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page 4



page 14



page 19

Cover by Yong Soon Min

- 2** Introduction: The Cutting Edge — Asian American Creativity and Change
- 4** Revolutionary Asian American Art: Tradition and Change, Inheritance and Innovation, Not Imitation!  
*by Fred Wei-han Houn*
- 9** Haikus *by David Monkawa*
- 10** Searching for an Asian American Music:  
Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo  
*by Norman Jayo and Paul Yamazaki*
- 13** Poetry *by Norman Jayo*
- 14** American Chinese Opera, Chinese American Reality  
*by Jack Chen*
- 18** Poetry *by Virginia Cerenio*
- 19** **THE VISUAL ARTS: Portraits/Visions**  
Works by Tomie Arai, Orlando Castillo, Santiago Bose and Yong Soon Min
- 25** Poetry *by Mars Estrada*
- 26** Ruthanne Lum McCunn: A Commitment to Historical Truth *by Forrest Gok*
- 28** Book Review: Sole Survivor *by Genny Lim*
- 29** An ABC from NYC: "Charlie" Chin, Asian American Singer and Songwriter *by Fred Wei-han Houn*
- 32** Hawai'i's Literature and Lunch *by Darrell Lum*
- 34** The Brown Power Poet: Serafin Malay Syquia (1943-1973)
- 36** Poetry *by Serafin Malay Syquia*
- 39** Tribute to a Pioneer Chinese American Writer:  
Louis Chu (1915-1970)
- 42** Best of the New: Recent book and record releases

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

Due to the popularity of and favorable response to our last issue's focus on Asian American art and culture, the editors of *EAST WIND* decided to devote an entire issue to the subject.

Fred Wei-han Houn, acclaimed New York-based Jazz musician, literature/music historian, critic, writer and political activist, as well as leader of the Asian American Art Ensemble and the Afro-Asian Music Ensemble, edited this special edition of *EAST WIND*. We hope it will stimulate more dialogue and debate on the development and current direction of Asian American art. Keep sending us your comments and suggestions.

*Denise Imura*

# The Cutting Edge

*Asian American Creativity and Change*

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By Fred Wei-han Houn

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**A**s guest editor for this special follow-up issue of *EAST WIND* on Asian American art and culture, I have attempted to present some of the finest of contemporary Asian American creativity that expresses a tradition of cultural resistance and a commitment for progressive change. This issue gives attention to new visual art and poetry, profiles and tributes, and historical and analytic essays that provoke theoretical and practical debate as to the character, function and direction of Asian American art and culture.

A highlight is the section of tributes to writers Louis Chu and Serafin Malay Syquia. Their works are examples of rich and vibrant portraits of Asian American community life. Both their literature and their lives were strongly connected to the masses of immigrants and workers of the Chinese and Pilipino communities, respectively.

My opening essay, "Revolutionary Asian American Art," argues for the historical character of Asian American culture as a continuum of resistance rooted to the lives and the struggles of the Asian laboring masses. I posit a general call for what would be revolutionary Asian American art today and encourage that work.

Scholar/historian/arts organizer Jack Chen's historical essay on Cantonese opera in the U.S., the earliest known Asian American cultural form, also draws lessons for the need to support Asian American art through greater audience development and strategies for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Greater numbers of Asian Americans must become conscious consumers of Asian American cultural products (besides cuisine).

These essays call for a broad unity between the artistic sector and the Asian American Movement, intelligentsia, entrepreneurs, students and communities. They also insist upon the creation of an Asian American art that is strongly rooted to the lives of its people, yet innovative and progressive.

The profiles feature artists/cultural workers who continue to generate new and valuable works. Forrest Gok profiles author Ruthanne

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Lum McCunn, whose books are highly dramatic Chinese American stories, and the current controversy over an author's control of his/her work when transposed to another medium. Noted writer Genny Lim's short review of McCunn's current book, *Sole Survivor*, highlights it as an addition to a growing body of Asian American literature that combines historical research with effective storytelling craft. Darrell Lum presents the work of Bamboo Ridge Press in developing a body of literature based in Hawai'i's local particularities.

Two popular folk-style musicians are also featured:

"Charlie" Chin of New York and San Francisco's Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo. Both have been making consistent contributions to contemporary Asian American culture through music and songs that were inspired from and have evolved with the Asian American Movement and their changing perceptions of its current needs.

**T**here is new, exciting visual art by Tomie Arai, Yong Soon Min, and two Pilipinos — Santiago Bose and Orlando Castillo. Clearly, their art embodies an Asian American sensibility in a field of all-too-common confusion and misguided, abstract notions of simply "being an artist." Min, a Korean American, also contributed the cover art.

Note the strong presence of Pilipino American poets and artists, giving the works featured in this issue an anti-imperialist cutting edge. This character to their work is no doubt shaped

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by the contradictions and sharpness of the struggle in both the Philippines and in the U.S. Pilipino Americans are the fastest growing Asian American population, yet they constitute the bottom socio-economic rungs. These conditions impel a critical-realist stance in the artistic expression of the community. Animated by a commitment to social struggle, the poetry of Norman Jayo, Virginia Cerenio, Mars Estrada, and the deceased Serafin Syquia, resonates with love, strength and defiant spirit.

Relative newcomer David Monkawa's haikus are strong examples within the tradition

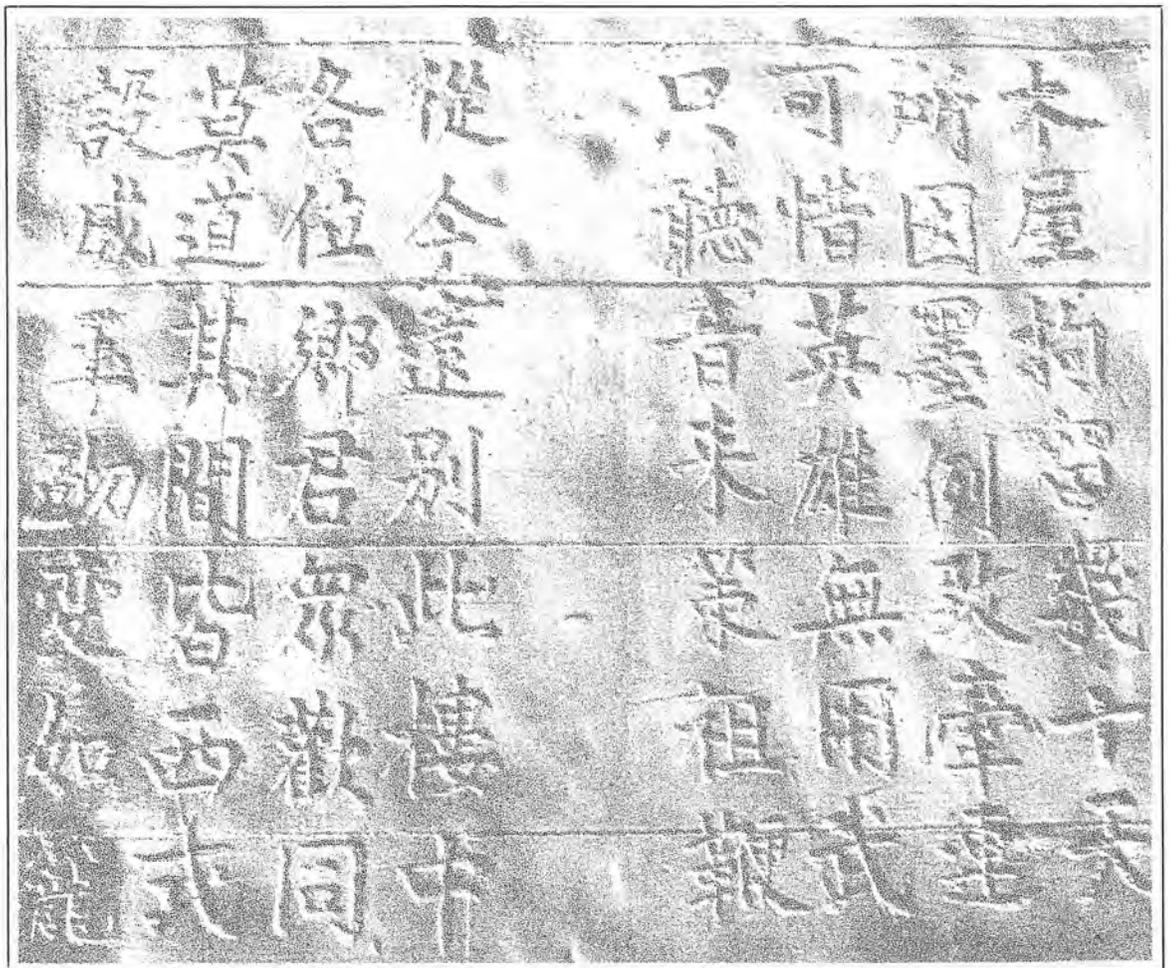
of Asian American writing by committed poet/activists. The haikus, utilizing a traditional form, nevertheless, are transformed to project a revolutionary content.

Finally, the "Best of the New" section features short reviews and announcements of important republished and recent works. These items are essential purchases for any serious study of Asian American culture. They also offer much joy and inspiration.

The commitment of art to liberation demands a constant creative effort, greater imagination and artistic depth, and makes for cutting-edge quality. This is art that accepts and expects the constant challenges to go further, to reach higher levels of aesthetic and social consciousness; not to simply describe reality, but to finally change it. □

May 1986

# REVOLUTIONARY ASIAN AMERICAN ART:



*Poem carved into barracks wall by an anonymous Chinese immigrant while detained at Angel Island Immigration Station. Translation by Hsu Kai-yu. (Courtesy of Visual Communications.)*

Several scores of days detained in this wood house,  
All because of some inked rules which involved me.  
Pity it is that a hero has no way of exercising his power.  
He can only wait for the word to whip his horse on a homeward journey.

From this moment on, we say goodbye to this house,  
My fellow countrymen here are rejoicing like me.  
Say not that here everything is western styled.  
Even if it were built with jade, it has turned into a cage.

# Tradition and Change, Inheritance and Innovation, Not Imitation!

Speech presented March 21, 1985, at  
Kearny Street Workshop, San Francisco.

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By Fred Wei-han Houn

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## Revolutionary Traditions in Asian American Culture and Art

At the time that the first Chinese contract laborers were brought to America, in China, Cantonese opera actor Li Wenmao was leading an armed uprising against the Chinese imperial government in 1854 during the Taiping Rebellion. All performances of Cantonese opera were subsequently banned and went underground. Thus, for more than a decade, Cantonese opera could only be openly performed abroad in overseas Chinese communities.

Cantonese opera was especially prevalent and popular in the Chinese community in America among the early Asian laborers and is one of the earliest forms of Chinese American culture, gradually evolving to incorporate the experiences of the Chinese in America. (An early example is a Cantonese opera about Angel Island presented in the early-20th century.) As an early Chinese American cultural form, Cantonese opera is also an example of the revolutionary roots of the Asian American cultural tradition.

The tradition of Asian American culture and art is essentially progressive and contains a strong revo-

lutionary current. This should come as no surprise since culture reflects the objective condition and character of the people. Since Asian/Pacific peoples in America have been continually oppressed, the dialectic would suggest that there has been resistance.

Other early Asian American folk cultural forms include the oral tradition of talk stories, ballads, chants, and folk songs brought over by the early Asian laborers from their peasant oral traditions. Carried over from their homelands, these oral traditions were a common part of life in the Asian labor camps along the West Coast and became increasingly shaped by the struggle to survive in

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---

America, *i.e.*, the contradiction between the dreams of Gold Mountain and the painful and brutal realities of contract labor.

Other examples include: The *muk-yu go* (wood-fish song), a form of narrative chant derived from the popular Cantonese oral narrative tradition. While chanting, a fish-head shaped wood block was beaten for rhythm. An example of such a chant appeared in a publication in Canton in 1905 during the boycott of American goods to protest the extension of the Chinese exclusion laws in the U.S. This piece was entitled *Night Cantos of the Gold Mountain Man*, and conveyed feelings of banishment and indignation over the agony and injustices faced by the Chinese in America.

Another example is the 46-syllable Cantonese folk song form called the *seisapluk jigo* with its 8-line patterns of 5-5-7-7-3-5-7-7 syllables, each ending with a rhyming syllable. These were often written and sung in the colloquial language. The only remaining collection of these folk songs is in an anthology of over 1,000 of such pieces published in two volumes in 1911 and 1915 entitled *Jian Shan Geji* (*Songs From Gold Mountain*), of which 246 of these songs have been translated into English by Professor Marlon Hom of UCLA.

Of course, there is the example of the poetry carved into the wooden barracks of Angel Island — hundreds of anonymous poems of the pain, loneliness, suffering and anger from being incarcerated in that hell-hole

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interrogation station.

One of the earliest examples of published Asian American literature is a collection of stories called *Ku Shehui* (*The Bitter Society*), published at the turn of this century and compiled as a collective literary outcry against the extension of the Chinese exclusion laws.

This is the folklore of Asians in America. By definition, folk culture is a collective body of community-derived traditions and forms with no known specific authors or creators, simply a part of the community's life. As such, folk forms and literature may not necessarily be well-crafted works, serving more as a functional part of daily work, ceremonies, rituals and social life, as distinct from art which developed primarily for aesthetic expression. We can clearly see that this beginning Asian American cultural tradition has been closely rooted to the Asian communities and to the lives of Asian workers. The themes of these traditional works express common feelings and experiences of separation, loneliness, disappointment, bitterness, pain, anger and struggle.

Asian American culture and literature cannot be correctly defined as works solely in the English language. Rather, the great body of the Asian American cultural tradition emanates from the working class Asian communities and is in the Asian languages and dialects.

I am opposed to the mistaken idea that early Asian American literature



*Detail from mural, Chi Lai/Arriba/Rise Up, Cityarts Workshop, Inc., 1974. Mural director: Alan Okada.*

is represented by Lin Yutang, Pardee Lowe, Etsu Sugimoto, Jade Snow Wong and other privileged writers of the merchant, high scholar, diplomatic and business class in America. These writers wrote in English for white publishers and to reach a white audience. As reflective of that small emerging petty bourgeois class of Asian Americans, their literature sought white acceptance, promoted the boot-strap path and projected their class interest: to be accepted by white society as model minorities, to be a credit to their race. They portrayed Chinatown as exotic, often apologizing for their community. Their literature was not the literature of the vast masses of Asians in America. It is my contention that even as literature, their writings are

narrow and limited in their emotional breadth and experience, whereas the vast body of literature emanating from the working class communities evokes and conveys a broader range of feelings and expression.

During the 1930's and 1940's, there was an active literary movement in San Francisco's and New York's Chinatowns influenced by the strong presence of left organizations in American labor and oppressed nationality struggles.

Chinese American Marxist writers were especially catalytic in generating many new community publications. Most of these were in Chinese. At first, the themes of these writings dealt mainly with China's

national salvation from warlordism, feudalism, and foreign imperialism. But as the Asian workers' struggles in the U.S. intensified, these publications came to address the struggle and lives of Chinatown workers and small businesses.

One of the main writers in this Chinatown literary movement was Ben Fee (president of the Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association — CWMAA — and Chinese section leader of the then-revolutionary Communist Party USA). Ben Fee was later "found" by Frank Chin as an example of an original "Chinatown Cowboy" type for Chin's own self-serving purposes, totally disregarding the fact that Ben Fee was a

communist.

Along with Ben Fee in San Francisco was Happy Gin Fu Lim, then-secretary of the CWMAA. While Ben Fee wrote in the old-style of writing, Happy Lim was an exponent of the new literature and developed and organized the New China Alphabet Language Association.

One of the giants of Asian American literature who wrote in that era was H.T. Tsiang, all but totally unknown to today's generation of Asian American writers. Tsiang was a communist intellectual and writer who wrote for the most part in English.

**T**siang published four books, three of which he self-published because the white capitalist publishers would not do so. Tsiang boldly published their rejection letters to him in his books. Tsiang's novel about a New York City Chinatown laundryman, *And China Has Hands*, is extremely funny, satiric and witty, yet politically very advanced and profound. Tsiang was hip before hip was hip, even making cameo appearances himself in his own books. Tsiang claimed to have distributed 16,000 copies of his *The Hanging On Union Square*, boldly denouncing the censorship of him as a revolutionary Chinese American writer for his proletarian politics. The endings to his books are caught up in sweeping socialist romanticism, but that was typical of that era of left-wing writers. Today's Asian American writers and researchers need to reclaim these great Asian American literary giants.

One of the most powerful of the critical realist writers of this era was Carlos Bulosan. His *America Is in the Heart* is, as E. San Juan, Jr. describes, "a veritable masterpiece in a genre of chronicling a young man's pilgrimage that in turn symbolizes the collective rite of passage of the Filipino working class in exile."

These writers represented diverse



Manong, silkscreened print by Jim Dong, 1985.

stylistic tendencies. They were also activists in the class struggle, which gave their writing truthful beauty and vitality. This has been the revolutionary heritage of Asian American literature and culture.

Further examples in this progressive heritage include the profusion of art, sculpture, crafts and poetry from the Japanese Americans interned during the concentration

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camps — passionate, filled with vibrant realism.

Though not leftists, artists and writers such as Miné Okubo, Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton) created moving works about the lives of the community people — stories about their work, families, love and conflicts. Often of a personal nature, yet these writings are intimately connected to community life, filled with compassion, sensitivity and a depthful understanding.

And another example of a great work of Asian American literature connected to the community and to the lives of its people is Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, a classic in Asian American writing. Chu, in my opinion, was an innovator, a Chinese American innovator whose own writing voice was able to realistically capture the feelings and meanings of everyday Chinatown communication. Simply, but in all

of its complex profundities.

It is my contention that Asian American art is not the loose collection of voices of artists who happen to be Asian American. Rather, Asian American culture and art is a collective body of folk and art traditions, a continuum to which our works will be judged. And I have tried to argue that within this continuum, there are different class tendencies. The strongest and most powerful works have been closely connected and rooted to the community, to the lives of the Asian American working class, while those works representing the Asian American petty bourgeoisie are more watered-down and white-assimilated and are weaker examples, peripheral to the thrust of this continuum. For Asian American cultural criticism, the point is not that each work represents a voice of a specific artist's experience, but what that voice is saying about Asian American life. Thus we can not evaluate an artistic work solely by the subjective intentions of the artist, but must deal with its impact in the real world.

## II What Makes Revolutionary Art Revolutionary?

In evaluating art, content is always primary — *i.e.*, the ideas of the work. All art is propaganda — it propagates ideas and feelings — but certainly not all propaganda is art.

We must be clear that art is not above or separate from society. The artist is not dispassionate or neutral to the world. A revolutionary analysis of culture and art deals with the class interest which it serves: the question of art for whom? But this question must not be treated mechanically, *i.e.*, by a simplistic numerical count of the audience whereby the majority must be workers. Art must reach *broadly* and include and reach different classes, but it must be clear whose interests it serves. And how are the revolutionary interests of the working class and oppressed peoples served?

**R**evolutionary art must intensify class antagonism; it is partisan, takes a stand with the masses; it attacks the enemy. It is art that accuses! Not to simply describe oppressive realities, but ultimately gets at why, and thereby makes us wise. Being "wise to the whys" compels us to rise and to act, to change reality. Revolutionary art boldly exhibits contradictions, the weaknesses and failures among the people, yet reveals the causes, shows the motion of our lives and of our struggles. Revolutionary art will also celebrate resistance. This is how revolutionary art serves the interests of the oppressed and exploited.

Another question: art about whom? Again, we can't be mechanical and one-sided. The subjects of revolutionary art must also be broad — revolutionary art is about life! But revolutionary art must be meaningful and relevant to the working class masses, the very people whom ruling class art degrades and/or ignores.

There must be the broadest range of artistic forms. We must be clear that even aesthetics are class partisan, that society conditions our tastes, values and norms about what

is beautiful and what we should love. Ruling class bourgeois aesthetics promote fear, alienation, submission, depravity: culture and values based on the supremacy of property ownership. The ruling class seeks to enforce its own image upon the world, *its* ideology and world view, as well as to keep the people in a state of confusion and impotence with a host of fads and trendy diversions, but never to offer clarity about exploitation and oppression.

Revolutionary art must be artistically powerful and politically revolu-

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tionary. It must inspire a spirit of defiance, of class and national pride to resist domination and backward ideology. Revolutionary art must energize and humanize; not pacify, confuse and desensitize. This is the liberating function of art, freeing the imagination and spirit, yet focusing us to our revolutionary potential.

I am adamantly against one-dimensional, so-called "correct" prescriptive forms that petty bourgeois critics try to label as "political art." I'm also not in favor of the errors of socialist-realist art with its glorified

"socialist heroes," but favor imaginative critical realism, a sensuous rendering of the colorful material world. Art can fill us with love, with hope and with revolutionary vision.

Ultimately society must be transformed through the organization of people for socialist revolution. Artists can contribute a critique of capitalist society. This is critical realism: to criticize appearances and obscured social relations, to show that social life is fundamentally class struggle and to expose and shatter the lies and false consciousness imposed on the people. To be an effective revolutionary artist, therefore, revolutionary ideology and talent are required. Artists play key roles in affecting *consciousness* and can help to transform the working class from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself.

The artist takes a stand through the practice of creating art and in his/her role in real struggle. After all, art comes from life. Revolutionary and progressive artists must delve deeply into the lives of the people, to be integrated with them.

Revolutionary ideas and spirit demand revolutionary artistry, not mediocrity and sycophancy. Revolutionary art is about what is coming into being. Therefore, it is innovative, not imitative or mimicking fads. Asian American artistic innovation will come from embracing and incorporating the broad tradition of Asian American culture in a creative leap in response to the actual leap in the level of struggle of the people. Innovation will not come about by abandoning Asian American culture for the "individual" and "universal." We must realize that the universal is expressed by the particulars. A full and deep grasp of the specificity and particularity of our experience naturally evokes the universal and makes for a truly rich and profound universality.

We need to study and grasp the traditional forms, not to be academic experts, but to create a living contemporary art through taking what is useful, positive, and rejecting the negative and backward. Tradition must serve liberation, to unite and focus us toward transforming the world. □

*Excerpts from:*

**COUNTER HAIKUS**  
**(An American Calendar)**

samurai's haiku  
written on paper that cleans  
peasants' blood off swords.

moon behind the cop  
casts a flaming cross shadow  
over still black limbs.

live poems will graze  
on virgin moss growing on  
capitalists' graves.

**David Monkawa © 1985**

*David Monkawa is a Los Angeles-based poet, artist, parent and Southern California co-chairperson of the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations. He is active in the labor movement and other struggles.*

## Searching for an Asian American Music

# Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo

Interview by Norman Jayo and Paul Yamazaki

Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo is an Asian American composer, singer, multi-instrumentalist and band leader. Since the mid-1970's, he has played a leading role in several Asian American music groups in the San Francisco Bay Area,

including the folk-style Yokohama, California; a duet with singer Lynn "Sam" Takimoto called Bamboo; the trio Bamboo Brew (with Phil Gotanda and David Henry Hwang on violin); the AAMO (Asian American Music Organization) with Gotanda, Sui-wai Anderson, Peter Horikoshi, Takimoto, and Patricia Shih; Kalilang kulintang (indigenous Pilipino percussion) ensemble; the ethnic-new wave Noh Buddies;

and his current group, Eth-Noh-Tec; as well as activity in PILAC (Philippine Arts in the Community). In the interview below, Kikuchi-Yngojo explains the development of his Asian American identity, political consciousness and commitment to a community-based Asian American musical expression. The interview was conducted by Norman Jayo (NJ) and Paul Yamazaki (PY).

\* \* \*

**NJ:** You were performing in a group about a decade ago called Yokohama, California, a folk group with its lyric in Asian American identity. You went on to team up with an Asian American woman, "Sam" Takimoto. Your music was very pop-oriented. So much so that it was said that you were the "Donny and Marie (Osmond)" of the Asian American music scene in the Bay Area . . . How did you take that and what did it mean to you?

**RK:** For one thing, I never listened to Donny and Marie! I see them as these young children singing nice, clean white music . . . I didn't see myself or the music, or the reason why we did the music, as "Donny and Marie." At that time, being aware of and committed to the Asian American Movement, I felt music was the vehicle for ideas to come across to create social change, more awareness. And I didn't see "Donny and Marie" doing that type of thing (laughs). It was definitely just pop. Although I could see what that label also meant — that our style had a pop sound to it . . . "

**NJ:** You were raised in a suburban town. Is that where the origins of white American pop music began for you?

**RK:** Yeah, I listened to the radio just like anybody else. I was influenced by everything from Martha and the Vandellas to the Beatles . . . there was a lot of rock 'n' roll. Sometimes there was Motown on the radio. I was drawn to the Mo-



Performing with Bamboo, 1977.



Seattle, 1979.



In 1981, Kikuchi-Yngojo pioneered the teaching and performing of kulintang music in California.

town sound. And if it was white music, I'd be drawn to something with a strong beat to it, a strong percussion sense in it.

**PY:** How conscious were you of taking in all these musical cultures?

**RK:** (Laughs) I was totally unconscious! . . . I was excited by the music of Trini Lopez, Harry Belafonte and calypso music and early reggae . . . At the *Obon* festival, there were sounds I was familiar with — the *tanko bushi*, the folk songs. My mother would like to sing the Visayan (Pilipino folk — *ed.*) love songs on the piano. Besides white culture, I was hearing the breadth of music growing up: European classical, folk songs from around the world . . .

**NJ:** How was your political consciousness shaped?

**RK:** It was in tandem both from our parents and the times of the late

'60's: Martin Luther King, Watts, Newark, the Civil Rights and Black identity movement had its effect on me to see that our situation as Asians was similar . . . I saw these injustices and the need for people to move in a positive direction; what am I going to do? How can I make that change happen? I entered college and at that time, I was going to be a doctor. To save the world through health care! I was exposed to the Asian Student Union (ASU) . . . that flung the door open for me as to all the thoughts I had growing up. I had these feelings and now could see the history of Asians and how other Asians had the similar experiences, same history, and now looked at myself in the context of a whole society of people. That's when I heard for the first time, Chris Iijima, Charlie Chin and Nobuko Miyamoto (then A Grain of Sand — *ed.*). They were doing Asian American songs in a folk style, speaking of who we are as a people, where we

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## The big lesson for me was to surrender all I knew in terms of learning music . . .

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are going in terms of making positive change. That definitely turned the light on for me . . . being involved with the ASU and seeing the cultural performances really woke up the artist in me. This could be another way of contributing to people. I saw the Asian American Dance Collective, Russel Baba, the Kearny St. Workshop people . . . There were a lot of publications coming out: books of poetry, history, writings, essays. It was a huge, swirling event that I was

starving for. When I left college and did *not* get into medical school, that was a big turning point. I moved to San Francisco. Before getting to San Francisco, I hooked up with Kenny Endo, who at the time was playing with Nobuko Miyamoto's Warriors of the Rainbow. Their sound was a fusion of taiko drums with electric piano, with an R 'n' B funk, Asian kind of sound that also excited something musically in me. When I moved to San Francisco, I was hungry for traditional music, hungry for fusing that with contemporary sounds. I saw that as Asian American: traditional and American values that could be combined into one.

**NJ:** This was the time when your folk-pop days took a drastic turn?

**RK:** We felt this desire for more rhythm, more percussion and syn-copation. We were influenced by the stuff that was coming out of the city . . . our song writing and singing was changing. By the time I rediscovered and really wanted to get into kulintang music . . . I decided to study with a kulintang master musician who was living in Seattle and prepared for a trip to the Philippines.

**PY:** This emotional resonance you found with kulintang, was that the major reason you decided to go to Mindanao?

**RK:** Yes, I knew I was going to get there . . . It was one accelerated year for me. I actually stayed in the Philippines for five and a half months . . . the last two and a half months were spent in intensive study.

**PY:** How did that affect you as an artist, being in the Philippines and actually studying the culture of one of your homelands?

**RK:** It was really emotional . . . I studied with Bailabi Mawiyag (a princess). She didn't speak a word of English. I spoke very little Maranao. The big lesson for me was to surrender all I knew in terms of learning music, because I was approaching kulintang music from a Western point of view . . . (but) that stuff

meant absolutely nothing there . . . The minute I decided to throw out what I knew, or thought I knew, and admit I knew nothing, the information was just flowing . . . In what we call mainstream pop music, it's such a formula, a prison of thinking and a prison of packaging . . . When I was in Mindanao, I realized, forget the packaging, the ABA (form), the chords, the beat. This is going to require communication without words. This is going to require me exposing myself, emptying



*I am and will  
always be com-  
mitted to the  
traditional form.  
Now that it's a  
foundation in me,  
I can use that as  
the building  
blocks . . . that  
would express the  
American-born  
part of me.*

my mind and brain and getting what she's playing, getting the communication there. It's so ironic, since kulintang music is social interaction without words . . . The value I got out of playing kulintang music was not just the forms, the beats, the rhythm, but more of an essence of how music can be a pure form of communication that requires spontaneity, immediate communication and no intellectualism. Just doing it, in action, now.

**PY:** With all these influences and journeys over the last ten years, where do you see yourself going now?

**RK:** I am and will always be committed to the traditional form. Now that it's a foundation in me, I can use that as the building blocks or the basis of other kinds of work that would express the American-born part of me. All the stuff that was me — the pop stuff, the R 'n' B, the Motown, Stevie Wonder, the Charlie Chin-Chris Iijima-Nobuko sound — can now all be used to weave with what I've laid down in the last several years with kulintang. Now the new chapter is the electronic age with synthesizers and rhythm boxes . . . almost like I was at the same point I was ten years ago: what is Asian American Music? I find that it's not any particular sound, not a sound. It is more like it lies in the heart of the musician; it lies in the listening of that musician's audience . . . It involves a context in which the artist lives his life, how he's committed to his people . . . The electronic music, the kulintang, the gagaku, it's all forming now into a concept I call Eth-Noh-Tec — *Noh* is a Japanese word for the phantom world of mystery — using ancient and future sounds, East and West, with the element of mystery in the world of technology . . . There's a wave going on. We are molecules of water in that wave . . . we are creating that wave. □

#### DISCOGRAPHY:

*Yokohama, California*, 1977;  
*Ballad of Chol Soo Lee*, Jeff Adachi project, 1978;  
*Noh Buddies*, 1983.

#### MUSIC FOR:

*Hollywood Mirrors*, a play by the Asian American Theater Company, 1977;  
*Quiet Thunder*, radio production by Norman Jayo, 1981;  
*Chan Is Missing*, theme song for the film by Wayne Wang, 1982.

Norman Jayo is an independent radio producer. Paul Yamazaki is a musician and historian of Asian American music and has been producer of the West Coast Asian American Jazz Festival.

## THE KINGFISH

THE SILVER BEAMS REFLECTED OFF THE OLD PHILCO SCREEN / STROKING HIS FACE WITH FLUORESCENT VIDEO IMAGES / HOLDING HIM CAPTIVE IN A 1950'S MIND LINK / THE KINGFISH WAS ON TV/ PUTTIN' SOMETHING OVER ON AMOS / ANDY HANGIN' BACK / THE STRAIGHT MAN / HE FORGOT MAMA'S CALL TO THE DINNER TABLE / THE BOY WAS BESIDE HIMSELF WITH LAUGHTER / THE BOY TURNED AND CALLED OUT / "... MAMA, LOOK AT THOSE NIGGERS..." / HE WAS ONLY SIX / HE DIDN'T KNOW NO BETTER / BUT HE DID SAY IT / SHE RUSHED TO HIM IN A BLUR / FASTER THAN SHE HAD EVER DONE BEFORE / 'CEPT THE TIME HE GOT HIS FINGER CAUGHT IN THE KITCHEN DOOR / THIS TIME / SHE GRABBED HIM BY THE BACK OF HIS SHIRT / THE NAPE OF HIS HAIR / THE BEAT OF HIS HEART / DRAGGING HIM TO THE BATHROOM / LIKE HE WAS TOO MANY POTATOES IN A SACK / ON THE WAY TO THE DARKNESS OF A CELLAR /

SUCH A SWIFT MOVE / LIKE THE FIRST TIME AN OCEAN WAVE PULLED HIM BELOW THE SEAWEED SWELL / THE MOTHER IS YELLING / ALL THE WAY DOWN THE HALL / THE KINGFISH IS DEFENDING HIMSELF / TO SOMEONE OFF CAMERA / THE CHILD IS PLEADING / AND CRYING AT THE SAME TIME / THE SOUND OF PAIN FILLED HIS EARS / LOUD / DROWNING / DEEP / THE WAY WATER TAKES LAND AT THE TIDE OF AN ANGRY MOON / TURNING THE FAUCET / AN ANGRY TWIST / THE MOUTH BURNS IN NEED OF FRESH WATER / TO WASH AWAY THE TASTE OF SOAP AND BITTER SURPRISE / MEASURED WORDS / "... I DON'T EVER WANT TO HEAR YOU SAY THAT WORD AGAIN..." / SLAP / ACROSS THE FACE / WET WITH LATHER AND TEARS / "... DO YOU HEAR ME... ?" / AGAIN / THE UNREASONING / "... DO YOU UNDERSTAND... ?" / EACH SLAP CREATES THE SOUND FLESH MAKES / HITTING BELLY FIRST ON WATER / SHE TURNS AWAY / UNABLE TO REASON AWAY / INDIGNATION / AWKWARD SHAME / HE WAS MOTIONLESS / ON THE DAMP LINOLEUM FLOOR / SOBBING BY THE BASE OF THE TOILET / CRYING FOR THE MISUNDERSTOOD / OTHER SOUNDS DRIFTED IN / AN ARGUMENT NEXT DOOR / THE KINGFISH'S VOICE / PLEADING / "... BUT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND... YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND..." / SHE STOPS IN THE HALLWAY / SHAKING / OUT OF SIGHT / WATCHING FROM A DISTANCE / ALONE /

THIS WASN'T LIKE SNEAKIN' COOKIES / OR CROSSIN' FIGUEROA STREET BY HIMSELF / OR PLAYING WITH THE LIGHTER IN MAMA'S PURSE / THIS WAS NEW / THIS WAS AN UNLEARNING / "... NIGGERS" / WAS THE BUS DRIVER'S WORD / "... NIGGERS" / SAID THE OLD WOMAN WHO SOLD PERFUME AND READ THE BIBLE / "... NIGGERS" / OUTSIDE STUB'S BAR ON THE CORNER / "... NIGGERS" / EVERYWHERE / LEARNING AND UNLEARNING /

SEEMED LIKE HE CRIED FOREVER / SOBS / IN RHYTHM / A MEASURE OF ANGER / HATE PLAYED AN UNMUTED SOLO / A CHORUS OF SELF-PITY / FRUSTRATION / LACED WITH SLEEPY TEARS / CLENCHED FISTS / ALL OF HIM SHAKING LIKE A BROWN LEAF / CAUGHT IN AN EARLY MORNING STORM / WARNING OF THINGS STILL TO COME / DAZED EYES FOCUS / A FAT HARD BACK LOW CRAWLING ROACH EMERGED / THE SPACE BETWEEN THE BATHTUB AND THE WALL / THE FIST / THE MIND / COMING DOWN HARD TOGETHER / KILLIN' THE ROACH / FOR THAT MOMENT HIS MOTHER / SHE / WATCHING / STROBES OF PAIN / TV SHADOWS / IN A HALLWAY WHERE THE KINGFISH CALLS OUT TO A SILENT HOUSE /

SHE CROSSED HERSELF / TREMBLING HAND / A SIGN / VISIBLE / FEAR / SADNESS / GUILT / INTO THE LIGHT / CROSSING / SHE STOPS / HE SEES / SUDDENLY / HIS ANGER DISAPPEARS / LEAVING THE CHILD THAT HE WAS / LEAVING THE MOTHER THAT SHE WAS / SORRY FOR ALL THAT IT MEANT / SHE WENT TO HIM / AS SHE HAD DONE SO MANY TIMES BEFORE / AND JUST ROCKED HIM / AND ROCKED HIM /

Norman Jayo © 1979

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Norman Jayo is a Pilipino poet, songwriter and radio activist and producer. He is on the media panel of the National Endowment for the Arts.

# American Chinese Opera, Chinese American Reality

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*Cantonese Opera's vital  
history provides lessons  
and tasks for Asian  
American arts today*

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FRANK WING

1983 — San Francisco  
Chinese Opera Troupe

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By Jack Chen of the  
Pear Garden in the West

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Performing arts groups of any minority community face special difficulties: in most cases, they have no ready-made back up organizational system to fund their activities, to publicize and stage their performances and to bring together their potential audience. They commonly have a hard struggle to arrive at the "take-off stage," when they and their potential audience achieve the "critical mass" that generates a self-sustaining interaction.

Groups in the mainstream culture enjoy the built-in advantage of having an organizational network built up over scores of years: funding organizations or well-known impresarios, financial backers, "angels," investors, corporate patrons, agents, PR agencies, journalists and critics, specialists in well-researched fields, theater and performing arts centers, supporting foundations and public opinion which demands such status symbols as the city opera, symphony and ballet troupe.

Those closely interested in the Chinese American performing arts realize that their continued successful growth demands a realistic assessment of their situation. No matter how talented, actors, singers, dancers, musicians all currently face a difficult period in which they must create an adequate support system. To create that system on an individual basis is doubly difficult. They must pull together.

This is the central organizational problem which must be faced today whether in San Francisco, New York or Los Angeles. In the U.S., there are over 800,000 Chinese Americans, a large potential audience, but they are scattered in these last remaining major Chinatowns with smaller communities in such cities as Seattle, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. While there is affluence in and around these communities, by and large they are not rich. That, too, presents problems for the theater arts because the box office is one of their basic sustainers. What can be done? What must be done? History provides some useful guidelines.

## Origins of American Chinese Opera

Chinese Opera is the common ancestor of the modern Chinese American performing arts and it remains the single most unique theatrical element the

Chinese American community can contribute to mainstream American culture. American Chinese Opera has an extraordinary and heroic history. The first Chinese Opera ever to be staged in the Western world was performed at the American Theater in San Francisco on Sansome Street between California and Sacramento in 1852, on the edge of the area which later became Chinatown. This was the R & R center for the Chinese gold miners laboring in the Sierra Mother Lode. At a time when other communities in the polyglot metropolis were importing their favorite entertainments, the San Francisco Chinese community, then numbering some 18,000, brought in their favorite — Cantonese Opera, a 123-member troupe. It was such a success that from then on until the 1960's, Chinese Opera was a constant feature of San Francisco Chinatown life and a tourist attraction to the whole city.

In those days, Chinatown's fluctuating population had few families. It was mostly young males with bunk beds for their "homes." The opera houses were their gathering places, their "clubs," their "community centers." A ticket cost 25¢. They visited the opera two or three times a week. The theaters were commercially run, but family and district associations comprising the so-called Six Companies were big patrons. An opera was a must for every festival or celebration and, they delighted to honor favorite stars from their clans or districts by sponsoring benefit performances.

**T**here was a well organized tour route. At its furthest extent it encompassed Canton — Hong Kong — the South Seas — Hawai'i — San Francisco and the Gold Country — Los Angeles — Seattle — Portland — Vancouver — the Midwest — St. Louis — Chicago — Toronto — the East Coast — Boston — New York — Philadelphia — Cuba — Mexico City. Eager to see their native opera, local communities helped make the necessary arrangements. Theaters maintained hostels for the touring companies. Local talent was always available to fill out casts as actors, supers or musicians.

#### **Role played by opera**

The touring opera companies were vital links between the scattered Chinese communities, particularly those too small to maintain much of a cultural life of their own. An opera performance played many roles. It was much more than entertainment. It was an instant "community center." Outstanding companies and actors were greeted with banners



*Cheet Sing Mui, star of the Great China Opera House in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1920's, strikes the pose of a woman warrior on horseback. (From the Wylie Wong Collection.)*

***Asian American artists currently face a difficult period in which they must create an adequate support system. To create that system on an individual basis is doubly difficult. They must pull together.***



San Francisco's Great China Theater staged this 1923 opera to aid Sun Yat-sen's revolution against the Chinese warlords of the 1920's. The slogans carried by the Girl Guides hail, "Government of, by and for the people," Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles, and his policy of "land to the tiller." (From the Wylie Wong Collection.)

across the streets. Their arrivals were great occasions, the talk of the town. Strings of firecrackers heralded their openings. Opera was an educational experience retelling the ancient legends and history; a school for social ethics inculcating the ancient lessons of right living and honorable behavior. It was a living course in literature and aesthetics with its grace and colorful costumes, a school for music, singing, martial and acrobatic skills. Chinese Opera is still all of these.

**I**n the darkest days of the Exclusion Era from 1882 to 1943, as many as four opera troupes might be performing on a single night. Why such popularity at such a time? Opera, even more perhaps than religion, sustained the spirits of beleaguered Chinatown dwellers with its dramas of the people's resistance to oppression, their triumphs over wrongdoers, the resilience of heroes and heroines in adversity. At a time when it was hazardous for a lone Chinese to venture beyond San Francisco Chinatown there was need for such role models as the demigod Guan Gung and sages like Quke Liang and Women Warriors like Mu Lan. The overseas Chinese invented their own mythologies. Guan Gung in China was the God of Battles, the patron of literature. In San Francisco Chinatown he was the Protector of those who travelled for a living: the immigrants, the merchants, the touring performers. His venerated image was in every theater.

From 1852 until the 1880's, the Chinese Operas that performed in San Francisco and other American cities were the same as those staged in China. They catered to the same people: adventurous Chinese farmers, pioneering artisans, merchants and the few women of their families who came with them. But

the 1882 Exclusion Act forced a change. The rigors of the times forced immigrants to make a hard choice and roughly half of them, the "sojourners," those who had come for a time to "make their fortunes," tired of anti-Chinese riots, packed up and left. The rest, the determined long-term immigrants, once they decided to hang on and stay, had to make the necessary adjustments to Americanize. They cut off their queues, exchanged their Chinese clothes for Western suits and leather shoes and went in for business, restaurants, shops and laundries in order to avoid the Exclusion Laws directed against laboring people. Chinatown became more and more middle class like the rest of mainstream America.

#### Opera's turning point

The Chinese Opera in America adapted to this change in its audience as well as to the revolutionary changes taking place in China where Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang Party was fighting to overthrow the effete yet still autocratic Qing dynasty and establish a Republic. Dr. Sun achieved his goal in 1911, but the new republic was subverted by the warlord Yuan Shikai, and China was rent by civil war and later devastated by the Japanese invasion of 1937. New operas written and staged at San Francisco's Great Star Theater on Jackson Street and the Mandarin (now Sun Sing) on Grant Avenue, responded to these events. From the Chinatown opera stages, new Women Warriors, emancipated women, defied the tyranny of old, out-of-date feudal customs. Modern revolutionary democrats battled feudal warlord villains to the applause of Chinese American audiences. Reflecting the increasingly realistic thinking of the times, realistic sets covered the formerly bare boards stage of the traditional opera. A modern American Chinese Opera began to emerge.

It is regrettable that these changes were nipped in the bud. The exigencies of wartime ended experimental modernization of the Chinese Opera in America. World War II San Francisco entered its Jazz Age and Chinatown followed suit. The Chinese Opera center shifted to New York to entertain the 15,000 Chinese seamen who served on the Allies' Transatlantic lifeline. The Pacific War and the post-war break in relations between the new People's Republic of China and the U.S. stopped the flow of opera performers from China for nearly 40 years. The old opera companies here failed to adapt to modern needs and conditions. Their old community sources of funding were inadequate. They never learned how to apply for federal, state and local grants and help from the corporate world, or use modern PR methods. Chinese Opera succumbed to competition from the cinema, radio and TV. Daily opera shows became a thing of the past. Except for very occasional amateur performances and a few touring troupes from Taiwan or Hong Kong, Chinese Opera ceased to be part of the American theater scene. The local opera troupes disbanded.

#### **Modern theater arts emerge**

But Chinese Opera is a synthesis of music, singing, drama, mime, dance, acrobatics, martial arts. While opera as an art form declined in America, its small constituent elements began to take on a life of their own.

**I**n recent years, Chinese and Asian American artists have formed vital modern dance, music and theater groups on both coasts. Important new artistic works have resulted.

These talented young artists — most are in their twenties and thirties — have matured extremely rapidly. Their best performances are of high professional quality. But their further advance is being seriously hampered by lack of suitable performing

***In the darkest days of  
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the people's resistance  
to oppression.***

space and of that support network, of which we spoke at the beginning of this article. Lack of a theater, the need to rent space even for rehearsals, the uncertainties of getting the proper space needed, send costs soaring and add to the hassles of production. A felt need to create the necessary support infrastructure of theater space, funding sources, publicity and touring facilities has brought together most of the main performing arts groups in San Francisco under the aegis of the Pear Garden in the West, the parent organization of the San Francisco American Chinese Opera.

This was formed just three years ago with two performers and an eight-man orchestra. Veteran and new young artists have gathered together again. In 1985, it staged five performances of three operas with a cast of six and supporting personnel. They are all determined to preserve the classical heritage of traditional opera and resume that earlier drive for a new modern opera that will answer the needs of the 21st century. The Pear Garden in the West has received great support from such funding sources as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the California Council for the Humanities, the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, and the San Francisco, Zellerbach, and Bank of America Foundations. They helped put it on its feet. Now it and its associated performing arts groups are faced with a further task: they are urgently seeking a performing arts center to serve as their home base. They are also working with other groups such as the Alliance for Asian American Arts and Culture of New York to reconstitute the old national tour route that served the old opera so well in the past. To achieve these goals they need the sympathetic help of the whole Chinese American community. □

**Jack Chen**, Chinese American historian, author of *The Chinese of America*, is president of the Pear Garden in the West: the San Francisco American Chinese Opera and Performing Arts Center.

## UNTITLED

"in manila, squatters throw stones at soldiers  
armed with American bullets  
and orders for eviction  
twelve year old Mary Grace Santiago, fallen  
into a pool of her own blood  
rushed into the white tomb of an ambulance  
dies in an hour's breath of time."

7/25/85

hail mary, full of grace  
yet too slow to escape  
the staccato notes of machine gun fire  
the lord is with thee  
the twelve years of your squatter childhood  
fallen into a red pool of your own blood

blessed art thou among women  
though you will never know  
beyond your mother's tear-filled kiss  
the miracle of your body  
changing with the seasons  
blessed is the fruit of thy womb  
the life you have sacrificed for this:  
the rain gutter roof for your family  
the smelly alleys lined with open sewers  
your playground, your home

holy mary, pray for us sinners  
the soldiers who fight brother sisters parents and cousins  
who torture and kill the young and old  
pray for us now mary grace  
and at this hour  
as you draw your last shuddering breath  
forgive us for trespassing  
the innocence of your childhood.

v.r. cerenio © 1985

Virginia Cerenio is a  
Pilipina American writer ac-  
tive in the Kearny St.  
Workshop's Bay Area  
Pilipino Writers Group. Her  
poetry has appeared in  
numerous Asian American  
literary anthologies, including  
Without Names, a new  
collection of Pilipino  
American poetry.

# P O R T R A I T S

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# V I S I O N S

**C**ontained in these visual art works are stories of Asian American life. They affirm an Asian American Experience marked by the richness of various national ancestries and diverse cultural traditions, yet with a consciousness of a common destiny and history of struggle.

Not simply "photographic" in their realism, these pieces project the multidimensionality of a people's experience, expressing their spirit, personality and living motion. They evoke the keenly felt warmth of the familiar and intimate — people we know,

faces and bodies that are, indeed, ourselves.

Asian American art and culture is necessarily "political" even though the subjects may not be specific issues or positions. But Asian American reality is the focus of this art, a reality that forces the basic issue that American art is not by, for and about white people only.

Taken together, the works by Tomie Arai, Orlando Castillo, Santiago Bose, and Yong Soon Min uphold pride, love, self respect, commitment, and the dignity of Asian American people: a democratic vision that celebrates the multinational and multicultural reality of America.

## T O M I E A R A I



Ms. Arai, a third generation Japanese American living in New York City, has coordinated Third World community mural projects since the early 1970's, and works in printmaking, graphic design, illustration and painting. "As a third generation American of Japanese ancestry — a *Sansei* — I have tried to incorporate the influences of both cultures in my work as my part in a collective effort to create an Asian American calligraphy or artistic language based on the unique experience of Asians in America." She is currently teaching art in the Children's Art Carnival program in Harlem.

## O R L A N D O C A S T I L L O



Mr. Castillo came to the U.S. in 1984 and now lives in Los Angeles. He is both a visual artist and activist. For six months in 1973, he was detained by the Marcos government. While in the Philippines, he was president of the Art Association of the Philippines and active with the Concerned Artists of the Philippines in Manila. Says Castillo, "I believe that art is not merely a creation of the mind but the mirror of the artist's involvement with his surroundings and his life experience." Philippine Arts in the Community (PILAC) will be sponsoring a major San Francisco exhibition of Mr. Castillo's work in early June. For more information, call (415) 386-2779.

## S A N T I A G O B O S E

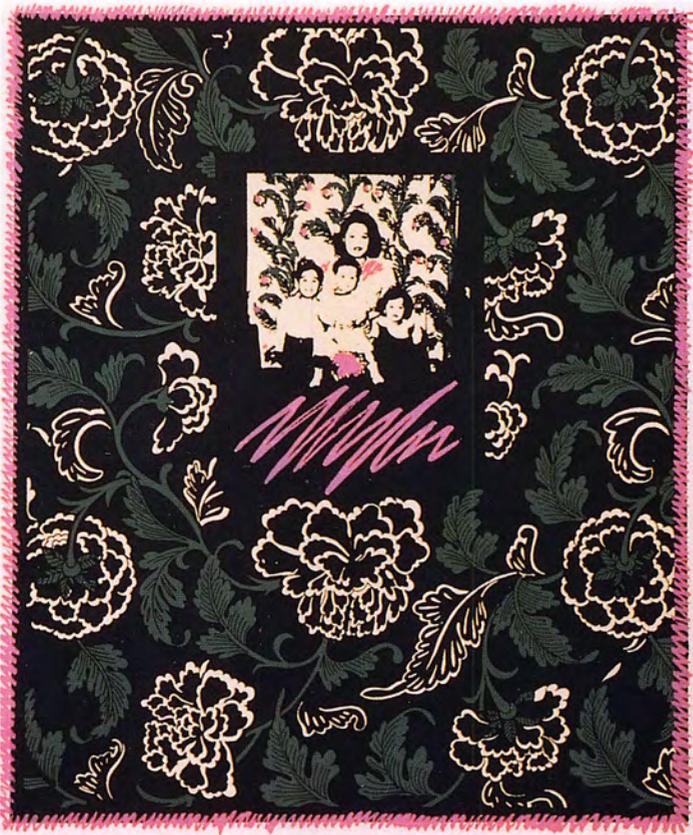


Mr. Bose is a Pilipino artist working in New York City. About his art, Bose states, "I try to be self-reliant with my concept and materials. It gives me freedom to be an artist without being dependent on art stores. It also makes a creative person in a poor country aware of what is in his habitat." His featured work, *¿Aqui? ¿No!* — a word play on "Aquino" and translated as *Here? No!* — is titled to memorialize the assassination of Benigno Aquino and to send a message to the assassins who thought his murder would thwart the aspirations of the Pilipino people for democracy. Yellow confetti (from phone books), prepared to celebrate Aquino's homecoming, became a symbol of protest upon his assassination, and a regular part of future demonstrations — a tactic to aggravate the government with the cost of cleanup.

## Y O N G S O O N M I N



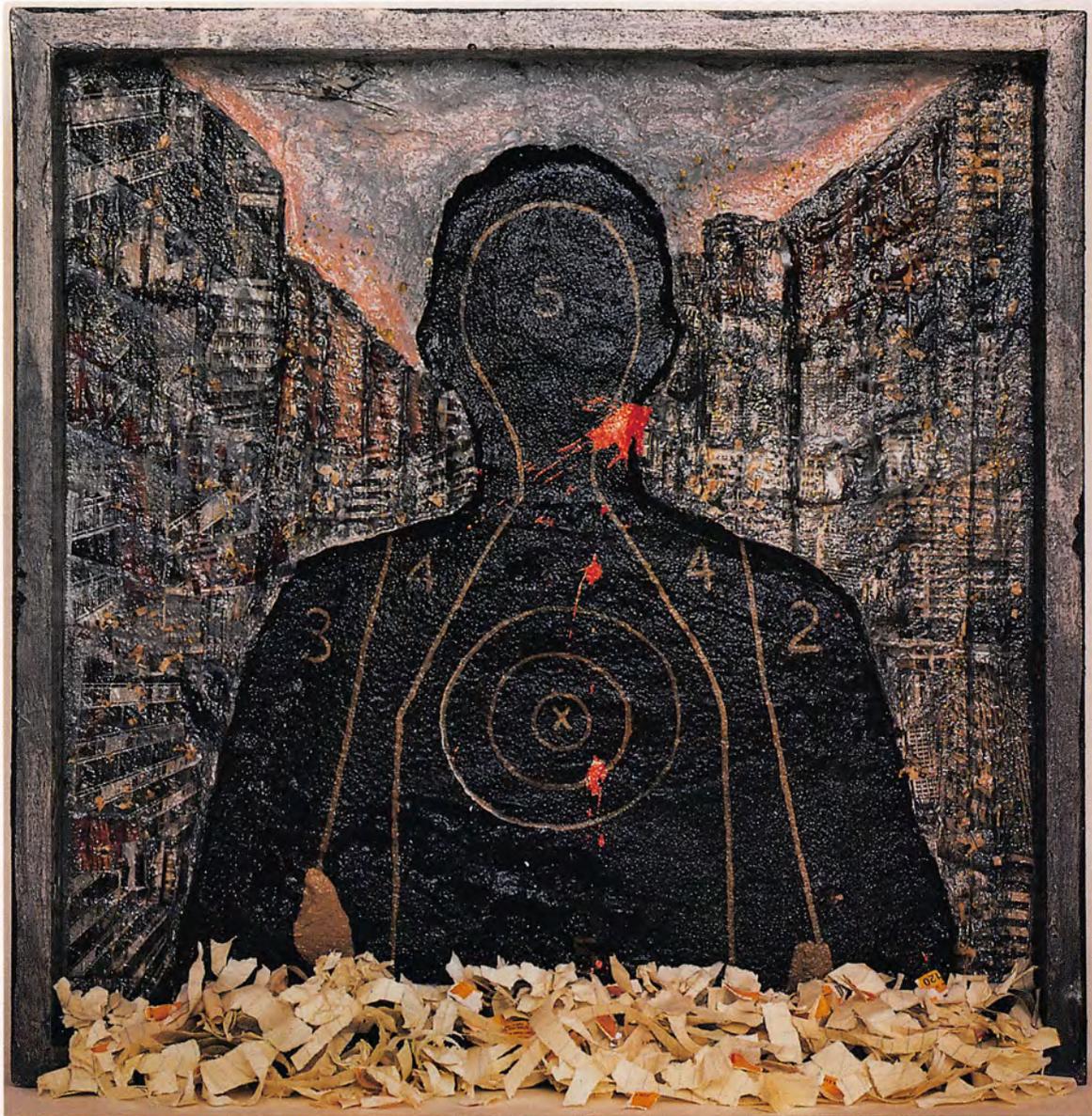
Ms. Min is a Korean American working in New York City. She has an MFA from UC Berkeley, residencies with the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and Yaddo. She taught for three years at Ohio University. Both works were featured at the "Roots to Reality" festival in 1985, sponsored by the Alliance for Asian American Arts and Culture and the Henry St. Settlement/Arts for Living Center in New York City. *Back of the Bus, 1953*, is part of a series of reflections on the U.S. military presence in south Korea — interactions with Americans and the impact upon the lives of Korean families who lived on U.S. military bases.



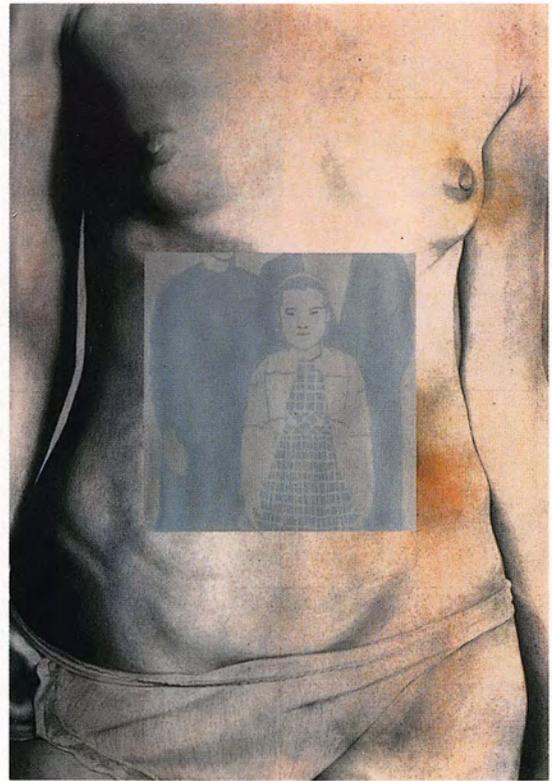
**TOMIE ARAI** (top) *Japanese Laborers*, 22 x 30 in., mixed media on paper, 1983;  
(bottom) *Portrait of a Chinese Family*, 14 x 17 in., silk screen, 1984.



**ORLANDO CASTILLO** (top) *Inang Bayan* (Motherland), 22 x 30 in., watercolor pastel/mixed media, 1985;  
(bottom) *Sakada ng Negros* (Sugar workers of Negros), 22 x 30 in., 1986.



SANTIAGO BOSE *¿Aqui? ¡no!* (Here? No!), 25 x 25 in., mixed media, 1983.



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**YONG SOON MIN** (top) *Back of the Bus*, 1953 , 29 x 40 in., drawing, 1985;  
(bottom) *Immigrant*, 39½ x 28 in., mixed media drawing, 1985.

## THERE ARE ROPES . . .

There are ropes  
tied around our necks  
keeping us suspended  
between life and death  
leaving us dangling  
dangling  
kicking  
gasping  
gasping  
last breath after  
last breath

These ropes have  
all kinds of names like  
democracy and constructive  
engagement  
like economic and military aid  
defense and military budget  
like SDIs and Star Wars

more concretely  
like  
hunger  
unemployment  
diseases

some are tied  
around our eyes and ears  
like hope  
education  
and lottery  
or have hypnotic names  
like sports and  
entertainment  
baseball football basketball  
superbowl world series olympics

Manufactured by the same  
companies  
these ropes  
have the same fabric  
as olden time ropes  
tied from beams  
or trees

But don't mistake it  
as if  
as if these new ropes  
are not enough

from time to time  
the old rope is pulled out  
of the museum shelf

Not far from here  
one dark night when  
we were busy  
watching commercials  
a black brother  
was hanged from a tree

Suicide  
they called it  
the next day

**mars estrada**  
**15 jan 1986**

*Mars Estrada is a Filipino American writer active in the Bay Area, and a member of the Kearny St. Workshop's Filipino Writers Group. His poetry appears in their new anthology, Without Names.*



Ruthanne Lum McCunn

# Ruthanne Lum McCunn

## A Commitment to Historical Truth

By Forrest Gok

"I wrote my first book (*The Illustrated History of the Chinese in America*) because as a bilingual education/ESL high school teacher in San Francisco, I had no materials about Chinese Americans to work with, so I created my own."

That's how Ruthanne Lum McCunn — librarian, educational consultant, and teacher — described her initial undertaking into the literary world and becoming Ruthanne Lum McCunn, writer.

Although she has only been writing and publishing since 1979, McCunn has created an admirable body of work which has given her readers strong Chinese and Chinese American heroes and heroines, Chinese American historical sensibilities, and vivid re-creations of Chinese American realities so often lacking in other works about Chinese and Asian Americans.

Beginning with *The Illustrated History of the Chinese in America* (1979), a pictorial history of the 200 years or so of the Chinese American experience, through *Thousand Pieces*

of *Gold* (1981), the story of the real life experiences of Chinese pioneer woman Polly Bemis; *Piebiter* (1983), a children's book about the first Chinese American folk hero in the American West; and *Sole Survivor* (1985), a painstaking account of Poon Lim, the world record holder for survival at sea, McCunn has obviously chosen her subjects for their historical and socio-cultural importance, inspirational quality, and to offer proof of the enduring courage and resolve of Chinese and Chinese American pioneers.

"Although I had always been interested in writing, I really never thought about it seriously until I saw a film about (historian) Connie Young Yu's mother describing her Angel Island experiences. She was weeping as she spoke and I was so moved on a gut level that I thought to myself, 'I'm going to write about that,'" said McCunn.

After writing a short story on the Chinese immigrants' experience on Angel Island, McCunn started the mechanism rolling towards writing on a full-time basis by doing *Illustrated History* and publishing it herself through Design Enterprises, the company she and her husband Don started to distribute his sewing pattern books. She bankrolled her first writing enterprise with the pen-

sion funds she cashed in upon leaving her teaching job with the San Francisco Unified School District.

"It really worked out for the best leaving teaching. I was assigned to teach a bilingual class in social studies when I was only credentialed to teach English. I refused the assignment because it would have been ridiculous for me to teach social studies. I wanted to force the issue of classroom assignment anyway and I wound up quitting on principle.

"I've always been someone who has done what I believe in, so it made perfect sense to go into writing at that point." With that tenet to guide her, she channeled her energies into the writing, publishing and distribution of her books — literally a one-woman band.

"It was not my original intention to write about Chinese Americans all the time . . . But, I found that I had an emotional feeling about the stories of Chinese Americans I discovered during my research on previous books."

In fact, it was during her research on *Illustrated History* that McCunn uncovered the story of Polly Bemis, whose incredible journey from Chinese peasant girl in the 1870's to the

first Chinese American pioneer woman in Idaho, inspired her to write her best-known and most heartfelt work.

Through her travels to Idaho talking with the locals who were reticent to talk to possible exploiters of Polly's lore, and researching libraries and historical archives, McCunn grew to admire and marvel at Polly's indomitable spirit and determination. Her affinity for the heroine of *Thousand Pieces* made her as cautious as those Idaho townspeople when approached by numerous film producers about the screen version of the book.

McCunn weighed several offers, including one from PBS' "Great Performances" series, before finally selling the option for film rights to Nancy Kelly and Kenji Yamamoto, two San Francisco Bay Area independent filmmakers.

"I felt that Nancy and Kenji had reflected a true empathy and understanding of their subjects in their previous works and could bring a strong feminist and Asian point of view to the film . . . They were also local filmmakers and it would be convenient to work together. I thought it was going to be a collaborative effort."

However, at the time of this interview, McCunn is in the midst of a controversy with Kelly and Yamamoto over the initial film treatment (outline) of the film. She believes that the spirit of the film is being changed for commercial considerations.

"The treatment which I read disturbs me because of what was changed about the story. The whole point of the story was that Polly was an independent woman, a woman surviving alone in the West with her spirit intact . . . She was not a prostitute . . . She was not a helpless Asian woman dependent on a white man . . . The tone of the film treatment distorts Polly's story."

**M**McCunn voiced objections to the manner in which her book and Polly's story were changed, and brought the matter to the attention of the Asian community when the

filmmakers ignored her.

"My obligation is to Polly Bemis, to her memory, to her life, to make sure that the importance of her life is told in truth. My obligation is also to the people in Polly's community in Idaho who cooperated with me. Having won their trust, I owe them an historical truth.

"If one changes history by addition, one can also change it by omission. This is not simply a creative difference between author and filmmaker . . . We're talking about a commitment to re-creating a life

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*If one changes  
history by addition,  
one can also  
change it by  
omission.*

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Polly Bemis

through historical accuracy."

McCunn is also concerned about the Asian community's reaction to a "distorted" film. "Because there are so few Asian American productions, they must reflect truth. Their impact is so great, especially a product by Asian Americans, we're even more beholden to reflect truth.

**"I** think that the film *The Color Purple* is a perfect example of how a film changes the spirit of a book. The choices made in that film really demean Blacks. On the other hand, *The World According to Garp* and *Sophie's Choice* are two examples where the filmmakers captured the spirit of the novels without following them exactly, so it can be done."

With the resoluteness and determination of her cherished Polly, McCunn said she "has to believe" that the film will eventually turn out because "I tried to buy the rights back and they (the filmmakers) refused . . . I went to a lawyer to see what I could do and was told there was no legal recourse . . . so I'll try to make the film work by continuing to offer suggestions which will do the story justice . . ."

"I'm hoping that I'll have some input in a proactive way rather than a reactive way after the damage has been done. With an upswing in films like *Year of the Dragon* and so forth, which stereotype Asians and Asian Americans, it's important that our community's opinions be given to producers before films are made."

As she did when she started her writing/publishing adventure nearly eight years ago, McCunn is still operating from a gut level with a clear perspective on her own Asian American sensibilities and sensitivities.

"Of course I do worry that I am coming off as an arbiter of taste," she added, "but the community is diverse and I am entitled to my opinion. I hope my bringing this issue to the public's attention will help stimulate thought" — which is basically what she has been doing all along. □

**Forrest Gok** is a freelance writer, arts critic, editorial consultant, and contributing editor of EAST WIND.

Book Review:

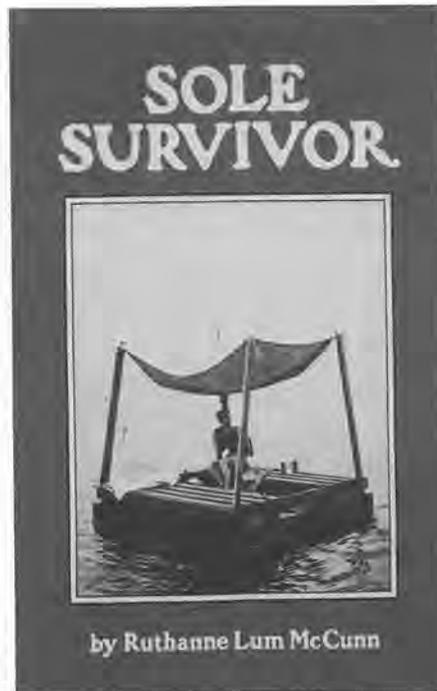
# Sole Survivor

By Genny Lim

Ruthanne Lum McCunn, author of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, the true story of the Chinese American woman pioneer Polly Bemis, succeeds in resurrecting another incredible saga from the buried depths of Amerasia. Her *Sole Survivor* is the story of Poon Lim's days while adrift in the Atlantic beyond the northwest coast of Brazil while on a wooden raft. McCunn gives us a seemingly firsthand, almost blow-by-blow account of the traumatic events that challenged Lim's life, from the moment a German U-boat torpedoed the British merchant steamer, *Benlomond*, where he was a second steward, on November 23, 1942.

Lim, its only surviving member, floated 130 days at sea and was finally rescued by fishermen at the mouth of the Amazon River. Hailed as the "World's Champion Survivor" by *National Geographic*, Poon Lim was bestowed the British Empire Medal in 1943 and continues to hold the Guinness World Record for survival at sea.

Told in the third person narrative voice, McCunn documents Lim's experience with religious detail and chronology, perception, caution and credibility, without ever losing sight of the fact that this is a biographical novel, and not a fictional tale. This task is made ever more complicated, in one sense, because Poon Lim is a man still alive, living in New Jersey with his family, and not a folk hero conjured up by an author's romantic design. Therefore, McCunn's characterization of the man must be dictated by reality and authenticity, rather than sheer fantasy or sensationalism.



*Sole Survivor*, by Ruthanne Lum McCunn, published by Design Enterprises of San Francisco, P.O. Box 14695, San Francisco, CA 94114, \$14.95 hardcover, \$6.95 paperback.

McCunn does embellish this adventure story with dramatic narrative descriptions of inclement weather, would-be rescues, shark threats and other calamities, to sustain suspense. In order to give the reader a better grasp of Lim's Chinese sensibility, McCunn makes abundant references to village life, Chinese mythology, folk tales, superstitions and legends, through Lim's narrative thoughts.

McCunn also uses this saga of masculine achievement to parallel the everyday unsung heroism of the village womenfolk:

*A memory, long buried, surfaced: Because his mother's feet had been bound in childhood, Lim's father carried the heavy wooden buckets of water for household use from the village well, though it was a woman's chore. Yet she plodded eight li to visit her mother each month and carried Lim as well . . . Pretending he was riding a stallion, he wrapped his arms tight around her neck, and as she staggered forward, he*

*dug his knees into her sides, urging her to go faster.*

As Poon Lim is braiding the line for a new fish hook, again he thinks of the womenfolk:

*Twisting the strands with tender fingers, he was his mother and sister-in-law, their eyes glistening with unshed tears as they pushed their long, thick needles in and out of the layers and layers of paper and cotton wadding that made the soles for the family's shoes. A thousand stitches to every sole. A thousand twists of hemp to complete the fishing line.*

These passages offer some of the most effective images in the book. McCunn's strength as the author of Poon Lim's story is, ironically, her woman's perspective. Rather than just another tribute to machismo endurance, we have a sensitive depiction of the critical struggle for the survival of the human spirit.

What makes Poon Lim more than just another survivor is his yellow skin. Had it not been for his color, destiny would have prevented his long ordeal. The ship, which had come to his rescue, would not have refused to pick him up when it saw he was Chinese. Because he was Chinese, his life held value only to himself. Poon Lim triumphs against man and nature. It is this test of fortitude, this courage under the harsh reality of man's own inhumanity to man, that makes Lim's victory doubly meaningful, monumental to those of us who struggle the good battle on a comparatively mundane level. McCunn is to be commended for her research into the lives of pioneers like Poon Lim and Polly Bemis, who would otherwise never see the light of an American history book. □

Genny Lim is the author of *Paper Angels*, which aired on PBS' *American Playhouse*, July 1985; co-author of *ISLAND: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*; and the bilingual children's book, *Wings for Lai Ho*.

An  
**ABC**



from  
**NYC**

"Charlie" Chin:  
Asian American  
Singer and  
Songwriter

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By Fred Wei-han Houn

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"Charlie" Chin is a popular and prolific songwriter, storyteller and singer who has serenaded Asian American community and student audiences with songs about Asian American history, identity, love and struggles for more than a decade. Born in 1944 as William David Chin, homegrown to New York City, he is fondly known to most as "Charlie," a name given to him by neighborhood youths while growing up as the only Chinese American boy in Manhattan's Upper West Side.

"Charlie" grew up with music in his family and started to play the acoustic guitar at age 16 as he and other youths were interested in the folk music movement of the 1950's with Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger as its most prominent figures. In trying to impress an early romantic interest, Chin took up the banjo to distinguish himself among all the many guitar players of his age in Queens.

Soon after finishing high school, Chin entered the life of a professional musician. Drawn to the late-'50's "Beat" scene of New York's Greenwich Village, Chin was hanging out in small bohemian cafes listening to the poetry and music. The Village had become a haven for many folk musicians living a romantic "hand-to-mouth" existence.

It was in the Village that he developed his poise as a performer, learning to be comfortable on stage from night after night of playing piggy-back sets, running between breaks from one club to another, sometimes playing in houses with only one customer, to hustle some money. During this time, Chin worked mostly folk duets and trios, such as the Kingston Trio, the New York City Ramblers, Jive and Jean, and Charlie and Jay. By the mid-'60's, "Charlie" Chin was

deep into bohemian life.

In 1968, Chin found himself playing rhythm guitar in a commercially successful rock band called Cat Mother and the All Night Newsboys. The band soon bought a house in upstate New York, outside of Woodstock, to build a rock commune, and threw weekend mini rock festivals they called "Sound Outs." These "Sound Outs" turned into major rock events and drew an audience of 2,000 people each weekend, epitomizing the lifestyle of the Love Generation of late-'60's white youth. And this lone Chinese American had immersed himself "totally and completely" as a hippie.

Cat Mother... soon signed with big-time rock management and did some 30-odd shows as the opening band for Jimi Hendrix. As Chin describes, "We were living high off the hog. We recorded an album for Polydor, *The Street Giveth and the Street Taketh*, and released a hit single called *Good Ol' Rock 'N' Roll* . . ."

But the white rock experience was a negative one for Chin. In the example of Hendrix, "whom everybody held in awe as a god-like figure," Chin came to see the decadence and manipulative use of drugs in the

white music business:

"(Jimi) was a golden goose that everyone was expecting to lay more eggs . . . Rock music kept the kids 'happy' and on drugs . . . if the rock band wrecked a hotel where they were staying, it was okay since the record company would pay for it."

While in the middle of it, Chin had done a lot of drugs and alcohol himself. When Hendrix died of an overdose in England, and Janis Joplin OD'd a month later, for Chin it seemed to be the time to get out of a scene that was coming to an end. For Chin, the music had become formulaic. And after years in the Village and white music world, "Charlie" Chin was as confused and lost as ever. By 1970, sick of it all, Chin, astounding his friends in the business, left.

Sometime around 1971, while working as a bartender, Chin was invited to perform at an Asian American conference cultural program at Pace University, and thus introduced to the emerging Asian Movement. For the first time, he was exposed to an all-Asian audience and introduced to "Asian American music" in meeting the then-duo of Joanne (now Nobuko) Miyamoto and Chris Iijima. Out of this meeting and inspiring ex-

perience, the three formed A Grain of Sand, an Asian American version of Peter, Paul and Mary — musically not very different in form from the current white pop-folk groups, but with a content uniquely expressing the struggles of Asians in America. The group and its role in the Asian Movement deeply influenced Chin's current direction in life. He recalls how they would often discuss music, art and politics. Chin credits Miyamoto as the most militant of the three, radicalized by her contact with the Black Panther Party:

"A"t the time, Joanne was the 'erotic-exotic' girlfriend of this Italian filmmaker doing a documentary of the Panthers and she came to see how the Panthers were right about the state being out to kill them . . . Inspired by the Panthers, she felt that the Asian Movement, too, had to stand up around issues such as racism and U.S. aggression in Viet Nam, that Asian Americans had to make their voices heard, to get off their knees and no longer be a quiet minority."

The group recorded the first Asian American album, *A Grain of Sand*, for the left music label, Paredon, and

was significant as one of the first modern *Asian American* cultural groups that reflected the cultural and political explosion of the late '60's Asian Movement. A Grain of Sand inspired a similar West Coast band, Yokohama, California.

After the group disbanded, Chin, now conscious of himself as an Asian American artist, continued performing for Chinese (and then later, Asian American) student groups, community benefits and Movement programs. He worked briefly in the Jazz scene with David Amram. Chin also worked at folk festivals around the U.S., but now questioned, "whose folk?"

"Not my 'folks' . . . the emphasis is on Anglo-American folk music, with some, but not much, Afro-American folk music. Usually the Black performers they had were older Black men who aren't threatening — an Uncle so-and-so, singing the blues, not a troublemaker . . . usually there isn't any attention to the other folk cultures in the U.S. For them, Asians didn't exist. But sometimes, they would ask me, 'Do you know any traditional Asian music?' The reason why traditional Asian culture appealed to these white liberals is because it is non-threatening — it's distant and therefore exotic. They don't want too much of it, only a couple of minutes . . . just a sampling and not to really *experience* it . . . In a days-long so-called world music festival such as the Hudson River Festival . . . maybe 45 minutes would be devoted to the rest of the world."

Chin feels his work is important as it emphasizes identity and cultural awareness: "Asian Americans should be conscious of their history, culture and position in society." He feels the 1980's yuppie-pressures on young Asian American college students require that his work become "more entertaining and digestible — now that there is no great Asian Movement and that the revolution won't come next year — yet still communicate Asian American cultural pride and identity."

Chin's current studies involve traditional Chinese and Japanese music, "the folk music of the villages, com-



December 1976, jam session at Kenny Endo and Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo's place. Left to right: George Abe, "Sam" Takimoto, Gordy Watanabe, Chin, Paul Yamazaki.



Chin in between sets at Folk City, New York City, 1982.

munities and common people" and not "the obscure classical Asian arts, which even in its day was limited to the upper classes. I'm interested in the folk arts of China, Japan and Korea — the culture produced over thousands of years by thousands of nameless people."

"Charlie" Chin's current performances involve one-man shows. They include: *ABC* (for American Born Chinese), "a one-man play with songs and monologues strung together with the premise of being Chinese in America"; *Guest of the Flowery Flag*, an extended monologue about the lives of 20th-century laundrymen in New York Chinatown, done as a talk-story by a laundryman telling stories "in the way I've heard older people talk." Through Chin's performances, he carries on the traditions of Asian American folk culture:

"Most early Asian American history is not written down, but has been orally transmitted. These old stories and recollections give evidence that these workers weren't robots, but were very conscious about what was going on around

them, why they came here and the sacrifices they made."

Now working on a yet-to-be-presented work, *Dr. Sun Yat-sen, The American Years*, Chin is frank about the fact that he has never made a living as an Asian American artist consciously doing Asian American culture. He continues to make a living in:

"... a delicate balance working in the food and beverage industry (as a bartender) and performing ... and it's tough, working nine hours on your feet, throwing out troublesome customers, dealing with problems, and going home trying to write a new song."

Chin also isn't into the "grant game":

"There's a saying, 'Old revolutionaries don't die, they just apply for grants ... (grant dependency) takes the edge off of creative perception ... life becomes a series of endless grant applications and very little work gets done. The means have become an end. It's valid to pursue the grant game, but this shouldn't be

the end of one's creative endeavor ... an artist shouldn't be limited ... but should draw from a deep reservoir of real life and experiences."

He advocates that his present work is for "theater aimed at a middle class, though elastic enough with its topics and subjects to relate to the whole Asian American community." But he continues to see his work, and that of other Asian American artists, as something that should be "from our own consciousness, not an imitation or cheap reproduction of the mainstream ... (we shouldn't) ape white behavior, but develop our own history, culture and aspirations."

After almost ten years, his second Asian American record, *Back to Back*, came out in 1982 on the small Asian American label, East/West World Records. Continuing to do new Asian American cultural work, "Charlie" Chin recognizes the urgent need for the Asian Movement "to have our own arts, theater, recording companies, and we (the Asian communities — ed.) must support them. If we don't, Asian American artists will be forced into commercial work, which has little, if no, artistic freedom for us." □

#### DISCOGRAPHY: (partial listing)

*The Street Giveth and the Street Taketh*, Cat Mother and the All Night Newsboys, Polydor Records;

*A Grain of Sand*, Joanne Miyamoto/Chris Iijima/Charlie Chin, Paredon P-1020, 1973;

*1975 Mariposa Folk Festival*, Mariposa Records, sideman;

*Melting Pots*, Susie Monick, Adelphi Records, 1976, features banjo solo by Chin;

*Summer Nights, Winter Rain*, David Amram, RCA, 1976, includes pieces with words by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg; musicians include Beaver Harris, Ray Mantilla, and others;

*Back to Back*, East/West World Records, WEER-1001, 1982.

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# Hawai'i's Literature and Lunch

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By Darrell H.Y. Lum

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**T**here's an island surf shop called Local Motion, where you can buy T-shirts that say, "Locals Only." Anyone can shop there, even tourists. And locals and tourists alike buy "Locals Only" shirts because they're brightly colored, full of geometric New Wave designs, and they say "Hawai'i" right there in front.

There's also a lunch that's quick and cheap that you can buy at drive-in restaurants and coffee shops called a "loco-moco." It's a bed of rice topped by a hamburger patty topped by an over-easy fried egg and smothered in brown gravy. Real locals then add salt, pepper, *shoyu*, and ketchup before digging in! And there's always *saimin*, a noodles-in-soup dish that you'd never find in Japan or China. It's a distinctly local invention along with the plate lunch. Watch where the truck drivers and businessmen and surfers always end up. It's usually

at a lunch wagon (usually a large Ford panel van outfitted with a propane warming table and a flip-up side that forms a serving counter) serving up a nutritional nightmare on a paper plate along the beaches, the waterfront, at construction sites, even right outside City Hall. A plate lunch of curry stew poured over two scoops of rice alongside a scoop of macaroni salad and a bit of *kim chee* (chili-pepper spiced cabbage, Korean-style) will run you around three dollars.

Then you can drive home to a nice little house in the suburbs: a modest



LEON SUN

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## The Cane Cutters

It is early morning. The brave  
Hawaiian moon sits in the saddle  
Of morning, bucking its light.  
A woman shivers as she trudges  
Briskly, behind a man. She carries  
The lunches and an old kerosene lantern  
That trails fumes heavily into the gloom.  
Surrounding them, piles of bagasse  
Sit silently fat and rank. Unmindful,  
The old-looking couple, stop to rest.  
The man takes out two long knives.  
They sparkle in the negligent light.  
He fingers each honed edge and tenderly  
caresses the sharpness. Pleased,  
He hands one to his wife. Together,  
They work the tall burnt fields,  
Long into the tiring hours. They sing,  
And they dream to the pendulum  
Swing of their machetes.

**Juliet S. Kono**

© 1980 Bamboo Ridge Press

twenty-year-old, single-wall, three-bedroom, two-bath place with a carport going for \$150,000 or so . . . on leased land. This is all part of living in these islands.

No wonder a number of Hawai'i writers choose to describe themselves as local writers of "local literature," (as opposed to "Asian American" literature, largely a mainland term, or "Hawaiian" literature which the locals know means ethnic Hawaiian literature, or work done by

native Hawaiians). Things are different here. And, not surprisingly, the literature reflects it.

Of course, there are the nature themes which, according to some visiting writers, appear too much and too often in local literature. But why shouldn't we write about nature when locals know that the EDB (ethylene dimethylbromide, more simply, ant poison) sprayed on the pineapples shows up in the drinking water years after they stop using the insecticide. This isn't standing-in-awe-of or ain't-it-beautiful nature writing that we're talking about. It's chemicals in the milk and the water, don't wash the car or water the lawn when there's a water shortage. It's volcanic ash and ash from burning the sugar cane. It's the sting of wind-flung sand at the beach and going out even if it's raining because it'll probably stop by the time you get there. It's smashing a two-inch cockroach in your bathroom or listening to a gecko call all night from your ceiling. And you learn after that first time rolling around in the surf not knowing which way is up, "Never Turn Your Back To The Ocean."

Or at the first hint of a shipping strike, you find yourself in line at the supermarket behind all those *mama-sans* buying up the rice and Spam and vienna sausages. They have memories of shipping strikes that lasted for months. They have memories of being a striker or of someone they know who went hungry during a strike. And for many islanders, it doesn't take a lot of digging to find one's roots in the soil of Hawai'i's sugar plantations, grandparents or great-grandparents who immigrated to the islands as contract laborers.

No wonder then, that local literature published over the years by *Bamboo Ridge — The Hawaii Writers' Quarterly* has echoed this island life. Forget the "Golden Man" or the "melting pot" myths. Not surprisingly the literature of local writers has a distinct sensitivity to ethnicity, the environment (in particular that valuable commodity, the land), a sense of personal lineage and family history, and the use of the sound, the languages, and the vocabulary of island people. After a while, it all makes sense and everyone orders their *dim sum* not by the Chinese names or their English translations but by their local and partly Hawaiian counterparts. Me? I like the chicken curry *manapua* (neither Hawaiian nor Chinese but possibly a corruption of a Hawaiian word "pua'a," pig, for the Chinese steamed meat buns), the *half-moon* (aptly described), and the *pepeiau* (Hawaiian for "ear," which this dumpling resembles).

Hungry? More of my favorites follow:

"The Poet Imagines His Grandfather's Thoughts on the Day He Died" by Wing Tek Lum, *Bamboo Ridge* #13, copyright 1981 Wing Tek Lum;

"Termites" by Eric Chock, *Bamboo Ridge* #4, copyright 1979 Bamboo Ridge Press;

Excerpt from "Paint" by Darrell Lum, *Bamboo Ridge* #27, copyright 1985 Bamboo Ridge Press.

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Bamboo Ridge Press is a non-profit, tax-exempt literary small press founded in 1978 by Eric Chock and Darrell Lum. The selection included here is from a forthcoming anthology, *The Best of Bamboo Ridge*, which will be available during the summer of 1986. For more information about the anthology, back issues, special issues, and yearly subscriptions, please contact: Bamboo Ridge Press, P.O. Box 61781, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822-8781. □

**Darrell H.Y. Lum** is a fiction writer and playwright and co-editor of *Bamboo Ridge Press*.

# THE BROWN POWER POET

*Serafin Malay Syquia*  
(1943-1973)

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By Fred Wei-han Houn

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Serafin ("Serf") Malay Syquia was one of Pilipino America's most powerful poetic voices. At the time of his death at the early age of 30 from a brain tumor, Syquia had emerged as a leading and prolific Third World writer and deeply committed political activist. Moved by the upsurge of third world peoples' struggles abroad and in the U.S., Syquia, a product of the late-1960's, left a career as a stockbroker virtually overnight to consume his life activity and creative energy in the struggles of his Pilipino American community and the movement for social change. Indeed, his strength as a poet/artist stemmed from mirroring his own personal transformation as it increasingly connected with the collective



life of the Pilipino American masses in both his art and social practice.

A quiet and gentle man, his poems, however, expressed an unmitigating anger and determined opposition to the oppression and exploitation of the Pilipino people (both in the U.S. and in the Philippines). Serafin loved his people. His art and life were devoted to the self-respect, dignity and empowerment of Pilipinos, Asians and Third World peoples. His sacrifice, energy and spirit of revolutionary optimism represented the finest of that generation

of Asian American cultural workers.

His first experience in political struggle was the movement to save the International Hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown-Manilatown, a historic battle to defend a Third World community from destruction. Through his involvement with the I-Hotel, he became very close to and was touched by the lives and struggles of the *manongs*, the elderly Pilipino male workers. Many of his poems capture the experiences and personalities of the *manongs*.

With other Pilipino American writ-

ers, such as Oscar Peñaranda, Emilia Cachapero, Bayani Mariano, and Al Robles, Syquia worked daily in the Pilipino American communities. The lives, the language and stories of the Pilipino American masses became the source of inspiration for their poetry. Indeed, these young writers had also emerged at the forefront of a new Pilipino American cultural movement that expressed pride in Pilipino American identity ("Brown is Beautiful/We are an Oppressed People") — writers that sought to inspire the people to struggle. Syquia was probably the leading developer of a Pilipino American poetry of resistance: culture to expose the lies of racist stereotyping, to be a force for irresistible beauty and irrepressible truth.

Syquia was one of the coordinators of *Ating Tao* ("Our People"), formed at San Francisco State University as a Pilipino American performing arts/theater collective. *Ating Tao* combined traditional Pilipino and modern dance, music, poetry and agit-prop theater, and performed extensively to Pilipino American communities throughout the West Coast.

He was also part of the core of Black, Asian, Latino and Native American writers that formed Third World Communications in 1971, a cutting-edge alliance of a number of the major contemporary oppressed nationality writers of that period, including Janice Mirikitani, Roberto Vargas, Ntozake Shange, Jessica Hagedorn, Buriel Clay, among many others.

A serious writer, Syquia was constantly writing and perfecting his craft. He had studied creative writing at San Francisco State University, where he earned both his bachelor and masters degrees. His literary influences were broad, though his major inspiration came from writers with a militant political vision. These included: Imamu Amiri Baraka, Pablo Neruda, Amado Hernandez, Janice Mirikitani, Kay Boyle (his professor at State), as well as William Carlos Williams and e. e. cummings.

Syquia was very aware of the Pili-

pino American literary tradition based on the lives and stories of the *manongs*. So many unpublished poems by Serafin Syquia were discovered after his death that they could comprise an important collection documenting his contributions to the continuum of Pilipino American literature. Along with such writers as Carlos Bulosan, Philip Vera Cruz, Joaquin Legaspi, Bienvenido

***His sacrifice,  
energy and spirit  
of revolutionary  
optimism  
represented the  
finest of that  
generation of  
Asian American  
cultural workers.***

Santos, Sam Tagatac, N.V.M. Gonsales and the oral traditions of the *Pinoy* workers, Serafin Syquia remains an example to this and future generations of Pilipino and Asian American cultural workers.

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*Writings by Serafin Syquia are found in the following:*

*Selected Poems: Serafin Malay Syquia*, published by friends, 1973;

*Two Poems by Serafin Syquia*, broadside published by Anita Burrows, 1973;

*Anthologies:*

*Time to Greez!*, Mirikitani, et al., Glide and Third World Communications, 1975;

*Perspectives, E.O.P. Third World Journal*, San Francisco State University, 1973;

*Liwanag*, Liwanag Publications, 1976;

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*Special thanks to Luis Syquia, Mrs. Amelia Syquia, and Janice Mirikitani.* □



*Serafin Syquia working in the Poetry in the Schools program at Bessie Carmichael Junior High School, San Francisco. A number of community activist/poets were involved in this program that began in the late-1960's to reach the masses with committed art.*

## a distant drum

a country within a street  
dying  
abandoned by affluent alumni  
uncaring

pungent odor of *bagoong* & *adobo*  
blend with garbage  
outside chinese restaurants

Kearny St. glistens after the rain  
wetness gleams  
in the backdrop of neon  
bawdy Broadway  
topless  
bottomless  
countryless

as the old man walks  
his back hunched  
by his life  
clicks of billiard balls  
in his ear  
topless  
bottomless  
tongueless

large brown faded hat  
covers his baldness  
stains of soya & dust  
in his overcoat  
touching the ground  
with its memories  
clothes much larger  
than he

revolution has passed him by  
his silence is heard in dry tears  
Kearny St. his home family country  
squeezed between the tourist money of Chinatown  
and the monolith structure of Montgomery  
topless  
bottomless  
powerless

calloused hands dig deeper into the overcoat  
the light in his room becomes a beacon  
door opens to warmth from a heater  
sitting slowly on the bed  
he waits for a visitor  
flashing neon & blaring horns stop  
a long day and the knock on the door  
is a distant drum

— serafin syquia



1.



2.

**shadowboxing**  
*(a requiem for  
pancho villa)*

in this corner

weighing less  
than he should  
wearing stained

trunks  
aching from a  
cavity unfilled

from money wasted  
on paid love styling  
monkey suits

trusting crooked managers  
and taxi club blondies

in this corner

scarred by years of  
left jabs and right  
crosses of unfilled

flushes and snakeeyes  
staring at closed doors

and no help wanted signs

in this corner  
leather fingers jabbing  
rice in thin chinese

diners in

his corner  
he sits a  
story

aching to  
be told

— serafin syquia



3.

1. I-Hotel, San Francisco, 1976,  
Crystal Huie
2. Leland Wong, Apa2 Designs
3. Jim Dong

## sammy

the head butcher  
knew him best  
he walked a regular  
route  
painted eyebrows  
magnifying glasses  
bulging eyes  
rumor had it  
his brain was damaged  
from too many blows  
someone else said  
he was a former hit man  
for some filipino politician  
too many hits  
too many blows  
and he lives in ketchikan  
alone  
in a hollow house  
omigosh  
he would say  
strolling past us  
during brief coffee breaks

omigosh omigosh omigosh  
he would repeat  
sometimes  
he would visit sammy  
and eat fish head soup  
with the old *ilocanos*  
in the kitchen  
omigosh  
he would say  
eyes bulging  
painted eyebrows  
twitching  
omigosh omigosh  
where is my townmate  
sammy said  
that omigosh  
wanted to give his house  
away  
away  
to someone born  
in his province  
sammy said  
he had money  
in the bank  
and that hollow house  
to give away  
away  
away to a townmate  
omigosh omigosh  
where is my townmate  
he repeated  
sucking fisheyes  
gelatin drippings

dropping  
on his crusty shoes  
just tell him  
you were born  
in his province  
his house is hollow  
your voice will echo  
a deep growl  
from ancestral graves  
his house is hollow  
and it's yours  
just be his townmate  
for a while  
my apron  
covered  
with scales  
from sliming salmon  
all day and night  
a rancid smell  
pressed  
against me  
he's loco  
we would say  
he's *gulu*  
in the head  
giving away a volkswagen  
to a long-haired blond  
dude  
he thought was a woman  
he's loco  
as he walked  
the broadwalk of ketchikan  
looking for a townmate

— serafin syquia

*Tribute to a Pioneer  
Chinese American Writer:*

# Louis Chu

*(1915–1970)*



*Louis Chu in  
New York Chinatown.*

*Reprinted from a New York Chinatown History Project exhibit on Louis Chu, which appeared during the run of the play Eat a Bowl of Tea, performed by the Pan Asian Repertory Theater in May 1985. Text by Steven Chin.*

\* \* \*

**F**ew, if any novelists writing on the subject of New York Chinatown, have been able to capture the subtleties of the culture and social dynamics of this ethnic community as

accurately as Louis Chu did in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. Although many writers have made use of the Chinatown locale as a backdrop in their literary works, most of these attempts have simply utilized existing stereotypes of the community and its people, further promoting negative attitudes towards the community. Louis Chu's efforts to counter these negative images through his own literary work and his extraordinary work with the people of Chinatown put him far ahead of his time.

Anglo-American literary portrayals

of Chinatown and its inhabitants reinforced widespread popular misconceptions about Chinese in America and strengthened prejudices against them. Louis Chu was well aware of the need to address the problem of the misrepresentation and stereotyping of the Chinese. In 1939, he wrote a sociology dissertation for New York University entitled "The Chinese Restaurants in New York City." In his introduction, he expressed the essence of a lifelong faith: "(This) author feels that it is his duty to attempt to bring about a better understanding of the Chinese by the American people."

### Toishan to Newark

Louis Chu was certainly well-qualified to write about the immigrant experience. He, himself, experienced firsthand what Chinatown immigrants endured. Like most of the Chinese who immigrated to the United States before 1949, he hailed from Toishan, one of the Szeyup districts in Guangdong province.

His real name was Louie Hing Chu. Louie, his last name, was later modified to become his first name, Louis. He was born the son of a *gum-shanhok*, a "Gold Mountain" visitor. At the age of seven he left his mother and village to join his father and grandfather in Newark. Chu's father operated a successful chop suey restaurant in Newark Chinatown called Sui Wu.

**L**ouis Chu grew up in Newark Chinatown. He later attended Blirstown Academy and Upsala College in New Jersey, where he majored in English. He made frequent visits to New York Chinatown, where there were many social activities for Chinese youth. He participated in Edserbro (Education, Service, and Brotherhood), a New York Chinatown boys' group which did community service work and held social activities with other youth groups.

Chu went on to attend graduate school at New York University in sociology, focusing his academic interests on Chinatown life. He maintained this interest throughout his life. He was bilingual in Chinese and



New York Chinatown today.

**Louis Chu was certainly well-qualified to write about the immigrant experience. He, himself, experienced firsthand what Chinatown immigrants endured.**

English and his experiences enabled him to sympathize with both the older and younger generations.

### A visit home

Chu seemed particularly sensitive to the effects on the Chinese American community brought about by its transformation from a bachelor society to a family society after immigration laws changed for Chinese in the 1940's. This sensitivity was sharpened by his personal experience of family separation.

A passage from "Terraced Mountain," a section of his unfinished autobiography, captures the emotional impact his return home had on him after a 17-year absence:

*When we entered the village, the other two Louies pointed out to me the narrow lane I was to take to reach my house, and they separated to go to their respective homes. Between two rows of houses young and old poked their heads out of doorways and inquired. "Which uncle are you?" or, "Which elder brother are you?" Everybody seemed to know me after I told them who I was. The youngest ones followed me to my doorstep, in front of which an old woman with bound feet now stood staring at me as I approached. I was waiting for her to speak and ask me who I was, as the rest of them had done. When she failed to speak, I was disappointed. I asked the old lady who she was. The kids who had followed me and now gathered around me, burst out in spontaneous laughter.*

*"I am Hing Chu's grandmother. Who are you?"*

*"I am your grandson."*

*"Hing Chu! Why didn't you let us know you were coming home?"*

*"I wanted to surprise you. Where is mother?"*

*I turned to enter the house as a woman of about fifty was coming out. I turned helplessly to my grandmother and asked who she was.*

*"That's your mother!" she replied.*

*"Ma!" I cried, somewhat shyly and awkwardly.*

*"Hing Chu, you have come home!"*

*Unlike a reunion of mother and son in a western setting, my mother and I did not fall into each other's arms; and we didn't kiss one another. There was no boisterous elation, no display of affection in our reunion. Kissing and hugging were replaced by a serene and dignified restraint. My mother looked at me fondly and unbelievably.*

*"Hing Chu, you have grown so big." Her voice was choked with emotions. "You used to be so skinny."*

*Before I could answer her and told her that I had a big appetite, her eyes were brimming with tears. I gently put my arms around her and dried her eyes with my handkerchief.*

*"Please don't cry, mother," I pleaded.*

Chu had returned to Toishan to comfort his mother. His younger brother, whom he had never met, was murdered by local toughs. The visit turned out to be a propitious

one — the murderers were caught and Louis Chu was married. Unable to bring his wife, Kang Louie, to the United States due to immigration restrictions, he returned to New York to work, save, and send remittance back home. He left without knowing that a daughter was on the way.

### New York Chinatown

During World War II, Chu was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to the China-Burma-India region. After the war and the passage of the War Brides Act, he was able to return to the village and bring his wife and first-born to the United States. They eventually settled in New York and opened a small record store called Acme, selling Chinese music and radios. The store was located in Chinatown, on Bayard

Street near the corner of Elizabeth Street. He and Mrs. Louie also became the city's only Chinese disc jockeys with a five-day-a-week, one-hour program on WHOM-FM called "Chinese Festival." The program was later extended to ninety minutes. During the program, Louis Chu would speak English and his wife, Kang, would speak Cantonese. For over ten years they provided laundry and restaurant workers with news of China and the community, interviews, commercials, and Chinese music, especially Chinese opera.

They had boundless energy. Besides managing the record store and doing the "Chinese Festival" program, they raised three more children. Chu later returned to do post-graduate work at the New School for Social Research, earning an M.A. in Social Work. He then

founded the first senior citizens' program in Chinatown, the Golden Age Club of Hamilton Madison House. He remained director there for many years. The Golden Age Club continues today in St. Andrew's Church near City Hall.

### Eat a Bowl of Tea

In his busy schedule, Chu found time to write *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, as well as a few short stories, while traveling on the subways to and from Queens and Chinatown. Originally he wanted to write a "serious" book about Chinatown, but Lyle Stuart, his classmate and soon-to-be publisher, advised him that a love story was a necessary ingredient to a successful novel. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* was published in 1961. It never achieved the popularity or financial success of other Chinatown novels like Chin Yan Lee's *Flower Drum Song* or Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Louis Chu died of a heart attack in 1970 before the limited first edition of his first novel had sold out. He had been working on another novel, *Double Trouble*, when he died.

*Eat a Bowl of Tea* was rediscovered in the early 1970's, and nine years after Chu's death the book was reprinted by the University of Washington Press. Louis Chu was a pioneer Chinese American writer. His work is recognized for its dramatic documentation and uneuphemized, unexotic portrait of Chinese American community life, as seen from one who lived it. His work has influenced and inspired a new generation of Asian American cultural expression. To him we owe a great deal of thanks. □

### New York Chinatown History Project

*The History Project would like to thank Fred Houn, Bill Shek, Lyle Stuart and Renqiu Yu for valuable information about Louis Chu. And our special appreciation goes to Mrs. Kang Louie and her family for sharing her memories and photographs with us.*



Louis Chu and his wife, Kang Louie, broadcasting their Chinese music show.

## Best of the New

### New Books

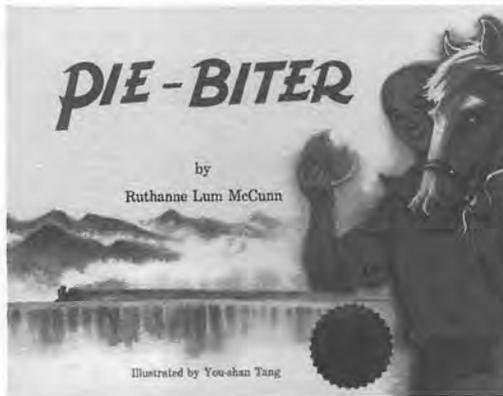
#### Pie-Biter

by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

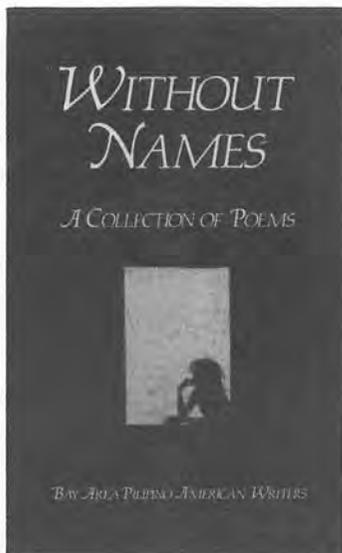
Illustrated by You-shan Tang. Design Enterprises of San Francisco, P.O. Box 14695, San Francisco, CA 94114, hardcover: \$11.95.

A 1984 American Book Award winner, McCunn's children's book is

about an early Chinese railroad worker told in the tall tale tradition, who earns the nickname "Pie-Biter" from his love for eating American pies. Though the story overlooks the hardships and struggles of these earlier Chinese laborers, and strangely praises the use of deception by Pie-Biter to gain a competitive advantage over the other Chinese to become a successful packer, the narrative and illustrations are lively and colorful.



#### Without Names: A Collection of Poems



Kearny Street Workshop Press, 827 Pacific Street, Box 3, San Francisco, CA 94133, paperback: \$5 plus \$1 shipping/handling.

The major contemporary Pilipino American writers and poets are featured, with particularly exciting and compelling new poetry by Virginia R. Cerenio, Luis Syquia, Norman Jayo, Shirley Ancheta, Jeff Tagami, Mars Estrada and Lloyd Nebres. Collections of Pilipino American cultural works are infrequent and the inclusion of Estrada and Nebres gives *Without Names* an anti-imperialist edge. This eclectic collection, however, could have benefited from greater focus and clarity about the direction of Pilipino American art and literature, i.e., its relationship to the current struggles and needs of the Pilipino American community.

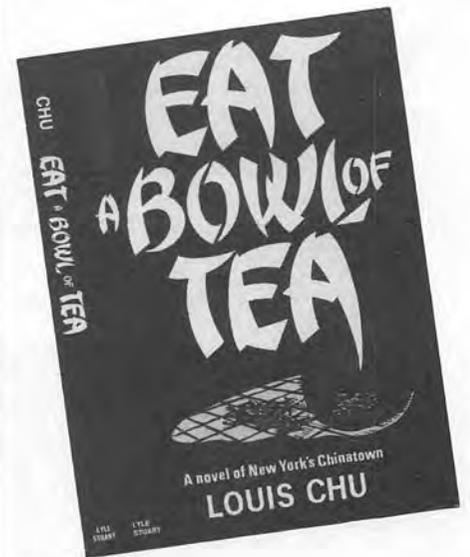
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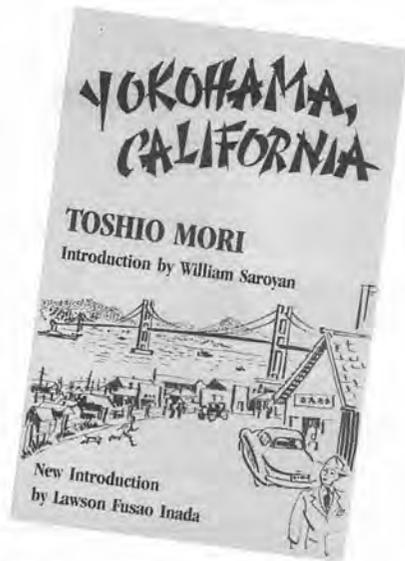
#### Eat A Bowl of Tea: A Novel of New York's Chinatown

by Louis Chu

Lyle Stuart, 120 Enterprise Avenue, Secaucus, NJ 07094, paperback: \$5.95, available in May 1986.

This is a classic in Asian American literature. Originally published in 1961, Chu has captured, in English, the speech and life of everyday Chinatown, New York. A story about adultery and retribution set in Chinatown's bachelor society, *Eat A Bowl of Tea* is a warm and sensitive portrait of the complexities and conflicts of this immigrant Chinese community from the perspective of an author who shared their lives.





## Yokohama, California

by Toshio Mori

University of Washington Press, P.O. Box C50096, Seattle, WA 98145, paperback: \$7.95.

These short stories by Mori (1910-1980) are deeply felt portraits of the common folk of Japanese America. The characters are familiar community people, full of human weaknesses, impossible dreams, often laughable mistakes, yet they are real Japanese American people, with dignity and spirit. Lawson Inada's fine introductory comments help us to understand Toshio Mori's writing as a commitment to and celebration of the Japanese American community: "Japanese-America; he was committed to his people, he lived up to his people, he saw his people as the stuff of great art." Originally published in 1949, and now rescued from obscurity, *Yokohama, California* is another important Asian American work that mustn't be missed.

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June 1, Sunday, De Anza Days. De Anza College, Cupertino, 10:00 a.m.

June 29, Sat., Suzume no Gakko 10th Anniv. San Jose Buddhist Church, 2 p.m.

July 12, Saturday, Obon Festival. Marysville Buddhist Church, 7:00 p.m.

July 13, Sunday, Obon Festival. San Jose Buddhist Church, 4:00 p.m.

August 2,3, Sat. & Sunday. Powell Street Festival, Vancouver, Canada

Aug. 16, Saturday. Daruma Festival, West Valley JACL, Saratoga & Graves, San Jose, 1 p.m.

Sept. 13, Saturday, Aki Matsuri. Wesley Methodist Church, 566 N. Fifth St., San Jose, time to be announced.

Dates and times are subject to change. Please call (408) 293-9344 for update.

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What's the reality behind the "model minority" myth? Vol. V, No. 2 of *EAST WIND* will examine the history and current situation of Asian American labor: a continuum of struggle.

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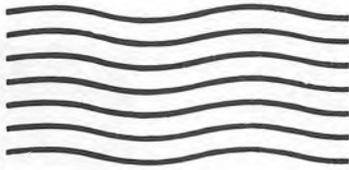
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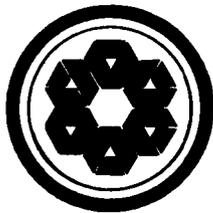
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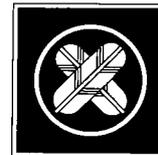
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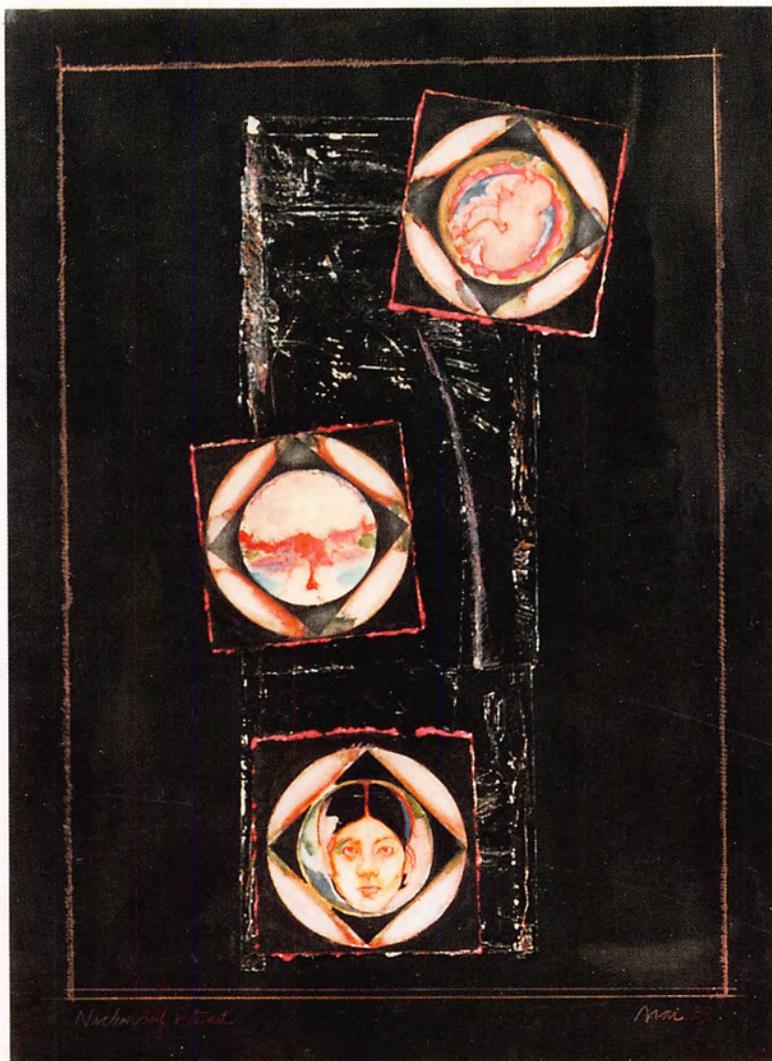
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*Works by Four Asian  
American Artists*

Page 19

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30 x 22 in., mixed media/paper, 1985