

Calling on All "Dragon Ladies," "China Dolls," and "Lotus Blossoms": The Need for Asian American Feminism

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On the night of February 10, 2012, Steffi Hu was crowned the new Miss Chinatown U.S.A. With this title, she would go on to act as a "goodwill ambassador" promoting Chinese culture and heritage for the rest of the year. Sponsored by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC) as part of San Francisco's annual Lunar New Year celebrations, the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. pageant was initiated in 1958 as a competition to find "the most beautiful Chinese girl with the right proportion of beauty, personality and talent."¹ Since the inception of the pageant, the organizers had an "ideal image of Miss Chinatown contestants as the perfect blend of Chinese and American cultures" and so wished to crown a Chinese American woman who displayed Chinese features but modern American qualities.² By conceiving the "ideal" Chinese American identity as a blend of East and West, the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. pageant objectifies the female body as an ambivalent register of international and domestic political struggle. The Chinese American woman thus bears the burden of representing the whole Chinese American community's contradictory desires to simultaneously assimilate into mainstream American society yet preserve traditional Chinese culture. This exhibition of female gender identity in relation to Asian American women's ethnic and national affiliation situates their bodies as a site of divisions and loyalties to mediate between progress and tradition, the United States and Asia. As a result, the Asian American community has focused on race and class at the exclusion of women's issues, and any expression of a distinct feminine identity or feminism has been criticized as ethnic or national betrayal.³

In looking at the relationship between the history of

Asian women's immigration to the United States and the prevailing stereotypes that marginalize this community in contemporary American society, it becomes clear that the issues of race, gender, and class are closely intertwined in the lives of Asian American women today. The combination of a patriarchal structure within the Asian American community, the degrading status of minority groups within a white-dominated society, and the exaggerated sexual stereotypes of Asian American women in US popular culture represent multi-faceted sources of bias and discrimination. Asian American women are subjugated to a system of triple oppression: as Asian Americans, as Asian American women, and as Asian American women workers.⁴

Asian American women are still struggling to find a place in their ethnic communities and mainstream society. While an Asian American feminist movement has begun to emerge, it will need to evolve within its own cultural and political paradigm, separate from Asian American politics and distinct from the white feminist movement, as both of these realms push Asian American women into the margins. The movement needs to articulate the imbrications of race, gender, and class within socio-historical processes of hierarchy. Faced with popular stereotypes that relegate their bodies as sites of historical oppression and sociopolitical racism, a distinct feminist movement within this community is necessary to more effectively contest their marginalization. As Asian American women challenge dominant ethnic representations, generally within the context of collective action to transform economic, legal, and political constraints on Asian Americans as a whole, they must negotiate the difficult terrain of gender identity and national liberation. Mainstream feminist perspectives do not account for the national and racial oppression of Asian American women and are unworkable. At the same time, the struggle for gender equality may be constrained by ethnic group pressures to conform to hierarchical gender roles, and Asian American women seeking to assert their feminist rights are seen as undermining

the struggle.

To tackle the stereotypes and gendered racism that diminish Asian American womanhood, an Asian American feminist movement should address the specific needs of this marginalized community. By prioritizing neglected issues that harm all Asian American women, an Asian American feminist movement can transcend class distinctions with activism and advocacy concentrating on common prejudices experienced at the most fundamental level. A major problem with Asian American women stereotypes is that they mask the diversity of this pan-ethnic community. Although the notion of an "Asian American" identity is not an accurate reflection of the diverse ethnicities that have been grouped under the same category, the issue of identity politics surrounding how individuals identify themselves with or as "Asian American" as a demographic group is beyond the purview of this essay. Moreover, the stereotypes of Asian American women that pervade U.S. society stem from a few dominant ethnic Asian groups. Consequently, this essay focuses on Chinese American women, as they constitute the largest population, making up 23.5 percent of Asian Americans in 2011.⁵ As such, many of their particular experiences and challenges struggling with race and gender issues in the United States extend to all Asian American women.

The contradictory subject-positions of Chinese American women as both "desiring subjects" and "working subjects" have long been shaped by US global capitalism, imperialism and militarism.⁶ Their "nimble fingers" have been hard at work in various US sweatshops; their exoticized and eroticized bodies have been sold in the Western sex industry; their "submissive" and "obedient" foreign personalities have been commodified and purchased by white males through mail-order bride catalogs.⁷ The historical policies of the United States toward the Chinese in general and Chinese women in particular have shaped the distinct experience of Chinese American women as a socially repressed community.

Although Americans initially sought the cheap labor of

Chinese men, Chinese women's labor has been essential to the establishment and survival of a Chinese American community.⁸ Chinese immigrant women have been preferred in nonunionized industries, particularly for garment production or electronics assembly work, as they are perceived to be docile, hard-working employees who are willing to work for lower wages or in substandard working conditions.⁹ Nevertheless, the financial achievements of Chinese men in the United States have often hinged on the ability of Chinese women to provide unpaid or low-wage labor.¹⁰ As these Chinese immigrants gained increasing success and posed a threat to the prosperity of white Americans, exclusionary immigration legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed. These racially based immigration policies were biased against Chinese men and women in order to control and reduce the increasing Chinese population in America.¹¹ These laws drastically transformed traditional family and community structures and heavily influenced gender role dynamics in the newly developing Chinese American community.¹²

Throughout US history, Chinese American women have been fetishized and commodified as Oriental exotic beauties to fulfill the expectations of white males. In the mid-1800s, many of the first Asian women to come to the United States were tricked, kidnapped, or smuggled into the country to serve as prostitutes.¹³ As historian Sucheng Chan elucidates, this situation "colored the public perception of, attitude toward, and action against all Chinese women for almost a century"; it was alleged that *all* Asian women in the United States were prostitutes. Today, mainstream institutions continue to popularize stereotypes like the super-feminine "China doll" and "exotic-erotic-Susie Wong-Geisha girl dream of white American males."¹⁴ They homogenize these women and reinforce gender and racial hierarchies within the Chinese American community, resulting in the hyperfemininity, eroticization, and exploitation of this minority community in the dominant U.S. culture. The gendered, sexual, and racial stereotypes of Chinese American

women in the media, especially those depicted in popular movies, give an impression of what Asian American women are "really like" to other Americans as well as to Asian Americans themselves.¹⁵ The influence of media stereotypes are even more pronounced because Asian Americans make up less than percent of the total population in the United States and reside mostly on the West and East Coasts or Hawaii.¹⁶ This situation indicates that the majority of Americans gain their only exposure to Asian Americans through television and movies.¹⁷

Accordingly, Asian American women are largely underrepresented and significantly misrepresented in the US media. Perceptions of Asian American women range from images of erotic sexual objectification to quiet invisibility and facelessness, all of which are unquestionably oppressive.¹⁸ There are four common exotic/erotic representations of Chinese American women in US history and popular culture: the Foreigner, the Prostitute, the Dragon Lady, and the Lotus Blossom or China Doll.¹⁹ Examples of such characters have appeared in many popular movies, including *The Year of the Dragon* (1985), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), and *Return to Paradise* (1998). From a feminist perspective, the portrayals of Chinese women in these popular films racialize Chinese American womanhood, entrenching white male dominance deeper into the framework of US society. In every situation, the Chinese woman is almost always the subordinate, whether she is the abused spouse of the Chinese man or the loyal lover of the white man. This sort of sexual domination reinforces social processes of labor exploitation and white male supremacy.²⁰

In contrast to the sexual objectification and disproportionate *visibility* of Chinese American women associated with exotic sexual roles, the other influential stereotype depicts Chinese American women as hardworking, homogenous, and servile to render them silent, neglected and *invisible*.²¹ All of these popular images, whether negative or seemingly positive, contribute in part to the denigration, devaluation, and oppression of Chinese American women in US society. Yet, Chinese Ameri-

can women are particularly valued in a white-dominated patriarchal society because they appear to provide the "antidote" to visions of liberated career women who challenge the traditional role of females in society.²²

As US society became increasingly stratified, the hegemonic model of womanhood accentuated the distance between races and classes.²³ The image of the ideal woman is incontrovertibly identified with the home: as the ideal wife and mother; as good, passive, delicate, submissive, calm, frail, small, and dependent. In other words, Chinese American women are desirable because they are doll-like, quiet, and submissive.²⁴ This perception is manifest both in the Asian war bride pamphlets circulated in the early twentieth century and in the notion of "yellow fever" in contemporary American culture.²⁵ Yen Le Espiritu, Asian American ethnic studies expert and sociologist, has observed that "implicitly, these [stereotypes] warn white women to embrace the socially constructed passive Asian beauty as the feminine ideal if they want to attract and keep a man."²⁶ Fetishized as the embodiment of perfect womanhood and genuine exotic femininity, Asian American women are pitted against their Western sisters.²⁷

Unfortunately, these stereotypes accentuate the triple marginalization of Asian American women based on race, class, and gender and are at the root of why their specific needs are so often overlooked. Since the first wave of Chinese immigration in the early nineteenth century, these immigrant women have been forced to work outside their homes due to economic necessity; they certainly do not conform to the image of an unassuming, obedient Chinese woman from the perspective of a white male.²⁸ Nonetheless, the facelessness and invisibility of these women perpetuated by popular stereotypes are the main reasons the specific social, economic, legal, and political problems that Chinese American women struggle with go unmentioned and unaddressed.

Like other minority women, Chinese American women as a single demographic group did not collectively identify with

nor participate in the mainstream white feminist movement going on in the mid-1900s.²⁹ Inspired by the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, the nascent Asian American movement in the late 1960s enabled Chinese American women to organize a sweeping resistance effort for the first time.³⁰ Women have since then consistently engaged in pan-Asian community activities in support of civil, political, and human rights and played a key role in strengthening collective affiliations and securing group cohesion in the Asian American community. Several labor strikes led by women, including the 1982 International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) strike in New York Chinatown, effectively raised awareness about the abusive conditions that existed.³¹ Nevertheless, although Asian American women had significant influence within the movement to promote activism and protest discrimination, they mostly dedicated their efforts to general issues that affected the entire racial group (e.g., social justice, equality, human rights), and were not concerned specifically with women's rights. In fact, Asian American advocates organized initial resistance efforts against social discrimination framed solely in terms of race to force a sense of racial unity among Asian American communities without regard to gender, nationality, class, or sexual orientation.³² While this approach succeeded in fostering Asian American solidarity to fuel a large-scale movement against racism, it also meant that gender disparity issues were not a focal point for activism and resistance.

While Asian American women activist groups such as Asian Women United and the Organization of Asian Women gained prominence throughout the 1970s and 1980s, initiatives were primarily concerned with enhancing work environments for Asian workers, without any emphasis on the status of women.³³ This relative absence of a gender lens for Asian American activism and resistance cannot be read as an indication of the absence of gender inequality or of the disengagement of Asian American women from the issues of social justice. Feminist consciousness among Asian American women has been hin-

dered by unique social and political tensions that suppress their ability to form solidarity on the basis of a gender identity. For example, the marginalization of Asian Americans as a whole affiliates Asian American women with the struggles of a traditionally patriarchal ethnic society, in which Asian American men criticize feminist expression as a subversive act threatening the cohesion of their own racial group.³⁴

This principal focus on race has led to the ostracizing of Asian American women who express feminist sentiments, as they are blamed by Asian American men for their entire community's struggles with racism. Asian men claim that Asian women participate in their racial castration when they are "materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary," or emasculated by American culture through exoticizing Oriental stereotypes.³⁵ Thus, among Asian Americans, feminists are criticized by men for undermining group solidarity and are charged with exaggerating the community's patriarchal structure to please the larger society.³⁶ The resentment and tensions that exist between the sexes within the Asian American ethnic community are most transparent in the literary realm.³⁷ Feminist themes in literary works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) ignited controversy over what Asian men have criticized as racist and sexist but Asian American women lauded because it confirmed their personal experiences of sexism.³⁸ As critics have pointed out, the politics of gender relations in these works typically serves a modern white feminist agenda rather than objectives more applicable to the Asian American predicament.³⁹

Because of the ambivalence they face over ethnic and gender affiliations, Asian American women tend to subscribe to a binary mode of thought when they either exclusively focus on Asian American racism even when it marginalizes their positions as women, or obdurately privilege women's concerns over other forms of inequality. This dichotomous stance of either gender or race without recognizing the "complex relationality that shapes our social and political lives" has hamstrung the

nascent Asian American feminist movement.⁴⁰ Although such complications may not be so different from those with which other minority women struggle, there is divergence when Asian American women have to deal with stereotypes that simultaneously dehumanize them as submissive, obedient, and hardworking subjects but also sexually fetishize their bodies as erotic/exotic objects. The image of the "model minority" has a particularly damaging effect in this context because it generates antagonism between Asian Americans and other minority communities.⁴¹ Because Asian American women are held up as models for other minority women to emulate, this façade of the ideal Asian American woman exacerbates the tendency for other communities to overlook the internal tensions and gender imbalances within Asian America.

Subsequently, Asian American women continue to operate within the patriarchal confines of their own ethnic community, where feminist ideas make very few inroads. They are caught amid the need to assert their equality by protesting their invisibility in US society and the obligation to restore the prerogatives of masculinity denied to Asian American men, as well as the broader struggle to transform economic, political, social, and legal constraints that affect the entire community.⁴² Therefore, racial or national equality for Asian American women involves submitting to the protections, as well as the limitations, of ethnic patriarchy. The desire of Asian American women to advocate for improved conditions for people of the same racial and ethnic background has consistently outweighed the importance of issues advocated by the mainstream feminist movement and that predominantly affect white, middle-class women, even when they are aware of their specific gender oppression as Asian Americans.⁴³

As such, the Asian American women's movement can be considered two movements in one, highlighting the notion that for this community, race comes before gender. Among Asian American women there is a need to further develop gender consciousness, defined by an awareness of one's self as

having certain gender characteristics to facilitate identification with others who occupy a similar position in the sex-gender structure.⁴⁴ For Asian American women, gender consciousness leading to an understanding of gender power relations can bring about the development of feminist consciousness. Promoting this feminist perspective is necessary to draw attention to the way gender hierarchies inform every aspect of social life, shifting the focus of attention onto the specific experience of Asian American women.

Although Asian American women have been gaining influence as an organized group speaking out against social injustice, there exists a relative lack of participation of Asian American women in the mainstream feminist movement in the United States. Feminist discourse has been a hot topic in the contemporary sociopolitical landscape of the United States, but Asian American women have yet to receive substantial critical attention.⁴⁵ Even leading activists such as Daphne Kwok and Judy Chu primarily focus on Asian American advocacy in relation to political and civil rights rather than issues of gender oppression and the triple marginalization of Asian American women.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Asian American women are beginning to speak up. The development of Asian feminist theology and organizations such as Pacific Asian North American Women in Theology and Ministry has consistently brought Asian and Asian-American women together to "celebrate women's lives and wisdom," "name their sufferings," and raise awareness about "racism, identity, and sexism within the Asian American community, as well as tokenism and marginalization within U. S. society at large."⁴⁷ As Asian American women face unique multiple challenges, with conflicting experiences of racialization and gendering, recognizing the history behind and understanding how this community conceives a sense of self-identity will be crucial in prompting growth of a feminist consciousness.

Discourse related to Asian American women's issues

emphasizes either the need to establish Asian American studies programs to raise awareness about this community's historical dilemmas or the necessity of protesting superficial media representations.⁴⁸ Educational reforms cannot eliminate inequality, but education nonetheless remains important to any struggle to reduce inequality. Therefore, scholars such as Shirley Hune have argued that US university curricula should incorporate courses that examine the Asian American experience with a women-centered perspective and raise awareness of Asian American women's histories, contemporary experiences, and struggles.⁴⁹ Feminist pedagogy should be incorporated into Asian American studies to teach Asian American gender relations and feminist issues, controverting homogenizing stereotypes of Asian American women.⁵⁰ By increasing recognition of the triple oppression and multiple pressures that Asian American women face, faculty will be able to dismantle stereotypes about Asian Americans or women in general and about Asian American women in particular. Such a curriculum in higher education will also help facilitate dialogue about the important role social institutions play in shaping contemporary gender relations and Asian women's experiences.⁵¹ Asian American feminist theory will concretize only by integrating race, gender, and class with feminist and ethnic discourse, giving Asian American women proper voice and representation.⁵²

In recent decades, Asian Americans have actively protested the inhuman and subhuman depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream American media.⁵³ Yet, Asian American women continue to be stigmatized by their race and gender when movies perpetuate exotic/erotic stereotypes of Asian women more often than images of Asian men.⁵⁴ There is a need for an Asian American feminist movement to press for a more dignified and diverse range of representation on screen by scrutinizing the institutions that have continued to propagate these stereotypical portrayals. Because sexist misrepresentations and gendered stereotypes are issues that affect all women, across ethnicities and cultures, the advantage of media activism

is that the Asian American feminist movement will be able to unite with other women's groups based on this shared experience.

Asian American women need to be treated as individuals, not as embodiments of their stereotypes in U.S. society. Thus, there is a need to inscribe the agency of Asian American women through the development of gender consciousness and identification with a feminist identity to advocate for equality. In other words, an Asian American feminist movement is a productive development that challenges the dualistic model of world cultures between being labeled "Oriental" in an "Occidental" nation to forge a politically empowering ethnic identity.⁵⁵ An Asian American feminist movement should strive to raise consciousness and increase awareness of the oppression that constrains Asian American women by shattering the public perception of biased stereotypes.

As such, a distinct movement prompting educational reform and media activism can fashion a unifying feminist consciousness among Asian American women. This movement has the potential to unite women from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds regardless of class position. Establishing a theoretical foundation for Asian American feminism in the US educational system can also help Asian American women acknowledge and discuss their struggles vis-à-vis racial and gender identity, history, and contemporary issues, empowering them to dismantle oppressive stereotypes and transform their lives. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to assess how Asian American women can conceivably address their specific issues of dual marginalization and triple oppression to develop a feminist movement advocating for women's rights and gender equality. In the final analysis, the importance of an Asian American feminist movement as a means of combating racist and sexist stereotypes in the mainstream white-dominated US culture cannot be denied. Ignoring the repression of these women can no longer be an option, and an Asian American feminist movement has to be more firmly estab-

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lished, as it is the *only* movement that will consistently represent the specific needs of Asian American women.

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Notes

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