form and history; as was *Yellow Tale Blues* (1990), a collaboration with Christine Choy. Japanese American filmmakers, in particular, seem stuck in reverse. Perhaps it is a function of catharsis, as the Nikkei assemble the various pieces of the story in order to release itself of the whole. Thus, we have examined the legal angle in *Unfinished Business*, a Nisei perspective in *Emi*, the three-generational Japanese American experience in *Conversations*, the Amerasian experience in *Family Gathering*, and the white experience in *Days of Waiting*. But by relegating Japanese American life to historical artifact, we are not confronting racism today; and we are failing to confront the tremendous changes in our own cultural identity.

Crossing Gender Lines

For Asian American directors, gender divisions are not cut and dried. There are few directly feminist films by Asian American women, and some of the best films about women have been made by Asian American men. Male centrality is not the norm. In Steve Okazaki's *Survivors* (1982), the searing document of Japanese American victims of the atomic attack over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, again it is the Nisei/Kibei women who shape the emotional core. His documentary short, *The Only Language She Knows* (1983), is a portrait of the rocky relationships between Chinese American mothers and daughters. The film is funny and incisive, engined by Okazaki's economy of style and Lim's recreations of her mother and herself. This theme is repeated in Wayne Wang's *Dim Sum*, the 1984 feature about the love and hate relationship between an American-born Chinese and her immigrant mother. Then you have Arthur Dong's *Lotus* (1987), which exposes the feudal basis of women's exploitation through footbinding.

In formal terms, there is also cross-pollination. The personal documentary is known to be the realm of women filmmakers, but Asian American men have always used this approach, both in diary form and autobiographical form. From Visual Communications, Eddie Wong's *Wong Sinsang* (1971) and Bob Nakamura's *Wataridori* profiled the filmmakers' immigrant fathers. And there is no particular gender affiliation in subject matter—just as Arthur Dong profiles his mother in *Sewing Woman*, Lori Tsang portrays her father's life in her intriguing first effort, *Chinaman's Choice*.

Asian American women documentarians have produced films about

Asian women's experiences, but few of these are expressly feminist films or filmmakers. Two exceptions are Trinh T. Minh-ha and Mira Nair, who are both consistent in grappling with the issue of sexual exploitation in their films, although they couldn't be more different in approach. Nair's *India Cabaret* (1985), a biting portrait of nightclub dancers in suburban Bombay, Nair places these "polluted women" within the broader scheme of Indian sexual politics, in which male domination renders every wife a whore, and every man a john. Her cameras had considerable access, following the dancers everywhere: at home, primping backstage, or performing on the floor to an Indian version of "Black Magic Woman." The film was attacked by some feminists for being voyeuristic, a bewildering label at best. The dance scenes are titillating at first, but stop short of exploitation. As a visual thread, these scenes gradually come to express monotony, it's a job after all, and the underlying meaning of the women's lives comes into sharp focus.

Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha renegotiates the hierarchical basis of cinematic language itself. The work has a compelling theoretical base, and has sparked considerable excitement among those familiar with semiotics, and debates on representation—but some befuddlement among those who are not. Her latest film, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), steeped as it is in Vietnamese music, literatures, and lives, has its own intrinsic poetry which doesn't need as much theoretical translation. A bifurcated film within a film, Trinh first reconstructs the history of Vietnamese women's resistance through scripted voices—sort of a lilting version of Santiago Alvarez's *Seventy-Nine Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* (1969)—then reveals the lives of those Vietnamese immigrant women who played these roles. Like the Black British Workshops, Trinh's work is theoretically elegant and aesthetically challenging. I only wish they would lighten up a little. Trinh may be the only filmmaker alive who could render the campy footage from a local Miss Vietnam beauty pageant into a humorless artifact of cultural deconstruction.

Notably, Nair and Trinh are more closely linked to Third World Cinema than to that of the Asian American movement. In its first period of development, the Asian American cinema reflected the political sensibilities of the broader movement. But to say that Asian American filmmaking never developed its own feminist genre is akin to those critics of Japanese cinema who claim the *benshi* tradition eclipsed the evolution of a narrative base. Asian American cinema, as it reflects sexual politics with the Asian American community, has its own particular development, and needs to be looked at on its own terms.

During the 1980s, however, a third wave of Asian women directors has emerged who have addressed Asian/Asian American sexual politics in dramatic shorts. All were trained in film schools, especially at UCLA. Kayo Hatta's appealing short, *Otemba* (1988), is a girl's-eye view of the final days of her mother's pregnancy as her father, owner of a Little Tokyo karaoke bar, hopes and prays for the birth of a boy. In Hei Sook Park's uneven drama, *Mija* (1989), a Korean American divorcee grapples with the alienation of life in a Koreatown halfway house, and Hiroko Yamazaki's *Juxta* (1989) explores the conflicts of Japanese war brides and their racially-mixed children. The most sophisticated of this group is Pam Tom's *Two Lies* (1989), a crafted and stylized piece that manages to attack western concepts of beauty—and Asian women's self-hatred—on a number of levels. The film's premise is simple: Again, a girl's view of the foibles of adulthood, this time her mother's eyelid surgery. There



(Top) *JUXTA* (1989)

Hiroko Yamazaki

(Bottom) *TWO LIES* (1989)

is no clunky didacticism to the narrative. As a tale of Asian womanhood, Tom surrounds the drama in Americana, reminiscent of *Paris, Texas* (1984), Wim Wenders' perspective of the outsider.

Dramatic Imperative and Crafting a New Language

In any developing cinema, the narrative is the next level of sophistication after the documentary. During the 1980s, independents as a whole moved towards dramatic production—a function of the maturing field and the decade's cultural politics—dominated by the economies of entertainment, and of scale. Some Asian American documentary filmmakers tried their hand at dramatic shorts, but they were mostly unremarkable efforts, such as Bob Nakamura's *Fool's Dance* (1983), Christine Choy's *Fei Tien: Goddess in Flight* (1983), *Permanent Wave* (1986), produced by myself, and Arthur Dong's *Lotus* (1987). More intriguing were these same filmmakers' push to open up the documentary form, incorporating narrative and non-documentary elements with documentary realism. Given the new atmosphere of experimentation and personal exploration, the 1980s was also a crucial period in the development of individual filmmakers.

At the heart of these experiments is Montavais's strategy of necessity: for example, how to recreate the past now that the key players are no longer living? Some early efforts were awkward in execution, especially when dramatic recreations were combined with the documentary like so many apples and oranges. Three examples of this approach are San Francisco-based filmmakers Steve Okazaki's *Unfinished Business* (1984), Loni Ding's *Color of Honor* (1987), and Felicia Lowe's *Carved in Silence* (1987). One problem may be the visual contrast between the qualities of dramatic lighting, which can achieve an exquisite look—especially true in cinematographer Emiko Omori's narrative camerawork, in contrast to the raw quality of 16mm documentary images. It is the same problem with films that combine 16mm footage with video, without regards to any aesthetic logic. Perhaps taking these factors into account, Okazaki's later film, *Days of Waiting* (1990), combined various formats but achieved a greater proficiency in visual unity.

In Arthur Dong's *Sewing Woman* (1983), for instance, the elegance of the narrative text elevates the documentary realism of the film. In this case, the protagonist may still be living, but her recollections are articulated through a fictionalized script based on oral histories. On the surface, *Sewing Woman* is a simple biographical story of filmmaker Arthur Dong's mother, told ostensibly in her own words. The deft construction of filmed elements—archival footage from prewar China, family snapshots, and home movies—combined with the straight-talking eloquence of Lorraine, Dong's script moves the film beyond the realm of oral history.

A second aesthetic "problem" Asian American filmmakers have tackled is how to articulate to a general audience, an experience lived and spoken in another tongue? Or, beyond the debate over subtitles versus voiceovers, how do we speak to each other in a multilingual culture? In *Chan is Missing*, Wayne Wang lets the myriad of Chinatown/Chonk/Chinese dialects work organically, as the "Spanglish" of the Nuorican writers.

Multimedia Strategies

Long before performance artists like Laurie Anderson rediscovered multimedia strategies, Asian and African cultures fused storytelling and music

(Top) *THE COLOR OF HONOR* (1989)

Loni Ding

(Bottom) *CARVED IN SILENCE* (1987)

Felicia Lowe





with silent movie projection in Korea, Japan, India, and Nigeria. These raconteurs improvised to the films, sometimes creating a narrative that had nothing to do with the original story on screen. In Japan, the *benshi* were so strong a union, they were able to force theater owners to turn the volume off when talkies came in. In 1982, Korean American poet Walter Lew revived the *pyonsa*, using his own narrative and Sessue Hayakawa's 1924 silent feature, *The Dragon Painter*. Collaborating with filmmaker Lewis Klahr, he then renegotiated the tradition with the performance piece, "Movieteller, Part I: Ch'un Hyang"—expanded this year to "Movieteller, Part II: Kogi Eso"—which incorporates the Korean dance, Salp'uri, Sanjo music played on the kayaggum, a string instrument, William Powell in *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), and Super-8 footage Lew shot himself in Korea. Lew draws upon the *pyonsa* tradition in both form and spirit. During the Japanese invasion over fifty years ago, according to Lew, movie theaters were among the only places that Koreans were allowed to assemble by their Japanese occupiers. The *pyonsa* turned them into political forums, showing seemingly innocuous films like *Ben-Hur* (1926, 1959), but appropriating its scenes of Jewish rebellion as a symbol of Korean resistance.

The appropriation and reconstruction of images has its western equivalent to the silent era as well. During the 1920s, Joris Ivens' Dutch film society, *Filmliga*, borrowed newsreels from conspirant projectionists over weekends, then recut the establishment-line footage to produce an altered film with a leftist message. When Taka Iimura (*Film Strips, Number 1 and 2*, 1969) or Trinh T. Minh-ha, twenty years later, renegotiates scenes of Vietnam, or when the Black Audio Film Collective reinterprets the BBC's television newsreels—the use of media images goes beyond social critique because the media industry itself embodies racial hegemony and power. And the media industry has been Asian America's nemesis and obsession.

The Feature Film

The 1980s was launched with the resounding success of *Chan Is Missing*. Its release coincided with the popularity of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) and David Henry Hwang's burgeoning career as a playwright, making it seem like big things were on the horizon. For the first time, a critical mass of Asian American actors with cinema, as well as theater, experience had evolved: veterans like Lisa Lu, Pat Morita, Mako, Nobu McCarthy, Victor Wong now joined by new talent, Marc Hayashi, Amy Hill, Hong Kong actress Cora Miao, Kelvin Han Yee. There were newly bankable cultural properties—Kingston's work, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989); and there was a new crop of writers such as Hwang, Marina Gonzalez, Philip Kan Gotanda, Karen Ishizuka, Jessica Hagedorn, Genny Lim, and Spencer Nakasako, among them. This convergence of factors made Asian American feature filmmaking during the 1980s promising, but in reality, feature products were limited to the art house circuit. Wayne Wang and Peter Wang alone accounted for the majority of these films. All of the features have been produced by male filmmakers, with the exception of Mira Nair's neorealist drama of abandoned youth, *Salaam Bombay* (1988), and Shirley Sun's portrait of an *American in China, Iron and Silk* (1990).

Feature filmmaking has been the greatest hurdle for filmmakers of color, because it is at once a risky creative and business venture, and the industry has been resistant to investment. At a conference of black independents two

years ago, veteran documentary maker William Greaves told this story:

When I was studying with Hans Richter, a young man came over to my house. We talked about our aspiration to become film directors. I had been assured that the path to become a documentary film producer was the right one. He, on the other hand, seemed anxious to get on with the business of making features. His name was Stanley Kubrick. My choice of the documentary as opposed to the feature film can be explained by the fact that I am more interested in documentaries. But this is a rationalization. The simple fact was that Kubrick was white and I was black. The motion picture field is one of the most fiercely competitive enterprises. The talented Kubrick could take a gamble and hope to succeed. I couldn't.⁹

Once Asian American filmmakers have overcome the hurdles of production, they are dependent on the vagaries of the theatrical market. Distribution woes seems to have plagued David Rathod's *West Is West* (1988), a funny tale of culture shock and crosscultural discovery in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. In it, Ashotosh Gowariker plays a young Indian student named Vikram, who finds himself stranded in a seedy hotel run by a Mrs. Shah (Pearl Padamsee), and pursued by immigration agents. Rathod has devised a classic pairing in the upper-class kid, whose impeccable manners and a good heart have little currency in America, and the wily Mrs. Shah, a queen bee standing guard over her hotel. *West Is West* is witty and appealing, but its distribution trail seems to have ended with festival and showcase releases.

What Language Do We Speak?

In this short period of time—about twenty years—the Asian American film movement has proceeded at an accelerated pace. We've had eight Academy Award nominees, a winner of the Cannes Camera D'Or (Mira Nair, *Salaam Bombay*), and a handful of theatrical releases, even an Asian American vanity film (Patrick Chu, *Illusory Thoughts*). James Wong Howe received Oscars in 1956 for *The Rose Tattoo* and in 1963 for *Hud*. Okazaki's *Days of Waiting* garnered an Oscar in 1991. But we have reached a glass ceiling, a barrier forged by continuing racism in the industry, and hoisted by our own failure to leap beyond the public television heaven we've come to inhabit. It is unclear whether or not any Asian American independents will be able to cross the threshold, as Spike Lee or John Sayles did. I mention these two, because they embody an element of creative, even political daring, as well as a broad audience appeal. A film like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), for example, reflects the political manifesto to provoke and entertain. It moved the debate over the complexity of racial conflict in a primarily Black and white, but also Latino and Asian world; and it sharpened the battle lines. Therefore, by invoking Spike Lee, I'm not talking box office alone, but a reaffirmation of our earliest ideals as Asian American filmmakers—to create an original cinema that would reach, and appeal to the people. Will Asian American cinema stagnate during the coming decade—churning out new and better educational market programming and occasional art house hits—or will we emerge from the minor leagues?

A handful of filmmakers, like Nair—whose work-in-progress *Mississippi Masala* casts Denzel Washington in a transatlantic production shot in Uganda



and Mississippi—have begun to chip away at the glass ceiling. Foremost among them is Wayne Wang, who continues to be one of the most consistently exciting independent filmmakers. His work bears a distinct, personal signature—visually stylized, a wry intellect, stronger on concept than in narrative—but he is rarely predictable. Imagine following *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, a mild romantic comedy that resembles a Chinatown version of *Barefoot in the Park* with *Life Is Cheap...but Toilet Paper is Expensive* (1990), codirected and written by Spencer Nakasako, a collision course of a film that could be subtitled “A Guide to Hong Kong on Ten ‘Ludes a Day,” and has the added distinction of an “X” rating from the Motion Pictures Association.

The only other feature filmmaker to approach Wang in prolificacy is Peter Wang, an actor who nearly stole the show in *Chan Is Missing* with his rendition of a samurai chef. As a filmmaker, Wang’s work has been uneven. He first appeared on the independent scene in 1984 with *A Great Wall*, the captivating story of a Chinese American family’s trip home to the People’s Republic. In contrast to Wayne Wang, Peter Wang is primarily a storyteller who stumbled with the high concept *Laserman* (1988), a comedy thriller about a laser scientist living in the bicultural blur and technosheen of downtown New York. Here again, Peter Wang is wryly effective as an eccentric, self-deprecating police detective. *Laserman* was ambitious in conception, but less successful in execution, with its meandering storyline. It also made Wang infinitely more interesting as a filmmaker, especially in light of the conventional delights of *A Great Wall* and his new coming-of-age tale, *First Date* (1989).

It is the element of risk-taking that sets *Laserman* and *Life Is Cheap* apart—along with the filmmakers who are moving forward the documentary and narrative form—especially in the 1980s, as Asian American filmmaking in general entered a relative comfort zone. These two films also represent an intriguing crosscultural free-for-all: Tossing into the celluloid stage a mix of cinematic influences from film noir to Jackie Chan, evoking an Americanized China (Hong Kong) on the one hand; and a Sinophile America (New York) on the other—and allowing all the pieces to land where they may. Although uneven in execution, both have the same raw energy and freshness that characterized the Asian American films made fifteen and twenty years ago, like the rambunctious *Dupont Guy* (1976). But much of the fire in these early films has been replaced by the cool embrace of television, sometimes the remove of history. Along the way, Asian American films have gained in technical standards, narrative cohesion, and basic watchability. We have learned the master’s language, but have we sacrificed our own?

Something should be said about the tumult over “quality,” with which we were baptized at the start of the decade. The debate has been an undercurrent to these new cinema practices, but we have never really resolved the heart of the matter. At the time, the word “quality” became synonymous with exclusion for artists of color. Our work was labeled primitive, unaccomplished, immature, amateurish and sociological. To some extent, we swallowed the reactionary definition whole, and set about sharpening our technical skills and rethinking the beauty of form, rather than building our own cultural forms. In truth, quality derives from the esthetic emotion inherent to a work of art. So when filmmakers refocus the Asian American way of seeing through a camera’s lens, or locate the poetry in real life stories, that is quality.



THE LASERMAN (1988)
Peter Wang

It is likely that much of the angrier, and aesthetically daring work is being produced on video today, such as Shu Lea Cheang's brilliantly conceived *Color Schemes* (1989), a three-monitor rumination on racial identity installed in the most common of crosscultural venues—a laundromat. Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, whose films were once staples at the Asian American Film Festival (*Garage Sales*, 1975) switched gears early, going on to make one of the first video features, *Green Card* (1982).

There remains a strain of underground filmmaking, from new directors like Gregg Araki, whose low-budget feature *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (1987) is a bleak and clever picture of the adolescent twilight; and Jon Moritsugu, director of *My Degeneration* (1989), an extended rock 'n roll anthem to the juvenile and the grotesque. Angst-ridden to be sure, but there is little that is subversive or even outrageous about these films. In *My Degeneration*, for example, girl group lead singer Amanda may be heavy in love with a hog's head named Livingston. But she only goes so far as to manage a few caresses of the porker's snout, never crossing the line that John Waters would have obliterated in a minute.

The Future

The Japanese American experience, and the weight of historical artifact, may be a lesson for the cinema as a whole. Asian American filmmakers may be moving away from the community-based culture that infused its early development. Furthermore, the continued monopoly of Chinese and Japanese American filmmakers means we have failed to nurture talent from the other immigrant populations—such as Filipino, Korean, Laotian, Pakistani, Thai, et al—the newer communities being the most vital cultural centers in Asian America. A tremendous support system of advocacy and mentorship has evolved over the years, but its benefits have been distributed largely within our own ranks. Our own political prejudices may have played a part in this neglect. Unlike the Chinese, East Indian, Filipino, and Japanese sojourner of the first century of Asian immigration, many immigrants of the last twenty years have come from far different political circumstances. They may have been too rabidly anti-communist and pro-American for our tastes, or at least, intent on buying into the American Dream that we scorned in our parents' generation. As the nature of the Asian American community has changed, we cannot remain stagnant in our outlook.

Ironically, many filmmakers from the newer communities are being nurtured at film schools, and not the Asian American media arts centers. From New York University, there is Fruto Corre, director of the hilarious Imelda Marco send-up, *Women of Waray Waray* (1990); from USC, Charles Ignacio, who wrote and directed the contemporary gothic tale, *Deans' List* (1987); Supachai Surongsain, director-writer of the first Thai American independent film, *Pak Bueng On Fire* (1987) studied at UCLA. The slow matriculation into prestigious film schools accelerated during the 1980s, and these students have produced some of the best short, narrative work in the last ten years, not all of which lies within the thematic boundaries of Asian experience: They include NYU graduates Stephen Ning, director of the affectionate coming-of-age story, *Freckled Rice* (1988), Orinne J.T. Takagi's biting funny *Community Plot* (1984), and LiPo Ching's deftly crafted comedy, *One Sunday Afternoon* (1988); and from the American Film Institute, Susan Inouye's professionally executed *Solo* (1989).

(Top) *GREEN CARD: AN AMERICAN ROMANCE* (1982) Kira Perov
FRECKLED RICE (1988) Stephen Ning
 (Bottom) *SOLO* (1989) Susan Inouye



Filmmakers trained at these institutions will undoubtedly play a major role in Asian American cinema during the 1990s. And the nature of film training will slowly change as well. Filmmakers like Ayoka Chenzira, Christine Choy, Haile Gerima, and Bob Nakamura are now teaching on the college level, and you can bet the “canon” of cinema practice they expose to their students is far different from the Eurocentricism that has dominated media education. However, if film schools are the conduit of the future, how are we nurturing talent from poor and working class backgrounds? Film schools are exclusionary in a number of ways, foremost being the expense. In the rough and ready days of anti-slick cinema, a young filmmaker could learn on the job. Now that production occurs on a professional level, you have to come to the location with proven skills. For professional training, Third World Newsreel remains the only 16mm film workshop directed towards people of color; Visual Communications teaches in Super-8, Asian CineVision in video, and Film News Now Foundation in screenwriting alone.

What is the future of Asian American film? Of cinema “on the margin” as a whole? Right now the debate is sharpening: read it in the *Black Film Review*, which has been publishing essays by Zeinabu Davis, David Nicholson, Clyde Taylor and others on the future of African American cinema. Or see it in *August 29*, the new play by the Los Angeles Theater Company’s Latino Theatre Lab, which ostensibly documents the Chicano Moratorium and murder of Ruben Salazar, but in fact, questions the direction of Chicano art and politics—“the spirit of the movimiento”—under the spectre of assimilation.

As we steady our gaze towards the next twenty years, we may not really have to look too far. Artists of color sit squarely in the midst of cultural upheaval. And when all the dust settles, we may very well arrive, if not at the center, as the links in a new cultural matrix. We are concentrated in the country’s metropolitan centers, in the belly of cultural production. We are facing constant infusions of wealth from the Pacific Rim via direct investment and new immigrants, and these new immigrants, rich or poor, are a potent source of cultural vitality.

How will we move forward from here? Twenty years ago, Asian American cinema was borne out of a lucid and pragmatic social and political ideal. Along the way, we may have bought into the conventional wisdom, relegating our place in America to the marginalized and ghettoized, and positioning our cultural products accordingly. It may now be time to look back, in order to start looking at the state of Asian Americanness in a new way, in the new world.

NOTES

1. Coco Fusco, “A Black Avant-Garde,” in *Young British & Black: A Monograph on the Work of the Sankofa Film Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective* (Buffalo: Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Center), 20.
2. Louis Chu, *Eat A Bowl of Tea* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961, reprinted by the University of Washington Press).
3. Daryl Chin, “Film Forums: The Asian American Case,” *CineVue* 1:3 (1986), 9.
4. Tomas Ybarra Frausto, speech at “Show the Right Thing: A National Conference on Multi-cultural Film & Video Exhibition,” New York University, September 1989.
5. Benjamin Tong, statement in “Public Record,” *Amerasia Journal* 15:1 (1989), 154.
6. Taka Iimura, “On Reflected Cinema,” *A Note on the Program*, (New York: The Japan Society, 1978).
7. Third World Newsreel—which split off from New York Newsreel in 1974—and Visual Communications operated as production collectives during the 1970s. Individual credits were not