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Author

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Publication Date

1983-09-10

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We appreciate the secretarial and administrative assistance of Helen, Cary, and Patrice. We also wish to extend thanks to the librarians within the Department of Ethnic Studies, especially Francisco Garcia — Ayuens and Wei-chi Poon. We gratefully appreciate the faith and dedication of Professor Ronald T. Takaki, our departmental sponsor. Special thanks and appreciation to the students and teachers that have made this journal possible. Without their commitment, their hope, and their vision, this journal would have never been realized. Thanks.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES of Third World America

Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 1983

Race, Class, Culture in America

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THIRD WORLD AMERICA

Volume one, Number one, Fall 1983

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Published twice yearly by the Ethnic Studies Student Union and Editorial Board Council, 3407 Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. Subscription cost \$5.95 per issue and covers postage and handling. Two issues \$11.50. Libraries and institutions — \$6.95 per issue; \$13.50 for two issues. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Critical Perspectives of Third World America*, 3407 Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.

Typeset by Calgraphics, Berkeley, California.
Designed by Kate Godfrey. Production by Kathy Tomynis.
Printed by GRT Book Printing, Oakland, California.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES of Third World America

Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 1983

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"Front Line of Freedom" by Merle Woo, was originally published in *The
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"Making Waves" by Nellie Wong, was originally published in *The Asian
American Journey*, General Community Issue, January 1982 — Agape
Fellowship, Los Angeles, CA.

© 1983 Nellie Wong. "When will It Ever End?"

"The Difficulty of being Black at UC Berkeley" by Venita Kelley, origi-
nally appeared in the *Daily Californian*, Berkeley, Ca, Feb. 8, 1983.

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Berkeley, or call us at (415) 642-7383.

Hmmm, of course, be deceitful. Lie. Use a frozen food and pretend you've spent hours cooking. Pretend you are the good wife from Japan. And as the husband in the commercial says, "she must have spent hours cooking the vegetables." Hmmm, Asian Americans know it does not take hours to cook vegetables. After chopping them up, we chow them in hot oil. Or we fry them in deep fat coated with batter.

Of course, *Birds Eye* is not selling to Asian Americans. But they are using Asian Americans to sell what is properly and stereotypically Asian. *Birds Eye* dishes it out on the T.V. screen. But, it can be argued that Asian American actors are being employed! It can be argued that *Birds Eye* is promoting affirmative action!

Food for All Her Living

King Kok Cheung

Much has been written on Asian identity in recent years. Some feel that Asian Americans have assimilated successfully into the mainstream of white America. Others feel that Asian Americans have not, and should not be, assimilated into the dominant culture. In the meantime, Asian Americans are caught between the pressure to assert their ethnicity, to resist white absorption and the yearning to feel at home in America. As an Asian who has spent almost a decade in America, I feel I can empathize with Asian Americans. I think Asian Americans can have an identity which involves expression rather than suppression, which profits from their being Asian and their being American at the expense of neither.

My interest in the situation of Asian Americans grew out of teaching English to a group of Asian American undergraduates. Even though I had taught before, I had never felt so close as to this group of students, to the extent of identifying with them. It pains me to hear a Chinese American student tell me that she hates Chinese. "I don't look Chinese, do I?" she asks, hoping for my reassurance. It pains me to read an essay by a Korean American student who confesses his anxiety to conform to the dominant culture even though he cherishes his own. Living in the dorm, he hides his rice-cooker under his bed so that even his roommate cannot detect it. It disturbs me no less to have another native-born student confide to me that she feels threatened reading works by Asian American writers who attack whites and make fun of their own people. She moans, "I don't know what is my allegiance anymore."

Among the works assigned in my course are an interview with Frank Chin and his provocative story "Food For All His Dead." In his interview with the editors of *Longtime Californi'*, Chin expresses his anger at the stereotyping of the Chinese and his desire to "legitimize the Chinese-American sensibility."¹ He describes with humor and pathos his experience as a Chinese in Iowa, lamenting that people can treat him only as a stereotype: "In this society . . . [a white man] can disappear. I couldn't disappear, no matter how enlightened I was, no matter how straight my English was. Someone, just because they saw my skin color, would detect an accent. Someone would always correct me."² Speaking as a writer, Chin rightly refuses to cater to the American craving for stereotypes about the Chinese: "I don't want to talk about neon lights and Chop Suey and funny music."³ But whites are not the only ones who believe in stereotypes. Chin points out that many Chinese American writers before him came from "a generation which strongly believed in the stereotypes as being real. They looked on writing as the proof that they were not of the stereotype, that they were assimilated, nearing white. They bought their way into second-class white status by humiliating their whole race and people and history and fucking up the future." Chin claims to be different: "I'm not writing white. I'm very consciously trying to write Chinese-American."⁴

Yet, what is "Chinese-American"? Searching for the answer in "Food For All His Dead," one detects some of the same self-contempt that Chin has deplored in other Chinese American writers. The author who refuses to stereotype, to write about "neon lights and Chop Suey and funny music," is himself depicting a gaudy Lion dance, a meek and dumb Chinese girl, and funny yellow English. To be sure, such a description does not do justice to Chin's story, which is a moving account of an adolescent's ambivalent attitude toward his dying father and what he stands for — the Chinese or at least the Chinese heritage in America.

The story is told from the point of view of the son, Johnny. Brought up in Chinatown, Johnny is educated in the white world. Upon returning to his place of birth, he feels ashamed of his own people. While displaying a "cowardly loyalty" toward his father and his hometown, Johnny is waiting for both to die, "waiting for the time after death when he could relax."⁵ Implored by his father to stay in Chinatown, the boy replies, "Maybe I'm not Chinese, pa! Maybe I'm just a Chinese accident . . . Pa, most of the

people I don't like are Chinese. They even *laugh* with an accent, Christ!"⁶ Later, he tells his friend Sharon: "I think I'd leave [Chinatown]. I know what that sounds like, like I'm waiting for him to die so I can leave; maybe it's so"⁷ This attitude of Johnny symbolically kills his father at the end. It is also this attitude which kills the Chinese in the Chinese American.

While granting room for irony, it is difficult to resist the temptation of reading the story as autobiography. In the interview Chin says of himself and his father: "We live in different worlds. And when my world comes in contact with his we just destroy each other."⁸ If the autobiographical interpretation is valid, then the Chinese American who is dying to leave Chinatown nevertheless feels that his only place of refuge in Iowa is the Chinese restaurant. Chin may be aware of the contradiction himself, for he laments in the interview how stereotypes affect Asian Americans themselves. He describes how his Asian American students, upon being asked to divide themselves into what they thought were their Chinese and American qualities, attributed everything positive to American and attributed everything negative to Chinese. Chin states: "You break down according to the lines of the stereotype. It's something conditioned into you that you don't even realize. It's self-contempt. The Chinese are dumb, the Chinese are inhibited. The Chinese are restrained."⁹

Sadly enough, self-contempt is also conditioned into Chin, with or without his realization. He is fighting against both the American and the Chinese notwithstanding his emphatic assertion: "I was Chinese-American, whatever that meant."¹⁰ Yet what is left of the Chinese American, alienated alike from the East and from the West? "I want to be something by myself," says Johnny.¹¹ Yet can he be something by negating, by renouncing all that is inalienably him? This something will be inanimate and cadaverous indeed. No wonder my student feels threatened: "I don't know what is my allegiance anymore."

Instead of continuing to sacrifice food for the dead, we should start nurturing the living. Let me make the point by comparing the Asian American struggle to the women's struggle. In the past women tried to live up to man's feminine ideal by being passive, obedient, and domestic. Lured by an alternate existence, some stalked out of the Doll's House into the outside world. They first made their presence felt by aping men, by accepting patriarchal criteria for achievement and success. Feeling the resistance in

their attempt to enter careers traditionally closed to women, they became more aggressive. They denigrated and raved against men. Yet because these pioneering feminists had adopted the male criteria for success and were conditioned by the belief in male superiority, they also denigrated their own femininity, putting career above caring and putting intellect above emotions. For them the adjective "feminine" was almost derogatory.

Likewise Asian Americans have tried for a long time to survive by catering and living up to white stereotypes — quiet, passive, withdrawn, family-bound, earthbound. After years of silence and servitude, some ventured forth to pursue careers conducive to better living, according to middle-class American standards. Frustrated and exasperated by inequality and discrimination, they rebelled by denouncing their oppressors and fighting for equal opportunity. But years of white supremacy had bleached their criteria. While endeavoring to separate themselves from the dominant culture, at the same time they were ashamed of their own. They had so internalized the stereotypes attached to their race that self-contempt became inevitable. Ironically, the pejorative epithet "yellow," popularized by white poet-journalist Bret Harte (who referred to early Chinese immigrants as "Heathen Chinese"), was used most frequently by Asian Americans against one another. Rather than calling someone "chicken," some Asian Americans would opt for the strong insult — "yellow."¹²

Chinese American writers, specifically, can be seen to have undergone a similar process. They too had been silent for many years.

Without knowing it, many of them are accepting the image which the white Americans have assigned to the Chinese, thus perpetuating the mythical Chinese character of "keeping to themselves and keeping their place" as a virtue. . . . For a Chinese to try to become an established creative writer in English is almost impossible, so states the myth, which is reinforced . . . by the white-dominated writers' world in America.¹³

The American Chinese writers who first broke the silence tended to lapse into ventriloquism, speaking behind a whitewashed veil and appropriating white American norms, thereby perpetuating the exposure of their own people to ridicule. As mentioned earlier by Chin, the first generation of American Chinese writers adopted the white perspectives and wrote with a white readership in mind. But though Chin vehemently refuses to follow these writers, to buy

himself out of bondage by the rejection of his race,¹⁴ his story suggests that he too is disdainful of the Chinese, that he too "has internalized almost fatal suicidal doses of self-contempt."¹⁵

While thanks are due to feminists who have pointed out the ills of patriarchal society, and to writers (including Chin) who have revealed the pernicious effects of racial stereotypes, the dual problems of hatred toward the dominant group and contempt of one's sex or race must be resolved. Both hatred and self-contempt are destructive, inhibitive, draining. The movement against discrimination must be paralleled by a movement toward self-acceptance. While striving for equal rights at work, women should also have the right to feel equally at ease in being loving partners and mothers at home. Likewise the time has come for Asian Americans to be rather than to bereave. Why be torn by divergent allegiances when an alliance is possible? Only by reconciling, connecting the pulls from both sides can one truly be Asian American.

Turning again to the sexual analogy, to use the words of Virginia Woolf: "In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. . . . It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties."¹⁶ She adds later: "All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority, belong to the private-school stage of human existence where there are 'sides,' and it is necessary for one side to beat another side . . . [but] as people mature they cease to believe in sides. . . ."¹⁷

Perhaps the maturation of Asian Americans will also involve the relinquishing of sides. Instead of expending their energy on separating, rejecting, and negating what is Asian and what is American, their energy can be harnessed for creativity. Instead of pitting Asian against American, Asian Americans should recognize that they are bicultural inheritors. In some minds the Asian consciousness dominates while in others the American consciousness dominates. Rather than making everyone conform to one mold, with identical proportions of each consciousness, it is better to have diversity, given the space for the various blendings, without any shame or guilt. Rather than being ashamed of their ethnic origins, Asian Americans should strive to understand them, going

beyond the superficial aspects of color, shape, and accent. While fighting against the stereotypes imposed on them, they must also guard against reverse stereotypes, against giving negative labels to whites in return.

After all, "American" is not an ethnic description; the epithet describes all the racial groups, Asians included, who have made America their home. Assimilation does not entail the annihilation of one's ethnic culture in favor of the "American" culture; rather minorities also help to create the American culture. Being part of the melting pot does not mean losing one's own flavor; rather it is the addition of one's own distinct spice, be that soy sauce, miso, or tabasco. Then will we have food fit for the living.

Notes

- 1 Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee, eds., *Longtime California: A Documentary Study of An American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 386.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 379.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- 5 Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas, eds., *Asian-American Authors* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), p. 49.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 8 *Longtime California*, p. 389.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- 11 *Asian-American Authors*, p. 52.
- 12 See for example Milton Murayama, *All I Asking For Is My Body* (San Francisco: Supa Press, 1959), pp. 1, 37, 59.
- 13 Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas, *Introd.*, *Asian-American Authors*, p. 11.
- 14 *Longtime California*, p. 386.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- 16 *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), p. 102.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Sansei Male/Female Interpersonal Relations

Jim Okutsu

The following essay is an exploration into the subject of race and identity at the interpersonal level. Because of the lack of information on this subject, there are no footnotes. What follows, then, is a reflective look by one Sansei instructor. This paper was originally presented at the National Conference on Asian/Pacific American Studies, University of California, 1982.

Although a considerable amount of material on gender and sexuality has surfaced in the last decade, similar information on the Sansei* generation's attitude towards male/female interpersonal relations remains a mystery. It appears that dialogue to improve communications and awareness among Sansei is not occurring. Evolving societal sex roles and the increasing number of inter-ethnic relationships necessitates the need for Sansei to explore the influences of society, culture, ethnicity and gender on interpersonal relations. I would like to present a contextual framework for examining interpersonal interactions among the third generation and to focus on gender issues among college-age Sansei.

The term "Sansei" connotes a cohesiveness and implies a similarity of experiences, attitudes and values. Yet in actuality, the Sansei are a diverse grouping ranging in age from the 40s to the teens. Sansei, additionally, represent a co-mingling of Japanese and American cultures of varying proportions and are products of such diverse factors as the post-war dispersal of Japanese Ameri-

*Third generation Americans of Japanese ancestry.