

The background of the book cover is a deep blue. It features a stylized, pink dragon with a long, flowing mane and a large, open mouth showing sharp teeth. The dragon is positioned on the left side, with its head and front paws visible. The dragon's body is decorated with horizontal blue and white stripes, reminiscent of the American flag. The dragon's tail is long and curved, also featuring the same striped pattern. The dragon's feet are large and pink. The background is also decorated with several white stars of varying sizes, scattered across the top right and bottom left. A large, solid pink circle is located on the right side of the cover. The title is centered within a white rectangular box with a pink border. The title is written in a dark blue, serif font. The subtitle is written in a pink, italicized serif font. The author's name is written in a dark blue, serif font. A small pink square is located between the subtitle and the author's name.

# Reading Asian American Literature

*From Necessity to Extravagance*



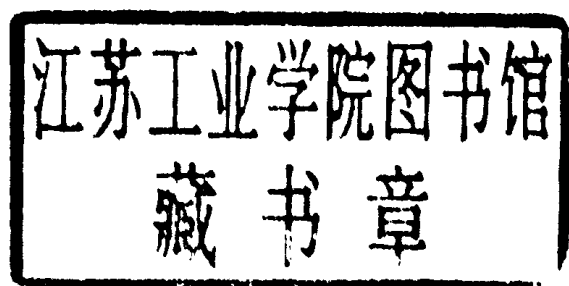
Sau-ling Cynthia Wong

Reading  
Asian American Literature

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FROM NECESSITY  
TO EXTRAVAGANCE

*Sau-ling Cynthia Wong*



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# Reading Asian American Literature

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*To George, Helen, Lulu, and Huan-Hua*

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## CONTENTS

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<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
INTRODUCTION	
Constructing an Asian American Textual Coalition	3
CHAPTER ONE	
Big Eaters, Treat Lovers, “Food Prostitutes,” “Food Pornographers,” and Doughnut Makers	18
CHAPTER TWO	
Encounters with the Racial Shadow	77
CHAPTER THREE	
The Politics of Mobility	118
CHAPTER FOUR	
The Asian American <i>Homo Ludens</i> : Work, Play, and Art	166
<i>Notes</i>	213
<i>Works Cited</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	249



# Reading Asian American Literature

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## CONSTRUCTING AN ASIAN AMERICAN TEXTUAL COALITION

THIS BOOK is a thematic study of Asian American literature. But perhaps even more important, it is a book about the reading of Asian American literature as a critical project within the academy.

Since its inception in the late 1960s, as part of the ethnic studies agenda established by student activism, Asian American literary studies have been gaining increasing institutional recognition across the nation, particularly on the West Coast, and especially since about 1986.<sup>1</sup> A number of book-length studies by Asian American critics have appeared or are forthcoming,<sup>2</sup> and recent publishing projects to broaden the canon of American literature have all, to varying extents, included Asian American authors (e.g., Gilbert and Gubar; Elliott et al.; Lauter et al.; Phillips et al.; Reed et al.). Growing academic interest in the subject, even from quarters previously indifferent to it, coincides with a recent explosion of publishing activity by Asian American authors,<sup>3</sup> a phenomenon that has caught the interest of the “mainstream” media (e.g., Feldman; Simpson; Solovitch). In the half decade preceding the writing of this study,<sup>4</sup> there have appeared a large number of first novels, most of them well received;<sup>5</sup> new novels by established writers;<sup>6</sup> several award-winning short story collections;<sup>7</sup> many other interesting additions to Asian American literature;<sup>8</sup> anthologies of Asian American writing, especially by and/or about women;<sup>9</sup> a Broadway hit;<sup>10</sup> and many volumes of poetry, several of which garnered national honors.<sup>11</sup> The year 1991, in particular, is something of an *annus mirabilis* for Asian American writing; it witnessed the appearance of an extraordinary number of well-received books, some of them debuts for first-timers, others representing new directions for established authors.<sup>12</sup> As this study goes to press in 1992, Asian American literature continues to thrive.<sup>13</sup> In the words of one journalist, the “silence” that once shrouded painful Asian American experiences “has ended in a burst of voices as Asian Americans—long successful in fields such as medicine, engineering and business—are making their mark in the literary world” (Solovitch 1991:18).

The commercial success and general popularity of some Asian American writings, such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, and David

Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, have raised fundamental questions about how Asian American literature is to be read. Specifically, concern has been voiced about the misreading, appropriation, and co-optation of this literature by white readers and critics.<sup>14</sup> Debate on this matter is part of a larger controversy on the direction of American studies in general and the reading of marginalized literatures in particular. Does the study of a marginalized literature require membership in the given group, participation in appropriately typical historical experience, "insider" cultural knowledge, and a group-specific methodology?

The approach that has come to be known as the "ethnicity school"<sup>15</sup> charges that an affirmative answer to any of the above questions would open the floodgate to a host of ills: exclusivist "biological insiderism" and a "'good vibes' methodology" (Sollors 1986a:11); an untenable "exceptionalism" (Sollors 1990a:186); as well as further isolation of the marginalized group, fragmentation of American studies as a discipline, a tendency toward "one-sided reading," and perhaps most ominously, undermining of "the possibility of acknowledging an American national culture" (Fox-Genovese 1990:27, 23, 8). Opponents of the "ethnicity school," on the other hand, take issue with its homogenizing invocation of "ethnicity" as a unifying force in American culture, its facile conflation of ethnicity with race, its unwarranted privileging of immigration and assimilation as quintessentially American experiences, its erasure of group-specific historical injuries, and its insensitivity to the distinctive textual features of marginalized literatures. These critics prefer to stress the interacting operations of race, class, and gender in such literatures, attend to their particular sociopolitical contexts, and promote a "text-specific" (Gates 1987:xix) reading methodology which may, however, selectively draw upon universalist literary theories (Wald 1987). A third approach, allied with the "race, class and gender school," advances a "minority discourse" framework that shifts critical focus away from minority-white relations to minority-minority relations. Its premise is that shared historical experiences of oppression have created literary affinities among minorities that cannot be adequately addressed by a model centered on a hegemonic culture (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1990a). This debate on critical methodology, though often couched in terms familiar only to the literature specialist, has far from esoteric implications. The background to its emergence is a rancorous backlash against multiculturalism in education prompted by radical demographic transformations of American society, a backlash that takes forms ranging from attacks on affirmative action to calls for a return to Western classics in college curricula.<sup>16</sup>

To begin to answer the question "How is Asian American literature to be read?" within such a charged context, one must first gain some understanding of the term *Asian American*.

The task is much more difficult than it seems. The term is inherently elastic and of fairly recent currency (the odd title of Lemuel Ignacio's book—see Works Cited—is not a matter of whimsy). It carries within it layers of historical sedimentation. Not merely a denotative label with a fixed, extralinguistic referent, it is a sign, a site of contestation for a multitude of political and cultural forces. It is the semiotic status of the term *Asian American* that shapes our understanding of what kind of discourse Asian American literature is, and in turn, what kind of practice Asian American criticism is.

From a legal perspective, the peoples previously known as Orientals and now designated as Asian Americans have almost all, at one time or another, been excluded from U.S. citizenship. (Recent refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnam War constitute an exception.) As Jeff H. Lesser notes in a review of Supreme Court rulings regarding Asians, "Naturalization is the ultimate means whereby a government decides who is acceptable—and who is not" (1985–86: 83): acceptable, that is, as Americans. The Naturalization Act of 1790 passed by Congress employed explicitly racial criteria limiting citizenship to "free white persons"; after this act was successfully challenged on behalf of blacks after the Civil War, "Asian immigrants became the most significant 'other' in terms of citizenship eligibility" (Lesser, 85). In the *Ozawa v. United States* case (1922), the Supreme Court ruled against a Japan-born applicant to naturalization (who had lived most of his life in the United States), arguing that "had these particular races [like the Japanese] been suggested, the language of the act would have been so varied as to include them in its privileges."<sup>17</sup> To circumvent the question of color, the Court defined "white" as "Caucasian." However, when an immigrant from India, Bhagat Singh Thind, attempted to gain citizenship by arguing that he was Caucasian, the Supreme Court changed its definition again, brushing aside anthropological and historical issues and appealing to the popular meaning of the term "white" (S. Chan 1991:94). Furthermore, in its 1923 decision against Thind, the Court invoked the criterion of assimilability to separate the desirable immigrants from the undesirable ones: Asian Indians were distinguished from the swarthy European immigrants, who were deemed "*readily amalgamated*" (italics in original) with the immigrants "already here" (Lesser, 88).

These and other Supreme Court cases prevent Asian Americans from "mov[ing] out of the sphere of 'the other' and into the sphere of 'American' " (Lesser, 94). The legal contortions resorted to in order to maintain exclusion suggest that Asian Americans have historically functioned as a peculiar kind of Other (among other Others) in the symbolic economy of America. Generally speaking, they are, to borrow the subtitle of

James W. Loewen's study of the Mississippi Chinese, "between black and white";<sup>18</sup> however, since Native Americans and Chicanos are also thus placed, the description must be refined. We may say that Asian Americans are put in the niche of the "unassimilable alien": despite being voluntary immigrants like the Europeans (and unlike the enslaved blacks), they are alleged to be self-disqualified from full American membership by materialistic motives, questionable political allegiance, and, above all, outlandish, overripe, "Oriental" cultures. On this last point they are differentiated from the stereotypes of "primitive" or "uncultured" Native Americans, African Americans, and Chicanos. Asian Americans are permanent houseguests in the house of America. When on their best behavior (as defined by the hosts), they are allowed to add the spice of variety to American life and are even held up as a "model minority" to prove the viability of American egalitarian ideals. However, their putative unwillingness or inability to assimilate comes readily to the fore when scapegoating is called for, as recently as in the debate preceding the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Lesser, 95) and in the English-only movement (Chen and Henderson 1987; Takano 1987).

The Asian American movement of the late 1960s was precipitated by massive demographic changes within Asian American communities caused by the immigration reforms of 1965. Galvanized by anti-Vietnam War activism and modeled upon the Black Power struggle, it represents, among other things, a refusal to acquiesce in the roles and expectations imposed by white society. *Asian American* has since been adopted as the preferred self-designation of the "ethnically conscious" elements in the community, in contradistinction to the exoticizing *Oriental* (P. Wong 1972; Kim 1982:xii). What is more, the new term expresses a political conviction and agenda: it is based on the assumption that regardless of individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification, Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted. If Asian American subgroups are too small to effect changes in isolation, together they can create a louder voice and greater political leverage vis-à-vis the dominant group (Kim 1982:xiii). Nevertheless, this subsumption of identity as Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, etc. in a larger pan-Asian identity has to be *voluntarily adopted* and highly *context-sensitive* in order to work; it is not meant to obscure the unique experiences of each subgroup, but merely to provide an instrument for political mobilization under chosen circumstances. Otherwise, the term *Asian American* is in danger of reproducing some of the damage caused by the earlier, stereotypical *Oriental* label (Lyman 1974:173-75).

This double-edged nature of the term *Asian American* is clearly seen when we examine decennial census categories to designate groups of

Asian descent. A glance at the questions pertaining to "Color" or "Race" in *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions 1790–1980*, compiled by the Bureau of the Census, reveals fluctuations in the official recognition of the Asian American presence. Since the introduction of "Asiatic" in the 1860 census, categories referring to Asian-ancestry Americans have undergone many changes: from "Chinese" in 1870, the categories have proliferated to nine checkoff boxes under the heading of "Asian or Pacific Islander" on the 1990 form (Robey 1989:18). However, the addition and maintenance of new categories have come about primarily as a result of skillful and tenacious lobbying from the Asian American community, which is concerned that inappropriate categories—either overnarrow or overbroad—would jeopardize the Asian Americans' claim in government resource allocation (Lowry 1982:53; Robey 1989:18).<sup>19</sup> The 1990 census is an especially instructive case. Originally, the Bureau of the Census designed a form on which one could write in specific labels under the umbrella category of "Asian or Pacific Islander"; being more cumbersome and open-ended for the respondents, this form would lead to a less accurate picture of the Asian American population. The Asian American community and its advocates in Congress objected vigorously to this lumping, and even after a presidential veto, succeeded in effecting a return to the checkoff format (Robey, 18). In this instance, Asian American subgroups acted in coalition, but the goal of such action is to ensure that interests of diverse subgroups do not get erased: they *united* with each other in order to protect their *separate* interests. In doing so, they illustrate one social science theory that sees ethnic groups as interest groups—political coalitions—rather than anthropological, cultural, linguistic, or religious ones (Petersen 1982:18; Omi and Winant 1986:19).

As even such a brief survey shows, the term *Asian American* is intrinsically complex: it focuses all the contending sociopolitical and cultural forces that affect the daily life of Asian Americans. The uncertainties surrounding everyday usages are part of this picture: though *Asian American* has been gaining increasing acceptance in the public arena, in private most Asian Americans continue to define themselves by reference to the subgroup; in addition, the term may signify "American-born Asians" as well as "persons of mixed Asian and Caucasian parentage." Users of the term, even those within the group itself, cannot count on a consensual usage, but must constantly negotiate its meanings in context.

Transposed to Asian American literary studies, this phenomenon means that critics have not reached any agreement on how their subject matter is to be delimited. Prescriptive usages exist side by side with descriptive ones; some favor a narrow precision, others an expansive catholicity. As Shirley Lim (1990) points out in a conference paper on the intersection of feminist and ethnic literary theories in Asian American

literature, anthologists differ in their criteria for inclusion. In their influential "Introduction" to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974b), Frank Chin and his coeditors operate on the premise that a true Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, nonfeminine, and nonimmigrant; they also limit their selections to three subgroups—Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino—each seen as possessing a distinctive tradition within the broader definition. While this approach has hardened considerably over the years into a rigid distinction between "real" and "fake" Asian American literature in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (J. Chan et al. 1991), with a concomitant narrowing of focus,<sup>20</sup> a number of recent anthologies, notably those by and about women, counter the practice by broadening the definition of *Asian American* and dispensing with ethnic subgroup designations. For example, Lim and Tsutakawa's *The Forbidden Stitch* and Watanabe and Bruchac's *Home to Stay* both include Korean and Asian Indian writers, some of them first-generation, while Asian Women United of California's *Making Waves*, a multigenre collection, contains selections by Vietnamese authors as well. Like the anthologists, the scholars also differ in the way they elect to demarcate Asian American literature. In her *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Elaine Kim limits her survey to literature written in English by Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino Americans, citing both ideological, pragmatic, and personal reasons for her decision, but expressing a hope that immigrant writing in the Asian languages will some day be incorporated (1982: xi–xiv). In editing their annotated bibliography of Asian American literature, King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi choose a nonprescriptive approach, listing "works by writers of Asian descent who have made the United States or Canada their home, regardless of where they were born, when they settled in North America, and how they interpret their experiences." They also list authors of mixed descent and nonpermanent residents who have written specifically about Asian life in America (1988:v).

This multiplicity of opinions is not an embarrassing symptom of confused thinking or mere factionalism on the part of scholars and critics, but a necessary result of Asian American literature's interdiscursivity in history and in contemporary life. (A good reminder of this fact is the title of Lisa Lowe's 1991 theoretical essay on Asian American "differences"—"Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity.") An Asian American work may allude to Asian classics or folklore, draw upon an oral tradition maintained by immigrant forebears, participate in dominant Western genres like the realist novel or movements like postmodernism, serve class interests, engage in gender politics, and do a host of other things that multiply-situated texts do. At any point in the interpretive process, in order to arrive at an articulation of emphasis satisfactory to themselves, careful readers have to balance the centrifugal and centripetal, the



heterogenizing and homogenizing, tendencies inherent in the term *Asian American literature*. Calibration is all.

Still, whatever their disagreements, and however their foci may shift according to the task at hand, students of Asian American literature tend to be united by a desire to ensure that voices of Asian Americans are heard and to make known the richness and complexity of Asian American writing. Just as the Asian American ethnic group is a political coalition, Asian American literature may be thought of as an emergent and evolving textual coalition, whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote.<sup>21</sup> Apart from being an intellectual challenge, criticism is also praxis. Unlike those whose subject matter has been canonized and protected by an established power structure, Asian American critics have to establish their professional domain; through doing so, and through disseminating the products of their efforts, they play a role in building their community. For although coalitions necessarily retain a certain degree of provisionality, the very process of creating a coalition feeds back into history, to further realize what has hitherto been tentative and unstable.

To return to the earlier question on how to read Asian American literature, given the constructed status of Asian American literature as a textual coalition, reading, too, involves conscious inhabitation of a reading position. As Diana Fuss reminds us, “there is no ‘natural’ way to read a text: ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed, assigned, or mapped” (1989:35). Asian American critics have always had choices to make: notably between tracing Asian influence in the texts and demonstrating their grounding in American historical experiences; between accentuating their universal accessibility and uncovering their particular preoccupations. My choice in this study, to focus on the latter of each pair, is based on the conviction that the tendency to “de-Americanize” Asian American literature is too rampant to need any inadvertent abetting. The literatures of other major peoples of color in the United States, though also vulnerable to exoticization, are less susceptible in this regard: Native Americans, being the indigenous inhabitants of the North American continent, cannot be regarded as foreign;<sup>22</sup> Chicanos can also draw on a long history of settlement predating the Anglos’ arrival, while as a result of slavery, the culture that African Americans have had to develop is indisputably American. In contrast, Asian American writers, however rooted on this land they or their families may have been, tend to be regarded as direct transplants from Asia or as custodians of an esoteric subculture.<sup>23</sup> Thus it is incumbent upon Asian American critics to orient discussions away from exoticization and to ensure that the word *American* is not blithely excised from the term *Asian American*.