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LIVING THE FANTASY: EAST ASIAN WOMEN IN POPULAR MEDIA

ILAYDA ORANKOY
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Laura Spielvogel
Teaching Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies
Thesis Supervisor

Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor
Professor of English and Women's Studies
Director of Undergraduate Studies
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

As immigration from East Asia burgeoned during the late 19th and early 20th century, Orientalist attitudes and beliefs perpetuated in popular literature like Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* grew to shape the Western notion of yellow peril—and later, the model minority myth. Likewise, Orientalism remains influential in even contemporary depictions of Asian and Asian American identity. In portrayals of Asian women, Orientalist stereotype is compounded by fetish and misogyny, thereby creating the Western fantasy of Asian womanhood. In order to examine the symbiotic relationship between media and public perception, this paper traces the implications of Orientalist stereotype through representations of East Asian women in works like *Memoirs of a Geisha* and the aforementioned *Fu Manchu* and juxtaposes them with the lived experiences of East Asian women like Ah Fong Moy and Yoko Ono. This paper argues for Asian women's reclamation of Orientalist fantasy; though historically a tool for white patriarchy, reclaimed fantasy can also function as a mechanism for reexamining the past, deconstructing myth, reconciling trauma, and reimagining the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	4
I. THE MODERN FANTASY	7
II. OF LOTUS BLOSSOMS AND CHINOISERIE	12
III. THE YOKO MYTHOS	17
IV. WHOSE STORIES BECOME MEMOIR?	21
V. EXPANDING ASIANNNESS	26
CONCLUSION.....	30
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32

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INTRODUCTION

When Sax Rohmer published his first Fu Manchu novel in 1913, his mystical, otherworldly depiction of the East was far from groundbreaking. As originally discussed in Edward Said's landmark 1978 book *Orientalism*, Western societies have historically relegated non-white peoples to the oppressive role of "Other", which then frames the "Orient" as the moral, social, and cultural opposite of the more civilized, more rational Occident.¹ Likewise, the character of Fu Manchu—a deviously intelligent, sexually aggressive Chinese man with a penchant for the arcane—encapsulates longstanding Western fear of an encroaching Orient. Rohmer's body of work juxtaposes this fear (later termed "yellow peril") with white fascination for the purpose of entertainment, which thereby reaffirms Western superiority while simultaneously offering a voyeuristic glimpse into Rohmer's notion of the East. Furthermore, the symbiotic relationship between fear and fascination plays a key role in not only other popular fictionalizations of East Asian immigrants and East Asian Americans throughout American history. Though imitations of Asianness have fostered trend after trend in popular culture, people of Asian descent face alienation in American society for their Asianness. In other words, Asian aesthetics inspire morbid fascination; Asian people inspire fear.

In addition to painting a wealth of different Asian cultures as a monolith, Rohmer's work also perpetuates a strict dichotomy of Asian masculinity and Asian femininity. For example, in Shoba Rajgopal's 2010 article "The Daughter of Fu Manchu: The Pedagogy of Deconstructing the Representation of Asian Women in Film and Fiction", Rajgopal identifies the nefarious, bewhiskered Fu Manchu to be the distillation of 20th century yellow peril in the United States.

¹ Said, Edward W. "Orientalism (1st Vintage Books ed.)." New York, NY: Vintage (1979)

Even more worrisome than Fu Manchu and his heavy-handed, theatrical plots for mass destruction, however, was his equally devious (and far more beautiful) daughter. Yet another haphazard amalgamation of various unnamed Asian cultures, Fu Manchu's daughter triggered white fear for slightly different reasons. A master of disguise and talented seductress, she symbolized the mysterious Asian woman's supposed ability to infiltrate the West with her hypnotic, otherworldly allure.² Unlike her father, whose pastime of kidnapping white women underscored the predatory, repugnant nature of Asian men, Fu Manchu's daughter spoke to the underhanded (yet submissive) treachery of Asian women. Additionally, the daughter of Fu Manchu remains nameless throughout the Fu Manchu series; although she is often referred to by the pet name Fah Lo Suee, her assigned personal identity—that of the token Asian woman—is reduced to her relationship to her father, the token Asian man. Although Fu Manchu's daughter exhibits some autonomy in her evil-doing, Rohmer still portrays Asian women to be accessories to power.

As a white English author who held no prior concept of Asian cultures, Sax Rohmer was singularly unqualified to construct such an enduring portrait of Asian identity. In fact, by his own account, he was compelled to pen the Fu Manchu novels when a *Ouija* board spelled out “C-H-I-N-A-M-A-N” after he inquired as to how he might earn his fortune.³ Rohmer's false authority is therefore symptomatic of yet another dilemma: In the eyes of the West, East Asian people's stories—and, by extension, their histories—are not their own. Asian stereotypes are a direct product of Western fantasy, as are the fetishization of Asian women, the desexualization of

² Rajgopal, Shoba Sharad. "' The Daughter of Fu Manchu': The Pedagogy of Deconstructing the Representation of Asian Women in Film and Fiction." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 10, no. 2 (2010): 141-162.

³ Baker, Phil. "Fu Manchu and China: Was the 'yellow Peril Incarnate' Really Appallingly Racist?" *The Independent*. October 20, 2015.

Asian men, and the general infantilization of Asian peoples. As such, despite the many liberties Rohmer took in representing Asian culture, his Orientalist fabrication—and the yellow peril upon which it was built—continues to evolve in contemporary perceptions of Asianness.

As illustrated in Rohmer's lucrative career, fiction does not exist in a vacuum; rather, Western fantasy actively shapes contemporary understanding. Given the mutual exchange between storytelling and public perception, this project traces the effects of this so-called Western fantasy through representations of East Asian women in pop culture and prominent literature. Though fantasy has long served as a tool for oppression and control, fantasy—when reappropriated by Asian women as an outlet for creativity and empowerment—becomes a valuable mechanism for reexamining the past, deconstructing myth, reconciling trauma, and reimagining the future. In order to critique avenues for such reclamation, this project first addresses the components of Western fantasy and pinpoints their modern-day applications. Additionally, this project specifically examines media representation of East Asian women in relation to immigration patterns and Orientalist attitudes during the 19th and 20th century. Given the separate history of South Asian immigration during the latter half of the 20th century, this project's discussion of Asianness focuses on East Asian heritage.

I. THE MODERN FANTASY

As immigration to the United States from East Asia burgeoned during the late 19th and early 20th century, so too did white American distrust of what they perceived to be the yellow peril—the clear and present danger of an Asian supremacy. Characterized by Orientalist assertions of Asian barbarism, infantilism, and cruelty, those who bought into yellow peril scapegoated Asian immigrants in reaction to mounting economic anxiety and wartime nationalism. As a result, nationwide anti-Asian sentiment framed these immigrants as parasites of the American way of life, out to topple the American workforce from the ground-up.⁴ Though American infrastructure and agriculture grew to rely on cheap, uncontracted Asian labor, racist Americans continued to begrudge these workers for their foreignness, which was viewed as inherently incompatible with Western culture. Such prejudice was reinforced with legislature like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which hindered the immigration process and prevented naturalization until 1943.⁵ Unsurprisingly, because Chinese exclusion was largely appearance-based, the Act also extended to non-Chinese Asian immigrants, which again bolstered the Orientalist misconception of an Asian monolith. In legally classifying Asian immigrants as interchangeable, these immigrants were then barred from achieving Americanness in a landscape that functioned (and still functions) on the assumption of American superiority.⁶

Yellow peril, however, represents only one component of the Western fantasy. Over the course of the 20th century, yellow peril ultimately evolved into the contemporary myth of the

⁴ Rajgopal, Shoba Sharad. "'The Daughter of Fu Manchu': The Pedagogy of Deconstructing the Representation of Asian Women in Film and Fiction." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 10, no. 2 (2010): 141-162.

⁵ Chin, Doug. "The Chinese Exclusion Acts: A Racist Chapter in U.S. Civil Rights History." *Chinese American Forum* 33, no. 1 (July 2017): 19-21. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost

⁶ Frayling, Christopher. *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia*. Thames & Hudson, 2014.

model minority—that is, the concept that Asian Americans compose a smarter, more diligent, more obedient subset of American racial minorities, and can therefore more easily assimilate into the white population.⁷ Still, the catalyst of said evolution remains uncertain. For instance, some scholars posit that various social movements during the era afforded Asian Americans the opportunity to rebrand their communities to be more palatable to white Americans.⁸ Others, meanwhile, cite the rigorous and selective American immigration process as the cause of this gradual change. In granting more social mobility to immigrants with more “cultural capital”, the American government could thereby ensure an influx of highly-educated Asian immigrants—which subsequently led to the 20th century notion of the “brain drain”.⁹ Causality aside, the fact remains that the transformation from yellow peril to model minority still hinged entirely on white opinion; though a marked shift from outright hostility to wary acceptance, the classification of “model minority” still trivializes the diversity of Asian experience for white benefit.

Moreover, the model minority myth impresses an intelligence-based hierarchy among Asian Americans that assigns cultural value to outstanding, tireless achievement while simultaneously punishing failure to attain it.¹⁰ When Asian Americans succeed without demanding reward or recognition, they are presented as “models” to which other minorities should aspire. When they cannot, they regress to yellow peril—dormant threats with nothing to offer save for increased population. Furthermore, because model minority status necessitates extreme self-sufficiency, this hierarchy also dissuades displays of outward vulnerability, such as

⁷ Hsu, Madeline Y. *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

⁸ Wu, Ellen D. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

⁹ Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*.

¹⁰ Kolano, Lan. "Smartness as cultural wealth: an AsianCrit counterstory." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 19, no. 6 (2016): 1149-1163.

physical and mental illness. This, in turn, not only results in higher levels of unchecked health risks, but contributes to the stigmatization of mental illness in the Asian American community.¹¹ Additionally, rather than recognizing Asian Americans' demanding standards of performance to be a prerequisite for white approval, such drive is chalked up to cultural difference, which only reasserts Asian Americans' position as perpetual (and unwelcome) foreigners in their own home country. In short, under the model minority myth, the acceptability of Asian Americans becomes proportional to their potential for uninterrupted, invariable production.

In addition to the yellow-peril-to-model-minority shift being an instrument of white interest, it was also an incomplete transfiguration, as both still live on in the modern Western fantasy. The seemingly contradictory relationship between the phenomena is exemplified in media portrayals of desexualized, foolhardy Asian men, where they tend to provide comedic relief through exaggerated incompetence. The most infamous of such stereotypes of desexualization is likely Gebbe Watanabe's character Long Duk Dong from 1984 romantic comedy *Sixteen Candles*, in which Long Duk Dong inappropriately hits on the white woman protagonist and frequently remarks on his masturbatory habits—all while seemingly unaware of his own self-inflicted humiliation.¹² Though a far cry from the predatory antagonism of Fu Manchu, both Orientalist creations share a lechery toward white women that results in a reflexive disgust. The blatant desexualization of Asian men isn't just restricted to fictional characters, either. More recently, movies like *The Interview*, released in 2014, depict North Korean Dictator

¹¹ Jang, Yuri, Nan Sook Park, Hyunwoo Yoon, Ya-Ching Huang, Min-Kyoung Rhee, David A. Chiriboga, and Miyong T. Kim. "The risk typology of healthcare access and its association with unmet healthcare needs in Asian Americans." *Health & social care in the community* 26, no. 1 (2018): 72-79.

¹² Chow, Kat. "What's So 'Cringeworthy' About Long Duk Dong in 'Sixteen Candles'?" NPR. February 06, 2015. Accessed March 27, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/06/384307677/whats-so-cringe-worthy-about-long-duk-dong-in-sixteen-candles>.

Kim Jung Un as a bumbling, overly-emotional buffoon, which only trivializes a deadly situation borne of American oversight during the aftermath of WWII.¹³ By interpreting North Korea to be the butt of an elaborate American joke, the fused myths of yellow peril and model minority adjust to frame trauma as comedy. This juxtaposition of ineptitude and violence, in turn, perpetuates age-old dichotomies in Orientalist stereotypes: Asian people are either toiling laborers or corrupt aristocrats, dedicated scholars or complete idiots, helpless victims or cruel abusers. In any case, these supposed shortcomings are presumably attributed to the repressed, duty-bound nature of the Asian hive-mind, which conveniently sets the stage for white supremacy.

To revisit the case of Fu Manchu's daughter, the aforementioned dichotomy of subservience and wickedness is further polarized in stereotypes of Asian women, who are so often defined by (and fetishized for) their relationship to men—white men in particular. In their 2016 analysis of Asian women in American pornography, Yanyan Zhou and Paul Bryant identify “dragon ladies” and “lotus blossoms” as either side of this binary. On one hand, dragon ladies (again, like Fu Manchu's daughter) are characterized by a deviousness and manipulateness that leads good white Christian men to moral decay.¹⁴ On the other, lotus blossoms are characterized by virtue and docility, which makes them ideal wives to dominant white men.¹⁵ In both cases, however, the presentation of Asian women's sexuality requires both an unquestionable sexual subservience and a total lack of agency. As is congruent with the history of the model minority myth, Asian women's value and personhood are entirely dependent upon their service and appeal

¹³ Yan, Holly, and Ben Brumfield. "North Korea Blasts U.S. over Release of 'The Interview'." CNN. December 29, 2014. Accessed March 24, 2018.

¹⁴ Zhou, Yanyan, and Bryant Paul. "Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of “Asian women” Online Pornography." *Sexuality & Culture* 20, no. 4 (2016): 1086.

¹⁵ Zhou and Paul, "Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady," 1086.

to white men. By depicting Asian women to have an implicit sexual preference for white men, Asian women are therefore rendered resources to be depleted, and Asian men are further desexualized by white patriarchy. Whether lotus blossoms are preferable to dragon ladies is irrelevant, because white men's fantasies of Asian women leave no room for aggression, ugliness, outspokenness, or even disinterest. Asian women who cannot fit either impossible molds thereby pose a threat to the stability of white supremacy and, as a result, are subject to erasure, violence, and ridicule.

II. OF LOTUS BLOSSOMS AND CHINOISERIE

Of course, pornography-born narratives, such as those of the lotus blossom and the dragon lady, seldom ring true in daily, lived experiences. Pornographic idealizations function as components of the Western fantasy of Asian women, and, consequently, cannot reflect Asian women's reality. However, if such fantasy is indeed ill-founded and unrealistic, how, then, does it continue to survive in the American conscious? When it comes to perceptions of Asian womanhood, does fetish trump reality, or does fetish merely supplement ignorance? Can a dose of reality remedy either fetish or ignorance? Provenance aside, the implications are one and the same: "yellow fever"—in other words, a fetish for Asian women construed as a legitimate sexual preference. Moreover, the qualities of yellow fever are exemplified in the lotus blossom stereotype, which arose from American soldiers' interactions with local Asian women during WWII.¹⁶ These interracial relationships, in addition to bearing gender-based power dynamics of masculinity and femininity, also bore the added dynamics of colonizer and colonized. Consequently, yellow fever, as a fetish built entirely on such dynamics, represents a thinly-veiled reassertion of white male supremacy that is still present in modern iterations of the soldier-blossom affair, such as the concept of mail-order brides.

For example, Debbie Lum's 2012 documentary *Seeking Asian Female* chronicles the relationship between Steven, a man afflicted with yellow fever, and his mail-order bride, Sandy. As both director of the film and the couple's sole Mandarin-to-English translator, Lum navigates a certain mindset that she herself admits to be deeply uncomfortable: an old white man's unwavering and seemingly irrational desire to marry a Chinese woman. Steven, the pseudo-protagonist in question, allows Lum to follow him through his exploits in online dating and to

¹⁶ Zhou and Paul, "Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady."

peruse his vast collections of ex-girlfriends' photos and correspondences (all the while expressing fascination at Lum's facial features, much to Lum's palpable exasperation).

A self-titled lover of Chinese women for no specific reason save for the insistence that they just look "so Chinese!", Steven is unsuccessful in finding a woman willing to marry him until he meets Sandy. After a year of dating, Sandy agrees to move to the United States to be with Steven; later, she reveals that, for fear of shame, she would not be able to return to China if her situation went awry. When Sandy arrives in San Francisco, she immediately takes a liking to Lum, whom she treats like a confidante throughout the film. As Sandy tries to settle into her new life, however, she stumbles upon Steven's persisting email interactions with other Chinese women. Naturally, their relationship takes a turn for the worse, and Sandy, who had already been having difficulties adjusting to new language barriers and cultural differences, expresses a degree of anger and hurt that catches Steven off-guard. Unprepared for Sandy's multifaceted personality, Steven reacts to her feelings of betrayal with his own confusion and resentment.

As tension mounts between the increasingly distant couple, Lum grows increasingly uncertain about her level of involvement in their personal lives. Sandy, meanwhile, quickly becomes extremely aware of just how ill-equipped Steven is for marriage, and they argue about Steven's financial habits, their upcoming wedding, and Sandy's desire to become a nurse. Lum, whose rudimentary Mandarin cannot quite keep pace with the couple's need for translation, decides to leave, but comes back when Sandy reaches out to her for help. With some assistance from Lum, Sandy and Steven eventually work out their differences, book their dream wedding, and reportedly live happily ever after.

Though presented as an eccentric modern love story, *Seeking Asian Female* is largely a spectacle. Happy ending notwithstanding, there is very little development in Steven's awareness

of his Orientalism-fueled ignorance. Even as the only source of financial support for an immigrant woman in a completely foreign country, Steven doesn't seem cognizant of the power imbalance between him and his mail-order bride. Instead, Steven dismisses Sandy's legitimate fears and grievances as wrongdoings on both sides. As such, though the couple supposedly resolves their personal disagreements, whether Steven or Sandy recognize Steven's yellow fever to be a relic of the fetishistic dragon lady-lotus blossom dichotomy remains uncertain. While Steven is by no means representative of all yellow fever "cases", his lack of self-awareness proves unsettling, because it implies that reality can indeed be overlooked in favor of pursuing fetish. Furthermore, Sandy and Steven's marriage reads more as a compromise than a declaration of love—had their reconciliation been unsuccessful, Sandy would likely have been stranded in the United States without means to support herself.

Although the audience cannot truly infer the degree of sincerity in the couple's decision to marry, the fact remains that Steven had far less to lose. Moreover, the notion of the lotus blossom stereotype—of which Steven assumes Sandy to be during the beginning of their courtship—requires helplessness and vulnerability on the part of the Asian woman, which is undoubtedly part of the allure. The white man, in sweeping the lotus blossom away to a foreign country, ensures complete financial and emotional dependence while avoiding the hassle of interacting with non-white in-laws. Again, though the lotus blossom narrative might not ring entirely true for Sandy and Steven, the mere appearance of such raises questions—especially because Asian women have a long history of immigration for the express purpose of decoration.

For instance, in 1834, Ah Fong Moy (sometimes anglicized as Afong Moy) became the first Chinese woman to immigrate to the United States. Ah Fong Moy, whose parents could not afford to support her in China, subsequently earned a living by taking part in several museum

exhibitions of chinoiserie under the fabricated title of “Chinese Lady”.¹⁷ Clad in luxurious silks and surrounded by various antiquities, Western audiences flocked to these exhibits to marvel at her bound feet, listen to her speak in Chinese dialect, and watch her eat with chopsticks.¹⁸ Likewise, her “display” confirmed Othering preconceptions of “Oriental” culture and underscored the superiority of the significantly more modern American lifestyle. Though Ah Fong Moy intended to return to China after two years of performing “Chineseness” for white audiences, her act lasted well into the 1850s—which speaks to how profitable and popular displays of chinoiserie could be.¹⁹ In all, the threads of yellow fever, however primitive, are inextricably woven into the tapestry of Asian women’s immigration to the U.S. Therefore, Steven’s unrelenting desire to import himself a dutiful wife transcends the distasteful; the phenomenon of mail-order brides stems from a history of racism, sexism, and trafficking. For both Sandy and Ah Fong Moy, the illusion of Chineseness that their presence inspired was considered more valuable than actual Chinese culture. Neither Ah Fong Moy nor Sandy were sought out for their experience or their insight; rather, they served as stand-ins for prescribed (and inauthentic) narratives.

Although Sandy’s behavior throughout the film rejects Steven’s insistence for typical lotus blossom subservience, their unexpected marriage nonetheless seems to resolve the couples’ discrepancies in expectation. By contrast, Asian women who are labelled dragon ladies—a stereotype imbued with more hostility than its lotus blossom counterpart—are seldom offered the chance at a happy ending. Likewise, though dragon ladies represent yet another pornographic

¹⁷ Lee, Robert G. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Temple University Press, 1999.

¹⁸ Moon, Krystyn R. *Yellowface: creating the Chinese in American popular music and performance, 1850s-1920s*. Rutgers University Press, 2005.

¹⁹ Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*.

idealization of Asian women, these women face an additional double-bind. If they are sufficiently submissive and devious, they are reviled for their duplicity. If they are not, they are reviled for not fitting the mold.

III. THE YOKO MYTHOS

As a sex-positive Japanese woman artist thrust onto an unforeseen platform in Western popular culture, Yoko Ono involuntarily played the part of dragon lady throughout the entirety of her relationship with John Lennon. Consequently, when The Beatles officially split in 1970, the dominant theories about their rumor-shrouded breakup all involved the supposedly disruptive quality of Yoko Ono's presence as both a wife and a fellow artist. She sat in on the band's rehearsals, breaking the members' long-standing agreement to bar wives and girlfriends from the recording studio.²⁰ She encouraged Lennon to pursue other avenues of musical expression when he grew disillusioned with his boyband identity.²¹ She intimidated the Beatles—Lennon especially—with her avant-garde and radical artwork.²² Though Lennon and Ono created several critically acclaimed albums together, media outlets obstinately framed both Ono and her creative influence as a dissonant and dangerously ambitious Other.

To a livid Western fanbase, it didn't matter that Lennon had invited Ono into the recording studio as a collaborator, not a spectator—nor did it matter that Ono (reluctantly) put her own independently successful career as a performance artist aside to do so.²³ In terms of public image, Ono's existence was consumed by her appointed myth—that of a domineering Japanese seductress who lured away a younger, more talented, more beloved music legend. Of course, Lennon and Ono's love for one another was only a small factor in the Beatles' brutal, lengthy divorce process, but the global ridicule both tarnished her personal reputation and threatened her physical safety for years to come. When in public together, Lennon was often

²⁰ Lynch, John. "Paul McCartney Says The Beatles Felt 'threatened' by Yoko Ono." *Business Insider*. August 11, 2016.

²¹ Lynch, "Paul McCartney Says The Beatles Felt 'threatened' by Yoko Ono."

²² Lynch, "Paul McCartney Says The Beatles Felt 'threatened' by Yoko Ono."

²³ Gilmore, Mikal. "Why the Beatles broke up." *Rolling Stone* (2009).

forced to shield Ono from angry crowds of Beatles fans, many of whom would yell racial slurs like “Jap”, “chink”, or “yellow”.²⁴

Moreover, Ono’s myth long outlived her tragic romance with Lennon. Even after his assassination in 1980, the expression “to Yoko” remained synonymous with the act of cramping a band’s brotherly dynamic. In the 1990s, for example, Courtney Love was accused of “Yoko-ing” the late Kurt Cobain, a comparison she rebuffed not because of ire from Nirvana fans, but because she never sat in on the band’s rehearsals—yet another disproportionate assumption of guilt maintained by the Ono myth.²⁵ As recently as 2015, Little Mix member Perrie Edwards was derided as a “Yoko” to Zayn Malik’s Lennon when he left One Direction. When they broke off their engagement, fans celebrated Zayn for “dropping the dead weight.”²⁶ Even today, young men are encouraged to favor “bros before hoes” in both their creative endeavors and their personal lives, a mindset that perpetuates the notion that a woman, by virtue of existing, will somehow diminish a man’s integrity and masculinity. In both media and public opinion, Ono’s personhood continued to be a target for mockery and misunderstanding, largely because her repertoire of experimental art, filmmaking, music, and feminist activism was—and still is—so wildly different from the mainstream appeal of the Beatles’ body of work.

Furthermore, it wasn’t until a 2016 interview with Rolling Stone that Paul McCartney, the other half of the Beatles’ songwriting tour de force, admitted that Ono was never to blame for their 1970 dissolution.²⁷ Though McCartney insisted that sexism (and racism, presumably) had nothing to do with the Beatles’ treatment of Ono, he did wait a cumulative 46 years before

²⁴ Gilmore, "Why the Beatles broke up."

²⁵ Coleman, Miriam. "Courtney Love Rejects Yoko Ono Comparisons." Rolling Stone. April 06, 2014.

²⁶ Fahy, Colette. "He's Cutting All the Dead Weight! Gleeful Fans React on Twitter after Zayn Malik Dumps 'Yoko' Perrie Edwards ." Daily Mail Online. August 04, 2015.

²⁷ Lynch, "Paul McCartney Says The Beatles Felt 'threatened' by Yoko Ono."

making any attempts to dispel Ono's myth. However, despite being trapped in the ceaseless crossfire of boyband drama, Ono never once languished under the pressure of public scrutiny. In addition to maintaining Lennon's creative legacy with art, peace activism, disaster relief, and other philanthropic undertakings, Ono also diligently added to her own oeuvre—which, though initially overlooked because of her stigmatized mythology, is finally (and rightfully) gaining recognition in the art world.²⁸ Last November, for instance, Ono's long and tumultuous career was honored at Performa 17, the New York City biennial for performance art.²⁹ While a vindicating achievement for a storied body of work, four and a half decades of misplaced Beatles infamy is nevertheless an unwieldy cross to bear.

The rise, fall, and subsequent reclamation of Ono's myth isn't so much a testament to the slowly improving representation of Asian women in pop culture as it is a case study in the repercussions of defying the Orientalist portrait of Asian womanhood. In many ways, Ono's crucifixion was a product of the West's inability to process her post-hippie, postmodern persona; she was comfortable with her body, outspoken in her musical criticism, and unintimidated by others' disdain for her. To the Beatles, a group of white men who built their fortunes on 60s hippie counterculture, Ono's classical musical training, university education, and blasé attitude toward sex threatened their worldviews—not only of what non-white women could accomplish, but also of their own capabilities and limitations. It's likely that one of the reasons that Ono's presence in the recording studio was considered so disruptive was because McCartney, Harrison, and Starr found her insight to be emasculating.

²⁸ Mooallem, Stephen. "The Ballad of Sean & Yoko." *Harper's BAZAAR*. October 07, 2017. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a10377044/yoko-ono-sean-lennon-interview/>.

²⁹ Cascone, Sarah. "Performa 17 Will Honor Yoko Ono by Recreating Her Classic Performance Artworks at Its Opening Night Gala." *Artnet News*. September 12, 2017.

Again, Ono—a prolific feminist whose performance pieces often explored themes of race, gender, and class disparity—proved to be a far cry from the subservient, soft-spoken foreigner that Western media expected her to be. In retaliation, they switched gears and instead painted her to be a dictatorial dragon lady, perverse in her single-minded pursuit of the naive, enraptured John Lennon. The Ono myth is consequently emblematic of the Western fantasy of Asian women. When demure, Asian women are an erotic affirmation of white men’s superiority. When anything but, Asian women like Ono have the potential to threaten the structural integrity of Western culture with their uncomfortable music and unabashed nudity. Sandy, Ah Fong Moy, and Yoko Ono all fell prey to prescribed narratives of Asian womanhood, albeit to very different ends. Of the three, only Ono was truly able to reclaim her narrative from the overwhelming influence of stereotype. Therein lies the problem: Asian women are seldom afforded the opportunity to tell their own stories. More often than not, the content of these stories is commandeered for their exoticism and foreignness for the purpose of entertaining white audiences.

IV. WHOSE STORIES BECOME MEMOIR?

Despite the Othering and reductive qualities of Orientalist fiction, Orientalism remains a powerful and compelling storytelling technique. By allowing white authors to bypass accuracy in exchange for exoticism, Asian characters or plot lines thereby foster a false sense of diversity without offering true representation. For instance, Netflix's 2017 film adaptation of popular animanga *Death Note* not only transplanted the original Tokyo setting to Seattle, but featured an exclusively non-Asian cast.³⁰ As such, Director Adam Wingard could retain a vague Japanese aesthetic without acknowledging the culture that originated the series. Moreover, whitewashing—the practice of casting white actors in Asian roles, like in Netflix's *Death Note*—comprises only one of Hollywood's longstanding, ongoing problems with race. Yellowface, the practice of outfitting white actors with stereotypical Asian features (buck teeth, slanted eyes, heavy accents), is a well-documented, but not yet extinct, precursor to whitewashing.³¹ Though the most well-known example of yellowface is likely Mickey Rooney's performance as Mr. Yunioshi in 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*,³² Emma Stone's portrayal of Alison Ng (a mixed Hawaiian, Chinese, and caucasian woman) in *Aloha* drew a combination of yellowface and whitewashing backlash as recently as 2016.³³ Again, by taking Asian stories out of Asian hands, Hollywood both prevents Asian actors from finding roles and showcases a blatant disregard for cultural integrity.

³⁰ Orankoy, Ilayda. "Whitewashing Death Note: Hollywood's Unabashed Bleaching of Anime Continues." Bitch Media. April 17, 2017. Accessed March 29, 2018. <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/whitewashing-death-note/hollywoods-unabashed-bleaching-anime-continues>.

³¹ Phruksachart, Melissa. "The Many Lives of Mr. Yunioshi: Yellowface and the Queer Buzz of Breakfast at Tiffany's." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 32, no. 3 (96) (2017): 93-119.

³² Phruksachart, "The Many Lives of Mr. Yunioshi."

³³ Nishime, Leilani. "Mixed Race Matters: What Emma Stone and Bruno Mars Can Tell Us about the Future of Asian American Media." *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (2017): 148-152.

In addition to facing obstacles like whitewashing and yellowface, original Asian stories are also often overshadowed by Orientalist narratives with similar themes or content, such as Arthur Golden's hit 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which takes place in Kyoto's famed geisha district of Gion. A reality-inspired account of young Sayuri's transformation from maid to full-fledged geisha, *Memoirs of a Geisha* features a cast of women who all fall into the lotus blossom-dragon lady dichotomy. Protagonist Sayuri, whose sole motivation in becoming a successful geisha is her childhood dream of earning the mysterious and kind Chairman's love, embodies the qualities of the devoted, selfless lotus blossom. Antagonist Hatsumomo, a lovely but hot-tempered geisha who instantly despises Sayuri for her intelligence and beauty (and for accidentally exposing her illicit affair with her commoner boyfriend, Koichi), exemplifies the quintessential dragon lady. Even foil character Pumpkin, Sayuri's childhood friend and roommate who later becomes Hatsumomo's apprentice, shifts from lotus blossom to dragon lady when she betrays Sayuri's trust at the end of the novel. By liberally making use of such fetishistic stereotypes, Golden's work is therefore instilled with a white male gaze that becomes especially apparent in the novel's hyper-focus on Sayuri's mizuage (deflowering) ceremony. No matter how well-researched or well-written *Memoirs* might be, Golden's gaze carries an Orientalist perspective that categorizes the novel as an exotic story meant for white audiences rather than an authentic illustration of geishahood during the 20th century. Golden's Orientalist agenda is doubly evident in the novel's resolution, during which Sayuri unflinchingly severs ties to Japan by moving to New York City so that she can be the Chairman's mistress in secrecy.

Relatedly, the Oscar-winning 2005 movie adaptation of *Memoirs of a Geisha* also drew controversy for casting Chinese actress Ziyi Zhang as Sayuri; given the Japanese government's history of forcing Chinese women to serve as sex slaves during WWII, some audiences felt

Zhang's performance to be an affirmation of the practice.³⁴ In any case, the uproar suggests both a level of ignorance in white Director Rob Marshall's portrayal of WWII-era Japan and a general lack of awareness about Asian ethnic identity in casting direction.

Golden's appropriation of Japanese women's stories is further underscored by retired geisha Mineko Iwasaki's 2001 lawsuit, which accused both Golden and his publisher of defamation, copyright violation, and breach of contract.³⁵ Iwasaki, who had allowed Golden stay with her in her Kyoto home for two weeks while he researched his novel during 1992, claimed that Golden had publicized her history against her wishes—which subsequently blacklisted her from the geisha community and tarnished her otherwise illustrious name and career.³⁶ Additionally, Iwasaki felt Golden's open discussion of her mizuage ceremony to be particularly disrespectful, as it flouted the geisha tradition of discretion.³⁷ Golden, meanwhile, brushed off Iwasaki's grievances by alleging that her wishes were difficult to follow and asserting that Iwasaki seemed excited to be included in the research process.³⁸ In essence, Iwasaki's suit against Golden proved to be an ironic microcosm of the historical dynamic between Asian women and white men. Iwasaki, asking only discretion in return, hospitably indulged Golden in his curiosity about her "exotic" culture. Golden then completely ignored her requests and profited off the misappropriation of her story, which then gained momentum in the Western world for marketing geisha as mysterious, demure, and sexually repressed. Though Iwasaki

³⁴ Associated Press. "Geisha' Under Fire For Casting Choices." Today, Dec. 7, 2005. Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.today.com/popculture/geisha-under-fire-casting-choices-wbna10370262>

³⁵ Associated Press. "Geisha' Author and Publisher Sued." ABC News, April 24, 2001. Accessed March 30, 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=106248&page=1>

³⁶ Sims, Calvin. "ARTS ABROAD; A Geisha, a Successful Novel and a Lawsuit." New York Times, June 19, 2001. Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/19/books/arts-abroad-a-geisha-a-successful-novel-and-a-lawsuit.html>

³⁷ Sims, "ARTS ABROAD; A Geisha, a Successful Novel and a Lawsuit."

³⁸ Sims, "ARTS ABROAD; A Geisha, a Successful Novel and a Lawsuit."

insisted that *Memoirs* was 90% her life story, Golden nonetheless shifted blame to Iwasaki for being so forthcoming with her own experiences.³⁹

As such, Western imitations of Asian narratives, like *Memoirs of a Geisha*, continue to influence public perceptions of Asian womanhood. This appropriation, in combination with other roadblocks to representation like yellowface and whitewashing, works to prevent Asian women's realities from banishing Orientalist fantasies from the Western conscious. To this end, the only solution to appropriation is reclamation; by recognizing harmful biases in dominant portrayals of Asianness and replacing them with lived experience, Western attitudes can be pushed to overcome decades of myth like yellow peril, model minority, and yellow fever. Mineko Iwasaki, for example, was able to find an avenue of reclamation in the wreckage of her unintentional exposé. In 2003, she published her autobiography *Geisha: A Life*, the first nonfictional account of a former geisha—which, in contrast to Golden's work, emphasizes geisha artistry instead of nonconsensually spotlighting geisha sex lives.⁴⁰ In reframing a bastardization of her career with her own insight and personal history, Iwasaki then made strides toward dissolving Golden's ubiquitous geisha fantasy. Thus, Asian women penning their own stories can be revolutionary, because it affords them the opportunity to create and explore their own fantasies.

Fantasy, as an instrument of reclamation, is therefore also a powerful mechanism for recontextualizing history. In Amy Tan's 2016 work *Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir*, she explores the relationship between memory and fantasy—more specifically, how fantasy often informs memory. For instance, in Tan's reflection on her childhood trauma, she openly admits that she is unsure whether some of the events she recounts are wholly true. She retells the story

³⁹ Sims, "ARTS ABROAD: A Geisha, a Successful Novel and a Lawsuit."

⁴⁰ Iwasaki, Mineko. *Geisha: A Life*. Simon and Schuster, 2003.

of her grandmother's suicide several times throughout the memoir, each time tweaked for context and newly discovered information. As a result, fantasy becomes both a vehicle for storytelling and a much-needed coping mechanism for Tan, because it provides a more intimate version of the truth. For Asian women, a demographic whose narratives are so often dictated and fictionalized for them, reclaimed fantasy offers a counterpoint to the Orientalist version of Asian history and culture. Tan's *ouvres*—the most famous of which is likely her 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club*, which explores friendships and family dynamics among immigrant Chinese women and their American-born daughters⁴¹—thereby inherently stand in opposition to voyeuristic abstractions like *Memoirs of a Geisha*, because they examine Asian womanhood through a lens of lived experience, not fetish. Furthermore, by reframing past prejudices and misconceptions, fantasy then primes Western audiences to identify Orientalist relics in the future. That is, as Asian women continue to replace tired Western fantasies with their own, surviving remnants of Orientalist storytelling become simpler to recognize as targets for critique.

Still, fantasy alone will not dismantle the deeply-ingrained Orientalist institution. Asian authors are not immune to internalized racism, sexism, colorism, homophobia, or other systems of oppression, and even Asian-created depictions of Asianness can fall short in capturing the diverse range of Asian experience. In summary, it is not enough for Asian women to merely showcase their own fantasies; to incite radical change, they must actively redefine Asian womanhood with acknowledgement to the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and ability.

⁴¹ Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

V. EXPANDING ASIANNNESS

As Asian stories begin to find a platform in mainstream media, dominant portrayals of Asian American identity reveal lingering hierarchies of power—which then impact marketability. Because Asian stories must first appeal to white audiences in order to find purchase in Hollywood’s Orientalist landscape, societal conformity remains the defining factor in presentations of Asianness. In other words, the model minority myth still plays an active role in determining which stories break into the mainstream; thus, prominent Asian American media must depict Asianness in proximity to whiteness. For instance, the few roles available to Asian American actors are usually further limited to those of East Asian descent—such as the characters of ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat*, the first American sitcom to feature an Asian American family since Margaret Cho’s short-lived *All American Girl* in 1994.⁴² As model minority status is only achievable for East Asians, their visibility often comes at the expense of South Asian erasure in both media and activism. Because Asianness has so long been defined by its relation to Americanness, South Asian heritage is reduced to an afterthought in the American conscious.⁴³ This erasure is, in part, the result of a very separate history of war and immigration. Though 20th century America was characterized by military conflict with Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, South Asia’s legacy of British imperialism prevented any comparable interaction.⁴⁴ In continuing to define Asianness in terms of American familiarity, however, Asian experience is again framed as monolithic. Moreover, Asian American identity is not static—as the components of identity evolve with time, representations must shift to accommodate reality.

⁴² Holmes, Linda. "A Skilled Cast Perks Up The Sweet And Funny 'Fresh Off The Boat'." NPR. February 04, 2015. Accessed March 31, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2015/02/04/383785757/a-skilled-cast-perks-up-the-sweet-and-funny-fresh-off-the-boat>.

⁴³ Shankar, Lavina Dhingra, and Rajini Srikanth. *A part, yet apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Temple University Press, 1998.

⁴⁴ Shankar, *A part, yet apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Temple University Press, 1998.

South Asian erasure, however, is just one facet of Hollywood's adherence to both model minority myth and societal norm. Other facets are evident in Hollywood's preference for light-skinned, heterosexual, conventionally attractive, and wealthy Asian Americans—as illustrated in Kevin Kwan's best-selling 2013 novel *Crazy Rich Asians*. Naturally, *Crazy Rich Asians* features a cast of exorbitantly rich (ethnically Chinese) Asians and Asian Americans, all of whom face theatrical setbacks in their quests for heterosexual love. Like any other fictionalization that uses privilege as a plot device, the women of *Crazy Rich Asians* are routinely evaluated by their level of physical attractiveness and moral ambiguity. Protagonist Rachel Chu, for example, is deemed pretty enough, but not wealthy or famous enough for her love interest's mother, Eleanor Young, to approve of her. Consequently, Eleanor spends most of the novel trying to sabotage her son's relationship with Rachel, which ultimately leads to Rachel learning the truth about her parentage (that her mother, Kerry, cheated on her abusive first husband with a neighbor who helped her escape to the United States). In all, aside from offering abundant East Asian representation, *Crazy Rich Asians* does little to complicate the meaning of Asianness. Therein lies yet another double-bind of Asian experience: Given the added burdens of whitewashing, yellowface, and other forms of Orientalist appropriation, why should Asian authors be expected to undo age-old systems of oppression—especially when white authors are seldom held to such high standards? In fact, during an interview with Entertainment Weekly about the upcoming movie adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians*, Kwan revealed that some producers attempted to persuade him to whitewash Rachel Chu to make her more relatable to white audiences.⁴⁵ When merely casting Asian actors in Asian roles remains a point of controversy in

⁴⁵ Li, Shirley. "Hollywood Wanted to Whitewash 'Crazy Rich Asians'." EW.com. November 3, 2017. Accessed March 31, 2018. <http://ew.com/movies/2017/11/03/hollywood-wanted-to-whitewash-crazy-rich-asians/>.

Hollywood, why should Asian writers move forward in their discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and power?

Put simply, representation must evolve to confront hierarchies of oppression because Asian American audiences have no obligation to be satisfied with its shortcomings. To claim otherwise would yet again constrain Asian Americans to the pervasive model minority myth. Likewise, just as Orientalist 20th-century fiction both informed and reflected public perception of Asian immigrants, contemporary media actively recontextualizes Asian identity with awareness to a (seemingly contradictory) history of trauma—such as exclusion, internment, desexualization, and fetishization. In brief, media does not exist in a vacuum; rather, media is both a catalyst and a reactant. Because *Crazy Rich Asians* presents a rare opportunity for Asian narratives to break into mainstream, blockbuster film, *Crazy Rich Asians* therefore also presents a rare opportunity for critique—and, by extension, improvement. In recognizing and naming internalized biases and prejudices within the Asian community, critique creates space for a more inclusive, intersectional portraits of Asianness in the American media landscape—many of which already exist, but cannot yet thrive in the mainstream.

For Asian women, whose identities are inherently intersectional, critique often takes the form of reclaimed fantasy. To revisit *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Mineko Iwasaki's autobiography *Geisha: A Life* posed a direct reaction to Arthur Golden's Orientalist fetish. Similarly, given the strict delineation of femininity and masculinity in both Orientalist and Asian literature, reclaimed fantasy can also offer valuable critique on the notion of a gender binary. For instance, author JY Yang explores the fluidity of gender in their 2017 novellas *The Red Threads of Fortune* and *The Black Tides of Heaven*, wherein characters can choose how, when, or if to express gender. Set in a "silkpunk" (the Asian counterpart to "steampunk", a subset of science fiction and/or fantasy

that incorporates 19th-century steam-powered technology into its aesthetic) universe, *Red Threads* and *Black Tides* reimagines Asianness and gender in separation from the colonialism and heteropatriarchy of the real world. Yang thus acknowledges the systems of oppression and societal constructs that influence Asian storytelling and addresses them through their own fantasy. As such, JY Yang provides a more multifaceted illustration of Asian identity than Kevin Kwan does; however, Yang is thereby unlikely to find Kwan's level of acceptance in Hollywood.

In summary, though Hollywood depictions of Asianness have most impact on public perception, Asian storytelling is far more multifaceted and intersectional than it appears in the mainstream. While Kevin Kwan's work does not directly oppose JY Yang's, it is through critique of dominant narratives like *Crazy Rich Asians* that reclamatory narratives like *Red Threads* and *Black Tides* can break into contemporary discourse surrounding presentations of Asian identity in popular media. Though Asian stories in the mainstream are few and far in between, rarity must not be an excuse for stagnancy; without radical and abundant critique, the model minority myth maintains its hold on the portrayal of Asian American identity.

CONCLUSION

From Fu Manchu's daughter to Sayuri of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Western depictions of Asian women have been saturated with Orientalist fantasy. Moreover, Westerners' Orientalist fantasy transcends just fiction; in public perception, paradigms of yellow peril, model minority, and yellow fever overwrite Asian women's lived experience and continue to inform contemporary racist attitudes. For instance, fetish remains the driving force behind the ongoing phenomenon of maid-order brides—which paints Asian women to be subservient, complicit, and above all, sexually available to white men. Meanwhile, Asian women who do not conform to white ideals—such as Yoko Ono—are then subject to ridicule, defamation, and even violence.

Moreover, Asian women's personal histories face Western appropriation through yellowface and whitewashing, which replace Asian identity with white imitation. Thus, not only are Asian women's narratives removed from their lived experience, but the aesthetic of their narratives are commandeered for the purpose of white entertainment as well. As such, Asian women's reclamation of Orientalist fantasy is instrumental in dissolving stereotype. Through rethinking and reinventing Orientalist fantasy, Asian women can then recontextualize Westerners' version of the past in relation to Asian Americans' seemingly contradictory history of exclusion, internment, fetishization, and desexualization.

Still, without consideration to existing hierarchies of power, Asian women merely reclaiming their fantasies will not dismantle the oppressive institution. In order to create a more inclusive, intersectional, and complete portrait of Asian American identity, Asian storytellers must first recognize the implications of colorism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and the like within their own communities. Going forward, the few portrayals of Asianness in mainstream

media must expand to include Asians that fall outside the constraints of the model minority myth.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Ilayda Orankoy

Education:

Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies; Bachelor of Arts in Digital & Print Journalism

Minor in Chinese Language

Honors: Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies

Thesis Title: Living the Fantasy: Representations of Asian Women in Pop Literature

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Laura Spielvogel

Work Experience:

2016 Republican National Convention (Cleveland, OH) July 2016

- ❖ *Researcher & Blogger*: Conducted interviews with protesters organized outside the convention; [blogged](#) about my experiences for the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

- ❖ Supervisor: Dr. Lee Ann Banaszak

National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, D.C.) September–December 2017

- ❖ *Publications & Communications Intern*: Monitored media presence; edited and contributed to quarterly magazine; produced press releases for upcoming exhibitions and events; authored internal weekly newsletter

- ❖ Supervisors: Elizabeth Lynch, Amy Mannarino

Grants Received:

Paterno Fellows Scholarship

Awards:

Dean's List Fall 2014, Fall & Spring 2015, Fall & Spring 2016, Fall 2017

Language Proficiency:

Native speaker in English; degree in Mandarin; fluent in Spanish; some experience with Turkish and Russian