Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck

By Jessica Hagedorn


As I was growing up in the Philippines in the 1950s, my fertile imagination was colonized by thoroughly American fantasies. Yellowface variations on the exotic erotic loomed larger than life on the silver screen. I was mystified and enthralled by Hollywood's skewed representations of Asian women: sleek, evil goddesses with slanted eyes and cunning ways, or smiling, sarong-clad South Seas "maidens" with undulating hips, kinky black hair, and white skin darkened by makeup. Hardly any of the "Asian" characters were played by Asians. White actors like Sidney Toler and Warner Oland played "incrutable Oriental detective" Charlie Chan with taped eyelids and a singsong, chop suey accent. Jennifer Jones was a Eurasian doctor swept up in a doomed "interracial romance" in Love Is a Many Splendored Thing. In my mother's youth, white actor Louise Rainer played the central role of the Patient Chinese Wife in the 1937 film adaptation of Pearl Buck's novel The Good Earth. Back then, not many thought to ask why; they were all too busy being grateful to see anyone in the movies remotely like themselves.

Cut to 1960: The World of Suzie Wong, another tragic East/West affair. I am now old enough to be impressed. Sexy, sassy Suzie (played by Nancy Kwan) works out of a bar patronized by white sailors, but doesn't seem bothered by any of it. For a hardworking girl turning nightly tricks to support her baby, she manages to parade an astonishing wardrobe in damn near every scene, down to matching handbags and shoes. The sailors are also strictly Hollywood, sanitized and not too menacing. Suzie and all the other prostitutes in this movie are cute, giggling, dancing sex machines with hearts of gold. William Holden plays an earnest, rather prim, Nice Guy painter seeking inspiration in The Other. Of course, Suzie falls madly in love with him. Typically, she tells him, "I not important," and "I'll be with you until you say—Izuzie, go away." She also thinks being beaten by a man is a sign of true passion, and is terribly disappointed when Mr. Nice Guy refuses to show his true feelings.

Next in Kwan's short-lived but memorable career was the kitschy 1961 musical Flower Drum Song, which, like Suzie Wong, is a thoroughly American commercial product. The female roles are typical of Hollywood musicals of the times: women are basically airheads, subordinate to men. Kwan's counterpart is the Good Chinese Girl, played by Miyoshi Umeki, who was better playing the Loyal Japanese Girl in that other classic Hollywood tale of forbidden love, Sayonara. Remember, Umeki was so loyal, she committed double suicide with actor Red Buttons. I instinctively hated Sayonara when I first saw it as a child; now I understand why. Contrived tragic resolutions were the only way Hollywood got past the censors in those days. With one or two exceptions, somebody in these movies always had to die to pay for breaking racial and sexual taboos.

Until the recent onslaught of films by both Asian and Asian American filmmakers, Asian Pacific women have generally been perceived by Hollywood with a mixture of fascination, fear, and contempt. Most Hollywood movies either trivialize or exoticize us as people of color and as women. Our intelligence is underestimated, our humanity overlooked, and our diverse cultures treated as interchangeable. If we are "good," we are childlike, submissive, silent, and eager for sex (see France Nuyen's glowing performance as Liut in the film version of South Pacific) or else we are tragic victim types (see Casualties of War, Brian De Palma's graphic 1989 drama set in Vietnam). And if we are not silent, suffering doormats, we are demonized dragon ladies—cunning, deceitful, sexual provocateurs. Give me the demonic any day—Anna May Wong as a villain slithering around in a slinky gown is at...
least gratifying to watch, neither servile nor passive. And she steals the show from Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg’s Shanghai Express. From the 1920s through the ’30s, Wong was our only female “star.” But even she was trapped in limited roles, in what filmmaker Renee Tajima has called the dragon lady/lotus blossom dichotomy.

Cut to 1985: There is a scene toward the end of the terribly dishonest but weirdly compelling Michael Cimino movie Year of the Dragon (cowritten by Oliver Stone) that is one of my favorite twisted movie moments of all time. If you ask a lot of my friends who’ve seen that movie (especially if they’re Asian), it’s one of their favorites too. The setting is a crowded Chinatown nightclub. There are two very young and very tough Jade Cobra gang girls in a shoot-out with Mickey Rourke, in the role of a demented Polish American cop who, in spite of being Mr. Ugly in the flesh—an arrogant, misogynistic bully devoid of any charm—wins the “good” Asian American anchorwoman in the film’s absurd and implausible ending. This is a movie with an actual disclaimer as its lead-in, covering its ass in advance in response to anticipated complaints about “stereotypes.”

My pleasure in the hard-edged power of the Chinatown gang girls in Year of the Dragon is my small revenge, the answer to all those Suzie Wong “I want to be your slave” female characters. The Jade Cobra girls are mere background to the white male foreground/focus of Cimino’s movie. But long after the movie has faded into video-rental heaven, the Jade Cobra girls remain defiant, fabulous images in my memory, flaunting tight metallic dresses and spiky cock’s-comb hairdos streaked electric red and blue.

Mickey Rourke looks down with world-weary pity at the unnamed Jade Cobra girl (Doreen Chan) he’s just shot who lies sprawled and bleeding on the street: “You look like you’re gonna die, beautiful.”

Jade Cobra girl: “Oh yeah? [blood gushing from her mouth] I’m proud of it.”

Rourke: “You are? You got anything you wanna tell me before you go, sweetheart?”


Cut to 1993: I’ve been told that like many New Yorkers, I watch movies with the right side of my brain on perpetual overdrive. I admit to being grouchy and overcritical, suspicious of sentiment, and cynical. When a critic like Richard Corliss of Time magazine gushes about The Joy Luck Club being a fourfold Terms of Endearment, my gut instinct is to run the other way. I resent being told how to feel. I went to see the 1993 eight-handkerchief movie version of Amy Tan’s best-seller with a group that included my ten-year-old daughter. I was caught between the sincere desire to be swept up by the turbulent mother-daughter sagas and my own stubborn resistance to being so obviously manipulated by the filmmakers. With every

flashback came tragedy. The music soared; the voice-overs were solemn or wistful; tears, tears, and more tears flowed onscreen. Daughters were reverent; mothers carried dark secrets.

I was elated by the grandness and strength of the four mothers and the luminous actors who portrayed them, but I was uneasy with the passivity of the Asian American daughters. They seemed to exist solely as receptors for their mothers’ amazing life stories. It’s almost as if by assimilating so easily into American society, they had lost all sense of self.

In spite of my resistance, my eyes watered as the desperate mother played by Kieu Chinh was forced to abandon her twin baby girls on a country road in war-torn China. (Kieu Chinh resembles my own mother and her twin sister, who suffered through the brutal Japanese occupation of the Philippines.) So far in this movie, an infatuated son had been deliberately drowned, a mother played

The Jade Cobra girls are defiant, fabulous images—a small revenge for all those servile female roles.

by the gravely beautiful France Nuyen had gone catatonic with grief, a concubine had cut her flesh open to save her dying mother, an insecure daughter had been oppressed by her boorish Asian American husband, another insecure daughter had been left by her white husband, and so on. . . . The overall effect was numbing as far as I’m concerned, but a man sitting two rows in front of us broke down sobbing. A Chinese Filipina writer even more grouch than me later complained, “Must ethnicity only be equated with suffering?”

Because change has been slow, The Joy Luck Club carries a lot of cultural baggage. It is a big-budget story about Chinese American women, directed by a Chinese American man, cowritten and coproduced by Chinese American women. That’s a lot to be thankful for. And its box office success proves that an immigrant narrative told from female perspectives can have mass appeal. But my cynical side tells me that its success might mean only one thing in Hollywood: more weepy epics about Asian American mother-daughter relationships will be planned.

That the film finally got made was significant. By Hollywood standards (think white male; think money, money, money), a movie about Asian Americans even when adapted from a best-seller was a risky proposition. When I asked a producer I know about the film’s rumored delays, he simply said, “It’s still an Asian movie,” surprised I had even asked. Equally interesting was director Wayne Wang’s initial reluctance to be involved in the project; he told the New York Times, “I didn’t want to do another Chinese movie.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have worried so much. After all, according to the media, the nineties are the decade of “Pacific Overtures” and East Asian chic. Madonna, the pop queen of shameless appropriation, cultivated Japanese high-tech style with her music video “Rain,” while Janet Jackson faked kitschy orientalia in hers, titled “If.” Critical attention was paid to movies from China, Japan, and Vietnam. But that didn’t mean an honest appraisal of women’s lives. Even on the art house circuit, filmmakers who should know better took the easy way out. Takehiro Nakajima’s 1992 film Okoge presents one of the more original film roles for women in recent years. In Japanese, “okoge” means the crust of rice that sticks to the bottom of the rice pot; in pejorative slang, it means fag hag. The way “okoge” is used in the film seems a reappropriation of the term; the portrait Nakajima creates of Sayoko, the so-called fag hag, is clearly an affectionate one. Sayoko is a quirky, self-assured woman in contemporary Tokyo who does voice-overs for cartoons, has a thing for Frida Kahlo paintings, and is drawn to a gentle young gay man named Goh. But the other women’s roles are disappointing, stereotypical “hysterical females” and the movie itself turns conventional halfway through. Sayoko sacrifices herself to a macho brute Goh desires, who rapes her as images of Frida Kahlo paintings and her beloved Goh rising from the ocean flash before her. She gives birth to a baby boy and endures a terrible life of poverty with the abusive rapist. This sudden change from spunky survivor to helpless, victimized woman is baffling. Whatever happened to her job? Or that artless apartment of hers? Didn’t her Frida Kahlo obsession teach her anything?

Then there was Tiana Thi Thanh Nga’s From Hollywood to Hanoi, a self-serving but fascinating documentary. Born in Vietnam to a privileged family that included an uncle who was defense minister in the Thieu government and an idolized father who served as press minister, Nga (a.k.a. Tiana) spent her adolescence in California. A former actor in martial arts movies and fitness teacher (“Karatecize with Tiana”), the vivacious Tiana decided to make a record of her journey back to Vietnam.

From Hollywood to Hanoi is at times unintentionally very funny. Tiana includes a quick scene of herself dancing with a white man at the Metropole hotel in Hanoi, and breathlessly announces: “That’s me doing the tango with Oliver Stone!” Then she listens sympathetically to a horrifying account of the My Lai massacre by one of its few female survivors. In another scene, Tiana cheerfully ad-
dresses a food vendor on the streets of Hanoi: “Your hairdo is so pretty.” The unimpressed, poker-faced woman gives a brusque, deadpan reply: “You want to eat, or what?” Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between Tiana Thi Thanh Nga and her Hollywood persona: the real Tiana still seems to be playing one of her B-movie roles, which are mainly fun because they’re fantasy. The time was certainly right to explore postwar Vietnam from a Vietnamese woman’s perspective; it’s too bad this film was done by a Valley Girl.

1993 also brought Tran Anh Hung’s _The Scent of Green Papaya_, a different kind of Vietnamese memento—this is a look back at the peaceful, lush country of the director’s childhood memories. The film opens in Saigon, in 1951. A willowy ten-year-old girl named Mui comes to work for a troubled family headed by a melancholy musician and his kind, stoic wife. The men of this bourgeois household are idle, pampered types who take naps while the women do all the work. Mui is a male fantasy; she is a devoted servant, enduring acts of cruel mischief with patience and dignity; as an adult, she barely speaks. She scrubs floors, shines shoes, and cooks with loving care and never a complaint. When she is sent off to work for another wealthy musician, she ends up being impregnated by him. The movie ends as the camera closes in on Mui’s contented face. Languid and precious, _The Scent of Green Papaya_ is visually haunting, but it suffers from the director’s colonial fantasy of women as docile, domestic creatures. Steeped in highbrow nostalgia, it’s the arty Vietnamese version of _My Fair Lady_ with the wealthy musician as Professor Hig-

gins, teaching Mui to read and write.

And then there is Ang Lee’s tepid 1993 hit, _The Wedding Banquet_—a clever culture-clash farce in which traditional Chinese values collide with contemporary American sexual mores. The somewhat formulaic plot goes like this: Wai-Tung, a yuppie landlord, lives with his white lover, Simon, in a chic Manhattan brownstone. Wai-Tung is an only child and his aging parents in Taiwan long for a grandchild to continue the family legacy. Enter Wei-Wei, an artist who lives in a grungy loft owned by Wai-Tung. She slugs tequila straight from the bottle as she paints and flirts boldly with her young, uptight landlord, who brushes her off. “It’s my fate. I am always attracted to handsome gay men,” she mutters. After this setup, the movie goes downhill, all edges blurred in a cozy nest of happy endings. In a refrain of Sayoko’s plight in _Okoge_, a pregnant, suddenly complacent Wei-Wei gives in to family pressures—and never gets her life back.

“It takes a man to know what it is to be a real woman.”

—Song Liling in _M. Butterfly_

Ironically, two gender-bending films in which men play men playing women reveal more about the mythology of the

< Leslie Cheung in “Farewell My Concubine”; May Chin and Winston Chao in “The Wedding Banquet”; Gong Li in “The Story of Qiu Ju”; and Tiana in “From Hollywood to Hanoi”
prized Asian woman and the superficial trappings of gender than most movies that star real women. The slow-moving *M. Butterfly* presents the ultimate object of Western male desire as the spy/opera diva Song Liling, a Suzie Wong/Lotus Blossom played by actor John Lone with a five o'clock shadow and bobbing Adam's apple. The best and most profound of these forays into cross-dressing is the spectacular melodrama *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Chen Kaige. Banned in China, *Farewell My Concubine* shared the prize for Best Film at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival with Jane Campion's *The Piano*. Sweeping through 50 years of tumultuous history in China, the story revolves around the lives of two male Beijing Opera stars and the woman who marries one of them. The three characters make an unforgettable triangle, struggling over love, art, friendship, and politics against the bloody backdrop of cultural upheaval. They are as capable of casually betraying each other as they are of selfless, heroic acts. The androgynous Dieyi, doomed to play the same female role of concubine over and over again, is portrayed with great vulnerability, wit, and grace by male Hong Kong pop star Leslie Cheung. Dieyi competes with the prostitute Juxian (Gong Li) for the love of his childhood protector and fellow opera star, Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi).

Cheung's highly stylized performance as the classic concubine-ready-to-die-for-love in the opera within the movie is all about female artifice. His sidelong glances, restrained passion, languid stance, small steps, and delicate, refined gestures say everything about what is considered desirable in Asian women—and are the antithesis of the feisty, outspoken woman played by Gong Li. The characters of Dieyi and Juxian both see suffering as part and parcel of love and life. Juxian matter-of-factly says to Duan Xiaolou before he agrees to marry her: “I'm used to hardship. If you take me in, I'll wait on you hand and foot. If you tire of me, I'll . . . kill myself. No big deal.” It's an echo of Suzie Wong's servility, but the context is new. Even with her back to the wall, Juxian is not helpless or whiny. She attempts to manipulate a man while admitting to the harsh reality that is her life.

Dieyi and Juxian are the two sides of the truth of women's lives in most Asian countries. Juxian in particular—wife and ex-prostitute—could be seen as a thankless and stereotypical role. But like the characters Gong Li has played in Chinese director Zhang Yimou's films, *Red Sorghum*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and especially *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Juxian is tough, obstinate, sensual, clever, oafish, beautiful, infuriating, cowardly, heroic, and banal. Above all, she is resilient. Gong Li is one of the few Asian Pacific actors whose roles have been drawn with intelligence, honesty, and depth. Nevertheless, the characters she plays are limited by the possibilities that exist for real women in China.

“Let's face it. Women still don't mean shit in China,” my friend Meeling reminds me. What she says so bluntly about her culture rings painfully true, but in less obvious fashion for me. In the Philippines, infant girls aren't drowned, nor were their feet bound to make them more desirable. But sons were and are cherished. To this day, men of the bourgeois class are coddled and prized, much like the spoiled men of the elite household in *The Scent of Green Papaya*. We do not have a geisha tradition like Japan, but physical beauty is overtreasured. Our daughters are protected virgins or primed as potential beauty queens. And many of us have bought into the image of the white man as our handsome savior: G.I. Joe.

*BUZZ* magazine recently featured an article entitled “Asian Women/L.A. Men,” a report on a popular hangout that caters to white men's fantasies of noble Thai women. The lines between movies and real life are blurred. Male screenwriters and cinematographers flock to this bar-restaurant, where the waitresses are eager to “audition” for roles. Many of these men have been to Bangkok while working on film crews for Vietnam War movies. They've come back to L.A., but for them, the movie never ends. In this particular fantasy the boys play G.I. Joe on a rescue mission in the urban jungle, saving the whore from herself. “A scene has developed here, a kind of R-rated *Cheers*,” author Alan Rifkin writes. “The waitresses audition for sitcoms. The customers date the waitresses or just keep score.”

Colonization of the imagination is a two-way street. And being enshrined on a pedestal as someone's Pearl of the Orient fantasy doesn't seem so demeaning, at first; who wouldn't want to be worshiped? Perhaps that's why Asian women are the ultimate wet dream in most Hollywood movies; it's no secret how well we've been taught to play the role, to take care of our men. In Hollywood vehicles, we are objects of desire or derision; we exist to provide sex, color, and texture in what is essentially a white man's world. It is akin to what Toni Morrison calls “the Africanist presence” in literature. She writes: “Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to em-
ploy an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture.” The same analogy could be made for the often titillating presence of Asian women in movies made by white men.

Movies are still the most seductive and powerful of artistic mediums, manipulating us with ease by a powerful combination of sound and image. In many ways, as females and Asians, as audiences or performers, we have learned to settle for less—to accept the fact that we are either decorative, invisible, or one-dimensional. When there are characters who look like us represented in a movie, we have also learned to view between the lines, or to add what is missing. For many of us, this way of watching has always been a necessity. We fill in the gaps. If a female character is presented as a mute, willowy beauty, we convince ourselves she is an ancestral ghost—so smart she doesn’t have to speak at all. If she is a whore with a heart of gold, we claim her as a tough feminist icon. If she is a sexless, sanitized, boring nerd, we embrace her as a role model for our daughters, rather than the tragic whore. And if she is presented as an utterly devoted saint suffering nobly in silence, we lie and say she is just like our mothers. Larger than life. Magical and insidious. A movie is never just a movie, after all.

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Honoring Home Places

B everly Buchanan is an artist who knows that home really is where the heart is. Nailing and gluing together scraps of wood, tin, and tar paper, she fashions miniature “shacks,” then decorates them with bottle caps, marbles, buttons, and other found objects (see inside front cover). Some have sturdy, blocky shapes and are little more than a foot tall; others are propped up on willowy stilts and stand at five feet. Their surfaces are covered with colorful scrawls, names, and silhouettes of skirted women. Each is accompanied by a written legend that records fictional and real events and personalities in southern communities. Like portraits, every shack exudes its own personality—sometimes lively and humorous, sometimes poignantly forlorn.

But Buchanan is doing more than just making beautiful objects when she builds shacks or makes vibrant drawings of them. She is recording the history of communities of women and men who by necessity live in houses made by their own hands. Sometimes called “home places” by their inhabitants, the structures are built, like Buchanan’s, from found scrap material. These constructions are prevalent in the rural South, and have provided shelter for many African Americans since the days of slavery.

As a child in North Carolina, Buchanan first learned about shack communities when she accompanied her father, a state agricultural agent, on his visits to tenant farmers. Later, she moved north to the New York area, where she worked as a medical technologist and health educator. Eventually, she realized her true vocation and devoted herself full-time to art.

To save money Buchanan moved to Georgia, where she renewed her acquaintance with people living in shack communities. She visited often and close friendships evolved.

Inspired by the resilience of her friends and their homes, Buchanan began to make her shack sculptures as a tribute, capturing the spirit of the real structure or its owner. Shiny objects and bright colors give the shacks a festive appearance that alludes to spirited good times and caring between neighbors. She doesn’t romanticize poverty, but her pieces transcend the sadness of destitution.

Buchanan functions as historian, artist, and storyteller. Often, her photographs of shacks or their inhabitants are exhibited along with her drawings and constructions. The art in this series is a visual testament to the amazing creativity and perseverance of the shack communities.

Buchanan’s work can be seen at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, this April and will then travel throughout the country. For more information call Steinbaum Krauss Gallery at (212) 431-4224.

—Lisa Kocaurek

“Waterfront Shacks”