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Source: *Feminist Studies*, Autumn, 1996, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 573-602

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

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ART ESSAY

"BAD WOMEN": ASIAN AMERICAN VISUAL ARTISTS HANH THI PHAM, HUNG LIU, AND YONG SOON MIN

ELAINE H. KIM

Names. Names imposed by slaveowners and immigration officials who could not and would not pronounce a person's given name. Names changed or adopted for use in a new land. Names taken on as part of an effort to forge a new self, a new life. Growing up, I learned that most Korean peasant women my mother's age didn't have given names. They were called "baby" or "pretty" until they married, whereupon they could be called "so-and-so's wife."

I figure that my grandmother fled Korea for Hawaii, alone and either pregnant or with a small infant, sometime between 1903 and 1905, the period during which Korean laborers were being recruited to work on the sugar plantations of Hawaii. She told my mother that she had had other children, who died. She said that she had left because she became "fed up" with her husband, an inveterate gambler, when he threw a blanket over my mother to muffle her crying. Fearful lest her only remaining child be smothered to death, she decided to run away to Hawaii, thereby fashioning a narrative of protective motherhood that pinned their exile on my mother. Then again, the story of my grandmother becoming a "bad woman" because she was a "good mother" could have been created by my mother to cope with not having known her father. There's no way for me to find out now.

In any case, I heard the story many times as I was growing up. I think my mother told it because we kept asking her how we had ended up in a country where we were ceaselessly told we would never be anything but foreigners by adults who couldn't stop asking us where we were from, how we happened to speak English, and when we were "going back," and by children who

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chased us, pulling their eyes up at the corners and yelling "chink!" or "jap!" We used to ask our parents, who seemed so preoccupied with what was going on in Korea, why we were *here* instead of *there*.

It wasn't until I had grown up and studied Korean history that I began to understand how the Japanese colonization spurred the dispersal of Koreans to the far corners of the world and how a combination of political instability in Korea and the insatiable demand for cheap labor in the United States stimulated the migration of Korean and other workers to this country. At the same time, learning about Korean society made me wonder how it was possible for an illiterate woman from the Korean countryside to simply decide to go to Hawaii at the turn of the century, pregnant or a new mother, without a man. My mother looked like a person of mixed racial heritage, which would have stigmatized her in Korea and made her mother's life even more impossible. Could the father she never knew be one of the Russian soldiers who was sent to the Korean peninsula around the time of the Russo-Japanese War? Had my grandmother been seduced? Was she raped?

Although they cannot be said to have conquered the social barriers they faced, I like to think of both my grandmother and my mother as bravely stepping forth to meet them. They were blamed both for circumstances beyond their control and for the choices they made—for responding to violation of their bodies by leaving home to start a new life. They became female transgressors. No doubt they would both be considered "bad women" in a community that does not recognize female sexual desires; condemns single motherhood, especially among unmarried women; discourages the woman who runs away from a violently abusive husband; and criticizes the woman who wants to live alone or focus on her work for placing her individual well-being over the needs of family members.

When I was growing up, I heard a lot about my father's history, which he characterized as replete with epic heroism, class privilege, and, in this century, great feats of nationalism. His family's roots could be traced back eight hundred years to Silla royalty, he used to say, adding that up till now, no one in the Kim family had ever gotten anything but straight As on their report cards.

No one said much about my mother's background. Her connections to any "nation" were so fragile that they were almost invisible. Because there was no record of the date or place of her birth or of her arrival in the United States, her passport read "Displaced Person." We knew that the first husband she had run away from had beaten her badly, because sometimes we had to take her to the hospital after she yawned and her jaws locked open from an old injury. But when she died, there were no photographs of her before she met our father, no letters, no mementos, no material evidence of her girlhood or young womanhood. Like the stories of untold numbers of others before her, my mother's personal history no doubt remained in silence and shadow because she was a commoner and because she was a woman. But I think she complied with the erasure because she did not want to unveil herself and her mother as "bad women." Just as she may have chosen to read her mother's renditions of the past as motivated by protective love, I like to think that she was motivated by a wish to protect me from the legacy by not letting me know that I come from a long line of "bad women."

Every Korean American family I know has a cache of skeletons in its closet. Isn't it likely that most immigrants to a new land do? Many early Japanese and Korean picture brides, for example, left their homelands behind to marry men they had never met, to live in a foreign country where they could not speak the language. At least some of these women must have been escaping from something; some of them must have been women with a "past"—a failed love affair, perhaps, or a child born out of wedlock. Six years ago, when I was conducting interviews in Seoul, whenever I was told about a scandal and would ask what had happened to the parties involved, the answer would invariably be, "She moved to L.A." or "She's living in New York." Aren't these new immigrants women with a "past"? Aren't all Korean immigrants people with a "past," or at least descendants of women with a "past," such as some of the women who immigrated here through men they met while working near U.S. military bases in Korea? Perhaps the majority of Koreans in the United States today can be traced to a distant relative who married a Black or white military man. But they mostly shun the women who made their American

lives possible, sneeringly referring to them as *yangsaekssi* (Western girlies), *yanggongju* (Western princesses), or *yanggal-bo* (whores of the West).

It turns out, then, that most of us are probably descended from a long line of "bad women." And it seems to me that we need to reexamine just what is meant by "badness," so that we can claim the term for quite different uses.

Unofficial Asian American history is replete with "bad women." They may not be acknowledged or much written about, but their legacies branch into the present. In the 1981 novel *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, Ruthanne Lum McCunn immortalized the legend of Polly Bemis, the Chinese pioneer woman who became a homesteader in the American West in the latter part of the nineteenth century after having been sold into prostitution by her impoverished family in the early 1870s, held as a Chinese saloon-keeper's mistress, and finally won in a card game by a white man who eventually became her husband. But most of the nineteenth-century Chinese women in America who had been lured, sold, or kidnapped into prostitution to meet the demand for sexual services in the predominantly male West Coast culture remain anonymous, except as statistics used to fuel the massive movement to end Chinese immigration to the United States. Some suggestions of the individual agency of early Japanese prostitutes in Hawaii and on the Pacific Coast do remain. In their public discussions, Japanese government officials and Japanese American community leaders, fearing harm to the reputation of Japan in the West, publicly expressed their indignation that these women deliberately chose prostitution over much less lucrative but more "honorable" agricultural labor.¹ Little has been said about Japanese and Korean picture brides who ran away from their husbands in the early decades of this century, but desperate notices from deserted husbands in the Japanese vernacular press provide clues that such incidences were not infrequent. Another group of "bad women," divorced second-generation Chinese American women, were talked about mainly in immigrant Chinese families, where they emblemized the evils of "Americanization." Rose Hum Lee points out that although comparable numbers

of immigrant Chinese women left their husbands, little was said about them.² Asian women, some of whom worked in their native countries as bar girls on U.S. military bases in their homelands, built power bases for themselves by marrying U.S. citizens and then sponsoring family members as immigrants. Another group of "bad women" includes Filipino and other Asian women who immigrated to this country as "mail order brides" and then started catalog companies of their own. Finally, Asian American lesbians, artists, and activists have challenged patriarchal stories with their own lives. Asian American feminists have been working to bring the buried stories of "bad women" to light, rethinking how they figure into Asian American history and conjecturing about their subjectivity and agency in their location between patriarchy and racism.

Asian American feminism needs to turn the world upside down. Instead of defining as "good" the Asian Americans who obey the rules by staying between the lines and categorizing as "bad" those who are difficult to control, we need to bring forth subjugated knowledges like the stories of "bad women" and to interrogate the meanings of "badness." This is particularly important at a time when Asian Americans so often find themselves positioned in a buffer zone between mostly affluent white Americans, on the one hand, and mostly poor Black and brown Americans, on the other, as programs to assure equal opportunities for people of color and for the poor are being directly assaulted. Asian American women could serve as decorative gatekeepers and as apologists for and explicators, upholders, and functionaries of the status quo, mediating between those who have the power to make the rules and those who are oppressed by them. Asian American female "badness" is particularly unruly because it so often challenges both Western patriarchal racism and patriarchal attitudes and practices in Asian American families and communities, which are profoundly influenced by Western concepts and customs.

One arena where "bad women" seem to abound is the visual arts, where illusions are challenged and the possible is imagined and made palpable. Scholars and teachers write and talk about what activists and artists do. As an Asian American woman scholar and teacher, I realize how impoverished I would be without Asian American women activists-artists like

Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min. In their quite different ways, they are most certainly "bad women" who remember and celebrate other "bad women" as they uncover the past buried by the winners of History and place the woman's body in world history. And in doing so, they gesture toward both the history and the politics of the possible.

Among contemporary Asian American "bad women," Vietnamese American photographic installation artist Hanh Thi Pham ranks high. At a time when movements against affirmative action are enthusiastically taking up the notion that Asian Americans are a diligent, docile "model minority" that makes other people of color look lazy and threatening, Hanh places her own dark Asian body into photographs that stage racism in U.S. history and the arrogance of Americans during the Vietnam War. As a member of the Vietnamese refugee community in the United States, where people suspected of harboring favorable attitudes toward Vietnam have been mysteriously killed, she places Ho Chi Minh in her art work and challenges the right-wing political views that predominate among many of her fellow refugees. In a world where heterosexism is a given, where men control almost all the power and resources, where the female body is generally allowed to function only for procreation and male sexual pleasure, she focuses on women and celebrates female sexual desire with images of her own nude body.

In 1985, in collaboration with sculptor Richard Turner (who attended high school in Vietnam when his father worked there for the South Vietnamese government), Hanh created *Along the Street of Knives*, an installation of eight large multiple-exposure color photographs. Although each photograph is a self-contained entity, the series makes up a narrative drama. Using "set design" drawings on acetate to create the scenes, Hanh and Turner situate themselves on the sets, performing in different costumes and poses. The set is lit in sumptuous, symbolic colors. Filtered theater spots, dissolving details into white-or-black background areas, impart the feeling of being caught in a dream or trance. The two artists act out the scenes, creating an allegorical "movie" of successive still shots that is actually a performance of history. Each photograph is created with

between two and thirteen exposures compacted into one negative or transparency.

Along the Street of Knives examines the vexed relationship between Americans in Vietnam and the South Vietnamese. Uncle Sam, half naked, is trying to buy sex with dollars and flying a kite among the U.S. bombers. The American tourists in the various tableaux view Vietnam as a playground; when things don't work out, they simply fly home, leaving behind the damage they have done. Hanh calls this an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude that makes her "hate them and want revenge."³ In "Asking Questions of Mr. Sky" from the 1990 installation *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (fig. 1), the American men in Hawaiian print shirts and shorts need their television and their beer as they recline on their lawn chairs, peering at Vietnam through dark glasses and binoculars. As viewers, we look at them looking at Vietnam. We identify with them but also with the woman who could be both a Vietnamese woman and an Asian immigrant woman as she climbs a Jacob's ladder that leads nowhere. She may be striving toward the imperialist culture, or she may be trying to escape the destructive and voyeuristic gaze of the white men as she balances precariously on the suspension bridge, moving in the direction of the question marks in the sky, but the bridge ends in black space. Still, her apparent destination is marked only by question marks suspended in empty space.

Hanh's installations are also meant to draw attention to the brutalizing effects of the war on both Americans and Vietnamese. The photographs focus on the possibly dark results of differences and misunderstandings between the two cultures. Both Americans and Vietnamese, especially uprooted Vietnamese like Hanh, are victims of war and undergo a "process of mutual humiliation," for "no one . . . has been able to follow his or her ideals without being destructive, from Ho Chi Minh down to the rank-and-file American G.I."⁴ In "Reconnaissance" from *Along the Street of Knives* (fig. 2), Hanh is pictured as a Vietnamese girl wearing long braids and Vietnamese clothing, a sinister rifle propped beside her as she peers at an American couple. Although we see them through her eyes, we are somehow made complicit in the possibility that she will take up arms and drive them from Vietnam. In another, she is drown-

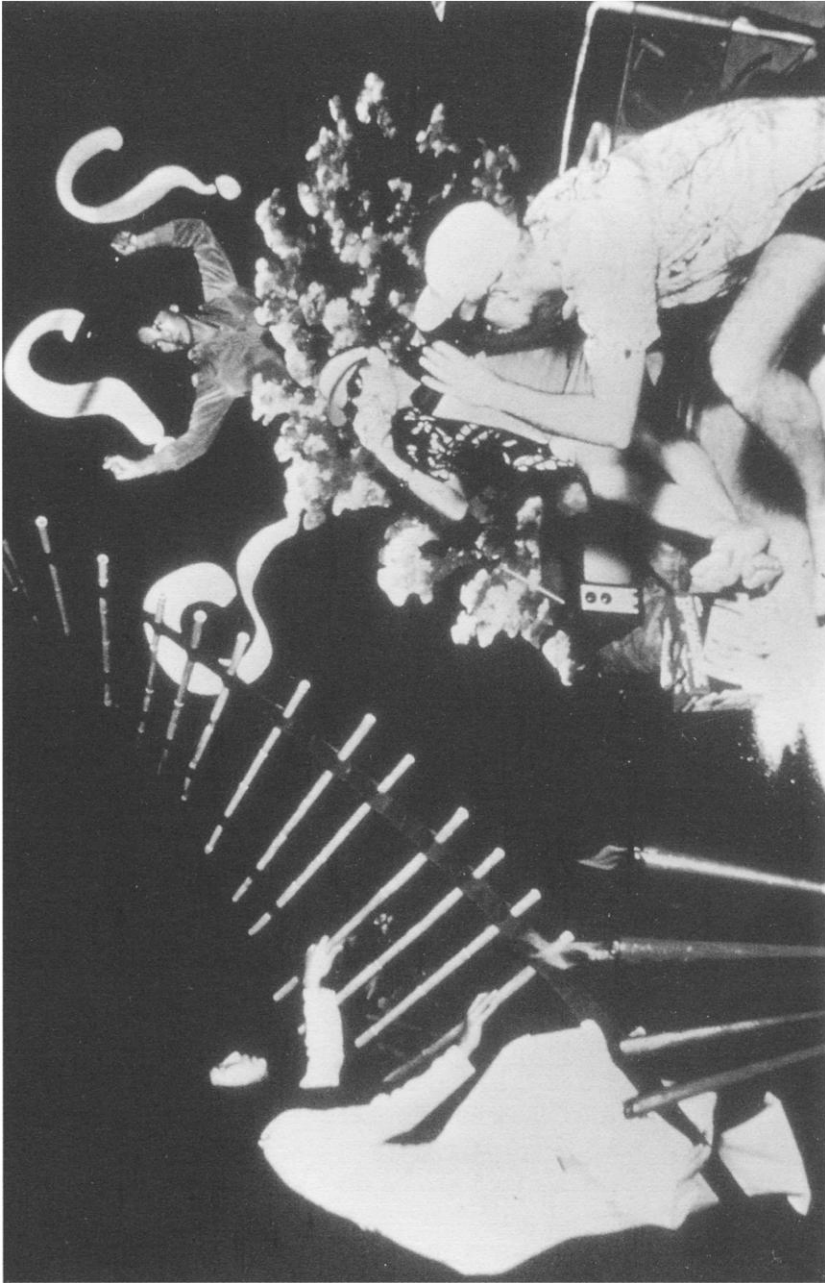


Fig. 1. Hanh Thi Pham, "Asking Questions of Mr. Sky," 1985. Ektachrome print, 20 x 24 inches. From the 1990 installation *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*.

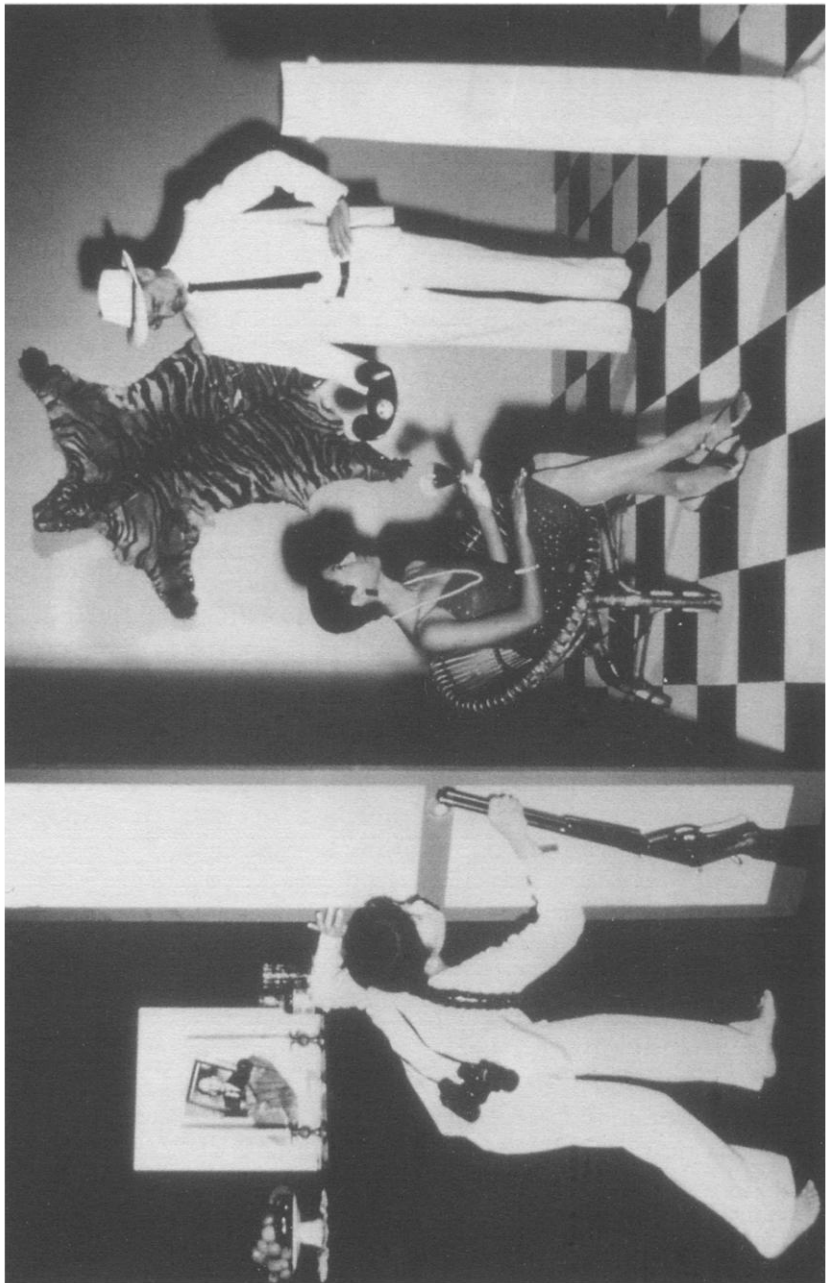


Fig. 2. Hanh Thi Pham and Richard Turner, "Reconnaissance," 1985. From the installation *Along the Street of Knives*.

ing a shackled American man in a tub and, in still another, she assumes the role of the South Vietnamese general shooting a suspected Viet Cong in the head in the well-known news photograph, except here an American is being executed by a Vietnamese girl who, Hanh points out, is not a "nice smiling submissive Asian."⁵

Hanh's performance of Vietnamese womanhood disrupts the orientalist fetishization of Asian women as what she calls "nice smiling submissive" exotic sex objects or pitiable victims of Asian patriarchal practices. Hanh's artwork challenges aesthetic and political modes that privilege Americans over Vietnamese, men over women, and heterosexuals over queers. In "Misbegotten No More" (fig. 3), one of nine photographs in a photographic installation titled *Khong La Nguoi O* (Expatriate consciousness) (1991-92), Hanh's image is seen in profile in the center of a collage of transparencies and color xeroxes, handwriting, newspaper photographs, and Vietnamese poetry, flexing her right arm in an "up yours" gesture. Her image is superimposed over an upside-down, crossed-out image of Buffalo Bill, that quintessential Wild West "hero" and enemy of not only the buffalo but also the Native Americans whose land he invades. The accompanying text contains the Vietnamese phrase that means "not the person who lives here," which Hanh says means refusing to be a servant, because in Vietnamese "a person who lives here" means a servant. "[It stands for] 'not as your servant.' I am speaking to Americans."⁶

[I]n the picture, I no longer want to be a servant of the system, and I can be my own self. I'm a lesbian. I'm very proud of myself as a woman. I'm very proud of my body, the muscles of my body, and my intentions as a person [This is] my empowerment, given to me by myself.⁷

Hanh came to the United States in 1975, when she was twenty-one years old. She settled in southern California with her family. Fourteen years later, she came out as a lesbian. "I was a very 'good' and dutiful female before," she has said. "I remember my marriage to a man, and living as a housewife [for twelve and a half years], while trying to be a role model daughter. . . . I tried always to blend in with the expectations of family and femaleness." Stimulated by her divorce to start "taking charge of [her] life," she experienced a "new birth: bringing out the man within the woman."⁸ The change was not without

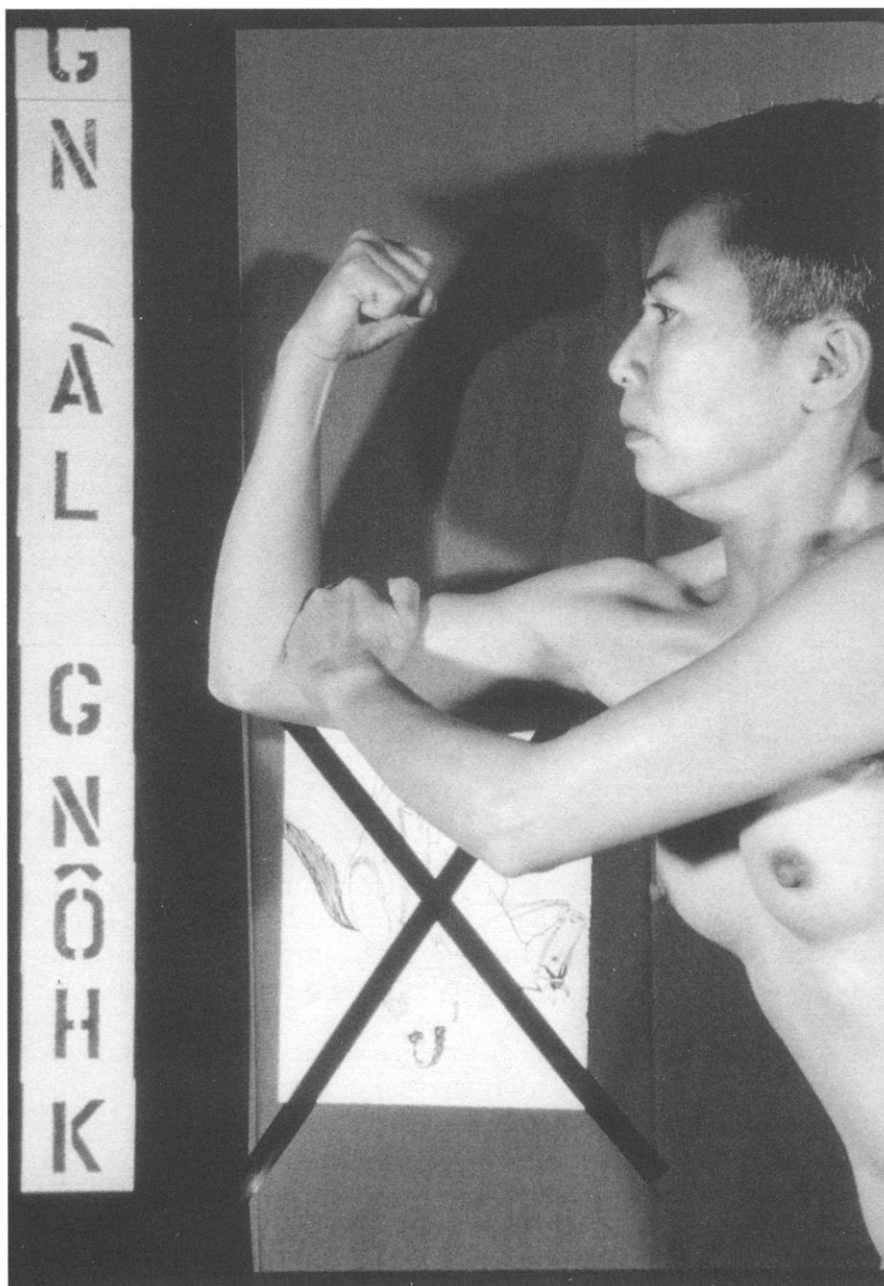


Fig. 3. Hanh Thi Pham, "Misbegotten No More." From the 1991-92 installation *Expatriate Consciousness*.

pain, because although she tries to identify herself as a strong lesbian, Hanh calls herself a transsexual, a man in the body of a woman.

I have . . . remained lonesome . . . because. . . Males mistake me for a female, then females decipher the male aspect of me as not being like themselves. . . . They know I am not one of them, and that bothers me. . . . I always value females to be superior to males, and transsexuals. I still feel very sad that I cannot completely be a woman.⁹

According to Hanh, neither Americans nor Vietnamese are prepared to see Asian women as "real." The identity and self-image Hanh chooses has nothing to do with the view of Vietnamese women as the "model minority of model minorities," or of them as obedient and devoted wives. Hanh's expression of her own sexuality no doubt makes her a "bad woman" in the Vietnamese community as well as in the community at large, where "model minorities" are never permitted their own sexual desires and pleasures. For her, sexual energy facilitates physiological, intellectual, and spiritual change and development, and what is most private may also be the most urgent and important. But most people in the Vietnamese community, as well as other Asian immigrant communities, disapprove of public talk about sexual desire and unconventional sexual orientation, not to mention photographing oneself nude and using "obscene" gestures. Understanding that "showing the entrance of me" may "become [a] very volatile [issue]" in the Vietnamese community, Hanh wonders why people censor only certain things: "It may be pornographic to be so poor that you have to eat potato leaves to survive. If Asian people eat animals' genital organs, why should they refuse to see a human vagina? Why eat a bull's penis and refuse to look at it in a photograph?"¹⁰

In general, the Vietnamese refugee community has responded to Hanh's work with what she calls "outrage." Some are angry about her work about Vietnam, because they want "positive" images to enhance their businesses and therefore the community's economic advancement. Others, in the guise of objecting to her public display of "in-house" community issues, disapprove of her left-leaning political orientation. Through the 1980s, many Vietnamese Americans who seemed tolerant of the communist government in Vietnam were murdered.

"You're not supposed to address these issues," says Hanh. "If you live in Orange County [in Southern California, where the largest Vietnamese refugee community in the United States is located], you are supposed to support the right wing. . . . If you're otherwise, then you're a leftist. There's nothing in the middle."¹¹ "Long time ago, I did not want to be associated with the term 'radical.' But afterwards I say, 'Yes! I am radical!' . . . If you don't do anything, nothing changes the world," she said.¹² Although Hanh may be dismissed by some as too "bad" a woman to be dealt with, for others it is precisely her badness that inspires and empowers, by challenging social injustices such as racism and patriarchy, by insisting on the centrality of female identity, and by assertively acknowledging the validity of female desire and sexual pleasure.

"Bad Women," a 1991 San Francisco exhibit of Hung Liu's paintings of young Chinese prostitutes from the early decades of this century, has nothing to do with female desire and sexual pleasure. Liu discovered the photographs that inspired the images at a public archive while visiting Beijing earlier that year. They were arranged in two books that had apparently served as catalogs for wealthy male customers. Liu had been searching for old photographs that recall China before the 1949 Revolution effaced signs of social life before communism, especially when they seemed to suggest Western influences.

Born in 1948, Liu is a first-generation product of Chinese communist culture; like other artists of her generation, she has at times been obsessed with a desire to uncover what was forbidden to her, particularly as a result of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. She has often painted from her own family's photographs, as well as from photographs of urban scenes, landscapes, temples, and families from a catalog of a traveling American exhibition she found in 1987: *The Face of China As Seen By Photographers and Travelers 1860-1912* (Aperture, 1978). Fascinated by erasures of the past, Liu found that painting from third-generation reproductions and faded photographs was like dealing with memory loss. It was difficult to locate private collections because so many family photographs had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, when peo-

ple blotted out traces of their past so as not to be suspected of bourgeois backgrounds or aspirations. Trying to unearth the buried past itself marks Liu as a possible traitor to Chinese nationalism, and shining floodlights into the dark corners of Chinese patriarchy so that it is revealed before Western eyes makes her a truly "bad woman."

Strangely, the collection of photographs of prostitutes, like sexism itself, survived through the Japanese invasions, the civil war between the nationalists and communists, and the Cultural Revolution. The books were ostensibly saved because they were intended as a reference on fashions of the period. Indeed, the young women in them are stylishly dressed in Chinese and Western style, their startled faces turned directly toward the camera lens as they pose among Western trappings intended to bespeak modernity and sophistication: telephones, Victorian couches, motor cars, and rowboats. The accoutrements were clearly meant to appeal to the customers' own wish for urbanity. Even the Western medium of photography, an only recently imported technology, flatters the customer with its fashionable modernness.

Discovering these photographs was immensely important to Liu for a number of reasons: first, because of her desire to uncover precommunist Chinese life; second, because of her keen interest in unexpected connections between China and the West; third, because of her wish to document in her art the forgotten lives of anonymous people, especially women, who have most often been the victims rather than the victors of History; and fourth, because of her focus on the interplay of illusions and gazes as she painted the photographs of women posed in front of paintings so that contemporary Western viewers might look at her looking at what the Chinese used Western technology to look at.

Liu has said that for her, painting from photographs constitutes a defiant act of sorts, because artists in communist China were exhorted to paint from life to better represent the true human condition. Painting from pictures was considered "cheating," even though artists were supposed to create illusions from life. Liu recalls how Chinese teachers criticized her for painting pale, unhappy-looking people instead of ruddy-cheeked heroes and heroines of the revolution.¹³ But she sug-

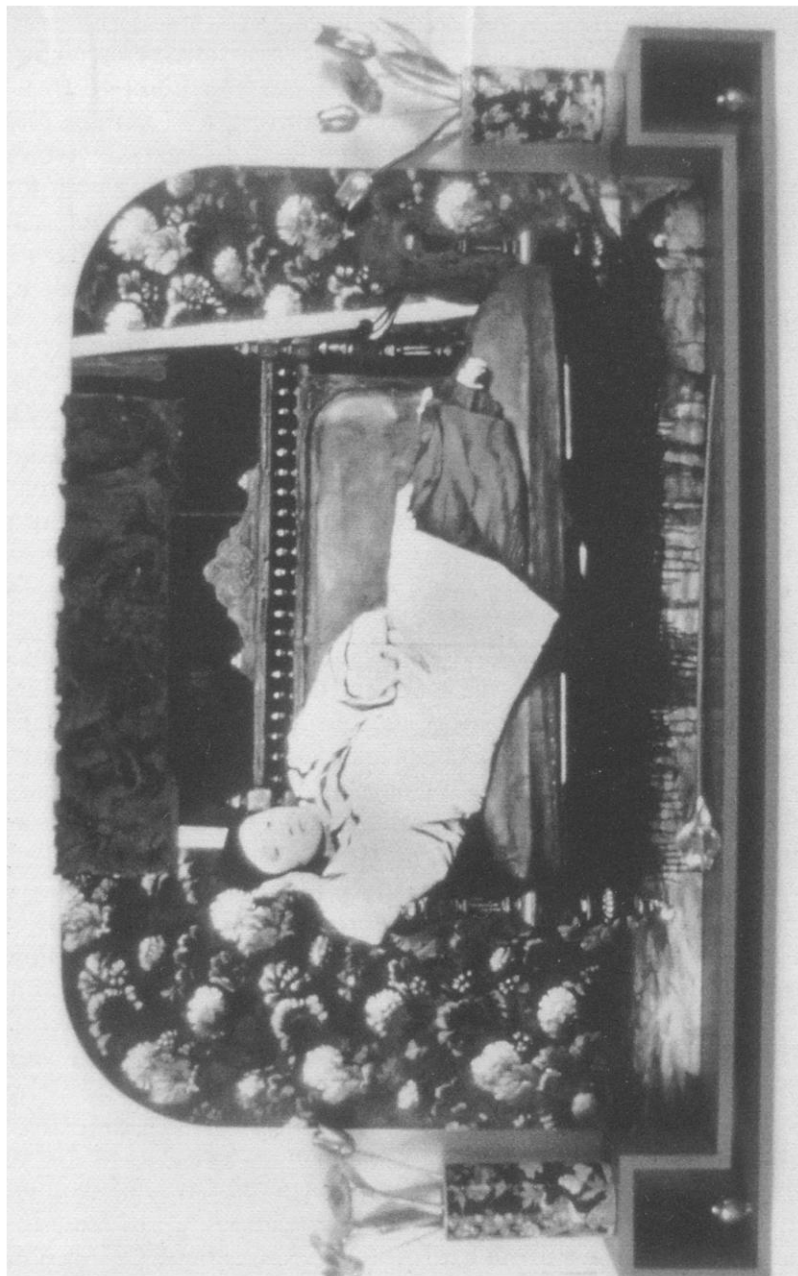


Fig. 4. Hung Liu, "Odalisque," 1992. Oil on canvas, wood, ceramic, antique wall, 80 x 86 x 11 inches.

gests that copying an image, which requires focusing one's physical and emotional attention like a scientist on every square inch of its minutest details, is to pay homage to it. Training in traditional Asian brush painting and calligraphy requires much copying and the repetition of certain brush strokes until the hand and eye are skilled and sure enough for individual improvisation. According to Liu, repetition itself can be like a meditative prayer. "I communicate with the characters in my paintings," she has said, "with reverence, sympathy, and awe." In a sense, by painting their images, as in "*Odalisque*" (fig. 4), Liu is worshipping her forgotten sisters, who were known only by trade names like Little Apple, White Lily, Sweet Orchid. She wants to acknowledge them, to reclaim, recover, and reinterpret them, these anonymous "sisters for sale" who were not allowed to have names or even, she imagines, their own children. "I don't want their stories to be forgotten; I don't want them to disappear without a trace."¹⁴ But viewers will never know who they were or where they came from. To the paintings, with their flattened surfaces, Liu attaches wooden altars, on which she sets small jade-colored vases of glass flowers or tiny embroidered shoes for bound feet. Like the lacquer panels and the lifeless glass flowers, the prostitutes are mere decorations, passive, powerless, and empty in a culture that traditionally counted emptiness as a female virtue.

Liu never permits viewers to forget that they are looking at paintings from photographs. The three-dimensional altars insistently interrupt the illusion of "reality" in the work. She flattens the photographic images, distorting them in monochrome, painting black-and-white scenes in the background, behind the women, to enhance the contrast between the flat photograph or painting and the three-dimensional sculptural and architectural elements, as well as to remind the viewer continually that the women have been posed. Several of the women are painted in poses reminiscent of Western paintings of women, such as Manet's *Olympia*, Goya's *The Naked Maja*, or Ingres's *Odalisque*. The paintings focus on Chinese women in history and expose Chinese patriarchy to view, but they inhibit orientalist or self-congratulatory views about China and Chinese patriarchy.

Liu presents Chinese female pariahs, whose identities had

been buried and denied, on altars and at the center of a theater stage. Instead of being downcast as might be expected in Chinese society, their eyes stare brazenly and Westernly at the viewer. But their gaze expresses accessibility rather than agency or even insolence. That their images are captured by Chinese men using Western technology is important to Liu, who often equates colonization with rape, the camera with the rapist, and Chinese land with Chinese women.

In a number of works, Liu focuses on another point of shame in Chinese culture: the bound feet of women. The image of a numb-faced woman, her broken, deformed, naked feet pointing obscenely, bottoms-up, at the viewer, appears repeatedly in her work. "I do not mean to exhibit weirdoes," she has said; "I just want to startle the audience and convey the pain felt by our mothers."¹⁵ Juxtaposed with erotic scenes painted on porcelain vases (*Goddess of Love, Goddess of Liberty*, 1989) or with old diagrams of the woman's internal organs, painted in rich reds, sensual purples, and opulent greens, the image is used to unveil the social construction of beauty in *Bonsai* (1992). It is also used to represent China: in "Chinese Pieta" from the *Trauma* installation (1989) (fig. 5) commemorating the demonstrations for democracy at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, the centerpiece is the image on the wall of a bound-foot woman, her head ringed with a halo in the shape of a map of China. At her feet lies the inert body of a dead student whose halo is a pool of his own blood. On the floor is a blood-red piece of felt also in the shape of the nation, on which a ritual bowl has been placed in commemoration. The bound feet here are equated with bound minds.

Exposing Chinese patriarchy, bringing "bad women" and private shame into the public, and criticizing Chinese officialdom constitute the work of a "bad woman," as does the artist's insistence on inscriptions of her own very female image, whether as communist soldier, green-card holder, "guerrilla girl," Buddha, or "A Third World" woman (fig. 6) with a Mao button on her shoulder and a gold map of San Francisco in the middle of her forehead.

Liu's artwork is concerned about what is lost in transit between times and places, what has been severed from its surroundings: thus, her fascination with faded old photographs of

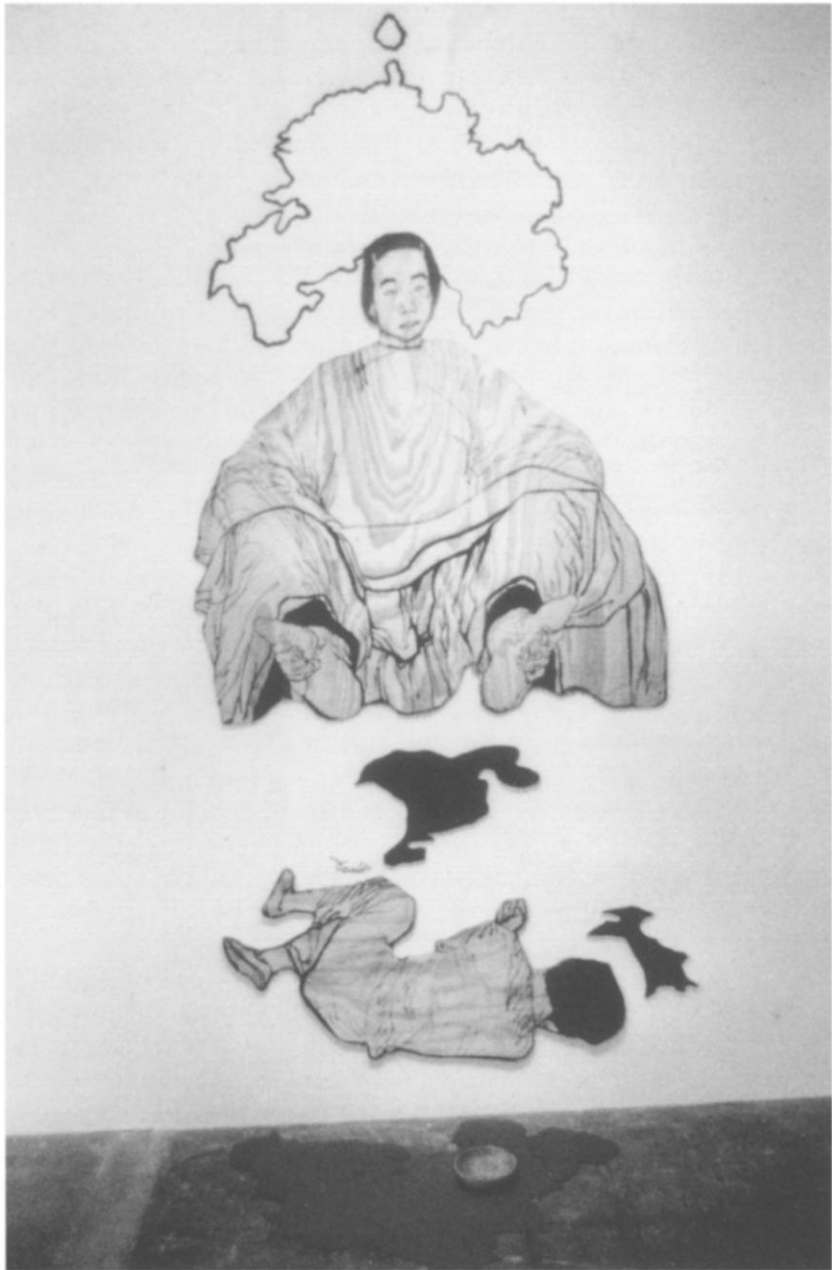


Fig. 5. Hung Liu, "Chinese Pieta," 1989. Ink on wood, felt and clay. From the installation *Trauma*.

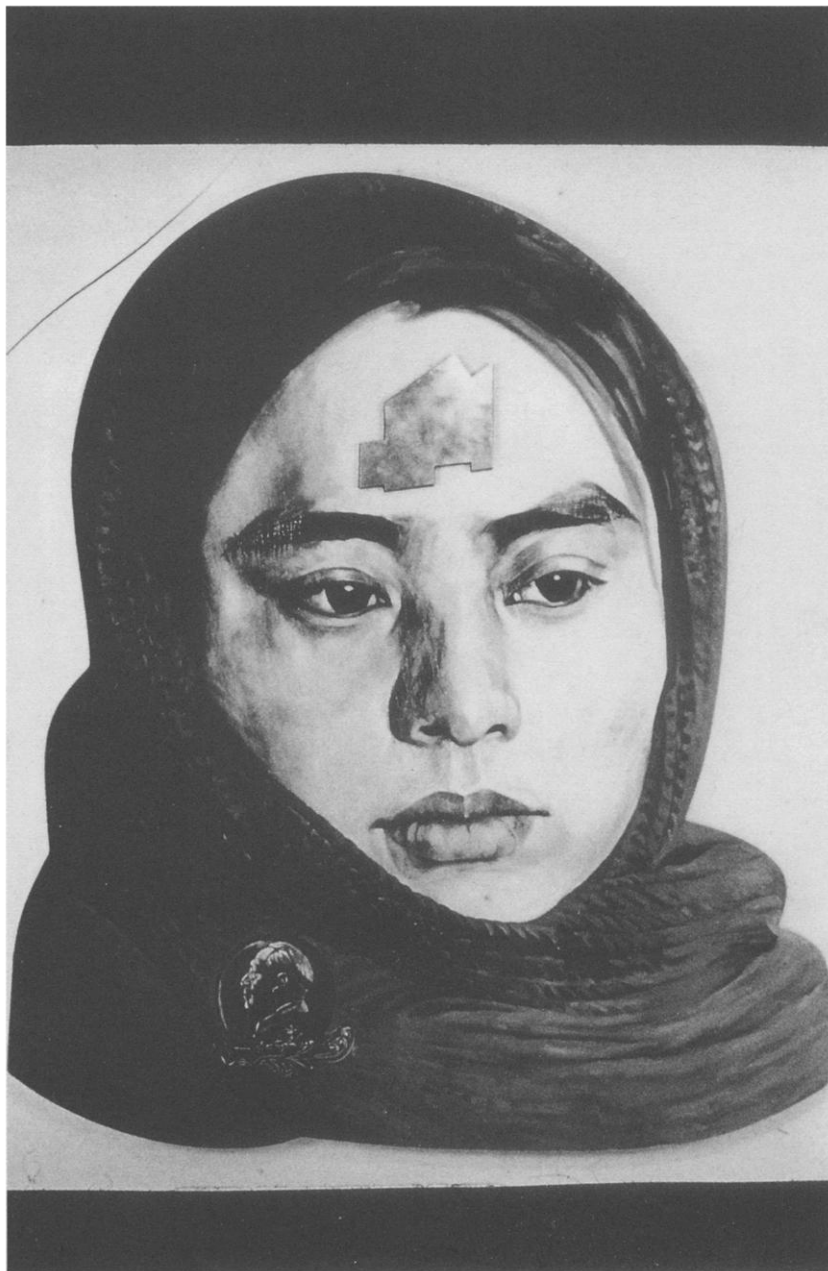


Fig. 6. Hung Liu, "A Third World." Oil on canvas, gold leaf on wood, 91 x 72 x 4 inches.

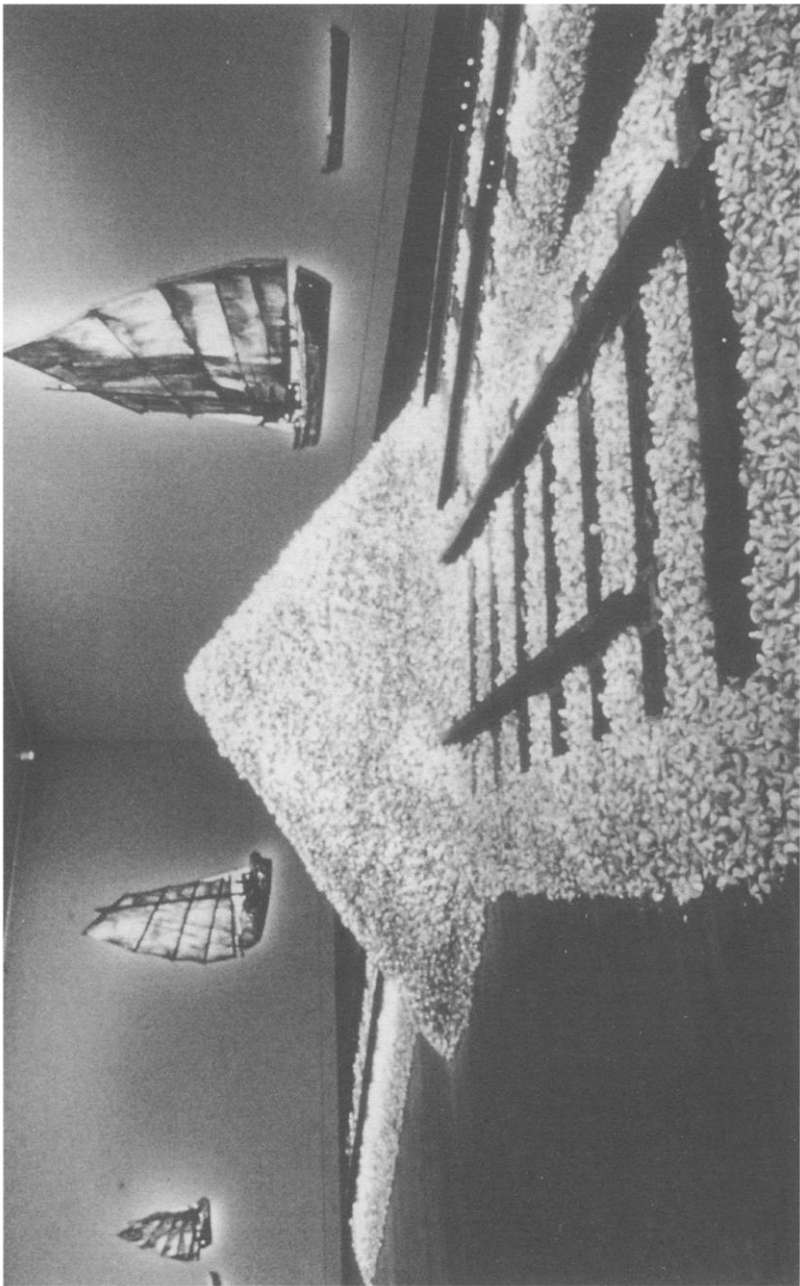


Fig. 7. Hung Liu, "Jiu Jin San (Old Gold Mountain)," 1994.

nameless young women and girls. Having settled in America, she began to view herself as a Chinese artist working outside China: "My responsibility as a classically trained Chinese artist in America is to express my Chineseness as clearly as I can."¹⁶ At the same time, she distinguishes between Chinese and Chinese American artists: "Maybe the . . . images [in my work look] Chinese. But this doesn't mean I'm a Chinese painter, because I never would have painted this way in China."¹⁷ After having visited China again and having seen the influence of the West everywhere, Liu declared that she no longer had to "confine [herself] to only Chinese imagery" and began to focus on the absence of "fixed origins" and her "collaged identity" as a cross-cultural, hybrid artist.¹⁸ "I do not feel obligated to be Chinese anymore," she recently said.¹⁹ Indeed, her installation at the San Francisco DeYoung Museum in 1994, *Jiu Jin Shan* (Old gold mountain) (fig. 7), focuses on Chinese America, with its asymptotic railroad tracks, which lie like a false promise over a huge mountain of fortune cookies. Believing that America was the "mountain of gold," early Chinese immigrants came and found themselves working on the transcontinental railroad, digging tunnels through snowdrifts and blasting rock cliffs with dynamite at half the white man's wages. Although they had perished by the thousands by the time the railroad was completed in 1869, their role in creating America's wealth has never been fully acknowledged. Thus, the fake gold is the fortune cookie, a joke invented in America: it doesn't really contain fortunes and it isn't even really Chinese.

Like her thematics, Liu's formal techniques are a kind of cultural collage, combining American pop imagery, Western classical oil painting styles, minimalism's flat planes of color, expressionism's drip techniques, Asian brush-painting aesthetics, old Chinese iconography, maps, scientific drawings, acupuncture charts, ceramics, calligraphy, and modern Chinese political poster references. Yong Soon Min also works with cultural and aesthetic collage. Like Liu, she insists on the centrality of women, focuses on concepts of self and nationhood and on her own female body and its place in global politics, and challenges Eurocentrism in her work. And like Liu, she is in-



Fig. 8. Yong Soon Min, "Talking Herstory," 1980. Lithograph.

terested in using photographs to dismantle the truth claims of representation. But although she uses photographs and videotapes, they are usually part of large, complex installations in which written text plays an important role. "The installation is a Godsend for me," Min has said. "Installations help the artist break out of the constraints of the wall. They also serve as a receptacle for my own collection of materials."²⁰

Because she is concerned with the oppositional, the personal, with "talking about the banished" and helping to create a culture of resistance,²¹ Min grapples with perspectives, themes, and images traditionally kept hidden in the Korean American community—not only the notion that women are central to history and nation, with images of the naked female body as the site of nationhood and global politics but also anti-imperialist politics. Her work challenges the old Korean concept of *sadae-jui* (reliance on the powerful) by exploring the affinities among people who have suffered oppression in the West, such as Native Americans (*Home Be Coming*, 1992); countries that Americans overlook, like Palestine (*Two States Now*, 1989); and societies that have survived Western military onslaught, like Vietnam (*DMZ XING*, 1994).

Like Hanh and Liu, Min places her own image in her work, where her personal history, the history of Korea, and global issues are brought together. In the lithograph *Talking Herstory* (1990) (fig. 8), her face is featured in profile on the bottom of the print. The celadon-colored forms that seem to sprout from her lips are a collage of torn pieces of a map of Korea, arranged to suggest branches of a family tree from which hang various snapshots from the 1940s and 1950s. The tree branch and the snapshots float on a blue rectangle that represents a strip of sky. On the margins are pale images from newspaper and news magazine photographs of statesmen from the United States and the USSR (who partitioned Korea after World War II), Roosevelt, Stalin, Truman, Nixon, and Krushchev, as they negotiate the fate of the nation and Min's family.

In *Writing Self/Writing Nation: Four Essays about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's DICTEE* (Third Woman Press, 1994), a book Min designed, she presents a variation of a six-part photo ensemble titled *Defining Moments* (fig. 9), in which she connects crucial moments in Korean history to important dates in her

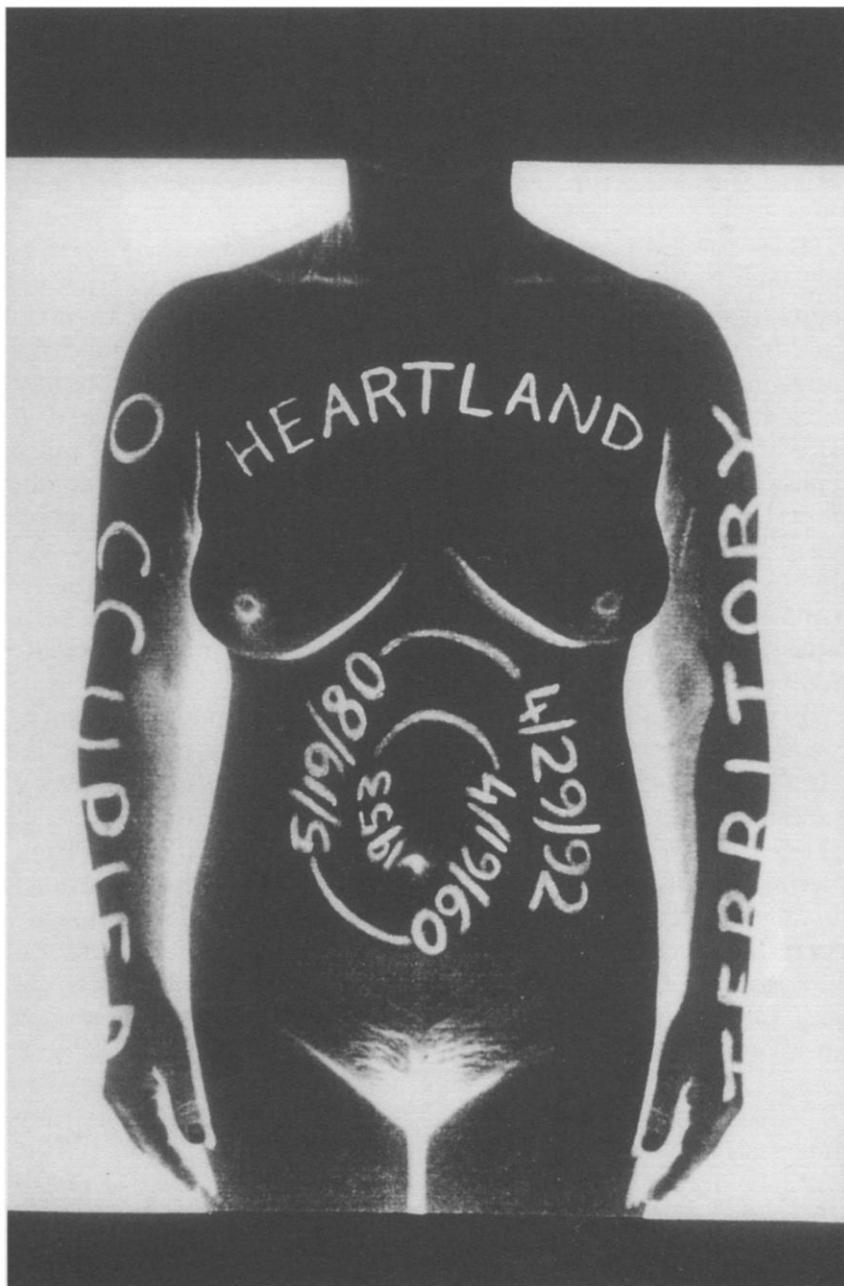


Fig. 9. Yong Soon Min, "Defining Moments," 1994.

own life. Opposite the title page is a negative of the artist's abdomen and forearms, with "occupied" written on one arm and "territory" written on the other. Emanating from the navel are four dates: 1953; April 19, 1960; May 19, 1980; and April 29, 1992. The book's sections are divided by images of Min's face and torso, over which she has printed photo scenes from the Korean War, which ended in 1953, the year of her birth; from the April 1960 student revolution, which Min witnessed as a child; from the 1980 Kwangju massacre, which marked the awakening of her own political consciousness; and from the April 1992 Los Angeles uprisings, a defining moment for her as a Korean American, which occurred on Min's birthday. In each visual, the letters "DMZ," for "demilitarized zone" are written across her forehead, and the word "Heartland" is inscribed across her chest. Just as the words are carved into her flesh, the scenes from Korean and Korean American history are tattooed on to her body. In the final visual at the end of the book, Min superimposes a shot of Paekdusan, the fabled mountain in North Korea, which is the mythical birthplace of the Korean people, the supposed birthplace of the late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, and the site considered by both the opposition movement and later by the South Korean government as a symbol of hope for reunification of North and South Korea. The back cover of the book features a photograph of Min's arms crossed over her naked torso, on to which is superimposed interlocking maps of Korea and the United States, the webs of rivers and mountains like the veins and blood vessels of her body through which her Korean and American blood courses.

Like the partitioned nation, Min's Korean and "Third World"²² body is occupied and divided. It is also a site of contestation as we reclaim our decolonized bodies for sexuality and desire. The lines: "Where is my demilitarized desire? Where is my decolonized body politic?" appear frequently in her work. Several collaborative works with her artist husband, Allan deSouza, address their double and triple colonization: he, a Goan born in Kenya who immigrated first to England and then to America; and she, the child of cold war politics, born in 1953 in divided Korea, which endured Japanese colonization and then U.S. neocolonialism, and later an immigrant to the United States, find themselves here being asked "What are you do-

ing here? Why don't you go back to where you belong?" "We are," Min says, "like errant children disowned for bad behavior by their foster parents because we don't belong in the model American family."

Min's installations are richly complex, the format allowing her to respond to her "compulsion to try to say everything in each and every work." It is here where she can create her own sort of order with suggestive and evocative collages from a large collection of fragments from her personal life while she explores the continuum between the personal and the political, between personal and official memory.

Min does not strive for a distilled image but rather a narration in space and time. For her, the concept or idea is more important than the materials; she does not move directly from idea to object. The materials encapsulate the ideas. In the installation *deCOLONIZATION* (1991), done for the Bronx Museum of Art, the letters for deCOLONIZE are taped across the floor diagonally. On one side of the room is a tree branch half in black and half in white, resting against a vinyl sheet that is also half black and half white. Written on this sheet are concepts Min considers to be "colonizing," split so that half of each phrase is in white against a black background and half are in black against a white background: salvage/savage, just/cause, desert/storm, right/might, civilizing/benevolence, free trade/zone. On the opposite side of the gallery is the fusion of nature and nurture—an unpainted tree, which Min names "the hybrid tree," with gourds hanging from it and the words of Aime Cesaire: "My gourd is heavy with stars." Against the tree is propped an old handwritten Korean language diary, and circling it in an outwardly moving spiral are small clay pots filled with rice.

"Bad women" are also featured in the installation. On another side of the room is an enlarged black-and-white photograph of Min's mother and some other Korean women on a U.S. army base, standing in front of an American-made car. The women work on the base, unaware that they are working for those who contribute to the death of their men. Layers of frosted Mylar create the sense of distance, fragmentation, and burial. The images flicker unevenly beneath material opaque and obscuring, like tracing paper or gauze. For Korean women, association with the U.S. military suggests prostitution, economic need, be-

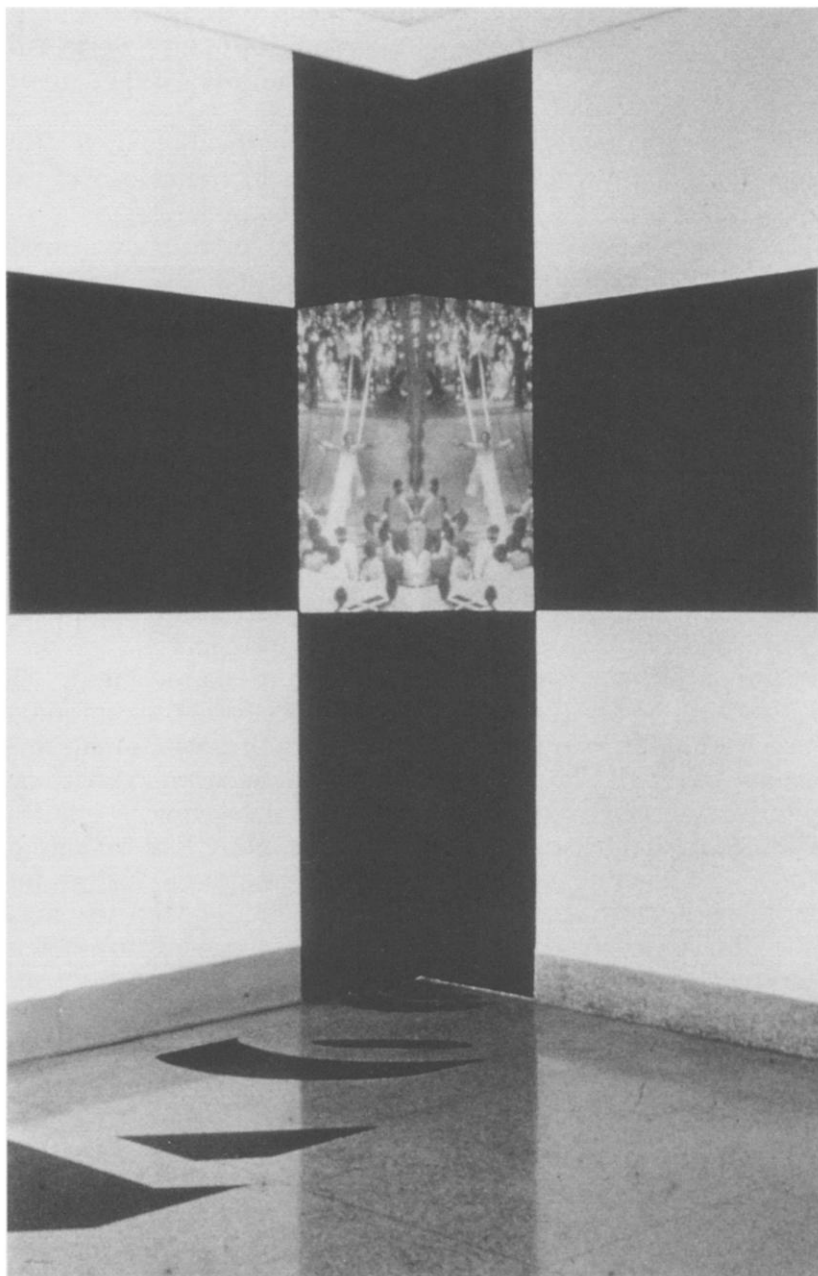


Fig. 10. Yong Soon Min, "deCOLONIZATION" (detail), 1991.

trayal of nation—"badness." The text reads, "OK, GI Joe, Checkpoint Charlie, I'm you first, your second, your third world girl, your mama-san, geisha, *ayah*, Miss Saigon, war bride, mail order bride, I'm yours."

Korean female identity is symbolized by the diaphanous Korean traditional dress that floats down in the center of the room, the *moshi* (flax) *ch'ima* (skirt) elongated. The dress envelops the female form, hiding even the pregnant body's curves with its own graceful lines, concealing with the illusion of fragility the resilience and fortitude of the bodies they enclose. The female strength suggested by the dress is represented again by the image opposite the doorway to the installation. Situated in a separate corner is a photo documentation of dancer Lee Ae Ju performing at an antigovernment rally in South Korea (fig. 10). She is splitting a piece of cloth by running through it. This image is mirrored in the corner so that she seems to be bursting forth from the constraints of a black cross that frames her image in red. Splitting the cloth cathartically releases *han*, the Korean word for sorrow and anger that grow from accumulated experiences of oppression.

Here, Min has given us several layers of "bad women": herself as the Korean American artist, Lee Ae Ju as the contemporary Korean activist dancer, and the traditional Korean *mudang* (shaman). The dancer, herself a "bad woman" because she uses her body in social movement activism, recalls the healing ritual movements of the quintessential "bad woman" of Korea, the female *mudang*. With the onslaught of Western imperialism and what Min views as its "handmaiden," the massive Christian missionary efforts in Korea (thus Min's use of the cross, which the dancer symbolically breaks from and transcends), the *mudang*, the mostly female pre-Confucian, pre-Buddhist traditional spiritual healers, became almost universally despised as a symbol of non-Western, premodern superstition and ignorance. Even those who (usually furtively) utilized their services viewed the female *mudang* as "bad women" because they were thought to prioritize their calling over their husbands and children; infantilize their husbands with their superior earnings; curse their social superiors, including men and their mothers-in-law, while in a trance; and be highly sexed and sexually expressive.

Young nationalists today recognize the *mudang* as representing indigenous cultural practices all but obliterated by Korea's encounter with modernity. But in my view, their symbolic importance lies in the fact that even though Korean official culture usually ignored the psychic and spiritual needs of women and the poor, the *mudang* traditionally ministered to the everyday needs of common people. For example, Confucian rituals for the dead traditionally excluded children who died before marriage and parenthood and women who died childless. The souls of such people, having no one to perform ancestor commemoration ceremonies for them, would have been condemned to roam the earth but for the *mudang*, who performed rites for them. By bringing back the *mudang*, tying her to the politics of resistance, and suggesting her triumph in the victorious dance, Min compels us to see "badness" in new ways, thereby opening a space for the nameless and giving us art to live by.

NOTES

I am grateful to Eungie Joo, Eithne Luibheid, and Moira Roth for their valuable comments on early drafts of this manuscript. Thanks also to Margo Machida for permission to quote from her unpublished interview with Hanh Thi Pham.

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20. Yong Soon Min, telephone interview with the author. May 1992.
21. See Yong Soon Min, "Territorial Waters: Mapping Asian American Cultural Identity," *New Asia: The Portable Lower East Side* 7 (1990): 1-10.
22. Min has said, "Korean American is one of the identities I assume; Third World is another" (interview).