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# Made in the USA: Rewriting Images of the Asian Fetish

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## **Abstract**

"My voice reveals the hidden power hidden within." A woman of Asian descent appears to be an entertainer, possibly a courtesan or geisha, wearing a pseudo-Chinese dress and hairdo; her hands are curled in front of her in an "Oriental-like" gesture as if she is dancing, and her head is tilted coyly with a cryptic smile (Figure 1). She gives a sexually suggestive expression and gaze but hesitates to speak. Another version with the same woman reads, "In silence I see. With WISDOM, I speak." These advertisements make up one part of the "Find Your Voice" Virginia Slims campaign. The campaign consisted of four different ads, each featuring women of distinctive races with stereotyping text.

## **Disciplines**

Other Arts and Humanities

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2005-2006 *Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image*, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

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Made in the USA  
Rewriting Images of the Asian Fetish

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Final Project Paper  
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## Introduction

“My voice reveals the hidden power hidden within.” A woman of Asian descent appears to be an entertainer, possibly a courtesan or geisha, wearing a pseudo-Chinese dress and hairdo; her hands are curled in front of her in an “Oriental-like” gesture as if she is dancing, and her head is tilted coyly with a cryptic smile (Figure 1). She gives a sexually suggestive expression and gaze but hesitates to speak. Another version with the same woman reads, “In silence I see. With WISDOM, I speak.” These advertisements make up one part of the “Find Your Voice” Virginia Slims campaign. The campaign consisted of four different ads, each featuring women of distinctive races with stereotyping text (Kim and Chung, 2005, p. 79, 80).

Calling to mind the “Oriental Woman,” the usage of the language “hidden power” and “In silence I see” reference subservient and quiet characteristics, while the model alludes to stereotypes of the seductive and pleasing. Historically, the Western image of Asian women has mainly surrounded these traits, and today the stereotype among Americans is still largely that they are exotic and submissive. Asian women have been Americans for nearly a century and a half, and enormous strides have been made in regards to racism. However, the thousands of Asian-American female life experiences in the United States has not made a large enough impact, for the image of the “Oriental Woman” continues to exist at all levels of discourse: from the level of mass media to the level of interpersonal exchanges in everyday life. In my work, I contend that stereotypical images of Asian women in American media propagate the modern phenomenon of the “Asian fetish”—a term referring to the sexual preference of Asian women had by Caucasian or other non-Asian males.

In exploring this notion of the media creating such a “fetishization,” my research methodology took on an interdisciplinary approach. Through a process of combining methods of critical study of scholarly works on American images of Asian females with creating my own artistic works regarding the subject, I allowed the two modes of exploration to influence each other. As a result, the final work contains three pieces accompanied by audio, *wife: combination of “woman” and “broom;” to please: combination of “woman” and “nothing;”* and *envy: combination of “woman” and “disease”* (Figures 2-4); in addition, it contains a critical analysis investigating the following four topics: the origin and basis of the term, “Asian fetish,” itself; an examination of the history of the United States depicting Asian women as the “Oriental woman” and the impacts such portrayals had on the lives of Asian women; an analysis of images of Asian women in modern media and the relations between such depictions and Asian-American women’s interpersonal interactions; and the expression of my artist statement and reflections upon the artwork having taken the other subjects into account. Each topic presents and develops the argument that more consideration needs to be given to the portrayals of Asian women in American media and their impact on Asian-American women’s life experiences.

It is important to recognize that the preference, the fetish, the interaction I am interested in is specifically the heterosexual relationship between the Caucasian or non-Asian male and the Asian female, whether she be American or not. While the term, Asian fetish, has expanded to encompass the opposite situation where the Asian male is preferred, and while it is sometimes used when referring to homosexual relationships regarding preferences of Caucasian or non-Asian males for Asian males, these two

matters will not be discussed. Moreover, I realize that, although I narrow my subject down to that of specifically Asian women, making analyses and claims regarding Asian women as a whole runs the risk of making generalizations towards a group of people, and thus my methodology may border on hypocrisy. However, while the image of Asian women portrayed in America is a homogenization of many cultures, ethnicities, and practices from East Asian countries, it is the very nature of the subject to make generalizations. In other words, while it may be more accurate and politically correct when so critically analyzing to distinguish each Asian woman as not Asian but rather Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese, I find this very challenging and counter-productive since many scholarly works label any woman from an East Asian nation as Asian. As a result, I find that approaching Asian-American women in such a comprehensive way in my methodology is important, for it significantly reveals the stereotyping nature in American media and scholarship

### **What is the Asian Fetish?**

Yellow fever. A “thing” for Asians. An Asian fetish. In Western popular culture, the men afflicted with such behavior are sometimes referred to as “rice kings,” “rice chasers,” or “rice lovers.” These loaded terms and nicknames are used by Asian Americans and other Westerners and have become accepted slang terms in their vocabulary. The terms refer specifically to Caucasian or other non-Asian males who are attracted to Asian females with more intensity or frequency than is shown for other groups of women; in some instances, the intensity reaches the point where it may be

difficult or impossible for such a man to form relationships with women of his own race, or even non-Asian women in general (Prasso, 2005, p. 136). The Asian women of interest are primarily East Asians, such as Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Taiwanese. While the term regards interracial associations, it is not meant to concern customary, healthy interracial relationships and marriages.

Many of these men defend themselves asking how their preference is considered negative. Asian studies writer, Sheridan Prasso (2005), highlights an episode of *Seinfeld* regarding this not so idle question:

*Jerry: Hellooo?? Who is this? Donna Chang? Oh, I'm sorry, I musta dialed the wrong number.*

*Elaine: Donna Chang?*

*Jerry: (redialing) I shoulda talked to her; I love Chinese women.*

*Elaine: Isn't that a little racist?*

*Jerry: If I like their race, how can that be racist?*

While this question often arises as Asian Americans and Asians come into contact with Westerners, a deeper analysis of racism should be explored. The Oxford Dictionary (2005) lists two entries for racism: 1. the belief that there are characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to each race. 2. discrimination against or antagonism towards other races. Due to a history of slavery and bigotry, Americans may be inclined to correlate racism with the latter description. However, according the first definition, whether it is like or dislike, a judgment about someone—how he or she might think, behave, appear, or anything else—according to his or her race, is actually a form of racism.

It is important to note that when such pre-judged categorization affects cross-

cultural expectations and exchanges it poses a concern to the Asian and the Asian-American community. Moreover, as the term Asian fetish becomes more mainstream and widespread, it must be noted that the phenomenon raises not only oppression in terms of racism, but also in terms of sexism. In fact, sociologist expert, Matthew Wray (1998, p.41), defines the “fetish” portion of the expression as deriving from both racial fetishism as a form of commodity fetishism and from sexual fetishism. Regarding racial fetishism as a form of commodity fetishism, in post-colonialist and Neomarxist discourse, commodity fetishism is the process by which things with no inherent use-value, for example: money, become instilled with inherent exchange-value, such as the exchange for food. Racial fetishism is a form of this notion in the sense that Asian women become associated with Western sexual stereotypes of submissiveness, innocence, and latent promiscuity, and these constructs are identified as reality (Wray, 1998, p. 41). In regards to sexual fetishism, this is a situation wherein the object of affection is an inanimate object or a specific part of a person. A phenomenon studied and reworked by Sigmund Freud, his theory on fetishism declared that this behavior in men is the result of childhood trauma about castration anxiety where a boy, curious to see his mother's penis, averts his eyes to an object or body part in terror when he realizes his mother has none (Freud, 1925, p. 252). While a shoe or a glove serve as examples of objects of sexual fetishists' affection, the newly coined term Asian fetish appropriates the concept, and what is fetishized is an ethnicity. For Asian-American females, here lies an arena in which racism and sexism intersect.

Evidence of the preference trend and its consequences may not be considered substantial in terms of statistical proof. Most analyses report numbers such as the 1998

census by *American Demographics* which stated that one-third of all married Asian Americans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four married outside their ethnic groups, primarily Caucasians; however, involvement of the Asian fetish specifically as a reason behind the high percentage is not indicated. Thus, perhaps what may prove to be more insightful of the Asian fetish's prominence, though maybe not more authoritative, are sociological reports such as Reina Mizuno's article, headlined "Sex and the Campus: Attack of Yellow Fever," published in Harvard Business School's student newspaper, *Harbus*.

As an Asian person, I can immediately sense when someone has an Asian fetish. You spot someone staring at you from afar and the next moment coming to talk to you at a crowded [mostly white] party. You see a guy walking down the street, hand-in-hand with another Asian girl, and he still checks you out as you walk by him. Undergraduate majors of any East Asian language or East Asian Studies, or post college work as an English teacher in any Asian country are easy giveaways. Back in the day (circa late '90s), these Asian Studies types were the only people with Asian fetish, but now, they seem to be everywhere, and their fetish is not restricted to any one particular Asian [group]! (Prasso, 2005, p.136).

Another report by a graduate student, Debbie Liao, describes similar experiences. Yet while Mizuno is Japanese-American, Liao is Taiwanese-American, and each is from opposite geographic ends of the country.

A lot of my girlfriends claim they can tell right away if someone has an Asian fetish—if he has had a string of Asian girlfriends, that indicates he probably has an Asian fetish. For most Asian women, it *does* bother them, for so many reasons. You're seen as an object, because you have black hair or prominent cheekbones or whatever, and not for who you are. A lot of us ask ourselves why the preference and where the line is. (Prasso, 2005, p. 139).

Nevertheless, while it is difficult to discern which are the abnormal interracial relationships when given statistical analyses, Liao's anecdote resonates similarly with this when she addresses the question, "Where does the preference become no longer

normal?” Caucasian and non-Asian males’ sociological reports have also raised this question. A Caucasian male friend of Prasso’s (2005) who had lived in Asia for many years and married an Asian argued that he saw preferences in sexual attraction as normal, “You like what you like. If we all can find more ways of liking each other in this world, what’s wrong with that?”

The answer is that it is not normal when on the receiving end of that attention, Asian and Asian-American women such as Mizuno, Liao, and the women of whom they speak feel objectified and not valued as individuals but rather for their race, stereotypes, or perceptions of the culture from which they come. Thus, it is evident that, at the very least, this “line” Liao discusses must be drawn by the woman on the receiving end. In addition, as I contend that American society should communicate and hold open dialogue regarding the phenomenon and its effects on life experiences, it is important to acknowledge that the stereotypes fueling the Asian fetish and the subsequent experiences have evolved over nearly one hundred and fifty years.

### **A History of Stereotypes and Their Impacts**

In past centuries, the term “Oriental” denoted the exotic difference of a distant, foreign land east of the “Occident”—the Western world. Today, in the global world, this definition of the Oriental can be found at times in the West. It can be evoked by exotic environments, artifacts, and other markers of far-away culture, as well as a person’s race categorized by his or her physical appearance. Thus, on one hand, the Oriental is objectified in terms of culture and geography, and on the other hand, it is also objectified

in terms of one's race and gender. This latter situation may lead to serious impacts of intolerance and subjugation upon the lives of Asian-American women.

The United States' mainstream media has long depicted Asian-American women as exotic, sexy, and subservient. Furthermore, the image portrayed can be broken down into two contrasting stereotypes: the diabolical, immoral, seductive Dragon Lady and the docile, passive, obedient doll—the Lotus Blossom (Uchida, 1998, p.162). The paradoxical characteristics are both strikingly sexed and reflect the progression of white America's encounter with Asian women largely through immigration and U.S. military involvement in countries of Far East Asia in the twentieth century. Particularly, there has been significant character development of Chinese and Japanese women as the Oriental Woman, reflecting the historical forces of the last one hundred and fifty years. As mass media popularized it, the image of the Oriental Woman has come to represent Asian-American women in American cultural memory; and consequently this impacts Asian-American women's individual life experience.

In his distinguished study *Orientalism*, the influential scholar, Edward Said (1979), refers to Flaubert's "widely influential model of the Oriental woman" based on his encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan:

. . . she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence of history. He [Flaubert] spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental." (p. 6).

In the U.S today, the "typically Oriental" woman is usually a women of East Asian origin, regardless of if she may be American and may have lived her entire life in the U.S. It is true that Confucianism, a complex Chinese system of moral, social, political,

and religious thought, influenced many East Asian cultures and deals with certain patriarchal, sexist ethics that mold the culture's views and practices toward women; however, the circumstances under which America came into contact with East Asian women have had a more direct effect on the creation of the Oriental Woman. (Uchida, 1998, p.163) The origins behind the dominating and defining of Asian-American women can be found in the anti-Chinese period from 1870—1900's during which the Oriental Woman image emerged initially as "seductive and sinister" (Okamura, 1976, p. 90). The following is a brief overview regarding the major elements during this time that fostered the stereotype.

In the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of the Chinese in the U.S. were immigrant men, partly because of White Americans' interest in employing them as temporary, low-cost laborers. Chinese women served as a major threat to Caucasians fearful of the "Yellow Peril," the population of Chinese reproducing and thus taking over the labor in the country. As a result most of those able to immigrate were smuggled in large numbers as prostitutes (Yung, 1999). The Chinese men were dependent on the prostitutes to satisfy their sexual needs, and Chinese prostitution flourished in San Francisco's Chinatown in mid and late nineteenth century; in 1870 almost two-thirds of the Chinese women in San Francisco worked as prostitutes (Uchida, 1998, p. 163), and they were sexually exploited several times a day by both Chinese and Caucasian men (Yung, 1999). Their widespread prosperity and public slander fueled anti-Chinese sentiments, and Chinese women were generally accused of being sexually corrupt, "demoralizing, tainting the blood of White American youths, spreading diseases, and

stealing the jobs of white boys and girls, thus forcing them into lives of sin and crime” (Uchida, 1998, p. 163).

Consequently, such images of Chinese women as corrupt, promiscuous heathens presented a justification for anti-Chinese legislation, which in turn perpetuated the belief concerning Chinese women. The Page Law of 1875 made it unlawful to land Chinese and other Asian women without proof that she was a person of good character (Peffer, 1999). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, not repealed until 1943 applied to both males and females, and specifically prevented single Chinese women and the wives of U.S. residents other than merchants from immigrating (Vo, 2004, p. 2). Once again, the immorality of Chinese women was used as a reason to stop them from entering the U.S. The laws also influenced the image of other Asian women, for underlying the laws was the assumption that all “Oriental Women” who wanted to emigrate would engage in “criminal and demoralizing acts” (Uchida, 1998, p. 164). For those East Asian men and women who did attempt to immigrate, they were rigorously interrogated and cross-examined by U.S. officials stationed in China and Japan (Uchida, 1998, p. 164). Those who continued on usually arrived in San Francisco where they left their belongings in storage shed and were herded to the detention barracks of Angel Immigration Station for more interrogation. (Vo, 2004). Locked in their confined quarters and only allowed to leave to retrieve luggage once a week, the fortunate ones stayed for a few weeks, some remained for a couple of years, and 5-15 % of those detained were deported (Vo, 2004). The laws and interrogations barring Chinese women from entering the U.S. were so broad and strict that they also served to discourage Chinese wives from coming to America.

The anti-Chinese sentiments were also reflected in media, such as in Hollywood films, which further perpetuated the convictions regarding Asian women. Although the audiences understood that the movies were fantasy, the visuals of exotic, corrupt, deviant Chinese women only strongly enforced their already misconstrued perceptions. In the “Thief of Baghdad” (1924) Anna May Wong played a Mongol slave girl who assisted the evil ruler from taking over the world. The image she portrayed was a dangerous, mysterious, seductive vamp, from which came the Dragon Lady of the silver screen. Wong was the only widely watched Asian female actress in Hollywood during the first half of the nineteenth century since most Asian women were played by Caucasians due to such disapproval of Asians and Caucasians kissing onscreen. (Gee, 1988). To achieve the “seductive, exotic look”, Caucasian actresses used the technique of placing tape over their eyelids to create “slanty eyes” (Gee, 1988).

The image that America had of the Oriental Woman as seductive, corrupting, and diabolical began to take on more paradoxical characteristics with the next large-scale encounter with Asian women—World War II. Before the 1930’s, the U.S.’s image of Japanese women largely stemmed from the picture bride practice in which a Japanese man secured a spouse, requiring her to immigrate from their country while he remained in the States (Uchida, 1998, p. 164). While the practice was viewed as immoral compared to American Christian ideals, Japanese immigrant women were condemned as “breeding like rats and producing even more inassimilable Japanese” (Gee, 1975, p. 9-10). Again, this contributed to the negative image of the Oriental woman as having a dishonest, barbaric sexuality. However, the U.S.’s involvement in World War II led American soldiers to come into direct contact with Asian women, mostly Japanese but

also some Chinese and even South East Asian women. They encountered local Japanese women as geishas and bar girls—whores still at worst, but also as perfect domestic, obedient wives. Yet, even before interacting with actual pleasing, servicing Japanese women, the soldiers came into contact with an Asian woman's seductive, foreign voice on the radio. The voice belonged to not one woman but many Japanese broadcasters who were given the sole name of "Tokyo Rose" by American servicemen. The broadcasters were alluring hosts of English-language programs that Japanese radio networks aired as propaganda consisting of "music, humor, nostalgia, and news" (Okamura, 1976, p. 89). The previously sexually immoral and seductive character of the Oriental Woman provided a context in which the voice could be romanticized, and the war-weary soldiers could simply transfer their racial fantasies and hostilities (Uchida, 1998, p.165).

During this time, the Oriental Woman was cast into a desirable light compared to earlier in the century. Using sexism and racism to objectify Japanese women was a psychological tactic aimed at instilling a mentality necessary to become effective soldiers, or in other words, effective killers (Uchida, 1998, p. 166). Perceiving them as "dolls . . . useful toys or something to play with" enhanced the notion that Asians were something less than human and thus much easier to kill in battle (Uchida, 1998, p. 166). The dual characterization of being sexually exotic and passive was perpetuated for the soldiers in another aspect of their media with cartoon character, "Babysan" (Vo, 2004, p. 100). The comic strip, created by an American serviceman, was featured in the pages of the Far East edition of the *Navy Times* (Hume, 1953) and spoke directly to these contradictory qualities (Vo, 2004). Sketched in short, see through, American-style

resses, the images of the young, curvaceous, slanted eyed woman were juxtaposed with texts depicting “Babysan” as childlike, playful, obedient, and naïve (Figure 5).

The stereotype of dually exotic and subservient creatures able to please men in special ways transferred to characterize Asian-American women as well; however, images of bar girls and geishas were not the only impressions of the Oriental Woman that the soldiers brought back to the U.S. After World War II, the U.S. Congress passed the War Bride Act, which allowed the country’s servicemen to bring Japanese and European wives home (Uchida, 1998, p. 166). Along with the war brides, America became saturated with impressions of Japanese women as excellent homemakers with “wifely virtues and male pleasing attributes”—not so different from the geisha as they both represent the same image of an “Oriental Woman who exists to please men (Uchida, 1998, p. 166). Notably, it is crucial to compare the image of the war brides to the earlier image of picture brides of Asian immigrant men. “War brides of the Western Man are acceptable, but picture brides of Asians are not.” (Uchida, 1998, p. 166). This may have occurred due to the fact that the war brides symbolized the winning of the war; they were war prizes. Moreover, the segregation between the Oriental Woman and the White Woman was still upheld, for the “virtues” of the Oriental Woman did not transform her into a white or even Western woman. Anti-miscegenation laws not repealed until 1967 evidenced this.

Once again, the silver screen of Hollywood during the 1930s reflected U.S. sentiments towards Asians during monumental political events, and this time, the antagonists were the Japanese. In the films, Japanese men were portrayed as evil and abusive towards their women. In turn, the storylines depicted the Japanese woman, still

played by Caucasians, as continually hardworking and supportive of her husband and even his mistress. (Gee, 1988). Subsequently in the 50s in post-war Japan, the Geisha girl made her debut, as well as Japanese actresses playing lead roles. Several examples of films starring geishas include numerous versions of the famous opera of the early 1900s, *Madame Butterfly*, which glorifies the suffering and servitude of an Oriental Woman for her love for a white man. “Teahouse of the August Moon” (1956), a film about the Americanization of post-war Okinawa, Japan, starred the popular and prominent Marlon Brando as a GI whose needs are catered to by character, Lotus Blossom (Gee, 1988). It is important to keep in mind that film was popularizing during this time, thus media portrayals of ethnic groups and racial difference became more powerful in creating something real for the Caucasian American society.

The Asian themed storylines became more common in the later half of the 1900s as the Oriental Woman image became more desirable to watch. Accordingly, Asian-American actresses gained more onscreen exposure but still played characters such as the memorable Suzie Wong, who again instilled the image of being mysterious, subservient, and sexy (Gee, 1988). In addition, as media had previously reflected political activities repeatedly, Vietnamese women became the new performance subject during the 70s and 80s with the Vietnam War. Evidence of this can be found in the highly acclaimed films *Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987). The popular, modern musical, *Miss Saigon* (1989) is yet another appropriation of *Madame Butterfly* by merely changing the historical context into the circumstances of the Vietnam War softening the explicitness of the Orientalist theme (Uchida, 1998, p. 168).

### Images of Asian Women in Modern Mass Media

Today, the image of the Oriental Woman still exists at all levels of discourse: from the level of mass media to the level of interpersonal exchanges in everyday life. Their stereotype continues to be exotic and submissive or treacherous and lustful, even considering the duration that Asian women have been Americans. It is “as if the century of life experiences of Asian women in the United States has had little impact” (Uchida, 1998, p. 167).

After decades of Hollywood portrayals, the common, modern dominatrix role is not so far off from Anna May Wong’s *Dragon Lady*. Popular actress, Lucy Liu, made her debut in the hit 90s show *Ally McBeal* as Ling Woo, a smart, sexy, and insolent lawyer. Hardly appearing to be a lawyer, she owns a mud-wrestling joint, gives her boyfriend “hair jobs” with her long black hair, and holds off sleeping with men for once they experience her, they can never get enough (Chihara, 2000). With an incredibly brusque exterior, she seems suspiciously like a *Dragon Lady*. While she shatters the role of the *Lotus Blossom*, some Asian-American women like Helen Liu, media consultant for the Asian American Resource Workshop in Boston, states,

Like most Asian-American women, I’m upset by her. Ling Woo is the 90s version of all the old stereotypes wrapped up in one. She’s a *Suzie Wong*, she has sex secrets . . . People say, ‘It’s okay if she has this kind of weird and kinky side because she’s also a powerful and central character.’ But you have to look at what people are really drawn to. They’re not being drawn to the fact that she’s powerful or central. They’re drawn to her because of her stereotypical qualities. (Chihara, 2000).

The consultant continues posing the question that if the new generation of people believe that America has made much social progress, why is it not being reflected in social and political reality?

Following *Ally McBeal*, Lucy Liu became a prominent Asian-American actress and stars in many films where she continues to play roles that stereotype Asian women: *Payback* (1999), *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), *Kill Bill Volume 1* (2003) and *Volume 2* (2004). The actress's defense is, "People forget, sometimes you take roles because you've got bills to pay." (Chihara, 2000).

Beyond Hollywood in the modern global era, there are many more realms available for portraying the unchanged Oriental Woman image. This is evidenced by multicultural advertisements that have saturated the print media and the Internet, such as the Virginia Slims advertisement discussed earlier. Today, Asians are no longer quite racialized as invisible to mainstream culture, and consequently, commodified images of Asian-American women have come to play an integral role in today's consumer culture industries (Kim and Chung, 2005, p. 68). Moreover, Caucasian males are trying to separate from a past of "racism, segregation, and Anglo-conformity," (Kim and Chung, 2005, p. 89), and thus they are quick to consume the emerging global culture that has been packaged, commodified, and marketed by multi-national global corporations.

Kim and Chung (2005) highlight a multicultural Charles Schwab advertisement (Figure 6) to serve as an example of maintaining the dominance of upper-class, Caucasian males by reusing the Oriental Woman theme under the guise of multiculturalism (p. 77). It depicts three people sitting and holding books: a White woman looking straight ahead, holding a book titled "Keep Ahead of Sharks," an Asian-American woman sitting in the middle holding, "How to Get RICH Overnight," and a Caucasian male sits to her right reading "Boy, Am I Happy." The Asian-American woman is looking at the Caucasian male, focusing the viewer's attention towards him as

the main character; and her look appears more like a glare which seems to represent her resentment towards his financial success—a theme that references the “yellow peril” threats of Chinese laborers and the perception of Asian women as greedy, devious, and immoral. This ad along with the Virginia Slims ad demonstrating the other characteristics of the Oriental Woman being submissive, quiet, and docile illustrates the possible ingenuity of a multicultural print advertisement profiting off of a multi-racial consumer base via wider inclusion and while upholding Caucasian male superiority through consumption of the Oriental Woman image.

The fact that Asian-American women are still sexually objectified, culturally misrepresented, and visually consumed in contemporary American culture after a century and half of history in the U.S. seems to indicate that there is something deeper occurring; Uchida (1998) argues that with the existence of the Oriental Woman stereotype, there is a continuing process deeper than merely developing the image that is most fit under social conditions for “ingroup-outgroup” differentiations and for resolving conflicts in members of the “ingroup” (p. 170). He contends that the Oriental Woman does not merely represent Asian women as an “outgroup.” The image is used to deny Asian women’s status as “subjects,” for when a group has the power to characterize another group through mass media of representations of race, it can continue to support these images and can maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of this objectified group (hooks, 1992, p. 2). The process of creating the Oriental Woman image, recreating it, and even continuing to redevelop it is necessary because the customs and position of Caucasian males in American society rely on the racialized and gendered representations of Asian-American women as the “Other” (Uchida, 1998, p. 170). Kim and Chung

concur with this belief arguing that the emerging global culture has been put on the market by multi-national corporations in a manner that widens their range of cultural repertoires but resurrects traditional hierarchies of American Orientalism (2005, p. 67).

As the Asian immigrant women and war brides suffered the consequences of discrimination and scrutiny, modern Asian-American women also endure the effects of social consequences beyond the commodification of their image. An area of social practice where the Oriental Woman stereotype is prevalent is in the realm of sexual relationships such as courtship and marriage (Uchida, 1998, p. 168). hooks (1992) states that “mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference” (p. 21), and this is reflected in the sexual practice among youth and adults who prefer those of a particular race, such as Asian-Americans. The mail-order bride industry is a result of the preference for Oriental Women. The practice exploits Asian women and perpetuates the sexist racism directed towards Asian-American women by non-Asian men who view them only in terms of stereotypes. Men who want “submissive and less intimidating” women can order and purchase brides from Asian countries (Uchida, 1998, p. 168). Advertisements for the practice are often in classified ads of popular magazines like *Harper's* (January, 1992): “Asian dream-girl introductions. America's preferred service. Guaranteed. Free booklet.” “Meet Thai women desiring romance, correspondence. Color photograph brochure: \$2. Weekly introduction tours” (p. 78).

Sexual preference for Asian women legitimates the commodification of Asian women through marriage. However, there are also incidents where sexual preference

leads to cases of sexual violence. Kimberly Huisman (1996) postulates that Asian women may refrain from reporting sexual and domestic violence due to racism and sexism.

Asian women have to deal with patriarchal constraints on two fronts—one within their own culture and the other specific to American culture; together both may lower their chances of obtaining help. Moreover, racism may exaggerate an abused woman's fears about seeking help outside of her community, and she may have learned that to avoid racism and discrimination, it is in their best interest to remain invisible in U.S. society (Huisman, 1996, p. 280). Crimes involving sexual preference of Asian women should serve as a warning to American society of the grave consequences that come with the Oriental Woman image; however, awareness cannot arise if such cases of sexual discrimination and violence are not reported.

In 2000, a case involved the abduction and rap of two female Japanese college students; they were videotaped, and told that if they told anyone what had happened, the videotapes would be mailed to their fathers. After others, not the two women, reported the crime, the three Caucasian assailants admitted targeting Asian women specifically because they had a sexual preference for submissive Asian women, but also because they believed that this same submissiveness and cultural shame would prevent the women from reporting the assaults (Eranius). Moreover, this demonstrates the assailants' cultural blindness as they were targeting Japanese women and not Asian women as a whole.

The image of the Oriental Woman is present in an even more everyday interaction than personal, sexual relationships; the confining stereotypes are experienced in daily

conversation. Elena Tajima Creef (1990) quotes a man conversing with her in a movie theater:

I really love Japanese films, almost as much as I love Asian girls! I'm going to Taiwan next month to meet this woman I've been corresponding with. I really prefer Oriental women to American because (he whispers) there are so many "feminists" in town. You are Asian, aren't you? Don't tell me, let me guess. Japanese? Chinese? Hawaiian? Eurasian? (p. 83).

Her immediate response was that the man was an idiot. From her perspective, she was the daughter of a WWII Japanese war bride who married her "hillbilly" father in 1949 while she was hanging up the laundry to dry (Creef, 1990, p. 83). She continued to stating that after men impose their expectations, they are often surprised if an Asian-American woman does not act according to her Oriental Woman stereotype. Uchida (1998) raises the argument that the dissonance can then be credited to her labeled deviance, to the fact that there is something wrong with her instead of their expectations, their image of her (p. 169). These instances of sexist, racist discrimination involving social practices, specifically in the realm of sexual relationships, and interpersonal interactions are unfortunate consequences of the controlling image that American society has over Asian-American women.

### **Creating an Arena for New Images**

Upon discovering the hushed history of Asian women in America and reading modern sociological reports regarding the Asian fetish, I was inspired to create the works that make up "Made in the USA" (Figure 7). In the series, I aim to explore the visual experience of Asian female imagery in America and open up what I have found to be a

muted discourse. As a contemporary photographer, I am interested in subjecting the documentary power of portraits to a more reflective process of painting and to a more commercial process of silk screening, mimicking a sense of easy reproducibility. In other words, I want to both accentuate and strip the image of the Oriental woman.

Much of the meaning behind my pieces derives from the different layers inviting a slower, closer viewing and implying complexities beyond superficial stereotypes and the photographic moment. Woven into the picture plane are references to traditional Asian images and writing evoking a sense of Western fantasy of the Orient—antiquated, yet underlying the surfaces of misshaped perspectives. Furthermore, transparent in the background, Asian-American women represented in various media of the past surround the photographed figure referencing a persisting history. For, ultimately, the modern Asian-American figure extends from generations of stereotyped women and exists among centuries of misunderstandings, perceptions contorted in Western cultural memory. The audio recordings give the muted female a voice and allows her to speak out against the Orientalized filter of the “Asian Mystique” evoked in the viewer. Thus, in a realm of invisibility and silence, I want the images and words to wash the subject of its exotic “otherness.” I am looking for the personal narratives beneath the immediate moment of the photograph and beneath the stereotypes.

In order to create my own art form, I combined layers and mediums which reflect my interest in integrating the ancient and modern images and techniques. For example, I turned to silk screening for its distinct contemporary qualities. Its aspect of reproducibility imitates the ease at which the Asian female image is replicated in America, while its association with popular culture sets the tone from which the term

Asian fetish has derived. In contrast, while allusions to Asian painting motifs have been reduced to graphics and line drawings for a more contemporary feel, the cherry blossoms, sweet lotus blossoms, and ephemeral butterflies conjure up an exotic land of fantasy in the viewer's mind. I largely utilize influences from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean watercolor paintings and woodcuts, for they are the traditional images most widely viewed among a Western audience and thus most effective in evoking a sense of the Orient.

Similarly, I also utilize imagery of ancient Chinese calligraphy to elicit a sense of the Orient. I chose Chinese calligraphy based on the fact that it is the origin of modern Korean and Japanese characters and writing systems. Moreover, while maybe illegible and illiterate to the average, untrained Western viewer, the use of only Chinese calligraphy mimics the thinking that the incapacity to differentiate implies that "they must all be the same—Asian." Moreover, I did not select arbitrary Chinese characters; I chose words that highlight the sexism ingrained in the language. The character selected for each piece contains the root character "woman" and lays down the theme of the work, and ultimately gives rise to each piece's title. All these layers, the mixing of ancient and modern art forms, are screen printed on cotton bed sheets. While the fabric provides an ephemeral quality, it also abruptly addresses the hyper sexualized awareness attached to the Asian female image.

The audio consists of a compilation of twelve interviews of Asian-American females in college. In attempts to obtain a wide pool, I used the "snowball method," a method often used when conducting sociological interviews, and was able to interview young women of Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Vietnamese

descent. Their birthplaces and location of childhoods range from the east to the west coast of the U.S., from the Mid-West to the South of the U.S., and from Hong Kong to London. They also attend various universities around the nation. This portion of the art making influenced my conceptual research the most, for as they shared their stories, many of them brought me to topics and issues I had not previously researched or encountered.

I found that the interviews I conducted proved to be most educational largely because of the manner in which these young women behaved. I was very surprised that while speaking openly about the subject of the Asian fetish, more than half of the young women seemed incredibly self-conscious, shaken up, and bothered, even when the recording device was turned off. Two decided mid-interview that they could not muster up the confidence to speak about the topic. While each had either initially volunteered or happily agreed to the recorded interview, it became apparent to me that the issues surrounding the Asian fetish were sore subjects for them. This strongly reinforced how important I felt it was for the viewer to hear their words.

### **Conclusion**

The persistent image of the Oriental Woman has developed over the last century and a half into a dual character. On the one hand there exist the deviant, promiscuous, corrupt vamp, and on the other is the submissive, pleasing, self-sacrificing wife. These powerful stereotypes have been shaped through political forces, re-enforced by representations in the media, and influential on the life experiences of Asian-American

women. However, as it is apparent that traces of the Orientalist image are still lingering in today's popular culture, it seems as if American society has more to learn from its lengthy history of Asian discrimination. It should be acknowledged that the portrayals of Asian-American women in mass media have come a long way. The fact that some Asian women are receiving stronger, mold-breaking roles in the media implies improvement. One such actress that has received large attention recently for this very notion is Sandra Oh in the popular television series, *Grey's Anatomy*. While she exemplifies a strong, independent, American female, the writers have paired her in a healthy relationship with an African-American male and have not found the need to hyper sexualize her character. This higher representation of less stereotyped Asian-American females also applies in the arts, in politics, in business, and many other realms.

However, the consequences of the stereotypes continue to have serious implications for the life experiences of Asian-American women, and thus inherently seriously affect all groups of women: Caucasian women, women of color, other minority women, and Asian women themselves. As long as women are being dominated and defined by those other than themselves, women of different groups will be pitted against each other when they should be collaborating. In my artwork, "Made in the USA," I attempt to demonstrate that it is time the image of the Oriental woman lay to rest; it must be recognized that living in a global, politically correct world allows awareness to be raised regarding ethnic difference; and thus, in turn the stakes can be raised in creating new, just representations. I believe the first step is educating people about the topic of the Asian fetish and opening the doors for communication. Upon viewing my work, if viewers take anything away from my pieces, I would like for them to learn about the

hushed topic, for them to feel capable discussing a once taboo matter without feelings of guilt, and for them to be aware of what thoughts, insecurities, frustrations lie on the receiving side of the Asian fetish.

## Illustrations

**Figure 1.** The “Find Your Voice” advertisement by Virginia Slims.



**Figure 2.** Silk-screen of  
*Translation: envy (combination of “woman” and “disease”)*



**Figure 3.** Silk-screen of  
*Translation: to please (combination of “woman” and “nothing”)*



**Figure 4.** Silk-screen of  
*Translation: wife (combination of “woman” and “broom”)*



**Figure 5.** “Babysan” cartoon in *Navy Times*  
Text reads: “You think Babysan look like a babysan?”

**Figure 6.** Multicultural advertisement by Charles Schwab.



Figure 7. "Made In the USA" Silkscreen series.

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