The Duke Journal of Gender and Sexuality Issue IV, Spring 2013

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Calling All "Dragon Ladies," "China Dolls," and "Lotus Blossoms" THE NEED FOR ASIAN AMERICAN FEMINISM

Rachel Leng '14 Asian and Middle Eastern Studies



On the night of February 10th, Steffi Hu was crowned Miss Chinatown U.S.A. 2012. 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 "ideal image of Miss Chinatown contestants as the perfect blend of Chinese and American cultures", to crown a Chinese American woman who displayed Chinese features but modern American qualities (Wu 1997, p. 6). 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 Chinese American female gender identity is one example of how Asian American women's ethnic and national affiliation situates their bodies as a site of divisions and loyalties to mediate 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 (Bow 2001; Shah 1997).

By looking at the relationship between the immigration history of Asian women in the U.S. and the prevailing stereotypes that marginalize this community, it is evident that the problems 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 whitedominated society, and the exaggerated sexual stereotypes of Asian American women in U.S. 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 (Lai 1995). However, despite the extreme marginalization of these women, a feminist voice within this community is notably absent. An examination of the stereotypes of Asian American women that influence the social circumstances of this minority group in America reveals how the challenges that these women face differ from other women to suggest why a stronger feminist movement has not yet emerged. This paper will first examine the social and cultural circumstances, both past and present, that have affected the evolution and propagation of gendered racism through popular stereotypes of Asian American women. I will address how these various stereotypes of Asian American women affect their material lives and describe the path of a nascent Asian American feminist movement to resist racial and gender exploitation through cultural, economic, and political activism.

The following section will examine the increasing presence of Asian American women in the public sphere to investigate the relative lack of feminist advocacy compared to other groups of women. I will conclude that focusing on commonly overlooked issues that affect all members of this community can forge unity amongst pan-ethnic Asian American women. An Asian American feminist movement is essential to tackle stereotypes and gendered racism that diminishes and harms Asian American womanhood to 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 the stereotypes of Asian American women is that they mask the diversity of this pan-ethnic community to homogenize and associate all Asian American women with overgeneralized and factually inaccurate images. For the purposes of this paper, I realize the notion of an "Asian American" identity is not an accurate reflection of the diverse ethnicities that have been grouped under the same category. I also acknowledge that there is a controversial debate on the identity politics surrounding how individuals identify themselves with or as "Asian American" as a demographic group, but this dispute is beyond the scope of my paper. Moreover, the stereotypes of Asian American women that pervade U.S. society are derived from the presence of a few dominant ethnic Asian groups. Consequently, I focus on Chinese American women throughout this paper since they constitute the largest population within the "Asian American" category (Humes *et al.* 2010). In this way, many of their particular experiences and challenges struggling with race and gender issues in the U.S. similarly extend to all Asian American women.

Immigration History of Chinese American Women and the Creation of Exotic Stereotypes

Understanding the social and political influences of Chinese American women stereotypes in relation to feminism and gendered racism will first require a historical

analysis of the immigration trends of this community. The contradictory subjectpositions of Chinese American women as both "desiring subjects" and "working subjects" have long been shaped by U.S. global capitalism, imperialism, and militarism (Vo and Sciachitano 2000). Their "nimble fingers" have been hard at work in various U.S. 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 catalogues (Chan 1991). The historical policies of the U.S. toward the Chinese in general and Chinese women in particular have shaped the distinct experience of Chinese American women as a doubly-marginalized community.

Although Americans initially sought the cheap labor of Chinese men, Chinese women's labor has been essential to the establishment and survival of an Chinese American community (Esperitu 2008). Immigrant Chinese women's labor was perceived to be easily exploitable because of their gender, race, and citizenship status. They have thus been preferred in nonunionized industries, particularly for garment

oriental

Although the status of the term "Oriental" when used as an adjective to describe humans has recently been established as politically incorrect, the author uses this term in the paper apropos to and of Asian American women images and stereotypes. For the purposes of this paper, "Oriental" connotes the imperialist/colonialist period of European attitudes towards Asians and is therefore inextricably intertwined with the commodified and fetishized nature of Asian American women stereotypes in a way that "Asian" does not fully encapsulate.

production or electronics assembly work, as they are perceived to be docile, hardworking employees who are willing to work for lower wages or in substandard working conditions (Hossfeld 1994). Nevertheless, the financial achievements of Chinese men in the U.S. has often hinged on the ability of Chinese women to provide such unpaid or low-wage labor (Espitiru 2008). As these Chinese immigrants gained increasing success and posed a threat to the prosperity of white Americans, exclusionary immigration laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the National Origins Act of 1924 were subsequently enacted. These racially-based immigration policies were biased against Chinese men and women in order to control and eliminate the Chinese

population in America (Chan 1991). They drastically transformed traditional family and community structures and heavily influenced gender role dynamics in the newly developing Chinese American community (Gyory 1998; Lai 1988).

Images of the Oriental Body: Problems with Chinese American Women Stereotypes

Throughout history, Chinese American women have been fetishized and commodified as Oriental exotic beauties to fulfill the expectations of white males. Mainstream institutions continue to popularize stereotypes like the super-feminine "China Doll" and "exotic-erotic-Susie Wong-Geisha girl dream of white American males" (Wu 1997). These images homogenize these women and reinforce gender and racial hierarchies within the Chinese American community, resulting in the hyper-feminism, eroticization, and sexploitation 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 (Tien 2000). Unfortunately, Asian American women are largely underrepresented and significantly misrepresented in the U.S. media. Perceptions of the Asian American women range from images of erotic sexual objectification to quiet invisibility and facelessness, all of which are unquestionably oppressive (Yokoyama 2003). Four common exotic/erotic representations of Chinese American women in the U.S. history and popular culture include: the Foreigner, the Prostitute, the Dragon Lady, and the Lotus Blossom/China Doll images (Pak 1999). Examples of such characters appear in popular movies such as "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 portravals of Chinese women in these popular films render Chinese American womanhood racialized and invisible, entrenching white male dominance deeper into the framework of U.S. 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 may serve to reinforce labor exploitation as well as embody white male

supremacy (Said 1979). 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* (Tajima 1989). All of these popular images, whether negative or seemingly positive, contribute in part to the denigration, devaluation, and oppression of Chinese American women in U.S. society.

Yet Chinese American 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. As U.S. society became increasingly stratified, the hegemonic model of womanhood

racialization

Racialization refers to processes of the discursive production of racial identities. It signifies the extension of dehumanizing and racial meanings to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (for a more comprehensive explanation of racial formation in the U.S., see Omi and Winant 1986). In the context of this thesis, a racialized womanhood refers to the gendered (mis)representations of Asian American women stereotypes produced and perpetuated in U.S. popular culture and media (refer to the 2003 book by Karen Pyke and Denise Johnston for further discussion on racialized femininities).

accentuated the distance between races and classes (Mullings 1994). The image of the ideal woman is portrayed as incontrovertibly identified with the home; as the ideal wife and mother; as good, passive, delicate, submissive, calm, frail, small, and dependent. Chinese American women are desirable because they are doll-like, quiet, and submissive (Tien 2000). In other words, they are perceived as non-threatening. Yen Le Espiritu, Asian American Ethnic Studies expert and sociologist, observed that "implicitly, these [images] warn white women to embrace the socially constructed passive Asian beauty as the feminine ideal if they want to attract and keep a man" (2008). Fetishized as the embodiment of perfect womanhood and genuine exotic femininity, Asian American Women are pitted against their Western sisters (Tajimaa 1989).

These stereotypes in popular culture and literature take the form of accepted truths, constructing the nature of womanhood to be encouraged and comprehended. Unfortunately, they also 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. Throughout history, Chinese American women have been forced to work outside their homes due to economic necessity; they certainly do not typically conform to the image of an ideal Chinese woman as an unassuming, obedient homemaker from the perspective of a white male. Moreover, the misrepresentation of Chinese American women as the feminine ideal and model minority has resulted in substantial gendered racism and discrimination toward them from men within their ethnic community and from women of different racial backgrounds as well. The facelessness and invisibility of these women perpetuated by popular stereotypes are the main reasons the specific social, economic, legal, and political problems that Asian American women struggle with go unmentioned and unaddressed.

Asian American Women Engaging in Social Activism and First Feminist Stirrings

After World War II, immigration laws were finally revised in the mid-1960s to allow more Asian women into the United States, and they gained access to a wider range of occupations. These Asian women primarily took jobs in the garment and textile industries, where they faced both gender discrimination and institutionalized racism. Asian American women, like other women of color, have been very much in the public sphere as workers (Hirata 1979; Takaki 1989). The main advantage of paid work, however, was that it increased Asian American women's decision-making powers, particularly in negotiating new notions of womanhood and family roles.

The rise of an Asian American movement in the late 1960s was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, and it enabled Asian American women to organize a sweeping resistance effort for the first time (Chow 1987). Women have 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 ILGWU Strike in New York Chinatown, effectively raised awareness about the abusive conditions that existed (Quan 2009). Nevertheless, although Asian American women had significant influence within the movement to promote activism and protest, they mostly dedicated their efforts to general issues that affected the entire racial group (i.e.: social justice, equity, 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 (Wei 1993). While this approach succeeded in fostering Asian American solidarity to fuel a large-scale movement against racism, it also resulted in an absence of consideration to gender disparity issues as a focal point for activism and resistance. In this aspect, there is a gender bias ensconced in Asian American politics: gender is implicated in power relationships only when gender inequality is explicitly prioritized as a problem. Like other minority women of color, Asian 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 (AWUC 1989; Mohanty et al. 1991).

While Asian American women activist groups such as Asian Women United and The Organization of Asian Women gained prominence throughout the 1970s and 80s, initiatives were still primarily concerned with enhancing the employment opportunities and work environment for working women, particularly in the garment industry. This relative absence of gender as a 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 hindered by several social and political tensions unique to the Asian American community that continues to suppress their ability to form solidarity on the basis of a gender identity. For one, the marginalization of Asian Americans as a whole affiliates Asian American women with the struggles of a traditionally patriarchal ethnic society, where any feminist expression is criticized by Asian American men as an act of subversion threatening the cohesion of their own racial group (Bow 2001).

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 claimed Asian women participated in their racial castration when they were already "materially and psychically feminized" by American culture through desirable exotic Oriental stereotypes (Eng 2001). Asian American feminists are criticized by their men for undermining group solidarity, and are charged with exaggerating the community's patriarchal structure to please the larger society (Bow 2001). The resentment and tensions that exist between the sexes within the Asian American ethnic community are most transparent in the literary realm (Kim and Villanueva 1997). Feminist themes in literary works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) ignited controversy over what Asian men have perceived and criticized as racist but Asian American women lauded because it confirmed their personal experiences of sexism (Lim 1993; Pak 1999).

Another recurring theme in Asian American women's literature is the experience of being caught between two cultures: the conflicting values of a traditional Asian upbringing and those of mainstream American society. Some examples include The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston (1975), Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (1989), and Hunger: A Novella and Stories by Lan Samantha Chang (1998). This portrayal of clashing cultures is symptomatic of how this community of women grapples with oppositional demands from demarcated gender and ethnic identities. Asian American women have to negotiate with the contradictory desires to hold onto their cultural identity and acculturations, yet, at the same time, assimilate to life in America where gender roles in the traditional Asian family structure are dramatically altered (Pak 1999; Shah 1997). Nonetheless, it would be premature to classify these works as Asian American feminist literature. As numerous literary critics have pointed out, in order to be accepted in a system dominated by the West, 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 (e.g.: Cassel 2007; Skandera-Trombley 1998; Lim 1993).

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 (Mohanty et al. 1991, p. 13). While such complications may not be so different from those other minority women of color also struggle with, 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 fetishizes their bodies as erotic/exotic objects. The image of the "model minority" has a particularly damaging effect in this context as it generates

antagonism between Asian Americans and other minority communities, and further alienates Asian American women from other women of color (Prasso 2006). Subsequently, Asian American women continue to operate within the patriarchal confines of their own ethnic community where feminist ideas make very little inroad. They are caught amidst the need to assert their equality by protesting their invisibility in U.S. 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 (Pyke and Johnson 2003). In this way, racial or national equality for Asian American women involves submitting to the protections, as well as the limitations, of ethnic patriarchy.

Today, many Asian American women activists still prefer to join forces with Asian American men in the struggle against racism and classism instead of establishing commonality on the basis of gender issues. There is the general feeling that the mainstream feminist movement does not attack the racial discrimination and social injustice problems of central concern to them. 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 that predominantly affect white middle-class women, even if they are aware of their own gender oppression (Takagi 1994; Kang 2002).

Developing Asian American Women's Gender Consciousness and Feminist Identity

The Asian American women's movement can be considered "two movements in one," highlighting the notion that for this community, race comes before gender. There is an urgent need to develop gender consciousness among Asian American women, 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 (Yanagisako 1995). For Asian American women, gender consciousness leading to an understanding of gender power relations can bring about the development of feminist consciousness. Launching a feminist critique of society is necessary to disenable patriarchal power and draw attention to the way gender hierarchies informs every aspect of social life by 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. More and more Asian American women are winning elected offices and being appointed to important positions in their communities and the government. However, the extent to which these women advocate for Asian American women's issues remains limited. 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 dual marginalization of Asian American women (Nakanishi and Wu 2002). The development of Asian feminist theology and organizations such as the 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" (PANAAWTM). It is manifest that Asian American women possess the capacity and the resources to develop and support advocacy for feminist issues, but the dilemma remains that Asian American advocacy focuses on

racism, colonialism and imperialism, but never sexism. 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 to prompt a feminist consciousness.

Asian American Women's Feminism in Education and Media (Mis)Representations

Discourse related to Asian American women's issues emphasize 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 (e.g.: Chu 1986; Fujino 1998; Hune 1997, 1998; Liu 1997; Lee 1992; Osajima 2007; Wu 2008).

Educational reforms cannot eliminate inequality, but education nonetheless remains important to any struggle to reduce inequality. U.S. curriculums therefore need to incorporate courses that examine the Asian American experience with a womencentered perspective and raise awareness of Asian American women's histories, contemporary experiences, and struggles. This way, it will be possible to integrate race, gender, and class with feminist and ethnic discourse to concretize Asian American feminist theory, giving Asian American women proper voice and representation (Kim 1999). Feminist pedagogy should be incorporated into Asian American studies to teach Asian American gender relations and feminist issues and challenge overall homogenized and stereotyped notions of who Asian American women are. By increasing recognition of the triple oppression and multiple pressures that Asian American women face, it will be possible to dismantle stereotypes about Asian Americans or women in general and about Asian American women in particular. Such a curriculum will also help facilitate dialogue about the important role social institutions play in shaping contemporary gender relations and Asian women's experiences (Fujino 1998).

Related to this, it has been noted that great strides have been made in the ways in which Asian American women are portrayed and perceived, both within the Asian American community and outside. In recent decades, Asian Americans have actively protested the inhuman and subhuman, insulting and dismissive depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream American media. As a result, the "yellow peril" and emasculated figures of Asian (American) men as well as the highly sexualized Lotus Blossom or China Doll images of Asian (American) women are now much less prevalent than before. Nonetheless, Asian American women are still frequently doubly stigmatized by their race and gender when movies perpetuate exotic/erotic stereotypes of Asian women more often than images of Asian men (Liu 1997). There is a need for an Asian American feminist movement to press for more dignified and diverse range of representation on screen by scrutinizing the institutions that have continued to propagate these stereotypical portrayals. As sexist misrepresentation and gendered stereotypes are issues that affects 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.

Final Reflections on Asian American Women Stereotypes and Feminist Movement

Asian American women are still struggling to find a place in their ethnic communities and in 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 feminism into the margins. An Asian American women's feminist movement needs to articulate the overlap of the many social and historical processes of hierarchy and injustice in which the intersection of race, gender, and class is recognized. As Asian American women are faced with popular stereotypes that relegate their bodies as sites of historical oppression and sociopolitical racism, a distinct feminist movement within this community will be the only effective way to contest their marginalization. As Asian American women challenge dominant 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.

This paper has drawn upon the challenges that Chinese American women face as a fruitful exemplification of how Asian American women need to be treated as individuals, not as embodiments of their stereotypes in U.S. society. 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 solution to challenge the dualistic model of world cultures between being labeled "Oriental" in an "Occidental" nation to forge a politically empowering ethnic identity (Yanagisako 1995, p. 275). 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. A distinct movement prompting educational reform and media activism can fashion a unifying feminist consciousness among Asian American women from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds regardless of class position.

By prioritizing Asian American women's issues that are often overlooked due to misguided assumptions and harmful stereotypes, the Asian American feminist movement can inculcate a consensus for sociopolitical strategies that will address the gendered racism that affects all of their lives. Although there has been an increased gender focus in Asian American studies, binary thinking emphasizing either race or gender issues continues to border our field of inquiry. As such, education will be the main way Asian women develop their interests and presence in a variety of social and political organizations. Establishing a theoretical foundation for Asian American feminism in the U.S. 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 research on the Asian American women's course is necessary, including research focused on how students would engage with such courses and with one another to investigate the effectiveness of education in affecting social activism.

As Asian American women increase in numbers and visibility in the U.S. public sphere, there is an exigent need to recognize and embrace their experiences to see the different problems and challenges that limit their potentialities. Issues of education and gender imagery in the media have great potential to forge alliances – both within the Asian-American community and beyond. While the subject of this essay has been Asian American women and Asian American feminism, its implications extend beyond

the seemingly natural boundaries of one ethnic group to others in U.S. society and the world. However, amidst both the hopeful signs and caveats, the limited research and tremendous diversity among Asian American women requires caution in generalizing to the whole community. Asian American women face the major challenge of how to develop a pan-ethnic feminist position in order to eliminate economic exploitation, racial oppression, and gender subordination perpetuated and reinforced by stereotypes in popular U.S. culture. More research still needs to investigate the effectiveness of various methods of activism to influence the public perception of Asian American women. Related to this, the efficacy of collective action across women of color from different racial backgrounds also needs to be scrutinized.

In the final analysis, 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. As a solution to combat racist and sexist stereotypes of this community in the mainstream white-dominated U.S. culture, the importance of an Asian American feminist movement cannot be denied. Discreetly ignoring the repression of these women can no longer be an option, and an Asian American feminist movement has to be more firmly established as it is the *only* movement that will consistently represent the specific needs of Asian American women.

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