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The Representation of Asian War Brides through a Cold War Lens

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In the aftermath of World War II, American politicians began to emphasize the importance of having influence around the world to combat Communism, thus shifting focus away from domestic policy and towards foreign policy. With American occupation of Japan, the Korean War, and the ongoing Cold War with the USSR, America's image as the leading democratic nation became ever more important. While stationed in Japan and Korea, American GIs formed relationships with foreign women. Sometimes these relationships resulted in marriages, with the brides being known as war brides. The frequency of war brides, especially Asian ones, became so common that eventually politicians needed to develop laws for GIs to bring their foreign wives back to the United States, despite the existence of national origins quota laws and anti-miscegenation laws. These war brides challenged traditional laws in extremely significant ways, eventually laying the groundwork for civil rights cases like *Loving vs Virginia*. Because the popularization of war brides took place during the context of the Cold War, war brides must be examined through a Cold War lens: the representation of Asian war brides in American media reflected the needs of politicians during this extremely energetic and highly charged political climate. The United States was deeply entrenched in Cold War politics, thus Asian war brides were represented in media as "assimilable Americans" to directly counter

Communist rhetoric that painted the United States as racist; however, as a consequence, 1950s gender norms and stereotypes were also projected upon these women. Ultimately, the representation of women of color and its alternative function allude to America's longer history of using people of color to fit political needs.

Historically the concept of the war bride had existed since World War I. However, due to multiple factors, the frequency of American marriages to foreign women was much higher in the wars following WWI, especially during WWII and the Cold War. The first reason for an increase in war brides following the first world war was the United States' participation in WWI was only a year and seven months, as opposed to three years and eight months during WWII. This allowed for longer contact with foreign women. Secondly, the average age of drafted GI's during WWI was twenty, while in WWII it was eighteen. Being eighteen meant "that a larger percentage of the military personnel had not yet married or become engaged to young ladies in the United States."¹

By examining the historic military policies about GI relationships with non-American women, it is evident that acceptance of Asian war brides as "American" did not materialize till the start of the Cold War. During WWII, there was a stark difference between military policies regarding GI relations with non-American women depending on where the soldier was stationed. Susan Zeiger, author of *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century*, elegantly says: "In essence, area commanders tolerated and sometimes even abetted the establishment of military-regulated brothels for U.S troops in non-white colonial societies like Hawaii , whereas in white, advanced- industrial, and Allied countries, they committed resources and personnel to the suppression of brothels and the elimination of

¹ Susan Zeiger. "GIs and Girls around the Globe," in *Entangling Alliances Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York University Press, 2010), 73.

commercialized sex between US servicemen and women.”² In addition to the military’s stance on state sanctioned sex and commercialization of foreign women, depending on race and geographic location, there was also ranging views on which women were acceptable for marriage. While most white European women were viewed as marriage material, Asian women, for example Filipina women, “were viewed through a different lens... as sexual partners.”³ The military went so far as to take a scientific approach when analyzing the differences between these types of women: “Army medical staff created a taxonomy of sex and prostitution around the world that relied heavily on predetermined assumptions about gender, race, culture, and morality and drew broad conclusions about the essential ‘nature’ of foreign societies based on distorted observation.”⁴ With this negative predisposition towards non-white women during WWII, how and why did such a large number of marriages between American men and Asian women occur? The answer lies in the creation of the Cold War and American Cold War policy.

Following the end of WWII, Congress was concerned with stopping the spread of Communism, especially in Asian countries, leading to a shift in how the United States viewed Asian war brides. The red scare was felt by both sides of the political spectrum; both President Truman (Democrat) and President Eisenhower (Republican) created policies that centered around stopping Communism. While Truman’s policy was called the Containment Policy and Eisenhower’s was called the Domino Theory, both policies recognized that Asian countries required the most attention from the United States. In 1945, President Eisenhower gave his famous “domino theory” speech in which he spoke about stabilizing Southeast Asian countries because without it there would be a “loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula,

² Zeiger, 77.

³ Zeiger, 81.

⁴ Zeiger, 77.

and Indonesia following.”⁵ He would later argue that “even Japan, which needed Southeast Asia for trade, would be in danger.”⁶ Both Cold War presidents understood the gravity of not alienating Asian countries in order to keep them democratic, leading to changes in how Asian war brides were viewed.

This movement towards accepting Asian women was evident by the passage of new laws, namely The War Brides Act of 1945. The War Brides Act allowed for the immigration of Asian war brides to the United States under a non-quota bias, undermining state and local anti-miscegenation laws.⁷ Additionally, the passage of the act was monumental considering the fact that there were national origins quota laws that heavily restricted the number of immigrants allowed in the United States. During a highpoint of nativism in the 1920s, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924. The 1921 version of the act created the first national origins quota laws, putting a general ceiling of 300,000 immigrants per year and a percentage-based admittance.⁸ Using the 1910 census as a base, only 3% of immigrants from each country were admitted.⁹ The 1924 Immigration Act made these restrictions even harsher, lowering percentage admitted to only 2%.¹⁰ Moreover, Congress based admittances off the 1890 census, rather than the 1910 census, which did not reflect a large immigration wave of Southern and Eastern Europeans in 1896.¹¹ Finally, and most importantly, Asians were not included in national origins quota admittances, instead falling under “Asiatic Bar Zone” which totally

⁵ “Eisenhower Gives Famous ‘Domino Theory’ Speech,” *History.com*, accessed Aug. 30, 2017, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/eisenhower-gives-famous-domino-theory-speech.

⁶ “Eisenhower Gives Famous ‘Domino Theory’ Speech.”

⁷ Peggy Pascoe. *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 92.

⁸ “Immigration Act of 1921 Imposes Quota System, 1921-1924,” Gale U.S. History in Context (De troit: Gale, 2012).

⁹ “Immigration Act of 1921 Imposes Quota System, 1921-1924.”

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, “The Immigration Act of 1924,” accessed Aug. 30, 2017, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

¹¹ “The Immigration Act of 1924.”

restricted Asian immigration.¹² The Immigration Act of 1924 remained a working law until 1952, when Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act.

This nativists sentiment could still be felt when American lawmakers passed the War Brides Act of 1945. Two decades after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, there was bipartisan support for these national origins quota laws. Both Democratic immigration restrictionists, such as Pat McCarran, and Republican anti-communists, such as Joe McCarthy, agreed immigration should be limited because national security was being threatened. The fact Asian women were exempt from national origins quotas exemplifies just how much the United States government valued the acceptance of Asian women.

In addition to being exempt from immigration laws, the acceptance towards Asian women was seen by the ways in which American media portrayed Asian war brides as assimilable Americans rather than unassimilable foreigners. *Life* magazine ran a story titled “A War Bride Name Blue Comes Home” in 1951, capturing a love story between a Korean war bride and Sergeant Johnie Morgan. While on the surface this article was about war and peace, it actually functioned to counter previous American propaganda and stereotypes about Asians. The article purposely emphasizes the love aspect of their relationship, printing in a bold tagline under the title she “once walked 200 miles to be with him.”¹³ The placement and font of the tagline caught the reader's eye, pulling them into a war love story, one that the general public understood and was empathetic towards. By stressing the wife’s unwavering love, it works to humanize his wife, showing Americans that at the core, Asian women were also susceptible to love and were willing to make sacrifices. The reader was able to see her commitment to marriage and family

¹² “The Immigration Act of 1924 .”

¹³ “A War Bride Named Blue Comes Home,” *Life*, 5 Nov. 1951, 40–41.

formation, cornerstones of 1950s American society. Above all, this article directly countered World War II American propaganda that depicted Asians as bucktoothed, squinty-eyed animals, namely gorillas and monkeys, but rather as Americans committed to family life.

In addition to the text, the article's photographs work to dispel WWII propaganda by showing Blue seamlessly fitting into American life. Blue was pictured setting an American dinner table and cooking American food. Respectively, the captions of these pictures read "eating dinner, family sits at the dinner table. Before the meal was over, Blue overcame shyness, and began correcting Johnie's manners" and "getting hints on Johnie's favorite, Blue learns recipe for Carolina- style gravy."¹⁴ By learning to cook her husband's favorite dish, Blue shows Asian wives were capable of immersing themselves in American culture, contrasting the historic stereotype that Asians were perpetual foreigners, or even subhuman, and therefore unable to assimilate. Blue sheds her Korean identity by wearing American pajamas and styling her hair like a 1950s housewife; her smiling face makes it seem like she does not seem to miss Korea or her culture. Most importantly, Johnie and his mother were depicted as welcoming, as evident by the fact his mother gives her advice on how to make the dish and their warm embrace in the larger photo. By welcoming Blue into their family, this article countered Communist propaganda that painted the United States as nativists and racists. By depicting Blue as an assimilable American, the article countered propaganda that casts Asians as unassimilable foreigners.

Life magazine ran a similar article four years later in February 1955 titled "Pursuit of Happiness by GI and a Japanese," which captures the assimilation process, except focusing on the hardships of adjustment, such as racism. The story recognized that there was some prejudice towards Japanese people after WWII, noting the GI's wife was called "dirty Jap"¹⁵ by their

¹⁴ "A War Bride Named Blue Comes Home."

¹⁵ "Pursuit of Happiness by GI and a Japanese," *Life*, 21 Feb. 1955, 124.

Chicago neighbors; while recognizing racism was a problem in America, the article severely downplays it, noting that there were only a handful of people who held prejudices. By doing so, this article purposely presents racism as a person to person problem rather than institutionalized by the government. The article concluded with the neighbors meeting and getting to know the Japanese war bride on a personal level, leading to eventual acceptance in the Chicago community. Ultimately, these kind of success stories about Asian war brides worked to prove that Americans were not racist, but rather welcoming, and accepting of all races, cultures, and backgrounds. (However, the success of Asian war brides' assimilation was also used to criticize blacks during the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement and would later serve as the prototype of the "model minority." Pitting one minority against another speaks to the harsh reality of American suppression of people of color). The image of the United States as the leading democratic nation and its superiority to Communist nations was achieved by downplaying the racism towards Asian women in America.

Adding to the numerous newspapers and magazines that portray Asian war brides as assimilable, Hollywood films built upon this image by stereotyping them as submissive and praising them for embodying 1950s American ideals for women. One of the most well-known Asian war bride movies is *Sayonara* (1957), about Gruver (Marlon Brando), the war pilot stationed in Japan, and Hana Ogi (Miiko Taka), the love interest. Additional characters include Gruver's friend and fellow serviceman, Kelly (Red Buttons), Kelly's Japanese wife, Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki), and Gruver's American ex-fiancée, Elaine (Patricia Owens).

One of the main plots of the movie was concerned with who Gruver will marry. Throughout the movie, Gruver, by watching Kelly and his Japanese wife, realizes the great qualities of Japanese women. In the film "Katsumi is [summed] up as a paragon of female virtue.

Later she is shown performing her domestic tasks, cooking, serving guests, bathing her husband cheerfully and quietly. Her devotion to Kelly is all consuming and unquestioning.”¹⁶ These type of tasks are met with approval and a slight tinge of jealousy by Gruver. One of the most impactful moments of the film was when “Katsumi even contemplates self-mutilation, in the form of questionable eye operation, to please her husband by “fooling” the authorities into thinking she is white. Kelly beats her for this stupid idea, exercising his control over her body and her identity.”¹⁷

By the end of the movie, Gruver leaves his American fiancée and marries Hana Ogi. By having Gruver marry a Japanese woman who shares similar qualities to Kelly’s wife, the film does two things. The first was that it made marriage the end goal for all the female characters, alluding to traditional 1950s American ideals for women. Secondly, it reinforced the idea that women who break gender norms will not end up married. The passivity that Katsumi and Hana Ogi displays allows Kelly and Gruver, who are archetypes of the ideal American man, to dominate them, highlighting stereotypes of women of color. As Gina Marchetti puts it, “in the American popular imagination, women of color... [embody] the belief in a “genuine” exotic femininity beyond cultural control, something her more Western sister supposedly lost by their grumblings about emancipation.”¹⁸ This film, in a multi-functional way, worked to sustain the already present power structures created by white men over women, especially women of color. First, it stereotypes and exotifies women of color. In conjunction, by praising Asian women’s submissiveness, it put down white feminists and women who did not want to conform to gender norms. Additionally, looking through a non-critical 1950s lens, this film represents Asian women

¹⁶ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (University of California Press, 1994), 134.

¹⁷ Marchetti, 134.

¹⁸ Marchetti, 135.

in a positive way, helping amend relations with Asian countries that the U.S historically alienated through exclusion laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act and Immigration Act of 1924 (the Asiatic barred zone). The film chastised American feminists, while it put Asian women on a pedestal. By having Gruver marry Hana Ogi, the film stereotyped Asian women as submissive, while praising them for upholding traditional gender norms.

Moreover, the film uses both Japanese wives and an American ex-fiancée as foils to display Asians as the ideal woman. In *Sayonara*, American ex-fiancée Elaine was independent, outspoken, and in control of her sexuality. When Elaine asks Gruver if he ever “felt like grabbing me and hauling me off to a shack somewhere,”¹⁹ Gruver is appalled she would even speak of sex, pushing the viewer to shun Elaine. Gruver proceeded to not speak about the topic and the scene ends with them ending their engagement. This then caused Elaine's parents, especially her mother, to become angry with her. Because Elaine embodies the ideals of a modern feminist, a 1950s audience immediately understands why she was shunned by Gruver and her parents. The way in which the director manipulates the audience's reaction towards this situation captures American Cold War culture: so much energy was being put forth towards foreign policy and “helping” nations abroad, the progression of women's rights during first wave feminism were put on hold. Much like a rubber band, 1950s American culture snapped back to form a modern cult of domesticity where women were placed in a domestic sphere, losing any independence that they had gained previously. Upon hearing about the break up, Elaine's mother is determined to win Gruver back for her daughter; she invited him over without Elaine knowing and pressured him into asking her out on a “makeup” date. When Elaine refused, her mother was furious, underscoring both the importance of marriage and how achieving marriage, when put on

¹⁹ *Sayonara*, directed by Joshua Logan (1957; Warner Bros.), DVD.

hold, became a family issue. Elaine served as an example of what a woman does not want to be and by contrast the characteristics of Asian women are put on a pedestal for having the traditional American stereotypes. These stereotypes include being docile, not seeking sex, giving power over their own bodies to men, and having unwavering commitment to their husbands. Through the analysis of Elaine, Hana Ogi, and Katsumi this film functioned in a number of ways: it reinforced Cold War policies by representing Asian war brides in a positive manner, it stereotyped Asian while putting down American feminists, and it emphasized the importance of traditional gender norms.

While some might argue media portrayals were not linked to United States Cold War policy, there are two flaws to this argument that highlights how America used people of color to fit their political needs. The first flaw of the argument was that during this time other platforms, such as the civil rights case *Brown v Board of Education*, used African Americans as a way to satisfy Cold War public policy. Scholar Mary Dudziak, author of *Brown as a Cold War Case*, covers the ways in which the media portrayed the Brown decision: “In the American press, for the example, Brown was called a “Blow to Communism”. The Pittsburgh Courier said that Brown would “stun and silence America’s communism traducers behind the Iron Curtain. It will effectively impress upon millions of colored people in Asia and Africa the fact that idealism and social morality can and do prevail in the United States, regardless of race, creed, or color.”²⁰ While *Brown* was also used to silence USSR Communist propaganda, the subtle, yet important target audience were African and Asian countries. This is because these were the countries at risk of turning communist; the USSR, on the other hand, was a lost cause. This urgency by the United States was captured by the fact Asian representation and *Brown* worked in tandem to

²⁰ Mary L. Dudziak, “Brown as a Cold War Case,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (Jan. 2004): 32–42, doi:10.2307/3659611.

reach these specific audiences. Rather than covering the history of slavery, the abuses of the Jim Crow era, or the inequality of segregated schools, the article instead focuses on what this Supreme Court case means to foreign policy. This disregard for what desegregation actually meant for African Americans, captures how America uses people of color for their political needs.

The second flaw was that Asian portrayals were vastly inaccurate, highlighting the needs of American males during the 1950s. When portraying Blue, the Korean war bride, the article implies assimilation was easy, as if she did not miss Korea or her culture. However in reality, many brides, such as Mrs. Crispin, spoke about how missing Korean food and its implications: “I felt very homesick and the most difficult thing was food, eating. Suddenly every meal became a painful reminder of having left home...When I first came from Korea, I was one hundred thirty pounds.... But I lost more and more weight and finally I went down to ninety pounds.”²¹ As exemplified by this quote, assimilation was not only extremely difficult, but problematic for one’s health. Ms. Crispin became an unhealthy weight, which was a physical manifestation of the fact she was in a foreign country, missing home. Moreover, women could not eat Korean food because “Korean military brides found themselves subject to pressures to Americanize that were more overt than the absence of Korean food. These pressures came...primarily from husbands, children, and mother-in-laws, people difficult, [which were] dangerous to ignore precisely because they were intimate family members.”²² So, not only was assimilation grossly misrepresented as easy, but also as voluntary. This reality of coercion speaks to how, during the start of second wave feminism, men in the U.S needed to find a replacement for a traditional

²¹ Ji-Yeon, Yuh, “Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America,” in *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 130.

²² Yuh. 135.

housewife. Husbands of war brides were not interested in Asian culture, but interested in finding women with traditional female values, such as unwavering commitment. Because of stereotypes in media and army war stories, Asian women seemed like the answer. Just as the character Gruver was appalled by his sexually liberated ex-fiancée, some men were appalled and pushed back against politically active women. American men “wanted wives who would serve them roast beef and potatoes, with...a smile. In short, Korean women- whom they viewed as docile and subservient- would be able fulfill that role.”²³ While it is impossible to say that all marriages were made out of political needs, it is fair to say at least some relationships were used as a way for males to recreate a modern cult of domesticity. The bodies of Asian women were a vehicle to achieve this goal. By examining *Brown v Board* and the misrepresentations of Asian women, it is evident that people of color were used by the American Government to fit their historical political needs.

With the rise of Asian war brides in the post WWII era, American politicians needed to create laws to address such marriages. Not only were these laws significant because they gave war brides exemption from anti-miscegenation laws and national origins quotas, it highlighted a shift of acceptance towards Asian women. In reality, this acceptance was motivated by Cold War policy decisions, in particular combating Communist rhetoric and persuading Asian countries to follow capitalism and democracy. Through American media, Asian war brides were portrayed as assimilable Americans, docile, and as upholding traditional gender norms. Above all, these warped representations alluded to America’s long history of using people of color for political needs, whether that is critiquing feminists or finding a replacement for traditional housewives.

²³ Yuh, 137.

About the author

Laura Chun is a junior history major at Occidental College. Her research interests include Asian American history and South East Asia. She is captain of Occidental's Swim Team and plans to go to law school.