

Asian Women: Resisting The Violence

by Tracy A. Lai

*"To be an Asian woman---
Almond-eyed courtesans silently screaming
Their resistance---
At Being an Asian woman
Enduring
American pasts ridden with
Suzy Wongs and Saigon Mamas,
Victims of circumstance
And world dominance."*

— Miya Iwataki

Who are we? We came from many countries all around the Pacific Rim. Beginning in the late 1800's, we came to work alongside our men, and together, our labor created the great wealth of the western United States. We worked on the farms and plantations, in the hotels, laundries, restaurants, canneries and garment factories. Discriminatory laws limited and then excluded our immigration and prevented naturalization for those of us here. This legalized oppression made it hard to raise families, to feel secure or wanted in this newly adopted homeland. But we have survived, and we continue to struggle for justice, equality, and political power.

You may think you know us as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino or Korean. We were the earliest to immigrate and settle, and numerically, today, we are the largest in population. However, we are also Burmese, Kampuchean, East Indian, Malaysian, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese. And since the 1970's, with the rise of the Asian Pacific movement, we also claim the Pacific Island heritage: Fijian, Guamanian, Hawaiian, Palauan, and Samoan.

As second or third generation Asian Pacific Americans, we identify with the collective experience of Asian Pacific peoples in relation to white America. However, as you get to know us, we speak most of our personal experiences as unique nationalities and communities, each with a distinct culture, language and history.

Ask us who we are. We will be glad to share, glad that you care, that you want to know, that you want to help us deal with the difficult issue of sexual and domestic violence in our lives.

Traditional Asian Pacific culture often leaves us especially vulnerable, ill-equipped to deal with this violence. We women have become walking targets in this period of increased violence against Asian Pacific communities.

In June 1982, Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American was beaten to death in Detroit. His attackers thought he was Japanese and blamed him for autoworker unemployment. In February 1984, Ly Yung Cheung, a 19-year-old expectant mother was pushed to her death into the path of a subway train. The attacker, John Cardinale, based his defense on "a psychotic phobia about Orientals." In April 1985, Senator Paul Trible (R-VA) stated that "In Asia they have no value for life" in a *Washington Post* interview on the sixties.

The message is clear: Asians are convenient targets for economic ills or psychological frustration. And Trible's irresponsible, racist comment is only the most recent in a century of propaganda attempting to dehumanize Asians

and so justify violations of basic human rights. One hundred years ago, the anti-Chinese movement used these same tactics of physical attack and inflammatory rhetoric to successfully pass the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, denying immigration rights to Chinese workers. The stereotypes have hardly changed.

It is a hard time to be an Asian Pacific woman. Although we have rich histories and traditions and much to be proud of, we feel the hatred, the resentment, and we know that we must be better prepared to defend ourselves and our communities.

This essay attempts to analyze some of the roots of sexual and domestic violence within Asian Pacific communities, as well as the renewed onslaught of anti-Asian violence. Violence is encouraged by the media and the military through manipulating stereotypes of Asian Pacific women. Related issues include the struggle against feudal cultural practices and values, barriers arising from cultural differences, and the hostility towards Asian immigrants and refugees. The conclusion addresses possible strategies for increasing community education and support. We must surely work together to resist this tide of violence.

The Roots of Violence

There are two types of violence afflicting our communities, though both have their roots in the same imperialist system. Violence within Asian Pacific communities arises out of frustration and mis-directed anger: anger at the poverty, the discrimination, the powerlessness, the oppression.

The structures which support this oppression deserve our anger. But capitalism deflects our anger with the myth of success by hard work. We blame ourselves for not succeeding because we think that we have not worked hard enough. The reality is that the profit of capitalism depends on a large pool of underpaid labor. No matter how hard we work, we are still mainly in the lower to middle strata work force: non-unionized, unskilled, semi-skilled, and non-supervisory.

The system of institutionalized racism teaches us to hate ourselves, to hate our own people. The badge of success must be white. Self-hatred makes violence a logical alternative, and anger finds its mark on the women and girls, traditionally regarded as second-class by feudal and Confucian customs.

The second type of violence is based on the general stereotypes of Asian Pacific peoples and the specific stereotypes of Asian Pacific women. This second type

socialize women into secondary roles to men. Their identities are defined mainly in terms of their husbands and family responsibilities. As a consequence, there is often a pattern of behavior characterized by deference to authority (males, elders), non-assertiveness, and self-effacement.

In themselves, these traits are not inherently negative. The context must be considered. However, Asian Pacific women often feel trapped or limited by these model behaviors, and these behaviors create a vulnerability which invites exploitation and manipulation. Assertive behaviors for women may seem threatening if presented in opposition to traditional responses. However, cultivating a self-awareness of traditional values in the appropriate contexts can empower Asian Pacific women, enabling them to draw from a broader range of responses and actions.

Unfortunately, the American public school system often reinforces some of these traditional qualities, as reflected in comments by teachers who feel that Asian Pacific Americans are "model students" because they are quiet, well-behaved and do not cause any trouble. Such expectations cause teachers to "reward" passive behavior. For Asian Pacific women, passivity is precisely the stereotype identifying them as potential victims of violence. Passive victims do not fight back.

A deep-rooted sense of family loyalty and honor and an abhorrence towards "losing face" are cultural deterrents to reporting abuse. In the case of domestic violence, an Asian Pacific woman may feel disloyal in reporting a spouse, particularly to authorities. She may also feel that she has dishonored her family by being a victim or that she has made the family look bad by reporting an incident.

The abhorrence toward "losing face" stems from the traditional use of guilt and shame to discipline children. Children are taught that their actions reflect upon their whole family. As a victim of sexual or domestic violence, an Asian Pacific woman is likely to feel more shame than anger and is less able to openly talk about it, much less report or prosecute the attacker.

Taking responsibility and blame for problems and a fatalistic resignation to adverse conditions are traditionally valued virtues.⁸ Self-blame in this context is culturally determined rather than psychological in origin as is the low self-esteem often exhibited by other battered women. Fatalism may be summed up by the Japanese phrase, "shikatanai" (it cannot be helped). It is perseverance in the face of adversity, a quality of forbearance. While admirable and appropriate in some situations, such fatalism is detrimental in circumstances of abuse/violence.

Finally, the lack of cultural acceptance and openness in discussing sexuality makes it difficult to even begin to discuss what constitutes abuse or violence. In "Rape: It Can't Happen to Me," Chu and Fong-Torres state that "Sex is a non-spoken subject." At the most basic level, Asian Pacific women may lack the technical language to talk about sexuality. Beyond language, there are the traditional views that sex is a highly private, personal matter; that sex is mainly for conception; or that sex is a taboo topic.

At this time, we do not have accurate figures for the rate of incidence of sexual and domestic violence in Asian Pacific communities. Existing figures most likely represent only the crisis points since Asian Pacific communities generally underutilize social services. These services are often culturally insensitive, lacking in bilingual-bicultural outreach and service providers. In addition, Asian Pacific communities often attach a stigma to using such services and may also fear repercussions, either from government

agencies (e.g., Immigration and Naturalization Services) or within the community (e.g., shame, ostracization).

The problem of Asian Pacific male abusers is best viewed within the context of American society, as a whole, not solely in terms of Asian Pacific cultures. Certainly, Asian Pacific cultural influences must be taken into account when analyzing such aspects as the victim's relationship to the abuser and appropriate counseling methods. For example, Confucian philosophy asserts that women should be "dependent on father before marriage, on husband after marriage, and on sons after the death of husband." However, these kinds of values become modified and overwhelmed by overall American social values.

Asian Pacific Immigrants and Refugees: Special Needs

Besides the cultural issues, there are special circumstances which need to be addressed for Asian Pacific immigrants (mainly Korean, Filipino) and refugees (Southeast Asian). First, an orientation to basic legal rights is essential. Many immigrants avoid the authorities because they believe that any trouble with the law, even as a victim, may lead to deportation. They also may be unaware of what services are available and whom to contact. In any case, language and the availability of confidential interpreters are of great concern. Because of the high value placed on family and community needs, immigrants are reluctant to work with interpreters who may breach confidence or may be relatives of either the victim or the attacker.

The continued cutbacks in social and human services have caused a corresponding difficulty in receiving adequate preparation for functioning in American society. This inadequacy especially impacts refugees from rural and pre-literate backgrounds, such as the Hmong and Mien from Laos. Overall, this problem requires familiarizing them with American values and ways of doing things, in addition to teaching English as a second language.

Less tangible, but more dangerous, is the general hostility toward Asian Pacific peoples, particularly Southeast Asian refugees. Many Americans do not understand the reasons for resettlement, that Southeast Asians are here largely because of U.S. intervention in that region. The hostility stems from the mistaken view that they are living on welfare and/or taking away jobs from Americans. While some Southeast Asians may have or continue to receive public assistance, the circumstances of their resettlement make it a necessity.

This hostility too often translates into violent attacks, from murder to rape, with the justification that Southeast Asians are still the enemy, as propagandized during the Vietnam war. One of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, suffered by some Vietnam veterans, is an aversion for Asians, a logical result of a racist war.

In this regard, the public needs broad education on Southeast Asian refugees, their history and traditions, as well as the circumstances of resettlement. Without this effort, there will continue to be a shocking lack of outrage towards this wave of violence engulfing all Asian and Pacific communities.

Community Awareness

Asian and Pacific communities remain isolated from the present support movement for victims of sexual and domestic violence. Many Asian Pacific men and traditional leaders claim that such violence is not a problem in their

reflects an historically and fundamentally unequal relationship between Asian Pacific peoples and white America.

Beginning in the 19th century, the United States began its history of intervention in Asian countries by forcing China and Japan to concede favorable trade rights. Since then, the U.S. outright annexed, occupied, or otherwise dominated Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Korea, Viet Nam, Laos, and Kampuchea.

The result of this legacy is an attitude of American self-righteousness and superiority towards Asian and Pacific peoples. It is this colonial attitude which precludes any real acceptance of Asian and Pacific peoples. Americans see us as unassimilable, "forever foreign," "the Yellow Peril."

Military Conquest and Asian Pacific Women

In a declaration dated October 26, 1983, the Anti-Bases Coalition Philippines stated: "Foreign military bases distort the social and cultural values of the host country. Foreign bases foster smuggling, drug abuse, and the exploitation of women and children." Military bases dominate the local economy both in terms of available jobs and expendable income. Asian Pacific women fill the need for service workers, on and off base, catering to military personnel.

Frequently, this service is prostitution, even of pre-teen adolescents. According to the Campaign Against Military Intervention in the Philippines, "12,000 prostitutes, who make up 10 per cent of the city (Olongapo) population, 'service' the 9,000 sailors of the Seventh Fleet stationed at Subic." In 1983 in Olongapo, a U.S. naval officer was implicated in a child prostitution ring which sold the virginity and sexual favors of girls aged nine to fourteen years old to American servicemen for \$25-60 U.S.⁴ Elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific, wherever the U.S. maintains a military presence, these patterns are replicated.

These encounters by hundreds of thousands of military men reinforce a warped view of Asian Pacific women. Depending on U.S. foreign relations, these women may also be considered enemies/"gooks," or servants/"mamasans." The relationship of domination, both military and sexual, is basic to all of these stereotypes. This relationship enforces cultural behaviors which form a primary stereotype of Asian Pacific women: obedience, quiescence, and passivity. With this view, U.S. servicemen return to civilian life.

Asian Pacific Military Brides

One measure of American military presence in Asia and the Pacific is the nearly quarter of a million Asian and Pacific women who have married American servicemen overseas since World War II. In immigrating to America with their husbands, these women often experience tremendous alienation and trauma as they attempt to adapt.

The wife often speaks little English and completely depends upon her husband to translate and interpret all that is new in the environment. Stress between husband and wife develops from the difference between military personnel communities in the U.S. and in Asia and the Pacific, as well as the relative intolerance for interracial marriages in the U.S.

Women in Shadows, a pamphlet published by the National Committee Concerned with Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen, suggests that violence against Asian Pacific military wives is greatly underreported. Cases reported are usually at the crisis stage requiring immediate interven-

tion, for example, battering, sexual abuse, extreme neglect, desertion, severe depression or suicide attempts. Women report as a last resort because their husbands threaten them with deportation, and the unknown consequences of reporting appear worse than the relative security, however painful, of the present home/relationship.

The Inspector General's report on Domestic Violence (1979) identifies military families as more conducive to violent behavior. Military training which emphasizes physical force and obedience to authority, the stress of frequent moves by families, and the high rate of alcohol abuse among military personnel are all factors which may precipitate family violence.

Significantly, the stereotypes of Asian Pacific women directly influence many U.S. servicemen's choice of spouse. According to Kim *et. al.*, many servicemen believe that Asian Pacific women make better wives than their "liberated" American counterparts. These men expect a "Suzie Wong" type of man-pleasing woman who is docile and subservient.

The profile of battered Asian Pacific women resembles that of other American women victims of domestic violence. These characteristics include a traditional view of women's roles as wife/homemaker; extreme social isolation; low self-esteem combined with a feeling of guilt that abuse may be "justified;" deep belief that the men they love will change; financial/emotional dependency; and a greater fear of the problems of survival outside the family home than of the known violence within it.⁵ For Asian Pacific women, though the characteristics are similar, the causes are likely to be cultural, rather than psychological in origin. Examples include language and communication difficulties and anxiety regarding American norms.

Asian Pacific Mail-order Brides

On January 25, 1984, the *Wall Street Journal* carried a front page article titled, "American Men Find Asian Brides Fill the Unliberated Bill . . . Mail-order Firms Help Them Look for the Ideal Women They Didn't Find at Home." There are about 50 such services in the U.S. which provide catalogs advertising Asian women through photos and descriptions, like products for sale. Many of the women are recruited from poor families in Malaysia and the Philippines.

In 1970, 34 fiancee-petitioned visas were granted to Asian women; in 1983, the figure had jumped to 3,428.⁶ Mainstream newspapers and magazines print advertisements for these businesses, such as "Lotus Blossom," "Love Overseas," and "Cherry Blossom."⁷ Besides reinforcing sexual and racial stereotypes of Asian Pacific women, the advertisements promote these stereotypes as desirable, when in fact they are quite oppressive. Women who fulfill this "cater to every wish" role are reduced to virtual slaves, unable to develop or be treated as full, fundamentally equal human beings.

Similar to the military brides, mail-order brides are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Because of their conditions of entry to the U.S. as paid-for brides, they feel extreme obligation, both financial and psychological. If they do not fulfill the demands of their husbands, they may be coerced to accept the situation by threats of deportation or physical force.

Cultural Issues

The generalizations in this section are true to varying degrees for each Asian and Pacific culture and for any given individual. Traditional Asian Pacific values tend to

communities. To a certain extent, this view is fostered by the myth of Asians as a "model minority." A model minority, by definition, has no problems, and is content with the status quo.

The role of churches vary in each community, but in general, religious groups in Asian and Pacific communities have done little to educate on issues of sexual and domestic violence, or to support the victims. Awareness training through churches and other community groups could at least begin the process for recognizing the issue and identifying possible actions. Culturally relevant education and outreach tools are necessary for successfully raising the awareness. Involvement of community leaders and newspapers would help establish credibility and concern.

Fundamentally, the problem hinges on how the community itself views sexual and domestic violence. We must be able to admit that there is a problem before we can devise solutions. Violence is violence, no matter who commits it: Asian, Pacific Islander, whatever nationality.

While there should be much more outreach and resources committed by mainstream groups against sexual and domestic violence, Asian and Pacific women themselves must take up these issues in their communities.

For us, dealing with this violence means redefining who we are and how we want to be treated. We need to affirm our Asian Pacific heritage, at the same time creating new roles and values which reflect the inherent equality of women and men.

Change within our communities inspires change in society as a whole. Oppression breeds violence, yet oppression also breeds resistance. And our resistance gives us the strength and vision to create a new destiny.

Footnotes

1. Miya Iwataki, "I am a Woman of Asian Persuasion," *East Wind, Politics and Culture of Asians in the U.S.*, v.2 n.1, Spring/Summer 1983, p. 72.

2. Anti-Bases Coalition Philippines, *Declaration*, Quezon City, Philippines, 1983 (mimeographed copy)

3. Clergy and Laity Concerned, Church Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines, Philippine Support Committee and Southeast Asia Resource Center, "U.S. Bases in the Philippines" (1983 pamphlet).

4. Linda Golley, "For Sale Girls," *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, No. 89, April 1983, p. 32.

5. Bok-Lim C. Kim et. al, *Women in Shadows* (La Jolla, California: National Committee Concerned with Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen, 1981), p. 54.

6. Raymond A. Joseph, "American Men Find Asian Brides Fill the Unliberated Bill," *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 1984, p. 1, 22.

7. JACL Report on Asian Bride Catalogs," *Pacific Citizen*, February 22, 1985, p. 10-11.

8. Kim et. al., p. 65-66.

9. Winnie Chu and Sarah Fong-Torres, "Rape: It Can't Happen to Me!" *Bridge: An Asian American Perspective*, Spring 1979, p. 40.

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