A Hundred Million Messages: Reflections on Representation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*

THESIS

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By

Sabina M. Thalheim

Graduate Program in Music

The Ohio State University

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Master's Examination Committee:

Dr. Arved Ashby

Dr. Stratos Constantinidis

Dr. Udo Will, Advisor
Abstract

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song* stands as one of the first and one of the only Broadway musicals about the lives of Asian Americans. Premiering as a stage musical in 1958 and a film in 1961, it was a landmark in the entertainment industry, opening opportunities for Asian actors to play substantive roles written by one of the most famous writing teams in American musical theater. However, *Flower Drum Song* has effectively fallen out of mainstream memory. There are several possible reasons for this disappearance; one of the most salient causes is the use of stereotypes in the construction of characters, dialogue, and music.

The aim of this thesis is to reopen and reconsider musical theater as an important and revealing genre of entertainment that is birthed in the politics and history of the society from which it emerges. A reading through the libretto and score, listening to cast recordings, and viewing the film reveal *Flower Drum Song* as a product of its time. It is filled with stereotypes of Chinese and Chinese American characters—stereotypes that were commonly propagated in the mid-twentieth century and viewed, in this setting, as innocently humorous. Looking back at *Flower Drum Song* through a more culturally sensitive lens, one observes the offensive stereotypes presented therein. However, studying any piece of artwork necessitates understanding that art in its particular point in history. In order to historically situate *Flower Drum Song*, this discussion highlights some of the relevant events and legislations affecting immigrants to the US beginning in
the mid-nineteenth century, focusing particularly on Asian immigrants. Through a close reading of the libretto and an analysis of the score, one is able to identify elements used by Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields to construct their own versions of China and America—of Chineseness and Americanness. Through music, dialogue, staging, and costumes, the writing team constructs images of Asians and Asian Americans, thereby taking upon themselves the authority to represent a group of people through the show they wrote.

In the mid-twentieth century, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Joseph Fields crafted a musical comedy based on the novel by C. Y. Lee that gently prodded the theater world forward in terms of openness and acceptance of characters, actors, and stories of diverse backgrounds. Yet, as well-intentioned as the team may have been, they still drew on Orientalist and Exoticizing tropes, constructing an artificial understanding of “China” and “Chinese Americans”—images that would influence the theater going public. In 2002, David Henry Hwang, a Chinese American playwright, sought to salvage this musical by rewriting the book in a more culturally conscientious perspective. His version of the show, however, did not achieve much success. It seems as if *Flower Drum Song* is doomed to be forgotten. Yet, the issues surrounding the play are fruitful for discussion and vital to the history of American musical theater.
Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to my parents who have loved, supported, and guided me in my faith through every stage of life.
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My sincere thanks to The Ohio State University Department of Musicology, my colleagues, and to each of my thesis committee members for their time and assistance.

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I must also thank the Williamson Music (ASCAP), a division of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, an Imagem Company for permission to print excerpts from the score of *Flower Drum Song.*
Vita

June 2002 ............................................... Northwest High School, Cincinnati, OH

2006.................................................. B.A. Music, Mount Vernon Nazarene University

2010 .................................................. Graduate Fellow, The Ohio State University

2011 .................................................. Graduate Research Associate, Department of musicology, The Ohio State University

2012 to present..................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of musicology, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field:  Music
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The opening measures of Rodgers’s overture to *Flower Drum Song* pounce upon the audience with a lively and straightforward sixteenth-note drum figure. The figure is soon also taken up by the brass section in stark quartal harmony, adding to the original energy a distinct suggestion of—*something*: something Other; something non-American yet inoffensive to American ears. The audience already understands that it has come this evening for a show about the exotic and fascinating lives of the Chinese American population of San Francisco and the orchestra meets their musical expectations—or perhaps helps to shape them—with a percussive, fortissimo version of “A Hundred Million Miracles”—a piece later associated with Mei Li, the gentlest character of the story. The evenly metered percussion taking the role of Mei Li’s small flower drum combined with the brass fanfare and insistent V-I in the bass produce an almost militaristic background over which the woodwinds and pizzicato strings introduce the chromatic refrain in sharp, staccato octaves. The effect is a bold evocation of another land—another people—far from the typical white, middle to upper class demographic filling Broadway theaters in the mid-twentieth century.¹ Yet the use of western

A study performed in 1977 reviewing materials collected between 1960-1967 indicated that the average patron of performing arts during that period earned an income of approximately $19,342 - $28,027 (according to 1976 currency). The median income was $23,407 which is approximately equal to $12,176 in 1960 (or $94,730 according to the 2013 dollar). (Inflation calculations obtained at
orchestration techniques in the presentation of palatable Broadway ditties emphasizes a possible underlying intention of this musical: to show that Chinese Americans are indeed Americans just like “we” are. If this was indeed the intention of the show, one must ask the questions: who are “we”? Who are “they”? And who has the authority to assign such designations? Yet, in the golden age of musical theater, Rodgers and Hammerstein were cognizant of their positions as entertainers meeting the expectations of producers, financiers, and audiences and thus strove to claim once again their position as giants of the realm.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song* (hereafter referred to as *Flower*) is based on the 1957 novel *The Flower Drum Song* by Chinese American writer, Chin Yang Lee. Lee’s story chronicles the lives of an immigrant family located in San Francisco’s Chinatown in the first half of the twentieth century. The reader follows two main storylines: the three romances of 28-year-old Wang Ta; and his father, Wang Chi-yang’s battle to protect his home—his little piece of the Hunan province, from “foreign” (i.e. “American”) influences, disdaining the Americanized habits of his sons. Lee takes the reader through the emotional maelstrom of Ta’s love affairs and Wang Chi-yang’s disintegrating position as head of the household, all situated in the context of a diasporic Chinese community. The characters are interesting, relatable, and sympathetic creating

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Andrew Shin and C. Y. Lee, “Forty Percent is Luck”: An Interview with C. Y. (Chin Yang) Lee, *MELUS*, 29, no. 2, *Elusive Illusions: Art and Reality* (Summer, 2004): 85. Lee states that *The Flower Drum Song* is set in the 1930s and is an accurate portrayal of this historical time period. However, a close reading of the novel indicates a slightly later time period more contemporary with its publication.
an enjoyable novel. However, musicals are a separate media from novels. Writers Hammerstein and Fields needed a book that compacted Lee’s novel and generated occasions for song. In past works, Rodgers and Hammerstein had proven themselves committed to the integrated musical model\(^3\), a format that demanded the story and music to be tied together in such a manner as to advance the plot. Characters, settings, and situations were invented for the telling of this story.

This thesis presents a multifaceted approach to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*, acknowledging it as a piece of musical theater—a genre as much visual as it is aural—and considering the portrayals and representations of Asian characters in this piece. I intend to show how Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields construct Asian and Asian American characters—an entire world, in fact, for the musical. For its time, *Flower* was rather revolutionary, being a typical romantic musical comedy, yet here set in Chinatown with a full cast of Asian characters. It was one of the first large-scale acting opportunities for Asian actors on Broadway and in Hollywood. I intend to show how Rodgers and Hammerstein, using multiple aspects of the medium of musical theater (both auditory and visual) and presenting it in this particular historical context, perpetuated certain stereotypical images in American popular entertainment. In order to grasp each aspect of this musical, the score and libretto must be closely read and analyzed and the show ought to be situated in its historical and political context. This

\(^3\) Thomas S. Hischak, *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), xxxiv. Many deem *Oklahoma!* to be a landmark fully integrated musical play that has influenced every piece of musical theater since 1943. Kathryn Edney, in her dissertation “Gliding Through Our Memories”: The Performance of Nostalgia in American Musical Theater, (2009) questions the integration of *Flower*, noting that musical comedies tend to be less integrated works than musical plays.
paper will discuss the use of stereotypes in the musical and demonstrate how these stereotypes are expressed not only through dialogue, lyrics, and staging, but through musical elements and constructed signifiers as well.

When approaching a piece like this, one becomes keenly aware that it is a product of its time. David H. Lewis explores the path of Flower from its propitious beginnings to its present status as “a show written off as a quaint, racially offensive relic.” Coming at a tumultuous period in American history, perhaps it is apparent why this musical has received such varied reception. Notable reviews from contemporary critics tend to describe the musical as basically enjoyable, though lackluster and not achieving the level of artistry of former Rodgers and Hammerstein hits. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times called Flower “pleasant,” stating that stronger or more direct descriptors are simply not warranted; Hobe Morrison of Daily Variety curtly summed up his feelings toward the show by saying, “It’ll do.” Though Flower has not achieved the same staying power as other Rodgers and Hammerstein shows, the work does have some lasting aspects: some numbers have made it into vocal solo repertoire; it stands as one of the earliest major productions in America to feature a large number of Asian actors; the musical made enough of an impact to inspire playwright David Henry Hwang to revive it.

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in 2002. The case can be made expressing the significance of this piece of theater in its
time as a vehicle for change in mainstream entertainment and the opening up of acting
opportunities. The argument for the show’s current status is a more complicated
matter—does the artistic and historical value of the piece legitimize continued
performances of the show in its original form? Ought Flower to only live on through
specific songs divorced from the context of the show or through highly altered versions
of the musical like that of Hwang’s? Considering the layers of meaning and implications
surrounding the musical will establish a platform from which to begin to make these
arguments.
Chapter 2: The Making of *Flower Drum Song*

2.1: Chinatown Through the Eyes of Rodgers and Hammerstein

The authors create a world within *Flower*—a world that represents people and cultural practices that their audience would presumably recognize and relate to with preconceived notions. While Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields attempt to steer away from some stereotypes of Chinatown existing in the early twentieth century\(^7\), they utilize others in the telling of their story. Rodgers and Hammerstein were faced with many ethical choices in this process—issues of representation, identity, authority—though in 1958, these problematic issues were viewed in a different light, if acknowledged at all. Through music and dialogue choices, Rodgers and Hammerstein invented a world based on C. Y. Lee’s interpretation of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Rather than the seedy, sinister Chinatown images previously known in popular entertainment, Rodgers and Hammerstein brought us “A Western street with Eastern manners.”\(^8\) Effort is made to highlight the relatable humanity in each character, but also display particularities and peculiarities that will satisfy an audience’s hunger for the exotic.

Dedicated to the notion of the integrated musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein worked to create music specific to each of their characters in each given situation. A

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\(^7\) Many images of Chinatown portrayed in film and media characterized these areas as sinister and dangerous, referring to Yellow Peril, tong wars, etc.

song was not meant to be simply a vehicle to showcase the talents of one performer—rather each piece was to give insight and meaning thereby advancing the plot and message of the production. Referring to the score of one of his earlier musicals, Rodgers states that he has no intention of replicating Asian music for his scores, but that he wishes to achieve an “Oriental inflection.”\(^9\) He constructs a body of music meant to illustrate a spectrum of Chineseness within the constructed world of the musical—that is, each character’s degree of Chineseness or Americanness is indicated by the songs attached to them. Those characters having resided longer in the USA and/or characters that actively strive for Americanness tend to sing songs that are more closely linked with jazz, rock and roll, dance tunes, and Broadway show tunes. Characters representing the more “Chinese” side of the spectrum are given songs that emphasize their Otherness.

2.2: Selected Literature Review

Most writings on the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein spend very little time discussing *Flower*. The show enjoyed moderate success at the time of its premiere, running 600 performances on Broadway, 464 in London\(^10\), and a national tour (USA).

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\(^9\) Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: an Autobiography*, (New York: Random House, 1975), 295. Rodgers refers to *Chee-Chee* a 1928 collaboration with Lorenz Hart. In his discussion about *The King and I*, Rodgers comments that “Western audiences are not attuned to the sounds of tinkling bells, high nasal strings and percussive gongs, and would not find this kind of music attractive. If a composer is to reach his audience emotionally—and surely that’s what theatre music is all about—he must reach the people through sounds they can relate to” (273).

The reaction to *Flower* was positive enough to adapt it to screen in 1961.\(^{11}\) As the duo’s penultimate musical, *Flower* seems to have had enough entertainment value to restore audiences’ interest in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s new works. In fact, *Flower* effectively ended an eight-year dry-spell for the team. Through the 1950s, Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals continued to run on Broadway and on national tour; cast recordings made significant sales; songs became part of the popular music scene; several musicals were adapted for the silver screen. Yet the pair had not successfully staged a new musical since their 1951 triumph, *The King and I*. *Flower* served to turn the audiences’ ears back to Rodgers and Hammerstein as they moved into their final collaboration, *The Sound of Music* (1959).

As stated above, writers who tackle the mountain of information about Rodgers and Hammerstein—or even American musicals as a whole—tend to devote limited space to discussion of *Flower*. In most encyclopedic sources, one may find a few pages summarizing the plot of *Flower* in addition to basic specifications and information from productions—cast and crew lists, opening and closing dates, quotations from reviews.\(^{12}\) Writers focusing on biographical accounts of Rodgers and Hammerstein may dedicate a bit of time to connect *Flower* to the lives and emotional states of the authors. Hugh Fordin situates his defense of Hammerstein’s touted optimism in a discussion of *Flower*—a musical comedy containing less explicit preaching and moralizing than other Rodgers and Hammerstein collaborations, yet Fordin’s discussion adds little to the

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\(^{11}\) The two musicals immediately preceding *Flower Drum Song*—*Me and Juliet* (1953) and *Pipedream* (1955)—were never made into major motion pictures.

numerous sources that describe the basic specs of the musical.\textsuperscript{13} Geoffrey Block, in his biography, \textit{Richard Rodgers}, compares Hwang’s 2002 revival of \textit{Flower} with the original and associates Rodgers’s compositional style in this work with that of his collaborations with Lorenz Hart.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{The Richard Rodgers Reader}, however, he does expand the discussion to include the cultural atmosphere of mid-twentieth century USA.\textsuperscript{15}

Recently, there have been larger scale works that closely investigate \textit{Flower} as an important piece of musical theater. One such study is Carla M. Ponti’s dissertation, “The Musical Representation of Asian Characters in the Musicals of Richard Rodgers” (2010) which examines \textit{Flower} more closely in relation to the other two musicals often designated as the “Oriental musicals” (\textit{South Pacific}, 1949 and \textit{The King and I}, 1951). Another focuses specifically on \textit{Flower} in each of its presentational incarnations—David H. Lewis’s \textit{Flower Drum Songs: The Story of Two Musicals} (2006).

Ponti analyzes Rodgers’s compositional techniques and presents a useful list of features often found in his music, allowing one to compare the songs of the “Oriental musicals” to the rest of his oeuvre.\textsuperscript{16} Her discussion is well-laid out and an effective starting point. It is, however, generally limited to the music and only lightly touches on other crucial elements that characterize musical theater including staging and critical


\textsuperscript{16} Ponti compiles a list of compositional features based on her own analyses and the writings of Milton Kaye, Geoffrey Block, and Graham Wood.
reception. David Henry Hwang’s revival of Flower is only given brief attention. Lewis’s research is quite comprehensive, drawn from information about each version of Flower, including national tours of the musical and interviews with members of the casts and crews involved in the long life of this show. His work is stimulating and filled with individual voices of those who brought life to Flower. However, his book does not discuss the music beyond simple descriptions, and much of his discussion focuses on visual elements and personal histories of the figures involved in the show. For this paper, I have engaged in close reading of the novel, both libretti (1958 and 2002), and the score, and will highlight particular features—musical and extra-musical—expanding on the rich base of information Ponti, Lewis, and other writers have presented.

“Grant Avenue”
from “Flower Drum Song”
Music by Richard Rodgers Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II
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Chapter 3: Situating *Flower Drum Song* Historically

The questions have already been posed: who are we? President John F. Kennedy called the USA a nation of immigrants. Edward Said notes that the USA (and the West in general) defines itself by constructing and defining the Other.\(^\text{17}\) We could be a melting pot, a tossed salad, chop suey or any number of trendy metaphors—but the salient theme in each label is some sort of recognition of difference—within or without. Historically, immigrants to the USA have very frequently fallen into the category of outsider or Other, experiencing difficulties due to the social status allotted to the Other. Immigrants from Asia—imagined by mainstream audiences as the faraway Orient—faced a different set of struggles than their European counterparts. Different sources note the first arrival of Chinese immigrants into the New World anytime between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was, though, the mid nineteenth century that saw significant growth in the population of Chinese immigrants in North America. Events and shortages in China prompted many of the poor to leave their homes—fracturing of the Qing dynasty, low production of rice, The Opium War (1839-1842), etc.\(^\text{18}\) These and other motivations for leaving China combined with the demand for laborers in the American sugar industry,


gold mining, and the railroad resulted in a Chinese population in the US exceeding 100,000 by 1880.  

As long as there was great demand for labor and the economy continued to grow, immigration laws tended to be less restrictive. However, when the American economy began to suffer recessions toward the end of the nineteenth century, blame was thrown at any available target. Consider the plight of Chinese gold miners: the California gold rush (1848-1858) drew a large number of immigrants from various nations, but a particularly large population of Chinese. With the waning of the gold rush, hostility toward immigrants grew and the Chinese became a prominent target. Politicians attempted to mollify their constituents by creating exclusory legislation in California like the Foreign Miners Tax which forced many Chinese to stop prospecting.  

Catherine Lee, in her article “Prostitutes and Picture Brides,” convincingly argues a connection between the labor demands of American nation-building and immigration legislation. She states that there were two viewpoints fueling practices when settling the western part of the continent during the mid-nineteenth century—“the logic of economic development” and “the logic of permanent settlement.” Asian immigrants were an effective labor force propelling the first logic. However, the possibility of interracial marriages was deemed a threat to the ideal family and thus a threat to the aim of

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21 Catherine Lee, 2.
permanent settlement—these immigrants were allowed to work for the greatness of the
nation, but discouraged and often prohibited from being fully incorporated into society.

The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 was enacted to improve relations between China and America and allowed free immigration to the US. This agreement, however, was short-lived. Most Chinese laborers entering the country were men either unmarried or having left their families behind. The disproportionate number of men to women attached a stigma to the women who did come to the US—many were prostitutes, but even those who were not were regarded as such. The Page Law of 1875 was enacted to prevent the entrance of Chinese, Japanese, and “Mongolian” prostitutes, but effectively barred any Chinese woman from entering the US. The “free immigration” promised in the Burlingame Treaty was attenuated with extra stipulations by the Angell Treaty (1880), and essentially overturned by Chinese Exclusion Law (1882).

Immigrants, as relatively recent newcomers still not fully incorporated into society, came under attack by unemployed American citizens and by the politicians representing those citizens. Udo Will discusses the aggressive Nativist movement in US

22 Catherine Lee, 11.


24 Notably, the Gentlemen’s Agreement (1907 and 1908) made provisions for Japanese proxy brides or picture brides to enter the country to join their husbands. The influx of Japanese women created a more even sex ratio among the Japanese population in the US than that of the Chinese. (Catherine Lee, 26-28.)

25 [http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/tu_exclusion_doc_1.html](http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/tu_exclusion_doc_1.html), accessed 3/6/13Article I of The Angell Treaty (1880) states that “Whenever in the opinion of the Government of the United States, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States, or their residence therein, affects or threatens to affect the interests of that country…the Government of the United States may regulate, limit, or suspend such coming or residence, but may not absolutely prohibit it.”

26 Bella Adams, xi.
history describing it as “defensive reaction to the flux of immigration, a form of
nationalistic racism.”\textsuperscript{27} Those who hold such sentiments tend to connect hardships—
economic, social, or otherwise—with the threat of foreign influence, extending that fear
to the national origin of the identified foreigners. Will points out that the American
economy struggled between 1870 and 1914, noting that immigration legislation also
tended to be more stringent and restrictive during this time.\textsuperscript{28}

California, with its diverse population and growing racial tension, enacted many
of the anti-Chinese and anti-foreign laws and movements. In 1880, the state passed an
anti-miscegenation law to prohibit interracial unions, and in 1905, the state forbade
“marriage between whites and ‘Mongolians’” (recall Catherine Lee’s discussion about
Chinese immigrants in relation to nation-building). The California Alien Land Law of
1913 precluded Asians from purchasing land or leasing long-term in order to discourage
permanent settlement. These laws were finally repealed in 1956.\textsuperscript{29}

With the advent of the Second World War, the status of Chinese Americans was
altered. Labor shortages due to the military draft opened up jobs nationwide, creating
positions for skilled workers.\textsuperscript{30} Chinese Americans served in the military, and the United
States and China banded, as it were, against a common enemy—the Japanese. This also

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{27} Udo Will, “‘In the garden of cultural identities silk flowers quickly grow roots’ (K. A. Appiah). On the
logic of culture, race and identity in postmodernist discourse,” in European Meeting in Ethnomusicology, vol. 12.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Bella Adams, xi, xiv, xv.

\textsuperscript{30} Him Mark Lai, 265.
\end{flushright}
helped to combat the idea of the “universal Oriental” as mainstream America more readily recognized the many and diverse peoples that had previously been subsumed under essentializing labels like “Oriental.” In 1943, the Magnuson Act was established “To repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, to establish quotas, and for other purposes.” This new law allowed for 105 Chinese immigrants to enter annually (more of a pittance than anything) and, more notably, re-established the opportunity for Chinese to become naturalized citizens. After World War II, war veterans were given the right to bring Chinese wives into the US, and between 1945 and 1950, 8000 Chinese women immigrated.

In the post-World War II era, the US experienced an economic boom and with it an attitude of authority as a global leader promoting goodwill and benevolence. America had proven itself as a military power and this expanded to a general mindset of superiority in regards to international affairs. There was among the mainstream population a fascination with faraway lands and unfamiliar peoples—a desire to experience the “exotic” and sometimes the “Oriental.” Edward Said notes that the American version of “Orientalism” is connected to countries of the “Far East” including China, Japan, and Korea. Said describes Orientalism as a comparison between the Orient

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33 Him Mark Lai, 265.

34 Him Mark Lai, 265.
and the Occident—a construction originating with the European powers as a way to define themselves by setting up an opposing Other—the Orient. By “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it…Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient.”35 White America was growing more interested in different world cultures, and Broadway, Hollywood—even Chinatowns—were satiating that appetite with an alluring but domesticated view of Asia, filtered through American interpretations or the desire to fulfill American expectations.

The People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, ending the “friendly” relations between the US and China and reigniting the “yellow peril” fears—this time associating those fears with Communist China. The US reached out to those fleeing the Communist regime—5000 Chinese intelligentsia residing in America were granted refugee status. Yet, in 1955, the Cold War Confession Program scrutinized loyalties among Chinese Americans, and anyone considered disloyal or pro-communist could be deported.36

3.1: C. Y. Lee’s Experience

In 1957, C. Y. Lee, living and working in San Francisco, California, published his first novel, *The Flower Drum Song*. An immigrant originally from the Hunan Province, China, Lee came to the US in 1942 to study comparative literature and drama at

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36 Bella Adams, xix.
Columbia University and Yale, respectively. After receiving his MFA from Yale in 1947, Lee made his way to San Francisco working as a columnist, editor, and translator. His experiences and observations inspired the novel that Hammerstein deemed a “Chinese Life with Father.” In an interview from 2002, Lee reflects on his writing process stating that the stories and characters he creates are amalgamations of his own experiences, people he has known or observed, and his imagination. Lee briefly discusses occurrences in his own life as a refugee and immigrant, describing periods of fear (“bombing everyday [in China]. A lot of intellectuals were being killed…”), racial discrimination (being refused lodgings in the USA), but also light moments: “we could all become playboys…American males all went to war. So who was left? 4Fs, sick males, and foreigners…So we took the opportunity to enjoy ourselves.” What makes Lee’s novel so compelling are the characters who populate it—they live and love and hate; they are human, thus they are flawed—people living in difficult circumstances, yet still seeking love, companionship, and personal fulfillment. Lee has been criticized for pandering to Western tastes in his writing—utilizing stereotypical images in his stories. He responds to the criticism by situating his stories in their historical time period and articulating his aim of selling fiction to a Western audience. In his desire to reach

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38 Hugh Fordin, 337.

39 Andrew Shin and C. Y. Lee, 86.


41 Andrew Shin and C. Y. Lee, 85, 89.
Western audiences, Lee read and emulated such writers as Somerset Maugham and John Steinbeck.\footnote{Andrew Shin and C. Y. Lee, 89.}

Lee presents two main characters in his novel—Wang Chi-yang, the wealthy, traditional, and proud father; and Wang Ta, the son drifting between his understanding of what it is to be Chinese and what it is to be American. Lee relates some of the difficulties faced by Chinese Americans living in the US during the mid twentieth century most clearly through the character of Wang Ta. Ta is an educated young adult who struggles with a racially prejudiced job market and a grossly uneven ratio of men to women—issues that plagued Chinese immigrants from the nineteenth century on. These two struggles effectively disenfranchise Wang Ta, stripping him of choice and opportunity and leaving him feeling impotent and directionless. Meanwhile, his father, Wang Chi-yang stubbornly fights to maintain his idea of order and proper lifestyle, being continually stymied by circumstances or other characters. By the end of the novel, both characters give up their lifestyles in some sort of compromise or rebellion.\footnote{Wang Ta leaves his father’s home to marry May Li—an illegal immigrant, and Wang Chi-yang abandons his friend, an herbalist, in favor of Western medicine—an action symbolizing the relinquishing of his tradition.} It is a novel with poignant and painful moments—familial turmoil, deception, and suicide. Enter playwright, Joseph Fields—a known comedy writer—who procured the rights to the novel and approached Rodgers and Hammerstein with the project. *Flower Drum Song*, the musical comedy, opened on Broadway on December 1, 1958.
During this time, the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum and national attention. The integration of southern schools made headlines; Actors Equity campaigned for integrated theater spaces and lodgings.\textsuperscript{44} Though most of the efforts associated with the Civil Rights movement are generally connected with the rights of African Americans, other minority groups in the US joined in the struggle to claim authority over their own lives and identity. Groups made more vocal and concerted efforts to protest prejudiced policies. In 1965, seven years after the premiere of \textit{Flower}, the federal government passed another Immigration Act. This law granted equal immigration from all nations, eliminating the restrictions on national origin, and allowing an annual quota of 20,000 immigrants from each.\textsuperscript{45}

Understanding the historical situation and the effective isolation of Chinese Americans is crucial to digesting \textit{Flower} as a text commenting on the political atmosphere of mid-twentieth century USA. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields could have chosen to write a darker story more closely related to C. Y. Lee’s novel as well as the experience of actual Chinese immigrants—but they did not. With Fields, a reputed comedy writer, as part of the team, musical comedy may have seemed like the surest option.\textsuperscript{46} Also, many accounts of the process of adapting the novel to the stage state that Lee remained rather quiet and compliant throughout the process, thrilled at seeing his


\textsuperscript{45} Him Mark Lai, 267.

\textsuperscript{46} David Lewis, 16.
novel brought to life on stage by such important names.\textsuperscript{47} The collaborative Broadway team could have taken their basic (and fairly generic) plot and placed it in most any other community in the US—but they did not. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s previous success with \textit{South Pacific} and \textit{The King and I} likely encouraged the team toward a show dealing again with Asian material. Additionally, several other plays exploring American-Asian interactions (e.g. \textit{The World of Suzie Wong}, \textit{A Majority of One}, \textit{Rashomon}) were hitting Broadway stages in the late 1950s, indicating a theater-going public that was willing to patronize these “Oriental” shows. Kathryn Edney suggests that the underpinning ideology of \textit{Flower} and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s other two “Oriental” musicals centers on Cold War politics, positioning the US as a superior, open-minded democracy able to educate and tolerate other nations.\textsuperscript{48} This attitude of the generous benefactor falls in line with a larger campaign of Western “moral” superiority—a thinly-veiled incarnation of Western imperialism.


Rogers, Hammerstein, and Fields wrote *Flower* connecting specific musical gestures to lyrics, costumes, dance, and characters thereby creating links that their audiences would perceive. I will highlight a number of places in the score that demonstrate Rodgers’s musical spectrum of China and America, showing that all of the music falls into the western system though includes embellishments or elements that create an Othering sound. When drawing on existing tropes (such as pentatonicism, parallel fourths and fifths, and the “Asian riff”\(^{49}\)) Rodgers and Hammerstein could reasonably expect their audience to connect the sounds and images on stage with their prior understanding of China and Asian America. As for their constructed ideas (e.g. pitting “American” syncopation against “Chinese” even rhythms), the combination of aural and visual and movement cues of a musical theater performance was presented to the audience as an accurate picture of this (constructed) world. The amount or saturation of Rodgers’s Chinese tropes and constructions in a song is dependent on each character’s identity—either more “Chinese” or more “American.” More traditional sounding songs are typically performed by characters donning more traditional clothing (connecting to visual elements) who are also generally less comfortable communicating in English.

\(^{49}\) The Asian Riff or Oriental Riff occurs in various forms and may be identified by a number of other labels. It is recognized by Charles Hiroshi Garrett (2004) as “one of the most efficient [tropes] that the West has developed to signal ‘Asia’” (131). A transcription of the common form of this riff will be provided later in the paper.
Characters on stage are thus categorized not simply by music or costuming or dialogue, but by the interaction of these elements. No one aspect needs to specifically signify China on its own—rather, the combination of methods creates correlations for the audience to observe. The generic tropes Rodgers utilizes in his score are often used by other composers to signify China. However, they could easily be used to evoke other musical traditions as well (e.g. pentatonic scales are also often used to compose songs suggesting Native American or Appalachian music, as well as numerous cultures worldwide.) The non-musical elements and devices used in the show lead to more specific signification that the music alone could not achieve, and it is by these means that Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields specify the type of Otherness they are exploiting.

Ponti, in her dissertation analyzing Rodgers and Hammerstein’s three Asian-themed musicals\(^{50}\) presents a succinct description of Rodgers’s compositional conventions. Some of these features include his “preference for major mode,” pairing of “unexpected harmonies…with expected melody notes,” repeated notes “as rhythmic propellants,” stepwise motion in melodies, and a “‘family resemblance’ between songs within a show.”\(^{51}\) Many of the traits she describes can be identified in the music of *Flower*—vocal pieces typically lean toward the major mode; many melodies are built on stepwise motion, etc. Yet this score makes several deliberate deviations from Rodgers’s general style in order to musically signify Otherness.

\(^{50}\) Carla M. Ponti, *The Musical Representation of Asian Characters in the Musicals of Richard Rodgers* (PhD. Diss., University of California, 2010), 60-68, (UMI 3408871). The three Asian-themed musicals are *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Flower Drum Song*.

\(^{51}\) Carla M. Ponti, 67-68.
Some of the features Rodgers uses here to demonstrate Otherness include: simple melody lines, often with limited vocal ranges; parallel fourths, fifths, and octaves; straight, unsyncopated rhythms; notes that obfuscate the tonal chord progression, including ornaments, chromaticism, and drones; instruments that may or may not generally be found in the orchestra used here to produce a nonwestern or atypical orchestral timbre. As stated above, certain songs within the musical are more closely associated with more traditionally Chinese characters. These songs have a higher concentration of Rodgers’s Othering tactics, while songs of the more Americanized characters have fewer. The music, like the characters is meant to reflect a point on the spectrum of Chineseness to Americanness.

4.1: A Hundred Million Miracles

The initial introduction to “A Hundred Million Miracles” described at the beginning of this paper sets up an intriguing contrast to the piece as it is realized within the context of the musical. We next encounter the song at the end of Act I Scene 1. Here, the song serves to introduce Mei Li and her father and to establish these characters as the embodiment of nostalgia for the old country. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines nostalgia as “homesickness” or “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition…” Nostalgia is often associated

with idealistic, often created or imagined memories. Mei Li and Dr. Li step into the San Francisco home representing a China that was created by a team of Broadway writers to stand, in this musical, as a land of pristine beauty and tradition against the bustling, modern world of the USA.

Much of the musical centers around the complications and misunderstandings between generations experienced in families everywhere, but in this setting, within immigrant families. Thus, many of the messages iterated here praise filial piety and the wisdom of age. Hammerstein’s lyrics also praise the beauty and wonder of nature and extraordinary everyday “miracles.” How many of these messages are indicative of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s own understanding of Chinese culture, and how many are simply falling in line with the typical Rodgers and Hammerstein exhortation? It will be advantageous to consider particular aspects of this piece.

Oscar Hammerstein II, known for his hope-filled, optimistic lyrics offers a sweet poem emphasizing the miracles of daily life, challenging the listener to observe the beauty and wonder all around:

My father says
That children keep growing,
Rivers keep flowing, too.
My father says
He doesn’t know why,
But, somehow or other, they do.  

Mei Li’s flower drum song extols the glories of nature and the oft ignored occurrences therein; other verses discuss “the miracle of changing weather,” the hatching of

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swallows, and the rising of the sun. Hammerstein is offering the audience some new clothing on the old axiom to “stop and smell the roses.” Such a text is certainly not out of the scope of Hammerstein’s oeuvre. One need not look far to find pieces focusing on nature in other Rodgers and Hammerstein scores: “O, What a Beautiful Mornin’;” “The Sound of Music;” “June is Bustin’ out all Over”—songs wherein the emotional state of a character is expressed through their melodious reflections on nature. In the case of Flower, the characters on stage at this time—Mei Li and her father, newly arrived from China; Wang Chi-Yang, the wealthy immigrant patriarch; Madam Liang, his sister-in-law; and Liu Ma, a household servant—become wrapped up in their memories of home of the past. The other characters—as well as the audience—are from this moment, presumably, enamored with the sweet and simple goodness of Mei Li—she is now a symbol of all that is pure and kind and caring. To Wang Chi-Yang, she has become representative of filial piety and the perfect bride for his vexingly Americanized son, Wang Ta. Miyoshi Umeki’s performance as Mei Li was so effective that she was featured on the cover of Time Magazine with Pat Suzuki who played Linda Low. The two were gushed over in the accompanying article that romantically connected their own lives with those of the characters they portrayed. Reviews in Daily Variety from the Boston tryouts and the New York opening make favorable references to both actresses


and refer specifically to Umeki as a (China) doll. Critics and audiences were enchanted by this delicate and foreign, thus “exotic” beauty.

As the male romantic lead, Wang Ta is coming of age at a complicated time in US history when Chinese Americans are seen by many as curiosities to be studied and, frequently, parodied. He struggles to relate to the new life he has formed in America while remembering the life he formerly lived in China. To Wang Ta, Wang Chi-Yang and, I would argue, the audience, Mei Li has become China—at least an idealized, rural, and less politicized version of China. According to the sage advice of Hammerstein’s imagined Chinese elders implied in “A Hundred Million Miracles,” true wonder and enjoyment of life come only when one stops to notice everything that happens around them. “And those who say they don’t agree, Are those who do not hear or see.”

Hammerstein is pitting his musical proverbs against conventionally accepted “modern intelligence” or self-imagined cosmopolitanism, subtly attacking the chaotic, bustling world of the United States. Though the characters of Mei Li and her father, Dr. Li, are celebrated throughout the course of the show, they also become symbols of simplicity; characters that lack a sophistication that is here associated with urban, American life. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields produce a script after C. Y. Lee’s novel that situates

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57 Kathryn Edney makes a similar observation in a comment about The King and I: “The music functions to establish an emotional rapport with the audience, smoothing over any disbelief on their part…in effect Rodgers’s representations of ‘authentic Asian music’ came to sound like authentic Asian music to many theatergoers.” (2009: 125-126).

the United States as the epitome of modernity and China as a land of the past. In the case of the musical, the happy ending is only achieved once the young lovers can satisfactorily negotiate their identities as both Chinese and American—members of the “old world” as well as the “new.” For one dramatic moment, it seems as if Wang Ta and Mei Li will be separated by an arranged marriage between Mei Li and Sammy. Yet Mei Li has apparently adjusted well to “modern” life in America. She stays up to watch the late movie and is inspired to announce her illegal status at the wedding ceremony to avoid marrying Sammy and to be united instead with Wang Ta. The finale of Act II is cued by Mei Li’s statement, “Ta, tomorrow we must go to the Temple of Tin How and thank the Goddess of Heaven for Television”\(^{59}\)—juxtaposing the construction of Chinese tradition versus contemporary American television programming. The company joins together in one last refrain of “A Hundred Million Miracles” that grows from a gentle pianissimo, reminiscent of Mei Li’s quiet and supposedly Chinese demeanor at the start of the musical, to a victorious fortissimo in 28 bars, giving voice to this community’s achievement at having found home in America and culminating in the final curtain, bookending the musical with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s version of a flower drum song.

The simplicity of the piece is emphasized by Rodgers’s composition. The tessitura of the melody is one octave and the melody itself does not exceed a major tenth (only a harmony part written in two measures\(^{60}\) stretches further than that range.) All rhythms are even and on the beat. The opening ten measures feature a tranquil vocal

\(^{59}\) Richard Rodgers et al, libretto (1959), 141.

\(^{60}\) Measures 163-164 feature loud, even hits on a G chord minus the third. The top soprano voice sings G5, the vocal peak of this piece.
melody (confined to a perfect fifth) that is doubled by flute and clarinet in turn and harmonized at a half cadence in measure 4—this sort of harmonic progression is not typical of Chinese folk music, a style “A Hundred Million Miracles” is meant to invoke. The light orchestration could be situationally justified—this performance as described in the novel is meant to be accompanied only with occasional drum beats and gong hits.

The refrain begins in the pickup to measure eleven, returning to the theme introduced in the overture. The refrain starts with short, disjunct phrases utilizing two nonharmonic tones that could act as momentary leading tones in order to sway the ear away from the tonal center, C major. Ponti stipulates that it is not simply the use of this chromaticism that accentuates the Othering nature of songs, but the “co-occurrence with other orientalist features” such as whole tone scales and parallel fourths, fifths, and octaves.61

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61 Carla M. Ponti, 96.
The orchestration, again doubling the vocal line, includes a banjo to presumably push beyond the typical western orchestral sound. The harmonic flow changes when Mei Li reaches the previously stated admonition regarding “those who say they don’t agree.” Here, Rodgers employs a walking bass line and punctuates with light upbeats in the woodwinds and strings, leading to an imperfect authentic cadence in C before driving the second half of the statement to a half cadence via a flatted VI chord. This excursion sets up the return of the disjunct, accidental-fraught theme that ends cleanly in a solid authentic cadence in C, again juxtaposing Rodgers’s “Oriental” constructions (chromatics and parallel octaves) with standard Western harmony (authentic cadence).

The next section describes the “Miracle of…Changing Weather”\textsuperscript{63} (sic) and is set to a flowing legato melody moving up and down an augmented fourth in whole tones. Underneath, the bass line continually alternates quarter notes C to G essentially sounding a drone and undermining any distinct harmonic progression. It would seem that Rodgers’s understanding of nonwestern musical systems at least extended to this point—many musics outside the western art tradition do not abide by the same sort of harmonic progression that typifies European and American music. Perhaps this static I-V accompaniment represents his attempt at composing a more melodically-based progression. However, he wraps up this sixteen bar interlude with a tidy half cadence (guiding us back to harmonic progression) to once again lead back into the refrain.

Following this second refrain, the song leaps into its most stagnant period. From measure 123 until 142, the accompaniment hammers straight eighth notes on a D minor seventh chord (third inversion—balancing on the seventh of the chord) breaking only briefly for a cadence in G. The vocal melody simply outlines the chord (one pitch per measure) beginning its first phrase on the dissonant middle C and ending its second phrase on the C one octave higher. The intersection of the rising pitch level, unrelenting eighth notes, and weight of the pitch C builds the intensity of the verse and creates an unsettled feeling—a need for resolution. Rodgers provides a brief moment of relief—four measures in G when all voices (orchestral as well) repeat the percussive title “A hundred million miracles” followed by another repetition of the now familiar drum figure. The next ten measures proceed in much the same way. Measures 143 and 144,

however, end in open fifths in G, creating a bolder, more striking quality. Favoring the simple dissonances of the sometimes-resolved seventh as well as the consistent and even rhythmic movement are two of Rodgers’s most salient compositional tactics in this verse suggesting an “Otherness.”

The next eight measures of the verse (beginning in measure 145) continue the basic feeling of the previous phrases except that the bass line of the accompaniment plays only open fifths (C and G), and the upper and lower registers alternate (i.e. the upper registers play chords—first C+2, then D minor 7—on each downbeat while the bass notes occur on each upbeat). The verse culminates in another exclamation, “A hundred million miracles”—this time forte and with a high G stacked on top. This marks the return of the angular refrain, though the line is now repeated four times with more harmony added in the accompaniment in the final repetitions—building the intensity to the end. After reaching the climax of the piece, Rodgers finishes the song with a quiet, contemplative reappearance of the introduction performed by Mei Li and echoed by the other characters. Sonically, the melody is drifting away, achieving a tenderness; a reminiscence; a sense of loss and nostalgia for that which is gone.

The simplicity of the music and text of “A Hundred Million Miracles” could be construed as a sort of child-likeness. As stated above, “filial piety” is a major theme in the story, and one of Mei Li’s many virtues. The opening words of the song, “My father says,” paint a picture of the father as the wise sage bestowing wisdom on his children. Of course, the final lines of the verse, “He doesn’t know why But, somehow or other,

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they do,”⁶⁵ seem to detract from the father’s authority, or—at its most extreme—implies that living according to tradition necessarily means to follow that tradition blindly accepting the state of ignorance. While this does seem like a rather extreme interpretation, Hammerstein’s lyric here could effectually implicate Dr. Li and his daughter as undereducated and unprepared for the fast-paced science and technology-driven urban San Francisco portrayed in this show. It places Dr. Li and Mei Li on a lower level as some sort of curiosity to be observed—as children to be led. And this is one of the points of contention for modern audiences viewing *Flower:* the picture of the quaint, meek Chinese daughter/wife speaking in broken English and kowtowing to all elders is, to say the least, a misleading representation and generally offensive. As the only female character who seems to be in line with “Chinese” values, Mei Li comes to represent all women of China in this show.

4.2: The Flower Drum Song Genre

As the titular piece and bookending number of the show, the flower drum song of the musical refers directly to a genre of Chinese folk music. However, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s version of this folk song has minimal connection to the actual genre that is its namesake. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields constructed their own style of a flower drum song to serve the purposes of their musical with little regard for the thriving tradition of Chinese folk music. Derek B. Scott has written that “Oriental music”—that is, music written by Western composers meant to evoke Orientalism—“is not a poor

imitation of another cultural practice: its purpose is not to imitate but to represent.”

Keeping this principle in mind, it will be beneficial to consider the flower drum song—its history and performance practice; its position in Chinese and American culture—in order to understand the extent to which Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields took artistic liberties.

Originally, C. Y. Lee’s novel was entitled *Grant Avenue*. The title was changed to *The Flower Drum Song* for publication—an alteration that guides the focus of the reader away from the locale (the main street that embodied the core of Chinatown) to a musical genre. The reader must wade through the first 140 pages of the novel before a “flower drum song” is even mentioned. The performance of this genre has the dual purpose of introducing our two young lovers, Wang Ta and Mei Li, and also serving as a connection between the Chinese enclave in San Francisco and their home of the past. Lee describes the event—an impromptu, but well-practiced performance by May Li and her father, Old Man Li. The show is announced by Old Man Li beating his hand-held gong and announcing to the crowd to make room for a flower drum show of the north. Then follows a scripted dialogue wherein much of the humor and tone revolves around the status of the performers as poor, hungry slaves or refugees. An overture of drum and gong rhythms cuts in then leads into the first sung portion, performed by May Li and

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67 Lewis, 28.

68 The spelling of this character’s name was altered—in Lee’s novel, she is May Li; but in the musical she is Mei Li.
accompanied by her own drum. Afterwards, there is another percussion interlude, another round of dialogue, and a second song is performed. This song has verses for both May Li and her father to sing, outlining the miseries of a beggar’s life. When the song concludes, Old Man Li elicits applause for his “little slave” and upturns his gong for donations.

Jonathan Stock describes a related genre of Chinese music—the tradition of huaguixi (flower drum performance) that was instrumental in the development of Shanghai Opera. These flower drum song and dance skits came out of a rural folk tradition and were characterized by improvised texts centering on everyday concerns. Often the subject matter may revolve around feminine concerns (being forced to marry one man and love another, etc.) The early stages of this performance style seem to have been dominated by men, though female performers began to take part starting in the twentieth century. These songs were frequently accompanied by string instruments and clappers. The genre came to Shanghai during the nineteenth century and became known as tanhuang.

A repertoire of flower drum songs still exists in China and the Chinese speaking world. They are regarded as folk songs, well known to the general public, taught to and sung by children. In fact, one of the two examples from The Flower Drum and Other

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Chinese Songs—"The Flower Drum: Hua Ku Ko – No. 2"—is particularly popular. This piece has been re-set and re-arranged for a variety of performance contexts: popular artists record music videos; there are arrangements for large choirs and western style bands—quite removed from its original context. The song was also featured in the opening of a Chinese film, *Flower Drums of Fung Yang*, directed by Mu Chu and Han Hsiang Li (1967). The performance featured in this film exemplifies Communist ideals with the common people in a rural village coming together to sing and dance to folk music for the community rather than performing esoteric or highbrow art music.

A note in Lee’s novel explains that the flower drum song text translations he uses are taken from a piano book, *The Flower Drum and Other Chinese Songs* by Chin-Hsin Yao Chen and Shih-Hsiang Chen (1943). This piano book includes two hua gu (flower drum) songs with Chinese text, English translations, and a brief history of the genre researched and written by the two authors of the book. Chin-Hsin Yao Chen and Shih-Hsiang Chen describe a flower drum performance as a two- (sometimes three-) person performance involving singing, drum, and gong. According to their discussion, the performers, typically a man with a gong and girl with a drum, act as refugees from Feng Yang in the Anhui province of China (though the genre likely began with agricultural workers entertaining other workers within their local community before the refugee theme came into play. In fact, the growing immigrant situation could have fueled the

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71 Mu Chu and Han Hsiang Li, directors, *The Flower Drums of Fung Yang* (*Feng yang hua gu*). Published by Xianggang, Distributed in San Francisco: Tai seng video marketing (1967).
refugee themes in the genre). Most flower drum songs take Feng Yang as their central subject and express the sadness and frustration of being trapped in bad marriages and/or impoverished circumstances. It seems reasonable to assume that Lee had a prior understanding of this musical genre outside the information given in the piano book. Lee’s detailed description of a flower drum show—format, instruments, performance practice—indicates this knowledge. Additionally, Lee posed in some publicity shots with Hammerstein and Fields and a drum with flowers painted on it—Lee protested the inauthentic instrument, recognizing that it was not an actual flower drum, though the photographer still insisted on taking the picture. It seems plausible that Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields had access to these two sources—Lee’s novel and the piano book—and had the opportunity to utilize them as their creative platform to compose their own flower drum song. The lyrics listed below are found in the piano book by Chen and Chen and are quoted in Lee’s novel:

Say Feng-yong, sing Feng-yong,  
Feng-yong was once a wealthy town,  
But was cursed by the birth  
Of our emp’ror Chu-Yan-chong.  
Rich men took to lowly trade,  
Poor men’s sons were sold out of town;  
I have no more children to sell.  
With my flow’r drum I beg around.  

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72 Chin-Hsin Yao Chen and Shih-Hsiang Chen, 10-11.

73 Lewis, 16-17.

As the centerpiece to the musical, Hammerstein created a new song of wisdom and contemplation that could be punctuated by a flower drum. His lyrics reflect the characteristic optimism found in so many of his pieces and abandon altogether any relation to the histories, politics, and woes that inspire lyrics like those listed above.

Scott’s statement regarding the Western practice of composing Oriental music is clearly illustrated in this instance: Rodgers and Hammerstein created an Oriental folk song, not by imitating it, but by reinventing it. They strove to capitalize on the idea of a flower drum song without drawing from any extant material. As stated above, Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields had at their disposal several resources to provide them with a good understanding of the sound and style of an actual flower drum song, but their composition reflects these sources only to an extent (i.e. their version was a two person vocal performance involving a gong and a flower drum). Dr. Li and Mei Li frame the performance in a similar manner to their characters in the novel—announcing to the crowd an imminent performance. An average theater audience in the 1950s-60s could very likely have watched Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields’ *Flower* and accepted their version of a flower drum song to be an accurate presentation of the genre. Such a concept would likely be indicative of an overarching attitude wherein one takes the constructed Westernized versions of culture and cultural artifacts as the actual cultures themselves believing the constructions to be reality. Once again, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s construction comes to represent “China” to the theater-going public.
Chapter 5: Characters

5.1: Linda Low, Mei Li, and Helen Chao

Carla M. Ponti has written that the characters of *Flower Drum Song* represent points on a continuum (what I have referred to as a spectrum) ranging from Chinese to American. She states that “[d]ifferent characters in the musical maintain different levels of their Chineseness.”75 This Chineseness versus Americanness is played out musically by the presence of certain melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic signifiers and by specific instruments. Much can be gleaned by investigating the position of women in the society created for *Flower*. I will first consider two women who vie for the affections of both Wang Ta and another character, Sammy Fong—Linda Low and Mei Li. Ethan Mordden highlights the opposing positions of Linda and Mei Li in his entry on *Flower Drum Song* in his larger work, *Rodgers & Hammerstein*. Mordden describes Linda and Mei Li as “two contrasting ideals in Ta’s romantic life, the bold, free American woman and the tender Chinese woman, sex versus poetry.”76

The audience is first introduced to Linda Low in the second scene of Act I when she is described (in stage directions) as “a thoroughly Americanized Chinese girl.”77

75 Carla M. Ponti, 149.


From observing her character, one must deduce that “a thoroughly Americanized Chinese girl” is one who is fashionable and fun-loving who delights in manipulating men to get what she desires, but ultimately wants the suburban American dream-life. Linda lives alone and works for a living—though it is unclear how much of her living is earned and how much comes from her adoring lovers. So Linda Low of the musical represents a woman partially financially dependent on others seeking a secure marriage and thus total financial dependence:

> From men we may take an awful beating.  
> They’re pains in our pretty little necks,  
> But all girls are interested in eating—  
> And we must have another sex to pay the checks! 

Compare Linda to Mei Li, a new and illegal immigrant travelling with her father to the US with the express purpose of fulfilling a marriage contract. The plights of these two diverse women are not so separate—particularly as they both intend to marry the same man—Sammy Fong. Yet it is the younger, and less formed character Wang Ta that each woman attempts to woo according to her unique personality. Linda, representing the “American” front is direct and forward—she makes her desires known even to the fairly oblivious Wang Ta. Her confidence in her own overt sensuality overcomes Wang Ta, a character who proves to be more traditional than even he believes. However, Linda does betray her fear of loneliness in her pursuit of Wang Ta, positioning her as one of the women of *Flower Drum Song* whose security depends on incorporation into a family

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78 Linda Tung of the novel, on whom Linda Low is based, paid for nothing on her own, but tricked different boyfriends into funding her lifestyle.

unit. Mei Li and Madam Liang also reflect this attitude (Madam Liang is not seeking a husband, though much of her identity is wrapped up in her position as sister-in-law and aunt).

Originally portrayed by Pat Suzuki, Linda belts out her every thought in full voice without hesitation. Two of her songs, “I Enjoy Being a Girl” and “Grant Avenue,” are boisterous and jazzy highlighting deliberate uses of blatant syncopation to cement their “American” status. The rhythm in her songs is especially striking—when compared to other pieces within Flower, one can note the deviation from the solid, relentless beat of the previously discussed “A Hundred Million Miracles. For example, Linda Low is portrayed as a fully assimilated Chinese American woman. She performs in a night club singing and dancing for men of any ethnic background, glorying in her sexuality and the influence that comes with it. Linda Low’s character is illuminated in the text of “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” yet Rodgers’s composition adds a further dimension of comparison between Mei Li and Linda. The first eighteen bars of “I Enjoy Being a Girl” float over a simple “bass” line on the oboe alternating between C-sharp and D and punctuated on the upbeat by staccato chords in the strings. After this introduction, however, the rhythm achieves more freedom, emphasized by the voice. The first verse begins: “When I have a brand new hair-do,” now set in an easy cut-time. The word “hair,” rather than landing directly on beat one of the measure, enters (accented) after a quarter rest, syncopating the measure. Upon first listening to the Original Broadway recording, I interpreted the syncopation as the artist’s expression rather than accurate reading, so striking was the


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effect. Lewis relates a telling anecdote about this song: when Pat Suzuki first learned “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” she struggled to perform it to Rodgers’s specifications. Her complaint—“It’s hard to sing because it’s really square!” Evidently, Rodgers would not be thwarted and demanded that Suzuki sing the solo precisely as he had written it.\(^{81}\)

Musically, Rodgers suggests in the introduction that Linda’s origins are the same as Mei Li’s—the same space, the same ideals and tendencies—by means of the even, insistent chromatic alternation. There is also a notable lack of any low-register for the first eighteen bars (the accompaniment in the piano-vocal score never extends below C-sharp 4). Yet as the song continues to develop, Linda’s attitude and technique break away from Mei Li’s simple, straightforward rhythm and melody—further away from Rodgers’s constructed Chinese music.

“Grant Avenue” describes the busy, bustling pace of the main road in San Francisco’s Chinatown—the spot Linda loves to be. This piece is the jazzy tune of the score. Listening to the original Broadway cast recording, one hears full orchestration with an especially prominent brass section. The syncopated rhythms swing jauntily answering Suzuki’s exuberant delivery of the lyrics. It is interesting that such a “thoroughly Americanized” character sings such praises to the heart of Chinatown—the thoroughfare C. Y. Lee equates with Canton.\(^{82}\) Another lyric of concern occurs in the B section—Linda names foods that one may find to eat on Grant Avenue, then explains that

\(^{81}\) Lewis, 54.

\(^{82}\) C. Y. Lee (1957), 3. Lee opens the novel stating what Grant Avenue represents to different groups. “to the refugees from the mainland, Grant Avenue is Canton.” Linda’s character in the novel is a refugee from
The girl who serves you all your food  
Is another tasty dish!83

Here again, Hammerstein’s lyrics are emphasizing Linda’s sensuality and need to be desired by men, while also commodifying women—Asian women—in general. The style of the song hearkens to a night club act, but the context of this performance does not justify it. According to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s model of the integrated musical, each song must belong to a character and properly fit into his or her idiom; each number ought also to advance or add to the plot. Ergo, Linda’s song may not be justified by its setting, though it is characteristic of the bold, brassy night club singer who is expressing it. In the film, “Grant Avenue” is performed as part of a New Year’s Day parade acting also as an advertisement for the Celestial Bar where Linda performs. The salesman-spirit woven throughout the song seems more logical in this situation.

As stated above, Linda represents a fully assimilated young woman, and so her songs favor the more “American” sound—they tend toward jazz and rock and roll motifs, Western harmonic progressions, and freer treatment of rhythms. However, to maintain the internal consistency of the score as a whole and to set this community apart as Chinese American (rather than simply American, it would seem) Rodgers injects elements of exoticism into most every number. Ponti highlights the parallel octaves along a chromatic movement in the bridge of “Grant Avenue.” The lyrics at this point make some of the most direct references to Asian themes and subject matter in this song:

Shanghai, though this status is never made clear in the stage musical. In the film, it is implied that Linda was born in the USA.

83Richard Rodgers, et al, Vocal Score, (1959), 78. “Grant Avenue.”
A western street with eastern manners,
Tall pagodas and golden banners.

If Linda is the sex, Mei Li certainly fulfills the role of poetry in Mordden’s dichotomy. Her character is all sweetness, innocence, delicateness, and subtlety. Besides “A Hundred Million Miracles”—the flower drum song itself—Mei Li is made most open and vulnerable to the audience through a contented and hopeful tune, “I am Going to Like it Here.” In his autobiography, Rodgers discusses Hammerstein’s artistic model for the text:

To achieve an appropriately naïve, singsong flavor, Oscar went back to an ancient Malaysian form called the “pantoum,” in which the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza become the first and third lines in the following stanza. It was meticulously worked out, though it’s unlikely that many people were conscious of the technique—which is just as it should be.

Having Rodgers’s comments on this piece is enlightening—his perspective on the “appropriately naïve” nature of this piece bolsters the previous discussion regarding the simplistic, childlike overtones of other pieces that fall closer to the “Chinese” side of the spectrum. The melody Rodgers composed for this piece is repetitive based around the ascending movement through a major third. All rhythms in the song are even and square, never hinting at jazz or rock and roll, and the text is set syllabically with each phrase beginning on beat four and leading into a strong, plodding beat one. The most notable feature of this melody providing an Other flavor is the raised second in each of those sets of ascending major thirds.

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84 Richard Rodgers, et al, Vocal Score (1959), 87. “Grant Avenue,” mm. 41-44.
85 Rodgers, Musical Stages, 295-296
The tune is first introduced by an alto flute, and echoed (pianissimo and dolce) by Mei Li. The vocal timbres of both Broadway recordings (original 1958 cast and new 2002 cast)\(^{86}\) reflect the lightness that this personal reflection demands. Ponti connects Umeki’s performance with Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields’ interpretation of the character Mei Li. She says that “Mei Li’s softness and humility are represented by Miyoshi Umeki’s vocal timbre in the original cast recording: her voice is thin and breathy, with occasional bursts of strength, but never enough to overwhelm the gentle, almost tentative sound.”\(^{87}\) Umeki charmed audiences with her sweetness, and understated grace—she embodied an angelic innocence in need of protection. Would she have been as much of a darling on stage had her character retained more of the traits written in C. Y. Lee’s novel? The Mei Li introduced in Lee’s story harbors a stubborn streak and fights for what she wants—and is still an incredibly likable character. Why trim away so much of her original personality? Perhaps Hammerstein and Fields could not fit this version of Mei Li into their mold of the innocent and naïve country girl from China, and so they reshaped the image.

The most tragic character of *Flower Drum Song* is the unassuming and rather forgettable Helen Chao. In Lee’s novel, Helen is an intelligent woman and a faithful friend to Wang Ta. Yet, due to her badly pock-marked face, she finds herself hopelessly alone and ultimately kills herself when Wang Ta refuses to marry her. The musical version of Helen does not suffer blemished skin or debilitating loneliness. However, she

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\(^{86}\) Miyoshi Umeki in the 1958 cast recording takes a slower tempo than does Lea Salonga in the 2002 cast. The character of Mei Li regained some of her original tenacity in the revived version of the musical.

\(^{87}\) Carla M. Ponti, 89.
is still deeply lost in unrequited love with Wang Ta which culminates in a passionate lament (and reprise) rather than an act of self-inflicted harm. Helen represents the one woman who is not entangled by or dependent upon family—she is independent and self-reliant, and according to Ponti, “the most Westernized of the characters.” Though she desires a romantic relationship with Wang Ta, she does not need him for security or citizenship. Anne Anlin Cheng deems Helen “the one character who may be said to be an instance of ‘good’ assimilation…who seems to weave effortlessly together both her Chinese heritage and American style” and “is also the classic odd woman out, whose ‘just-rightness’ no one chooses.” In Lee’s novel, Helen’s poor complexion and her advanced years preclude her from Wang Ta’s consideration from the start. Neither of these factors comes into play in the musical—Helen is, as Cheng says, “just right” yet still unwanted. To stick with the original storyline, Helen must end up alone, but the surrounding circumstances of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical provide far less explanation. The bitter tragedy of suicide is removed from the musical and with it the emotional trauma experienced by a woman effectively ostracized for her physical appearance. Therefore, the audience must draw other conclusions about Wang Ta’s reasons for overlooking Helen. She is neither the sexy “thoroughly Americanized Chinese girl” that Linda Low is, nor the gentle, “exotic” beauty that Mei Li is. She exhibits none of the desirable traits necessary to catch a husband in this setting. Thus, it is not the charming characteristics Helen has that define her within this context; it is her

88 Carla M. Ponti, 151.

lack of striking qualities that fail to allow her to stand out in Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Field’s Chinatown—her lack of Otherness leads her to a lonely, unremarkable end.

To give voice to Helen’s bitter sorrow, Rodgers composes a song without any Asian signifiers. The heartfelt lament separates Helen from the rest of the cast of characters, each of whom express their “Chineseness” through their music (whether in the vocal line or accompaniment.) According to David Lewis, Helen’s solo, “Love Look Away,” “is arguably the most tautly crafted blues song Dick and Oscar would ever create. A spare economy of both words and notes combine to evoke the stark loneliness of unrequited love…” Arabella Hong, Helen of the original Broadway cast, was a classically trained vocalist and frequently heard the criticism “too operatic” from the writing and directorial team. In this sweeping aria, Helen expresses the emotional battle raging inside her: “Wanting you so, I try too much…Lonely though I may be, Leave me and set me free…” The turbulent lyrics are reflected in the melodic contour— the first “love, look away” phrase outlines a G minor triad, emphasizing the first and last notes (D and B-flat, respectively). The voice quickly flutters over the syllables “look a-” (B-flat and G) to create a falling motion before rising again to B-flat. This motive becomes the building block for the A section of the song, though the final phrase of this section ends in an ascending line landing on the tonic, E-flat. One hears the mental dilemma paining

90 Carla M. Ponti, 151.

91 David H. Lewis, 70. Also, this piece was sung (dubbed) by Marilyn Horne in the 1961 film.

92 David H. Lewis, 61.

Helen as she experiences rollercoaster-like emotions—resolving one moment to put her love out of her mind, and the next, experiencing unrealized hope. The final cadence of the song descends to a solid tonic, building in volume, symbolizing Helen’s resolution to finally give up on Wang Ta. In the 1958 musical, Helen sings a reprise that ends with the final three measures an octave higher, giving even more force to Helen’s surrender. In the film, Helen experiences a dream ballet dramatizing her pining for Wang Ta and his rejection of her. In the stage version though, it is the haunting tune of “Love, Look Away” that lingers in one’s memory, establishing Helen as the tragic character of the musical and essentially ending her part in this story.

5.2 Sammy Fong

In order to condense the plot of Lee’s novel into an appropriate length for the Broadway stage, Rodgers, Hammerstein and Fields created a new character—a plot instigator: Sammy Fong—the highly “Americanized” owner of a local night club, the Celestial Bar. The son of “traditional” Chinese parents and a prominent businessman in his own right, Sammy becomes the catalyst of the action in the 1958 stage musical version of Flower.

Mei Li comes to the United States as a picture bride, betrothed to Sammy since childhood. The Picture Bride, or proxy marriage phenomenon is generally associated with the Japanese. The Gentlemen’s Agreement (1907-1908) between the US and Japan allowed Japanese workers in America to send for their wives. Many men set up proxy marriages in which a go-between would connect with the family of a potential bride and
the couple would marry by proxy, only ever having viewed their new spouse’s picture. US immigration workers called these female immigrants “picture brides” or “photograph brides.” Catherine Lee notes that this practice was derided by Americans citing arguments against it by Senator James D. Phelan as early as 1919. The senator protested the practice as it did not fit into American ideas of individualism and marriage for love. This attitude is directly reflected in Hammerstein and Fields’ dialogue in *Flower*.

However, Sammy is uninterested in his parents’ choice for his bride; his heart has already been claimed by the saucy and (also) Americanized Linda Low. To free himself of the entanglement, Sammy pawns Mei Li off onto the initially reluctant Wang Ta. And finally, it is Sammy’s mother who insists upon his marriage to Mei Li which leads our mixed-up pairs to the climax of the show. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields needed an element to compress the original storyline and Sammy Fong served that purpose. As such, the character is an interesting blend—a schmoozing sycophant at times, an inconstant lover—always fearing commitment—and an Americanized son to “traditional” parents. Sammy walks through a minefield of propriety, family expectations, and romance eventually landing in his proper place beside the proper woman.

Different sides of Sammy’s character are exhibited through his two duets in the musical: “Don’t Marry Me” with Mei Li, and “Sunday” with Linda Low. The music, lyrics, and general attitude of the songs reflect Sammy’s interaction with these two dissimilar women, and flesh out his position in relation to each one. The song “Don’t

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95 Catherine Lee, 34.
“Marry Me” is an admonition to the young, naïve Mei Li, while “Sunday” expresses a more equal footing between Sammy and Linda.

“Don’t Marry Me” is situated in Act I scene 5. Most every character of the show is in attendance at a graduation party for Wang Ta and Madam Liang. It is at this time that the starry-eyed Mei Li is made aware of Wang Ta’s infatuation with Linda Low. Mei Li is sorely disappointed and intends to return to Sammy to be married. Sammy’s defensive tactic is to convince Mei Li that she is better off without him. In order to do this, Sammy shapes his argument and its musical accompaniment into what is presumably a more effective communicative style—something Mei Li can relate to and understand.

Hammerstein’s lyrics emphasize Mei Li’s youth and inexperience. Sammy lays out reason after reason of why she should not marry him—statements that are likely honest expressions that will convince Mei Li that she does not want to marry Sammy as much as he does not want her:

If you want a man you can depend on,
I can absolutely guarantee
I will never fail to disappoint you, baby,
Don’t marry me!96

There is a self-deprecation—even vilification—occurring in hopes of manipulating Mei Li’s feelings. The end result is that Sammy is reprieved from his marriage commitment while Mei Li remains in limbo as an illegal immigrant and a young unmarried woman.

The lyrics of “Don’t Marry Me” also make several blatant ethnic or Orientalist references: litchi nuts; Ali and Aga Khan; and the following:

I am talking like a Chinese uncle,
I’m as serious as I can be,
I am saying this because I love you, darling,
Don’t marry me.⁹⁷

Sonically, the introduction to this piece once again plays on the idea of simplicity as it lightly floats over alternating G and C chords (the G chord consisting only of D and G; the C chord consisting of C and E). Over this hypnotic repetition, the vocal line enters with very square, on the beat rhythms on the notes G and E (the melodic notes always fall within the chord). After twelve bars, the chords are changed to C and F until the line leads to a D7, into a G chord, then back to the dreamy G-C combination. The first sixteen bars of the song contain no bass voices. The high register and lightness of the instruments in the introduction (strings, flute, and muted trumpet) produce a calm and unthreatening, and constructed Chinese atmosphere when Sammy tries to convince Mei Li that she should not want to marry him. As an adult may sit a child down to impart necessary lessons to her, so Sammy treats and instructs Mei Li. Sammy must convince the “innocent” and trusting Chinese girl that her childish whims are of no value in this new setting. In order to do so, he approaches her through a familiar idiom (or at least Rodgers’s version of it).

As stated above, most of the rhythms in “Don’t Marry Me” are on the beat, falling in line with other pieces in Flower Drum Song meant to signify a more “traditional

Chinese” sound. There are, however, seven deliberate occurrences of syncopation, always on the line “Don’t marry me!” The phrase becomes a mantra emphasizing Sammy’s and Mei Li’s incompatibility through the lyrics as well as the rhythm. Rodgers is again using syncopation as a signifier of Americanness. It is most typically found in pieces sung by Sammy Fong and Linda Low (two of the most “Americanized” characters in Flower. Characters who can be identified as more “traditional” or more “Chinese”—Mei Li, Dr. Li, Wang Chi-yang—typically sing even rhythms emphasizing strong downbeats.}

The duet, “Sunday” between Sammy and Linda creates a different atmosphere altogether. Linda, fed up with Sammy’s foot-dragging regarding their five year relationship, declares that she is leaving him. In desperation, Sammy proposes marriage and the two begin a duet praising the delights of the lazy Sundays enjoyed by married couples—a song that David H. Lewis calls “soft-shoe heaven.” This duet features a fairly standard harmonic progression in its main theme (I – IV – V – I) but colors the movement with certain chromatic tones. These chromatics, however, do not suggest the “Oriental flavor” that chromatic tones in other songs do. In Carla M. Ponti’s distillation of common compositional features found in Rodgers’s music, she describes his use of “unexpected harmonies combined with expected melody notes.” An example of this combination is found in measures 30 and 62 of “Sunday” (in the twelfth bar of the

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98 Other examples of such pieces include “A Hundred Million Miracles” and “I Am Going to Like it Here.”

99 David H. Lewis, 70.

100 Carla M. Ponti, 67.
fifteen-bar theme). Focusing on the first occurrence of the theme—Sammy begins the verse:

Sunday,/ Sweet Sunday,/ With nothing to do,
Lazy/ And lovely,/ My one day with you,
Hazy/ And happy,/ We’ll drift through the day.
Dreaming the hours away.  

As the lyrics suggest, the melody lazily dances over arpeggiations of the I, IV, and V chords involving several octave leaps. Yet, the moderato tempo and the vocal slides added by the performers create a feeling of effortlessness and ease. The phrase briefly modulates to the relative minor (B minor) before coming to an unexpected cadence on the secondary dominant, E (an E major triad with added 7th, 9th and sharp 11th). The harmony slides in under an F-sharp in the melody (the third of the key acting as the ninth in the chord).

Sammy and Linda seem to enjoy a more equitable relationship as expressed through this duet. Each character sings 39 measures of a solo, and the song ends with a twenty-two bar duet. The symmetry of this jaunty soft-shoe number emphasizes the compatibility present in this relationship that was so egregiously lacking between Sammy and Mei Li.

5.3 Wang Ta

*Flower* has been described as a story more about generational conflict than of cultural clash. The two elements are rather interwoven through the musical. While there are two generations clearly highlighted in the piece (with the suggestion of another, slightly younger group), the age-groups are not clearly defined or slotted into unified ways of thinking. Rather, each character of the musical represents a position on the aforementioned spectrum gauging degrees of assimilation. While it is true that those members of the older generation generally fall closer to the “less assimilated” end of the spectrum, the attitudes of each of these characters is particular as is their acceptance or rejection of American customs. The same is true for the younger generation, represented by the two romantic couples around which the musical is centered.

In one of the reviews quoted in the Rodgers and Hammerstein Fact Book, critic John McClain specifically cites four songs from *Flower* that will “grow in stature”: “You are Beautiful,” “Don’t Marry Me,” “Grant Avenue,” and “Love Look Away.”

Three of these pieces have been mentioned in the present paper as representing instances of Americanness on the constructed spectrum of this musical. It is notable that these were the songs standing out in the minds of contemporary critics. Though it was Rodgers’s goal to create music that was comprehensible and palatable to his audience, could it be that his “Asian” pieces were still too “exotic” to find a place in mainstream enjoyment?

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Or is it as Edney, drawing from Louis Kronenberger’s review, suggests—there is too little of the exotic to create a lasting impression?  

“‘You are Beautiful’ represents a Chinese poem Wang Ta learned in his younger years. He and Madam Liang begin this song with a steady oscillation between E and F over what sounds effectively like tone clusters (G minor 7 + 6; F9) and open fifths and octaves in the bass. The main theme of the song begins in measure 16 with Wang Ta describing his “Beautiful,/ Small and shy” dream girl. There are two main rhythmic motives building this melody—observe the vocal line beginning at the lyrics “‘You are beautiful…’” opening with a serene melody set to an unhurried rhythm. The next two bars start the pattern of the first two, but come to rest on the tonic. The second motive starts on the lyrics “‘You are the girl whose…’” and are similarly reflected in the next two measures (not pictured).

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103 Kathryn Edney (2009), 136.

104 Richard Rodgers et al, Libretto (1959), 13. “‘You Are Beautiful.’”

105 Ibid.
The second rhythmic motive stresses the upbeat in the first half of the measure, syncopating those two beats. However, the continuous flowing sound of the vocal line and accompaniment and lack of tied note rhythms draw attention away from the syncopation and more toward the legato ascent of the line. Also, the orchestration features prominent parallel fourths during this figure—one of David B. Scott’s surefire ingredients for identifiable chinoiserie. Wang Ta is a character who must come to terms with this blended Chinese and American identity. This particular piece presented marries Rodgers’s Chinese signifiers to his American signifier, syncopation.


107 Derek B. Scott, 323.
Wang Ta’s poetic dabbling went through several different titles including “She is the Girl” and “She is Beautiful” (still listed as the title during the Boston tryouts) before finally settling on the direct address “You Are Beautiful.” When browsing through the handwritten full score, one discovers Chinese script written in above certain vocal lines. The characters represent the names Liang and Wang Ta—the two people singing this piece. The presence of Chinese script in the score labeling characters’ vocal entrances is indicative of some attempt, however small, to incorporate genuine Chinese elements into the musical. Other minor changes between the novel and the musical raise questions that are beyond the scope of the present paper (e.g. the change of spelling from May Li in Lee’s novel to Mei Li in Hammerstein and Fields’ libretto and whose decision this was.)

5.4 Issues with this Construction

One of the major dangers inherent in such a project is, of course, that members of the powerful class of popular entertainment take upon themselves the authority to portray a certain group of people to the rest of the country. Rodgers and Hammerstein likely did not fully understand the implications of taking such authority. The history of their collaboration indicates a desire to create good, entertaining musicals that encourage hope, love, and tolerance. The pair at this time was also seeking a new hit to keep their names

108 See the two reviews previously mentioned from Daily Variety (Hobe Morrison and Guy, 1958). The song title “You Are Beautiful” was established by the time the show opened on Broadway.

lit up on New York marquees. Their good intentions and, indeed, curiosity led them to write musicals in a new way about subjects many others avoided (i.e. attacking enculturated racism; propagating equality of all people). However, their faulty sense of authority over their subjects undermines their supposed intention of a fair and genuine portrayal of Chinese America.

Through this story, Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields present a “China” that, while an honorable land of filial piety, essentially comes across as old-fashioned, innocent, even backwards. Their America, on the other hand is fast-moving, forward-thinking, and progressive—individuals in this America have the right to choose for themselves, even if that choice is ultimately the wrong one. This dichotomy of China and America is directly referred to in a heated dialogue between Wang Ta and his father Wang Chi-yang (Act I, sc. 5). The father and son argue about Wang Ta’s choice of brides:

Ta: Anytime I wanted to do anything, you decided it for me.
Wang: That is as it should be.
Ta: In China—yes. But here a man is supposed to think for himself.\(^{110}\)

Hammerstein and Fields trumpet the connection between living in America and choosing one’s own path through the argument in this scene. Interestingly, by the end of the musical, Wang Ta chooses to marry the girl his father had already chosen for him—both men are right; both implied traditions (Chinese and American) are victorious in the end. The authors present some positive and negative aspects for each cultural group and the story ends with happy marriages between the right couples—people closest to each other

\(^{110}\) Rodgers et al, Libretto (1959), 70.
on the Chinese-American spectrum. The characters portrayed in *Flower Drum Song* stand in for and essentially become China and America to the audience thus creating and perpetuating stereotypical positions on a large scale—the empire of popular entertainment.

There are certainly shallow, superficial characters populating plays, musicals, operas, and films that represent every color and creed. However, Thomas Hischak notes that “(b)efore World War Two, the American musical theatre was notorious for its racial stereotyping, reducing various ethnic groups to one-dimensional caricatures.”\(^{111}\) He contends that Rodgers and Hammerstein combat this trend by creating personae with depth and meaning. Additionally, the two giants of musical theater were known to directly address issues of racism and prejudice in their shows. In *South Pacific*, the themes of overcoming racism and prejudice drive the romantic plots. Though by today’s standards, the characters in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s shows often prove problematic, Hammerstein’s musicals were taking significant forward strides in mid-twentieth century America.\(^{112}\)

Casting a show like *Flower Drum Song* proved to be more difficult than other musicals of its time. Each character in the show is Chinese or Chinese American.

However, with the dearth of opportunities for Asian actors in the early to mid twentieth

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\(^{112}\) Thomas Hischak, “Ethnicity,” *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Encyclopedia*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 78. According to Hischak, Florenz Ziegfeld, *Showboat’s* (1927) producer tried to convince the Hammerstein and Kern to cast Al Jolson in blackface as Joe, the dockhand. Jolson was “the kind of African American…that Broadway understood.” Hammerstein and Kern were not swayed and insisted on hiring African-American performers.
century as well as apparent negative attitudes toward the acting profession among the Chinese American community, there were very few Asian actors available with the skills and experience necessary to fill every role. According to C. Y. Lee, “(t)raditionally, the Chinese don’t promote the performing arts, so they don’t want their children to go into that field, because it’s a starving field…Acting is considered to be a lower than low profession.”

And so, the “magic” of stage takes over—though Rodgers and Hammerstein refrained from using blackface in their shows yellowface, it seems, was a more acceptable option. Rodgers references the diverse cast in his autobiography—Japanese, Hawaiian, Caucasian, African American. He claims that “(t)his ethnically mixed cast certainly didn’t lessen the total effect; what was important was that the actors gave the illusion of being Chinese. This demonstrates one of the wonderful things about theatre audiences. People want to believe what they see on a stage, and they will gladly go along with whatever is done to achieve the desired effect” (emphasis mine).

This particular quotation is rife with implications. Rodgers describes suspension of disbelief—the conscious decision on the part of the audience to disregard even outlandish impossibilities in favor of a good show. He acknowledges the active role of the audience “going along” with the theater experience and choosing to accept the vision of the director, producer, writer, etc. It also suggests the amenability of the audience’s perspective, and their susceptibility to accept stereotypes that are portrayed on stage.

113 Andrew Shin and C. Y. Lee, 83-84.
114 Thomas Hischak, (2007), 78
115 Richard Rodgers, Musical Stages (1975), 295.
This acceptance in turn perpetuates these stereotypes—cementing the constructed images as a part of their personal cultural imagination. Also, Rodgers’s attitude about actors giving “the illusion of being Chinese” is reflected in his compositions. Rodgers strives to suggest and signify “China” in his music without ever incorporating actual Chinese elements into it. When reflecting on his compositional style for the 1928 Rodgers and Hart musical, *Chee-Chee*, set in China, he has the following to say:

> Obviously it would have been inappropriate for me to write typically “American” music, but equally obviously, even if I could have written “Chinese” music, Broadway audiences would have found it unattractive…The only solution was to compose my own kind of music but with an Oriental inflection, reproducing a style rather than creating a faithful imitation. Frequently composers try to reproduce the musical sound of a specific age or locale, often with some success, but I think it’s a mistake. It leaves the writer wide open to comparison—usually unfavorable—with the real thing, and at best only reveals re-creative, rather than creative, skills.\(^{116}\)

On the one hand, Rodgers indicates a certain respect for musical systems outside of his training and understanding—he admits that he could not compose properly or “authentically” in Chinese tradition; that his music would be a pale impression at best. However, his notion to create his own style with “Oriental inflection”—something acceptable to Broadway audiences—clearly demonstrates his attitude regarding his position as a theater composer writing scores meant to sell Broadway tickets. Rodgers creates a musical score for *Flower* that is consistent within itself and originating in his own compositional style (though painted also with commonly used Asian signifiers). According to Derek B. Scott, “(p)entatonicism and parallel fourths are the basic signifiers

for chinoiserie” — basic signifiers that weave their way into *Flower Drum Song*’s score. Rodgers musically invents an “Orient” in order to display the blended elements of immigrant life and to demonstrate degrees of assimilation.

Despite the aforementioned issues problematizing the project, it would be misleading to claim that *Flower’s* every effect and outcome was negative. The film version of *Flower* stands as one of the first movies about Asian-Americans, featuring Asian actors to be released by a major Hollywood studio to a wide audience. Hwang, while deeming Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song* “inauthentic” by nature—written by three non-Asian writers—notes that the film made a lasting impression on him—it portrayed romance between Asian men and women (as opposed to popular fetishizing romances between white men and Asian women, or predatory relationships between Asian men and white women, etc.) ; it showed Asian-Americans living “American” life, singing and dancing to jazzy tunes; it showed a side of Chinatown divorced from the sinister “yellow peril” stigma; it opened doors in Hollywood for Asian actors to break away from clichéd roles.

5.4.1: *Chop Suey*

Act I Scene 5 opens in the Wang family garden where the entire ensemble joins together to celebrate two events: Wang Ta’s graduation from university and Madam

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117 Derek B. Scott, 323.
118 David Henry Hwang, 10.
119 Kathryn Edney, (2009), 118-119.
Liang’s graduation from citizenship school. Each member of this gathering hails from the Chinatown community and ranges in age and degree of assimilation. According to Kathryn Edney, “Chop Suey” glorifies the idea of assimilation, which she calls “Rodgers and Hammerstein’s intended message for Flower Drum Song.” She goes on to say that Rodgers and Hammerstein utilize full-ensemble scenes like this to symbolize society as a whole.\textsuperscript{120} If this is the case, one can interpret this song and dance as America’s musical embrace of its diverse nature. Some lyrics are light and benign while others jab quickly at more serious issues. Mordden describes the song saying it is “so vague it feels pointless,”\textsuperscript{121} but a close listening and reading reveals a musical collage of references to American popular culture, political events, and Rodgers’ constructed Chinese signifiers. Hammerstein paves the way for this hodgepodge of images with the following exchange:

Wang: You are like that Chinese dish that the American’s invented—what do they call it?
   Madam Liang: Chop Suey?
   Wang: That’s it. Everything is in it all mixed up.
   Madam Liang: That is what is good about my new country…I like that!\textsuperscript{122}

This brief dialogue sends the entire ensemble into an upbeat cha-cha celebrating the idea of the American melting pot. The song opens with sharp staccato hits on the xylophone and muted trumpets descending and ascending the scale in parallel triads. The effect highlights the parallel fifths in bright timbre and mid to high register. Here, as in many other numbers in Flower Drum Song, the rhythms are square and straightforward.

\textsuperscript{120} Kathryn Edney, “‘Integration through the wide open back door’: African Americans respond to Flower Drum Song (1958),” in Studies in Musical Theatre 4, no 3 (2010), 269.
\textsuperscript{121} Ethan Mordden, 199.
The combination of parallel, nonfunctional harmony and the rhythm here again emphasizes the “exotic” nature of the community gathered at the party (a group entirely made up of Chinese and Chinese American characters), setting this group apart from Anglo-European suburbanites who might hold a similar gathering. The main body of the song, however, falls into a clean, danceable rhythm in cut time and a standard chord progression featuring functional Western harmony. Rodgers incorporates his constructed Chinese sounds in the melody lines and ornamentation. Meanwhile, Hammerstein’s lyrics refer persistently to Americana rather than integrating text about Chinatown and Chinese America.  

Following the three measures of introduction, Madam Liang initiates the A section with an octave leap (connected with a major seven) on the words, “Chop Suey.” She immediately throws a number of references at the audience:

Chop Suey,
Chop Suey,
Living here is very much like Chop Suey:
Hula Hoops and nuclear war,
Doctor Salk and Zsa Zsa Gabor,
Harry Truman, Truman Capote and Dewey—
Chop Suey!  

After the opening leaps, Rodgers oscillates between D-sharp and E ending that phrase (“Living here is…”) by approaching D-natural from C-sharp. The following phrases establish a sense of ascending movement by walking up a C-major scale to relish the leading tone and finally move to the tonic at the bottom of the scale, then repeated at the

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higher octave. The upward motion resonates with the optimism and excitement experienced by this group of Chinese Americans establishing new homes in America.

Note the juxtaposition of images that dances up this scale in the first refrain: hula hoops with nuclear war; Dr. Salk (pioneer of the polio vaccine) and Zsa Zsa Gabor (an actress as well as immigrant to the US); “Harry Truman, Truman Capote, and Dewey.”

For the 1961 film, that final line is altered—Liang sings instead, “Bobby Darin, Sandra Dee, and Dewey.” Why the change? The song moves along at such a brisk tempo, that each reference effectively flies away making it difficult to contemplate implications in the initial listening. There is a shift toward more elements of popular and mainstream cultural icons for the intended film audience which seems to be, as Oliver Wang points out, largely white and comfortable being so. He argues that rather than celebrating the pluralism of American society, this number with its superficial Orientalisms—specifically mentioning pentatonicism—indicates a larger agenda: “Flower Drum Song must reconcile the exotic origin of characters and assimilate them into a recognizable and nonthreatening American mainstream.”

Wang provides further evidence for his theory citing solo vocal albums recorded by James Shigeta and Pat Suzuki (both Flower alumni) that were marketed as “all-American” to mainstream consumers. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s gesture toward cultural pluralism becomes more suspect when considering the setting of the celebration—the group living in Chinatown is essentially an...


126 Oliver Wang, 447-8.

127 Ibid. 446.
enclave segregated from all other cultural groups, yet pointedly singing about images and icons associated with the greater American society. Indeed the original story in Lee’s novel centers on life in Chinatown and exhibits some of the tense relationships with the “foreigners” living outside the town. However, Lee uses these relationships and interactions to illustrate some of the difficulties experienced by immigrants. The characters in Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields story simply accept the division between Chinatown and the outside world as the natural order, singing about mainstream images from the confines of a culturally segregated community. The image presented here may offer insight into the hegemonic practices of the entertainment industry of the period: theaters and production studios are happy to present a contained show about Chinese Americans, yet history demonstrates widespread discrimination and inequalities experienced by minority populations in daily life at this time.

Images of blending and reappropriating music and dance styles are particularly evident in the dance sequence that ends the song in the 1961 film version. The characters line up for a square dance that is called half in English and half in Taishanese—do-si-do’s and kowtows are juxtaposed in the exuberant sequence. The music and dance then move through waltz and jazz building in dynamics and intensity, finally culminating in a quiet, restrained bow accompanied by a light ending reminiscent of the Asian Riff performed by woodwinds and xylophone in even rhythms and parallel fourths, punctuated by a single gong hit.

128 Two sources, Yini Wei and Karena Lam, have listened to this musical excerpt and identified the dialect as Taishanese.
The extended dance section takes the place of “Chop Suey’s” encore found in the stage score. Hammerstein’s lyrics for the encore also suggest more serious and perhaps controversial themes:

Peking Duck and Mulligan stew,
Plymouth Rock and Little Rock, too.
Milk and beer and Seven-Up and Drambuie—
Chop Suey!129

Peking duck and Mulligan stew are two foods associated with specific groups, and notably, Peking duck is the only direct lyric reference to Asian culture in this song.

“Little Rock” most likely refers to the Little Rock Nine and to the racial tension surrounding school integration efforts in the US during the Civil Rights movement concurrent with this show. Whether or not this reference was Hammerstein’s intention, hearing the name “Little Rock” on stage post-1957 would have sparked images of violent protests and racial segregation.

The B section of “Chop Suey” is built on walking figures of stepwise motion that finally jump up to achieve a half cadence by bar 26 of the verse. These figures walk down a major third, confining the vocal range to that interval for the first twelve measures of the verse. The following fourteen bars introduce accidentals and semitones—the contour of the figure is basically retained, but the character is different. The first part of the section hints at a whole tone scale in the melody line—often used by composers to construct oriental-sounding music—but the second phrase does not deliver, instead guiding us back to a diatonic scale played through a brief modulation to G.

129 Richard Rodgers, et al, Libretto (1959), 64.
Rodgers plays with the ear of his audience, creating another simple melody line conforming to some established Orientalist tropes, then breaking out of them just a bit to demonstrate his marriage of Chinese and American music.

The foundation of Rodgers’s accompaniment is basic—emphasizing the downbeats in the bass and punctuating upbeats with higher, lighter sounds. He adds to some of these punctuations grace notes to ornament and orientalize the European oompah orchestral part. Additionally, Rodgers creates a drone on the dominant through the beginning of the B section. Drones can create the effect of harmonic stasis, thereby drawing the audience’s ears away from typical Broadway fare and exhibiting the Otherness of this group. The drone is only partially effective, however—when the descending third motif is moved or altered, the drone is as well, maintaining a sense of functional harmony. The overall result suggests that music of the Other can be fully expressed and contained within Western notation and conventions and that these characters must be understood also through this lens.

5.4.2: The Night Club Act

In the last scene of Act I (1958 musical), the audience enters the Celestial Bar, owned by Sammy Fong, to watch the night club act. Described as “a typical San Francisco Chinese night club designed to attract tourists,” the staging and songs at the Celestial Bar perform a separate role from other songs in the musical. While most musical numbers discussed in this essay are crafted specifically to fit the characters

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130 Richard Rodgers, et al. Libretto (1959), 85. This description is recorded in the stage directions.
performing them, the songs of the night club act (“Fan Tan Fanny” and “Gliding Through My Memoree”) could be regarded as more mediated presentations of identity—characters are intentionally performing an artificial persona beyond the initial layer of performance that every stage or screen actor must necessarily engage in. Singers and dancers taking part in the night club act are playing the dual role of an actor in a show within a show. Here, the writers are deliberately writing to existing stereotypes through the music and the text. A cursory listening to these songs is likely to yield negative reactions—the pieces come across as reductionist and offensive, built on racial stereotypes. The staging adds to the effect: the chorus girls in “Fan Tan Fanny” are dressed in “idealized coolie costumes.” What can one suppose about Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields’ purpose for this scene fraught with such blatant representations that go beyond the borders of the ridiculous and offensive? The songs themselves could be lifted out of the musical without much effect. In fact, it is only the events at the end of “Gliding” (which transitions into a reprise of “Grant Avenue”) that serve to advance the plot—not the songs themselves. “Fan” and “Gliding” apparently function to set the scene and provide a venue for the antics of Sammy and Linda Low. Yet on another level, this “typical…Chinese night club” for tourists may also serve as a mirror for contemporary American society, reflecting widely held misconceptions of cultural identities represented through this show within the show. As previously stated, mainstream America seemed fascinated by the possibility of exoticisms, yet the experience with different cultures as presented through Broadway and Hollywood suggests an intense need to filter cultures

131 Richard Rodgers et al. Libretto (1959), 85. This description is recorded in the stage directions.
through a western understanding. Chinese American businesses and communities were aware of this tendency: in his concise survey of the history of Chinese Americans, Him Mark Lai writes that by the 1950s “[t]raditional Chinese observances lost their religious significance, but gained a commercial purpose as Chinese Americans started exploiting Chinese customs to promote business” citing festivals from the early 1950s as events to draw in tourists.\footnote{Him Mark Lai, 266.} The Celestial Bar serves a similar purpose in the construction of Chinatown in \textit{Flower}.

“Fan Tan Fanny” opens with a resonant gong hit\footnote{The piano vocal score indicates a cymbal hit, while the original Broadway cast recording features the gong.} before blazing into a brassy introduction (six of the eight-bar closing phrase of the vocal melody). Meanwhile, the woodwinds and temple blocks are providing forward motion with insistent eighth note patterns. In measures eight and nine, Rodgers forcefully establishes this piece as an exotic representation: the brass and banjo (likely imitating the Chinese pipa) break into parallel fourths and perform a rhythm reminiscent of the “Asian riff.”\footnote{“Asian Riff,” “Oriental Riff,” “Chinese Riff”—all are interchangeable terms used to describe the commonly used motive transcribed above. (The motive Garrett (2004) suggests is a western device to signify Asia musically.), 131. The basic intervallic contour CAN be found in selections of Chinese folk music. However, the rhythm seems to be a defining factor for this motif. Additionally, the riff is frequently harmonized in parallel fourths, sometimes in fifths. This sort of texture/movement is atypical of Chinese folk songs.}
In this small piece (just over 40 measures in a moderato cut time) Rodgers brings in most of the Asian signifiers he has established already in *Flower*: pentatonicism, simple melodic lines, parallel fourths and fifths, straight and simple rhythms, and either less conventional instruments (e.g. banjo) or orchestral instruments used to highlight “foreign” sounds (e.g. gong and temple blocks). These are the ploys he uses throughout the show to characterize the more “traditionally Chinese” characters’ songs, yet in this setting, the music adopts another layer. Today, we recognize that *Flower* already holds a strained position as a representation of Chinese-American culture mediated through the eyes and ears of seasoned Broadway team of non-Asian writers creating a show for a largely non-Asian audience. The scene at the Celestial Bar portrays a Chinese-owned night club that caters to tourists. To accomplish this, Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields write characters that play to their (the characters’) own perception of the audience’s expectations—utilizing stereotypical costuming and musical devices that the wider audience will identify as “Chinese.” Essentially, Rodgers uses many of the same compositional techniques for “Fan” that he used in “A Hundred Million Miracles” or “I
Am Going to Like it Here.” Yet the setting, presentation, and relative pointlessness of “Fan” sets this song apart—it is not meant to be a “natural” or unconscious performance of identity like the pieces sung by Mei Li. “Fan Tan Fanny” is a performance of perceived identity—stereotypes that Sammy Fong and his night club singers assume will entertain their patrons—stereotypes that Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields perceive will be read and understood by their audiences. The scene is written to be an exaggerated performance, using stereotypes to poke fun at the stereotypes—but is this enough to justify parading offensive clichés? Writing these caricatures into a show within a show points to the writing team’s awareness and acknowledgment of these stereotypes as artificial. However, little is done in the original script to correct these. Hwang uses these scenes in his book to undermine the clichés.

The lyrics of “Fan Tan Fanny” present a brief narrative about a woman (her name refers to a popular gambling game associated with the Chinese and Chinese Americans) shedding her unfaithful boyfriend in favor of a new one. The piece is short: the text is comprised of just over 60 words—one-third of which are or rhyme with ‘fan’ and ‘Fanny.’ Each statement is short and simple, sometimes lacking a smooth transition and set to music in such a way as to break the flow; to sound “choppy,” suggesting to the audience a more “primitive” sound, lacking the sweep and flow associated with other Rodgers and Hammerstein songs. The short phrases evoke the idea of broken English,

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135 In the original libretto and recording, “Fan Tan Fanny” is performed by “a singer” in the night club act. For the 1961 film, Linda performs the song imbuing extra meaning to the lyrics. Linda resonates with the discontented Fanny, and the song reflects her own attempt to say “Good-bye” to Sammy.
while the syllabic setting over this sometimes pentatonic melody (in this and other pieces) could remind the audience of the sound of tonal languages.

Fan Tan Fanny was leaving her man,
Fan Tan Fanny kept waving her fan,
Said “Good-bye, Danny,
You two-timing Dan,
Some other man
Loves your little Fanny!
Bye, Bye!\textsuperscript{136}

Fanny, who insists on waving that fan, is kind enough to leave Danny a can of Moo Goo Gai Pan;\textsuperscript{137} the food, recognized as standard Chinese restaurant fare, emphasizes her “Chineseness.” The three names mentioned in this song—Fanny, Danny, and Manny—are ambiguous as to ethnic origins, and they provide the song with a simplistic rhyme scheme.

Though the introduction sets up the key as B-flat major, the first two phrases are set in basic pentatonic modes. (The second phrase is a repetition of the first transposed up a whole step.) The melody continues by walking up and down the scale, avoiding establishing a tonal center and leading to an unexpected cadence in D major. The banjo doubles the vocal line for much of the song, though in some recordings, it may parallel the voice a fourth below. Additionally, the string section accompanies the melody as well as the parallel quartal harmonies.

There is added complexity to the texture with an eighth note pattern in the woodwinds: piccolo, clarinets, oboe respond to the vocal line with a quick-moving

\textsuperscript{136} Richard Rodgers, et al. Libretto (1959), 85. Also found in the Vocal Score (1959), 99-100.

\textsuperscript{137} Spelled “Moo-Goo-Guy-Pan” in the 1959 script, but Moo Goo Gai Pan (a more common spelling) in the score.
descending pentatonic figure. In the second verse, these ornamental instruments embellish their lines, playing during the vocal phrases as well as in between. The brass section reenters the mix at this point with even percussive hits imitating the square rhythm presented in measure eight. The combination of the thick texture and the belted chest voice used by the singer is more at home in the night club setting than say, as a personal reflection or an intimate conversation. As stated above, Rodgers utilizes many of the same Asian signifiers in this piece that he does in pieces sung by Mei Li. However, the busy orchestration and full loud vocal line distinguish “Fan” from Mei Li’s supposedly more “genuine” songs. Where Mei Li’s songs spring from her organically and sincerely—even during the flower drum show—the night club singer’s vocal timbre—particularly in the original Broadway Cast Recording—sounds forced and put on.

The night club act continues with a “Gliding Through My Memoree”—a song indulging in the idea of the promiscuous sailor with a girl in every port. The sexually suggestive lyrics describe clichéd images of women from a number of different countries. As Frankie, the soloist, describes each woman, she appears in costume though, according to the stage directions, she is “undeniably Asian.” The joke of “Gliding Through My Memoree” lies not only in the accentuated stereotypes, but in the intended absurdity of the layered and incongruous stereotypes.

Rodgers musically elaborates several of these stereotypes. When Frankie sings about his “dancing chick” from Barcelona, the orchestra takes up a habanera rhythm punctuated by castanets. Another identifiable signifier can be heard in the film’s soundtrack during the line regarding “Casablancer” (sic). The bass plays a repetitive figure of a quarter note followed by two eights. The longer note remains constant while the eighth notes are played first a perfect fifth above, then a major sixth, then minor sixth, then perfect fifth again. The rhythm and intervals combined with the reference to Casablanca reference a sonic signifier often associated with Arabic or Persian musical cultures.

During this ambiguously international musical romp, Hammerstein’s lyrics drip with innuendo: “Her eyes gave out a green light that said I could go ahead;” “her castanets were clicking like nothing ever clicked;” “she was a girl who couldn’t say anything but ‘Oui!’” The entire number is built on exoticizing women of non-American origin and reveling in the resultant sexual fantasies. As stated above, much of the intended comedy of this number is also held in the staging. While Frankie sings about “a stately Scandinavian type, a buxom, blue-eyed blonde,” the stage directions tell us that a “very dark, unstately and unbuxom girl enters.” The film audience is treated to a show of scantily clad women wearing clichéd costumes representing different world cultures. These portrayals do not meet the audience’s expectation of an actual woman.

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from Barcelona, Paris, or Scandinavia—rather they are blatant misrepresentations meant to elicit laughter. Thus the piece succeeds not only in objectifying women in general, but also demonstrates the perceived mockery inherent when a member of one ethnic group portrays another—rather an interesting statement in a show about Chinese people played by Japanese, Filipino, and African-American.

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from “Flower Drum Song”
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Chapter 6: An Alternative Approach

Theater is an ephemeral art. A show lives in its moment—certainly the script remains and the score persists—but interpretations and deliveries vary; music is heard, then promptly becomes a memory of the past; the energy of the audience influences each actor’s performance. A stage musical can be re-imagined and reinterpreted with every new performance in a manner that a film—a completed product—cannot. When considering the history of *Flower Drum Song*, one concludes that this musical in its original version—stereotypes and all—could not hold up against the changing social situations.

The world of popular entertainment has been exploiting stereotypes—racial, ethnic, religious, gender, socioeconomic—for centuries. From ancient to contemporary theater, characters have exhibited stereotypes that have been perpetuated through common use. Why resort to pre-cut stock characters? A writer may opt to employ a stereotype for the same purpose they might incorporate an archetypal figure—playing on an audience’s assumed mutual (mis)understanding, the stereotype will imply enough about the character to save the writer time and effort in further developing and explaining the character. It can reduce the level of engagement on the parts of the writer and the audience, as well as on that of the actor. When playing the role of a stereotype, one simply works to fulfill basic audience expectations rather than truly internalizing the
character, deciding upon complex motivation, etc. According to playwright, David Henry Hwang:

At its core, a stereotype is bad writing: a one- or two-dimensional cutout devoid of humanity, and therefore prone to demonization. Whether one’s characters are cooks, laundrymen, computer scientists or gangsters, if they are all well written, they will exude humanity which is ultimately the most effective weapon against stereotypes, and the most visceral measure of authenticity.¹⁴²

Hwang attempted to correct some of the issues of identity and representation by writing a brand new book for *Flower*. Taking a darker slant on the story and exploring the difficulties experienced by Asian Americans in the mid-twentieth century, Hwang sought to premiere a more culturally sensitive *Flower*. His new script utilized and exaggerated certain stereotypes in order to display their absurdity and meaninglessness. The show was met with mixed reviews, many of the negative comments coming from either devotees of the original or those who took the stereotypes at face-value, not considering Hwang’s underlying purposes. Hwang’s revival indeed brought new life to the musical, though the show did not experience the same success as the original, playing only 169 shows on Broadway.¹⁴³

Hwang premiered his re-imagined version of *Flower Drum Song* on Broadway in 2002. While retaining most of the original songs, Hwang produced his new book with the intention of preserving the spirit and tone of both C. Y. Lee’s novel and

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¹⁴² David Henry Hwang, introduction to *Flower Drum Song*, Libretto (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), xiv. Hwang’s invocation of “authenticity” calls for further examination beyond the scope of this paper.


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Hammerstein’s libretto, with the additional goal of “feel[ing] relevant and moving to more culturally sophisticated, contemporary audiences.” The resulting story includes characters that (mostly) go by the same names as in the earlier version, a romantic leading lady from China, and her love interest, a Chinese-American. Much of the story centers around a theater—the Golden Pearl Theatre—which becomes a nightclub during the play. While the nightclub is an important part of the 1958 musical, it is virtually nonexistent in Lee’s 1957 novel. Though Hwang strove to evoke the spirit of the original show, he made little effort to preserve Hammerstein and Fields’ plot—ostensibly to steer away from the offensive stereotypes that riddled the first incarnation of the musical.

This reimagining of the piece involves significant shifting and re-arranging of the score. Songs are reassigned to different characters and reinterpreted to fit alternative situations. Compare “A Hundred Million Miracles” from Hwang’s version to that of the 1958 production. Hwang’s musical opens poignantly with a light drum beat (the flower drum figure established in Rodger’s original version) and Mei Li’s opening line “My father says…” Her voice is doubled by a flute, and later, by the pipa (four-stringed Chinese lute). The half cadence in the fourth measure of the original version has been stricken, leaving only a monophonic melody in place of Rodgers’s functional western harmony. Immediately, the audience encounters a melody line with no sense of harmonic progression (and even a touch of heterophony when the pipa ornaments a note). As the

144 David Henry Hwang, “Introduction,” Flower Drum Song (2003), xi. Hwang also states his desire to create a book that “Hammerstein might have wanted to write had he been Asian American…” The use of the word “sophisticated” indicates a judgment and creation of an intellectual hierarchy indicating the more advanced attitudes of today’s audiences. Perhaps a better description would have been “culturally sensitive” or aware.
song continues, Western style harmonization certainly comes into play, but the
orchestration also includes an instrumental break featuring a heterophonic melody played
by pipa and dizi (transverse flute with a rice-paper membrane creating its distinct timbre).
Mei Li’s second verse is accompanied by erhu (two-stringed spike fiddle). The presence
of instruments commonly used in Chinese folk music sets Don Sebesky’s orchestration
(2002) apart from Robert Russell Bennett’s (1958). The result is still a score of
Broadway show tunes with an “Oriental inflection” composed by Rodgers, but now the
audience has the opportunity to hear some of the timbres that Rodgers and Bennett’s
score only suggested. It now presents a sound more blended than assimilated. Rather
than singing about the miracle of weather as in the 1958 musical, Mei Li abandons this
verse to instead explain the miracle of song.¹⁴⁵

As stated above, Hwang uses this song as the prologue to open the musical rather
than resurrecting Rodgers’s overture. During the prologue, the action begins in China
allowing the audience to observe the establishing of the People’s Republic of China and
subsequent hardships of dissidents. Mei Li’s father is abducted by the Chinese
government for his political views, and Mei Li finds herself fleeing to the United States
with other refugees. Adding a back story to the piece—allowing the audience to connect
the song with tangible, painful memories of Mei Li’s father and her (soon to be) past—
attaches a new emotion to the song. The simple melody and lyrics, discussed earlier in
this essay, imply a certain childlikeness to this piece. Yet the context now, perhaps,

¹⁴⁵ These lyrics appear in the original handwritten score of *A Hundred Million Miracles* and are used in the
film, but are not part of the libretto published in 1959.
justifies this aspect—a young woman struggles to keep the memory of her father and (pre-communist) childhood home alive as she heads into the unknown. The flower drum song, as the metaphoric centerpiece of the musical, once stood as a simple message of hope highlighting the Otherness of the performers. Hwang’s reinterpretation of the piece, however, breathes a more complex emotionality into the flower drum song.

The original production of Flower became a hit running 600 performances on Broadway, having a successful tour, and being adapted to the silver screen. The timing of this musical may have been strategic for Rodgers and Hammerstein (this success bringing an end to an eight-year slump for the pair) but it also hit American popular entertainment at a politically tumultuous time. Having recently come out of the McCarthy “witch hunt” era, the US was still deeply embroiled in Cold War anxieties and anti-Communist sentiments. In June of 1958, just six months before Flower opened on Broadway, the House of Un-American Activities Committee held a public hearing in New York City to ferret out Communists from among the ranks of the entertainment industry.\footnote{NBC, CBS Firing of Dubin, Papp In Red Probe Cues CLU Protest,” Variety, Vol. 211 No 4 (June 25, 1958).} The New York stage walked a precarious path as a platform for spreading ideas, yet a highly visible target thus necessarily restricted.

Chinese immigration was more strictly regulated than that from other nations. Not until the Immigration Act of 1965 did Chinese receive equal treatment and opportunity to establish new life in the US.\footnote{Him Mark Lai, 267.} Meanwhile, the Civil Rights movement continued to gain momentum directing public consciousness to the lives of the hitherto
ignored and oppressed groups among the American population. David H. Lewis suggests that, in addition to African Americans, other minority groups were “emboldened” to protest existing stereotypes thrust upon them. Asian Americans sought to define themselves.\textsuperscript{148} The change in attitudes, or rather in the vocalizing of those attitudes, may have marked the beginning of the end for Flower. Lewis pinpoints a particular performance in 1983 that received criticism from the educated Chinese American class of San Francisco. And so, Flower Drum Song effectively disappeared.\textsuperscript{149}

David Henry Hwang confesses in the Introduction to his version of the musical that he experienced a love-hate relationship with the work. As a young Chinese American, it was refreshing to see very human depictions of Chinese and Chinese Americans tangled up in believable romances and singing and dancing to jazzy tunes. His attitude changed, however, when he entered college and began writing stage works of his own: “Along with other writers of color, we Asian Americans sought to define our own identities, rather than permitting those images to be drawn by mainstream society, which had done such a poor job of portraying us in my youth.”\textsuperscript{150} The stereotypes rampant in 1950s America were thrown into sharp relief as time passed and society became more socially conscious. Karen Wada, in the Afterword of Hwang’s rewrite highlights an important question: “why were they (Rodgers and Hammerstein) taking a chance on Chinese Americans?” She suggests that this show might have allowed them to utilize their chosen media to “satisf(y) their penchant for pushing liberal values or poking

\textsuperscript{148} David H. Lewis, 118-119.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{150} David Henry Hwang, “Introduction,” Flower Drum Song (2003), ix-x.
the status quo…” Indeed, *Flower* broke away from previous portrayals of Chinatown as sinister and too culturally far-removed from mainstream America to be relatable. It also created opportunities for Asian actors to play significant roles on stage and screen—roles with the dimension and complexity that were frequently lacking in popular entertainment.

Hwang came back to *Flower* with a new ambition—to write the libretto Hammerstein would have written had he been Asian American. He hoped to preserve Rodgers’s music, but rewrite the story with a darker tone, intending to capture some of the grittier elements of C. Y. Lee’s novel. The result is a musical drama that deliberately flouts stereotypes in order to subvert them. Hwang retains most of the songs from the original version, even adding one that was cut from the 1958 show (“My Best Love”). The story, however, is an entirely new entity.

The show opens with a prologue based around the song “A Hundred Million Miracles” as described previously in this paper. When the refugee, Mei Li, arrives in San Francisco with no father, a flower drum her only possession, she seeks out Wang Chi Yang—an old family friend. This Wang Chi Yang is a dedicated actor of Chinese opera who refuses to accept the imminent demise of this small opera theater. His son, Wang Ta, has a bolder, more “American” dream—to turn the theater into a strip club and entice white men to come in and drop large sums to see Chinese girls revealing all. Mei Li summarily falls in love with Wang Ta who is beguiled by Miss Grant Avenue herself,

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Linda Low. Linda has no interest in Ta and gives a rather poignant speech expressing her frustrations with the social climate of the time period (here 1960). Ta pushes her to explain why she only dates white men. Linda, exasperated, retorts, “We all wanna be Americans—like everyone else. When I’m out with my boyfriends, no one ever says to me, ‘Go back to where you came from.’ Is that so terrible? To feel now and then like I actually belong here?”

Hwang’s telling of *Flower Drum Song*, while retaining very little of Lee’s original story does attempt to portray some of the difficulties and frustrations experienced by Asian Americans living in mid-twentieth century America—feelings reflected in Lee’s characters. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields essentially left the darker sides of immigrant life out of their musical comedy.

Mei Li, seeing that Wang Ta has no interest in her, decides to travel to Hong Kong with another recent immigrant, allowing him to sell her father’s flower drum to pay the fare. Wang Ta, discovering his true feelings for Mei Li, seeks her out to express his love.

Meanwhile, back at the theater, Wang Chi Yang has discovered the joys of performing to a packed house and begins to create characters and acts that exploit and magnify stereotypes, eventually turning the show into what Wang Ta calls “some kind of weird Oriental minstrel show.” The musical ends with a sort of role reversal—Wang Chi Yang as the night club performer, and Wang Ta creating new Chinese opera with Mei Li.

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from “Flower Drum Song”
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Chapter 7: Summary, Interpretation, and Conclusions

*Flower Drum Song* remains to this day one of the only Broadway musicals to feature an all Asian and Asian American cast of characters. Its positive outcomes—providing job opportunities for Asian performers; showing a different side of Chinese America than had hitherto been seen—must be considered and weighed with its negative—perpetuating stereotypes and power hierarchies.

My intention was to approach this piece as a product of its time and to situate it historically. Rather than immediately dismissing the piece as an offensive artifact, I hoped to grasp the significance of *Flower* in its time and to understand the changes in its meaning by recognizing changes in political attitudes. To better comprehend this musical, I have done a close reading of the score, the 1958/9 libretto, the 2002/3 libretto, and the novel (1957), and briefly discussed the history and politics affecting Chinese Americans beginning in the nineteenth century. Musical analysis has revealed Orientalist tropes and Othering constructs that, when in combination with elements like costuming, staging, and dialogue, come to signify Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields’ imagined China. This nostalgic and fictitious China is pitted against the modern, fast-paced USA, and the characters living in the world of *Flower* find their proper places along the constructed spectrum of Americanness (modernity) and Chineseness (tradition).
Consigning this piece to the dustbin of history may not be the wisest course of action. However, any ethical performances of the original script must necessarily be approached in a new, more culturally-sensitive way—acknowledging unjust and unequal circumstances, and presenting real characters rather than contrived stereotypes. Anyone to take on such a task needs to be informed about its historical/political context and conscientious about creating a nuanced performance. A company that chooses to perform the original 1958 script of *Flower* could reinterpret character motivations to create a more informed and culturally-sensitive performance, demonstrating the irony and absurdity inherent in the stereotypes found here. A careful balance may be difficult to achieve, as irony could come across as cynicism and possibly undermine the efforts of the venture.

By nature, a musical is a spectacle—it has been written and rehearsed to be performed and to be seen. The challenge facing the creative team who chooses to take on *Flower* is to make certain that it does not become a spectacle of Otherness or Orientalism. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Fields’ *Flower Drum Song* is an opportunity for producers, directors, cast, crew, and audience to consider the history of racial relations, politics, and discrimination in the United States. However, the most effective way to do this—or at least, most straightforward—is to use this material in educational settings, situating the piece in its historical and political context in order to promote a dialogue—perhaps performing excerpts framed by open-ended discussions about the material.

David Henry Hwang’s revival of *Flower* with a new book proved an interesting experiment—a complete revamping of one of the forgettable collaborations of an iconic
team. Edney points out that total “revisals” of musical comedies are not unheard of, and that Hwang re-imagined Flower as a musical play,\textsuperscript{155} intending to infuse the musical with drama more in line with Lee’s 1957 novel. Lasting only 169 performances on Broadway,\textsuperscript{156} it seems that the revived musical has not made a noticeable mark in mainstream theater.

Regardless of the show’s current status, Flower still holds an important place in the history of musical theater. It remains today one of the few major Broadway and Hollywood productions centered on the lives of Asian Americans; it provided opportunities for Asian actors to play roles that were less clichéd and two-dimensional. True—Flower is now regarded as out-of-date, stereotypical material. However, at its time, it was a more forward-looking production. As Arved Ashby has pointed out, it is those pieces that are intended to be most progressive that very quickly become defunct and outdated.\textsuperscript{157} Perhaps the musical was a forward step in history, opening doors for today’s society—allowing us the opportunity to examine it and deem it effective or obsolete. In any case, ignoring Flower Drum Song or simply writing it off from the start would have been the simpler approach to this material and would also have disrespected the memories of not only the writers, but the casts and crews through the years and the plight of the Asian American performing community. There are rich stories to be told in conjunction with Flower Drum Song musicologically and ethnographically. This writer

\textsuperscript{155} Kathryn Edney, 115, 150.


\textsuperscript{157} Arved Ashby, in discussion with the author, October 2012.
hopes to be a part of the larger dialogue that continues to study works of musical theater as cultural expressions and artifacts revealing attitudes and perspectives of their given time period.
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Appendix A: Additional Sources

The following sources were utilized during my research into this topic, but were not directly cited in the body of the thesis.


Appendix B: Copy of Permission Letter from Williamson Music, a Division of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization

Rodgers & Hammerstein 229 West 28th Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001
Telephone (212) 541-6600 Fax (212) 489 6637 www.rnh.com

April 11, 2013
Sabina Thalheim
5041 Godown Road
Columbus, OH 43220

RE: You Are Beautiful; A Hundred Million Miracles; I Enjoy Being a Girl; Chop Suey; Don’t Marry Me; Grant Avenue; Love Look Away; Fan Tan Fanny; Gliding through My Memoree; Sunday

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