AC 198W (Mondays, 3:00-5:30)

Who's Afraid of Suzie Wong?
Asian American Women Writers and American Culture
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Introduction
In a recent interview in The Boston Globe (March 27, 1991, pp. 33 & 37), the Chinese American woman writer Gish Jen remarks "The climate now is right for Asian-American writers. It's a good opportunity to get our stuff in print." Indeed, with the recent successes of writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Cynthia Kadohata, there seems to be a growing interest in Asian American women writers in particular. This course will examine the writings of Asian American women writers of the twentieth century, focusing on how these writers negotiate the difficulty of writing as women and as Asian Americans and also concentrating on their relationship to popular culture.

Shari Benstock describes how women writers are always already expatriated or marginalized in a male-dominated world because "[t]he definition of patriarchy already assumes the reality of expatriate in patria; for women, this expatriation is internalized, experienced as an exclusion imposed from the outside and lived from the inside in such a way that the separation of outside from inside, patriarchal dicta from female decorum, cannot be easily distinguished." This forced psychological exile from hegemonic discourse is compounded in the case of Asian American women writers by their identity as women descended from peoples for whom the words "exile" and "expatriate" hold much meaning. Furthermore, American mainstream popular culture also serves to complicate the process of creating voices for Asian American women writers because of the many stereotypes of Asian and Asian American women in the media.

In this course, taking Edward Said's ubiquitous but useful work Orientalism as a departure point, we will examine literary and cultural theories to explore the dynamics of the popular construction, representation, and fetishization of Asian American women in film (The World of Suzie Wong, Year of the Dragon) and advertising (tv ads for Asian prostitutes, commercials for pantyhose, perfume, etc.). Then we will go on to look at the writings of Asian American women writers of this century to see how they in their own lives and in their works respond and work through these various obstacles present within American culture to compose a literature of their own. The writers featured in this syllabus are North Americans of East Asian descent; because they have been writing as Asian Americans the longest, this will allow us to read and analyze texts from different generations. In addition to issues such as gender, identity, race, class, language, history, generation, and region, we will also discuss canonicity and tradition, as well as the politics of publishing as they pertain to Asian American women writers.

Format, Requirements, Assignments
This class will meet once a week on Monday afternoons, from 3:00 to 5:30. To make the most out of this block of time, I have tentatively divided each session into two segments, roughly 60-70 minutes each (marked 'L' and 'H' where applicable), with a short break (for tea? coffee? cookies?) in between. I would like to conduct this course as a seminar so students will be required to lead discussion, present papers and research as well as be prepared to actively discuss the texts assigned. (Please note that I will take into account your attendance record and class participation when assigning your final grade.)

There are a series of assignments for this course: most of the oral presentations stem from group work (research and/or leading discussion--to be assigned) and the rest are papers. In groups, you are responsible for several joint research projects that involve compiling bibliographies of novels/writers/films/etc. and leading discussion for one of the assigned readings scheduled Feb. 24-April 27. All written assignments must be typed or wordprocessed. There are two kinds of written

assignments: one-page, single-spaced papers that you will write at intervals during the semester and a 8-10 page, double-spaced final paper due on a date to be assigned in May. The first one-pager is due next week; as for the other three, you may write your papers on the texts of your choice. The papers are due on the first day that we are to discuss that text. However, you may NOT write a one-pager on the book for which you are a discussion leader. Since the objective of the one-pagers is to facilitate your preparation for the class (reading, interpreting, discussing), they represent an opportunity for you to present a coherent, lucidly written, absolutely fascinating interpretation/argument within a very limited space, so you may decrease the margins on the one-pager as much as possible to increase the area upon which you can type. Make sure you have your name and a title at the top of the page. As for the final paper, I will give you details for it after mid-semester but suffice it to say that it should be an extended analysis of one or several of the texts read in class and/or of other related material.

**Required Texts**

All of the books are available at the Brown Bookstore. Library copies will be put on reserve.


PLUS A XEROX PACKET (AVAILABLE AT A LOCATION TO BE ANNOUNCED)

**Film screenings**

During the semester, I would like to screen films that influenced how the popular imagination perceived Asian (American) women so that we may talk about the representations of Asian (American) women in popular culture along with our readings. The time and place of the screenings is up to the class but here is a list of films of suggested films:

- *Who's Afraid of Suzie Wong*
- *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924 version)
- *Shanghai Express*
- *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*
- *The Flower Drum Song*
- *Sayonara*
- *China Girl*
- *Year of the Dragon*

**Tentative reading schedule**

**week 1 (Jan. 27)** --- Definitions

I: introduction to the course

II: discussion of "buzzwords"--representation, canon, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, interpretation, ideology, Orientalism, Asian American, etc. Texts: excerpts from Louis Althusser, John Berger, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, and others

To be shown on an evening before the next class: *The World of Suzie Wong*

ASSIGNMENT: Watch *The World of Suzie Wong* and read *M. Butterfly* and the
"Orientalism" excerpts. Write a one-page paper focusing on one of the three texts (Suzie, Butterfly, Orientalism); your paper should be informed by the other two texts. Look for advertisements of Asian or Asian American women to bring to class.

**Week 2 (Feb. 3)**—Reading Popular Culture: making Asian women ONE-PAGER #1 DUE
I: discussion of papers on *The World of Suzie Wong*, *M. Butterfly*, and *Orientalism*
II: discussion cont. on representations of Asian women; Western constructions of Asian women in the media; decoding advertisements (Barthes's codes, etc.)
**Assignment**: In groups, find and decode an advertisement (it can be a print ad or a clip from a film, video, commercial, etc.) to present next class in 5-8 minutes.

**Week 3 (Feb. 10)**—Reading Popular Culture: reading Asian American women
I: group presentations—ads decoded and interpreted
II: on Edith and Winnifred Eaton

**LONG WEEKEND—NO CLASS ON FEB. 17**

**Week 4 (Feb. 24)**—Choosing Identities: the case of the Eaton sisters
I: on Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna
II: on Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

**Week 5 (March 2)**—Familial/Familial Lives: two autobiographical daughters
I: Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter*
II: on Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*

**Week 6 (March 9)**—Entering/Interring the Past: the Japanese internment experience
I: on Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*
II: on Hisaye Yamamoto, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*

**Week 7 (March 16)**—Experiments, Experience, and Narrative
I: on Chuang Hua, *Crossings*
II: on Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

**SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS ON MARCH 23**

**Week 8 (March 30)**—Hersstory
I: on *Crossings* and *The Woman Warrior*
II: on Sky Lee, *The Disappearing Moon Cafe*

**Week 9 (April 6)**—Theirstories: history, voice, and narrative
I: on Sky Lee, *The Disappearing Moon Cafe*
II: on Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

**Week 10 (April 13)**—Charting the American Dream I
I: on Cynthia Kadohata, *The Floating World*
II: on Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*

**Week 11 (April 20)**—Charting the American Dream II
I: on Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*
II: on Gish Jen, *Typical American*

**Week 12 (April 27)**—Charting the American Dream III
I: on Gish Jen, *Typical American*