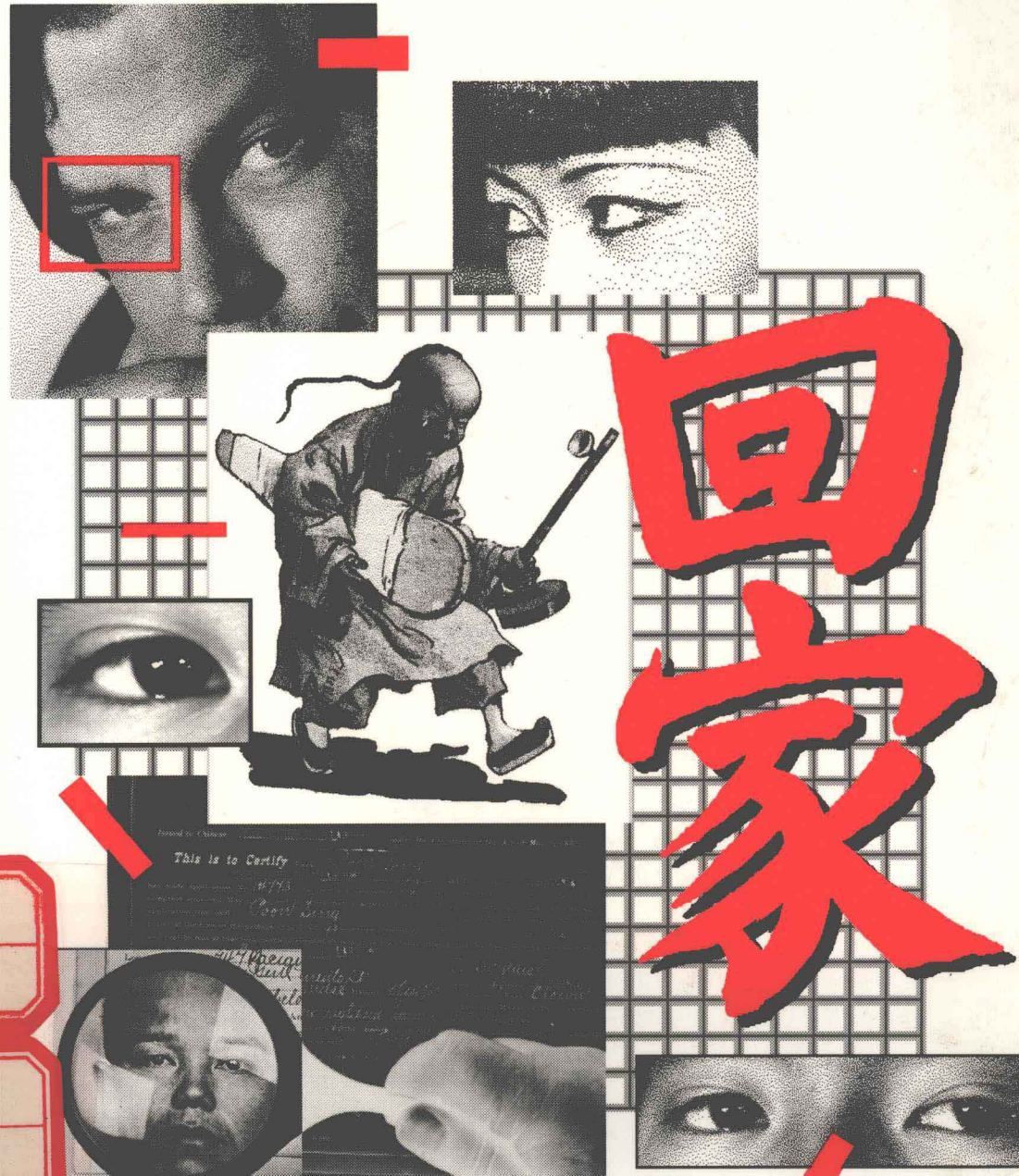
MARGINAL SIGHTS

STAGING THE CHINESE IN AMERICA

STUDIES IN THEATRE HISTORY & CULTURE

JAMES S. MOY



Sights

James S. Moy

University of Iowa Press Iowa City

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242

Printed in the United States of America
Design by Richard Hendel

Printed on acid-free paper
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Moy, James S.
Marginal sights: staging the Chinese in America / by James S. Moy.
p. cm. — (Studies in theatre history and culture)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-87745-427-2, ISBN 0-87745-448-5 paper
1. American literature — Chinese influences. 2. United States — Civilization — Chinese influences. 3. American literature — History and criticism. 4. Chinese Americans in literature. 5. Theater — United States — History. 6. Chinese in literature. 7. China in literature. I. Title. II. Series.
PS159.C5M69 1993
973'.004951 — dc20 93-17415
97 96 95 94 93 C 5 4 3 2 1
97 96 P 5 4 3 2

Acknowledgments

Sections from chapters and early versions of several parts of this project have appeared as journal articles. Portions of "The Panoptic Empire of the Gaze: Authenticity and the Touristic Siting of Chinese America" recently appeared in *Modern Drama* 35 (1992) under the title "The Anthropological Gaze and the Touristic Siting of Chinese America." A version of "Bret Harte and Mark Twain's *Ah Sin*: Locating China in the Geography of the American West" appeared under the same title in *Studies in Chinese-Western Comparative Drama*, ed. Yun-Tong Luk (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990). "*Casualties of War*: The Death of Asia on the American Field of Representation" came out under a similar title in *Asian American Literary Criticism*, ed. Amy Ling and Shirley Lim (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). "Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions*: Desiring Marginality and the Dematerialization of Asia," originally published in Chinese, appears in English in *O'Neill in China*, ed. Lui Haiping and Leonard Swortzell (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992). A shorter version of "Flawed Self-Representations: Authenticating Chinese American Marginality" appeared earlier as "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Philip Kan Gotanta's *Yankee Dawg You Die*: Repositioning Chinese American Marginality on the American Stage," *Theatre Journal* 42 (March 1990). And, finally I thank all who helped to make this book possible.

Contents

1 Introduction

Siting Race/Staging Chineseness

Here is madness elevated to spectacle above the silence of the asylums, and becoming a public scandal for the general delight. Unreason was hidden in the houses of confinement, but madness continued to be present on the stage of the world — with more commotion than ever.
— Michel Foucault

Since the beginning of the Western tradition in drama, dominant cultures have represented marginal or foreign racial groups in a manner that presents these characters as othered — that is, not only as different from people in the dominant culture but also as less than completely human or civilized. The Greeks, for example, had an all-purpose word for these people: barbarians. From Euripides' *Medea* through Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (as well as *Othello, The Merchant of Venice*, and even *Romeo and Juliet*) to O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, these characters, with few exceptions, have been cast negatively. Apparently they lack certain essential human qualities, and this condition of absence is often pivotal to the development of the dramatic conflict. It would seem, then, that the need to demean or dehumanize these othered people serves to maintain or reestablish an advantage for the dominant culture.

Playwrights and audiences alike have been fascinated with racial difference, and this fascination, though sometimes benign, has depended upon a process of fetishization. The con-

structed — allegedly fantastic — attributes ascribed to alien races identify them as creatures from distant lands, beyond the boundaries of civilization and normal existence. Often attached to the marginalized regions of the flat world, the circular *mappa mundi*, the inhabitants of these marginal pieces of geography were thought to be fantastic, monstrous beings. As constructed beings without a real presence, they could not argue against their marginalization. And, as Aristotle had noted, beings living beyond the reaches of known governmental structures, without the state, were either gods or beasts.[1] Obviously not gods, those living beyond the known Eurocentric notions of state had to be beasts. By the Middle Ages, these beings were often graphically represented without heads, with crane-like necks, ill-proportioned or misdirected feet, animal faces, and with faces imbedded in chests.

These beasts were simply accepted as the exotic creatures which God, as reconstituted in the Judeo-Christian form, had created to dwell in paradise situated in the East: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden."[2] The Hereford *Mappa Mundi* (1280), typical of the circular "T and O" maps of the era, locates the "East," or Asia, at the top of the flat circular world, with Europe and Africa each occupying half of the lower section. Surrounded by Asia, Jerusalem, source of both antiquity and Christianity, occupies the center. Such maps often displayed the monstrous races residing on the edges of this world, which feathered out into mystery, far from the centrality of governments.

Rudolf Wittkower, tracing the history of the monstrous races inhabiting these mystical sites on the margins of the known world, noted that many explorers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries believed that they had "located Paradise" in their travels. "Friar Jordanus placed it between the 'terza India' and Ethiopia, John of Marignola believed it to be in Ceylon, Odoric of Pordenone found it 50 days west of Cathay, John of Hese on a mythical journey professed to have reached it in the extreme East; and Columbus, who thought to his death that he had discovered the sea route to India, was convinced that he had passed near it."[3]

During the European Renaissance, however, the world was radically refigured from a flat tabletop into a sphere now fixed in proper perspec-

tive by a grid of meridians. This change in understanding at once problematized the location of these mystical places. Indeed, as Asia became merely a part of the world, Europe redefined itself as the center, with optical perspective providing both agency and superstructure. In the process Asia ceased to be the site of ancient wisdom and became just another — or, more to the point, an othered — location.

Still, received knowledge influenced the observations of explorers such as Jordanus, Marignola, Odoric, and later Mandeville, who claimed to have come in contact with races fitting the medieval descriptions of monsters.[4] The tension between reality and the monstrous of imaginary realms produced some amusing ruptures in the social text of Renaissance Italy. Christian entrepreneurs, with worker populations devastated by plague, were allowed to import slaves, but only if they were heathen. Because Asians and other people of color lived beyond the boundaries of a Eurocentric perspective, they qualified as heathens. Imported by the thousands, these slaves *de genere Tartarorum* worked regularly in the homes of the most conspicuous families of Florence. They were "rapidly absorbed by the indigenous population, [and] a certain Mongolian strain would not have been rare in Tuscan homes and streets." Indeed, the introduction of these Asian slaves significantly altered the demographics of Tuscany. One study notes that "among the 7,534 infants delivered, between 1394 and 1485, in the Florentine foundling hospital, up to 32 per cent were illegitimate children of those oriental slaves. When recognized, these halfbreeds followed the condition of the father and were declared free by law."[5] Once declared free by law, they likely ceased to be beasts.

This type of interaction, often producing offspring, humanized the Asian and other alien races. Accordingly, it is puzzling to find that even in the sixteenth century, with the continued trade in slaves from all over the known world, Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici (1511–1535) maintained a human menagerie of

> barbarians who talked no less than twenty different languages, and who were all of them perfect specimens of their races. Among them were incomparable *voltigeurs* of the best blood of the North African

> Moors, Tartar bowmen, Negro wrestlers, Indian divers, and Turks, who generally accompanied the Cardinal on his hunting expeditions. When he was overtaken by an early death (1535), this motley band carried the corpse on their shoulders from Itri to Rome, and mingled with the general mourning for the open-handed Cardinal their medley of tongues and violent gesticulations.[6]

It would seem that the Renaissance mind, though prepared on some occasions to grant humanity to others, preferred to cling to the imaginary construction of the alien slave as monstrous. Though obviously not beasts, these foreigners, because they lived by extra-European laws, were othered by European xenophobia. Moreover, Ippolito de' Medici likely employed the museum strategy of the survey collection to affirm his position of power. His control over each individual in the panoptic survey apparently doubled as an articulation of authority over the homeland of each representative. Thus the racial other was enslaved even as the paternalistic Christian desire to civilize the heathen emerged.

Perhaps Europe's most significant early social contribution to America was a two-thousand-year-old Eurocentric prejudice that maintained the bestial representation of those not fitting into familiar governmental structures. Well before Asians began to appear in America, the framework that would provide for their representation had been established. The Chinese, and Asians in general, first appear as representational issues during the nineteenth century, their constructed images emerging amidst a rapidly expanding world of visual text. But the constructed aspects of Asianness which survive today appear stripped of the nineteenth-century intertextual relationships which provided definition and initially enforced visibility. This Asianness, kept in place by the power of the desire for domination which brought it into view but now drained of its substance, stands available for continual refiguration. Rendered a blank, the Asian in late twentieth-century America is a void waiting to be refilled. Of course, the Euro-American advantage in the deployment of the constructed stereotype is that one never need interact with the real and can misinterpret as one pleases. But all are victims of this position. Americans visiting Asia are often disappointed, noting that indeed

Asians in American Chinatowns, J-Towns, Little Saigons, or the constructed habitats of Epcot Center seem more authentic, and cleaner too—a sad commentary on the extent to which Asians in America, like those in the sex shops of Bangkok, have become complicitous with the colonial gaze, and on how that way of looking has shaped Anglo expectations as well. The continuing late twentieth-century commodification of such examples of constructed Asian American sites, constantly consumed by white America, articulates the power this history has over both populations and serves as a reminder that Asian America never existed beyond the already represented stereotype bestowed upon it.

Displacing nineteenth-century stereotypes has proved especially difficult for Asian Americans. An attack is often little more than an assault on an empty shell whose substance was long ago drained but whose current existence seems more persuasive because of the new attention given to it. Still, to ignore the stereotype is to leave the geography littered with awkward figurations of Asianness that recall a bitter past which continues to affect the present in subtle ways.

Those who rail against the dominant culture's imaging of Asians in America have tended to reinforce images of exoticism by focusing, for instance, on details of costume.[7] The Lotus Blossom stereotype, for example, is attacked, but without naming the rupture through which this representation was forced into visibility. Lost in some mystical moment of spontaneous generation, Lotus Blossom seems to assume an almost folkloric right to continue. And, what of the seriocomic Chinese detective, Charlie Chan, whose offspring desire to be American but fail, and in their failure reinscribe more deeply the father's foreignness? Competent Asian American parents, then, are disfigured as their progeny are denied a place in the representational West. The failure to adequately identify and interrogate such moments gives the stereotype an almost authoritative sense of rightful social construction.

This extended essay, then, seeks to interact with a few of these moments. The study consists of ten readings, each a treatment of Euro-American strategies deployed in the staging of the Chinese in America. While the focus is on the Chinese, the implications for the American staging of marginalized people in general should be clear. Moreover, the

study focuses as much on the *sites* as on the constructed representation, for the representation reaches out to construct and reinscribe itself before and within the spectator. The objective is not to construct a comprehensive account of the Chinese or Asian stereotype with suggestions for how to respond, but rather through the readings to bring Asian America "nearer to the roots of our oppression"[8] and to contribute to the dismantling of the apparatus which enforces Asian American invisibility.

2

The Panoptic Empire of the Gaze

Authenticity and the Touristic Siting of Chinese America

The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre.
— Charles Dickens

The bourgeois dream of empire, expressed ironically by Dickens in his novel *Dombey and Son* (1848), was taken for granted by most late nineteenth-century writers and so thoroughly imbued the Western psyche that such great expectations seemed natural. It is within this context that the department of knowledge called anthropology came into existence during the nineteenth century as an enterprise in which white men fanned out across the world to look at and "study" people of color. The anthropological gaze emerged as the mechanism by which the common man came to participate in national dreams of empire.

While postcolonial nineteenth-century America had not achieved the extraterritorial empire of its European counterparts, the desire for an imperialist perspective was manifest in American institutions of the day. America had inherited a governmental tradition that featured genocide and the internal colonization of native American lands. Further, the military solution of the native American problem created labor shortages that led to the importation of black

slaves. The imperialist perspective of early America would have a significant impact on the representation of othered populations.

Of interest here is the effect this perspective had on the construction of Chineseness in the representational practice of the period and the subsequent creation of new sites for the reinscription of this Chineseness across broad ranges of spectatorship. The evolution of the anthropological gaze, then, is central. For, while denying overt connection with empire, it nonetheless allowed America to claim equal status in the community of imperialistic Western powers, but under the sign of altruism. In turn this altruistic anthropological desire enslaved the Asian subject to yield a stage character befitting the imperialistic gaze, now reconstituted as American.

By the middle of the nineteenth century two forms of the empowering gaze become clear, the serial and the voyeuristic. The popular form of the serial, or survey, offered amusements which brought together apparently authoritative series and collocations of objects to create the *potential* for meaning. Panoptic in sensibility and usually nonnarrative, these entertainments employed displacement as a structural force and included museum displays, vaudeville, circus, travelogues, and even melodrama. The potency of this mode of production lay in its ability to obliterate geography and narrative time, in the process offering the spectator an almost godlike option to either examine with care or completely ignore the efforts up on stage. While these popular forms offered the possibility for significance, nothing would come of it. Producers preferred to use this potential as little more than a false proairetic to fascinate audiences while entrapping them for future exploitation. The voyeuristic gaze, generally associated with the emergent self-conscious literary elite of mid-nineteenth-century narrative realism, served to affirm the authority of the looker, generally at the expense of the object—which in turn was often reduced to stereotype.

Both ways of looking—the serial and the voyeuristic—operated to reinforce a particular institutional culture of the gaze, each limited to its own audience. The serial offered an amusingly empowering yet dismissive gaze to entertain the masses, while the voyeuristic gaze offered exquisitely fashioned, fetishized "realistic" visions of everyday life which

could inspire polite conversation for the learned elite. Significantly, each of these forms produced stereotypical racial representations while promising an authentic experience.

Chineseness first appeared in America within the displacing structure of the variety stage. For instance, Voltaire's *Orphan of China* (1755), adapted into English by Arthur Murphy, appeared in Philadelphia's Southwark Theatre on 16 January 1767. This production, like the premiere, presented Middle Eastern dress in a vaguely "Oriental" mode of representation. Still, this exotic construction was likely the first performance of Chineseness to make its way to what would become the American stage. Indeed, the notion of Chineseness under the sign of the exotic became familiar to the American spectator long before sightings of the actual Chinese. In 1781, a "Chinese Umbra" display, or shadow performance, was described thus: "This evening will be exhibited At the sign of the Store-grate, nearly opposite the Coffee-House, and next to the Hessian guard-house, The Chinese Umbra, On an entire new construction; with a variety of devices, in lively colours, such as ships sailing on the water, a representation of the sun and moon, with a view of Noah's Ark. . . ."[1] "Chinese Shades," or shadow displays, were popular throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century and were frequently featured in benefit performances. The novelty of the shadow performance would sometimes be combined with live action, as in a 1789 "transparent scene — Les Ombres Chinoises — in which will be introduced a very entertaining and laughable Scene between the Coblers, Barbers, Taylors, &c."[2] Typically, these novelty pieces of exotic display were part of a larger proairetic sequence:

> At No. 14, William street, in a room adjacent to where the Speaking figure is exhibited, will be opened with An Introductory Prologue, After which will be presented, an exhibition of Mechanical Artificers in the Chinese Shades . . . A Sailor's Prologue. A Pantomimical Representation, in the Italian Shades, of Robinson Crusoe, With transparent scenes adapted, taken from Cook's Voyage. A representation of the Broken Bridge and Drunken Carpenter. With a view of Pasaic Falls. A favorite Hunting scene, with SONGS adapted. The whole to

conclude with Bucks have at ye all, And a view of Broad Way from St. Paul's, in Transparency.[3]

And, indeed, on 13 July 1796, a "Chinese Shades" production at Ricketts's Circus in New York promised six actors performing "as Chinese" and a representation of a "Grand Chinese Temple" for the finale.[4]

While it is clear from the cast list for the circus performance that the portrayals of the Chinese were executed by non-Asian performers, an 1808 performance by the Pepin and Breschard circus troupe in New York offers "THE YOUNG CHINESE" who "will display a variety of Comic attitudes and Vaultings, over his Horse in full speed." While it is not clear from the cast list of this troupe that the individual advertised was truly Asian, it should be noted that his appearance seems part of an increased use of racial representation, for along with the "Young Chinese" the program promised circus performances by a "Young African," as well as characters with Spanish- and French-sounding surnames.[5]

From the outset, then, the Chinese in America resided solely in the province of the imaginary. Indeed, the consistency of the representation of Chineseness is astonishing. For example, a review of *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1902), a musical comedy, some one hundred years later notes: "The piece is only another variation of a senseless species of stage entertainment, plotless and formless, that has become popular of recent years, which is neither drama, comedy nor operetta, and defies all intelligent criticism. It is really vaudeville with the various 'acts' strung on the slenderest possible plot . . . The stage settings and costumes are as beautiful as have ever been seen in this city . . . the Chinese gowns constitute a perfect orgy of splendid coloring."[6] The Chinese appeared in fleeting moments within a longer sequence of performances designed to provide the spectator with a pleasant sense of plentitude, but devoid of narrative. This deployment of Chineseness, at once in the service of both the survey and the exotic, marks its place in the imaginary realm of American experience to this day. (The 1992 program for the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus remains full of Chinese and Mongolian performers who are presented as exotic.) The early use of the Orient is in keeping with what could be called an Anglo-American desire to define

LORD HIGH ADMIRAL (William Pruette) THE EMPEROR (Edwin Stevens) LORD CHANCELLOR (William Burress)

"A CHINESE HONEYMOON" AT THE CASINO

Americanness by noting difference, especially racial. This theatricalization of difference emerged of necessity, out of the need to justify the extermination of native Americans and the institution of slavery.

As dreams of American empire in a liberal tradition developed, previously popular entertainments were often turned into projects which promised scientific knowledge through careful study. This tendency is perhaps most evident in the enterprise of the museum as large-scale *Wunderkammer* for the display of souvenirs of colonial expansion.[7] One of the most famous of the early American museums, Barnum's, offered little more than collections of freakish novelties gathered from around the world. Displayed within the cases were collections of dead things