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"Front Line of Freedom” by Merle Woo, was originally published in The Freedom Socialist, Summer 1982.

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© 1983 Nellie Wong. “When will It Ever End?”

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© 1983 C.D. Grant. “Jazz: Lost Legacy of a People?”

We want comments on articles and on the direction of the journal. We would like people to visit us when they are in the San Francisco Bay Area. Drop in to our office at 404B Eshleman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, or call us at (415) 642-7383.
Hmmm, of course, be deceitful. Lie. Use a frozen food
and pretend you've spent hours cooking. Pretend you are
the good wife from Japan. And as the husband in the commercial
says, "she must have spent hours cooking the vegetables."
Hmmm, Asian Americans know it does not take hours to cook
vegetables. After chopping them up, we chow them in hot oil.
Or we fry them in deep fat coated with batter.

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

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

My interest in the situation of Asian Americans grew out of
teaching English to a group of Asian American undergraduates.
Even though I had taught before, I had never felt so close as to this
group of students, to the extent of identifying with them. It pains
me to hear a Chinese American student tell me that she hates
Chinese. "I don't look Chinese, do I?" she asks, hoping for my
reassurance. It pains me to read an essay by a Korean American
student who confesses his anxiety to conform to the dominant
culture even though he cherishes his own. Living in the dorm, he
hides his rice-cooker under his bed so that even his roommate
cannot detect it. It disturbs me no less to have another native-born
student confide to me that she feels threatened reading works by
Asian American writers who attack whites and make fun of their
own people. She moans, "I don't know what is my allegiance
anymore."
Among the works assigned in my course are an interview with Frank Chin and his provocative story "Food For All His Dead." In his interview with the editors of Longtime Californ, Chin expresses his anger at the stereotyping of the Chinese and his desire to "legitimize the Chinese-American sensibility." He describes with humor and pathos his experience as a Chinese in Iowa, lamenting that people can treat him only as a stereotype: "In this society . . . [a white man] can disappear. I couldn’t disappear, no matter how enlightened I was, no matter how straight my English was. Someone, just because they saw my skin color, would detect an accent. Someone would always correct me." Speaking as a writer, Chin rightly refuses to cater to the American craving for stereotypes about the Chinese: "I don’t want to talk about neon lights and Chop Suey and funny music." But whites are not the only ones who believe in stereotypes. Chin points out that many Chinese American writers before him came from "a generation which strongly believed in the stereotypes as being real. They looked on writing as the proof that they were not of the stereotype, that they were assimilated, nearing white. They bought their way into second-class white status by humiliating their whole race and people and history and fucking up the future." Chin claims to be different: "I’m not writing white. I’m very consciously trying to write Chinese-American."

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

The story is told from the point of view of the son, Johnny. Brought up in Chinatown, Johnny is educated in the white world. Upon returning to his place of birth, he feels ashamed of his own people. While displaying a "cowardly loyalty" toward his father and his hometown, Johnny is waiting for both to die, "waiting for the time after death when he could relax." Imploring by his father to stay in Chinatown, the boy replies, "Maybe I’m not Chinese, pa! Maybe I’m just a Chinese accident . . . Pa, most of the people I don’t like are Chinese. They even laugh with an accent, Christ!" Later, he tells his friend Sharon: "I think I’ll leave [Chinatown]. I know what that sounds like, like I’m waiting for him to die so I can leave; maybe it’s so." This attitude of Johnny symbolically kills his father at the end. It is also this attitude which kills the Chinese in the Chinese American.

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

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

Instead of continuing to sacrifice food for the dead, we should start nurturing the living. Let me make the point by comparing the Asian American struggle to the women’s struggle. In the past women tried to live up to man’s feminine ideal by being passive, obedient, and domestic. Lured by an alternate existence, some stalked out of the Doll’s House into the outside world. They first made their presence felt by aping men, by accepting patriarchal criteria for achievement and success. Feeling the resistance in
their attempt to enter careers traditionally closed to women, they
came more aggressive. They denigrated and raved against men.
Yet because these pioneering feminists had adopted the male
criteria for success and were conditioned by the belief in male
superiority, they also denigrated their own femininity, putting
career above caring and putting intellect above emotions. For them
the adjective “feminine” was almost derogatory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the maturating of Asian Americans will also involve the
relinquishing of sides. Instead of expending their energy on
separating, rejecting, and negating what is Asian and what is
American, their energy can be harnessed for creativity. Instead of
pitting Asian against American, Asian Americans should recog-
nize that they are bicultural inheritors. In some minds the Asian
consciousness dominates while in others the American conscious-
ness dominates. Rather than making everyone conform to one
mold, with identical proportions of each consciousness, it is better
to have diversity, given the space for the various blendings, with-
out any shame or guilt. Rather than being ashamed of their ethnic
origins, Asian Americans should strive to understand them, going
beyond the superficial aspects of color, shape, and accent. While fighting against the stereotypes imposed on them, they must also guard against reverse stereotypes, against giving negative labels to whites in return.

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

Notes
2 Ibid., p. 383.
3 Ibid., p. 379.
4 Ibid., p. 385.
6 Ibid., p. 53.
7 Ibid., p. 56.
8 *Longtime Californ*': p. 389.
9 Ibid., p. 384.
10 Ibid., p. 383.
11 *Asian-American Authors*, p. 52.
14 *Longtime Californ*': p. 386.
15 Ibid., p. 385.
17 Ibid., p. 110.

Sansei Male/Female Interpersonal Relations

Jim Okutsu

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

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

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

*Third generation Americans of Japanese ancestry.*