ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE HISTORY
FROM THE 1960S TO 1990S:
ACTORS, PLAYWRIGHTS,
COMMUNITIES, AND PRODUCERS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

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* * * * *

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This dissertation surveys the history of Asian American theatre from the 1960s through the 1990s. Asian American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s began as an artistic response to both the civil rights and Asian American movements that fought for racial equality and self-defined identity. As community-based organizations, Asian American theatre companies emerged not only to protest racial misrepresentations but also to create positive representations of Asian American culture. These companies also sought to create new employment opportunities for Asian American theatre artists. In chapter one, I provide a brief summary of Asian American history from the nineteenth century to the 1960s and 1970s in order to provide an historical context. In chapter two, I describe the beginning years of the first professional Asian American theatre companies and establish an organizational structure for the following chapters. Chapter three focuses on specific case studies and issues of the 1980s, including multicultural education, color-blind casting policy, and second-wave Asian American playwrights such as David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda. Chapter four includes an analysis of the Miss Saigon controversy and a discussion of new performance groups in the 1990s.

Each chapter is divided into four sections: actors, playwrights, communities, and management. While these four categories represent the founding agendas of the first four
companies, they also encompass major issues that have shaped Asian American theatre
during the last three decades. The issues related to actors include not only training,
growing professionalism, and acting styles, but also the complex matter of identity. The
role of playwrights in Asian American theatre is discussed in the context of
commercialism, cultural authenticity, and literary legitimacy. The challenges of audience
development have been intrinsically connected to community identities—which assume the
highly contested concept of pan-ethnicity. And in relation to communities, theatre
companies face the difficulties of developing a viable management model. I conclude the
dissertation with an examination of the first meeting of Asian American theatre artistic
directors in 1999 in Seattle.
Dedicated to my parents,
Kwang Su Kim and Kyong Cha Kim
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PUBLICATIONS

Book Review

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INTRODUCTION

This project began with a simple query about Asian American theatre, about who the participants were, what happened when they worked together, and when and in what order the historical events occurred. But to my surprise, the scholarship on Asian American theatre was virtually non-existent when I first began my research. This lack is even more surprising after finding out about its rich and complex history that goes back at least to 1965 and arguably as far back as the nineteenth century. The first professional Asian American theatre company, the East West Players (Los Angeles), was founded in 1965 by a group of actors who wanted the opportunity to play non-stereotypical roles. Three decades later, more than thirty active Asian American theatre companies and performance groups exist in the country. The number of Asian American playwrights grew from virtually none in 1965 to hundreds in 1999. Many writers have received national recognition and continue to expand the genre with increasing diversity in content and dramaturgical styles. Asian American actors, designers, directors, and producers have also grown not only in number and but also in artistic quality. Despite these developments in Asian American theatre, it has yet to receive historical study. Currently, the only book written specifically on Asian American theatre history is Yuko Kurahashi's *Asian
American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players (1999), which covers the history of the East West Players from 1965 to 1989. Another important book on Asian American theatre is Josephine Lee’s Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage (1997), which examines a selection of Asian American plays from the perspective of critical and literary theories of racial representation and perception. Like Lee’s book, most studies on Asian American theatre have focused on the literary aspects of Asian American theatre. Several anthologies of Asian American plays have been published, and some editors have provided brief historical studies in their introductions. For instance, Roberta Uno’s introduction to Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women (1993) is one of the first surveys of Asian American theatre history.

Like my initial query, the preliminary research process for this project was simple. I started by interviewing questions to several Asian American theatre actors, playwrights, and artistic directors in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and New York City. As I met and talked to these artists, one fact became clear: everybody in the Asian American theatre community is linked together professionally (and often personally). Over the course of two years, one interview led to another, and by early summer of 2000, I had interviewed over forty Asian American theatre artists. Each interview became a piece of the puzzle, so, progressively, the basic chronology of events and specific activities of the artists began to make sense. However, while I began to understand what happened when and who participated, one question emerged and persisted: why Asian American theatre? For most interviewees, doing theatre as Asian Americans has been a struggle with very little
recognition and reward. Mainstream theatre rarely took notice of Asian American theatre, and only a very few artists such as playwright David Henry Hwang and actor John Lone "broke through." Even within the Asian American community, theatre artists had to constantly justify their occupation and activities. Asian American theatre’s survival for over three decades could not have been possible without the sacrifices of Asian American theatre artists, most of who lived and breathed theatre twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. As the following chapters reveal, they had more reasons to quit than to continue their efforts to survive both artistically and administratively. Thus, the more I talked to these artists, the more I began to wonder "why?".

Although I was aware of the differences in individual answers, I wanted to find a theoretical framework to answer the "why" question. The concept of "Asian American" has served to organize this study, but it is a problematic designation. Likewise, as I explain in chapter three, section three, the concept of pan-ethnicity is both misleading and inappropriate. For example, an immigrant from Vietnam does not consider herself an "Asian American" before arriving in America. Only as an American resident of Asian heritage is she an "Asian American." The identity is not chosen by her; the label is automatically imposed on her without her consent. Within this involuntary and imposed pan-Asian American community, Asian American theatre is a voluntary activity that attempts to reconstruct the Asian American community and to redefine the Asian American identity. And Asian American theatre is a voluntary cultural intervention because it not only challenges the imposed status quo but also attempts to offer a revised conception of Asian America.
Moreover, theatre artists volunteer not because of practicality or financial reward but because of theatre’s intervening strengths such as creative expression, collaboration, and audience reception. For over three decades, Asian American theatre artists have created a unique cultural product based strongly in community. On stage, they enacted various Asian American identities and challenged the mainstream stereotypes. They presented stories never told in other venues. And they touched the hearts of Asian American audience members, many of whom saw themselves and their lives for the first time on stage. For instance, on the Seattle premiere night of Philip Kan Gotanda’s *The Wash* in 1990, the audience at the Northwest Asian American Theatre was predominantly *nisei* (second generation Japanese Americans). The play, which is about a *nisei* couple, resonated deeply with the audience. And when the play ended, instead of applauding, the audience remained silent for a while, and the entire theatre was filled with a heavy emotional tension. The audience then broke out a loud applause, but the silence before the applause was filled with an unspoken collective acknowledgement that something amazing had just happened on stage. For the first time the aging members of the *nisei* generation in Seattle saw their own lives on stage. Their stories were told in a beautiful, well-crafted way. For many Asian American theatre artists, moments such as this provided ample reasons to continue doing theatre. These artists believe in the power of Asian American theatre as voluntary cultural intervention in an involuntary and imposed community.

The main purpose of this dissertation is to tell the stories of Asian American theatre artists from the 1960s to the 1990s. The stories include who, what, when, and why of Asian American theatre, told in a chronological order. However, my overview is far from
complete. For instance, it lacks a discussion of the significance of gender in Asian American theatre history, although several crucial gender issues are mentioned. Other issues of identity and community—including the tension between interculturalism and multiculturalism, assimilation, labeling, generational conflict, inter-ethnic variance, and commercialism—are discussed briefly, but they need to be explored in depth in future studies that can take up specific issues more comprehensively. Moreover, because I conducted the interviews while writing the chapters, not all information from the interviews has been incorporated. I hope to produce a more complete survey of Asian American theatre history in future revisions of this project.

For now, this dissertation outlines the basic aspects of Asian American theatre. I focus on actors, playwrights, communities, and management, which I link together. As historian Jaques Barzun has recently said, “Linking is particularly important in cultural history, because culture is a web of many strands; none is spun by itself, nor is any cut off at a fixed date like wars and regimes.”¹ This work highlights the major links created by the Asian American theatre artists who crossed paths and actively volunteered to participate in cultural expression and reconstruction.

I must emphasize, however, that I have had to be selective in my description and interpretation of key events, in part because I must depend on the views of the interviewees, who themselves represent a select part of a larger, more comprehensive narrative. Also, many interviewees do not agree on the facts that serve to document this history. The result is a Roshomon-like history, in which everyone tells a different version of an event. It is fitting, then, that a stage version of Roshomon was the first production
presented by the East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company in 1965.²

*Rashomon* serves appropriately as a metaphor for Asian American theatre history, and the different versions of the story allow the rich complexity of the history to begin to emerge into the history of American theatre. This Rashomon-like, complex network of history has been a pleasant contradiction to the initial simplicity of my query and approach. Although not all complexities and contradictions are explored, I do point to the “links” and hope that the readers will get a glimpse of the truth of Asian American theatre history from the 1960s to the 1990s.
CHAPTER 1

Asian American theatre in the 1960s and the 1970s began as an artistic response to both the civil rights and Asian American movements that fought for racial equality and self-defined identity. As community-based organizations, Asian American theatre companies emerged not only to protest racial misrepresentations but also to create positive representations of Asian American culture. In addition, the companies sought to create new employment opportunities for theatre artists. Based in major cities around the country, these theatre companies played a central role in defining the newly formed pan-Asian identity, thus providing actors, playwrights, producers and audience members with venues through which self-expression and self-representation became possible. In this chapter, I will trace the historical events that contributed to the beginning stages of Asian American theatre. I will examine the conditions and contexts of Asian American history and explain how they influenced the Asian American Movement, and I will offer a brief history of theatrical activities by Asian Americans before the 1960s.

Part I: A Brief History of Asian America

Although the term “Asian American movement” refers specifically to the political activism that started in the 1960s, the seeds for protest and resistance began with the first
Asian immigrants to America in the nineteenth century. Asian Americans have a long history of “fighting for equality and justice, using its members’ common cultural heritage and ethnic identity as the basis for collective action” (Wei 1). When the first Asians immigrated to America in the nineteenth century, Euro-Americans viewed them as members of “inferior races” like other non-whites. Sucheng Chan identifies seven categories of hostility against Asian immigrants: prejudice, economic discrimination, political disenfranchisement, physical violence, immigration exclusion, social segregation, and incarceration (Chan 45). In order to counter oppression in the U.S. and to provide themselves with mutual aid and systems of communication, early Asian immigrants formed organizations that functioned as community centers. The Chinese formed the first such association in San Francisco in 1851. In 1882, the first formal umbrella association called Zhonghua Huiguan (Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association which later acquired the nickname “Chinese Six Companies”) was formed out of the need to unite smaller groups of Chinese to fight anti-Chinese legislation (Chan 65). Other Asian ethnic groups followed with similar organizations: the Japanese Association of America in 1908, Taehan Kookmin-hoe (Korean National Association or KNA) in 1909, the gurdwara or Sikh temple that served as the Indian community center in 1912, and Caballeros de Dimas Alang, Inc. (fraternal organization of Filipinos) in 1921 (Tsang 6).

In general, Asian immigrants organized themselves on two kinds of foundations: “primordial ties, such as common locality or dialect, kinship bonds, and religious affinity; and pragmatic interests, such as the desire to secure economic advantages or achieve political ends” (Chan 63). For instance, before the Chinese Six Companies was formed,
Chinese immigrants helped each other according to family or clan associations (i.e. those who had the same surnames, spoke the same dialect, or had similar religious beliefs). These associations provided many kinds of services: giving monetary loans, sending letters and money to China, settling quarrels, building altars and temples, and caring for the sick and indigent. They even shipped the exhumed bones of the dead to China for proper burial. These smaller groups formed coalitions with others for mutual benefit but continued to operate within common nationalities. The concept of pan-Asian identity had not yet been formulated, and these divisions reflected larger political relations among Asian countries. During the second half of the nineteenth century, regions of major American cities were occupied by Asian immigrants who formed their own "towns" such as Chinatown in San Francisco and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

Between 1850 and 1930, almost one million Asian immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and India came to the United States, and approximately 35 million European, East European, and Russian immigrants entered during the same decades (Chan 3). Most Asians immigrated as the cheapest laborers that entrepreneurs could find for sugarcane plantation in Hawaii, transcontinental railroad construction and gold mines in the continental U. S. Some European-Americans viewed the Asian laborers as having economic value while others felt threatened by their increasing numbers. America was caught between the need for cheap labor and the fear of allowing entry to Chinese and "Mongolians" who, like "Negroes" and "Mexicans" were excluded from permanent immigration. Numerous laws were passed -- starting with a California law in 1858 that barred entry of Chinese and "Mongolians" -- in order to control the number of Asian
immigrant workers and to make sure that they did not settle in the United States once their contract was fulfilled.

In order to discourage permanent immigration of families, the anti-Chinese laws prohibited wives of laborers from entering America. This prohibition created a predominantly male Chinese population which, in 1890, had a ratio of twenty-nine men to one woman. However, no law prohibited Japanese women, and a great number of them came as “picture brides.” The primary purpose of these laws was to minimize the number of Asian immigrants who wanted to make America their new home. At first, laws such as the Page Law of 1875 barred entry to “Chinese, Japanese, and ‘Mongolian’ prostitutes, felons, and contract laborers.” In 1882, the Chinese Exclusionary Law suspended immigration of laborers for ten years, and in 1892, the law was renewed for another ten years and required all Chinese to register. In 1902, in addition to another ten-year renewal of the law banning Chinese immigration, police in major cities raided Chinatowns and arrested those who allegedly had not registered. And in 1924, the Immigration Act closed the door to virtually all Asians, along with other immigrants.3

Asian immigrants challenged and resisted the exclusion laws with every possible method they could find. For instance, the Chinese Six Companies hired a group of European-American lawyers to defend the rights of its members from 1882 to the first half of the twentieth century. Asian immigrants fought the exclusion laws in numerous court battles, demonstrations, and strikes, but not until 1965 did immigrants from Asian countries receive treatment equal to other immigrants when the new Immigration Law abolished the “national origins” quotas. In order to counter anti-Asian sentiment, Asian
immigrants built schools, churches, and temples where they not only maintained their
cultural heritage but also taught themselves Western ways of living. As early as 1884, the
Chinese Six Companies started a Chinese language school in San Francisco.

During the 1920s and 1930s, as the number of American-born Asians increased,
members of the older generation felt obligated to teach their traditional ways. At the same
time, though, they wanted to see the second generation accepted and assimilated into
American culture. As American-born citizens, the second generation Asians now had
access to public education and other rights enjoyed by European American citizens.
However, they often faced uncertainties about how to define themselves. They knew that
they were different from their parents, yet they hated the stereotypes imposed by
Euro-Americans. Moreover, although they had the rights and privileges of being
American citizens, they were denied full participation because of racial discrimination.
These American-born Asians protested vigorously against their lack of political and human
rights (Tsang 8).

World War II, more than any other event in the U.S. history, brought major
changes, improvements, and turmoil to Asians in America. For example, European
Americans began to view the different nationalities among Asians according to American
diplomatic relations towards individual nations. The conditions for Chinese, Korean,
Filipino, and Asian Indian descendants improved because their ancestral nations were
allies of the U.S. “Four positive changes took place: the images held by the general public
of these groups improved, some of their members finally managed to get jobs in the
technical professions and skilled trades, sizable numbers of Chinese and Filipinos joined
and served in the armed forces, and immigration exclusion was lifted for the Chinese in 1943 and for Filipinos and Asian Indians in 1946 after the war ended” (Chan 121). In the 1940s, the Chinese were seen as “hardworking, strong, persevering, kind toward children, respectful towards elders, admirable and lovable,” whereas earlier in the century they were seen as “unintelligent, strange, exotic, gamblers, opium addicts, and even dangerous” (Lyman 162). The Japanese, on the other hand, were seen as “treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike” (162). Accordingly, the Japanese, including those who were U.S. citizens, were perceived by most Americans as evil foreigners and potential spies who could not be trusted.

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were forced to move to relocation camps designated by the Department of Justice. Some policymakers -- including Attorney General Francis Biddles -- opposed the relocation, but on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, allowing the evacuation. The order authorized the Secretary of War and the Military Commanders to “impose discretion” to “any or all persons.”4 In other words, the order did not specify the Japanese as a group to be evacuated. However, President Roosevelt discouraged the evacuation of Germans and Italians, and emphasized the “military necessity” of evacuating the Japanese who were “strangers from a different shore” (Takaki 392). The supporters of the order did not distinguish Japanese from Japanese Americans. The Secretary of War, General DeWitt, justified the racist categorization: “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed
of United States citizenship, have become ‘Americanized,’ the racial strains are undiluted....It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today.”5

The news of the evacuation divided the Japanese American community. Some challenged the unconstitutionality of the order, and others followed it to prove their loyalty to America. Most had no choice but to follow the evacuation orders. In the internment camps, the question of loyalty haunted the Japanese Americans who lost trust in the American government. In February 1943, the government required the internees to answer loyalty questionnaires. Of the twenty-eight questions, the last two bothered the Japanese Americans the most. Question twenty-seven asked all able men, “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?” And question twenty-eight asked everyone, “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?” These questions befuddled and angered the internees. They struggled with question twenty-eight which assumed that all internees were loyal to the Japanese emperor by default. Also, *nisei* (second generation) men had to decide whether they wanted to fight for the country that had put them and their families into internment camps. Most answered “yes” to both questions, but some protested by answering “no” to both and acquired the infamous label, “no no boy.”
Even after the war, the loyalty question created a deep wound in the Japanese American community. The novelist John Okada confesses in his novel, *No No Boy*, "I'm not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American." Okada's vivid account of the Nisei experience was an exception; most Japanese Americans chose to remain silent and invisible. In contrast to the "no no boys," 33,000 Nisei served in the U.S. Armed Forces, and for them, the war provided an opportunity to claim their rights as Americans. When they came home, the Japanese Americans had lost trust and unity as a community. Some went back to the West Coast, but many went to the other parts of the country under the advice of President Roosevelt who wanted them "scattered" (Takaki 404).

The war had an opposite effect on the Chinese, Filipino, and Korean communities. When Filipino Americans heard the news that Japan had bombed the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, many rushed to recruiting offices to volunteer in the U.S. Armed Forces. Initially, they were refused for being "nationals." The Filipino Americans insisted on volunteering, and President Roosevelt changed the draft law to include them. The Filipino Infantry Regiments fought with great distinction, and on February 20, 1943, twelve hundred Filipino American soldiers became American citizens. Also, encouraged by the government, many Filipino Americans took over the farms and houses vacated by Japanese Americans. Before the war, many Filipinos had worked for Japanese Americans as laborers and houseboys. After the war, they not only owned property but also found employment opportunities in the technical and office related fields.

For Korean Americans, the news of the Pearl Harbor bombing was reason for celebration. They had been asking the U.S. government to enter the war to fight Japan's
annexation of Korea. Korean Americans shouted “Korea for Victory with America” and “Long Live Korean Independence!” (Takaki 654-5). However, the war also brought much pain and confusion to Korean Americans. The Alien Registration Act of 1940 classified Koreans as “subjects of Japan” and “enemy aliens.” Following protests, Korean Americans were allowed to wear badges with the statement “I am Korean.” Some Korean nationalists supported the evacuation of Japanese Americans while others criticized it. Since most Koreans spoke Japanese, they were often employed as translators and propaganda broadcasters in the Pacific front. Although the immigration laws for them did not improve, Korean Americans gained recognition and acceptance for their efforts in defeating Japan.

For Chinese Americans, the war brought major changes in immigration laws. The Chinese Exclusion Law, first introduced in 1870, was finally repealed in 1943. Like Filipino and Korean Americans, Chinese Americans were eager to participate in the war efforts by joining the U. S. Armed Forces and buying war bonds. For the first time, Chinese Americans felt accepted by America. In the international context, the repeal of the Exclusion Law represented more than permitting war participation. Japanese propaganda in Asia used the Exclusion Law to highlight contradictions in the American Constitution. America feared that the war could lead to a conflict of “the entire oriental world behind Japanese leadership” against “the occidental world” (Takaki 378). In order to prevent a race war and to keep China as an ally, the Exclusion Law had to be repealed. China was, as a Chicago newspaper declared, the “White hope” in the East (378).
The repeal of the Exclusion Law did not have an immediate effect on Chinese Americans. The annual quota of Chinese immigration was only 105, and during the first ten years, an annual average of fifty-nine immigrated to the U.S. Also, to achieve naturalized citizenship, Chinese Americans had to prove their legal immigration status and pass tests for English competency and their knowledge of American history and the Constitution. During the first eight years after the repeal, only 1,428 Chinese Americans were naturalized (Takaki 378). The real impact of the repeal was psychological for Chinese Americans; they had to wait until 1965 for the Exclusion Law to be lifted in its entirety.

After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States emerged as one of the world’s super powers. During the Cold War years, the Soviet Union and the United States competed for countries in Asia, and the situation in the Asian continent directly influenced Asian Americans. China became a Communist country, and Japan became America’s “junior partner” in “containing” communism. Within a decade, the perception and treatment of Japanese and Chinese Americans reversed. While Chinese Americans were viewed with suspicion and occasionally harassed, well-educated Japanese Americans began to enter the mainstream of American society. In 1950, war broke out in Korea as the Soviet Union, with China, vied for the entire peninsula, and the U.S. struggled to maximize its control in the area. As the Cold War continued into the 1960s, Asian Americans “worked hard, complained little, and kept silent,” probably because they did not want to be suspected as communists or un-American (Chan 142).
In the 1960s and 1970s, the population of Asian Americans and new Asian immigrants grew exponentially as two acts of Congress allowed more Asians to enter the U.S. and the number of American-born Asians increased. The McCarran-Walter Act (1952) and the Immigration Act (1965) virtually lifted all prohibitions and allowed a large number of Asians to enter America. These two acts brought approximately two million Asian quota immigrants, two million nonquota immigrants, and one million refugees to America from 1965 to 1990. During the same time, “some 800,000 Asian students, tourists, and businessmen in the U.S. on temporary visas have adjusted their status and become permanent residents” (Chan 147). With the new influx of Asian immigrants, second and third generation Asian Americans began to unite to voice their opinions and to find their identities.

The Asian American Movement in the 1960s and 1970s

It was during the civil rights movement in the 1960s that Asians in America first felt the need to organize themselves for political activism and pan-Asian identity. College-educated Asian Americans participated in what is now known as “The Asian American Movement” by borrowing rhetoric from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Mao, and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. For instance, on November 17, 1969, a group of Asian Americans staged a guerilla street theatre performance to protest the arrival of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and to call for the removal of American military bases in Japan. About 250 people participated in the rally at Dupont Circle in Washington D.C. The performers, mostly from Asian Americans for Action, used the Chinese-style
dragon to portray Uncle Sam “swallowing up third-world groups” (The Washington Post, November 18, 1969. Section A3). Asian Americans, for the first time in American history, participated in the democratic movement to make social change specific to their culture.

Despite the fact that Asian Americans’ contributions to the civil rights movement were not insignificant, the Asian American movement was usually “invisible,” just as Asian Americans were labeled the “silent minority.” Several factors contributed to this invisibility. For one, Asians constituted one of the smallest minority groups in the United States. Their sense of pan-Asian identity had not yet fully emerged, and no Asian American leader had gained national recognition. Even civil rights historians have ignored the Asian American movement. As William Wei demonstrates as recently as 1990, some of the major historians writing on the civil rights movement have omitted Asian Americans. Even the prominent Asian American historian, Ronald Takaki, has been criticized for leaving out the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s in his Strangers from a Different Shore.

This historical silence on the formative years of the Asian American Movement may be explained by the notion that Asian Americans merely imitated other ethnic minorities and were not able to accomplish any social change on their own. In other words, Asian Americans were the benefactors, not the leaders, of the civil rights movement which was fought with such rigor and sacrifice by African Americans. This view assumes that the civil rights movement mostly involved blacks and whites while people of other colors were passive participants. However, this view is precisely the reason that Asian Americans formed their own organizations and worked to create their sense of pan-Asian identity.
On the West Coast, community activists focused on improving the condition of San Francisco's Chinatown, and Asian American college students campaigned to include ethnic studies in the general curriculum. Asian American student activists participated in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) which consisted of students of color and "progressive European Americans" who believed that people in the Third World had to be liberated from U.S. imperialism. From November 1968 to March 1969, members of the TWLF rallied at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley to demand an ethnic studies program in which the faculty and the curriculum would be controlled by minority students. Although the students' requests were not fully met, the strikes were successful. Ethnic Studies programs were created at both San Francisco State and the University of California, Berkeley, and other programs soon followed in California and other parts of the country.

College students on the East Coast (mostly from Columbia University and Yale University) followed the model set by the activists at the University of California, Berkeley. They also rallied for Asian American studies program on their campuses, but the movement was not as centralized as the one in California. Instead, some students took on anti-imperialist issues as their organizing principle and participated in groups such as the Asian American Political Alliance that identified "with the antiwar and black liberation movement" (Wei 25).

Most of the first organizations of the Asian American movement struggled with internal conflicts and external intrusion. Some members found the political issues too radical while others found the focus on cultural identity too traditional. The older
generation was concerned with U.S. foreign policy towards their homelands and with teaching their children the old culture and customs they had left behind. The younger people wanted to emulate the political action of the black power movement and to be more aggressive in their protest against the Vietnam War. Moreover, they felt that creating pan-Asian American identity was the only way to find solidarity and "new culture" for second and third generation Asian Americans.

The Foundation of Asian American Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s in the Contexts of the Movement and Other Ethnic Theatres

For mainstream European and American theatre, the 1960s and 1970s constituted an historical period of much change and experimentation. Avant-garde theatre artists such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski challenged mainstream theatre by practicing "ritualistic" and symbolic modes of performance. Also, Bread and Puppet Theatre was founded in 1961, Ellen Stewart founded the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in 1962, Joseph Chaikin founded the Open Theatre in 1963, and the Living Theatre returned to the U.S. in 1968. With these and other avant-garde theatre groups, the theatrical experimentation in America exploded in the 1960s. Moreover, African American and Chicano theatre artists used theatre to make social protests in organizations such as the El Teatro Campesino and movements such as the Black Revolutionary Theatre.

Asian American theatre emerged as part of this new experimentation, although it was not directly involved with the avant-garde movement or with other ethnic theatres. Moreover, like the civil rights movement, Asian American theatre was not as visible as its African American or Chicano counterparts. El Teatro Campesino and the Black
Revolutionary Theatre began around the same year (1965) as the founding of the first Asian American theatre company, the East West Players (Los Angeles). Like the Asian American movement, Asian American theatre lacked visible leaders such as Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka (then called LeRoi Jones). Other factors contributing to the "invisibility" of the Asian American movement and Asian American theatre include the fact that the Asian American community did not have a common language (like Spanish for Chicanos) or history (slavery and the civil rights struggle for African-Americans).

A major difference between Asian American theatre and other ethnic theatres in the 1960s and the 1970s was the fact that Asian American theatre artists got together for the first time in history to form theatre companies specifically for Asian Americans. While the Black Revolutionary Theatre and El Teatro utilized theatre as the mouthpiece for their ongoing social protest, the founding of these first Asian American theatre groups was itself an initial act of protest and activism -- simply because it had not been done before. This does not mean that Asians in America did not participate in any theatrical activities before the 1960s. Theatre has been a major part of the lives of Asian immigrants since the nineteenth century. In order to distinguish the emergence of Asian American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s from what came before, I will provide in the next section an historical review of theatrical activities by Asians in America since the nineteenth century.

Part II: The Development of Asian American Theatre and Drama before 1965

As the number of Asians grew in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, three distinct types of theatre and drama emerged for Asian Americans. The first type appeared
in the European American theatre where stereotypical characters such as the "Heathen Chinee" gained popularity. In both legitimate theatre and popular entertainment, Asian characters were often reduced to objects of ridicule. The second type took place in the Asian communities where touring performers and troupes from Asia came to Chinatowns and Japantowns to entertain immigrants. These included everything from tradition theatre to acrobats. And later, other forms of entertainment, including imitations of popular American shows, appeared in the Asian communities. The third type involved plays written in English by Asian Americans. Although only a few such plays were created during this period, they anticipated the body of Asian American drama that would emerge after 1965. In this introduction, I will discuss the development of the first two types of theatre from the nineteenth century to 1965. I will conclude with an examination of the third type.

In the 1879 play by Henry Grimm, *The Chinese Must Go*, most of the Chinese characters speak pidgin English and behave in a deceptive and childish manner. But one Chinese character, Slim Chunk Pin, stands out with his perfect English and the ability to negotiate with both white Americans and Chinamen. As a member of the "powerful Six Companies," he tells other Chinese characters, "We can do without the white people altogether. Why should we allow them to always skim the cream from the milk; we have submitted to it long enough. In ten years more, California will be ours" (Williams, 102). Although his appearance is brief, Slim Chunk Pin represents the "assimilated" Chinaman who is significantly different from the newly immigrated ones. The new immigrants in the play make fools of themselves with their laughable behaviors, most of which involve
chasing after money and women. Slim Chunk Pin, on the other hand, is the “evil genius” who “articulates [...] Sinophobia” in America culture (Moy, *Marginal Sights* 43). The characters represent the “Chinese parasite” who “suck[s] as much blood out of every State in the Union, destroying Uncle Sam’s sinews and muscles” (Williams 117).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, these two stereotypes of Asian Americans -- the pidgin-speaking foreigner with his comical behavior and the “evil genius” who plots to ruin the lives of white Americans -- appeared regularly on the American stage. Variations of these types such as the title character of *Ah Sin!* by Mark Twain and Bret Harte and Fu Manchu, the infamous Oriental tyrant, categorically defined the Asian male identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Stereotypes of Asian women also appeared as two opposing ‘traits: the self-sacrificing lover and the much feared dragon lady.

Like the stereotypes of Chinese men, these images were “frequently contradictory, often to the point of appearing mutually exclusive” (Lee, Robert xi). But they were powerful. From David Belasco’s *Madame Butterfly* to John Colton’s *Shanghai Gesture*, Asian women submitted to white men or decayed in opium smoke-filled rooms while plotting evil deeds. And they all died on the stage either by their own doing or as part of poetic justice.

Another type of “Oriental” play was romantic melodrama such as *The Darling of the Gods* (1902) by David Belasco and John Luther Long and *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) by Harry Benrimo and George G. Hazelton. These plays were set in Asian countries and involved clearly distinguishable heroes and villains. The stories appealed to romantic notions popular at the turn of the century, and the authors used the Asian locales to
dramatize exotic adventures and mystical events. For instance, *The Darling of the Gods*, which is set in ancient Japan, is about a Princess Yo-San who falls in love with the outlawed Prince Kara after he saves her life. After several plot twists, the prince is killed by the villain, but the couple promises to meet in a thousand years. The play ends with a thousand years passing and the lovers reuniting and ascending to heaven. The play was the biggest hit in the season and ran for 182 performances. The popularity was fueled by Belasco’s theatrical set that included “smoke-like water,” “fires of Hades,” “harbor of paradise.” Using exotic stories from the “Orient” and theatrical sets, the romantic melodramas defined and influenced popular notions of Asia. Moreover, all roles were played by white actors in yellow face, and the images of Asia were far removed from the realities of Asians in America.

The year 1924, when the Immigration Act prohibited virtually all Asians from immigration and excluded Asians already in the country from citizenship, marked a turning point for Asians in America and their representation in American theatre. Before passage of the Act, many “Oriental” shows on Broadway featured Asians as “alien residents” in America or as exotic people. After 1924, however, American theatre increasingly represented Asians as foreigners and Asia as a place evoking fear and mistrust. A series of plays produced between 1924 and World War II portrayed Asia as an exotic land that threatened Europe and America. Examples include: *Shanghai Gesture* (1928), *Sakura* (1928), *Good Earth* (1932), *If This Be Treason* (1935), *A Woman of Destiny* (1936), *The Family* (1943), and *What’s Up?* (1943). In these “Oriental” plays, white actors played the
major roles in yellow face, as in the case of Florence Reed as Mother Goddam in *Shanghai Gesture*.

While Asian characters endured ridicule and death on American stages, very different kinds of characters emerged in Asian communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Wherever sizeable Asian communities developed -- San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, Portland, Seattle -- theatre companies and buildings emerged. At first, theatre served the male-dominated communities by functioning as a source of entertainment for men. Later, theatre complemented the development of community centers for families. In San Francisco, for instance, visiting theatre companies from China appeared as early as the 1850s, and permanent theatres soon developed in the 1860s and 1870s. In Portland, three Chinese theatre companies were operating by the 1890s. And in Seattle the first Japanese American theatre building, the Nippon Kan Theatre, was built in 1909 in the heart of old Japantown. The theatre provided the space in which “numerous political debates, musicals, concerts, puppet shows, plays, operas, and symphonies were performed” (Niiya 261). Also, many touring companies from China and Japan received invitations to perform for New Year’s celebrations and other important events in Chinatowns and Japantowns. Theatre helped the immigrants to hold on to their heritage, and in many cases, provided a means for escaping, at least temporarily, from the difficult conditions in America.

Theatre remained segregated for Euro-American and Asian American communities at the turn of the century. But in the early twentieth century, Asian actors began to appear on American stages. One of the first Asian American actors to appear on Broadway was
Yoshin Sakurai, who played a valet in George M. Cohan’s *Get Rich Quick Wallingford* in 1912. Other actors such as Anna May Wong followed, but only a small number of them acted on stage or in films, and when they did, their roles depicted negative Asian stereotypes. Moreover, these actors were exceptions rather than the trend. The representation of Asians in American theatre and drama had not improved, and performances in Asian communities remained within geographical boundaries.

As more Asians assimilated into American society and American born second and third generations replaced the immigrants, Asian communities began to enjoy different forms of theatrical entertainment such as nightclubs. William Wei describes the Forbidden City, an infamous Chinese nightclub that opened after prohibition in the 1930s in San Francisco: “In this Asian American counterpart to the Cotton Club, Chinese American talent performed in all-American production numbers. These entertainers were rebels, for they had to face the Chinese community’s opprobrium for dancing and singing in public, and at the same time challenge segregated show business, with its stereotype of Chinese as speaking only pidgin English, having bowed legs and no rhythm” (Wei 57). Forbidden City provided the Chinatown version of “Cole Porter and Sophie Tucker, dancing tap, ballroom, and soft-shoe, parodying Western musicals in cowboy outfits, and kicking it up in chorus lines” (Yung 202). It challenged Hollywood’s stereotypes of Chinese Americans and provided employment opportunities to talented actors, actresses, dancers, and singers who were not taken seriously by Hollywood and mainstream American theatre.

Acting opportunities improved somewhat after World War II when a series of plays and musicals with “Oriental” themes gained popularity. Although the main male
characters were always played by white actors in yellow face, these plays and musicals provided employment opportunities to Asian American actors in minor roles. After World War II, Asia became less of a threat to America for reasons that included Japan’s defeat and China’s civil war. Thus, productions on Broadway portrayed Asia and Asians as sympathetic and likeable. For instance, *The King and I*, the longest running show in 1951, showed the reticent yet favorable Sinese king. And in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* a Japanese interpreter plays the smart assistant to his American boss. *The World of Suzie Wong* (the second longest running play in 1958) captured Americans’ hearts with the Hong Kong bargirl. *Flower Drum Song* showed the light-hearted side of San Francisco’s Chinatown. And *A Majority of One* (the second longest running play in 1959) presented a likeable Japanese businessman.

In *The King and I*, Asian Americans were cast for the first time in Broadway musical history. Critics praised the actors for capturing the "pulsing formalism of Asiatic theatre" and achieving the "quintessence of Eastern art," despite the fact that most of the "Asian" actors were American-born citizens who studied with famous Western theatre artists (Atkinson 1). Similar comments were made about the Asian American actors in other plays and musicals. The more "exotic" and "Oriental" they looked and acted, the more critics praised their "authenticity."

Those actors who tried to break out of the expectations of critics and spectators by emphasizing their Americanness or by complaining about racism in the world of American theatre and film often became outcasts. For instance, France Nuyen, who had a French mother and a Chinese father (who later became an American citizen), played the lead role
in the Broadway production of *The World of Suzie Wong*, but later was fired from the film version for being a “freethinker” and “temperamental” (Milstein 12). Raised in France and being “half-white,” Nuyen could not understand and accept the racism she witnessed in Hollywood. And unlike other Asian American actors, she was not shy in speaking her mind. In interviews, she proudly discussed her Chinese background which added to the “dignity” of her character Suzie Wong. However, she bluntly expressed her disgust at the way non-white actors were treated in Hollywood. She told an interviewer:

> This is a racist country. I am more discriminated [against here] than in France. If you are Chinese or Japanese you cannot live in Beverly Hills or Malibu. And Negro men are picked up if they cross Beverly Hills after one a.m. You think that is right? I do not. I have not the courage to go where I would be kicked out. But it hurts me for my friends.  

Nuyen’s outspoken attitude clashed with the popular stereotype of the submissive, quiet, Asian woman. And this cost Nuyen her job in Hollywood. She was fired, and the role of the beautiful, fragile Chinese bargirl was played by Nancy Kwon who pleased the American audience without controversy.

Another Broadway show that became a Hollywood film was *Flower Drum Song* which, for the first time in American theatre history, had an all-Asian cast. Written by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the musical was based on a novel by an Asian American, Chin Yang Lee, who had studied at the Yale Drama School. It was the first dramatic piece to feature Asian characters created by an Asian American. As the third longest running musical in 1958, it improved casting practices by allowing a large group of Asian American actors to portray their own racial identity. In *Flower Drum Song* both the lead
and minor roles were played by Asian American actors. Although the musical was one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oriental” shows, it did depict the world of Asian America (Chinatown) as much different from Asia. However, these efforts at understanding Asian America did not extend to casting practices. Many of the major Chinese American and Chinese roles were played by Japanese American actors. Richard Rodgers describes the cast:

Most of our leads were played by non-Chinese. John Logan had told me about a Japanese girl named Miyoshi Umeki who turned out to be just right for the shy heroine. In the brassier role of a night-club stripper was a Japanese American song belter named Pat Suzuki. For other main roles we cast Juanita Hall, who was black; Ed Kennedy, who was Hawaiian, and Larry Blyden, who was Houston, Texas. Keye Luke, formerly Charlie Chan’s number-one son, was the only actor of Chinese background who had a major part.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the musical caught the attention of theatre goers because of its all-Asian cast which sang and danced in the chorus line. Most publicity for the show featured the two lead actresses, Umeki and Suzuki who were labeled “Oriental Beauties” in Newsweek. The critical comparison between the two actresses is instructive. As discussed earlier, the more “Oriental” the actors seemed, the more popular they were with critics and audience. Thus, Umeki, who, like her character Mei Li in the musical, was “fresh off the boat,” won the favor of critics who praised her for being “pliant and outwardly submissive, yet inwardly serene and sturdy” (Newsweek 54). On the other hand, Suzuki was reviewed as being “American by instinct, chafed by restrictions, careless of customs, and in a hurry.”¹⁷ Most critics devoted more attention to Umeki and her character Mei Li in their reviews, probably in response to readers who wanted to know more about the “foreign” actress.
Unfortunately, the sudden explosion of “Oriental” shows on Broadway during the 1950s disappeared as soon as the decade ended. After Flower Drum Song, no other original Broadway production has presented all-Asian cast in shows created by non-Asian Americans. Unlike The King and I, Flower Drum Song has yet to be revived on Broadway.18 Ironically, critics in the 1950s found The King and I more “authentic” than Flower Drum Song which, according to one critic, was “Pseudo-Chinese” and lacking “Oriental temperament.”19 This tendency to judge shows with Asian American themes as less than “authentic” and therefore not as entertaining as the exotic version has continued beyond the 1950s. Such perceptions by non-Asian American critics has continued to haunt Asian American theatre artists, even into the 1990s.

Flower Drum Song had immense influence on Asian American actors, who thought they would continue to have opportunities to perform their ethnicity in the American theatre. But they soon found themselves in the same situation as existed, before the “Oriental” shows. White actors continued to play Asian characters in yellow face, and Asian American actors had to compete with each other to play demeaning, stereotypical roles, many of which were variations of nineteenth century stereotypes.

In Asian communities, on the other hand, traditional performances that once had entertained immigrants became tourist attractions. Many Asian Americans in Chinatowns and other Asian communities were second, third, or even fourth generation by the early 1960s. They did not relate to Asian theatre, and most of them tried to detach themselves from their Asian heritages in order to be accepted as Americans. The performances instead attracted tourists who wanted to see “authentic” Asian theatre.
Asian American Drama Before 1965

_The Submission of Rose Moy_, a play written in the 1920s by Gladys (Ling-Ai) Li, a Chinese American in Hawaii, is often cited as one of the first Asian American plays. Many college students like Li, who attended the University of Hawaii, wrote plays for English classes. For instance, in Willar Wilson’s class on playwriting (in the 1930s), several noticeable plays were written by his Asian American students: examples include Charlotte Lum’s one-act, _These Unsaid Things_ and Wai Chee Chun Yee’s _For You a Lei_. Josephine Lee notes that “Wilson gives his writing student a specifically mimetic task: to ‘look around...to attempt to present life as it has impinged upon him [sic] and as he sees it.’” Most of these students were Chinese Americans living in Hawaii.²⁰

On the mainland, Sadakichi Hartmann, an art critic and “intellectual Bohemian” of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, wrote three plays. Hartmann was an Amerasian with a German father and Japanese mother. Although his plays do not address Asian American issues, they are rare American symbolists plays with an intercultural dynamic that was ahead of its time. His plays _Buddha_ (1897), _Confucius_ (1923), and _Christ_ (1893), were published in 1971.²¹

Since the 1850s, Asian immigrants have been writing plays in their own languages. Dave Williams notes that a play written in English by a Chinese playwright was registered with the Copyright Office in the late 1890s. The text is yet to be found. In 1919, a Chinese American playwright by the name of Shen Hung attended the famous playwriting workshop at Harvard with George Pierce Baker. In 1921, he submitted the play _The
Wedded Husband to Poet Lore magazine which published it the same year. According to Williams, two other plays by Chinese American authors written in English appeared in the magazine in the next two years. Williams notes: “Taken together, the three texts represent a new step in both the assimilation and the literary productivity of Americans of Chinese descent” (Williams 390). Shen Hung returned to China and became a prominent playwright and director, as well as an important drama administrator in the government of the People’s Republic. His play The Wedded Husband takes place in China and does not attempt to create a positive image of Asians. Rather, the play uses the same racial images created by the Euro-American theatre, namely, that Chinese are “deferential, conservative, and more or less willing slaves of ancient customs” (390). Although the play is a disappointment because of its content, its mere existence provides an early touchstone in the history of Asian American theatre.
CHAPTER 2


**Introduction**

In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American theatre artists faced four major challenges: the lack of employment for actors; the lack of plays about Asian American experiences; the desire to serve the community; and the need for effective management, both administratively and financially. Around the same time that the Asian American movement began, Asian American actors, writers, and activists addressed these challenges by founding the first Asian American theatre companies. In concert with the political movement, the founders of Asian American theatre wanted to “make a place for themselves in America’s ethnic pluralist society through the development of a unique ethnic identity and counterculture” (Wei 45). Many small groups of Asian American theatre artists formed and dissipated during the 1960s and the 1970s, mostly on the West and East Coasts. Four major theatre companies survived and continue to provide strong foundations for the Asian American theatre community: East West Players (founded in 1965 in Los Angeles), the Asian American Theater Company (1973, San Francisco), Northwest Asian Theater Company (1974, Seattle), and Pan Asian Repertory Company (1977, New York City).
These companies began with similar agendas, but each focused on at least one of the four challenges mentioned above. The East West Players was founded by a group of actors; the Asian American Theatre Company was founded by Frank Chin, a playwright; the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company started as a community-based theatre; and the Pan Asian Repertory has been maintained by its founding producer, Tisa Chang. In this chapter, I will describe the beginning years of these companies in order to establish an organizational structure for chapters two and three. All three chapters are divided into four sections: actors, playwrights, communities, and management. Chapters two and three focus on the broader issues of the 1980s and the 1990s respectively.

While these four categories represent the founding agendas of the first four companies, they also allow us to focus on major issues that have shaped Asian American theatre during the last three decades. These issues recur in the next sections as I discuss key individuals, companies, cities, and productions. For instance, the issues related to actors include not only training, growing professionalism, and acting styles, but also the complex matter of identity, from multicultural and pan-Asian development to separatist conflicts and struggles. Similarly, the role of playwrights in Asian American theatre needs to be understood in the context of commercialism, cultural authenticity, and literary legitimacy. For the companies, the challenges of audience development are intrinsically connected to community identities—which assume the highly contested concept of pan-Asian American ethnicity. And as these companies work towards gaining community support, they inevitably run into the difficulties of developing a viable management model. In 1999, over thirty Asian American theatre companies were operating in the country.
Within three decades, Asian American theatre went from virtual non-existence to its emergence as one of the most exciting theatre sites in American theatre. This growth has been led by the first four theatre companies, which I will now discuss.
Section 1 - Actor’s Theatre
East West Players in Los Angeles

For Asian American actors in the 1960s, as for most actors, Los Angeles represented fame, celebrity, and job opportunities in Hollywood. Before 1965, when the East West Players was founded, a few Asian American actors such as James Hong and Beulah Quo were appearing in minor film and television roles that reflected “Oriental” stereotypes. Despite the demeaning implications of these roles, Asian American actors had no other choice. As Vincent in Philip Kan Gotanda’s Yankee Dawg You Die explains, “At least an oriental was on screen acting, being seen.” For these actors, having a job, any role, had higher priority than fighting racism in Hollywood. Vincent defends these actors to a younger Asian American actor, Bradley, who criticizes him for “kissing up to some white man”:

That’s all there was, Bradley. That’s all there was! But you don’t think I wouldn’t have wanted to play a better role than that bucktoothed, groveling waiter? I would have killed for a better role where I could have played an honest-to-god human being with real emotions. I would have killed for it. You seem to assume “Asian Americans” always existed. That there were always roles for you. You didn’t exist back then buster. Back then there was no Asian American consciousness, no Asian American actor, and no Asian American theaters. Just a handful of “orientals” who for some god forsaken reason wanted to perform. Act. And we did. At church bazaars, community talent night, and on the Chop Suey Circuit playing Chinatowns and Little Tokyos around the country as hoofer, jugglers, acrobats, strippers -- anything we could for anyone who would watch. You, you with that holier than thou look, trying to make me feel ashamed. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for all the crap we had to put up with. We built something. We built the mountain, as small as it may be, that you stand on so proudly looking down at me. (26)
One of the things these actors built was the East West Players. The first Asian American theatre in the country was erected on a foundation of frustration, anger, and indignity felt by Asian American actors.

The Founders of the East West Players

Unlike playwrights, designers, and directors, an actor’s physical appearance is often the most important factor in employment and reputation. Asian American actors have had to prove their talent and to demonstrate that they are more than mere “yellow face.” Typical roles offered to Asian American actors in the 1960s included houseboy, butler, gardener, Japanese soldier in World War II, Kung Fu master, Charlie Chan’s son, geisha, dragon lady, and similar stereotypes. In both theatre and film, all Asian roles emphasized the foreignness and exoticism of Asia. For the audiences, the face and body of an Asian actor conveniently represented a set of established images. After over a hundred years of reinforcement, these Asian stereotypes had become character archetypes with strong resistance to change.

Asian American actors -- many of whom were second, third, or fourth generation Americans -- were advised to be more “ethnic” or to speak with an accent for “authenticity.” Actors would refuse at first, but if they wanted work, they had to make compromises. Philip Ahn, one of the first and best know Asian American actors in film and television, made a career out of playing Asian stereotypes. A second generation Korean American, Ahn spoke perfect English, but his ability to speak with a “cooie” accent got him into films.¹ As Vincent in Yankee Dawg reminds us, there were no “Asian

³
American actors” in the 1960s; there were “Oriental actors” whose mere visibility meant everything. (The actors themselves even used the label “Oriental actors.”)

In the early 1960s, a few “Oriental actors” including James Hong and Beulah Quo in the Los Angeles area began to seek ways to make their acting careers more meaningful. They met as a group to discuss ways to improve their image as actors and to challenge stereotypes. By creating performance venues such as Chinese Medicine Shows in Chinatown in Los Angeles, the actors attempted to demonstrate their acting abilities to Hollywood producers and non-Asian audiences. Artistic exposure was the central motive of the group. This exposure, they thought, would bring them better roles. The group eventually grew to include Mako Iwamatsu (“Mako”), Pat Li, Guy Lee, Rae Creevey, Irvin Paik, and Soon-Tek Oh. These “Oriental actors” founded the East West Players in 1965 under the leadership of Mako.²

By 1965, Mako was one of the best-trained Asian American actors. As an issei (first generation Japanese American), he came to America to study architecture in New York City. As part of his education, Mako built sets for theatre productions. This was his first encounter with theatre. He never finished his studies in architecture but instead moved to Southern California and attended the Pasadena Playhouse in the 1950s. His instructors told Mako that he would not be able to find jobs because of his ethnicity. However, Mako trained himself rigorously by performing in European-American classics, from Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams. After graduating from the Pasadena Playhouse, Mako moved back to New York and applied to the Actors Studio, which rejected him for two years in a row. Mako then decide to pursue an acting career on his own by auditioning
for plays, television shows, and films. When James Hong contacted him, Mako was in a professional touring company, *A Majority of One*, which performed around the country. Hong’s idea interested Mako because by this time he was growing tired of being denied roles based on his ethnicity. For instance, when he auditioned for the television version of *Rashomon*, he was told that because he was Japanese he would be “too conspicuous” (Paik 33). He, along with other Asian American actors, had to observe yet another Asian role played by a white actor in “yellow face.”

**The First Production**

With Mako in the picture, the focus of the group shifted from film actors to theatre actors who were more serious about the intensity and seriousness of training and performance. In organizing EWP, Mako used the model of a repertory company with a workshop as the central component. He emphasized the need for well-trained actors above anything else. Also, Mako and the members decided to include a diverse range of shows in the repertory: from traditional Asian theatres to modern European and American plays. They also wanted to demonstrate their skills without depending on the usual “Oriental” roles. Because there was no established body of Asian American dramatic literature at the time, the founders took advantage of the quality and complexity of Asian, European, and American plays.

After much struggle and effort by a few talented actors, the first production of the EWP occurred on April 3, 1965 on the campus of the University of Southern California. Initially, the production of *Rashomon*, based on Akira Kurosawa’s film, was to be
performed only once, but after receiving positive reviews, the group gave nine additional performances at the University of Judaism in Hollywood. More critics praised the show and Mako’s performance in the role of the bandit. With increasing popularity, the show moved in July 1965 to the Warner Playhouse, where it ran for six more weeks (four performances per week). The show was forced to close when the Watts riot erupted in Los Angeles.

For the actors in the play, the medium of traditional Asian theatre provided an advantageous edge. They demonstrated a unique acting style and strength which attracted many critics and spectators. And in the later seasons, the company included European/American plays as well as original Asian American plays. In essence, the members of the EWP negotiated a balance between intercultural and multicultural shows, to their advantage as actors.

The production of Rashomon had clearly caught the attention of critics and spectators in the Los Angeles area. Critics especially praised Mako’s acting style. The spotlight on Mako continued when he was cast in the film The Sand Pebbles (1966) for which he received the nomination for the Best Supporting Actor Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. With Mako as the “star” artistic director, the EWP had an advantage in writing grants and requesting community support.

In 1967 when Mako returned to the EWP, its members began to develop the administrative organization. First, an honorary board was established, and the members elected themselves to the new board of directors as well as to the artistic staff. Beulah Quo was elected president of the board, which also included Mako, Guy Lee, Soon-Tek Oh, Yet
Lock, and Yuki Shimoda. For the artistic staff, Mako was elected the artistic director. Guy Lee the business manager, Rae Creevey the technical director, Beulah Quo the audience development officer, and Jeanne Joe the workshop coordinator. Soon-Tek Oh, the executive director, summarized the accomplishments and goals of the EWP as of December, 1967:

The company has been introducing a unique theater to the western world -- the amalgamation of East and West in its ultimate form, as well as providing opportunities for Orientals to extend the scope and depth of their theatrical talents. It is now well-known fact that the nation's only all-Oriental acting company, through its remarkable achievements since 1965, has been a decisive influence in amending the debasing Hollywood image of Oriental actors. 3

Once the company achieved an organizational structure, albeit a loose one, the EWP began what members called the "church basement period" from 1967 to 1970. They rented the basement space of the Bethany Presbyterian Church on Griffith Street in exchange for paying the church 25 percent of the net profit of a production or the minimum fee, $110.00. The members also agreed to do maintenance work. This period was both beneficial and damaging to the company; while the church provided an affordable space for the company to establish itself, it limited the group in many ways such as not allowing Sunday performances. Most importantly, a church basement is not the ideal place for theatrical performances; the company had to spend much time and money letting people know of its existence.

It is impressive, however, that the EWP created thirteen productions during those four years in the church basement. Most of the productions resulted from acting workshops which Mako had proposed. The workshops were operated with membership
dues of $20 a year. By 1970, the number of workshops increased to include directing, lighting, set, dance and movement courses. Outside instructors were invited to teach for a low salary, and thus began a tradition of workshops that has been the backbone of the EWP. Despite the company’s success, members had to look for a new space in 1970. The end of the church basement period began when a church member walked into a rehearsal of Soon Tek Oli’s *Tondemonai-Never Happen!*, a play about homosexuality, among other things. According to Mako, the actors were “almost naked” in the middle of the rehearsal when they were visited. Not surprisingly, the church leaders found the play inappropriate.\(^4\) They church then required that all plays be submitted before rehearsals could be held. With such censorship, the EWP could not continue its residence there.

Following the production of *Tondemonai* in the spring of 1971, the EWP moved to a space at 4502 Santa Monica Boulevard. Unfortunately, the members later found out that the building violated the city code and was condemned. A year later, they founded a 99-seat theatre space at 4424 Santa Monica Boulevard which was the home of the EWP until 1998. During the early years when the EWP lacked a permanent home, members toured with shows they had developed. They appeared at high schools, universities, and city festivals in the Los Angeles area.

Before the company left the church basement space in 1971, members focused on three kinds of productions. The majority of shows involved traditional Japanese classics and traditional theatrical styles such as Kabuki and Kyogen performed in English. The second type included European/American plays such as *The Inspector General* by Nikolai Gogol, performed in 1968. The actors attempted to be true to the Russian setting and
Gogol's original intentions in the play. In other words, they did not adapt the play into any kind of Asian or Asian American style. These two approaches are what I classify as intercultural productions. In each case, an attempt is made to present shows that combine two or more distinct cultures which normally do not coexist in theatrical performances. In other words, the presentation of traditional Japanese theatre in English was certainly a combination unfamiliar not only to the white mainstream audiences, but also to Asian American audiences. Likewise, the appearance of Asian faces in a Russian play (which has been part of the European/American dramatic literature canon) set up a new kind of intercultural dynamic, for performers and spectators.

The third approach or type, which I categorize as multicultural productions, included original plays by Asian American playwrights. The distinction between intercultural and multicultural productions during the EWP's early years is not clear cut. Rather, Asian American plays such as the ones by Soon-Tek Oh depict events that took place in modern Asia. For example, Oh's *Martyrs Can't Go Home* (1967) takes place in Korea during the Korean War. In general, those plays written by first generation Asian Americans often explore pertinent issues in Asia and dramatize them for an American audience, primarily Asian American, but also including some non-Asian Americans. In this context, these plays can arguably be categorized as intercultural. However, I include them in the multicultural category because they tell stories of first generation immigrants who are also Asian Americans in the broadest sense. It seems to me that as long as the plays deal with issues relevant to the experience of Asian Americans of any generation, they should be included in the multicultural category.
An interesting press release by the EWP captures the purpose behind their productions of traditional Asian theatre. In introducing *Monkey*, a touring show adapted from a Chinese folk tale, Irvin Paik writes in 1972:

As China opens up to the world politically, it is one of the goals of the East West Players to present to the public the vast cultural heritages of Asia which have been ignored or distorted by movies and TV and to show young people that Asian Americans are capable of presenting lively entertainment. (8 February 1972) (Quoted in Kurahashi, 38)

The press release implies that the EWP aims to be cultural ambassadors by introducing the “heritage of Asia” to young audiences. It is uncertain whether the members of the EWP used such publicity to attract audiences or whether they sincerely believed that they had the responsibility to correct popular perceptions of Asia and Asian American actors’ capabilities. In any case, the Asian theatre shows were successful. Since its first show, *Rashomon* in 1965, the EWP used traditional Asian pieces to validate their purpose and develop what Kurahashi calls “their sense of ethnic identity” (33).

Between 1968 and 1972, the company produced four traditional Japanese theatre pieces. Shizuko Hoshi, Mako’s wife, had studied Noh theatre in Japan, and when the EWP received a grant from the Ford Foundation for actors’ training, she was chosen to make a trip to Japan in order to study the movements of traditional Japanese theatre, namely Kabuki and Kyogen. She decided to teach Kyogen to the members of the EWP because its style was the easiest to learn. During Hoshi’s workshop, the actors learned to move, walk, and dance in Kyogen style. They then created a repertory of Kyogen pieces and toured universities and colleges in the Los Angeles area, mostly as part of cultural education.
programs. Although the EWP concentrated on traditional Japanese theatre, they did include adaptations of Chinese stories in children’s theatre which also toured for community outreach.

In 1968, the EWP received a $38,500 grant from the Ford Foundation, which required that the money be spent: (1) to prepare and stimulate original plays; (2) to train actors in a workshop situation; and (3) to develop each season’s productions (Kurahashi 49). The second requirement was fulfilled with Hoshi’s visit to Japan and her subsequent workshops for actors. The first requirement, however, presented a major challenge to the company. Soon-Tek Oh, who had a master’s degree in playwriting from UCLA, proposed an annual playwriting contest. The first was held in 1968 with a first prize of $1000. They placed ads in literary magazines and newspapers which stated that the contest “would help the community at large become aware of the East-West Players [...] and this would aid us in searching out potential material and artists” (49). The winner of the first contest was Henry Woon whose play, *Now You See, Now You Don’t*, dealt with racism in the workplace and a Chinese American man’s personal activism to change it. The play was significant because for the first time the EWP presented a production that addressed issues unique to Asian Americans.

The second playwriting contest was held in 1970, and Soon Tek Oh’s *Tondemonai* won first prize. And in the following year, Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* and Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch* shared first prize. However, because the EWP decided to move out of the church basement space in the same year, neither of the winning plays were performed at the time. Instead, *Chickencoop Chinaman* premiered at the America Place
Theatre in New York in 1972, and Gold Watch had its first performance at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles, also in 1972.

The year 1971 was problematic for the EWP in many ways. Besides the church basement issue, the company had to deal with internal disagreements and financial disorganization. The conflicts and problems raised during the year would be echoed throughout the EWP history in increasing severity. What started as minor problems in the early 1970s would explode in the late 1980s when the company had to restructure the entire administration and redefine its artistic goals. Two issues repeatedly appeared at staff meetings: the first was raised by new and younger members who challenged the administration; the second was raised by Mako who put up his own money to run the company. For instance, on February 16, 1971, two new members (Elaine Kashiki and Momo Yashima) complained during a meeting, “Who are we, and what are our goals?; [Is the company] branching out into various other areas?” They also felt “morale and togetherness has [sic] been lax” and suggested a “general membership meeting to clarify our purpose.”

Around this time, Soon Tek Oh resigned as executive director and officially left the company. He would return on occasion to act and help behind the scenes, but he never took an administrative role after his resignation. Thus, the burden on Mako increased. Mako depended on volunteers and members who sacrificed their personal time and money to help the EWP. In a meeting minute dated March 22, 1971, he makes an interesting recommendation:
I recommend that whatever people owe in back dues be dropped as of now--only the people who have worked here day and night. We have spent roughly $1500 remodeling so far. This place is built out of love. This will be the last time such compromise will be made on dues. This is yours, not mine--it belongs to all of us.6

Instead of paying members for the work they did at the theatre, Mako dropped the membership dues. Such compromise reflects the unstructured management style of the EWP. During this time, a few who “loved” the theatre continued to put in time and money, but most people burned out. Most of those who helped Mako were Japanese Americans, and the largest subscription base consisted of the nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) population in Little Tokyo.

Many of the original or early members recall the EWP in the 1970s as a “family.” The model was indeed like a “family” with Mako as the father figure and breadwinner. He did not hesitate to use his own money to pay the company’s bills. More than once, Mako used the money he earned by playing stereotypical roles in Hollywood films to produce Asian American plays that criticized the very same stereotypes. As an issei (first generation Japanese American), Mako viewed grant writing equivalent to “begging for money” and dishonorable. He preferred to spend his own money rather than to ask for help from corporations and foundations follow their restrictions. Also, he did not want others to control the artistic decisions of the EWP. However, as honorable as his actions might have been, Mako’s administrative practices backfired on him in the late 1980s when the board of directors, accusing him of practicing nepotism, forced him to resign. In hindsight, the problem started in the early 1970s when founding members clashed with younger members, and all of them were asked to sacrifice for the “love” of the EWP.
Although the East West Players began as an actor’s theatre, in the early 1970s the company received two significant grants that would revise their goals. One of the grants required the development of original Asian American plays. With such monetary incentive, the company naturally shifted its focus to playwrights. In 1973, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded $20,000 to the EWP. The grant allowed the company to continue workshops which led to productions. And in the same year, the Rockefeller Foundation gave the company a grant for an Asian American playwright-in-residence. As one of the most important grants in the history of the EWP, it continued annually until 1980 with an award of $2,500 to the playwright-in-residence and $1,000 to the EWP. This combination of workshop and playwright-in-residence grants provided ideal conditions for emerging Asian American playwrights. Between 1972 and 1980, the EWP premiered over twenty original Asian American plays in addition to several European/American plays. Moreover, the EWP provided a stepping-stone for many Asian American playwrights who were the first-wave pioneers of Asian American playwriting. These writers included Jon Shirotta, Momoko Iko, Dom Magwili, Wakako Yamauchi, Karen Tei Yamashita, Perry Miyake, Bill Shinkai, Paul Stephen Lim, Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, and Edward Sakamoto.

Most of the first generation Asian American playwrights were new at playwriting. Wakako Yamauchi admits that she was “sort of pushed into playwriting—blind and unaware” (Houston 1990, 36). And when she decided to write a play version of her short story, she sent her daughter out “for some books on playwriting” to guide her. “Though I rewrote it about six times, it wasn’t that hard to do” (Berson 130). Similarly, for Momoko
Iko, the East West Player's playwriting competition was the "catalyst" that encouraged her to experiment with plays. Similarly, Chickencoop Chinaman was Frank Chin's first attempt at playwriting. For these "first-wave" Asian American playwrights, the EWP provided a forum for experimentation and, more importantly, a place to develop a new dramatic canon of Asian American plays.

The development of Asian American plays did not deter the EWP from training new actors. For the season 1975-1976, the EWP introduced The Asian American Hearings, a show written and performed by Asian American actors. It was a composite work of songs, dances, skits, parodies, and monologues that addressed social and political issues. Mako initiated the idea, and while he was away performing in Pacific Overture in New York, the young actors continued the project on their own. The show included a multimedia presentation of Asian American histories and cultures with an emphasis on diversity within the pan-Asian identity. "Established" writers such as Frank Chin assisted the actors in developing the piece. The primary goal of the show was to dispel popular stereotypes of Asian Americans as quiet, passive, and polite. The actors presented their show as a Bicentennial gift to the city of Los Angeles. The critics were mostly surprised at the comedic and light-hearted spirit of the production, especially since it professed to show a history of Asian Americans. In an interview, Creevey, who was the executive producer, commented that "The Hearings will chronicle the sweep and scope of the Asian American experience but not in the way you might expect. We are deadly serious and will probably split your sides watching us" (Kunitsugu, 8 June 1976; quoted in Kurahashi 95). The quick-paced skits of comedy and drama allowed the young actors to demonstrate their
talents and to explore new aspects of their acting styles. The audiences and critics took notice of the actors’ creative energy and responded positively.

Another program that allowed young actors to participate in the EWP was the Total Theatre Ensemble for the Young Audience (TTE). A touring group composed of several actors, it was created in 1973 and continued through the early 1980s. The young artists were trained by Mako in acting, by Shizuko Hoshi in movement, and by others in playwriting, designing, and directing. Their shows focused on adaptations of traditional Asian folk tales and theatre pieces. Presentation venues included schools in Los Angeles and other Unified School Districts in the area. By introducing Asian cultures in English and allowing young Asian American actors to perform various theatrical styles, the TTE served to educate not only school children but also EWP trainees.

Conclusion

During the 1980s and 1990s, several issues forced the EWP to restructure its management and redefine its goals. For one, the company increasingly became identified as Japanese American theatre where the majority of the season subscribers were of the nisei (second generation Japanese American) generation. The EWP board did not approve of this direction and with Mako’s decisions as artistic director. The chasm between Mako and the board members began to appear in the mid-1980s, and it culminated into Mako’s forced resignation in January 1989. Nobu McCarthy, who had worked in theatre and film as an actress, became EWP’s artistic director soon after Mako’s resignation. She shifted the company’s focus from Japanese American to pan-Asian American and multicultural
issues. She envisioned the EWP as an inclusive regional theatre where artists of all ethnic backgrounds could find opportunities. For instance, McCarthy hired non-Asian Americans in major staff positions, including the literary manager position, which was filled by Brian Nelson, a European American. She also increased the board members and organized several major fundraising events to improve EWP’s financial situation which, like those of other regional theatres in the U. S., suffered subsidy cuts in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In July 1993, Nobu McCarthy resigned due to poor health, and Tim Dang became the artistic director and has since led the EWP to a new direction. Under his leadership, the EWP grew in both size and diversity. He has endeavored to reach out to Asian American communities in the Los Angeles area beyond Little Tokyo by diversifying the season and creating new conservatory programs. And in 1998, the EWP moved to a new theatre space that used to be Union Church building. Based in the heart of Little Tokyo, the building had been selected by Mako as the ideal location during his administration, but it wasn’t until 1995 that the EWP had enough money to begin renovation. With this new space, the EWP leads Asian American theatre in new play development, actor training, fundraising, and audience development.

What started in 1965 as a modest attempt to change the perception of “Oriental actors” had grown into a major Asian American theatre company by the early 1980s. During the 1960s and 1970s, the EWP was a catalyst for the development of Asian American plays and community-based performances. During that period, the EWP remained an actor’s theatre where Mako’s aims, desires, and talent extended to the rest of the company. The EWP has continued to provide opportunities to Asian American actors
who otherwise would not find work. Keeping with its founding principles, the EWP’s repertory remains wide-ranged. The actors at the EWP have performed in musicals, European-American plays, adaptation of Asian plays, and Asian American plays. In 1999, the EWP reported that “Over 75% of all Asian Pacific performers in the acting unions have worked with EWP.” No other company in the country can claim such an influence. The history of the EWP is not without administrative problems and personal clashes, but it has managed to survive as the first and largest Asian American company.
Section 2 - Playwright’s Theatre  
Asian American Theatre Workshop in the 1970s

Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman*  
When Frank Chin submitted *Chickencoop Chinaman* for the East West Player’s playwriting competition in 1971, the judges could not decide on the first prize winner. Many plays had been submitted, but none pleased all of the judges. One judge in particular argued for the cancellation of the competition and criticized the submitted plays as “[un]performable” and “lectures.” Others agreed, but one of them, Jack Jackson, felt Chin’s play was “worthy of a prize.” They postponed the decision and waited until the artistic director and executive producer looked into the matter. After serious consideration, the EWP decided to award first prize to Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* and Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch*. The concern over Chin’s play wasn’t with its literary or artistic merits but with its contentiousness. One judge warned that the EWP “should not get into a bag similar to the Blacks, i.e. lamenting that [Asian Americans] are yellow.” Such worrisome comments and concerns have echoed throughout Chin’s career.

*Chickencoop Chinaman* premiered at the American Place Theatre off Broadway in 1972, making it the first Asian American play to be produced in New York City. Chin’s synopsis of the play is deceptively simple: “Documentary film-maker Tam Lum comes to Pittsburgh to rekindle an old friendship with Kenji, a fellow boxing fan, while researching the life of a black boxer and former light heavyweight champion they both admired as boys in another city, another time.” With such a simple plot, Chin created one of the most
complex protagonists in Asian American drama, Tam Lum (played by Randall Duk Kim) who epitomizes the angry and confused side of Asian American identity. Chin describes Tam as “a Chinese American writer film-maker with a gift of gab and an open mouth. A multi-tongued word magician[.]” The play begins with Tam in an airplane where he meets Hong Kong Dream Girl ("a dream monster from a popular American song of the twenties"). When she asks him where he was born, he answers:

Chinamen are made, not born, my dear. Out of junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes, broken bottles, cigar smoke, Cosquilla Indian blood, wino spit, and lots of milk of amnesia. [...] I am the natural born ragmouth speaking the motherless bloody tongue. No real language of my own to make sense with, so out comes everybody else's trash that don't conceive. But the sound truth is that I AM THE NOTORIOUS ONE AND ONLY CHICKENCOOP CHINAMAN HIMSELF that talks in the dark heavy Midnight, the secret Chinatown Buck Buck Bagaw. I am the result of a pile of pork chop suey thrown up into the chickencoop in the dead of night and the riot of dark birds, night cocks and insomniac nympho hens running after strange food that followed. There was Mother Red built like a fighting cock and running like one too. Hellbent for feather, cocksure, running for pot chop suey in the dead of night. And DESTINY!

Tam’s grandiloquent speech continues when he arrives in Pittsburgh and visits his childhood friend Kenji, a Japanese American dentist who Tam calls a “Black Jap.” Kenji helps Tam visit the father (Charley Popcorn) of the legendary black boxer (Ovaltine Jack Dancer). When they meet, Charley Popcorn denies being the father of Ovaltine, and Tam’s disillusionment with the boxing hero begins. Without a hero or a father figure, Tam’s anger mixes with pain and loss of self-identity. At the end of the play, he alienates everyone with sharp cynicism and insensible tirades. Tam becomes the Chickencoop Chinaman who remembers the “old days” of his grandparents in the Old West and who is made, not born.
The main female character in the play is Lee who Tam meets at Kenji’s apartment. She is “possible Eurasian or Chinese American passing for white” and the mother of “several kids in several racial combinations.” Lee continually nags Tam and Kenji for acting too “black” and describes Tam as “no kind of man […] like those vulnerable sea animals born with no shells of their own so he puts on the shells of the dead.” She voices what Chin sees as the dominant culture’s raw racist feelings against the Chinaman.

Throughout the play, Lee believes she might be pregnant, although the identity of the father is unclear. The original title of the play was The Chickencoop Chinaman’s Pregnant Pause. Symbolically, Lee seems to be pregnant with all that Tam (or, perhaps, Chin) hates about women, the dominant culture, and even himself.

The founding artistic director of American Place Theatre, Wynn Handman, remembers the original script as “fat as the Queens or Brooklyn phone book.” He invited Frank Chin to NYC to cut the play to a manageable size, but Chin was not easy to work with. “He had and still has so much talent and anger and fury in him and such a wild imagination that it creates a turbulence that just keeps exploding. So when you ask him to change something in a scene, he comes back with a long prologue when you don’t need a prologue” (Eng, Tokens? 410). Handman’s original notes to his first reading of the play foreshadowed the play’s reception in NYC:

The talent is squandered because the scenes are too loose and drawn out. The writing is excessive. The audience will be too worn out by the time the play is less than half over. It needs focusing, tightening and cutting, but the talent is abundant, original, genuine and full of force needed for drama. This is the ‘Chinese Look Back in Anger [by John Osborne].’ You must know that what we do to minority groups will ultimately produce its anger and then its violence, even with the Chinaman. (411)
Julius Novick, the reviewer for *The New York Times* compared Tam Lum to

"[John] Osborne's most famous hero. [...] loquacious, disaffected, excitable, sarcastic, angry" (Novick 3). Although Novick concluded that Frank Chin was not a "master rhetorician" like John Osborne, his comparison of the two main characters was accurate. In a more positive review, Edith Oliver of *The New Yorker* described Tam Lum's speech as a "dazzling eruption of verbal legerdemain" (June 24, 1972). Overall, the reviewers recognized Chin's ability to write and create original characters, but many criticized Tam's long monologues. Some described them as "hot air, disguised as poetry" and "bitterness and hatred [...] with] Frank Chin showing through." ¹⁴

The comments and reviews varied, but no one questioned the play’s importance. For the first time in American theatre history, not only was an original Asian American play produced in New York, but a conversation about Asian American drama had begun. Comments by Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* seems to best describe the general reaction (and cultural shock) felt by the mainstream white audience: "To be honest, I did not much like the play, but it showed me an ethnic attitude I had never previously encountered. It is difficult to understand a prejudice when you don't subscribe to it, but I can see that the American Oriental, in some fashion like the American Indian, must feel very underprivileged and threatened" (Barnes, "Stage: Identity Problem" 53). An angry Chinaman appeared on the American stage, and Frank Chin became a central figure in Asian American theatre and drama.
Randall Duk Kim, who played Tam, received praise for his performance at American Place Theatre. Randall Duk Kim was Classically trained, and did not let his racial identity prevent him from playing any role. He debuted as Malcolm in Macbeth at the age of 18 in his native home Hawaii and continued to perform in plays by Molière, Chekhov, Brecht, O’Neill, to name a few. Kim was and still is in a different league than most other Asian American actors. He has distinguished himself as a Shakespearean actor, including the role of Hamlet at the Guthrie Theatre in 1978 and even more successful productions with his own company in 1987 and 1988. Chin, to this date, recognizes Kim as the only actor who could play his characters to his satisfaction.

The Beginning of the Asian American Theatre Workshop

After The Chickencoop Chinaman closed at the American Place Theater, Frank Chin met with Edward Hastings, Executive Director of the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) in San Francisco. Chin and Hastings agreed to start the Asian American Theatre Workshop (AATW) as part of ACT’s Summer Training Congress program in 1973. Its purpose was to create productions of the same caliber as Chin’s Chickencoop Chinaman by cultivating new playwrights through writing workshops that would also train new Asian American actors, designers, and technicians. The goal of the workshop was to produce an “Asian-American production” by the end of the summer.

In May 1973, ACT gave ten special tuition scholarships of $ 600 each to Asian American actors and actresses for the company’s Summer Training Congress in San Francisco. In the press release that announced the pilot Asian American theatre workshop
program, ACT noted: “Asian-American talent has been virtually untapped for decades, with no professional outlet for growth and development on its own terms. The result is a widely-noted scarcity of Asian-American performers and playwrights, even in San Francisco where 17% of the population is Asian-American.” The workshop allowed the Asian American scholarship students to attend the full curriculum of the Summer Training Congress, “an intensive 10-week program of professional instruction in dramatic studies,” including workshops in “acting, voice, speech, dance, stage movement, yoga, mime, and verse drama, all taught by A.C.T. directors, actors, and trainers.” The students also participated in “special evening workshops” led by Frank Chin. This evening workshop was also open to Asian-American writers. Chin wanted Randall Duk Kim to teach acting, but when Kim could not take on the responsibility, Janis Chan stepped in as acting instructor.

The inauguration of the Asian American Theatre Workshop would not have been possible without Frank Chin’s efforts and vision. In an undated letter (probably early 1973) to Randall Duk Kim, Chin describes his plans to create what he tentatively calls “The Chinatown Theatre Workshop” with the help of the American Conservatory theatre and the Chinese Cultural Foundation. The letter includes a draft of the “Prospectus” that Chin later incorporated into the proposal for a “Theater Workshop for Asian-Americans,” submitted to Edward Hastings.

Culture, according to the scientists, is “history and its artifacts.” In other words culture is defined by its lifetime and its works. The works that define Chinese and Japanese American culture are obscure to the point of being unknown. Chinese and Japanese culture are replete with great poets, novelists, dramatists, and performing artists. This urge to self-expression in literature and the theatre arts that marked
Asian cultures in Asia is not obvious in Asian-America, if it exists at all. Why there are no known Chinese or Japanese American contributions to America drama and literature is not being considered here, only the fact that the total absence of an artistic voice from a minority group that has had seven generations of evolution is unnatural. Another strange fact worth noting is that none of the federal and state agencies or private foundations that have given any recognition or funds to Asian-American artists. While grants and subsidies to black, brown and red arts and individual artists are available from government, private and community sources, the only overt encouragement for Asian-American literary artists is the East West Players’ annual playwriting contest with a nominal thousand dollar first prize and a five hundred dollar second spot. (“Prospectus” 1)

Chin also states that theatre is the best way to satisfy the cultural needs of the Asian-American communities in San Francisco because of the medium’s “intrinsic collaborative nature” that combines “both the literary and performing aspects.” He ends the prospectus on a humorous note: “Hopefully, if all goes well, we don’t lose our hearts or minds, we will shut down the swordshow for a night or two, and end the summer with a play or two, put up on a big Chinatown stage.” Chin also states that he “personally want[s] ACT involved to give the project some credibility and theatrical respect.” Chin reached out to one of the most prestigious mainstream theatre companies in San Francisco to sponsor his project for artistic validation. He wanted to advance the Asian American culture in San Francisco in order to produce theatre pieces that would have literary merit equal to that of the best of Asian, European, and American dramatic traditions.

According to Chin, the goal of the workshop was “mainly to get Asian Americans into theater, to create respect for Asian American art and culture of all kinds.”18 With this goal in mind, the first Asian American Theatre Workshop opened in the summer of 1973 with twenty-five members, most of whom were new to theatre. Classes began on June 18
and continued through August 25. Chin’s idea for the workshop was a four-week rehearsal after which participants would present what they had worked on to an audience. He wanted the workshop to present “rehearsed readings of Chickencoop Chinaman or possibly Gee Pop or another work or works depending on the material I have to work with. The readings could be presented for ACT subscribers and friends four weeks after the beginning of the summer program.” Chin’s plan was implemented, and in August, the Workshop presented “scenes from the summer workshop” at ACT’s Playroom.

On August 16, 18, and 25, the presentation consisted of “The Lone Ranger Scene” from The Chickencoop Chinaman, excerpts from Year of the Dragon by Chin, and Portrait of Three Chinese-American Women, which was “developed by the director [Janis Chan] and actresses from taped interviews made for the Combined Asian-American Resources Project, CARP.” On August 17 and 24, the entire act one of Chickencoop Chinaman was performed. The cast of the “Lone Ranger Scene” included John Ng (Tam), Kathleen Chin (Kenji), Frank Chin (Lone Ranger), and Peter Fong (Tonto). The director was Janis Chan. In the excerpt from Year of the Dragon (directed by Frank Chin), the cast was Marion K. Yue (Fred), Viki Chang (Sissy), Gloria Choi (Ross), Joanne Matsui (Ma), Lulula Lee (Pa), and Eva Chan (Johnny). Portrait of Three Chinese-American Women included Judy Seto (left position), Kathleen Chan (center position), and Jean Wong (right position). And in act one of Chickencoop Chinaman, the cast included Gil Chooey (Tam Lum), Jean Wong (Hong Kong Dream Girl), Cliff Yosa (Kenji), Mary Dacumos (Robbie), and Arika Dacumos (Lee). Set and light designers were Michael Brooks and Eric Hayashi (who would become the artistic director in the 1980s).
The ACT proclaimed the workshop a success. In a September press release, ACT announced the workshop's continuation: "A pilot Asian-American theater workshop program [...] was so successful that it will be continued during the regular season, beginning Oct. 2. Participants in the 30-week program will meet at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays through May 7."\(^{21}\) The announcement also encouraged interested Asian American actors and playwrights to register. Frank Chin and Janis Chan were named co-directors of the workshop. The first meeting of the second workshop attracted over fifty interested people. Many of them learned about the workshop from a local television's (KQED-TV) open studio presentation which featured scenes from *Portrait of Three Chinese-American Women* and a panel discussion. Approximately thirty members remained throughout the fall of 1973 and met two nights a week in acting, voice, and movement classes.

During this time, Frank Chin's vision of the Workshop grew ambitiously. He wanted to develop an "ensemble" like that of filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, "with writers working together over a period of time, with a definite vision of what they think life is about, with personality and consistency in their work."\(^{22}\) Also, he felt that Asian American plays should have "the feeling and emotion and the language of their time," similar to the plays of the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey.\(^{23}\) For Chin, the oral history of Asian Americans provided an invaluable source of emotion and language for the Workshop. In the late 1960s, Chin had personally collected many oral history tapes in places like Seattle and Hanford and had founded the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP)
in San Francisco that archived the tapes and other historical documents. Chin wanted the Workshop to develop a theatre piece based on the tapes.\textsuperscript{24} At the end of 1973, the group began to work on a full-length show, “Freddie Eng’s Chinatown Tour” which was based on Frank Chin’s \textit{The Year of the Dragon} with scenes developed in the workshop.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Year of the Dragon} is about Fred Eng, a Chinese American travel agent and tourist guide who fakes his accent for “authenticity” while giving tours to visitors in Chinatown. Members used the oral history tapes and their personal experiences to create the show, which included monologues, skits, andagit-props.

Around this time, the members of the Workshop increasingly worked with each other, rather than with Frank Chin or Janis Chan. Chin was often out of town, working on other projects. When he returned, he directed what the Workshop members had created. More often than not, Chin was critical of their work. The younger members of the Workshop did not appreciate Chin’s criticism, and began to clash with him. Janice Chan was a white woman married to Jeff Chan, a friend of Frank Chin. The members did not like a non-Asian American teaching and directing them. Many of them felt Chan did not understand Asian American sensibility and awareness. This distrust eventually led to Chan’s resignation in 1975. As early as 1973, the members of the Workshop preferred working independently, and Frank Chin did not approve of the style and quality of their work.

In late 1973, two faculty members of Sacramento High School approached the Workshop to request a performance at their school. The invitation encouraged the Workshop to complete the show, “Freddie Eng’s Chinatown Tour.” More requests by
schools, colleges, and community groups came in, and in March, April, and May of 1974, the Workshop performed “Freddie Eng’s Chinatown Tour” at eight different venues in San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, and San Jose. The sponsors of these performances varied. For instance, on March 22, the Workshop’s performance at Sacramento High School was sponsored by two school groups Asian American Awareness and The Thespians. The April 9th performance at the Calvary Presbyterian Church was sponsored by the Christian Careers Forum. And on May 4th, the Workshop performed at the University of California, Santa Cruz and was sponsored by Merrill, Covell, Stevenson, Oaks, and VIII Colleges. 26

During this period, the number of invitations was greater than could be handled by the members, all of whom were working on a volunteer basis. To alleviate the shorthandedness, the Workshop created a series of scenes and monologues that required a minimum number of technical equipment. The Workshop performed these shows at San Francisco State University (April 19, sponsored by Association of Students for Third World Cultural Fair) and Pine Methodist Church (May 17, sponsored by San Francisco Center for Japanese American Studies).

By the end of spring, 1974, the Workshop had produced nearly thirty trained Asian American theatre artists who performed for hundreds of spectators. Most of the audiences were Asian Americans who, for the first time, saw glimpses of their own lives on the stage. The popularity of the Workshop in the community demonstrated the need for such cultural outlets. When the Workshop announced 1974 summer classes, over eighty potential members showed up at the first meeting. In addition, ACT gave full scholarships to ten
Asian Americans to attend its Summer Training Congress. This ten-week summer session included classes for both beginners and advanced students. Janis Chan led the acting classes, and instructors of ACT volunteered to teach voice and movement classes. Also, Eric Hayashi and Nathan Lee led new classes in “scene study” and technical theatre.

At the end of the 1974 summer Workshop, students gave a special performance of scenes from their classes. The program note shows that the “co-directors” for the scene works were Janis Chan and Frank Chin. The primary acting teacher was Janis Chan with teaching assistants Frank Abe, Kathleen Chin, and Gil Chooey. Guest teachers included Ron Bossums and Rick Winter from ACT. With Marc Hayashi as the master of ceremonies, the program included two scenes from Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman*, Chin’s *Year of the Dragon*, Alberto S. Florentino’s *Wedding Dance*, Jon Shirota’s *Pineapple White*, Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch*, and *A Matter of Nose* by Wood Moy and Gil Chooey, two members of the workshop. These plays were not developed at the Workshop but were included in the repertory when they were “found.” Frank Chin, who was by this time well known in the Asian American writers’ community, actively solicited plays by Asian American writers.

In 1974, Frank Chin and Workshop members articulated their objectives in “An Overview of the Asian American Theatre Workshop”:

1. To provide a training ground for Asian American actors, directors, and technicians.

2. To mount an easily toured production to present to groups in the area.
3. To continue to develop an oral-history archive through taped interviews of Asian Americans of all ages and walks of life.

4. To continue to create theatre pieces from these tapes, using the actual words (and duplicating the actual accents) of the individuals recorded.

5. To develop and encourage Asian American playwrights
   a. By having advanced actors work with playwrights in creating new plays.
   b. By setting up writers’ workshops and conferences.
   c. By helping Asian American playwrights obtain grants.

6. To collect, edit, and publish anthologies of Asian American writings, including fiction, poetry, essays, and drama, specifically designed to be used as textbooks in both elementary and secondary curricula.

7. To set up a physical plant for a workshop-theatre, self-contained and housing ancillary services.

8. To integrate our activities with others in the Asian American community that are aimed at raising the level of consciousness concerning the history and condition of Asians in America.

9. To obtain financial support from local sources.\textsuperscript{27}

In 1975 the Workshop made plans to leave ACT and establish itself as an independent company. During the transition in 1975, members gathered at Eric Hayashi’s apartment to discuss the future of the Workshop. By this time, Frank Chin was not actively involved in the Workshop, and Janis Chan had resigned. Without Chin, the members
revisited the objectives of the Workshop. In numerous meetings, the members discussed what they called “vision questions”:

1. What is the objective of it (the Workshop)?
2. What are we individually in it for?
3. What direction would we like to see it go?
4. What end result or final goal would we like to see?
5. How does the Workshop fit into the Asian Community?
6. How can I individually contribute to the Workshop? 28

Without a visible leader, the members spent many hours discussing and debating the questions. Some sided with Frank Chin’s original vision, and others wanted revision. Chin was still nominally the artistic leader, but administratively younger members such as Eric Hayashi and Karen Seriguchi led the group. While Chin was busy with the Asian American Writer’s Conference and other projects, Workshop members struggled with their future in many meetings.

One undisputable need for the Workshop was an advisory board that would reflect the Asian American community in San Francisco. This need became apparent by October of 1975, and by 1976, was the “highest priority.” In October of 1976, the members of the AATW sent letters of invitation to about thirty potential advisory board members. The list of the candidates included Judge Harry W. Low (Superior Court of California), Danilo Begonia (acting dean of the School of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University),
Edward Hastings (executive director of the American Conservatory Theatre), Mako (artistic director of the East West Players), and Jeffery Chan (chairperson of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University). Most candidates responded positively, and at the end of 1976, sixteen members from the community joined the board. Some of the most active members of the first Advisory Board included Danilo Begonia, Jeffery Chan, Darrell Knouye (deputy public defender), Jeff Mori (director of JCYC), George Woo (lecturer in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University), and Antonio Grafilo (member of Human Rights Commission).

An internal memo written on August 11, 1976 by Karen Seriguchi (managing director) stated that, “An advisory board would strengthen the Workshop tremendously” by accomplishing the following goals:

- Establish and maintain links with the Asian American community
- Assist [AATW] in getting donation of supplies, materials, and cash
- Help [AATW] raise funds through their ties to businesses and community groups
- Demonstrate the support of the Workshop by prominent members of the Asian American community
- Provide [AATW] with expert advice as needed.

Between August and October of 1976, the AATW obtained a $20,000 grant from the San Francisco Foundation which “made it possible for [AATW] to stabilize [its] administrative structure, locate a space in which [it is] now building San Francisco’s first Asian American
theater, and begin the massive job of long-range planning.”29 With the grant and an advisory board, the Asian American Theatre Workshop established itself as a formal theatre company.

During the 1975-1976 season, members of the Workshop appointed Marianne Li as artistic director. Since all members shared administrative and artistic responsibilities, Li’s appointment did not signify a major organizational change. In the same season, the Workshop produced Honeybucket by Mel Escueta. Frank Chin with Chris Wong directed the play. The production was received positively by critics and the community, but the administration of the Workshop did not go smoothly. Marianne Li left her position as artistic director, and the board of directors began to make artistic decisions. Frank Chin, who had been in the background during the season, stepped in and nominated himself as the new artistic director.

In a letter to the board of directors, Chin blamed the board for not filling the position of artistic director vacated by Marianne Li:

True, Marianne’s performance as Artistic Director was miserable, confused and lacking in guts. Most of all ... and the board should have seen this immediately ... Marianne had no vision of Asian American theater. By not filling the position of Artistic Director the board took on the task of artistic policy and the day to day responsibilities of artistic direction upon itself and has made no progress. 30

Chin also specified the responsibilities of the board of directors: “to keep the workshop alive and growing [....] to get money, and get people supporting or participating in the workshop.” He tells the board to learn the specifics of the Workshop’s philosophy and vision and to focus on communicating them to the community. Moreover, Chin reclaimed his responsibility as the artistic leader of the Workshop:
I have, in effect, if not in fact, been the artistic director of the AATW from the start. I'd like the title and power laid on me up front so no one, including myself, will be confused anymore. As artistic director I will fix and direct artistic policy. I will be in charge of play productions, script development, anything affecting the artistic quality of our work...from the physical plant to the casting of specific parts. I will set the season, select the directors, co-ordinate the set design, construction and painting, costuming, casting, directing, stage managing and technical servicing of the productions. All the normal stuff of all Artistic Directors.  

With Frank Chin as the unquestionable artistic director, the Workshop produced his *Year of the Dragon* in the 1976-77 season. Chin acted the lead role and directed the production.

The 1977-88 season included *Manila Murder* by Dom Magwiil (directed by Frank Chin) and *Lady is Dying* by Amy Sanbo and Lonny Kaneko (directed by Frank Chin).  

With Chin at the helm, the Workshop continued to develop new Asian American plays and train new artists. However, his authoritarian style of leadership did not please all members of the Workshop. Tension had been building up since the beginning in 1973, and Chin had upset many people with his explosive temper and sharp tongue.

Among the many complaints members directed towards Frank Chin, the most frequent was the fact that Chin conceived and operated the group as a “Writers Workshop” and refused to make it a “community outreach group.” Chin, on the other hand, complained that some of the pieces created by members without his help were “illegitimate.” Furthermore, he felt that the Workshop should not go out to the Asian American community to perform, but that the community should come to the theatre. In 1977, for instance, some members of the Workshop performed agit-prop pieces before the Asian Law Caucus and at Hayward State University, receiving positive responses. The
members used agit-props and similar projects for “fundraising, publicity, the promotion of Asian consciousness [and] providing our actors with experience.”\textsuperscript{33} The Board “fully endorsed” such projects, but Chin opposed them for lacking “artistic control” and “advanced planning.”\textsuperscript{34}

Throughout his appointment as artistic director, Chin’s style of theatre management continued to clash with others in the company. Founding members such as Eric Hayashi, who had received apprenticeship from Chin, began to challenge Chin’s authoritarian method. Hayashi, for instance, suggested a newer model of theatre management that allowed the staff to have some power in the decision-making process. The number of disagreements increased, and in March 1978, Chin resigned from the company. Before the resignation, the Workshop suffered an odd triangular relationship among Chin, veteran members, and new members. Veteran members knew Chin’s style and understood ways of communicating with him. New members, on the other hand, could not cope with Chin’s demands. For instance, Chin had a reputation of yelling at members when he did not like their work. The veteran members had learned to dismiss such outbursts and to confront Chin when necessary. The new members, however, were intimidated by Chin. Often, a new member would leave the Workshop with an emotional wound, and the staff would have difficulty finding a replacement. Also, new members shied away from Chin and avoided any direct conversation with him. This caused Chin to disapprove of new members even more. Caught in between, the veteran members continually pushed Chin to restructure the Workshop’s administrative organization to be more inviting and democratic. Chin remained adamantly about his vision and style as artistic
director, and when opposition of the staff (by both veteran and new members) grew, he resigned.

The Resignation of Frank Chin

The dispute that led to Chin's resignation began as a small disagreement over a set design. It culminated during the rehearsal for Jeff Chan's new play, *Bunnyhop*, in early 1978. (Ironically, *Bunnyhop* was the first comedy produced by the Workshop.) The play required a wall that would make a loud noise as it fell flat on the ground. In one scene, the wall was to fall while a character stood at its open door. Frank Chin wanted the wall to fall like the real thing and make a believable noise. He insisted on building a real wall on the stage. Technical director Raymond Ju and managing director Eric Hayashi disagreed, preferring a set wall that would be lighter and therefore safer for the actors. Chin went ahead and started to build the wall as he wished, but Ju and Hayashi fought his decision. Chin, as artistic director, felt that he could direct and design the show himself as he had done during the earlier years of the Workshop. Chin had, over the years, "ruled in matters of publicity, sound, lighting, and set design."\(^{35}\) Raymond Ju and Eric Hayashi argued that the technical crew was responsible for implementing the set design. Finally, Chin asked the board to fire the entire staff, announcing that he would leave otherwise.

The board asked Chin to reconsider. On March 1, the board sent a letter to Chin stating that "As a director you [Chin] must certainly have final approval over the set and lighting designs. We feel, however, that the technical director is responsible for the implementation of these designs. As long as the finished products meet the specifications
of the approved designs, the how of getting them done is up to him or her.” The board did not think that Chin would actually quit, but to its surprise, he wasn’t bluffing. Considering the board’s letter an ultimatum, Chin resigned four days later on March 5, 1978. However, Jeff Chan, the playwright of *Bunnyhop* and member of the board, would not allow the play to continue without Chin as director. Two days later, on March 7, the Board rehired Chin to direct *Bunnyhop*, giving him full authority. But when Chin saw that the set he had constructed had been “kicked” (according to Chin) and dismantled, he left the Workshop, never to return to work with AATW. According to an article in *The San Francisco Journal*, Raymond Ju, Eric Hayashi, and assistant director Mark Hayashi had, with the board’s permission, disassembled the triggering device that collapsed the wall. They felt it was “too damn heavy” and therefore dangerous (Yip 1).

The Workshop had just received an unexpected grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and such mainstream recognition could not have been possible without Frank Chin’s reputation. Thus, his resignation caused much concern for the newly formed AATW Community Advisory Board, which immediately called a meeting to discuss the issue. The meeting, including members of the Board of the Directors and the Workshop, was held on March 21, 1978 at San Francisco State University. Board members wanted to make sure that all options had been explored to prevent Chin from resigning. For them, Chin was “a national voice in Asian American literature, and especially theater.”36 The Board offered to assist the Workshop in revising the administrative structure to prevent similar disputes in the future. Jeff Chan sided with Chin and threatened to “cut off” the present grants until Chin was rehired as the director of *Bunnyhop*. However, the majority
of the twenty-six voting members (of both the board and Workshop) voted to refuse Chan’s request and reconfirmed its original decision. They replied to the Advisory Board with a note stating that, “It is our belief that, while the Workshop will possibly be financially poorer in the immediate future, the present offers a rich opportunity to develop acting, directing, and technical skills for many people.”

Responses of the Workshop and Board members varied. Karen Seriguchi, the president of the Board, felt that it was “unfortunate” to lose Chin, but stated that “the Workshop will have a new look, and we will certainly be strong artistically.” Most people supported the Board’s decision. John Ng’s letter to the Board of Directors is representative of the general sentiment towards Chin’s approach:

As an original member of the Asian American Theater Workshop, I envisioned the workshop to be just that, an Asian American theater workshop. The Asian American Theater Workshop was to be a theater facility for Asian American actors, technicians, directors, producers, and playwrights to work cooperatively toward developing their skills. I believe that this outlet is extremely important because of the lack of opportunity, due to racism, for Asian Americans in this field. I feel that Frank Chin as artistic director of the workshop has not taken direction for the workshop to be a “workshop.” He has not only been the only director of the majority of plays, but also has been scenic designer, principal carpenter, and lead actor. He has taken the workshop toward a direction as being principally an Asian American playwright’s workshop.

As Ng states, the Workshop began with a playwright’s vision, but after five years, it grew to include many talented producers, technical designers, and set designers whom Chin refused to acknowledge. The Workshop could no longer be ruled by a playwright autocrat. But others, like Ben Tong of the University of California, Santa Cruz, defended Chin and
asked to be disassociated from the Workshop. In a letter to the Board, Tong defended Chin:

I realize that Frank Chin’s temperament has never been the easiest to adjust to and I would be the very last one to defend him as someone with the manners of an airline steward. Nevertheless, disagreements with him have never been as open and confrontive as they might have been. People in the Workshop who cower in fear of him have to take responsibility for not responding as adults whenever Frank turned them off or turned them the wrong way. A large part of the problem, of course, was programmatic or organizational. That is to say, it has never really been clear just how much final power and authority the Artistic Director should have. [...] Suffice to say that Frank did not deserve to be treated in the way that he was. He may not have been the easiest Artistic Director to live with but his wholehearted, sacrificial efforts should have counted for something. [...] All I can say at this point is that those in AATW who have resented Frank for the glory that was not theirs can have it all now. I imagine AATW will become a nightclub act, doing a lot of instant flashy things like poetry readings and the like, which will be nice. Too bad it will never be a theater again and live up to what it might have been.39

The Workshop did not become a “nightclub act,” but Chin’s resignation opened the doors to a new generation of Asian American theatre artists in San Francisco. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, the Workshop continued to implement Chin’s vision for years after his resignation.

Following his departure, Jeff Chan’s Bunnyhop, Chin’s new play, Oofy, Goofy, and a third unnamed original play were withdrawn from the season. No play was produced in 1978, but in 1979, the Workshop produced four original Asian American plays: Point of Departure by Paul Stephen Lim, Coda by Alberto Isaac, A Play by Bill Yamasaki by Adrian Kinoshita-Myers, and Intake-Outtake by Judi Nihei, Marc Hayashi, Diana Tanaka, Adrienne Fong and ensemble. The 1979 season showcased the new artistic style of AATW that would continue until the mid-1980s.
Chin continued to work on *Oofly, Goofly*, a play about the Japanese internment experience, when he moved to Seattle after the resignation. The experience of resignation was bitter for Frank Chin: “I’ve been slapped in the face twice, humiliated and lied to by the Board. [...] They [Hayashi and Ju] played on resentment, jealousy, and fear” (Yip 5). To this day, Chin calls AATW a “failed experiment” and blames the “chickenshit actors” for the failure. Despite what Chin says, his “experiment” in San Francisco made an immense impact on Asian American theatre. He was a true visionary with a clear and unalterable view of an Asian American theatre company.

**Frank Chin’s Vision of Asian American Theatre**

Before he left AATW in 1978, Frank Chin wrote more about the vision of Asian American theatre than anyone else in the American theatre community. In fact, he claimed that he was the only one with a vision. “Ours [AATW] is the first Asian American theater to start with a vision of Asian American theater. And to be quick and dirty about it, we started with a vision of Asian American theater because I started this group.”

Chin believed that Asian American theatre should be led by a visionary playwright like himself. “Yellow” playwrights, he thought, had to first create characters and scenes for “yellow” actors, designers, and technicians. Without Asian American plays, Chin claimed, Asian American theatre could not exist. For instance, he argued that actors were at the mercy of writers and that without “yellow” writers, “yellow” actors would have to portray racist stereotypes created by white Americans.
Chin did not approve of all plays by “yellow” writers. He criticized those writers who -- in his opinion -- catered exclusively to white readers and provided “prayers to white supremacy and white manhood.” Chin prescribed a specific vision for Asian American writers. He explained the vision in Aiiieee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers (published in 1974 by Howard University Press), the first anthology of writings by Asian Americans, co-edited by Frank Chin, Jeff Chan, Lawson Fuaso Inada, and Shawn Wong. The anthology addressed “fifty years of [Asian American] voice” which had been “so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture.” The editors proclaimed: “Asian America [...] is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AiiIEEEEEE!!!” Chin’s hostile rhetoric against the “white Christian racists” echoed in his plays, novels, administrative style, and interviews. He told an interviewer: “[The] image of us as a race of men and women is that the men are passive, timid, non-aggressive, and non-assertive. This is patently ridiculous! [...] We’ve been suppressed! We’ve been ignored! We’ve been tyrannized! We’ve been terrorized!” (Chin, “I’m Not Chinese” 5).

Chin was offended by American racism, and his response was to offend almost anyone who did not agree with his views, his writing style, or his artistic manifesto. This isolated Chin from other, more popular, writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston who, in 1976, emerged as one of the most prominent Asian American writers with her novel Woman Warriors. Chin particularly despised “autobiographies by yellow women,” written to satisfy the “white racist” readers. He argued that the only “authentic” Asian American writers were those in Aiiieee! and those who wrote like them. All others --
including Maxine Hong Kingston and later Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang -- wrote like a "yellow white racist."\textsuperscript{45}

Chin expresses his aggressive and testosterone-driven vision of Asian American literature and theatre in his seventy-four page letter to Michael Kirby, the editor of The Drama Review in response to Yen Lu Wong's article, "Chinese American Theatre" in the 1976 spring edition of TDR. The letter lacks organization and often repeats itself, but it reflects Chin's profound understanding of the history of Asian American theatre as well as his vision for the future. Overall, he found Wong's article "offensive, ignorant, and white supremacist." His argument is essentially threefold: 1. Chinese-American culture is different from Chinese-in-America culture; 2. Chinese American theatre is not new -- Asian American theatre may have begun with the East West Players, but Chinese American theatre has existed since the nineteenth century; 3. His own plays and the theatre he envisions are new and different from other kinds of Asian American theatre.

Chin bases his view of Chinese American culture on the Cantonese mythical figure, Kwan Kung, who is, according to Chin, the god of war and plunder to soldiers, the god of literature to writers, and the god patron protector of actors to anyone who plays him on stage. Kwan Kung, for Chin, represents Chinese-American theatre tradition.

Among Cantonese actors Kwan Kung characterizes the loyalty they have to each other. The people are famous for taking care of their people and had only each other to trust. Many of the folk tales of Kwan Kung involve actors playing him on stage. Any actor who puts on the mask of Kwan Kung and uses Kwan Kung's name is Kwan Kung. Kwan Kung's name breaks all magic, good or bad. All magic dies around Kwan Kung. What Kwan Kung was to Cantonese and Cantonese actors was what Kwan Kung was to the first Chinamans. He was the most popular hero, and his the most popular opera because he embodied qualities we valued in ourselves and thought characterized us.\textsuperscript{46}
Chin calls himself a “Chinaman” and wishes to identify himself with Kwan Kung, “the most popular hero of the most popular novel and opera in Chinatown history, also known as the god of fighters, writers, actors, gamblers, and avengers, Kwan Kung himself.”

Chin criticizes Wong for putting him in the same category of “Chinese American theatre” with Peking opera and Tisa Chang, the founder and artistic director of Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York City and a first generation immigrant. Chin describes Tisa Chang as “doing white work ‘Chinese style’ and doing Chinese work tailored to white tolerance and taste.” He says that with the exception of Mako, who was “a trained actor with anything approaching a vision of Asian American theater,” the other members of the East West Players and the Chinese Theater Group (later renamed to Pan Asian Repertory Theatre) “began with no vision of Asian American theater or Asian America.” And ultimately, according to Chin, “they began without Asian American writers” (34).

In a letter to the Workshop’s Board of Directors, Chin described the East West Players in Los Angeles as lacking in vision:

The East West Players was the first Asian American as opposed to exclusively “Chinese” or “Japanese” American theater group. It was founded with the purpose of showing off yellow actors to white Hollywood producers. They opened with Rashomon, a white Broadway play based on a Japanese movie, based on a Japanese short story. Their artistic director, Mako was a few years into East West before articulating the need for stuff from a yellow heart to move yellow actors to feeling they were really acting. Today the East West Players is the Asian American actor’s theater. 47

For Chin, the visionary playwright was the brain and soul of Asian American theatre.

Thus, development of new Asian American plays constituted the highest priority at Chin’s
company. His vision of a community for this new drama is based upon a political commitment to do “yellow” work in a white America. But he lacked the organizational temperament and leadership skills to deliver such a vision.

**Conclusion**

After his resignation, Frank Chin called the Asian American Theatre Workshop a “failed experiment.” Without a visionary playwright -- namely, himself -- the Workshop ceased to be a true Asian American theatre company for Chin. However, many people disagree. For the five years between 1973 and 1978, the Asian American Theatre Workshop produced numerous Asian American actors, designers, and technicians who moved on to work in other theatres. And most importantly, Chin’s demanding call for the development of “authentic” Asian American plays remained the fundamental agenda for the Asian American Theatre Company. Chin may disapprove of their plays, but some of the most influential Asian American playwrights, including Philip Kan Gotanda, David Henry Hwang, and Lane Nishikawa, have emerged from the company. After Chin’s resignation, the Workshop began its second era with a new group of members who experimented with both administrative and artistic choices. In chapter two, section four, I will discuss this group, which many in the community called the “Group Theatre of Asian American theatre.”

After Chin left AATC, he moved to Seattle and helped Bea Kiyohara stabilize Asian Exclusion Act financially and artistically. However, his stay in Seattle was brief, and his involvement with Asian American theatre ceased after 1980. He turned to writing
novels and published *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R. R. Co.*, a collection of eight short stories in 1988. He continued to write novels such as *Donald Duk* (1991) and *Gunda Din Highway* (1994). As in theatre, Chin is a controversial figure in Asian American literary and cultural communities. Some recognize him as the “Godfather” Asian American writing, while others describe him as acrimonious and misogynist. Although he has refused to participate in Asian American theatre since 1980, he has continued to write plays, including a docudrama based on the court documents from the Japanese American internment camp period. According to Chin, he no longer writes plays for productions, but at the same time, he does not dismiss its staging possibilities at Asian American theatre companies in the future.
Section 3: Community Based Theatre:  
Formative Years of Northwest Asian American Theatre (Seattle, WA)

While the East West Players was founded by a group of actors and the Asian American Theatre Company by a playwright, the Northwest Asian American Theatre began as a community-based organization led by activists and artists devoted to the Asian American community in Seattle. The Northwest Asian American Theatre had two beginnings: the Asian Multi-Media Center (AMMC) in 1973 and the Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (TEA) in 1974. One of the first indications of interest in Asian American theatre in Seattle emerged in March 1972 when Tim Cordova, Nemesio Domingo, Jr. and Douglas Chin conceived the idea of creating a permanent Asian American acting group that resembled a local African American company, Black Arts West. After spending 1972 seeking supporters and possible funding sources, the three realized that their concept of an acting group had to include other art forms in order to receive community support. Community leaders advised them to create a multi-media group that could train youth in media for employment. Cordova, Domingo, and Chin recognized that they needed to change their focus. They proposed a multi-media center for “photography, graphic arts, and journalism with a training program that would encourage inner city youth to enter the mass communication field” (Dream 5). The center was to address “the lack of visibility of Asians in television and film and the distorted and negative stereotypes perpetuated by newspapers, radio, television, and film” (Proposal 1974, 9). After writing a grant to the Washington State Arts Commission, they received $14,500 from Model Cities for Youth Services Projects, and in late January 1973, the Asian Multi Media Center (AMMC)
opened under the umbrella of Filipino Youth Activities. Cordova, Domingo, and Chin asked Alan Schärer, who had been active in the Filipino community and had expertise with youth programs, to direct the Center.

The formation of the Asian Multi Media Center reflected the emerging political activism of young Asian Americans in Seattle in the early 1970s. Like their counterparts around the country, Asian Americans in Seattle were protesting racial and social discrimination in their community, especially in the International District. Since the nineteenth century, Asian immigrants and their descendants had made their homes in Seattle. The first group of Chinese came to the Pacific Northwest as early as 1789, but it was between 1870 and 1890 that a large number of Chinese laborers arrived in Seattle to work in railroad construction. The first Chinatown in Seattle was formed in the mid-1870s when Chin Chun Hock moved his prosperous merchant shop, Wa Chong Company, to Third and Washington Street. The area on Washington Street between Second and Fourth Avenues flourished with Chinese washhouses, restaurants, grocers, herbalists, merchants, and laborers. However, with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, anti-Chinese violence and legal exclusion increased in Chinatown. In 1886, an anti-Chinese riot erupted, and most of the 400 Chinese in Seattle were forcefully loaded onto steamers and sent back to China. A handful of Chinese merchants and domestic servants remained.

The Chinese community revived in the 1890s when the demand for cannery workers in Puget Sound and Alaska exploded. From Portland and San Francisco, over 2000 Chinese workers arrived in Seattle annually, looking for inexpensive housing and
high pay. At this time, laborers from Japan and the Philippines also began to arrive. In the early 1900s, the construction of the King Street Tunnel and the extension of Second Avenue -- both of which went through Chinatown -- forced the Chinese out of their community. 48 Most of the larger merchant shops moved to an area (on King Street between Seventh and Eight Avenues) that came to be known as the second Chinatown.

In the 1910s and 1920s the second Chinatown grew as a new influx of Filipino and Japanese immigrants settled in the area, which came to be known as the International District. Filipinos who escaped political oppression and religious intolerance in the Philippines found their niche in the southeast portion of the International District on Second and Main Streets. The majority of them were young men who worked in canneries or as cooks and houseboys. Whereas the Chinese and Filipino communities in Seattle were predominantly male, the Japanese community centered on the family since immigration laws allowed Japanese men to bring their wives and children. Thus, many Japanese immigrants owned family-run businesses in the District. The Japanese population originally settled around the Fifth Avenue area between Main and Jackson Streets adjacent to the second Chinatown. The Nippon Kan Theater, built in 1909, served as a community center where both performances and meetings took place. By World War II, the Japanese constituted the largest minority group in Seattle.

World War II divided and damaged the Japanese community whose families were forced to move out of the city to internment camps. On the other hand, the war empowered the Filipino and Chinese communities. The Chinese exclusion law was repealed in 1943, and new laws allowed the Filipinos and Chinese to become naturalized citizens who could
bring wives from their homelands. The War Bride Act enabled servicemen's wives to enter the U.S. on a non-quota basis. Consequently, the number of Filipino and Chinese families increased substantially after the second war. For instance, from 1940 to 1960, over 1,900 Chinese children were born in the state of Washington (most of them in Seattle). And the Chinese population in Seattle increased from 1,781 in 1940 to 2,650 in 1950. In 1960, that number increased by 65 percent to 4,176. On the other hand, the Japanese population in Seattle decreased from 7,000 in 1940 to 5,800 in 1950.49

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese Americans populated the International District. This generation, unlike most Asian Americans outside of the District, lived in the same neighborhood, attended the same schools, and interacted not only with themselves, but also with African Americans. In turn, some members of the following baby-boom generation of Chinese and Filipino Americans and the sansei (third generation) Japanese Americans adopted Black Power rhetoric and participated in the civil rights movement.

In 1972, at the same time that Cordova, Chin, and Domingo approached community leaders about an Asian American acting group, a city-wide protest united Asian American youths and activists and allowed them to focus on an immediate issue: the King County Dome Stadium construction. According to the protesters, the Dome, located at the south of the International District, threatened the welfare of its residents. The protesters marched to the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office and demanded actions to alleviate the Dome's impact. Concerned residents protested the substandard housing conditions, healthcare, and education in the International District which, for them,
was an “Asian ghetto.” The protest continued through 1973, giving momentum to Cordova, Domingo, and Chin as they stated their case for a multi-media center. The city supported efforts to improve the District both culturally and economically.

The Asian Multi Media Center was first housed in the St. Peter Claver Interracial Center Building, located next door to the old Providence Hospital in the International District. The building housed three other community programs and provided the Center with an office space and other facilities including classrooms, darkroom, and storage. In exchange for an annual rent of $5060, the staff was responsible for management and maintenance. The Center began with two paid administrative staff, Alan Scharer, coordinator, and Timothy Cordova, his assistant. Other staff members, including instructors, worked as volunteers. During 1973 and 1974, the Center received several grants: $20,000 from the Office of Economic Opportunity to support general activities, $2000 from the Seattle Arts Commission for a drama workshop, $1000 from the Washington State Arts Commission to buy photographic equipment, $700 from the Washington State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission to create a photo exhibit of Chinese in Seattle, and $300 from the Wing Luke Memorial Museum to hold an Asian American Art Exhibit.

By focusing on multi-media instead of acting, the Center was able to tap a wide range of grant sources, thus situating itself as a community-centered organization for Asian Americans in Seattle. Supporters of the Center argued that the field of multi-media was an essential element of a “technologically advanced society” and that the job market had been closed to untrained Asians. One of the main goals of the Center was to train Asian youths
for employment in media. In a grant proposal written in 1974, the Center stated that the Asian communities in the Northwest had been confined to low-income jobs. The proposal also reported that “the median income for Washington Filipinos, in 1970, was 62% of white male median income; for the Chinese, 68%; and for the Japanese, 86%” (Proposal 1974, 2). According to the proposal, one way to develop Asian communities economically was to “encourage young Asians to enter occupational fields from which they traditionally have been excluded, so that they may draw upon the economic resources of the larger society to augment the resources of their own peoples” (2).

The primary goal of the Center was to empower Asian American youths by providing occupational training and cultural education of their heritage. In addition, specific objectives included artistic training and media awareness:

1. develop the artistic means of expressing and articulating the unique experiences of Asians in America;
2. recognize Asian American talent in both individual and performing Arts;
3. help develop a realistic and positive image of the Asian American through various forms of the media;
4. train Asian community youth in [...] artistic field[s] such as drama, dance, photography, graphic arts, fine arts, and creative writing.

(Dreams and Promises: Northwest Asian American Theatre 20th Anniversary, 5)

Free classes on photography, graphic arts, and silk screening were taught by experts who volunteered to teach for a small stipend. Instructors included Steve Suzuki, Gary Wong, Rick Wong, and Hugo Louie, all professionals in the community.
The Drama Workshop began as a subdivision of the Center and was headed by Richard E. T. White, a student at the University of Washington’s Drama Department. The 1974 grant proposal described the Workshop as a coming together of “disjointed groups of Asian individuals doing a play here and there.” The Workshop provided opportunities to students who wanted to form a professional Asian American acting troupe. Comprised primarily of Asian American high school and college-age students who met two or three times a week, the classes provided training in basic acting and directing. In the first year, the drama workshop was titled “Creative Dramatics. Acting, Theater Games,” and the classes were taught by Richard E. T. White, Stan Asis, and Mariilyn Tokuda, all drama students at the University of Washington.

One of the first public presentations of the Drama Workshop was a staged reading titled “If You Want to Know What We Are: Voices of Asians In America,” directed by Richard E. B. White. It featured dramatic adaptations of novels and short stories by Lawson Inada and Carlos Bulosan, and other Asian American writers. Workshop students also presented staged readings at local high schools and colleges.

**Formation of Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (TEA)**

Around the time when the Asian Multi Media Center was established, a group of Asian American students at the University of Washington “went in search for a place to act” (*Dreams* 24). Led by Stan Asis, the group included Marilyn Tokuda, Yolly Irigon, Henry Tonel, Gloria Pacis, Larry Wong, and Maria Batayola. Before meeting Tokuda in a drama class at the University of Washington, Asis led a group called Dulaan Ng Mga
Tao, Theatre of the People, a Filipino American theatre group in Seattle. Asis and Tokuda felt the “loneliness of being nonwhite and having to play roles or learn about theatre which did not honor [their] culture” (Dreams 14). They agreed to form an Asian American drama group on their campus.

Their first public show in 1974 was the performance of Tokuda’s Marginal Man at the University of Washington. Written, produced, and directed by Tokuda, the show was a musical comedy revue about the Asian American experience. It emphasized the new concept of, “Asian American” which was “not Asian,” and “not American.” The sketches depicted “difficult situations and racist circumstances faced by the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos since they [had] arrived on the Western shores of the United States” (Proposal 16).

At the time, there were only a few Asians among over 300 drama majors in the University of Washington School of Drama. So most actors in the show were non-majors who acted for the first time. The reception of Marginal Man was positive. The group was invited by other campuses to perform the show. Within a year, the group toured the show not only around the Seattle area but also in Oregon. Performance sites included: Seattle University, Gonzaga University, Washington State University, Shoreline Community College, the 1973 Bumbershoot Festival, the Asian Education West Coast Conference, and the Child Welfare League Multi-racial Conference in Eugene, Oregon. During this time, the most important sponsor of the group was the Asian Multi Media Center.

Encouraged by the success of Marginal Man, Tokuda, Asia, and other students began to contemplate the idea of forming an Asian American acting group. Alan Scharer
asked them to develop an Asian American theatre group with the help of the Asian Multi Media Center. Their agenda was not to create just an acting group. They wanted to use theatre as a vehicle to address several problems:

- Negative stereotyping of Asian Americans in the mass media as depicted [by] such one dimensional characters as Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, Lotus Blossom, and Susie Wong;
- The use of non-Asian actors and actresses to portray Asian characters.
- The lack of a forum to describe the true Asian American experience;
- Lack of local performance opportunities for Seattle’s Asian American actors, directors, and playwrights (*Dreams 6*).

The members named the group Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (TEA) and began their first season in November 1974 with a dramatic adaptation of works by writer and poet Carlos Bulosan, *Philippine Legends, Folklore, and American Impressions*. Directed and adapted by Stan Asis, it was presented at the Ethnic Cultural Center at the University of Washington.

According to Tokuda, TEA gave artistic freedom and creative energy to its members who were in their early twenties: “Because we were young and full of energy and passion, fulfilling our visions left no room for the word, ‘no.’ We did what we had to do in order to get things done. As tiring and frustrating as it was at times, it was always a challenge and taught us self-sufficiency; it gave me the confidence to produce something
independently" (*Dreams*, 12). For the members of TEA, theatre was a new world where they found the opportunity to act, write, produce, and participate as audience members. Also, most of them considered themselves both artists and activists. According to Stan Asis, "theater [in Seattle] was a hub of activity for Asians, Blacks, Chicanos, and Indians -- for all people of color. Each group was developing theater which reflected the pain, anger, aspirations and hope of its people" (*Dreams* 14).

The founders of TEA were aware of the East West Players in Los Angeles, the Asian American Theatre Workshop in San Francisco and the Oriental Actors of America, an organization in New York that advocated equal rights for Asian American actors in American theatre. In 1974, TEA joined the EWP and the Oriental Actors of America and made a formal proposal to the Actors Equity Union to end the practice of yellow face in American theatre. TEA modeled itself after the EWP and the AATW in its administrative and artistic decisions. But more importantly, TEA established a strong relationship with the Asian Multi Media Center and other community resources in the International District.

In the same year that TEA was formed, the Asian Multi Media Center was awarded a grant of $70,758 from the Campaign for Human Development in Seattle. Mayumi Tsutakawa wrote the funding proposal on behalf of the Wing Luke Museum, and the local representative of the Campaign for Human Development, Mich Matsudaira, played a major role in making the funding possible. With the money, the Center was able to grow from a small organization for youth into an agency that provided multi-media services for the entire community. The Center moved to a new space on Rainier Avenue, remaining for the next three years in Seattle’s International District.
The Formation of Asian Exclusion Act

The Theatrical Ensemble of Asians had a close affiliation with the Asian Multi Media Center for over a year until 1975 when TEA moved off campus and formally joined the Center. In November 1975, Garrett Hongo was hired as managing director of the Center's theatre program by executive director Steven Suzuki. The first meeting, as Hongo recalled, took place in a loft space on South Rainier Street:

At that first meeting, we stood in a circle in the loft space down on South Rainier. There was no heat and we wore our winter coats indoors. We were all kids in our early 20s, wanting something. I felt there was a powerful spirit among us, even though most of us were socially tentative, even a little gloomy giving suggestions. [...] I took an intellectually radical stance and changed the name of the theatre group from Theatrical Ensemble of Asians to The Asian Exclusion Act -- after the Chinese Exclusion Act of the late 19th Century, after the Alien Land Laws of the early 20th Century, after the Japanese American exclusion orders sending 120,000 Americans to concentration camps during WWII. (Dreams 32)

In this new spirit of "radical stance," the first play by the Asian Exclusion Act was Frank Chin's The Year of the Dragon.

Garrett Hongo admits that other people in the group and the Board of Directors did not like the name change from "TEA (a kinder, gentler name)" to the Asian Exclusion Act. Some people in the community reacted negatively to the change. They also disapproved of the "ostensible subject of Chin's play" (Hongo, Dreams 32). According to Hongo, "A few folks [in the community] were angry, that they heard there was a character in [Chin's play] who was a stereotype, who used 'chop-suey English,' who played Asian ethnicity for laughs" (Dreams 32). Chin's rebellious, biting critique of racism has always been controversial in the Asian American community, and Seattle was no exception. Before the
play opened, rumors of protest from community activists -- who threatened to picket the play on opening night and shut it down -- worried the members of the Asian Exclusion Act. However, in late January 1976, the play opened without any trouble or disruption. The house had about sixty or seventy members in the audience which, for Hongo, "seemed enough of a beginning to keep on keeping on" (*Dreams* 32).50

The 1975-76 season, which also included a workshop of Wakako Yamauchi’s *And the Soul Shall Dance* and Garrett Hongo’s *Nisei Bar and Grill*, reflected Hongo’s commitment to producing full length plays rather than skits and readings. *And the Soul Shall Dance* was presented in a workshop format while Yamauchi continually rewrote the script. (In the following season, the East West Players premiered a full production of the final version of the play in Los Angeles.) *Nisei Bar and Grill* was directed by Frank Chin with a cast that included Bea Kiyohara, Judi Nihei, Stephen Sumida, Frank Abe, Richard Eng, and Maria Batayola.

The Asian Exclusion Act produced full-length Asian American plays in its 1976-77 and 1977-78 seasons. During Hongo’s tenure as artistic director, most plays produced by the company were imported from San Francisco and Los Angeles. For instance, the 1976-77 season included Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch* which received first prize in the East West Player’s playwriting competition, and Mel Escueta’s *Honey Bucket* which premiered at the Asian American Theatre Workshop in the 1975-76 season. The members of the Asian Exclusion Act had a close relationship with artists at the Asian American Theatre Workshop. Actors such as Marc Hayashi and directors such as Frank Chin from San Francisco visited Seattle regularly to assist Hongo and to participate in productions.51

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In the 1977-78 season, the Asian Exclusion Act produced Jeffery Chan’s *Jackrabbit* and Lori Higa’s *Lady Murasaki Rides the Wild, Wild West*. Around this time, the Asian Multi Media Center began to lose financial stability. And the Asian Exclusion Act lost many of its key members. Most of the actors who participated in the previous year’s plays moved on to other locations and occupations. According to Bea Kiyohara, “When the money started to run out and the kids who started [the theatre group] were becoming adults and had to have money, get married, and have family, slowly, it started to dissolve” (Personal Interview, May 23, 1999, Seattle). Hongo remembers the brief, yet very successful years in Seattle as the artistic director of the Asian Exclusion Act from 1975-77:

Recalling everyone now, recalling all that effort and all that pure fun and emotion, most of the details fall away to the recollection that what we were building, in each other and through the mechanism of gathering an audience, was a sense of a *new community*. We were youngsters and emerging adults defining ourselves by referring to and honoring what we could get of the past, building a recognition and acknowledgment of it *together*, gathering our community to *witness* that acknowledgment, and thus creating new, if ephemeral, political, social and subjective identities which were nonexistent elsewhere in the culture. Who could tell us who we were? *What then in literature or music or pop culture said anything about us as Americans?* (Dreams 32-3)

The years from 1975 to 1978 saw some of the first productions (including a first full length play) of Asian American plays in Seattle. The actors, directors, and writers who came together during these years in the Asian Exclusion Act would later move to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City as leaders of the Asian American theatre community. For instance, the cast of Momoko Iko’s *The Gold Watch* included Stephen Sumida (currently the director of Asian American studies at the University of Washington), Bea
Kiyohara (artistic director of the company from 1978 to 1993), and Ken Narasaki (currently the literary manager of the East West Players). Other cast members included Amy Hill, Marc Hayashi, and Judi Nihei, who would later join the Artistic Committee of the Asian American Theatre Workshop in San Francisco.

When funding for the Asian Multi Media Center began to dwindle in late 1977 and early 1978, the staff and board had to make the difficult yet necessary decision to close its programs. Photography, silk screening, and graphic arts at the Rainier Avenue site ended that year. The only program to remain was the theatre program, the Asian Exclusion Act. The artists and staff agreed to work as unpaid volunteers to keep the Asian American theatre group in Seattle. Hongo left the Asian Multi Media Center and his position as artistic director of the Asian Exclusion Act. The survival of the theatre group would not have been possible without Bea Kiyohara. "I wanted to keep the drama program alive. With Garret Hongo leaving, I became the Artistic Director of the Asian Multi Media Center, more by default than anything, but a position I [...] held for the [next] fifteen years” (Dreams 11). Having lost performing space in the Asian Multi Media Center, Bea Kiyohara with a few others such as Chris Wong and Maria Batayola utilized every possible resource. They performed at the Ethnic Cultural Center at the University of Washington and the historic Nippon Kan Theatre while it was being renovated. In the 1979-1980 season, three simplified productions were presented: excerpts of John Okada’s No-No Boy, Mei-Mei Bressenbrugge’s One, Two Cups (directed by Frank Chin), and Frank Chin’s Year of the Dragon (directed by Mako). Kiyohara remembers the Year of the Dragon at the Nippon Kan Theatre as one of her “acting highlights.” She was “sharing the stage with
Mako, Frank Chin, Pat Suzuki, and Tina Chen, all of whom have been [her] role models in acting and performing” (Dreams 11). Frank Chin moved to Seattle after he resigned from the Asian American Theatre Workshop, and for two years helped Kiyohara with her artistic administration.

With Chin’s Year of the Dragon, the creative decade of the 1970s came to an end for Asian American theatre in Seattle. Most artists left Seattle to find better opportunities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City. Those who remained devoted themselves to the theatre as a community-based organization and refocused their agenda to serve Asian Americans in the International District. In 1981, Bea Kiyohara renamed the Asian Exclusion Act as the Northwest Asian American Theatre “to reflect both its regional and ethnic identity” (Dreams 7). In chapter two, section three, I will discuss how the Northwest Asian American Theatre became an essential community-based theatre in Seattle and the International District.
Section 4 – Producer’s Theatre:  
Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York City

While the first three Asian American theatre companies exchanged resources such as plays and actors, the Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York City had an independent and isolated beginning, mainly because of its geographical distance from the West Coast. Like the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company in Seattle, the Pan Asian Repertory Theater had two beginnings. The first was in 1970 when Ellen Stewart, the founding artistic director of La Mama, Experimental Theatre Club (ETC) in New York City, formed the Chinese Theatre Group as one of her many projects. The second beginning took place in 1977 when Tisa Chang, who had been trained by Stewart as a producer and director, left La Mama and renamed the Chinese Theatre Group as the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. According to Tisa Chang, the company started with one driving principles: “to promote opportunities for Asian-American actors to be seen in context of who [they] really are and what [they] are capable of achieving as artists” (Gussow, “A Stage for All the World of Asian-Americans” 16). The Pan Asian Rep, like the East West Players, emphasized the needs of Asian American actors. However, the Pan Asian Rep’s strongest distinction, which has allowed the company to maintain its unique position in the Asian American theatre community, is the presence of Tisa Chang as producer. Of the first four Asian American theatre companies formed in the 1960s and 1970s, Pan Asian Rep is the only company still managed by its original founder. The history of Pan Asian Rep centers on one Asian American theatre producer who struggled to pay her actors competitive salaries,
diversify the repertoire, and provide opportunities not only for Asian American actors, but also for Asian American directors, designers, playwrights, and performance groups.

The La Mama Years: 1970-1977

In 1970, La Mama ETC was in its eighth year as an Off-off Broadway theatre where theatre artists from all over the world could freely experiment and perform. Ellen Stewart's passion for diversity extended to the Chinese community in New York City. She wanted to bring her theatre to Chinatown and vice versa. Ching Yeh, a biochemist from Taiwan, was a key player in connecting La Mama to Chinatown. Yeh was one of many international theatre artists who came to work at La Mama in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The group included Yugoslavian playwright Aleksandar Popovich, French director and actor Antoine Bourseiller, Romanian director Andrei Serban, and Indian playwright Jagga Kapur. In 1969, Ching Yeh wrote and directed *Wanton Soup* at La Mama. He subsequently directed other works, including *Heimskringla! Or the Stoned Angels* by Paul Foster in March, 1970.\(^5^2\)

When Ching Yeh and other Asian artists approached Stewart in 1970 and told her "the only thing in Chinatown was an occasional traveling troupe doing Beijing opera and not really anything else," she joined them to create "something" in Chinatown.\(^5^3\) The first show, *Three Travelers Watch the Sunrise* by Wallace Stevens, was performed on August 6, 1970, in the basement of the Transfiguration Church on Mott Street. Directed by Ching Yeh, the production was produced with La Mama Chinatown, a new program at La Mama and a precursor to the Pan Asian Repertory Theater. La Mama Chinatown's next
production was *Cranes and Peonies* by Jing-Jyi Wu and Ching Yeh, presented on December 30, 1970. For the next six years, La Mama Chinatown produced one show per year, including *Anticlassical Presentation* (October 20, 1971, written and directed by Gustavo Ames and music by Alvin Ing) and *Pomp-Eii* (November 1, 1972, written and directed by Ching Yeh).

The year 1972 was an interesting time for Asian American theatre in New York. Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* premiered at the American Place Theater as the first Asian American play to be produced in a major theatre in New York City. And Ping Chong, an experimental director, choreographer, and performer, presented his first independent piece, *Lazarus*, at the Daniel Negrin Studio Theatre (NYC) in 1972. Around this time, La Mama Chinatown did not have a clear leader and its members were involved with other projects at La Mama and with other theatre groups. Reflecting its erratic administration, La Mama Chinatown had several aliases, including the Chinese Theatre Project and La Mama Asian Repertory Theatre. And Tisa Chang, used “Chinese Theatre Group” to describe the pre-Pan Asian Rep group at La Mama.

Tisa Chang joined La Mama ETC as resident director in 1973. With the help of Ellen Stewart, Chang began to lead the Chinese Theatre Group and focused on productions that would highlight an “innovative blend of Eastern and Western art and the casting of talented Asian Americans” (Tsang 34). The first project directed by Chang in 1973 at La Mama was *The Return of the Phoenix*, described by Chang as a “Chinese musical fantasy [...] based on the story from the Chinese Peking Opera” (Program note). Adapted by Chang, the production used traditional Peking Opera movements and music while
providing bilingual (Mandarin and English) narrative and dialogues. It also included
musicians from the Yeh Yu Chinese Opera Association. The cast included Alan Chow,
Lu Yu, Kitty Chen, Lynette Chun, Eddie Chen, Lori Chinn, and Eleanor Yung. The
production was received favorably and subsequently shown at Fairfield University, the
Smithsonian Institute, and Alice Tully Hall. It also aired on television as the first of a new
series called the “CBS Festival of Lively Arts of Young People” on October 20, 1973.

With the positive reception of The Return of the Phoenix, Chang became a steady
leader of the Chinese Theatre Group. Subsequent productions directed by Chang at La
Mama included The Legend of Wu Chang performed in “Chinese theatre style,” A
Midsummer Night's Dream set in China 1000 B.C., Hotel Paradiso set in
turn-of-the-century, France, and Orphan of Chao, an adaptation of a Chinese tragedy. In
1975 Chang received a Best Play Focus Award for The Legend of Wu Chang which she
adapted from The Yellow Jacket: A Chinese Play Done in a Chinese Manner by George
C. Hazelton and J. Harry Benrimo. Produced in November 1912, at the Fulton Theatre on
Broadway, The Yellow Jacket was one of the first American plays to dramatize an
“Oriental tale” in the style of Chinese theatre. The play takes place in 900 A.D. in
provincial China where the wicked governor orders his first wife and infant son to be
killed. The son survives and grows up to unseat his half-brother and “ascend the throne of
[his] ancestors.”

Chang preferred to produce and direct adaptations of Chinese stories in Chinese
theatre style using English as the primary language. Chang was born in Chungking, China,
and grew up in New York where her father, Ping-Hsun Chang was the consul general for
Nationalist China. Her father acted in school plays (mostly Western pieces such as Ibsen) in China, and Chang credits him for getting her interested in theatre. She began her acting career as a dancer in musical choruses in the 1960s, appearing in revivals of *The King and I* and *Flower Drum Song*. Chang continued her acting career after joining La Mama as a director, and she often had to balance her acting jobs on Broadway with her directing work at La Mama.

Chang felt that the definition of American theatre was too narrow, so she wanted to “expand it to also include the very enriching traditions of the master works of China, Japan, and India” (Eng 411). That approach, she thought, could “bridge Asian and American cultures” (411). Also, Chang believed that her intercultural approach was “revolutionary” because she sought a “truly integrated theatrical environment,” very different from both traditional theatre in Chinatown and American mainstream theatre. All of Chang’s work at La Mama involved traditional Chinese theatre styles with English or bilingual dialogue. Often, the content of the shows came from Chinese stories. Some observers and colleagues liked her approach, but others, including Ellen Stewart, increasingly did not agree with Chang’s artistic choices.

Although most of La Mama’s productions had intercultural and international components, and her legacy derives from those kinds of works, Stewart did not find Chang’s work artistically daring and experimental. Mainly, she questioned Chang’s artistic taste and preference for narrative story telling. Stewart and other critics of Chang contrasted her productions with those of other Asian and Asian American theatre artists such as Ping Chong and Jessica Hagedorn who were at the forefronts of the avant-garde.
movement. Also, a growing number of artists from Asia came to La Mama to create experimental and intercultural projects that blended modern and Asian theatre styles.\textsuperscript{55} Chang had always focused on promoting acting opportunities for Asian American actors and educating people about her Chinese culture, rather than on artistic experimentation. Finally, in 1977, Stewart and Chang agreed to make the Chinese Theatre Group an independent company which Chang would produce. Yet despite this separation, Stewart and Chang have maintained an amicable relationship, and La Mama has supported Chang in many areas, including providing performance spaces and low rent for its office space.

Critiques of the artistic quality and mission of Chang and her group persisted even after the La Mama period. Unlike the other three Asian American theatre companies, Chang's group faced the high level of artistic expectation and challenges unique to New York City. Moreover, the Pan Asian Rep did not begin in a supportive Asian American community but in an experimental theatre whose audience was less willing to forgive a poor production. In contrast, the East West Players also began with intercultural productions such as \textit{Rashomon} in Japanese theatre style with English dialogue. But the main goal of the EWP was to show off acting abilities to Hollywood producers; EWP wasn't meant to be compared to an experimental theatre scene in Los Angeles. In New York City in the 1970s, however, the definition of theatre itself was questioned, and experimental theatre was at its heyday. An Asian American theatre group could not survive solely on its racial or cultural distinction; it had to provide what other groups lacked artistically, and some thought Chang did not have the necessary artistic edge.
Criticism against Chang and her company came not only from the theatre community in New York City but also from the Asian American community. Frank Chin, as at other times, voiced an extreme yet articulate criticism against Chang. In a letter to Michael Kirby, editor of *The Drama Review* on October 22, 1976, Frank Chin refused to be categorized with Tisa Chang as a Chinese American theatre artist. Chin described Chang as “Chinese [and] a first immigrant [who is] proud to know nothing of Chinese American history and culture.” He defined Chang’s style of theatre as “doing white work ‘Chinese style’ and doing Chinese work tailored to white tolerance and taste.” However, these criticisms did not deter Tisa Chang. She continued her work in her own style and founded the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in 1977 as an independent company. It was the first independent Asian American theatre company in New York City and the fourth in the country.

**Pan Asian Repertory Theatre (1977 – Present)**

“My earnings on Broadway literally made it possible to fund my first production,” remembers Tisa Chang (Hong, “Theater” 578). In May 1977, Chang was on Broadway playing Al Pacino’s Vietnamese girlfriend in David Rabe’s *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. In the same month, Pan Asian Rep staged its first production, a revival of the La Mama production, *The Legend of Wu Chang*. As director, Chang had to open at La Mama downtown at 7:30 p.m. and hurry to Broadway for the second act of *The Basic Training* to replace her understudy who appeared in the first act. The production of *The Legend of Wu Chang* was funded in part by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the
Board of Education and Arts Connection. But the majority of the funding came from Chang’s own pocket. Personally for Chang, “The founding of Pan Asian wasn’t something whimsical. It was a culmination of skills and dreams. I had experience as a working professional in the field, so by the time I founded Pan Asian, I was very focused and purposeful, and ready for new challenges as a director and producer” (Hong, 1995, 578).

The program note of Legends described the show as a “thrilling tale of a young prince battling for his rightful throne against his evil half-brother. A Total Theatre Experience unfolding the magic and color, the music and dance, the slapstick comedy and lyrical drama of the rarely performed Chinese theatre style.” Mel Gussow, who reviewed the production for The New York Times, described it as having “an unabashed childlike quality in both the play and the performance.” He found the plot “easy to follow as a nursery rhyme” and the show “suitable for children as well as adults” with gongs, drums, “vivid panoplies of color,” mime, dancing, martial arts, and cartwheels (Gussow, “Pan-Asian Troupe Visits La Mama” 5). Also, unlike the original bilingual production which was bilingual, the revival was performed entirely in English.

In his review, Gussow quotes Chang’s explanation of her goals for the Pan Asian Rep:

I want to utilize my heritage to explore new theatrical forms – rather than to espouse ethnicity. I also want to provide opportunity for Asian-American performers to work on the highest professional level. Sometimes American audiences find it jarring to see Orientals in predominantly white companies. We’re experimenting by doing Western classics with an Asian company. We already did Hotel Paradiso and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which I set in China. (5)
Two months later, Chang rearticulated her goals in a mission statement in the program note of Thunderstorm, the company’s second production:

1. to provide opportunities for Asian American performers to work under the highest professional standards;
2. to utilize the style, music and movement of our native origins in order to explore new theatrical forms;
3. to promote new Asian American playwrights and plays, particularly those plays with themes pertinent to our life in America today.

(Program Note of Thunderstorm, November 1977)

Of these three goals, Chang has been most dedicated to the first. While the style and content of the Pan Asian Rep productions varied, and some shows were more “Asian” and others more “Asian American,” Chang’s commitment to Asian American actors never wavered.

For instance, the cast of Legends included Lynette Chun, Lu Yu, Henry Yuk, Arline Miyazaki, Alvin Lum, Ching Valdes, Michael G. Chin, Gusti Bogok, and Glenn Kubota. Ernest Abuba played the title role. Of these ten actors, eight were members of the Actors’ Equity Association, and Chang paid her actors equity salary since the first season. Chang was the first Asian American artistic director to pay her actors as contracted by the Actors’ Equity Association. While actors at the East West Players, the Asian American Theatre Workshop, and the Asian Exclusion Act were often cast as volunteers or members,
Chang’s actors were paid full salary. Mako acknowledges Chang’s accomplishment: “I must say, on behalf of Tisa, she was able to pay her actors way before us [the East West Players]. Unless we had grants to cover [the production] we couldn’t pay actors.”56

After The Legend of Wu Chang, in 1977, Pan Asian Rep produced Thunderstorm, written in 1933 by Tsao Yu, a modern Chinese playwright whose play had been produced in Japan and the Soviet Union. Set in Peking, China in the summer of 1923, the play is a domestic drama written in Western (mainly Ibsenite) dramatic style. Written when the author was twenty-three, the play was the first major Mainland Chinese play to use Western dramatic conventions. The original script ran for four hours, but Chang edited the 1956 translation by Wang Tso-liang and A. C. Barnes into two and half hours. In his review, Mel Gussow of The New York Times, described the play as a “compendium of our own [Western] theatrical clichés” and “not exotic” (Gussow, “Stage: Storm of Complex Currents” 17). For him, the plot was confusingly complex and “exceedingly Western.” The only comment his made about the production was the actors who performed the play “unabashedly—as if for the first time” and with conviction and enthusiasm that “override even incipient amateurism.” The production was directed by Tisa Chang, and the cast included Ernest Abuba as Chou Ping and Mia Katigbak as Lu Ssu-feng. Other actors in the cast included Thomas Ikeda, Atsumi Sakato, Robert Chung, Freddy Mao, Phyllis Look, Glenn Cabrera, and Henry Yuk.57

As Chang became more aware of the Asian American theatre companies on the West Coast, she began to diversify the play selections to include not only Asian and Euro-American works but Asian American works as well. In 1978, the Pan Asian Rep
produced its first Asian American play, Wakako Yamauchi’s *And the Soul Shall Dance*. For the first time, the company realized its third goal, to promote new playwrights and plays. The play was received much more positively than earlier shows and ran through the next season. Other plays in the 1978-79 season included *The Dowager* by Ernest Abuba, a Filipino American writer, actor, and founding member of the Pan Asian Rep, and *The Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni. In the 1979-80 season, the company revived *And the Soul Shall Dance*, and also presented *Sunrise* by Cao Yu and *Monkey Music* by Margaret Lamb.

Thus, by the end of the 1970s, the Pan Asian Rep had managed to balance all three goals of the mission statement. For the next three seasons, the Pan Asian Rep produced a mixture of old and new plays, but focused increasingly on Asian American plays. For instance, the 1980-81 season included Momoko Iko’s *Flowers And Household Gods* and Edward Sakamoto’s *Yellow is My Favorite Color*, and in the 1981-82 season, Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Bullet Headed Birds* was produced. The Pan Asian Rep used La Mama’s rehearsal and performing spaces until 1981, when the company moved into the 28th Street Theater where it remained for the next four years. Officially, the Pan Asian Rep was established with four artists’ signatures: Tisa Chang, Lu Yu, Ernest Abuba, and Hsueh-tung Chen. All of them continued their full participation in the company for years.

In the 1980s, the Pan Asian Rep revised its mission statement to reflect the growing commitment to Asian American issues:
1. To present professional productions of plays that employ Asian and Asian American artists with the highest standards of professional theatre;

2. To encourage the production of new plays, especially those with contemporary Asian American themes;

3. To draw upon the unique heritage of Asian Americans by utilizing the style, music and movement of Asian performing arts traditions in order to explore new theatrical forms;

4. To nurture emerging Asian American talent through professionally led workshops and on-the-job training;

5. To reach out and make the arts more accessible and meaningful to the Asian American community while introducing Asian American theatre to the general theatre-going public.  

The name of the company, “Pan Asian Repertory,” underscored its agenda. According to Tisa Chang, it was intended to be “inclusive of all Asia” and all Asians in America” (Gussow, “A Stage for All the World of Asian-Americans” 16). Whereas the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco and the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company in Seattle purposely used the term “Asian American” to distinguish it from “Asian,” the Pan Asian Rep used “Asian” to imply both terms. In other words, “Pan Asian” included not only all Asians in America, but also all Asians in the world. According to Chang, the artists in her company “share and celebrate Asian traditions of rhythm and movement [and] become the springboard to forging a repertoire of new Asian
American works.” The repertoire included “plays which reflect the evolution of Asians in America - our secrets, struggles, and celebrations - expressed in a myriad of artistic modes and in a newfound common language: English.”

Whether Chang and the Pan Asian Rep achieved their goals is open to interpretation. In the late 1980s and 1990s, at least two new Asian American theatre companies in New York City were founded as reactions against the Pan Asian Rep. I will discuss these groups in chapter three. Criticisms similar to those made in the 1970s by Ellen Stewart and Frank Chin continued to be made against Tisa Chang and the Pan Asian Rep. Some Asian American playwrights and actors, especially those from the younger generation, resisted Chang’s directorial request to incorporate “Asianness” into their writing or performance. Moreover, as non-Asian American companies such as the Joseph Papp Public Theatre started to produce Asian American plays in the early 1980s, the purpose of the Pan Asian Rep had to be revisited. Chang’s treatment of Asian American issues in her productions has caused some disagreements and personal conflicts in New York’s Asian American theatre community. However, Chang’s dedication to Asian American actors is an undisputable fact. This was once again proven when Chang stepped forward as the first person to speak out against the Miss Saigon casting policy in 1990. She has fought against yellow face in American theatre since the 1960s. Despite criticisms, Chang will be remembered as the first Asian American theatre producer to pay her actors and treat them as professionals. Perhaps, this explains why she remains as the only founding artistic director in Asian American theatre history and the most veteran Asian American producer in New York City.
CHAPTER 3

GROWTH, MULTICULTURALISM, AND DILEMMA:
ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE IN THE 1980S

For many observers the 1980s is the breakthrough decade for Asian American theatre, in part because of the phenomenal success of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which played on Broadway for months in 1988 and received the Tony Award for best play. It also proved to be a great success for B. D. Wong who played the role of Song. Likewise, several other playwrights, including Philip Kan Gotanda and Velina Hasu Houston, emerged as significant American writers whose works began to be performed regularly, not only in the Asian American companies but sometimes at the universities and the professional resident theatres around the country. Occasionally, these plays made their way to New York (though they did not match the Broadway success of Hwang). And several actors, including John Lone, Dennis Dun, Amy Hill, and Mako, performed not only in the community theatre companies but also in television and film. Moreover, all four theatre companies that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s continued to develop during the 1980s. And new Asian American companies appeared in the major cities, including Chicago. Clearly, Asian American theatre had arrived on the scene.
But these successes are misleading, for they may mask the continuing problems that Asian American theatre faced in finance, organization, and community development, including audience development. And a set of new problems also confronted the artists and companies because of a shifting political climate in the Reagan era. For Asian American theatre the key political issue was the debate over affirmative action, which had clearly opened up new opportunities for Asian Americans, especially in education and the job market. The concept of racial equality once again became controversial during this period. Conservatives argued that the affirmative action policies of the 1960s and 1970s granted “preferential treatment” to racial minority groups and caused injustice to whites. On the surface, the term “color-blind society” replaced the “melting pot” analogy as the new metaphoric goal for America’s race relations. To many people, the rhetoric of “color-blind society” implied that the political activism of the civil rights movement was no longer necessary and that the country had moved on to a new stage in which ethnic minorities could enjoy social and political equality.

The theatre community borrowed the term to create “color-blind casting” or “non-traditional casting” policies to promote more employment opportunities for minority actors. During this optimistic yet awkward stage in American theatre, a few Asian American actors succeeded in making a break-through in the theatre and film industries, but most stayed in Asian American theatre, which was often the only source that provided satisfying roles for these artists. Also in the 1980s, multicultural education and intellectualization of the race discourse replaced the political urgency of the 1960s’ civil rights movement. In Asian American theatre, this shift was reflected in playwriting.
instance, characters written by second-wave playwrights were not as angry as Frank Chin’s protagonists, and immigrant stories began to have less dominance in Asian-American drama. Instead, many second-wave Asian American playwrights were concerned with cultural assimilation and their identities as part of the racial composition in America. And these topics coincided with the multicultural concerns of mainstream America. Affirmative action encouraged Asian American playwrights to address these issues by providing funding and production opportunities. As a result, the Asian American plays of the 1980s were generally safer, intellectual, and accessible to non-Asian American audiences.

While some Asian American playwrights enjoyed the financial support resulting from affirmative action, the 1980s was also a decade of funding cuts for the arts as a whole. And the cuts affected the theatre companies the most. To many marginal theatres such as Asian American theatres, survival was in jeopardy. On the surface, the first four Asian American theatre companies discussed in chapter one continued to produce new Asian American plays and to encourage theatrical activities in the Asian American communities. But all Asian American theatre companies suffered deep financial troubles that led to major changes at the end of the 1980s, including Mako’s forced resignation from the East West Players in 1989 and near-bankruptcy for the Asian American Theatre Company also in 1989.

In this chapter, I will discuss these issues of the 1980s by examining the choices made by Asian American theatre artists and administrators. Rather than focusing on the four companies, I will examine individual actors, playwrights and provide case studies of
communities and management models. This shift in focus reflects the changes experienced by the four theatre companies: the East West Players began to develop new Asian American plays in the 1970s and 1980s; the Asian American Theatre Workshop lost Frank Chin, with the result that a group of actors ran the company in the early 1980s; the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company was single handily led by dedicated producer, Bea Kiyohara; and the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre began to have a stronger presence in the New York City community. This chapter will thus focus on the theatre artists who took on the challenges posed by political conservatism and funding cuts to create a new era in Asian American theatre history.
Section 1 - Asian American Actors in the 1980s

Many Asian American actors in the 1980s started their careers in the first four theatre companies discussed in the first chapter. In general, these actors followed one of two paths. Those who had previously received formal training in acting (e.g., university programs) joined companies such as the East West Players to have more opportunities for both training and performance. And those who came to the theatre companies with no previous experience received training in acting workshops. The actors, undoubtedly the most visible artists in live performances, faced struggles that were unique to them and not to other theatre artists, especially playwrights. Often, the relationships between Asian American playwrights and actors developed into a kind of symbiosis in which both groups depended on the other for survival yet remained highly critical and demanding of each other. For instance, Frank Chin and others formed the acting workshop at the AATW in 1973 precisely because there were no Asian American actors to play Asian American characters in plays at the time. And Frank Chin, to this date, blames “untalented” actors for causing him to leave the AATW in 1978. In Chin’s mind, the only good Asian American actor is Randall Duk Kim. Not surprisingly, however, the number of actors at the AATW and other companies grew immensely in the 1980s. Although none of them had the experience and training of Randall Duk Kim, these new actors were young, energetic, and ready for anything that the theatre had to offer.

A new phenomenon for Asian American actors (as well as other minority actors) in the 1980s was the solo performance. Many artists in the community joke that every Asian
American actor had a solo performance show in the 1980s. In one sense, the actors felt that the writers--both Asian American and mainstream--did not provide good roles for them, so they wrote their own and performed the pieces by themselves. Also, one-person shows do not require the kinds of budget needed for the production of plays. Moreover, in the 1980s, Asian American theatre artists felt a strong need to tell their personal stories. Autobiographical theatre pieces became the new form of truthful representation of identity within the Asian American community. The performers of one-person shows embodied the symbiotic relationship of writers and actors and created a tradition that retains a strong presence in the Asian American theatre community.

In this section, I will focus on two actors who have performed across theatrical media in Asian American theatre, television, film, and solo-performances and who started their careers in the 1980s: Dennis Dun and Amy Hill. These two actors are not necessarily typical of Asian American actors in the 1980s, but they exemplify the kinds of careers that were available to Asian American actors.

Case Study #1 of Asian American Actors in the 1980s: Dennis Dun

In an interview in 1992, Dennis Dun made this observation about his life: “You see, I was born in the year of the dragon and in the hour of the dragon -- that means, like, double dragon magic. I hit puberty in the year of the dragon; I began acting in the year of the dragon. The first play I ever worked on was Frank Chin's *Year of the Dragon* as a stagehand, and that happened in the year of the dragon. And my first film was Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*” (Ahlgren 24). And his one-person show at the Asian
American Theatre Company in 1992 had the title *Dragon Dream*. Born and raised in Stockton, California, Dun did not become an actor until his mid-twenties. After attending San Francisco State University as a marketing major, he lived what he described as the "practical life that Asian American kids were encouraged to do." He worked in various marketing-related jobs, including management positions at major department stores. But Dun had many hobbies and "dabbled" in various interests. While he worked as a manager, he tried to join the acting class at the Asian American Theatre Company but the timing did not work out until 1977, a year before Frank Chin’s resignation. According to Dun, he spent seven days a week at the theatre and realized that all of his divergent interests were coming together there. He quit his job and "never looked back." He immediately began to appear in minor roles in shows at the company such as *Intake-Outtake* (1978-1979) and *Paper Angels* (1980-1981).

In 1981, Dun played what became his signature role, Steve in David Henry Hwang’s *F.O.B.* at AATC. This role allowed Dun to utilize his movement abilities as the character transformed from a visiting Chinese student to Gun Gwang, a god in Chinese mythology. He played the role again in 1983 when AATC revived the popular play. Around this time, Dun began to assess his career as an actor. After eight years at AATC, he was unsure about his future, although he had just gotten his equity card and was in *Kabuki Medea* at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. He almost quit acting, but in that fateful year, his career changed quickly to make him one of the most recognizable Asian American actors in the film industry.
Michael Cimino, a film director who received Oscars for best director and best film of the year in 1978 for *The Deer Hunter*, sent his staff all over the world to look for an Asian actor to be in his new film, *Year of the Dragon* (1985) which portrays gang warfare in New York’s Chinatown. Dun auditioned in San Francisco, and a couple of weeks later, he was in Los Angeles to meet Cimino. At auditions, he was asked about his acting training and background, which were unknown to most people in the industry. Dun feels that because he was allowed to experiment at AATC he developed his unique “organic” acting style. He believes that had he started at the East West Players where the training was more formalized and overshadowed by great actors such as Mako, he would not have had the freedom to do what he did at AATC where he felt like the “king of the mountains” and where “anarchy was the rule.” Four months after the audition, after which Cimino auditioned actors as far away as Asia, Dun got a role. “It changed my life. It was a small role, but it opened the doors to many things,” recalls Dun. He knew nothing about the film when he was selected, but when he read the script for the first time, he disliked the way the role was written for him. His character and the film represented a series of familiar Chinatown stereotypes. Though frustrated, Dun saw this as “an opportunity to learn and to push the envelope.” “I knew there might be some protest. One thing I learned in the theatre was making things grounded and full. So I rewrote all of my dialogues. I am a good improvisor. They kept postponing the film, and I kept changing it.” When Cimino asked Dun what he was doing during rehearsals, he replied, “I just have some ideas.” The idea was, according to Dun, advocacy. He wanted to take advantage of the situation to improve the representation of Asian Americans on film. He comments humorously, “I was
fearless because I knew nothing. And I had nothing to lose.” But Cimino told him to play the role as it was written. Dun knew that he could not play the stereotypical role, so he corrected the grammar and reduced the accent. When Cimino did not say anything, Dun kept the changes in the rest of the film.

Despite Dun’s efforts, however, the film caused controversy in the Asian American community. Dun remembers, with understanding, his own friends protesting the film for its stereotypical and negative portrayals of Chinatown and Asian Americans. The film had created a mood of hopeful anticipation in the Asian American community before its opening. David Henry Hwang, for instance, wrote an extensive column in The New York Times expressing his hope: “Will these films [Wayne Wang’s Dim Sum and Michael Cimino’s Year of the Dragon] represent a departure from past portrayals of Asians in the cinema? And how far has Hollywood come toward bringing to the screen three-dimensional Asian characters? [...] Though I have not seen Mr. Cimino’s film, I once met with him to discuss the script. At that time, he seemed intent on making a film that would speak truthfully about the Chinatown community” (Hwang, “Are Movies Ready for Real Orientals?” 1). Apparently, Cimino’s efforts were not successful enough for the Asian American community.

Yet despite the limitations of the film and the controversies it caused, Dun’s career in acting began to flourish. As a new face in the industry with a fresh acting style, Dun found himself working with Michael Cimino, John Carpenter (Big Trouble in Little China, 1986), and Bernardo Bertolucci (The Last Emperor, 1987) within a three-year period. Almost instantly, Dun became a well-known Asian American actor in mainstream film.
Dun enjoyed working on *Big Trouble in Little China* in which he played a Chinese American “hero” opposite Kurt Russell whose character was the comedic anti-hero. Unlike other films about Chinatown, *Big Trouble in Little China* featured a Chinese American character who was wiser and more heroic than the white protagonist. Also, Carpenter allowed Dun to make changes to the script. For instance, Dun had his character wear a jumpsuit instead of the original Ninja costume that was in the script. Although the film was not received favorably by critics, it allowed Dun to play an Asian American lead role.

Dun then went to China in 1987 to be in Bertolucci’s award-winning film, *The Last Emperor*, in which he shared the screen with other Asian American actors such as Victor Wong and John Lone and Chinese actors such as Joan Chen. By the time Dun completed *The Last Emperor*, he felt that he had accomplished much as an actor and as an advocate for Asian American actors. However, when he went on to the television industry as a series regular in NBC’s “Midnight Caller,” he realized that the battle was far from over. To Dun, the experience was extremely ironic. The television series was the first show in which he played a Chinese American character, Billy Po, a detective without the accent and other stereotypes. As he did with *Big Trouble in Little China*, Dun wanted to improve the role to be more representative of the Chinese American experience. He suggested several possibilities to the producers, but most of the time he was given two lines per show, despite the fact he was a “series regular.” At the time Dun felt that he experienced a general atmosphere of “institutional racism” from the producers, cast, and crew. More than once he was mistaken for a “houseboy” in the building and on set. And though the other lead
actors were featured in advertising promotions, he was usually excluded. He recognized that part of the problem was the way that the television industry operated both financially and administratively. Creating a marketable product was the name of the game. Scripts were packages, and actors were interchangeable. Perhaps, if Dun had been savvy about the industry, he might have been able to influence the development of the show. But the industry remained strange to him, and the careerism and politics eluded him: “I get it and I don’t get it. I didn’t want to play [the politics], and that hurt me.”

After a few shows [when], Dun wanted to quit, but for financial reasons, he delayed the decision. And he still hoped that conditions could be changed, though basically Dun had concluded that the creators of the show, who knew little or nothing about Asian Americans, lacked both understanding and commitment to write a viable Asian American character. Finally, after two years, Dun asked for a meeting with the producers. Frustrated, he informed them that he felt that he was not taken seriously as an actor. And he reports that he complained that he was being treated like “a nigger on the show,” which had become his “worse nightmare.” Even though his agent had warned him not to use the “R” word, Dun spoke his mind.

The conversation with the producers seemed to have some effect, for in the third year the writers produced a script that featured Dun as the lead character for one episode. But this one show did not satisfy Dun, who felt that such tokenism did not adequately address his concerns. Thus, the three years in television left Dun with a sense of ironic entrapment. After playing “foreigners” with accents, he now was playing an Asian American character with “good clothes” but few words.
After three years on the show, Dun “forgot how to act” and even began to hate acting. He felt like a human prop on the show, not an actor. He also felt that television took him “further and further away from [his] roots.” The only way that he could revive himself as an actor and reclaim his “roots” was to do a solo-performance in theatre. He had started to write a solo performance piece before joining “Midnight Caller” and had presented an earlier version of the show in the San Francisco Monologue Contest, taking fourth place in the summer of 1987. But after experiencing the television industry as an Asian American actor, Dun saw solo performance as a venue in which he could rekindle his passion in acting.

Dun’s first solo-performance piece was *Dragon Dream*, co-written with his wife Cynthia Leung. It depicted his experiences in China during filming of *The Last Emperor* and the racism he encountered afterwards. In an interview, Dun commented that the show was about “assimilation in a complex world--not just racial assimilation.” The piece expressed “his desire to reconcile the disparate pulls between his Asian American consciousness and a sense of being both a world citizen and a settled individual in his own psyche” (Ahlgren 24). He developed the show for the Solo Mio Festival in 1991, then in 1992, the show received a full production at AATC on the main stage. Coming back to the theatre where he had started his acting career reaffirmed his “lasting love” for Asian American theatre. “I found the reason I got work initially was that I was doing work on my own culture... When I started with (the Asian American Theater Company), some plays were pretty horrible -- you had to root yourself in it and work” (24).
Since returning to the stage, Dun has created other solo performance pieces for the East West Player and other companies on the West Coast. He has also increased his participation in Asian American theatre. He played the role of Steve in the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre’s 1990 production of *F.O.B.* which was directed by David Henry Hwang. Dun has also acted in *Big Hunk of Burning Love* at the East West Players, *Golden Child* at the Bread Loaf Theatre, and *The Square* at the Mark Taper Forum. Although Dun continues to act in television and film, his passion is for live performance. He continues to support and participate in Asian American theatre, thus being one of the few Asian American actors to have returned to his roots after experiencing the “outside” world of film and television.

**Case Study #2 of Asian American Actors in the 1980s: Amy Hill**

As a friend of Dennis Dun, Amy Hill remembers with much humor that Dun “didn’t even have a headshot” when he auditioned for Cimino’s film *Year of the Dragon.* By contrast, Amy Hill was, according to Dun and other actors who worked together at AATC in the early 1980s, the most professionally prepared actor in the group. She not only was the first to get a headshot, she also became an Equity actor and went to as many auditions as she could find. Her effort paid off for she is now one of the most recognized Asian American actors in both Asian American theatre and mainstream theatre, television, and film. Her popular solo-performance piece, *Tokyo Bound,* received numerous awards and toured nationally. Hill continues to be an influential actor and advocate in Asian American theatre.
Amy Hill was born in Deadwood, South Dakota to a Japanese war-bride and a Finnish-American father. She experienced her share of prejudice as an “Amerasian,” both from the isolated white community and the Asian community. Things did not improve much when the family moved to Seattle where Hill explored art and theatre as a way to find her identity in high school. At the age of 18, with the encouragement of her mother, she moved to Tokyo where she attended Sophia International University. Shortly after the move, she began to work part-time in radio and television. This work led to more opportunities, and Hill soon began to gain popularity and eventually the status of a celebrity as the bilingual host of a radio travelogue about Japan told from a foreigner’s perspective.

In 1975, Hill visited home in Seattle for a year in order to finish her degree at the University of Washington.² Coincidentally, Hill attended the same Japanese language class as Garrett Hongo. One day in class, Hongo announced that he was seeking anyone with a theatre background to participate in the new Asian American theatre group as volunteers. Hill hesitated for a moment but eventually followed Hongo and joined the Asian Exclusion Act. There, she met Judi Nihei for the first time, after which they would continue their friendship and professional relationship in San Francisco at AATC. When Hill joined the theatre, the group was rehearsing for Frank Chin’s Year of the Dragon (directed by Frank Chin and Garrett Hongo), which opened in January of 1976. Hill stage-managed the show.

Hill remembers this period as her “beginning” as an Asian American theatre artist. She also remembers being “profoundly moved” by the play and by watching Asian
Americans on stage for the first time. Prior to this time, she had never considered the need for Asian American theatre. Watching an Asian American play performed by Asian American actors who “did really amazing things on stage” changed her life. For Hill, the experience shifted her world. She remained in the theatre and began her acting career with the next play, *And the Soul Shall Dance* in 1976. Before going back to Tokyo, Hill acted once more in the 1976-77 season in Momoko Iko’s *The Gold Watch*.

Back in Tokyo, Hill began to pursue acting seriously as a profession while staying in touch with Judi Nihei who had moved to San Francisco and joined the AATW. Nihei sent letters to Hill asking her to come back to America to join the company in San Francisco. Relocating to San Francisco made sense when Hill evaluated her career in Tokyo as a radio personality without much future in acting. In addition, her husband, whom she had met and married in Japan, wanted to study in northern California. After six years of making a living out of her “exotic” background in Japan, Hill returned to America in 1978.

When she arrived at the airport in San Francisco, Judi Nihei and Marc Hayashi took her directly to the Asia American Theatre Company where Frank Chin had left a couple of months earlier. Hill joined the Company and stayed there for the next eight years. The members of the Company immediately became Hill’s new family. She spent seven days a week at the theatre with about fifteen core actors who did everything, including acting, directing, producing, writing, teaching, designing, building sets, and administrative work. Hill and her friends took acting classes at San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theatre during the day, and in the evening taught what they had learned to the student actors at the
AATW. “I was teaching and directing and acting, while I was learning,” remembers Hill.

It was during these years that Hill acted in some of the first major Asian American plays, including Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea* and David Henry Hwang’s *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*. She also directed several shows including Genny Lim’s *Paper Angels*. For Hill, the best thing about the AATC was the opportunity for her to be committed to “creating work by us, for our community.” Hill also learned to view theatre and the craft of acting as a “political tool” to make a difference in society.

Hill also found work in voice-over and improvisation around the Bay Area. In 1984, she played a lead role in Wayne Wang’s independent film *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (released in 1985). After eight years at AATC, she grew tired of devoting most of her time to a theatre where the members increasingly faced internal disagreements.³ She began to consider moving to Los Angeles, which she believed to be the best place to grow as an actor in all media: theatre, television, and film. In 1987 she started to commute to L.A. and sought jobs in voice-over and acting. Hill was making a decent living in San Francisco by doing voice-over work, while in Los Angeles, the number of unemployed actors was greater. Nevertheless, Hill slowly established a network and found work in Los Angeles.

One of the odd jobs Hill landed was serving as a translator for Japanese filmmakers who were working in Monterey, CA. By this time, Hill was desperate for work. She was literally standing in mud on the film set, translating to the actors and crew, when she received the call that changed her life. The Japanese American Culture Center in Los Angeles told her that they were organizing an event for Asian American solo-performance
pieces. The Center was under the impression that Hill had a solo-performance piece ready, but since she did not, she began writing immediately. The work became the nucleus of *Tokyo Bound*, the piece that launched her career as a solo-performer. To Hill, the piece came to her naturally because it was a story that she had wanted to tell and had begun to develop while she was at AATC. She continued to revise and improve the show even after it premiered at the Japanese American Culture Center. In 1990, the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company in Seattle invited her to perform the piece, and it was an immediate hit. Hill expanded the show and performed next at AATC (April 5-28, 1991), her old home theatre where the critics and the community received the work with much enthusiasm. The show received the nomination for the Bay Area Critic’s Circle Award for best solo performance. And on August 8, 1991, the show received the first East West Players production.

Hill continued to perform the show at the EWP, winning the *Los Angeles Times* Critic’s Award as well as the *Dramalogue* Award for best solo-performance. Hill then took the show on tour and performed at many major theatres around the country including the Public Theatre in New York. Brian Nelson, the editor of *Asian American Drama* (1999), summarizes Hill’s accomplishment in *Tokyo Bound*:

In *Tokyo Bound*, Hill invents and re-invents herself, seeking a persona that makes some kind of sense. The pun in the title reveals her conflicts: Japan as destination, Japan as inescapable restriction. Though Hill’s mixed-race heritage has clearly been the catalyst for some painful experiences, Hill does not wear her pain on her sleeve, and in fact the success of her performances owes as much to her own exuberant personality as to the wit and humor of the text. (Nelson 45)
With the success of *Tokyo Bound* in Los Angeles came requests from film and television studios offering opportunities to Hill. “It was really wonderful,” recalls Hill, “Who knew that the work I had done would pay off?” Hill continued to develop the show and added two more pieces to create a trilogy. At the same time, she became a recognizable face on film and television (including the popular character of grandmother in the first Asian American television sitcom, “All American Girl”).

Hill’s commitment to advocacy and community outreach never ceased despite her success in solo-performance and mainstream film and television. For instance, she joined the first Asian American improvisational group, Cold Tofu in 1987. To many people who have seen her one-person shows or improvisations, Amy Hill is an unforgettable actor who can combine humor with the poignant political issues of being an Asian American.

However, Hill admits that being an actor and an activist wasn’t always compatible. When she moved to Los Angeles and played a role in the East West Players production of a Tennessee Williams play, she felt a sense of relief. Since AATC was a “playwright’s theatre” dedicated to developing new Asian American plays, Hill and other actors never had the chance to act in Western classical plays, despite the fact that most of their training (including at the American Conservatory Theatre) prepared them to be in Shakespeare, Chekov, and Williams. Also, since most of the new Asian American plays submitted to AATC did not qualify as good plays, the actors secretly wished to act in the best plays in dramatic history, whether they were western classics or contemporary plays by non-Asian American playwrights. As an activist, Hill wanted to develop playwrights, but as an actor, she grew tired of working on inadequate new plays.
Although Hill had studied Shakespearean acting at ACT in San Francisco, she was unable to apply this training. No mainstream theatre in the 1980s wanted to cast her or other ethnic minority actors in Shakespeare. But when Hill moved to Los Angeles, she created the opportunity for herself by joining workshops where she could study Shakespearean texts, even though at the time, she wondered, “What am I doing this for? I am never going to use this.” However, much to her surprise and contentment, Hill finally got to show her acting talent in *Twelfth Night* (as Maria) at the Lincoln Center in 1998. The production starred Helen Hunt and aired live on PBS. Twenty years after joining AATC and ten years after developing *Tokyo Bound*, Amy Hill accomplished what most Asian American actors can only dream of doing.

**An Analysis of Asian American Actors in the 1980s**

In Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg you Die*, Bradley represents the new generation of Asian American actors that emerged after the Asian American Movement and the founding of the first four theatre companies in the 1980s. Bradley criticizes Vincent, a veteran actor who “never turned down a role.” Gotanda sets up a debate between the two characters and thus between the older and younger generations of Asian American actors. Vincent defends his career choices in a speech at the Asian American awards ceremony with an argument that he is an actor and only an actor:

> This is a great honor. A great honor, indeed. To be recognized by my fellow Asian American actors in the industry. I have been criticized. Yes, I am aware of that. But I am an actor. Not a writer. I can only speak the words that are written for me. I am an actor. Not a politician. I cannot change the world. I can only bring life, through truth and craft, to my characterizations. I have never turned down a role.
Good or bad, the responsibility of an actor is to do that role well. That is all an actor should be or has to be concerned about. Acting. Whatever is asked of you, do it. Yes. But do it with dignity. I am an actor. (Gotanda 94)

Bradley mocks Vincent’s speech and criticizes him for ignoring the political ramifications of his choice. Bradley proudly claims that he has been “acting at the Theater Project of Asian America in San Francisco for seven years – acting, directing, writing” (96). He announces to Vincent that he would never play demeaning roles:

Every time you [Vincent] do any old stereotypic role just to pay the bills, someone has to pay for it – and it ain’t you. No. It’s some Asian kid innocently walking home. “Hey, it’s a Chinaman gook!” “Rambo, Rambo, Rambo!” You older actors. You ask to be understood, forgiven, but you refuse to change. You have no sense of social responsibility. Only me [...] me, me. Shame on you. I’d never play a role like that stupid waiter in that musical. And [...] I’d never let them put so much make-up on my face that I look like some goddamn chimpanzee on the screen. [...] I don’t care if they paid me a million dollars, what good is it to lose your dignity? I’m not going to prostitute my soul just to [...] see myself on screen if I have to go grunting around like some slant-eyed animal. (99)

Despite the heated argument, the play ends with a major ironical reversal in which Vincent turns down a stereotypical role to play a lead in an Asian American independent film while Bradley decides to play “Yang’s number one son” who is “half Chinese and half rock” in a commercial film. Vincent gets excited about playing a Japanese American father in the film, and Bradley justifies his decision by arguing “I figure once I get there I can change it.” Dramatically, the reversal comes as a surprise, but realistically, it represents the typical path followed by Asian American actors in the 1980s. Like Dennis Dun, Bradley wants to convince the Hollywood producers to change his role “even if it’s a bit.” “And, even if they don’t change it, they’ll at least know how we feel and next time, maybe next
time..." (126). The hope for "next time" is perpetuated in the play, but it seldom came for Asian American actors in the 1980s. A very few Asian American actors such as John Lone and B. D. Wong (who received the Tony Award for best actor in *M. Butterfly* in 1988) achieved stardom and commercial success in the 1980s. John Lone, who started at the East West Players in the late 1970s, has portrayed several Asian lead roles in the 1980s, especially in film. Both Lone and Wong continued to work in mainstream film and gave hope to other Asian American actors. But they proved to be the exception. Most Asian American actors were trapped like Bradley in the ironical cycle of hope and desperation.

In the 1980s, the available roles for Asian American actors in mainstream theatre and film remained limited and stereotypical as they were in the previous decades. Once in a while, when the non-traditional casting policy was implemented, Asian American actors played token roles in awkwardly diverse casts. Only at Asian American theatre companies did Asian American actors find satisfying roles, although the actors had to trade off artistic satisfaction with financial reward. Many had day jobs, and some high profile actors, including Mako, played stereotypical roles on film and television to fund productions of Asian American plays at their companies. Also in the 1980s, actors learned to balance artistic integrity and survival with political activism. Asian American actors in the 1980s struggled to interject political activism and artistic integrity while trying to make a living as actors. And the young generation of actors was optimistic about the future. Some believed that Asian American actors could find non-stereotypical roles in mainstream theatre, television, and film. They began to demand equal treatment in non-Asian American venues and grew more vocal about making changes and implementing what the
founders of the theatre companies had envisioned in the 1960s and 1970s. However, their
demands were rarely met. Asian American actors still had to play stereotypical roles, and
the producers and directors in mainstream theatre, television, and film did not know what
to do with Asian American actors.

After experiencing this “outside world,” Asian American actors, like Dennis Dun
and Amy Hill, came back to Asian American theatre to rekindle their passion for live
theatre and political activism. Also, many used solo performance shows as a venue for
multicultural education agenda. Some moved on as directors, acting teachers, and theatre
administration in support of Asian American theatre. For instance, Judi Nihei who acted
at AATC for many years, served as the artistic director of the Northwest Asian American
Theatre from 1994 to 1998, and Tim Dang, who had joined the East West Players as an
actor in the 1980s, became the artistic director of the company in 1993. In the 1990s, Asian
American theatre grew both in number and artistic quality under the leadership of new
artistic directors such as Nihei and Dang, but the situation for Asian American actors
changed little. In the next chapter, I will discuss the Miss Saigon controversy, which, in
1991, forced Asian American actors to join together in a protest against casting practices in
mainstream theatre. Overall, Asian American actors have continued to fight the familiar
fight, one that began decades earlier. As Bradley argues in Yankee Dawg You Die, what
the actors accomplished in the 1980s was a small victory, but Asian American actors of all
generations have had to echo Vincent’s cry, “Why can’t you hear what I’m saying? Why
can’t you see me as I really am?” (127).
Section 2 - Asian American playwrights in the 1980s

One of the most promising developments in Asian American theatre took place in the world of playwriting in the 1980s. Unlike the 1960s, when basically there were no “Asian American playwrights,” and the 1970s, when the East West Players had trouble finding candidates for playwriting contests, the 1980s saw an exponential growth in the number of new playwrights. With the number came diversity, differences, and contentions. Overall, the 1980s marks the decade of a new voice in Asian American playwriting. Many artists and scholars distinguish this “new voice” as the “second wave” of playwrights. A list of these “second wave” playwrights includes David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Genny Lim, Velina Hasu Houston, Jeannie Barroga, Elizabeth Wong, Akemi Kikumura, Karen Yamashita, Linda Kalayaan Faigao, Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro, Karen Huie, Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro, R. A. Shiomi, Laurence Yep, and many others.

Consequently, “first wave” refers to the “pioneers” of Asian American playwrights who began writing before the 1980s. The categorization of “second wave” efficiently defines the new playwrights who emerged in the 1980s, but in turn, the assumed category of “first wave” has less significance in describing the earlier playwrights. It is absurd and probably even wrong to lump all of the playwrights before the 1980s into one category. Some of these writers such as Wakako Yamauchi, who started to write plays in the 1970s, resist the label “first wave” or “pioneers” since it implies that their role has been accomplished despite the fact that they never ceased to write plays through the 1980s and the 1990s. Also, the question of the category becomes even more complex when we
consider all Asian American playwrights before the 1980s. For instance, as I mentioned in the introduction, Asian Americans wrote plays in English as early as the late nineteenth century. A list of Asian American playwrights before the 1980s would include Sadakichi Hartmann (plays written between 1893-1923), Shen Hung (1919 and 1921), Gladys (Ling-Ai) Li (1920s), Wai Chee Chun Yee (1930s), Charlotte Lum (1930s), Frank Chin (1970s), Wakako Yamauchi (1970s - present), Momoko Iko (1970s - present), Mel Escueta (1970s), Edward Sakamoto (1970s), and many more. As the list reveals, the only commonality that the writers share is the fact that they began to write before the 1980s. Other than that, the dramaturgical styles and political agenda of the writers differ radically from each other. One can argue that with the exception of Hartmann and Hung, the writers focused on the identity issues of Asian America such as assimilation and generational conflicts. However, the identity issues played crucial thematic roles in the plays by the second wave writers as well.

For the second wave writers, the category distinguishes them from what came before and after. And most importantly, some second-wave writers such as David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda still lead and define the canon of Asian American plays and continue to be role models for younger writers. In this section, I will examine the second wave of Asian American playwrights in the context of their predecessors and the impact they continue to make on Asian American theatre history.

In 1980, the Public Theater in New York staged two Asian American plays, Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lesson* and David Henry Hwang’s *FOB*. In telling ways this two-part event reveals the crucial differences between the first wave and second wave
writers. The debut of Asian American plays at the Public Theater could not have been possible without David Oyama, an actor, director, and writer. On “a bitterly cold Sunday evening” of February 18, 1979, Oyama led a group of actors (15-20 in number) in a protest against the Public Theater.6 They picketed outside the theatre to protest the “casting of non-Asian actors in Asian roles without an equal opportunity for Asian actors to play non-Asian roles” (Fraser, “Asian-American Actors Get Pledge From Papp” 26). The actors claimed that between 1969 and 1979, ten or fewer Asian American actors worked at the Public Theater. In particular, in the production of Len Jenkin’s New Jerusalem 1979, none of the Asian roles (Wu Fang, Runme Singh, Miyoko Yakimoto, and others) was played by an Asian American actor. Oyama and his group cleverly baited Joseph Papp by stating publicly that they would not “object to ‘actors in yellow face’ if they [could] play in ‘white face.’” The protest created bad publicity for Papp and the Public Theater, which claimed to be one of the few theatre companies in the country with a multicultural agenda. Papp immediately assured Oyama’s group that they would “employ significant numbers of Asian-American actors, playwrights and directors in future productions at its Public Theater” (26).

According to Oyama, Papp met with the group and explained that “he [Papp] had already been pondering some possible projects because he could not help but be influenced by the large Chinese community in New York” (Oyama 3). Papp then suggested that Oyama work with Rosemarie Tichler, the casting director of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Together, they auditioned over 125 Asian American actors. Papp and Oyama then began to consider a number of possible Asian American plays to be submitted to the
Public Theater for production. They eventually chose Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lesson* and David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* from over 40 plays. On April 30, 1980, about a year after the protest, Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lesson* premiered at the Public Theater on the Martinson Hall stage. David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* was presented four weeks later in the same space.

The range of plays submitted to the Public Theatre illustrates an interesting issue in the canon of Asian American drama. What qualifies as an Asian American play? The writers who submitted their work had different views; their plays ranged from “an unauthorized adaptation of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* to David Hare’s *Fanshen* to an original one-act Noh dance drama” (Oyama 3). The decision by Papp and Oyama to choose *The Music Lesson* and *FOB* instead of *Fanshen* or Noh drama clearly showed their preference for a specific kind of Asian American play. The two chosen plays dramatize the experiences of Asian immigrants and their descendants in America by focusing on the cultural conflicts specific to Asian Americans.

Most Asian American playwrights, of all generations, have written about the experiences of Asian American immigrants and their children. Writing about the experiences of living in America has been one of the most common topics in the history of American drama. Indeed, as Gary A. Richardson points out, American drama since Colonial times has taken up this basic topic. “While the development of a truly national drama awaited more talented practitioners, the early dramatists of the colonies provided a firm sense of the appropriateness of drama as a means of translating and interpreting the experience of the New World” (Richardson 2). The dramaturgical methods used by the
playwrights may have differed, but they all shared the desire to express their experiences and interpret their lives through drama. The need to tell immigrant stories was especially strong among the first wave of Asian American playwrights in the 1970s, and the tradition continues to support Asian American theatre as its backbone.

_The Music Lesson_, which opened on April 30, 1980, in Martinson Hall (a small space), is based on an actual widow Yamauchi knew as a child in California’s Imperial Valley before World War II. The woman, Yamauchi remembers, “seemed so fragile yet drove a truck and ran a farm and raised children alone” (Uno, *Unbroken Thread* 57). The character, Chizuko, embodies the suffering of many _issei_ (first generation Japanese American) women who came to America by arranged marriages and had to struggle with isolation, difficult labor, and the overwhelming challenges of a new culture. Hwang’s _FOB_, on the other hand, portrays a lighter side of cultural assimilation. A second generation Chinese American, Hwang integrates the stories of the “FOB” (fresh off the boat) immigrants and “ABC” (American Born Chinese) with traditional Chinese mythology by using a nonlinear dramaturgical style.

However, the two plays differ in three crucial ways that separate second wave writers like Hwang from the earlier generation like Yamauchi: (1) audience; (2) dramaturgical styles; (3) political agenda.

1. Audience

The two writers write for different audiences. Like Frank Chin and other writers of the 1970s, Yamauchi mainly wrote for a particular audience, namely those who attend
productions at the EWP or the AATW. So Yamauchi’s debut at the Public Theater – whose audience was predominantly white – signified a major breakthrough for the first wave of Asian American playwrights. Evidently, Yamauchi was well aware of the differences in audience reception. Her play *And the Soul Shall Dance*, had received warm responses from Asian American audiences at the EWP and AATC. And she knew that she was taking a chance with the Public Theater and its New York audience. More than once, she had been told by non-Asian Americans that “no audience exists for her work” (Uno, *Unbroken Thread* 57). Such comments imply that because of the play’s ethnic specificity, a non-Asian American audience member would have difficulty sympathizing with the characters. As theatre critic Mel Gussow notes, the play is a “mood memory piece about Japanese-American farmworkers in California during the Depression” (Gussow, “Theater: Nisei ‘Music Lessons’” 5). The specific memory belongs to the first and second generation Japanese Americans who lived as farmers in California. Such a topic is suitable and expected in Asian American theatre companies with audiences who want to see their history played out by Asian American actors on stage. However, do non-Asian American audiences want to watch an Asian American memory play? As Yamauchi’s playwriting teacher said about *And the Soul Shall Dance*, “who cares about a bath house burning down” (Uno, *Unbroken Thread* 58)? Who cares about the ordinary details of a nisei girl’s experience? The Asian American audience did and still do, but the mainstream audience of the Public Theater preferred a different story. One can only imagine the confusion and disappointment the audience would have experienced in watching Yamauchi’s memory play, a painstakingly realistic portrayal of California in the 1930s.
Oyama noted that Hwang’s *FOB* was viewed by Joseph Papp “almost from the start as a complementary piece to Miss Yamauchi’s *The Music Lesson*.” Hwang had written *FOB* as a senior project at the Stanford University and had it performed in his dorm room. Hwang then submitted the play to the Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights’ Conference in Waterford, Connecticut, in the summer of 1979. Two weeks after the conference, the play came to the attention of Papp, who “promptly decided to produce the play after some rewriting by the playwright.” Nevertheless, the publicity focus was still on *The Music Lesson*. Oyama’s article in *The New York Times* features a large photograph of a scene from the play, and Yamauchi is quoted extensively. Little is said about Hwang and *FOB*. However, *FOB* received more favorable responses from the Public Theater audience than *Music Lesson*.

Hwang’s *FOB* gave the mainstream audience what it preferred and expected from an Asian American play. In New York, as in other major cities, the prevailing image of Chinese-American culture came from Chinatown. Joseph Papp explains his interest in Asian American theatre: “My wife and I were at a Chinese dance to celebrate the Chinese New Year, and all of my senses were stimulated by watching a thousand young Chinese Americans dancing and discoing. And I told Gail [Merrifield] that we should look for something that captured some of that beauty and energy, that life” (Oyama 3). He saw the same beauty and energy in Hwang’s *FOB*. In fact, Papp, along with Bob Ackerman of the O’Neill Theatre, suggested to Hwang that the play be revised to include Chinese opera. Mako, the director of the play, then cast John Lone, who had a background in Chinese opera (Savran 121).
According to Hwang, “Asian theater is an influence that [he] stumbled upon with *FOB*” (Savran 121). If so, it was a savvy decision because a theatricalized version of Chinese opera apparently played a central role in entertaining the mainstream audience and therefore promoting a wide acceptance of the play. Unlike Yamauchi’s play, which asks the audience to participate in remembering a forgotten history in a serious and even sad way, *FOB* allows the audience to laugh at the cultural clash between the Chinese and Chinese American characters. Along with enjoying the comedy, the audience can watch beautiful Chinese opera movements as well as listen to Chinese myths.

Basically, then, the theatricalism of Chinese performance reinforced the New York mainstream audience’s assumption about Asian American theatre. With the exception of Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* in 1972, the only Asian American plays performed in New York had been Yamauchi’s *And the Soul Shall Dance* at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in 1979. However, the Pan Asian Rep focused on intercultural productions that integrated Asian theatrical styles into almost every show. For many New Yorkers, “Asian American theatre” was synonymous with “Chinese theatre” or some variation of it.

For example, in a 1972 article in *The New York Times*, Ralph Blumenthal described the theatre scene in Chinatown (Blumenthal 37). He mentions an acrobatic troupe from Taiwan, a Shanghai-born Chinese American singer, amateur Peking opera troupes, and other imported cultures in Chinatown. He also notes, somewhat out of context, that a Chinese American play written by Frank Chin exists amid the showings of “Chinese theater.” But Chin was an exception. The familiar theatre scene in Chinatown involved acrobatics, Chinese opera, and other “Oriental” shows.
The mainstream audience went to Hwang’s *FOB* expecting such Asian theatre elements, and they got what they paid for. Frank Rich, in his review of *FOB* at the Public Theater, spells out the formula of the play’s success: “*FOB* is the first show that has ever attempted to marry the conventional well-made play to Oriental theater and to mix the sensibilities of Maxine Hong Kingston and Norman Lear” (Rich 6). Although Hwang does not represent the entire group of new writers in the 1980s, his decision to write for a specific audience outside of the Asian American theatre community reflected a larger trend. The second wave writers faced the problem of writing for a new audience as more of them began to present their works at non-Asian American theatre companies.

For Philip Kan Gotanda, a second wave playwright, the question of audience never had a simple answer. Unlike David Henry Hwang, Gotanda began his playwriting career at Asian American theatre companies. Between 1979 and 1985, the majority of Gotanda’s works were presented at the Asian American Theatre Company, and a few others at the East West Players and the Pan Asian Repertory Theater. The mainstream theatre began to notice his plays around 1985 when *The Wash* was featured as a workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. The play premiered at the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco in 1987. And in 1988, *Yankee Dawg You Die* premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Gotanda’s audience thus changed from “mainly young ‘politically correct’ and hip Asian American[s]” to a “more diverse one of Asian and non-Asians” (Omi, “Introduction,” *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* xvi). Despite this shift, his later plays continued assume the same kind of audience expectation as did his earlier plays. Gotanda comments: “Even though my work was being presented at these larger venues, I
refused to compromise the material or try to make it more accessible to a particular audience. The audience should come to you. This may seem arrogant, but what it amounts to is a leap of faith” (xvi).

Gotanda wanted his plays have a mainstream appeal, but at the same time, he did not want to compromise his specific sensibility as a third generation Japanese American playwright from Stockton, California. He emphasized that “If you are a third generation Japanese American, you will get my plays; if you are a third generation Japanese American from Stockton, California [where Gotanda was born and raised], you will really get my plays.” However, he invited the mainstream audience to gain a more expansive understanding of America through the world of his plays. In an interview with Misha Berson, he stated that “I’m coming from a specific place as a Japanese American, but I want to make sure audiences can meet me halfway. When you want to reach a lot of people, your work should be inclusive enough for everyone to find its center” (Berson, “Role Model on a Role” D1).

When writing, Gotanda does not consciously imagine an audience, but rather, he tries to tell a story of the world as he sees it. Nevertheless, since his world is full of Asian American characters, an Asian American audience emerges in his mind during the writing process: “Ultimately, I’m just trying to tell the story, and as I’m trying to tell the story, in the back of my mind, I think I see Asian American faces out there” (Ito 178).

Although Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang do not represent the entire group of second wave Asian American playwrights, their attitudes toward audience were shared by other writers in the 1980s. The questions of audience reception are inseparable
from the playwrights’ dramaturgical styles. The second wave writers moved beyond the realistic, documentary drama of the first wave writers in the 1970s. Some themes remained the same such as the immigrant experiences, generational conflicts, and cultural assimilation, but the new writers began to distinguish themselves with unique dramaturgical styles.

2. Dramaturgical Styles

Interestingly, the two major second wave Asian American playwrights, Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang, met as musicians before they pursued playwriting. Gotanda, on guitar, improvised with Hwang on jazz violin and played in several venues. This relationship continued into the theatre when Hwang directed Gotanda’s play, *A Song For a Nisei Fisherman*, at the AATC in 1980. Gotanda received a master’s degree in music and composed several songs. His music dealt with Asian American issues. With titles such as “Ballad of the Issei” and “All-American Asian Punk,” he tried to get a record made in 1974. When the record companies told him that a collection of Asian American folk-rock songs had no market, he continued to pursue music with other Asian American musicians such as Hiroshima, the first Asian American rock band.

Gotanda changed his career to study law and eventually graduated from Hasting College of Law in 1978. However, Gotanda recalls the fateful day when he injured his leg during a beach volleyball game with his law colleagues. The injury kept him in bed for over a month during which he could not work. He decided to write a musical to pass the time. This is when he realized that his passion was still with music and performance. After
a year, he had completed *The Avocado Kid or Zen in the Art of Guacamole*. He submitted the musical to the EWP, which produced it in 1979.

*The Avocado Kid* captures what Frank Chin would call the “uniqueness and irreducibility of Asian American culture, something that could not be reduced to some curious combination of “Oriental” and “Occidental” elements” (Omi, 1991, xv). The musical’s main character is based on Momotaro the Peach Boy from a Japanese children’s tale. The Kid in Gotanda’s version pops out of an avocado (a quintessential California product) instead of a peach. Dressed in a pop-culture style of Kabuki costume, the Kid holds “a glowing rose-gold mane” and moves to a “pulsating new wave beat” (Ken Wong 2). He helps out social outcasts and eventually goes on to defeat a band of outlaws in a musical contest with songs such as “Asian American Dream.” Its dramaturgy was a relaxed, playful irony: a use of traditional elements, but presented with ironic fun. The musical inserted a new voice into Asian American theatre by dramatizing a daring synthesis from Asian American popular culture. With this success, Gotanda continued to write for theatre, and his plays increasingly included more dialogues and less music.

Gotanda debuted in New York at the Pan Asian Repertory Theater with his second musical, *Bullet Headed Birds*, in November 1981. Mel Gussow, in his review of the musical, describes it as “a kind of Japanese-American equivalent of *Cowboy Mouth* by Mr. [Sam] Shepard and Patti Smith” (Gussow, “Stage: Surrealist ‘Bullet Headed Birds’” 24). He also notes that the Pan Asian Repertory Theater which had “specialized in naturalistic plays” took a “sidestep into surrealism and contemporary musical theater” with Gotanda’s work. Indeed, Gotanda cites Shepard as a major influence for opening up theatrical
possibilities. The “surreal” elements continued into Gotanda’s non-musical pieces including *The Dream of Kitamura, A Song For a Nisei Fisherman, The Wash*, and *Yankee Dawg You Die*.

David Henry Hwang’s dramaturgical approach was similar to Gotanda’s in its approaches to history and tradition. Hwang’s *FOB*, for instance, had similar ironic fun as *Avocado Kid*, while Asian American themes were central to both works. Unlike the first wave Asian American playwrights who used documentary details to dramatize the truth of their experiences, second wave playwrights used the details for a more detached, ironic, and sometimes playful engagement with history and tradition. In other words, they did not turn their backs on the defining issues in the first wave plays, but instead, approached the same issues with less angry and more relaxed attitudes.

Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* is written with a similar kind of detachment and irony. Dramatically, Hwang uses metatheatrical elements (such as the actors speaking directly to the audience) to emphasize this approach. While the play exemplifies the second wave writers’ new approaches, it is also a target of severe criticism from none other than Frank Chin, who claims that the play provides “Orientalized” entertainment to the mainstream audience. Frank Chin consistently criticizes David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and others who, in Chin’s mind, have accomplished commercial success in America. Some scholars dismiss Chin’s criticism as envious and antiquated nonsense, but others find a legitimate argument in his thoughts.

Although Chin’s criticism of Hwang and *M. Butterfly* may be unfair, his argument does reveal a distinction between Hwang and Gotanda. On the surface, both *FOB* and
*Avocado Kid* show the experiences of young Asian Americans in literal and symbolic ways. However, in studying the two playwrights in depth, a crucial difference -- as identified by Frank Chin -- distinguishes the two dramaturgical methods. Almost all second wave writers and even third wave writers in the 1990s use one of two approaches. One approach used by Hwang emphasizes the differences between the East and the West, and the other used by Gotanda focuses on the synthesized Asian American culture in which the East and the West are inseparable and irreducible.\(^{11}\)

An important characteristic of most second wave writers is their formal training in playwriting from universities and workshops with mainstream playwrights. Most first generation Asian American playwrights never received formal professional training in playwriting. Wakako Yamauchi admits that she was “sort of pushed into playwriting--blind and unaware” (Houston, *Politics of Life* 36). Similarly, for both Frank Chin and Momoko Iko, the East West Player’s playwriting competition was the “catalyst” that encouraged them to experiment with plays. By contrast, more than half of second wave writers have MFA degrees in playwriting from major universities around the country. Moreover, the decade of the 1980s provided an ideal setting for younger Asian American playwrights to emerge. As a result of the Asian American Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, several colleges and universities around the country created Asian American studies programs, and Asian American students, for the first time, learned about their history and literature.

Also, most second wave writers either read or saw an Asian American play in the early stages of their careers. David Henry Hwang, for instance, admits to being heavily
influenced by Frank Chin's plays. When Jeannie Barroga attended a production of an Asian American play for the first time, she felt as if "all of a sudden doors opened for [her]" (Uno 204). The power of self-representation was even more impressive for Elizabeth Wong who, upon watching a television version of Wakako Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance*, felt an intense sense of affirmation and joy. "I really felt opened up [...] to the possibility that I could explore my own world and other people would find it interesting" (Uno 262). And after seeing Hwang's *FOB*, she found the courage to change her career from journalism to playwriting.

In the 1980s, the world Asian American playwriting grew into a genre of its own, with a wide range of dramaturgical approaches. Also, the second wave Asian American playwrights not only received formal training in playwriting, but were influenced by the first wave writers and by each other. However, with its growth came political responsibilities and ramifications for the second wave writers. They often had to juggle artistic ambition with political agenda as minority playwrights in America.

3. Political agenda

In the 1980s, the complexity of the political debate about race and ethnicity grew as Americans attempted to rearticulate the meaning of racial equality. Several developments of the 1980s can be traced out of the 1960s and 1970s: the politics of racial and ethnic identity, racial pride, civil rights, separatism, and affirmative action, to name a few. In the 1980s, all of these versions of ethnic and racial politics still operated, but two new agendas emerged. The first agenda involved the idea of color-blind society and
contended with the second agenda: a growing emphasis within various groups on identity politics, from ethnic and racial categories to gender issues. Both conservatives and liberals, from day to day, went back and forth, arguing that differences should be de-emphasized, then arguing they are crucial. All sides of the debate claimed that they were promoting racial and ethnic equality. For instance, neoconservatives of the 1980s argued that their opposition to affirmative action was consistent with the goals of the civil rights movement; “it is a challenge to ‘race-thinking’” (Omi and Winant 130). This logic assumes that individual rights and opportunities should be guaranteed by law whereas collective equality (or “group rights”) does not justify the granting of privilege.

This dialectical conflict between individual rights and group rights also affected Asian American theatre and made a determining impact on second wave playwrights. Unlike Asian American theatre companies, which were essentially founded to promote Asian American group rights, Asian American playwrights had to factor in their individual ambitions and rights. Moreover, the playwrights were not limited by their physical appearances, as were Asian American actors for whom their Asian faces restricted employment opportunities. Thus, the question of “merit” in the affirmative action debate had a direct implication on Asian American playwrights. While affirmative action (which promoted group rights) helped launch many Asian American playwrights’ careers, ultimately, the writers wanted to be recognized as individual artists for the merit of their works, not by their Asian American identity. David Henry Hwang, for instance, commented: “America, however, must not restrict its ‘ethnic’ writers to ‘ethnic’ material, while assuming that white males can master any topic they so desire” (Hwang, 1990, xiii).
Hwang sketched an ideal world in which an Asian American playwright can be awarded and appreciated for the value of his or her plays and talent, not just for the ethnicity, which happens to meet the ethnic theme of the month. Most second wave writers agreed with Hwang and found the label “Asian American” limiting. Philip Kan Gotanda was the only writer who publicly stated that he did not find the label limiting but politically empowering: “I’m happy to be working more in the mainstream regional theatres and in the entertainment industry, but I still believe there is an Asian-American theatre and an Asian-American literature. ‘Asian-America’ is, in itself, a political term” (Berson, Between Worlds 33).

The politics of labeling did not stop the writers from receiving privileges and opportunities allocated for Asian American playwrights, including tokenism in funding and season selections. For most writers in the competitive world of playwriting, such opportunities were scarce, and Asian American playwrights took full advantage of what became available. In general affirmative action in American theatre proved successful for second wave Asian American playwrights. For one, their plays, along with works by other minority writers, diversified and expanded American drama. In a 1992 interview, Hwang summarized the 1980s:

Ten years ago, when you said someone was an Asian American writer or a black writer or a Latino writer, there was much more of a sense of second-class literary citizenship. When I first began writing, there was the notion that Chinese American or Asian American literature represented something that had sociological importance, something that had political importance. It was useful if you were going to work in Chinatown, but it somehow didn’t achieve the same kind of literary heights or the same universality as “mainstream” work did (mainstream equaling Caucasian culture). I think that that’s changed a lot in the last ten years; there’s much more of a recognition now that American literature encompasses a
great many groups. With someone like August Wilson, for example, most people feel that his work is just as valid and just as universal as a work by someone of the ethnic group called European; so I think that’s changed.

Indeed, things have changed for David Henry Hwang and a few other established Asian American playwrights.

But for new emerging playwrights, the same questions of affirmative action have remained and force them to ask whether anything has changed. For instance, Asian American theatre artists wonder why David Henry Hwang’s plays, *M. Butterfly* and *Golden Child* have been the only Asian American plays to be presented on Broadway. Also, they ask whether plays’ “Oriental” elements are merely coincidental or essential to their success. Both plays involve beautiful traditional Chinese costumes and exotic stories: transvestite Chinese opera singer/spy in *M. Butterfly* and the unbinding of a daughter’s feet in *Golden Child*. This speculation is supported by the fact that all of Hwang’s non-Asian specific plays were poorly received.

Some critics have argued that second wave Asian American playwrights have not succeeded in attacking stereotypes and reappropriating Asian American identity. For instance, James Moy, a theatre historian, have criticized the playwrights for writing to “seek validation” from Anglo-American spectators instead of attacking stereotypes. “Unfortunately such overt, powerful attacks have been for nought as many recent Asian American playwrights have chosen to attack the stereotype while reinscribing it in newly disfigured characters to gain popular Anglo-American audience acceptance” (Moy, “Death of Asia,” 355). Commenting on David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* and Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die*, Moy states:
In [the plays] the genesis of a new representational strategy has emerged, one in which the words offer a clear indictment of the cultural hegemony of the West while the characters empowered to represent and speak on behalf of the Chinese or Asians are laughable and grossly disfigured. Thus marginalized, desexed, and made faceless, these Asian characters constitute no threat to Anglo-American sensibilities. Instead, they provide a good evening's entertainment and then float as exotic Oriental fetishes articulating Anglo-American desire, now doubly displaced into the new order of stereotypical representations created by Asian Americans. (Moy, 1990, 55)

One can inductively hypothesize that an “Oriental” entertainment is the formula of success for Asian American playwrights. This could have been true in the 1980s, but in the 1990s, a new group of Asian American playwrights emerged to invalidate the hypothesis. Younger playwrights such as Diana Son rejected the label “Asian American playwright” from the beginning of her career and wrote non-Asian American plays. Without using any “Oriental” elements, Son has established herself as a major American playwright.

The questions of affirmative action, merit, race and ethnicity spawn even more questions and complex and confusing arguments. As America grappled with these issues in the 1980s, second wave Asian American playwrights took advantage of the political benefits and established themselves as an indispensable part of American theatre. And while most of them resisted artistic limitations as minority writers, they learned to balance their individual rights with their responsibility for Asian Americans' collective equality and group rights.
Section 3 - Community and Asian American Theatre in the 1980s

In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American theatre emerged as a community-based cultural product for, by, and near Asian Americans. Most theatre artists emphatically claimed that they were doing theatre “for the community,” so they did not distinguish art from activism or financial success from community acceptance. However, their notions of community were often based on a loosely defined concept of “Asian America,” a complex and contested concept itself. As Josephine Lee points out, “it is dangerous to assume that ‘Asian America’ can be fully expressed through a particular body of work, however diverse that body might at first appear” (8). However, theatre does have a specific role in the Asian American community, or at least, this is what most artists believe. But what do the concepts of “Asian America” and “community” actually mean in the context of theatre and its artists? What is a community? What is an Asian American community? Where and what is Asian American theatre in the community? What is community-based Asian American theatre?

The Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s changed in the 1980s from what William Wei calls “radical” to “electoral politics” (Wei 243). “During the 1980s, increasing numbers of Asian Americans began to attain political office, usually at the local level [...] Asian American activists, including erstwhile Maoists, began abandoning protest politics and entering electoral politics; much to the astonishment of the Asian American community, they too began to vie for public office” (243). Moreover, Asian American studies in colleges and universities gained popularity among students who demanded
courses reflecting their experiences. Asian American studies curricula emphasized community-based approaches to the discipline. Many classes were taught by community leaders, and students were encouraged to contribute back to their communities. More than ever, community was a focus of study, discussion, and cultural creation for Asian Americans.

After the liberating immigration law of 1965, the Asian American population in the U. S. doubled from 1970 to 1980 and doubled again from 1980 to 1990. The majority of new immigrants came from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines. These immigrants did not identify themselves as “Asian” before they came to the United States. In fact, many refused to be categorized in the same group as the members from their enemy countries or countries deemed inferior to their own. Most immigrants associated in ethnic enclaves such as Koreatown and Little Saigon. These new immigrants did not realize that they belonged to a larger, pan-Asian community until they learned about America’s ethnic hierarchy and structure. Thus, in the 1980s, a description of “Asian American community” emphasized the diversity and sub-communities within the pan-Asian community.

Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu, in Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities, provides four concepts that I find helpful in explaining the larger pan-Asian American community and the smaller ethnically specific sub-communities. They are: primordialism (communities of culture); instrumentalism (communities of interest); voluntary ethnicity; and imposed ethnicity. According to Espiritu, primordialists “focus on culture and tradition to explain the emergence and retention of ethnicity” (Espiritu 4). According to this concept, an ethnic group’s cohesion
depends on the members' belief in a common beginning or birth connection. The 
members' connection to each other presupposes and reinforces a common belief, 
worldview, practice, and sentiment. Often driven by the emotional and sentimental force 
of ethnicity, primordialism provides a "plausible reason for the durability of such 
attachments" (4). On the other hand, instrumentalism provides a functional approach. In 
Espiritu's words: "instrumentalists treat ethnicity as a strategic tool or resource. Scholars 
taking this approach argue that populations remain ethnic when their ethnicity yields 
greater return than other statuses available to them" (4-5). It doesn't deny the sentimental 
associations in an ethnic group; rather, it emphasizes rational interests in the retention of 
ethnic ties.

Both primordialism and instrumentalism presuppose the concepts of involuntary 
and voluntary ethnicity. All ethnic minority groups in America identify themselves with 
categories involuntarily predefined by the mainstream. As Espiritu argues, "while 
ethnicity may be an exercise of personal choice for Euro-Americans, it is not so for 
nonwhite groups in the United States" (6). The more powerful group categorizes and 
imposes identities on the less powerful groups. For example, when Africans were brought 
by force for slavery to the U. S., they did not perceive themselves as "blacks" or "Africans" 
but as members of ethnically specific groups. Because of slavery, the "Negro race" 
emerged as a category created by others. Similarly, the pan-Indian label imposed by 
Euro-Americans replaced the individual tribal identities of Native Americans. The impact 
of imposed or involuntary ethnicity also applies to Latino Americans and Asian 
Americans. Many Asian American scholars, including Espiritu, argue that the term Asian
America “arose out of a racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group” (6).

Pan-Asian American identity began as an involuntary ethnicity, but the Asian American community has taken advantage of its imposed solidarity. Political alliances were formed to protect the rights of Asian Americans, and cultural products such as theatre emerged in the name of pan-ethnic identity. The pan-Asian concept has been “shaped and reshaped in the continuing interaction between both external and internal forces” (Espiritu 7). Sometimes, external forces took the form of violence. In the 1980s, hate crimes against persons of Asian heritage increased greatly. For instance, in 1982, two white men in Detroit beat a Chinese American man, Vincent Chin, to death with a baseball bat because they thought he was Japanese. The two men worked for General Motors and believed that the Japanese were responsible for layoffs at their company. For the crime, the two men received three years of probation and a $2000 fine. While hate crimes against Asian Americans resulted from negative aspects of the dominant culture’s imposition of pan-ethnic identity, they motivated Asian Americans to find commonalities for survival. Imposed identity became the only way to organize for mutual protection against the group’s common fate.

Asian American theatre provides artistic home for actors, playwrights, and other artists who could not otherwise find work. But what is its role in the Asian American community? The larger community can certainly survive economically and politically without theatre and other cultural forms. What then is the purpose of theatre in the Asian American community? Asian American theatre is a voluntary community coexisting with
and emerging from the imposed pan-Asian American community. Theatre may not have a major economic or political function in the community, but it does allow for cultural creation that is independent from and even counter to the dominant culture. According to British director and theatre historian Baz Kershaw, this process is “cultural intervention.” Although Kershaw’s field of study is the British alternative theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, his methodologies and vocabularies are relevant to a discussion of Asian American theatre and community. Kershaw identifies three traits that define alternative theatre as a form of cultural intervention:

(1) Alternative theatre was a sub-set, as it were, of a much broader group of cultural activities which were all expressive of new ideologies, of new interpretations of existing social and political relations;

(2) For the most part, alternative and community theatre had to create its own context. There were no ready-made venues or audiences to begin with;

(3) Alternative theatre was expansionist. It sought to intervene in a widening range of communities and constituencies, to make a popular appeal to an ever-expanding audience. (Kershaw 6-7)

Replacing Kershaw’s phrase “alternative theatre” with “Asian American theatre” is instructive. Asian American theatre was part of the larger counter-culture movement that occurred in both the U. S. and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Like other alternative theatres, Asian American theatre has had to “create its own context” and cultivate new audiences. And finally, Asian American theatre aims to intervene not only in the Asian
American community but also in mainstream society. Asian American theatre is a form of

cultural intervention. The essence of cultural intervention derives from the voluntary

nature of theatre within a community of involuntary pan-ethnicity.

Kershaw quotes John McGrath to describe the aims that bind alternative and

community theatre together. Again, McGrath’s points can be applied to Asian American

theatre:

Firstly it can contribute to a definition, a revaluation of the cultural identity of

people or a section of society, can add to the richness and diversity of that identity.

Secondly, it can assert, draw attention to, give voice to threatened communities,

can, by allowing them to speak, help them to survive. Thirdly, it can mount an

attack on the standardisation of culture and consciousness which is a function of

late industrial/early technological ‘consumerist’ societies everywhere. Fourthly, it

can be and is often linked to a wider political struggle for the right of people or a

section of a society to control its own destiny, to ‘self-determination’. Fifthly, it

can make a challenge to the values imposed on it from a dominant group -- it can

help to stop ruling class, or ruling race, or male, or multi-national capitalist values

being ‘universalised’ as common sense, or self-evident truth: as such, it presents a

challenge also to the state’s cultural engineers, in Ministries of Culture, Arts

Councils, universities, schools, and the media. (MacGrath 408)

In the 1980s, several new performance forms emerged in Asian American theatre. In the

following section, I will discuss the two major performance forms that redefined Asian

American theatre in the 1980s: improvisation and solo-performance. These forms

demonstrated the kinds of cultural intervention described by McGrath and Kershaw. As

voluntary cultural products in an involuntary society, these performance forms in the 1980s

defined Asian American identity, gave voice to the community, provided a way to

participate in the wider political struggle, and challenged the values of the dominant

culture.
Cold Tofu (Los Angeles): The First Asian American Improvisation Group

In 1981, four actors, Marilyn Tokuda, Irma Escamilla, Judy Hoy, and Denice Kumagai founded Cold Tofu, the first Asian American improvisation group. The first artistic director, Tokuda, served as the backbone of the group until 1989. She had moved to Los Angeles from Seattle after forming the Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (TEA) in the early 1970s. She relocated for acting opportunities, but like most Asian American actors, found no roles except stereotypical ones. For her, “Cold Tofu didn’t just happen; it happened for a reason.” “You were not seeing Asians in positive roles, there were no funny Asians except for Pat Morita, and Asians were not perceived as funny. They had no sense of humor. Cold Tofu was born out of frustration at not seeing Asians in the media as something we could relate to. It was a necessity to define our own identity” (Momii 1). Using humor, Cold Tofu found a unique way to address the concerns of Asian American identity and culture.

The founding members trained with the prestigious improvisation instructor, Ann Bowen. When Bowen left for New York in the early 1980s, the members of the group continued their training with Steven Book, a protégée of Viola Spolin who created the “Spolin Game” and is considered “The Mother of Improv.” The “Spolin Game” method taught actors to use improvisation beyond fun and games. They learned to tackle acting problems and to focus on nurturing imagination and ideas. Escamilla, a founding member of Cold Tofu and the second artistic director, felt that the group eventually became “more
judgmental about the quality of our material, because we learned that what we were saying was just as important as being funny” (Momii 1).

The group grew to include more members, some of whom were non-Asian American. In fact, the group has since become multi-ethnic with African American actors and Latino actors playing central roles in performances and administration. The majority of the group has remained Asian American, but the issues tackled by Cold Tofu include not only the concerns of Asian Americans, but also those of multicultural America. With this inclusive strategy, Cold Tofu matured into one of the most politically daring performance groups in the Los Angeles area in the mid 1980s. The actors used improvisational humor to deliver poignant political and social messages to the audience. Their issues included racism, stereotypes, history, multiculturalism, and contemporary politics.

Because of Cold Tofu’s multicultural agenda, the group was often invited to schools and colleges for presentations. One of its first public performances took place at Pasadena City College at a recruitment session for Asian American high school students. This visit to PCC was a watershed moment that crystallized the group’s aim and style. Before the performance, the actors waited in the green room where they listened to the college administrators speaking to the high school students about the benefits of attending their college. While the Cold Tofu performers were waiting backstage for their turn to go on stage, they heard the college administrators telling the Asian American high school students about job opportunities at the college. The administrators described such stereotypic jobs as gardening, which they thought Asians would like to do. The Cold Tofu
members were appalled. According to Escamilla, Mike Chan, a core member of Cold Tofu, “became so quiet that it was scary” (1).

The silence did not continue on stage. In fact, the tension transformed itself into creative improvisation and satirical humor -- the ideal combination that Cold Tofu had been working on. Escamilla remembers the performance vividly:

When we got up on stage, everything that we had planned to do went right out the window and Mike took over. His humor started out slightly sarcastic. Mike did a piece about the Yellow Brotherhood, and his westside Sansei thing to show them (administration and kids) some other facets of Asian American identity. It progressed into biting commentary, like telling the audience about what kinds of classes he would like to teach at PCC [Pasadena Community College]. We started doing characters based on our family members and their reactions to things like the internment camps and we realized that the work, the message was so important. (Ibid)

This event set the path for Cold Tofu in the 1980s. The group increasingly attracted Asian Americans who actively participated in the improvisations as audience members. In the 1990s, the group grew into one of the most successful improvisation groups in the Los Angeles area. It still performs at least once a month at the Japanese American Museum in Little Tokyo to diverse audiences.

However, with its increasing popularity, the group lost some of its sharp-edged political message. (The new comedy performance groups in the 1990s would take on a sharper tone.) Educating and entertaining the community became the primary focus in the 1990s:

Cold Tofu's mission is to make people laugh, and to promote realistic images of our diverse ethnic backgrounds by presenting universal commonalities and issues through performing improv and sketch comedy. [...] Cold Tofu has not only
served as an entertaining force but also as an educational tool to help bridge cultural
gaps between different communities. We hope to continue reaching out not only to
the Asian American communities but to the Hispanic community as well as the
general public. We want to reach people through laughter dealing with universal
themes. We are striving to dispel stereotypes and to create positive role models for
young people and the community at large. 

For over two decades, Cold Tofu used humor and improvisation as a cultural intervention
to reevaluate Asian American identity, to speak for its community, and to criticize the status
quo. In its earlier days, political satire was its primary mode of cultural intervention, and
in the 1990s, when the community’s acceptance of Cold Tofu widened, it settled into the
community as both entertainer and educator. This shift has given Cold Tofu a stabilized
position in the Asian American community, especially in the Los Angeles area.

Solo Performers

Another form of cultural intervention in the 1980s came from solo performers who,
in their own ways, also contributed to the expansion and redefinition of Asian American
theatre and its role in the community. In the 1980s, many Asian American artists started to
create solo performances written, performed, and produced by themselves. For one, these
artists did not find existing venues satisfactory. Some actors in Asian American theatre
companies found the offered roles unchallenging and untrue to their experiences. Some
Asian American artists found the writer-centered theatre limiting; they wanted to
incorporate other art forms in their performances. Also, like Asian American actors of
earlier decades, they saw very few opportunities in mainstream theatre. Most importantly,
solo performances were inexpensive to produce in comparison to play productions and
group performances. This lower cost allowed versatility for performers who often took their shows to schools and other touring venues.

The multicultural messages of these solo performances touched a chord in the 1980s when schools looked to the arts to teach multiculturalism and pluralism. Although these Asian American artists took advantage of opportunities in multicultural education, they did not target school audiences from the start. In most cases, they focused on telling the stories of themselves and the Asian American community. Such biographical elements (both on a personal and community level—some call this “social biography”) made the solo performances “multicultural” by default. Encouraged by schools and communities, more solo performers emerged to tell their versions of the Asian American experience. (In the 1990s, autobiography continued as the primary form of solo performances.) Another type of encouragement came from governmental funding sources. In the 1960s and 1970s the grant-givers supported playwrights—Rockefeller grants, National Endowment of the Arts grants, and others. But then in the 1980s the funds for playwrights and artistic groups began to dwindle, and at the same time a new flow of money from city, state, and federal agencies gave incentives to schools to invite theatre groups and individuals. Multicultural education and community outreach became the hot topic in the 1980s. With this encouragement and support, Asian American solo performers were able to take Asian American theatre to the every corner of the country by performing in colleges, universities, and high schools even in the remotest areas.

In discussing solo performance in Asian American theatre, I find it helpful to identify two types of approaches, both of which began in the 1970s. One began with artists
such as Nobuko Miyamoto who purposely focused on identity politics and contemporary ideas of multiculturalism. The second approach began with Winston Tong, Ping Chong, and others who were part of the avant-garde experimental theatre in which their Asian American identities were consequential, not essential.

Nobuko Miyamoto and her company, Great Leap, as an example of solo-performances rooted in the Asian American community. Founded in 1978, Great Leap, Inc. is a non-profit performing arts organization in Los Angeles. It “creates, produces and presents contemporary works that give expression to the multicultural experience through music, theater, dance, and workshops.” The founder, Nobuko Miyamoto, has been artistic director since 1978. Before she founded Great Leap, Miyamoto began her artistic career as a musician. In 1973, she worked with Chris Iijima and Charlie Chin to create A Grain of Sand, the first Asian American music album. A focus of Great Leap, Inc. has always been community. Although the majority of its members are Asian Americans, artists of other ethnicities in the community have played a central role in the company. It describes itself as “rooted in the Asian American community” while “reaching out to the diverse multicultural communities of Southern California.” The group has performed in more than 500 venues, many of which include schools, colleges, and universities. Like other community-based performance organizations, the educational venue has been a primary source of presentation and financial resources for Great Leap. In the 1990s, Great Leap also worked with other community organizations and integrated performances with existing community programs.
For instance, it worked with Upward Bound to “develop and implement an intensive arts program which supplements an academic tutoring program for at-risk youth.”

As one of the first Asian American solo performers, Miyamoto encouraged a group of artists to use their autobiographical narratives and Asian American identity themes in performances. Solo performers of this approach in the 1980s include Lane Nishikawa, Jude Narita, Amy Hill, and Brenda Wong Aoki. In the 1990s, a new generation of Asian American artists joined the network of solo performers and continued to perform around the country. They included Denise Uyehara, Dawn Akemi Saito, Alison de la Cruz, Alex Luu, Kip Fulbeck, Shishir Kurup, Dan Kwong, Sandra Tsing Loh, Alec Mapa, Leilani Chan, Marcus Quiñones, Lê thi diem thúy lê, Muna Tseng, Maura Nguyen Donohue, and numerous others. While most of these new artists focus on the issues of Asian American identity and autobiographical narratives, many create works similar to those of Ping Chong and other artists of the second approach. Increasingly towards the end of the 1990s, the distinctions between the first and the second approaches became blurred.

But in the 1970s and 1980s the distinction was not only clear but also fundamental to the artists. Ping Chong, for instance, began his performance career with Meredith Monk in the late 1960s as an experimental director, choreographer, performer, and filmmaker. In his first few pieces, including Lazarus (1972), Nosferatu (1984), Angels of Swedenborg (1985), and Kind Ness (1986), Chong used multimedia technologies to explore various themes, including alienation of humanoid and android races and a gorilla visiting an American suburb. Although Chong’s works did not deal directly with Asian American issues, all of them focused on the concepts of “otherness,” exclusion, inside/outside, and
cultural exchanges. Only later in his career, Chong realized that his early works were

"partially disguised autobiography":

There was no Asian pride movement going on in New York [in the 1960s and 1970], as far as I can remember. I had to resolve all those issues of being Asian-American myself. I wasn’t particularly connected to the Asian community, because I didn’t know anybody like myself in New York. After [the first two shows] I had this realization that the role of the outside was more universal. I began dealing more with the problem of how whole cultures are unable to interact harmoniously. [...] In spirit I’m close to my Chinese roots but in practice I’m very far from them. As another way of trying to feel positive about what I had lost when I left Chinatown, I began to think of the entire world as my culture. I’ve developed a commitment to the sense that we are all together on this one little planet. It’s more and more important for us not to feel so foreign with one another. (Berson 1990, 3-4)

Chong also emphasized that “art was a way of surviving” in New York City when he did not know of any Asian American consciousness organizations (Chong 63). Some Asian Americans have criticized Chong for “ignoring” Asian American issues and creating work for white, elite audiences. These critics have also alleged that when funding became available for multicultural projects, Chong began to incorporate Asian American themes in his work, thus taking money away from those artists who had focused on Asian American issues from the start.

In the 1990s, Chong developed the “Asian Quartet” which consisted of four pieces about Japan (Deshima, 1990), China (Chinoiserie, 1995), Vietnam (After Sorrow, 1997), and Korea (Pojagi, 1999). The pieces dealt with major historical conflicts between the East and the West, including the Opium War and Vietnam War, and in some cases, Chong related the international topics to the Asian American experience. For example, in Chinoiserie, he juxtaposed the 1792 British invasion to China to a scene from Henry
Grimm’s *The Chinese Must Go* (1879), a racist play about the Chinese exclusion. Critics have claimed that Chong got on the “multicultural bandwagon” in the 1990s when he received commission to create these “Asian” works. Chong has denied these allegations and maintained that he has devoted his career on the theme of “Culture and the Other.”

All arguments aside, however, Chong’s approach is different from that of Asian American solo performers who focus on specific Asian American topics, not artistic experimentation. And in the 1980s, artists of both approaches not only shaped and diversified Asian American theatre but also took it to all parts of the country as the cultural representatives of Asian America.

**Conclusion**

Asian American theatre is a voluntary cultural intervention in the Asian American community -- which is defined by an involuntary or imposed racial identity. In the 1980s, improvisation and solo performance offered two new theatrical forms that redefined the relationship between theatre and community for Asian Americans. The Cold Tofu improvisation group used humor and satire to deliver social criticism while solo performers focused on biographical (both personal and social) experiences of Asian Americans. And many more new theatrical forms followed in the 1990s when the number of comedy groups and solo performers grew tremendously. I will discuss some of these forms in the next chapter. In the next section, I will introduce the artistic committee of the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco where a group of young artists produced perhaps the most important selection of new Asian American plays in the 1980s.
Section 4 - The Artistic Committee of the Asian American Theatre Company

With Frank Chin's resignation in early 1978, many members of the Asian American Theatre Company and supporters of Chin left the group. This transition gave the few remaining members and new participants an opportunity to move up as staff members with the power to make artistic and managerial decisions. Mostly Japanese Americans, the new group began to expand the Company's repertory by including various experimental forms such as improvisation and comedy skits. In 1979, the core members of the Company formed an artistic committee instead of hiring an artistic director, the position vacated by Frank Chin. Until 1986, the artistic committee managed the artistic aspects of productions including season selection and casting. Under its management, numerous new Asian American plays were developed, and playwrights such as Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang launched their careers. The group that came together around 1979 in San Francisco included some of the most talented and influential theatre artists who would go on to shape Asian American theatre in the 1980s and 1990s.

After Frank Chin's resignation, the members of the Company emphasized their intention to prioritize the founding agenda--development of new Asian American plays--in the company's mission statement and press releases, but in actuality, the Company's focus shifted from playwrights to actors, especially in administration. It was no longer a playwright's laboratory as envisioned by Chin, but rather a company in which all theatre artists, especially actors, could unleash their creativity. In short, Chin trained and used
actors to promote excellent playwriting, and after his resignation, the actors solicited new Asian American plays to expand their acting opportunities.

As if to exemplify this transition, the only production of 1978 was Momoko Iko’s *Hollywood Mirrors*. Iko—who had won the EWP’s playwriting contest in 1971 and had held both Rockefeller Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts grants—made her first attempt at writing comedy skits. Her previous plays were serious, realistic family dramas. In *Hollywood Mirrors*, Iko used “stereotypes of Asians from films, TV, and comic books, and through satire and music and dance, turns them to the mirror, revealing the real person and real human relations and emotions behind those masks” (Bernard Weiner. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Nov. 13, 1978. 47). Iko’s earlier plays were like the works by Frank Chin and Wakako Yamauchi in that they dramatized the immigrant experience in relatively straight narrative and literary forms. Unlike these earlier plays, *Hollywood Mirrors* was written by Iko for the young actors at the AATW. In an interview, Iko emphasized Asian American actors’ needs: “The younger Asian-American actors still need lots of training and experience, […] but the important point is that there are companies where they can go to perfect their craft and not lose touch with their heritage” (47). The AATW was such a company, and the young actors stepped up as its core members, and a few of them joined the first artistic committee in 1979.

The first artistic committee consisted of Eric Hayashi, Marc Hayashi, Amy Hill, Dennis Myers, John Ng, and Judi Nihei. When given the chance to redefine and restructure the staff, purpose, and future of the AATW, they began by making the group as democratic as possible, the opposite of Chin’s autocratic approach. According to the meeting minutes,
the committee was “designated” by the board of directors “for the purpose of providing artistic direction to the company.” The committee’s duties focused on the “artistic quality” of productions and curricula:

1. Choose plays for the season from scripts or treatments submitted by Asian American writers on the basis of their overall quality, stageability, and their development of the Asian American experience.
2. Oversee the artistic quality of production.
3. Oversee the artistic company.
4. Choose directors for the season.
5. Develop curricula for the artistic training of theatre personnel.
6. Oversee the artistic quality of the community development program of AATC. 18

The members of the committee were to serve a minimum of one season after which the position could be renewed by the board of directors. The committee included one representative from management (usually the executive director) and another from the “acting company” (or the acting division of the AATC). Other members were selected from the general theatre membership and had to have “demonstrated artistic quality and vision and commitment to AATC.” The number of committee members was limited to five minimum and nine maximum. In case of resignation and replacement, the committee could select the new member, and the board of directors had to approve the changes.
All decisions were made by a two-third vote of members in a meeting, and no voting could take place unless a minimum of four members was present. At the beginning of each season, the committee members chose a chairman whose duties included attending the board of directors’ meeting as a voting member. Officially, the artistic committee had to meet a minimum of twice a month, but meetings occurred much more frequently. As can be expected of an organization run by young, inexperienced administrators, the artistic committee often faced irresolvable disagreements and loss of focus.

As chaotic as it was, the AATW managed to restructure itself after Chin’s resignation and restart with strong seasons in 1979 and 1980 when it officially changed the name from Workshop to Company. The Company mounted eight shows in 1979, and three more shows in the first half of 1980. Most plays were new Asian American plays, but some were revivals of older plays such as Mel Escueta’s *Honey Bucket*.\(^9\) The artistic committee spent much of 1979 planning new programs and managing productions. One of the committee’s first actions was to increase the number of programs at the company. In “Narrative” written in 1979, the committee proposed to implement four programs: script development, production, training, and community development. The script development program promised to offer workshops that would provide playwrights “a cast, a director, and the guidance of an experienced playwright to help them complete their scripts” (“Narrative” 2).

After Frank Chin left the theatre, the group had some money available to create a touring project. Without the guidance of Chin, the group had to find a new method to organize and produce a new season. One way—which turned out to be a successful
shift—was to collectively create a touring show by utilizing the entire group’s talent. They created a sketch comedy show, mostly for staging flexibility during the tour. The show eventually became an in-house production with innovative video features.

As one of the Company’s most important programs, the training program offered three ten-week sessions a year. The training program’s core curriculum consisted of “voice, movement, acting, scene study, improvisation, [...] mime, agit-prop theater, political theater, tap dancing, musical cabaret, and advanced management.” Unlike the training programs under Frank Chin, these sessions offered to teach a variety of theatre styles. According to Judi Nihei, who had joined the company around the time Chin left, the AATC space on 4344 California Street provided an open atmosphere in which “people would just hang out there.” It was always open to anyone who was interested in participating in Asian American theatre. “It was very active: people were writing, learning to be technicians, and coming off the street wanting to do something to be challenged in one direction or the other” (Personal Interview, July 14, 1999, San Francisco).

Despite these changes, the basic goal of the AATW did not change. The artistic committee wanted to generate “new scripts that depict the experiences of Asians in this country” and made new play development one of AATW’s active programs (“Narrative”). The Company began the 1980-81 season with A Song for a Nisei Fisherman by Philip Kan Gotanda, who would continue to write new plays for the San Francisco ensemble throughout the 1980s. (The 1980-81 season had eight shows, and three of them were by Gotanda.) The director of A Song for Nisei Fisherman was David Henry Hwang, who participated in the Company mainly as a director during this period and had close
friendships with Gotanda and the members of the artistic committee. After his *F.O.B.* was received favorably at the Public Theater in 1980, Hwang moved to New York City but continued to maintain close ties with AATW members. Ironically, Hwang had initially submitted an earlier draft of *F.O.B.* to the artistic committee before sending it to the Eugene O’Neill Playwriting Festival. The committee thought that the play needed work and decided not to include it in the 1980-81 season. To its surprise, Joseph Papp liked the play and Hwang’s career took off. The artistic committee, however, did give opportunities to many new Asian American playwrights, most of whom did not make a major break-through like Hwang’s.

The artistic committee emphasized its commitment to new play development in press releases and other public relations materials. A magazine article written in March 1980 described the company as a “group [that] presents original pieces by, for the most part, untried playwrights expressing views on both contemporary issues and the timeless situations which involve the human spirit” (Martha Farmer 54). It went on to describe the artistic committee’s play selection process:

New scripts are brought before the Artistic [Committee] of five men and women who are familiar with the different aspects of the theater and who accept or reject a script on their judgment of its merit. The important thing to the group is that new writers have a forum for presenting their work; the actors have a chance to perform, and everyone gains from the experience, including the public. (Farmer 54)

In the 1980-81 season, the Company offered its first New Playwrights Series at the Marian Theater where five new Asian American plays premiered. Also, in the same season, subscription was implemented for the first time. The artistic committee managed to solicit
new plays and promote its image as a playwright’s theatre in the early 1980s, but not without internal problems and disagreements.

In January 1981, Eric Hayashi, who had served as the executive director of the AATW since 1978, decided to resign. As noted in chapter one, Hayashi helped Frank Chin found the AATW and was the production manager of the Company when Chin resigned in 1978. Also, Hayashi led the company as a fundraiser and business manager both before and after Chin’s resignation. Hayashi’s resignation was the result of “artistic difference” between him and other members of the AATW, and the transition was not as sudden and dramatic as Chin’s quitting. Hayashi allowed nine months for the transition, during which time he implemented several agendas. In a letter (written on January 10, 1981) to the board of directors and his colleagues, Hayashi stated his intent to resign, described the 1980-81 season, and recommended the Company’s direction. He emphasized that the season was better than others because the members wanted to work together:

Internally, AATC is represented by the youngest (age wise) group of members ever involved – infusing AATC with a fresh perspective on the theater process. This is balanced with the fact that this seems to be a socially mature group of people – we want to work together despite our differences and conflicts – a definite improvement over previous group dynamics at AATC. There is now a core of actors who are serious in their commitment to becoming “professional” in their craft. (Hayashi 2).

Hayashi had doubts about the financial judgments of the board members and disapproved of the administrative decisions of the artistic committee. But his letter diplomatically pointed out positive changes in the Company. For one, the Company’s repertory had grown both in number and in the diversity of writers and genre. Hayashi’s biggest concern,
however, was with finances. He knew that the “general economic forecast looked bleak the next few years” and feared “a conservative backlash against ethnic minorities.” (Both became realities in the 1980s and made the very survival of the Company difficult in 1989.) Hayashi recommended an “aggressive campaign” to eliminate the Company’s debt which in 1981 was over $20,000. He also spelled out the required qualifications for the next executive director by quoting the Rockefeller Panel Report, “The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects” and Stephen Langely’s “Theater Management in America.” Hayashi’s recommendations were all valid and well articulated, but the bottom line was that he left when the company was growing unmanageably and the administrative structure was not working well.

After Hayashi’s resignation, the responsibilities of the remaining artistic committee members increased. By 1981, the members of the committee changed several times and often took turns in their services. In November 1981, for instance, the committee consisted of Judi Nihei, Emilya Cachapero, Ken Narasaki, Lane Nishikawa, Dennis Dun, and Amy Hill. And Dennis Myers, who had joined the company in 1975, succeeded Hayashi as executive director at the end of 1981. These members decided that the committee needed restructuring, including formalizing and specifying the responsibilities of each member. Dennis Myers and the artistic committee implemented several tactics to improve management. For instance, in September 1982, they hired a professional theatre consultant, Yankee Johnson, to assist them in redeveloping its structure. The purpose of the consultation was simple for Myers. In a letter to the board of directors and artistic committee, he stated: “our theater is still, somewhat, ensconced in a bunker/survivalist
mentality. Although this will help us to survive, the question will be, ‘for what purpose?’ I believe that Yankee’s consultation services will greatly answer this question” (Myers. Sept. 16, 1982).

Upon initial observation, Johnson indicated to Myers that “the sometimes confusing relationships of various AATC functions are not surprising, given the evolution of the company.” He continued: “It appears to me that since Frank C[hin] left, however, the organizational and structural changes have come about as a means to continue programs without reevaluation of the way they relate to the total AATC program” (Johnson. September 5, 1982). He made four specific observations of the AATC:

1. The production program of the theater (new play or existing material) appears central to everything AATC does;

2. If he were starting an Asian American Theater Company from scratch, he would institute a playwrights’ workshop and an actors’ training program as well as a strong community outreach program;

3. The role of the artistic committee needs clarification;

4. How AATC presents its budget does not give a clear picture of the true cost of each program.

After ten days of meeting and discussions with the AATC staff, Johnson recommended several changes to improve management of the Company. He suggested that the Company define the goals and objectives of its programs – which included mainstage productions,
classes, playwright’s workshops, and outreach programs – and “indicate how each program serves the broad general purpose of AATC.” Johnson also provided specific recommendations on fundraising and grant writing, which again begged the question of the company’s goals and objectives. He based all recommendations on the Company’s mission statement: “To encourage and develop Asian-American artists in the dramatic arts and to present new and previously produced mainstage works for the viewing of Asian and non-Asian audiences.” He also provided a step-by-step process for planning programs, generating income, and finding contributors who would be interested in the programs.

But the most urgent recommendation from Johnson focused on the artistic committee. He suggested that the committee’s role be redefined: “For the short run the committee seems to be keeping AATC going, but its role needs immediate clarification by the board of directors and it needs to be made directly accountable to the board.” He also recommended that in the long run, AATC needed an artistic director who would report directly to the board. For the time, however, the artistic committee was much more cost-effective, and the specific objectives of the company – as recommended by Johnson -- had to be worked out before an artistic director could be hired. The committee made plans to hire an artistic director in a few years, but for the meantime, it decided to hold an extensive meeting on Johnson’s recommendations.

In October 1982, the artistic committee went on retreat to discuss the issues brought up by Johnson. Among many activities, committee members created a “brainstorm list” of desirable goals and objectives for AATC. The list is not prioritized and reflects the brainstorming process, but it does represent a summary of the abiding issues and problems
faced by Asian American theatre not only in San Francisco but also around the country.

The list had twenty-three items that included potential goals and objectives:

1. Provide a positive role model for community;
2. Develop playwrights, actors, directors, etc.;
3. Professional theater;
4. Development of all theater personnel;
5. Provide community ready access to theater;
6. Upgrade physical facility;
7. Enhance opportunities for artists outside AATC;
8. Make movies/videotapes (move into other media);
9. Move AATC into national/statewide focus/recognition;
10. Reflect the Asian American experience;
11. Incorporate Asian theatrical technique into training;
12. Promote Asian American experience to mainstream;
13. Network with other Asian American art groups and other Asian American theaters;
14. Include all Asian American ethnic groups;
15. Develop a touring capacity and tour;
16. Develop outreach;
17. Be true to each ethnic experience;
18. Promote an inter-ethnic understanding;
19. Expand audience diversity;
20. Develop/Express a unique Asian American theatrical form;
21. Establish/Develop an Asian American creative process;
22. Present Asian American plays;
23. Develop a resource library for artists.

While the purpose of the retreat and open discussion was to improve the artistic committee and the future prospects of AATC, the meeting was a prologue to the crisis that occurred three years later. The more they discussed, the more convinced the committee members became of the need for an artistic director. The critical and weighty question was: who? Each committee member had a different candidate in mind, and several of them wanted the job for themselves. As early as 1983, the artistic committee announced a position opening for an artistic director to begin work in the 1984-85 season. Adding to
this thorny problem was the loss of performing space in 1983 when the fire marshal closed it down. And, as Eric Hayashi had predicted, funding for the arts started to dwindle in general, and many small theatres in San Francisco went defunct. Moreover, Dennis Myers, who became executive director after Eric Hayashi’s resignation in 1980, decided to leave the Company. The responsibility of the artistic committee grew threefold, and members had to find a way to survive their tribulations.

Ironically, despite a general condition of management, the Company’s repertory of new Asian American plays was more numerous and diverse than ever. The artistic committee managed to produce R. A. Shiomi’s Yellow Fever at the YWCA on Sutter Street from October to December in 1983. Other plays of the 1983-84 season included David Henry Hwang’s F.O.B. (which was presented before the company lost its space), Not My Fault (an ensemble improvisational comedy), Hwang’s The Dance and the Railroad, and Ernest Abuba’s An American Story. The last three shows were presented at the Julian Theater and at a 9th Avenue space. In the following year in 1984, the AATC became a resident company of the People’s Theater at Fort Mason Center, and soon after, moved its offices into a historic landmark building (formerly a Buddhist temple) on the edge of Japantown.

In November 1984, the AATC hired David Fong as its new executive director, but he left a few months later (Diane Yen-Mei Wong 8). He had been a volunteer with the company in the mid 1970s and had taken its acting and writing classes, and had just completed his MBA in New York City. He had excellent credentials for the job, but he joined the company in the midst of many transitions and internal disputes. Also, like other
members of the staff, he was expected to sacrifice everything and devote almost all of his time and energy to the Company. The AATC, by this time, had too many problems to be solved by one person, but Fong was essentially hired to do exactly that. Fong left after realizing that he could not and was not willing to devote all of his time to the AATC and that he could not solve its many problems.


By the end of 1985, the organizational structure and objectives of the AATC were well articulated and codified, at least on paper. It was obvious that hiring an artistic director could no longer be delayed, and the artistic committee faced a growing number of disagreements. The number of committee members had increased to seven in 1984 when Judi Nihei and Amy Hill rejoined the committee to relieve the workload of other members. However, the division of labor became a major issue for the committee. Generally, some members felt that they were doing the majority of work, and gender came to play a major role in this dispute. Nihei, Hill, and Emilya Cachapero, who took charge of administrative details, were close friends and trusted each other professionally. Cachapero, in particular, did most of the administrative work such as grant-writing and organizing committee
meetings. But in public, men were the visible “leaders” of the company. Lane Nishikawa, Marc Hayashi, R. A. Shiomi, and Ken Narasaki formed their own close friendships. Also, the board of directors had a better relationship with the male members of the committee, especially Lane Nishikawa. The two groups, divided by gender, often disagreed on play selections and public relations strategies. Relationships were also complicated by personal histories. And when a decision had to be made on an artistic director, the final stages of the fall-out began.

From the time of its formation in 1979, the artistic committee’s relationship to the board of directors was not amicable. The board did not approve of many decisions made by the artistic committee, and most disputes were about money. The artistic committee wanted to fund new productions, and the board of directors wanted to pay rent and taxes. Also, the Company had difficulty getting out of debt, which was constantly growing. The board of directors finally decided to choose an artistic director from the committee when it could not find an outside person. The female members thought that one of them deserved the job since they had taken care of much of the administrative work. Cachapero was an especially strong candidate. However, the board of directors chose Lane Nishikawa as the new artistic director, beginning the 1986-87 season. With this decision, Amy Hill, Judi Nihei, and Emilya Cachapero left AATC. And with Nishikawa as artistic director, Eric Hayashi came back to the company as the executive director in October 1986. With that, the “artistic committee period” ended at the AATC, and the “Nishikawa-Hayashi period” began. (Hayashi served as the artistic director from 1989 to 1993.)
With the loss of some core members, the remaining members of the AATC had to once again struggle to survive. Writing soon after the fall-out, Nishikawa described the transition as a “crisis”: “Much of the original talent has moved on, sufficient administrative infrastructure was not developed over the years to support the level of activity and the artistic quality has slipped. This year [1986] has been an effort to regroup and recover financially. The theater is at a critical transition in its evolution.”

In the next three years, Nishikawa and Hayashi “turned the theatre around,” and in January 1989, it moved into a permanent space, after being “homeless” for over six years. (Nishikawa and Hayashi call the change a “turn-around,” but others disagree as I will explain later.) The new space, the Asian American Theater Center, was a dream come true for everyone. With a 135-seat mainstage, 60-seat second stage, a dance and rehearsal studio, and administrative offices in the ethnically diverse Richmond district, it was the best place any Asian American theatre company had ever obtained. The company began to produce large-scale shows with high budgets, and more often than not, the Company began to profit from the shows.

However, on October 17, 1989, an earthquake hit San Francisco and caused the new space’s mainstage fire sprinklers to trigger and break, flooding the theatre with 12,000 gallons of water. The space was fully renovated in ten months, but the Company could not recover financially. Nishikawa and Hayashi had built the new space with borrowed money, thinking that with large-scale productions, they would be able to pay back the debt before too long. Even before moving into the new space, the Company had incurred a large amount of debt and had failed to pay taxes for years. When the grant-givers found out

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about the company’s financial situation, some cancelled their funding. Also, in 1990, Nishikawa, with his lawyer, made a formal request for payment of about $33,000 in back salaries. To make things worse, the board of directors began to doubt the very survival of the Company and hesitated to assist it financially.

Unlike other periods in AATC history, very few documents from the Nishikawa-Hayashi period can be found in the archive. Some critics of this period allege that most administrative decisions were made at a bar which Nishikawa and Hayashi frequented, and they rarely took minutes for their meetings. According to Hayashi, however, he still possesses most of the documents and has not yet donated them to the archive. A fair assessment of the period cannot be made until these documents have been examined. In 1990, an accountant was hired to reconstruct records for the period of 1986-89, and the Business Volunteers for the Arts of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce got involved in the inquiry. The details of this topic remain to be researched further when documents become available, but in short, the company faced near-bankruptcy in 1990.

Conclusion

In 1993, Eric Hayashi resigned from the artistic director position to work for the National Endowment for the Arts and asked Pamela Wu to take the position of executive director. Diane Emiko Takei was named co-artistic director, and Kathy Lu managing director. Both Wu and Takei had acted and directed at the AATC in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, they were not told the disturbing facts of the AATC’s financial
situation or that the company might need to close down. Since then, Takei and Lu have left
the company, and Wu has managed to make deals with the IRS and some foundations to
reduce back payments. However, the AATC lost its space in the Richmond district, and the
status of the Company was reduced from a regional theatre to a small theatre. Some
veteran members of the Company have given up, and the few remaining members still
struggle to survive at least in name because of the historical reputation of the AATC.

Before the big crisis in 1985, the AATC produced some of the most important new
Asian American plays in history, and the intensity and level of its artistic quality have yet
to be matched. The committee members lived and breathed at the theatre, devoting
everything to both administrative and artistic aspects of the company. As one member
remembers, it was a “sexy and crazy time.” Every member of the committee directed,
designed, taught, wrote, and ran the theatre in the way he or she envisioned. Their visions
clashed most of time, but that made the process even more creative and exciting. However,
after the fall-out, the passion turned bitter. Most members remain divided (mostly along
gender lines) on the events that led to the fall-out, and like all sour situations, each group
blames the other for the failure of the AATC. The issue is now even more complicated
because Pamela Wu is a good friend of the female members, who collectively blame
Nishikawa and Hayashi for running the theatre to the ground. Nishikawa and Hayashi, on
the other hand, do not agree with some of Wu’s administrative decisions. All blame aside,
however, the artistic committee began in 1979 to recover from the aftereffects of Frank
Chin’s resignation, and managed to produce over forty productions—most of which were
new Asian American plays—in six seasons. The members of the artistic committee
maintained Chin's vision of the AATC as the playwright's theatre, but also added a new dimension to the Company by opening doors to a diverse group of writers and performers. Then, like so many theatre groups, the AATC found that the administrative and financial demands of running a company year after year were too challenging. The members of the Company divided into contentious groups, and many left in anger and frustration. Although a few people have attempted to salvage the Company both financially and artistically, most observers remain pessimistic about its future. However, there is little disagreement about the artistic committee's contribution to Asian American theatre in the 1980s when its members devoted their lives to the AATC as actors, writers, directors, designers, and producers to build one of the most creative periods in Asian American theatre history.
CHAPTER 4

ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE IN THE 1990S

Section 1 - Actors in the 1990s

For the Asian American theatre community, the 1990s began with what Dorinne Kondo describes as “a historical and political watershed that forced the mobilization of actors and community, spawning numerous artistic and political interventions that represent an array of tactical possibilities” (Kondo 229). Kondo is referring to the Miss Saigon controversy in which the producer of the show, Cameron Mackintosh, selected a non-Asian actor, Jonathan Pryce, to play the main male role of the Eurasian engineer, thus implying that no Asian American actor was talented enough to take on this important role. Asian American actors had to watch yet another Asian (or Eurasian) role played by a white actor. The controversy was a reminder of the fact that the political activism that began in the 1960s still remains one of the main requirements of Asian American theatre. The actors, playwrights, audiences and producers began to confront the naïveté of their optimism of the 1980s. The urgency of their realization created an atmosphere in which new companies branched out with more focused agendas than the first companies of the 1960s and the 1970s. Although the Miss Saigon controversy was but one of many events
that influenced Asian American theatre to change itself and reconsider its agendas, it was the touchstone in the debate about mainstream racial representation, casting policies, and political activism.

The “Miss Saigon” Controversy: Events, Causes, and Effects.

The month of August is traditionally a slow period for Broadway, but 1990 was an exception. Both the Daily News and Equity News filled their pages with articles on the casting controversy over Miss Saigon. The musical had premiered in London’s Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in September 1989, with Jonathan Pryce playing the leading role of the Engineer. The producer, Cameron Mackintosh, wanted to repeat the London production success on Broadway by bringing Pryce as the “star” of the show and Lea Salonga (a Filipina) as the female lead. In the initial stages of Mackintosh’s negotiations for a Broadway production, the only criticism was the absence of African-American performers among the roles of American soldiers. Mackintosh agreed to recast some roles including the character of “John” which was played by Hinton Battle, who went on to win a Tony Award for best featured actor in a musical. However, when it came to the role of the Engineer, Mackintosh was adamant about his choice of Jonathan Pryce.

The controversy began with a letter to Alan Eisenberg dated June 6 from Tisa Chang, the artistic director of Pan Asian Repertory Theatre of New York. She expressed the dissatisfaction of the Asian American actors with the Equity for allowing “a non-Asian foreign actor, Jonathan Pryce” to portray a Eurasian character (Behr 181). She wrote, “The insensitivity of this action could only be compared to having the role of Boy Willie in The
Piano Lesson portrayed by a man in blackface. It is a shame that Cameron Mackintosh and the AEA both believe that painting a Caucasian actor yellow is an acceptable action. [...] Equity is sending the following message to its minority members: we will support your right to work as long as your role is not central to the play” (182). In another letter, this time to Colleen Dewhurst, President of American Equity, other Asian American artists such as David Henry Hwang and B. D. Wong (who played “Song” in the original Broadway productions of M. Butterfly) joined the campaign by asking her to protest the practice of racism. B. D. Wong, who was probably the best contender for Pryce’s role, was one of the most vocal protesters. In the letter dated June 21, Wong wrote:

It is time for me and the Asian American community to stand in the way of yellowface. I strongly believe that the granting of a ‘visa’ [to Jonathan Pryce] would send a dangerous and detrimental racial message to Cameron Mackintosh, to British Equity, to the membership of our own AEA, and perhaps most frighteningly to the ticket-buyer public at large which would view such an abomination of casting naïvely. The time for actors of color to be playing “their own” roles is certainly now. We cannot even begin to fight for non-traditional casting if audiences are not given permission to accept us enacting characters of our own colors. [...] Allowing such a blatant example of high profile, racially false casting in our own backyard because British Equity has not taken care of its own members the way AEA aims to would be passive and self-destructive. [...] I am writing to demand protection of my rights as an Equity actor of color by calling for rejection of producer Cameron Mackintosh’s application which would allow a non-Asian British actor to play a leading, specifically Asian role in the forthcoming American production of Miss Saigon. [...] Force Cameron Mackintosh and future producers to cast their productions with racial authenticity. (182-3).

On the other side of the controversy, Cameron Mackintosh did not become aware of the complaints from Asian American artists until the second week of July 1990 when the controversy began to receive publicity.¹ During the month of July, Cameron Mackintosh and Equity executives struggled to come to an agreement over the controversy while the
latter postponed its formal decision. After many exchanges of arguments, diatribes, and insinuations, Mackintosh became “dismayed and infuriated” with Dewhurst’s remark that “it made little difference who played the Engineer” because 25 million dollars-worth of tickets have already been sold. Adding to Mackintosh’s frustration was Equity’s announcement that the casting of Pryce would be “especially insensitive and an affront to the Asian Community” (Behr 184). On August 7, after a long and emotional debate, Equity formally declined Mackintosh’s request to have Pryce perform the role of the Engineer. It could not “appear to condone the casting of a Caucasian actor in the role of a Eurasian.” Alan Eisenberg, the general secretary of AEA announced in a press conference that the Association was concerned that Mackintosh never made the efforts to recast the role of the Engineer with an Asian American actor. At the same time, Equity invited Mackintosh to appeal and to meet for arbitration. Mackintosh refused and announced the next day that he was canceling the show. And the day after that (August 9, 1990), he placed an ad in the New York Times:

“Miss Saigon Canceled”

Actor’s Equity has refused to approve Jonathan Pryce to play the role of the Engineer in the Broadway production of MISS SAIGON, as they cannot “condone the casting of a Caucasian actor in the role of a Eurasian.” The creative team of MISS SAIGON finds this position to be irresponsible, and a disturbing violation of the principles of artistic integrity and freedom. As a result, we are forced to announce the cancellation of next year’s Broadway production of MISS SAIGON. The debate is no longer about the casting of MISS SAIGON, but the art of acting itself. Because we feel so strongly about our own artistic position, we understand the depth of feeling within the Asian acting community and believe we share many of their aims. We passionately disapprove of stereotype casting, which is why we continue to champion freedom of artistic choice. Racial barriers can only undermine the very foundations of our profession. We share the disappointment of the American public who have ordered tickets to see MISS SAIGON, but we look
forward to a time when a calmer, more balanced atmosphere prevails. The original British Company is currently running at The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London. The Asian Company premieres at The Imperial Theatre, Tokyo on April 22, 1992 (Japanese language production). 2

Mackintosh called his announcement “a final decision in the light of Equity’s repeated condemnation of our artistic decision on this production” (Rothstein, “Producers Cancel ‘Miss Saigon’” C15). His argument was echoed by many members of the American theatre community, including Equity’s 140 plus members who signed a petition requesting that the decision be reconsidered. Many used the nontraditional casting policy to support Mackintosh’s decision. Arthur Rubin commented: “Equity is 100 percent wrong. The issue of an Asian role being played by a white man is an incorrect issue in this day and age, when we want blacks to be able to play whites and Asians to be able to play whites. We are trying to establish the fact that anybody should be able to play anything.” Some called the decision of Equity “stupid” for canceling work for many of their members (including 34 Asian Americans) and other theatre artists. 3 Even Joanna Merlin, the co-chairwoman of the Nontraditional Casting Project (a nonprofit organization that seeks to advance the principles of nondiscriminatory casting) carefully agreed with Mackintosh: “However strongly Equity feels they must condemn the casting of Jonathan Pryce for these reasons, I believe their vote seriously threatens freedom of artistic choice. How can anyone legitimately dictate who will or will not be cast in a show except the creative team?” (C15).

Most theatre artists were torn between their support for minority casting and for artistic freedom. Joseph Papp articulated this dilemma well when he said, “There’s
something maybe foolish, but brave, about Equity’s position. I think in the final analysis their position will mean more employment for Asian American actors. As a producer, I have certain resistance to their position, but as a citizen, and because of my commitment to minority casting, I think they did the proper and heroic thing” (C15). David Henry Hwang, who was one of the most vocal advocates against the casting choice, later took on a more moderate (or ambiguous) tone and said, “It has certainly never been my intention to see a show canceled. I simply felt that an important point had to be made, and this has clearly been achieved.” As Angela Pao accurately comments, support for or rejection of Equity’s position was not strictly divided along lines of race or ethnicity. She cites Frank Chin as an example: “Generally considered to be radical in his opinions on race relations in America, Chin saw Miss Saigon as a racist musical and believed that Asian American actors were fighting to portray stereotypes. Nevertheless, he maintained that once the decision had been made to mount the production, it was the exclusive right of the creator and director to cast the production as they wished.” In contrast, Pan Asian Repertory Theater praised “the courageous decision of Actor’s Equity,” but nevertheless agreed that canceling the show was not the best solution.

The cancellation of the Broadway production of Miss Saigon divided not only the mainstream American theatre community, but also the Asian American community. The actors of Asian heritage in the musical were torn between their career ambitions and their responsibility as artists of color in America. When announcement of the cancellation became a reality and not merely a threat, the loss of employment and the record advance ticket sales of $25 million increasingly became the focus of the controversy. On the same
night Mackintosh’s ad ran in *The New York Times*, Actor’s Equity announced that it would re-evaluate its decision in response to petitions signed by more than 140 of its members. Moreover, Equity could not ignore the request by many prominent figures of New York, including newly elected mayor David N. Dinkins, to solve the dispute. Dinkins commented that he recognized “the need to see to it that minorities have opportunities in theater and movies and television [because] they’ve been excluded for a very long time from roles,” but he also noted that he was concerned about the advance ticket sale of $25 million (Rothstein, “Equity Will Reconsider ‘Miss Saigon’ Decision” C3).

The phrases “employment of 50 actors” and “$25 million” became the leitmotifs that ran through all news articles and statements on the controversy. The frustration over the complexity of issues involving acting, artistic choice, racism, casting, and financial profit can be summarized with the comment by Craig Dorfman (the owner of the New York Agency): “While I disagree with the choice of casting, Equity has no right denying an actor employment on the basis of race” (C3). A week after Mackintosh’s announcement, on August 16, 1990, Equity rescinded its decision and granted Pryce the “visa” to perform in *Miss Saigon*. And on September 20, 1990, Mackintosh decided to reinstate his multi-million dollar production and scheduled it to open in March 1991.

During the time between Equity’s reversal of its decision and Mackintosh’s final decision to mount the musical, many Asian American theatre artists continued to protest the practice of “yellowface” in American theatre. In a *USA Today* column (August 17, 1990), Tisa Chang of Pan Asian Repertory argued that the practice of “yellowface” in which a Caucasian actor portrays “an ethnic role often in exaggerated makeup, stilted
accents and clichéd mannerism” had for many decades caused “pain and humiliation of Asian-Americans.” She uses the pronoun “we” to imply that Asian and Asian American actors were never taken seriously by the producers of Miss Saigon. “We support artistic expression, but it cannot be at the expense of denigrating people of color. We are sensitive to the economic impact of a successful Broadway show, but it cannot be at the expense of perpetuating discriminatory practices and images.” Chang also encouraged Mackintosh to “do the right thing and find an Asian-American actor of equal talent and greater cultural affinity.” This view was reinforced in a full-page advertisement in Variety on August 20, 1990:

True Equity Now!

We, as artists of Asian/Pacific heritage and highly concerned community members and organizations, are outraged at the insensitive casting by Cameron Mackintosh of a Caucasian actor in what is clearly a minority role in the production, “Miss Saigon”. This act has provoked tremendous furor because it perpetuates the gross injustices Asian/Pacific actors have always faced:

1. Traditionally, Caucasian actors have the freedom to portray all races, but Asian/Pacific actors have been denied that freedom.

2. Not only are Asian/Pacific actors restricted to racially specific roles, but they routinely have been denied those roles—especially leading ones.

3. Although “blackface” is vehemently condemned, WHY IS “YELLOWFACE” STILL ACCEPTABLE?

4. Is “Miss Saigon” another example of the blatant practice of labeling a role “Eurasian” to justify casting a Caucasian in visibly Asian/Pacific leading role?

5. “Non-traditional casting” has been completely distorted to justify casting a Caucasian in a specifically Asian/Pacific role. Non-traditional casting is defined by Actor’s Equity Association and agreed to by the League of American Theatres and Producers as “the casting of ethnic, minority and female actors in roles where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane.”
6. There are false claims that there is no qualified Asian/Pacific talent. In fact, the few instances where Asian/Pacifics were given their rightful opportunities, they have excelled, and have been awarded for their outstanding performances. We demand that these exclusionary, discriminatory, and extremely insensitive practices be abandoned. We refuse to sacrifice yet another generation of talented Asian/Pacific artists.

WE MUST ALL COMMIT TO ACHIEVE TRUE EQUITY NOW!


Before Equity rescinded its decision, the media (including *The New York Times* and *Variety*) did not hesitate to side with Cameron Mackintosh and to have a “field day,” what Joseph Papp called “the charge of the white brigade” (*Pang* 43). And by the end of August, the “standoff” was between Mackintosh and Equity while Asian American activists were pushed to the background as the ones who started the controversy but no longer had a
decisive voice. A few articles appeared in major newspapers sympathizing with Asian American theatre artists. For instance, on August 26, 1990, *The New York Times* printed two articles on the difficulties that Asian American actors faced in finding opportunities to act. Written by two guest columnists, Ellen Holly (a black actress) and Shirley Sun (an Asian American director), the articles provided a brief history of white actors playing Asian roles. The articles revealed the history of racism in American theatre and explained what yellowface meant for Asian Americans, but did not discuss the specifics of the continuing activism against the musical.

In “Letters to the Editor” of *The New York Times*, three actors (Robin Barlett, Victor Barber and Ellen Park) and three playwrights (Craig Lucas, Terrence McNally and Larry Kramer) expressed their support for Asian American artists: “Actors of color live in a world where almost all roles are denied them because of their race. Jonathan Pryce does not need affirmative action to give him an even break...that is why charges of ‘reverse discrimination’ do not apply” (Pang, 42). Other than a few editorial letters of support and ambiguously sympathetic articles written mostly by non-staff writers, major newspapers paid little attention to Asian American theatre artists’ anti-*Miss Saigon* activism. However, their activism became increasingly organized and effective, and a new kind of network of Asian American theatre artists began to form.

The “Miss Saigon” Controversy and Asian American Theatre: Critical Perspectives

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concepts of “political correctness,” “multiculturalism,” and “identity politics” entered the social psyche of the American
people. Michael Omi and Howard Winant call the phenomenon “a moral panic about the continuing disruptive effects of racial divisions (and polarization around gender and sexuality as well) in American society” (Omi, 148). The panic soon resulted in a new “culture war” between “universalists” and “multiculturalists.”

As Martha Minow argues, the Miss Saigon controversy was similar to a controversy she experienced at Harvard law school when the faculty was divided over its hiring practices. Both controversies focused on the debates over merit-based versus color-blind, symbolism, discrimination, and reverse discrimination, to mention a few. “The context of the [Miss Saigon] controversy included advance ticket sales of $25 million; the recent election of an African-American mayor concerned about both remedying discrimination and preserving the theater industry; the political attack on controversial art by conservative American officials seeking to control the uses of federal subsidies; an emerging public conflict over attention to “politically correct” claims about racism, sexism, and homophobia; and the United States Supreme Court’s repudiation of most public affirmative action programs” (Minow, 8). Similar debates flourished over university faculty tenure processes, college entrance criteria, employment, funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, and many other issues affecting all aspects of American life. In the larger context of American history, the Miss Saigon controversy was only one of many battles in the culture war.

Miss Saigon is a theatrical production created by white (French and English) men who based it on one of the most popular stories of Orientalism, Madame Butterfly. It is clear from the exchanges of statements during the height of the controversy that the
producers of the show never quite understood why Asian American artists were so strongly opposed to not only the casting choice but the musical itself. In *The Story of Miss Saigon*, Mackintosh is quoted as saying “It is particularly sad and ironic that this controversy should surround a piece of theatre such as *Miss Saigon*, a tragic love story in which a young woman sacrifices her life to ensure that her Amerasian son may find a better life in America” (Behr 186). In all interviews and news articles, rarely did the plot line become an issue or a concern for non-Asian Americans. Most viewed the musical as a beautiful story in which thirty-four Asian actors could have the golden opportunities to debut on Broadway. Dorinne Kondo points out that “Ultimately, the casting controversy is--or should be--a relatively minor aspect of the *Miss Saigon* story, for the striking feature here is the problematic politics of representation. *Miss Saigon* is a ‘colored museum of Asian stereotypes’” (Kondo, 231). The same stereotypes that Asian American theatre artists had been fighting against for decades not only reappeared but also overwhelmed them with a multi-million dollar Broadway production that included helicopters and glitzy spectacles of a virtual Saigon.

Familiar Asian stereotypes decorated the stage in the musical: the shy lotus blossom, the evil Asian male lover (and therefore competitor to the white man), the prostitute and the pimp, the simple but asexual peasants, and the “butterfly” who dies for the white man. The story is what Kondo calls “a mild improvement over the Puccini warhorse.” It does address the problems of “Bui-Doi” (children born of a Vietnamese mother and a U.S. soldier father) and American guilt over Vietnam. However, there is no sense of “guilt” over the narrative, which resurrects Puccini’s (and Belasco’s) Cio-Cio-san
as “Kim,” an innocent Vietnamese girl who is forced into prostitution and falls in love with “Chris,” the American G.I. He promises to take her to America, but is forced to leave as Saigon falls. Back in the U.S., Chris marries a white woman while Kim, left in Asia, bears him a son. When he discovers that Kim and his son are in Thailand, Chris goes to find them with his wife. Finally, Kim kills herself in order to allow Chris to take their son to a “better life” in America. As the curtain falls Kim sings to Chris about how happy she is to be dying in his arms. Indeed, the play is what Lee Lescaze of the Wall Street Journal describes as “a no-fault version” of the “Same Old Sordid Story” (Pao, “The Eye of the Storm” 27).

Only a few months before the controversy erupted, David Henry Hwang’s “deconstruction” of Madame Butterfly was welcomed and accepted by mainstream theatre audiences for intelligently subverting Asian stereotypes. Moreover, Hwang’s play directly criticized America’s underestimation of Vietnam and Asia as a whole. The Miss Saigon controversy, therefore, seemed almost anachronistic to the members of the Asian American theatre community. Hwang, in an interview during the controversy (Boston Globe, September 9, 1990), mitigated his success with M. Butterfly by referring to it as an American fad: “And of course, there’s always the fashion aspect. Every 20 years or so, there seems to be a new wave of chinoiserie, japonism” (Kelly B91). Hwang was probably trying to make sense of his success as an Asian American playwright in the context of events that seemed to contradict what he believed.

But even Hwang’s powerful play is problematic in its representations of Asians, as James Moy has argued. James Moy criticized M. Butterfly as a “new representational
strategy, one in which the words offer a clear indictment of the cultural hegemony of the West, while the characters empowered to represent and speak on behalf of the Chinese or Asianness are laughable and grossly disfigured” (Moy 125). While intellectually and verbally the play subverted racial stereotypes, visually and viscerally it displayed “exotic Orientalist fetishes.” In the Asian American theatre community, there was certainly a sense that the success of Hwang and other Asian American theatre artists represented yet another case of America’s fascination with Asian subjects. For mainstream theatre audiences, an Asian man in drag as a beautiful Chinese opera singer provided a similar type of entertainment as Vietnamese prostitutes in bikinis luring American soldiers. *Miss Saigon*, from this perspective, was the new Asian “fad” in American theatre. The controversy awakened many Asian American theatre artists into realizing the complexity of success for minorities in America, especially in the business of representation and visual display. The aftermath of the controversy involved the mobilization of political and artistic groups that continued to protest against not only *Miss Saigon* but also other racist representations.

Overall, the *Miss Saigon* controversy had a positive effect on the Asian American community. It brought about three major changes in Asian American theatre: activist solidarity, consciousness raising (both internally and externally), and world-wide recognition of the existence of Asian American theatre and its artists, especially actors. In the mid-1990s, younger Asian American actors created their own roles in political satires and comedy, partially as a reaction to the controversy. In the following section, I will discuss the actors and performance groups that emerged after the controversy.
Section 2 – New Performance Groups in the 1990s

The Case of 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors and Slant Performance Group

After the inception of the *Miss Saigon* controversy (1990) and before the formation of the 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors (1995) and the Slant Performance Group (1995), the Asian American theatre community experienced a period of inactivity or a ‘vacuum,’ as described by one of the 18MMW members. New and old plays produced were mostly in the tradition of European dramatic styles, and actors were recovering from the damage left by the *Miss Saigon* controversy. Asian American theatre companies produced revivals of older plays, and even the new plays seemed to repeat the usual themes and styles. This period of “vacuum” affected actors the most strongly. They had to reassess their agendas and ask, “For what kinds of roles are we competing?” During the *Miss Saigon* controversy, Asian American actors realized that they were caught in the contradiction of identifying themselves as “Asian American” yet wanting to enter the white-dominated mainstream theatre. By this time, it was obvious that a color-blind casting policy would not soon become a reality, and that Asian American actors would not soon be accepted into mainstream theatre. Asian American actors were forced to choose between demeaning, yet well-paying stereotypical roles or the road to unemployment while waiting for ‘better roles.’ Asian American actors were challenged to find their voice, identity, and audience in the 1990s.

In 1989, a group of young actors in the Los Angeles area formed a performance group called Here And Now, which began to find audiences by visiting as many colleges
as possible with their shows. The seven founding artists of the company were frustrated by
the lack of roles available for young, Asian American artists. During the 1990s the
company toured universities in almost every state of the country and continued to be
invited by Asian American student organizations on campuses. The actors, who created
their own materials, told stories about their experiences in short skits of drama, monologue,
and comedy. The company’s influence on Asian American theatre was tremendous and
inspired many young college students all over the country to enter the world of theatre. Its
influence reached even the remotest areas of the country because, even where no solid
Asian American community existed in the area surrounding colleges and universities, the
campuses usually had concentrated populations of Asian Americans. For most of these
students, Here And Now was the first company to represent characters and situations they
could identify with.

In 1994 and 1995, many new companies similar to Here And Now began to appear
around the country. These new companies rejected the dominance of Chinese and
Japanese Americans in Asian American theatre. They also rejected the preference for
plays modeled on the Western dramatic canon. Asian Americans with ancestors from the
Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, India, Thailand, Laos, and Singapore began to dramatize
their particular experiences in America. The degree of experimentation in both playwriting
and productions increased as these Asian American artists observed the failure of their
previous attempts at participation in mainstream American theatre. For instance, rather
than lamenting over the demise of the color-blind casting policy, these actors celebrated
their “Asianness” in performance groups with names such as Slant, 18 Mighty Mountain
Warriors, Cup O’Noodles, Cold Tofu, Eth-Noh-Tec Asian American Storytellers, and Stir Friday Night. Many companies rejected the style of realistic family drama and espoused slap-stick comedies, political satires, improvisations, and daring experiments. These new Asian American performance groups of the 1990s were influenced by three major sources: 1. African-American and Chicano performance groups; 2. national debate over political-correctness and multicultural education; 3. the mass media culture of television, movies, and standup comedy.

The 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors emerged from a comedy group called Godzilla Theatre (1993) which was created by actor Greg Wanatabe at the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco. Due to conflict with the AATC, Godzilla Theatre was disbanded after 8 months, and in 1994, 18MMW was formed by the remaining members of the Godzilla Theatre. With the “conscious intent of not repeating the mistakes of Godzilla theatre,” 18MMW gained its independence and became one of the most successful touring Asian American theatre groups. It calls itself “kind of an Asian American Monty Python or Saturday Night Live.” The comparison is well deserved since, for 18MMW, no topic is safe from parody, satire, and slapstick comedy. Typically, the shows consist of several comedic skits that address various aspects of the Asian American experience similar to plays of the 1970s and the 1980s but with a major comic twist. The titles of its skits suggest the group’s satiric and farcical aims: “A John Woo Family Dinner,” “Feminine Evolution,” “Blaine Asakawa’s Self-Defense Class,” “World Cup 2002,” and “L.A. Riot Rock Opera.”
From the films of John Woo to the 1992 riot in L.A., 18MMW took on the challenge of subverting Asian American stereotypes, including those that had been perpetuated by earlier styles of Asian American theatre. While watching 18MMW perform, one cannot escape the sense that something new is happening on the stage and in the Asian American theatre community. Even if doing “something new” is not one of the conscious goals of the group, the fact that they are “funny Asian Americans” is, in itself, challenging and subversive. “One of the finest and proudest comments we have received have been from the college audiences who have come up to us and said ‘we have never seen Asians do that before,’ and that’s great because that means that we are pushing the edge and breaking the stereotypes,” says a member of the group. Americans usually cannot see Asians as “funny,” except in the sense of Charlie Chan or buck-toothed nerds with thick glasses. But 18MMW equals Monty Python or Saturday Night Live in terms of being able to laugh at not only society, but also at themselves and the social identities imposed on them. 18MMW delivers laughter along with messages of political activism or, as the group put it, “a hysterically truthful perspective.”

Our ultimate goals are 3-pronged, and are Commercial, Artistic, and Political: Commercially, we want to make oodles of money; artistically, we want to become innovators of skit comedy; we don't want to be seen as just a freak-show Asian American comedy group, but very vital comedy artists unto ourselves; and politically we want to diversify the images of Asian Americans in the media, and we want to show people that Asian Americans can be funny and that we can write our own material.

For the member of 18MMW, freedom of artistic expression is more important than acceptance by the communities of Asian American or mainstream theatre. Harold Byun,
a member of the group, notes: “I think what we do that makes it exciting is, from the activist’s viewpoint, that you can say whatever the hell you want on stage [and] not have to answer for it.” For the Asian American Theatre Company, this approach went against their foundational ideas that valued the literary qualities of drama. But for many younger writers, this desire to achieve literary quality meant emulating the “great white male playwrights.” While Asian American playwrights have been encouraged to find models in writers such as Sean O’Casey, Eugene O’Neill, and Arthur Miller, the younger groups, including 18MMW and Slant, have found such plays boring and unproductive. One of the Slant members, Perry Yung, notes that he stopped auditioning for contemporary Asian American works because they were “Eurocentric works done by Asians in America.” Unlike the previous generation of Asian American theatre artists who wished to be “accepted” into the Western canon, these younger artists refused to be the “model minority” artists and sought their unique forms of expression.

In part they have achieved a new style by observing what other artists of non-European ethnicity have done. The members of Slant found African American and Latino theatres to be “cutting edge and interesting.” The style that Slant was seeking was similar to that of the Black Revolutionary Theatre (BRT) and El Teatro Campesino (ETC) of the 1960s and early 1970s. The use of satire and parody was as central to the Black Revolutionary Theatre and El Teatro as they were to the Asian American performance groups in the 1990s. As Harry Elam describes, the plays produced by companies of the Black Revolutionary Theatre movement and El Teatro “parody popular culture icons and subvert stereotypes. [They] act as cultural correctives and social commentaries as the
parodied subject is held up to ridicule, revised, and critiqued” (Elam 60). With a renewed sense of political activism in the 1990s, Asian American performance groups have presented social protest performances and interchanges with audiences that are strikingly similar to those of the Black Revolutionary Theatre and El Teatro. Recent groups of similar influence include Culture Clash (a California-based Chicano performance group) and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

The members of the Slant Performance Group describe it as “a musical satirical performance group that mocks sexual questions and derogatory stereotypes, while holding Asian men to the flames of American pop culture.” It consists of three men, Rick Ebihara, Wayland Quintero, and Perry Yung, and is a resident company of LaMama Experimental Theater Club. The group premiered in December 1995 with Big Dicks, Asian Men, and has appeared off-Broadway and toured colleges and universities. It was the highlight of the 1997 Belgrade Summer Festival in the former Yugoslavia. Their subsequent shows, The Second Coming and Squeal Like a Pig, an Intergalactic Poperetta also played to sold-out audiences around the country. The shows deconstruct images and stereotypes of Asian American men with caricatures, songs, choreographs, and their unique version of slap-stick comedy. With topics that range from subway workers who are haunted by their great grandfathers’ Central Pacific ghosts to the Asian Cajun Brothers Cooking Show, Slant does not shy away from twisting sensitive racial issues into fragmented images and a pastiche of stereotypes.

A critic from Time Out New York perhaps best describes the essence of Slant: “Like a karate chop to the senses, the gifted guys of Slant kick some comic ass on the stage of La
Mama... With the help of guitars, drums, and pop culture reference they conquer conception, Fu Manchu, sexual politics, the Union Pacific Railroad, internment camps, and more. This is a riotous show quivering with an energy that would make the Blue Man Group proud.” Slant conquers stereotypes and labels by reappropriating them. “Slant is a label. We are playing against the label of ‘slant,’ the name itself. In the past ‘slant’ was derogatory but now we are changing the word around like ‘queer’ and ‘nigger,’” notes the group. Just as homosexuals and African-Americans have defused their derogatory terms to express power and self-definition, Slant has taken the first steps to strip away decades-old racial connotations. The group notes that they chose “slant” because it not only has negative connotations for Asian eyes, but also has the meaning of “a different point of view, something abnormal, etc.” (Hong, 1997. 82).

The top priority of Slant as a performance group is to provide entertainment. The group also wants to explore and experiment with performative styles and artistic forms, and ultimately to be recognized for its originality and creativity. “One of our goals is to be recognized and not be pigeonholed [so people can] say ‘Hey, that’s Slant.’ Or if someone goes to see someone else who does something similar to us, they can say ‘That’s Slant-like’,” comments Rick Ebihara. Slant is different from 18MMW in that the latter not only admits to being influenced by Saturday Night Live, the Marx Brothers, hereandnow, and Culture Clash, but also welcomes these comparisons. Slant receives similar comparisons but would rather be recognized for its innovation in redefining Asian American theatre as well as its style of “in your face” theatre.
Both 18MMW and Slant have toured the country, performing at colleges and universities. The students actively participate in their shows as if they were at rock concerts. “Cooing and hollering and coming up for autographs. Autographing our t-shirts or CDs or piece of paper,” notes Wayland Quintero of Slant. The spectators at 18MMW and Slant performances feel free to shout, laugh, stand up, dance, and even sing along, especially in the case of Slant, which has released a CD of its songs.

Both groups emphasize that there is a hunger for representation and recognition of Asian Americans on college campuses, and that the groups fulfill those needs by tapping into the younger generation’s sensibility. Harold Byun of 18MMW comments on college audiences: “I think college audiences have been the most receptive, by and far. I think it’s the generational thing, and the fact that younger people want to laugh. They have been raised on sit-coms and are up on the issues. […] The college campuses seek us out. They want to bring this type of work on to campus.” To their surprise, the members of 18MMW have been invited to college campuses for being “educational.” Many colleges now include ethnic studies or Asian American studies as part of the general education curriculum, and groups like 18MMW and Slant seem to represent a positive movement towards such educational goals. Most of the time, the groups are invited by Asian American student organizations for their special events.

The members of both 18MMW and Slant are honest in admitting that commercial success is one of their most important goals. As for-profit organizations, they believe that the more commercially successful they are, the more opportunities they will have to perform. At present, though, both groups fund themselves and most members have day
jobs. When asked about grants and governmental funding, both groups felt that for one, they did not want the “people with money” to have control over their work. Freedom to express and experiment has been the backbone of both groups; they feel that governmental funding means control over content and censorship. Slant comments: “We realize that government funding is really nonexistent in this country. And accepting that, [we’re] not fighting it. [...] Government funding is pitting the people of color together. [It] is giving 90% of the grant money to the five institutes of New York City that uphold the European tradition, and 5% goes to the rest of the city.”

On the surface, the “educational” functions of these groups are comparable to those of the groups in the 1980s; both were invited by schools to present upbeat versions of Asian American identity. However, the nonprofit status of the 1980s’ groups obligated them to the specific requirements (mainly for multicultural education) that came with the funds whereas for the groups in the 1990s, schools were one of many voluntary performance venues. The rejection of government funds allowed the new groups in the 1990s to take on any topic, including multicultural education. Fortunately, these groups have reason to be optimistic about their financial status since demand for their shows has steadily increased not only at college campuses, but also in the greater Asian American theatre community and even in mainstream theatre. 12

Both 18MMW and Slant would consider moving into films and other media, as long as their voices can be heard and their agenda supported. More importantly, they want to create a new culture for Asian Americans. Quintero summarizes the status of 18MMW, Slant, and other similar groups in the context of the Asian American community when he
says, “We realize that a lot of our support is coming from the Asian American community. And it’s not just because we are Asian American, but because they really really enjoy our work as artists and again as an entertainment value. But partly, of course, because Asian Americans happened to be able to do this.” 18MMW and Slant represent the younger generation of Asian American theatre artists in the 1990s. Their energy and creativity have surprised the Asian American community and inspired potential artists and audiences. Before the 1990s, Asian American theatre was (or tried to be) the “model theatre,” as Asian Americans are often described as the “model minority.” But with the emergence of groups such as 18MMW and Slant, Asian American theatre is finally beginning to challenge traditional styles and to reappropriate and subvert what has been imposed on Asian Americans.
Section 3. Conclusion

In the 1990s, the number of Asian American performance groups and theatre companies grew exponentially from under ten in the late 1980s to over thirty by the end of the decade. And most of these new groups had unique purposes. For instance, Theater Mu (Minneapolis) was founded in the 1990s by artists with a new vision of Asian American theatre. Diane Espladon, one of the founders of Theater Mu, describes the purpose of the company as focusing “almost exclusively on new works by newer Asian American groups, not so much Japanese and Chinese Americans, but the newer communities of Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian Americans. We’re also trying to explore traditional art forms by integrating them into the works we’re creating. It’s a synthesis, because that’s what our lives as Asian Americans is like, the mix of Asian American and Asian Asian” (Hong, “Theatre,” 580). This artistic vision summarizes Asian American theatre in the 1990s. Asian American theatre artists wanted to broaden the scope of Asian American theatre to include not only their diverse backgrounds, but also a sense of the diaspora occurring in multicultural America. Increasingly, Asian American theatre artists in the 1990s described themselves as “citizens of the world” or “cosmopolitan” subjects who questioned racial labels and categories. Also, in the 1990s, Asian American artists welcomed the use of intercultural theatrical forms (mostly from traditional and modern Asian theatres) and began to see their Asian heritage as an advantage, rather than an impediment, to mainstream assimilation.
The 1990s also nurtured a new generation of Asian American playwrights. Included in this generation were writers of all kinds of ethnic and sexual backgrounds as well as a wealth of different styles of writing and visual presentation. Writers with ancestry from the Philippines, Korea, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and the Pacific Islands have entered the world of Asian American theatre. Moreover, some of the best and most innovative Asian American plays in the 1990s were by gay playwrights such as Dwight Okita, and Chay Yew. Not surprisingly, it was no longer easy or simple to define "Asian American theatre" as a homogeneous entity. As Dorinne Kondo comments in her introduction to *Asian American Drama* (1999), Asian American theatre is "crosscut by other forces, including gender, class, sexuality" and requires "new kinds of racialized subjects and [...] new kinds of racial identities" (Nelson ix).

This third generation of Asian American playwrights included Robert Chin, Sung Rno, Diana Son, Dwight Okita, Garrett H. Omata, Chay Yew, Han Ong, Huynh Quang Nhuong, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Dmae Roberts, and Lucy Wang. A common thread in plays by these playwrights is the question of identity—not merely in the sense of stereotypes and racial representation, but in a more complex context of self-definition and reappropriation. I call this trend, "incidental racial identity." For instance, the characters in these plays happen to be Asian Americans, and their racial identities are not necessarily essential to the plot or to characters' relationships. The plays address the "post-essentialist" conception of identity by challenging essentialist ideas of racial, ethnic, sexual, and national identities. According to some of these writers, it is no
longer necessary or even possible to define one's identity by referring to one's race or sexuality.

David Henry Hwang has taken note of the critique of the "myth of immutable cultural identity" in the works of the new playwrights in his introduction to *Asian American Drama: 9 Plays from Multiethnic Landscape*:

Taken together, the plays [...] seriously challenge notions of cultural purity and racial isolationism; indeed, they explode the very myth of an immutable cultural identity. Written largely by younger, or "Third Wave" Asian/Pacific playwrights, these works acknowledge the fluidity of culture itself, declaring it a living thing, born of ever-changing experience and therefore subject to continual reinterpretation. (Nelson vii-viii)

Not surprisingly, Hwang himself has taken up these issues in his more recent works such as *Bondage*. The play is set in an S & M parlor in which a dominatrix and her male customer play a game of power by taking on different racial identities. Their faces are covered with full masks and hoods, so the audience does not see their true racial identities until the very end. The power relations are strangely twisted and reversed throughout the play as the two characters carefully play their game of identity. They continue the competition until the end when they both remove the masks and stand gazing at each other's face. The question raised in the play is not "how to define Asian American identity," but *if* Asian American identity can be defined.

In Sung Rno's *Cleveland Raining*, the main character, Jimmy says, "We have nothing. Our family was a ghost family. It looked and felt like a family. But it really wasn't there. It was this faded photograph. Black and white. Smudged. Grainy." This sense of feeling detached from ancestry is common in plays by the third generation writers.
For the first and second generation of playwrights, knowledge of their history and ancestry was crucial in defining their identities as Asian Americans.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike these earlier writers, the new playwrights seem to view their ancestry as remotely relevant, if at all, in explaining who they are. Most characters in the plays confess a sense of not belonging to any particular culture, and the isolation somehow gives them their identity. For the third generation playwrights, defining the Asian American identity is no longer a simple project of knowing their history and culture. John, a character in Garrett H. Omata’s \textit{S.A.M. I Am}, concludes the play with the following statement about himself:

\begin{quote}
I’m going to tell the truth. I don’t know any of you, and that scares me. Every time I meet someone new, I feel like I’m a stranger in somebody else’s country. I’ve lived here all my life, yet still... I don’t not want to be Japanese, I just don’t want to be reminded of it like it’s important. It’s important to me, but it shouldn’t be important to you. [...] I don’t know if I believe in anything, but I have faith. I have faith that everything I need and desire out of life is just like what anybody else in the world needs and desires. (Nelson 323)
\end{quote}

The emergence of the third generation playwrights is a recent phenomenon and an on-going process. This group of writers is quite diverse, and thus impossible to define and categorize. Also, some of the second-generation playwrights now write plays with similar issues. The important point is that Asian American playwrights are writing not only for Asian Americans but also for mainstream audiences. Some of the representative plays by the third generation writers have debuted in Asian American theatre companies, but others were launched in regional theatres around the country. For example, Robert Shin’s \textit{The Art of Waiting} was a winner of the American College Theatre Festival and was first produced professionally at the Round House Theatre in Silver Springs, Maryland. Other theatre
companies to produce premieres of Asian American plays include the Celebration Theatre (Los Angeles), the Black Theatre Group (Berkeley), the Maplewood Barn Theatre (Columbus, Missouri), the Cleveland Public Theatre, and Etcetera Theatre (London, UK).

Compared to the first generation playwrights, the new Asian American playwrights in the 1990s are fully trained writers who have the opportunity to write for a wider audience. Without doubt, Asian American playwrights have come a long way in terms of venues, styles, and reputation. And in general, Asian American theatre has come a long way. Some consider its progress a tremendous accomplishment while others in the Asian American theatre community are not satisfied with its development. An executive director of a major Asian American theatre company has complained that “not much has changed” since the 1960s and the 1970s for Asian American theatre artists. She is referring to the fact that with the exception of David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly and Golden Child, no other Asian American play has debuted on Broadway. Moreover, mainstream theatre companies still do not usually consider Asian American plays for their seasons, and when they do, the play is often featured as part of as Asian Culture Awareness Month in May.

In May 1999, the first meeting of Asian American theatre artists was held in Seattle. Supported by The Ford Foundation and organized by the Northwest Asian American Theatre, the convening brought together several current artistic directors of Asian American theatre companies in the country. They held a private business meeting on the first day to discuss funding and collaboration. In this historic meeting, Asian American producers sat around a table for the first time to talk about various topics, including the need for a clearinghouse for Asian American plays and a database of Asian
American actors. The second day of the meeting was open to the public and had five panels.

The first panel, “A Retrospective of Asian American Theatre,” highlighted the earlier theatre companies and their histories. Although the original founders, Mako, Frank Chin, and Tisa Chang were not present, the panel provided a necessary historical context to the convening. The other four panels focused on both old and new issues faced by Asian American theatre artists in the 1990s. The second panel, “Writing for Asian American Theatre,” asked the same questions raised over three decades ago: “What does it mean to write for Asian American theatre? Who is writing for Asian American theatre? What are the resources available for Asian American playwrights?” The third panel, “Merging Traditions/ East and West,” addressed an issue unique to the 1990s: What does it mean to merge Asian performance traditions into Asian American theatre? The new intercultural productions in the 1990s were different from the first East West Players production of Rashomon in 1965 or the Pan Asian Rep production of a Peking Opera adaptation in the early 1970s. For one, the new performance modes are not an alternative to mainstream theatre – as they were in the 1960s and the 1970s – but a third type that changes both the alternative and mainstream theatres. This new intercultural trend in Asian American theatre is growing stronger and gaining wider acceptance, especially in Seattle (Northwest Asian American Theatre) and Minneapolis (Theatre Mu).

The fourth panel addressed “Asian American Theatre in an Evolving Ethnic Landscape.” The program brochure described the specific topics of this panel: “Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic minority in the U.S. What are the political and
cultural ramifications of this demographic shift and how does it affect Asian American theatre? How are Asian American theaters responding to the growing diversity of Asians in America?” And the last panel allowed participants to discuss the future of Asian American theatre. Some expressed pessimism for American theatre in general, but most believed that Asian American theatre artists had to work together to survive and to achieve their purposes. Many artists also agreed that they were heading in the right direction and that the meeting was the beginning of a new era for Asian American theatre.

As demonstrated in the Seattle gathering, Asian American theatre faced more questions than answers at the end of the 1990s. In the 1970s some Asian American theatre artists, full of hope and idealism, dreamed of a time when there would be no need for Asian American theatre. They had envisioned that by the 1990s, Asian American actors would be cast in non-stereotypical roles, Asian American plays would be part of the regular American theatre repertory, and Asian American theatre companies would be extinct. Obviously, they were wrong. In this sense of mainstream assimilation, Asian American theatre has not come as far as it should have. Or, as Frank Chin argues, Asian American theatre is a “failed experiment” and it “doesn’t stand for Asian America, it stands for nothing” (Eng 444). However, despite this critique, it is one of the fastest growing theatres in America, and it shows no sign of extinction. The future of Asian American theatre cannot be predicted, and its history from the 1960s to 1990s may be seen in an entirely different context in another thirty years. But for now, its developmental period has come to an end, and a new era has begun.
Notes to Introduction


2 *Rashomon* is a Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa. The story is about a court trial of a double-crime of rape and murder. In ancient Japan, a bandit sees a woman who is passing through the woods with her husband. The bandit becomes sexually infatuated with the woman and decides to rape her. He takes the husband to the bush, ties him up, and rapes the woman. Later, the husband is found dead with a stab wound to the chest. A woodcutter witnesses this and is later called to testify during the trial, along with the wife, the bandit, and a medium of the dead husband. The story is told by the woodcutter who, after the trial, stops at the Rashomon gate to avoid rain. The woodcutter tells his listeners about how each witness told the judge his or her own distinct version of the story. The versions contradicted one another although each witness sincerely believed in his or her testimony.

Notes to Chapter 1

3 For a chronology of these laws, see Sucheng Chan’s *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History.* 192-199.


6 See William Wei’s *Asian American Movement,* chapter 1, n. 12.

7 Elaine Kim and Sucheng Chen lead the criticism in the special issue of *Amerasia* 16.2: (1990). See Kim, Elaine. “*Strangers From a Different Shore* Forum Commentary.” 101-112.

8 The play was probably performed for Anti-Coolie Clubs in San Francisco when anti-Chinese sentiment was at its peak. See Dave Williams’s *Chinese Other.* 97.

Examples include: Bret Harte’s *Two Men in the Sandy Bar* (1876), Mark Twain and Bret Harte’s *Ah Sin* (1877), Joaquin Miller’s *Dainties* (1877), Clay M. Greene’s *The Chinese Question* (1877), Bartley Campbell’s *My Partner* (1879), Charles E. Blaney and J. J. McCloskey’s *Across the Pacific* (1900), Owen Davis’ *Chinatown Charlie* (1906), Menyhert Lengyel’s *Typhoon* (1912), David Belasco’s *Son-Daughter* (1919), *His Chinese Wife* (1920), *Lady of Lamp* (1920), *Poppy God* (1921), Forrest Halsey and Clara Beranger’s *Out of Seven Seas* (1923), and John Willard’s *The Green Beetle* (1924). This list is provided by Sung Hee Choi in her conference paper, “Performing the Other: Asian American Actors on Broadway in the 1950s,” presented in the American Society for Theatre Research Conference, November, 1998, Washington, DC. Exceptions include Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885), which takes place in Japan.


Arthur Dong has created a documentary film about the nightclub: *Forbidden City, USA.* “The film successfully preserves a piece of Asian American cultural history, but it does so in an entertaining way” (Wei 57).

As Sung Hee Choi notes, earlier in the twentieth century, the Japanese silent screen actor Sessue Hayakawa played the leading role, a Chinese brothel owner, in *Love City* (1927), and Anna May Wong was in *On the Spot* (1930), but they were already established as film stars at the time. Also, such practice was “an exception not a trend” (Choi 5).

From an interview with Sidney Fields, “New World for France Nuyen.” Unidentified date and source. Found in clipping file of France Nuyen in Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research. Quoted in Choi’s paper, 11.


In 2000, playwright David Henry Hwang wrote an adaptation of *Flower Drum Songs,* and it will premiere at the East West Players in the 2000-2001 season.


Notes to Chapter 2


5 Meeting minutes. February 16, 1971. The East West Players Archive at UCLA, Arts Library.

6 Meeting minutes. March 22, 1971. The East West Players Archive at UCLA, Arts Library.

7 Meeting minutes. April 21, 1971. The East West Players Archive at UCLA, Arts Library.

8 Meeting minutes. April 21, 1971. The East West Players Archive at UCLA, Arts Library.


13 Asian American feminist scholars have criticized Chin for his misogynistic portrayals
of women in *Chickencoop* and other works. In the process of re-masculinizing Asian American men, Chin often wrote women characters in what many critics consider as hateful and demeaning ways.


24 Before the founding of the Workshop, Frank Chin had created CARP (initially called Chinese American Resource Project and later Combined Asian American Resource Project) in the late 1960s.

25 *The Year of the Dragon* is about a Chinatown tourist guide, Fred Eng. The play premiered at the American Place Theatre (NYC) on May 22, 1974.


27 “An Overview of the Asian American Theatre Workshop” from the Collection at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The exact purpose of this proposal is unclear, and the specifics of its distribution have to be researched further.

29 AATW. From the letter to the advisory board candidates written on October 20, 1976.


32 During this time, AATW was housed in 4344 California Street. However, other pertinent details of this period cannot be found in the available archival sources. Further research on Frank Chin’s tenure as artistic director is necessary.

33 Glenn Kubota, President of the Board of Directors. Internal memo from Board of Directors to All Members and Entire Staff. March 24, 1974. Box 2/Folder 10.

34 Interestingly, a similar kind of “censorship” is used to argue against the Godzilla Group’s requests in the early 1990s. See Chapter 3.

35 Ibid.

36 A memorandum to the Board of Directors and Staff of the Asian American Theater Workshop from the Asian American Theater Workshop Community Advisory Board on March 14, 1978.

37 Letter from the Board of Directors to the members, staff and Advisory Board of AATW. Dated March 16, 1978. pg. 2. Box 2/Folder 10.


42 Ai! included excerpts from novels, short stories, plays, and poems by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans from the early twentieth century to the early 1970s. Of the fourteen excerpts, two were plays: Act I of The Chickencoop Chinaman by Frank Chin and Act I of The Gold Watch by Momoko Iko. It also included the short-story version of Wakako Yamauchi’s And The Soul Shall Dance. The publication of the anthology was a direct result of the first Asian American Writers Conference which took place in March, 1975 at The Oakland Museum. The conference was organized by The Oakland Museum and the Guild for Cultural and Ethnic Affairs in cooperation with the Combined Asian
American Resources Project, Inc. (CARP), the Bay Area Asian American communities, the Asian American Studies department at the University of California, Berkeley, and Laney College. The purpose of the conference was to “encourage creative expression and also to provide an occasion for the exchange of ideas, resources and experiences among the Asian American community, thereby reestablishing the tradition and continuity of Asian American writing that was broken during and after World War II.” (Program note.)


46 Letter to Kirby. UCSB Archive.

47 Despite the rhetoric, Chin respected Mako, and the two even discussed sharing resources and exchanging writers and actors between the companies. However, Chin retired before such a relationship could be formalized. Chin, Frank. Letter to the Board of Directors AATW. November 16, 1976. Pg. 2.


50 Garrett Hongo notes that years later, he found out that his office mate at UW, Silme Domingo, had gone to “the individuals or groups who’d misunderstood what [Asian Exclusion Act] was trying to do, spoken to them in defense of [it], arguing that [it] should be given a chance, that the community needed ‘freedom of artistic expression’ as much as it needed ‘freedom of political expression.’” Without Hongo knowledge, the Asian Exclusion Act had a smooth beginning because of Domingo’s behind-the-scenes lobbying. (Dreams 32)

51 In 1976, the second Asian American Writer’s Conference took place in Seattle. Frank Chin, who had organized the first conference in San Francisco in 1975, led the second conference as well. Participants of the conference included Frank Chin, Garrett Hongo, Stephen Sumida, and Wakako Yamauchi.


54 In an introduction, Brander Matthews describes the story as “beautiful in its several episodes, now poetic, now pathetic and again fantastic. It sets before us the everlasting appeal of maternal self-sacrifice; and it presents the always-sympathetic figure of the rightful heir recovering his place by his own powers.” Hazelton, George and Benrimo. The Yellow Jacket: A Chinese Play Done in a Chinese Manner. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1913.


57 Unlike the other three companies, the Pan Asian Rep does not yet have an archive where researchers can reconstruct past productions. Until such archive can be established for the company, theatre reviews are the only source on the productions.


Notes to Chapter 3

1 Unless noted otherwise, all of the quotations of Dun are from the personal interview I conducted with him on July 21, 1999 in San Francisco.

2 The following narrative and quotes are from an interview of Amy Hill by Richard Kim on October 1999 unless noted otherwise.

3 See the “Producer” section of this chapter for details.

4 The group Cold Tofu will be discussed in detail in the “Community” section of this chapter.

5 According to Hill and others at AATC, most plays that were submitted were very bad.

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Some writers did not know the basic craft of theatre, and others assumed that the company produced anything they got. The selective process was, therefore, not choosing the best play, but the least bad play. I will return to this issue in the next section of this chapter, “Playwrights in the 1980s.”

I want to thank Jessica Hagedorn for bringing this to my attention.

Some Asian American theatre artists, including Jessica Hagedorn, remember a different version of the story. According to this version, Papp provided Oyama with a desk at the Public Theater in order to stop the protest. With this gesture, Papp handed Oyama the responsibility to “develop” an Asian American theatre program similar to those of African-American and Latino-American. Some say that Papp did not expect any results; he thought that Oyama and his group would stop “making noise” and eventually disappear if they were left alone. Much to the surprise of Papp, Oyama did not go away. Instead, a year later, he mounted the first Asian American play at the Public Theater. Helen Epstein’s Joe Papp, An American Life (1994) does not mention David Oyama or Wakako Yamauchi. The biography contributes to the tendency to isolate David Henry Hwang as the representative Asian American playwright, although even Hwang gets mentioned only once.

Frank Chin’s Chickencoop Chinaman premiered at the American Place Theatre in New York, but the reception there was much different from that of San Francisco. The critics in NY did not understand the play.


There may be several reasons for this distinction between Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang. Gotanda is, for instance sansei, third generation Japanese American, whose parents experienced the internment camp during World War II. Hwang, on the other hand, is second generation Chinese American who is more familiar with his Chinese ancestry. Other biographical information may provide further explanation about the two playwrights and about Asian American playwrights in general. It is, however, premature to conclude a pattern for all Asian American playwrights of different immigrant generation. Further study is necessary.

Espiritu points out several weaknesses of primordialism. First, primordial ties do not
necessarily lead to ethnic solidarity. “For example, the strained relationship between Canadian-born Chinese and Vietnamese-born Chinese in Canada suggests that groups sharing the same ancestry do not necessarily fraternize” (4). Secondly, ethnic awareness varies from person to person, and primordialism is not sufficient to explain the variations. And thirdly, by focusing too much on the psychological aspects of primordialism, one can overlook economic and political aspects of ethnic groups.

In 1983, the Asian American Theatre Company formed its first improvisation group, Not My Fault. Its performances were included in the scheduled season. The group operated until 1986 when many members of the AATC left the company.

Robert Covarrubias and Helen Ota, Co-Artistic Directors. Http://www.coldtoto.com

Great Leap Homepage. Http://www.greatleap.org

This historical album is currently in the Smithsonian Institute’s collection. “About Great Leap.” Http://www.greatleap.org

Great Leap Homepage.

Undated meeting minutes. UCSB Archive.

New titles during this period included: Points of Departure by Paul Stephen Lim, Coda by Alberto Isaac, A Play by Bill Yamasaki by Adrian-Kinoshita-Myers, Intake-Outtake by Judi Nihei, Marc Hayashi, Diana Tanaka, Adrienne Fong, and ensemble, Yellow is My Favorite Color by Edward Sakamoto, Jelly Belly by Adrian Kinoshita-Myers, Followers of the Season by Oscar Peñaranda, and Truant by Oscar Peñaranda. The last play of the 1979-1980 season was Wakako Yamauchi’s And the Soul Shall Dance.

From a memo to Dennis Myers from Yankee Johnson titled, “Preliminary recommendations.” September 15, 1982. UCSB Archive.


This quote is from a draft of “Historical Introduction,” apparently written by the members of the company as it struggled to restructure. It is part of a document of over twenty pages that tries to summarize the company’s history and evaluate its future. It specifies immediate and long-term goals. The document describes Nishikawa and Hayashi’s plans, but the actual writing/typing of the document seems to have been done by Sharon Omi, the project coordinator of the AATC.
Notes to Chapter 4

1 According to A Story of Miss Saigon, Mackintosh was taking a vacation in the month of June 1990 and was “blissfully unaware that Pryce’s acceptance of the role in New York was set to become a highly controversial issue.” It also states that shortly after the London opening, Mackintosh told Alan Eisenberg (Executive Secretary of AEA) that “because of Jonathan Pryce’s huge success as the Engineer, he was the obvious choice to open in the part in New York.” In April 1990, Pryce agreed to open in New York, and by the end of May 1990, Eisenberg “unofficially told Mackintosh and Bernard Jacobs, head of the Shubert Organisations, that he could see no problem at all in Pryce’s doing so” (181).


3 According to Variety, the musical was to employ 182 people, including 50 actors and stage managers, 26 musicians and 34 stagehands.

4 Under Equity’s constitution, a petition signed by at least 100 members requires a special meeting to be held.

5 The Story of Miss Saigon notes that these final meetings between Cameron Mackintosh and Equity were held in private. “Both sides agreed that the talks should be conducted in private, and that there should be no further press ‘leaks’ which might exacerbate matters and cause the ‘activists’ in AEA to renew their campaign” (188). It is clear that Asian American ‘activists’ were to have no part in the decision making process. Again, Asian American actors had no power to decide their own fate.

6 John Highlands provides an excellent study of the concepts of multiculturalism and universalism in “Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and Critique” (American Quarterly. 45:2 (June 1993) : 195). The dichotomy can also be labeled as, according to Omi and Winant, “neoliberalism” and “neoconservatism.”

7 Hwang uses the term “deconstruction” to describe M. Butterfly. Scholars such as James Moy and writers like Frank Chin would argue otherwise.

8 All of the direct quotes are from personal interviews, unless otherwise noted. 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors was interviewed on March 27, 1998 during its final rehearsal for a co-performance with Slant on March 28, 1998 at Japan America Theatre in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, California. Slant was interviewed on March 29, 1998, the day after the performance in Los Angeles.

9 As published in the group’s web site, and as reiterated in the interview. The home page of 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors is: http://www.tz.net/18MMW
Another influential group is the San Francisco Mime Troupe which is a multicultural theatre company that was founded in the 1960s. El Teatro incorporated the Troupe’s style in their performances.

The Second Coming, for instance, is about a “journey of three innocent spermatozoa in their quest for life as the adventurous trio travels through different time periods in the history of Asia-America, searching for an identity as they head toward the next millennium, starting with ancient Tantric chanting monks and ending in a modern Japanese American engineer's on-line wet dreams and torture fantasies.”

For instance, 18MMW debuted at Pan-Asian Repertory theatre in New York on the weekend of October 22-25, 1998 with a full-length show. Slant was officially commissioned by the Joseph Papp Public Theater to do a play development project with them in the spring. The group also premiered "wetSpot" at La Mama Theater, NYC Jan. 1-17, 1999. “Another highly charged, satirical, musical, and visual piece about three blond bikers who take a nasty spill and end up in a kind of karaoke purgatory.”

Most of these playwrights have their plays published in major anthologies. There are, of course, numerous third generation writers who could have (and should have) been included in the publications. Some second generation writers, including David Henry Hwang, have written plays that contain all of the essential characteristics that define the third generation writers’ plays.

Dorinne Kondo examines David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly using the anti-essentialist critique in her article, “M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity” in Cultural Critique (Fall 1990), pg. 5. I would argue, however, that Judith Butler’s theory of “performance” applies to the play more readily than the anti-essentialist critique. Kondo’s method does provide an insightful reading of the play, but it seems to be an over-interpretation of a work that focuses on the “performance” of essentialist identity, rather than on an anti-essentialist critique of identity concepts. We have to wait until Hwang’s later play, Bondage (1992), to see the playwright use the anti-essentialist concepts in the most obvious and interesting dramaturgical ways. One of the characters in this one-act piece ends the play with the following passage “I worry when I think about the coming millennium—because it feels like all labels have to be re-written, all assumptions re-examined, all associations re-defined. The rules that governed behavior in the last era are crumbling, but those of the time to come have yet to be written. And there is a struggle brewing over the shape of these changing words, a struggle that begins here, now, in our hearts, in our shuttered rooms, in the lightning decisions that appear from nowhere” (Houston, 1997, 176).

For example, Mark (the male character) becomes inferior to Terry (the dominatrix) when he plays a Chinese American male and she becomes a white female. The power structure changes when he becomes a Caucasian man and she a black woman.

17 From the brochure of the first Asian American Theatre Convening in Seattle, May 22-23, 1999. The questions are for the panel titled, “Writing for Asian American Theatre.”
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