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## Shattered Dolls: An Examination of Authorship and the Boundaries of Female Asian Stereotypes in Western Theatrical Literature and Film

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Maya McGowan

April 24, 2020

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On March 15, 2018, an event called “Orientalism and the Portrayal of Asian Americans in Musicals,” co-hosted by Center Theatre Group and East West Players, brought to light questions involving misrepresentation of Asian Americans in theatrical literature. At the root of their argument was the idea that American playwrights had created stereotypical caricatures about the Asian and Asian American communities and thus were mistelling their stories. Likewise, in an article written for the *American Theatre*, writer, Diep Tran, talks about how past literature around Asian Americans has been historically known to be written by white composers and playwrights “whose perceptions of Asia (and Asian America) drew on testimonials and secondhand sources rather than personal experience” (Tran). She states that the results of these sources create a “one-sided” view of Asian Americans and that their “authenticity” is based on “these white authors’ intentions and approaches” (Tran). That being said, industries like Broadway and Hollywood have been notorious for reinforcing stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. In this paper, I will focus on the importance of authorship and how stereotypes that are reinforced by Euro-American playwrights, composers, and screenwriters can have harmful effects on Asian American women. I will examine the origins of these stereotypes and their effects, the theatrical literature enforcing and negating these ideas, as well as provide remedies to combat the usage of female Asian stereotypes in Western theatrical literature and film and ultimately promote diversity in industries often plagued in prejudice and racism.

## Defining a Stereotype

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines a stereotype as “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern,” especially “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgement” (“Stereotype”). But why do stereotypes exist? Well, according to James L. Hilton and William von Hippel in their article called “Stereotypes,” there are two sources: “they are formed as mental representations of real differences between groups” and “they are formed about various groups independent of real group differences” (Hilton and Hippel, 240-241). The first explanation seems to indicate that there is some truth to stereotypes. They can operate as schemas, “collections of basic knowledge about a concept or entity that serves as a guide to perception, interpretation, imagination, or problem solving” (“Schema”). However, as Hilton and Hippel reveal, schemas can “cause perceivers to gloss over or fail to notice individual differences” (Hilton and Hippel, 241). Whereas, the second explanation seems to allude to the idea that stereotypes are also invented as a form of oppression to give power to the oppressor. This is due to the fact that certain stereotypes can be created about a group of people to empower the status quo and those that benefit from it. In this project, I will examine stereotypes about Asian and Asian Americans that are created to benefit mainly Euro-Americans. In identifying this pattern, it will showcase how the reinforcement of these stereotypes in Western theatrical literature and film can limit opportunities for Asian Americans to excel in these industries.

## Origins and the Effects of Female Asian Stereotypes

In a 2018 study published in the *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, authors, Shruti Mukkamala and Karen Suyemoto, sought to answer the question “What are the current experiences of discrimination in terms of racism and sexism for Asian American women?” (Mukkamala and Suyemoto). Through a series of open-ended surveys and interviews with self-identified Asian American women, they identified fifteen different types of discrimination with six of those being tied to the intersectionality between race and gender. These themes included being seen as exotic, not a leader, submissive, cute and small, invisible, and a service worker. This result supported Mukkamala and Suyemoto’s thesis that these stereotypes aided in these women’s experiences of feeling marginalized, invisible, and oppressed in society. To elaborate, I will first explore some of the stereotypes associated with Asian and Asian American women and their origins. Additionally, I will consider the implications and consequences these stereotypes have produced for the Asian American communities. For the purpose of this project, I will be focussing primarily on women of East Asian descent from areas like Japan, China, and South Korea when I refer to Asian women, authors, and actors.

### *The Geisha and China Doll*

One common stereotype of the Asian American woman stems from the exotic ‘Geisha’ or submissive ‘China Doll.’ According to Kelly Foreman, in a chapter titled “Bad Girls Confined: Okuni, Geisha, and the Negotiation of Female Performance Space,” geisha are defined as “women who study classical Japanese music and dance, perform music and dance for parties in order to pay for their art lessons and elaborate public stage performances, and are officially

registered with a central office” (Foreman, 34). However, in Western culture, the term, Geisha, has been historically misused. During the Allied occupation of Japan, women known as ‘Geisha Girls’ were prostitutes who served American GI’s stationed in the country. They would dress up in traditional geisha looking attire and thus would be difficult to distinguish from the hired geisha used in court entertainment. Therefore, it became a Westernized term to describe all female Japanese prostitutes and workers. Eventually, this would perpetuate the misconception that all geisha are prostitutes and paint a picture that sexualizes Asian and Asian American women. As a result, this objectification has led to sexual harassment and derogatory behavior. In a 2018 study called “Sexual Harassment, Racial Harassment, and Well-Being among Asian American Women: An Intersectional Approach,” authors, NiCole Buchanan, Isis Settles, Ivan Wu, and Diane Hayashino, highlight how there has been “a long legacy of sexualized racial stereotyping (e.g. Geisha, sexually submissive)” and how it has “increased the risk of sexual harassment for Asian American women” (Buchanan et al.). In early estimates, it showed that over half of adult women experienced sexual harassment at work and upon further investigation, it was found that among sexual harassment subtypes “unwanted sexual attention was most common (reported by 64.3%), followed by gender harassment (36.4%) and sexual coercion (24.8%)” (Buchanan et al.). Although it was unclear whether or not stereotyping led to this type of behavior, it was clear that in labeling Asian American women as “sexually submissive” like the ‘Geisha,’ it promoted sexual and racial harassment (Buchanan et al.). Likewise, the Chinese equivalent to ‘Geisha’ is known as the ‘China Doll.’ According to Maythee Rojas, in her book titled *Women of Color in Feminism*, “Asian women have been typically portrayed as innocent, docile, and eager to be saved by Western armed forces” (Rojas, 57). Similarly, the usage of the

word, doll, implies features of beauty, smallness, and fragility and in using this term, reduces women to these characteristics. It implies stereotypes of how Asian American women should look a certain way and act a certain way, implicating them as mere breakable objects. It is this concept of fragility that enforces the idea that the Asian female is in need of saving by Western forces and the white man. Additionally, in a 2016 study called “Asian American Women Faculty: Stereotypes and Triumphs,” author, Celeste Fowles Nguyen, quoted an Asian American woman who stated that “being perceived persistently as exotic, subservient, passive, and nonassertive” made her internalize these ideas to behave in a manner in accordance to this stereotype (Nguyen, 131). Because she was seen as “delicate” and “feminine” in the classroom setting, it devalued her authority and provided challenges regarding her credibility in the eyes of her students and co-workers (Nguyen, 131). As evident through her story, being seen as a ‘China Doll’ provides challenges for Asian American women in the workplace and can affect their views of themselves.

### *The Dragon Lady*

Another stereotype that is often associated with Asian American women is known as the ‘Dragon Lady.’ The idea of the ‘Dragon Lady’ is that women who fall under this stereotype are considered to be strong, domineering, mysterious, deceitful, powerful, seductive, assertive, manipulative, and more. According to Sheridan Prasso, in her book titled *The Asian Mystique*, China’s Empress Dowager Cixi is “the reason we think ‘Dragon Lady’ in association with Asian women who yield power” (Prasso, 29). However, it is clear through her story that what brought upon this image was yet another misconception of the East, similar to the ‘Geisha’ and ‘China



Doll.’ So how did this happen? In 1898, the Empress Dowager went after a group of political reformers including a man named Kang Yu-wei who started a reformation movement through the Hundred Days’ Reform which included radical ideas like changing the government to a constitutional monarchy and practicing capitalism to strengthen China’s economy. The Empress Dowager was an opponent of this reform and eventually exiled Kang after repeated assassination attempts. Upon being exiled, Kang began to promote his own agenda to unseat the Manchu regime through the press and made false accusations against the Empress Dowager in hopes of starting a revolution. Some of these statements included calling her an “evil hag” and a “depraved palace concubine” (Prasso, 31). Eventually, the *Times* of London got ahold of these accusations and printed articles describing her as deceitful, powerful, and ruthless. In truth, the Empress Dowager was avoiding reforms that she was eventually forced to implement leading to the brink of collapse for the Manchu Dynasty. Since then, this term has been associated with many characters in Hollywood films and theatre including actress, Anna May Wong. Because she appeared as a powerful Chinese American woman in films like *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Daughter of the Dragon*, this paved a path that influenced the types of roles for Asian Americans and set a precedent for future casting decisions. Eventually, this would lead to Wong’s departure from Hollywood as she would spend her lifetime promoting herself to be seen beyond the limitations of this stereotype. According to a 2020 *Forbes* article titled “Why Asian American Women Aren’t Advancing Into Senior Leadership Positions,” Stella, an Asian American who works at an insurance company, states “by speaking up and strongly expressing ideas and opinions” she is more likely to be seen as a “Dragon Lady-overbearing, demanding, aggressive, and unlikeable” (Kramer). In fact, even when she is able to demonstrate a “high level of

competence,” if she is either “deferential or assertive,” she is seen as “lacking the social skills needed to function as a successful business leader” (Kramer). This can cause issues for the Asian American community as their abilities to be successful leaders are masked by qualities associated with a stereotype. The numbers are shocking as a paper published by Ascend Pan-Asian Leaders found that “white women are 164% more likely to be an executive than Asian women” (Gee and Wong, 3). Additionally, their research indicates that the reason these numbers are so stark is because of racial discrimination in the workplace. Evidently, this creates something known as a “bamboo ceiling” which prevents Asian American women from reaching managerial positions due to barriers like “racism and stereotypes” (Hyun, 47). This is because it is believed that Asian American women should meet certain expectations surrounding stereotypes. For instance, it implies that Asian American women must find a way to present themselves as a balance between the ‘China Doll’ and ‘Dragon Lady’ in order to be seen as a leader and authoritative figure. As a result, it sets unrealistic expectations for Asian American women in the workplace and prevents them from receiving promotions.

### *The Tiger Mom and Model Minority*

Some final stereotypes associated with Asian American women stem from the ‘Tiger Mom’ and ‘Model Minority.’ The earliest accounts of the phrase, ‘Tiger Mom,’ were found in novels in journals in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. For instance, this phrase was found in an 1878 English translation of *Bilder aus Oberägypten* by German zoologist and physician, Karl Benjamin Klunzinger. The English translation describes how there was a pervasive fear of mother-in-laws in Egypt that arose from “the relationship itself, being expressed in the proverb

‘Mother-in-law-tiger mother’ or ‘Devil’s darling’ (O’Connor and Kellerman). Although created in the 19th century, this term was made popular by Amy Chua in her book titled, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In this book, Chua discusses her methods related to Chinese parenting. Chua states that by raising her children in the “Chinese way” and supporting “punishingly hard work,” it yields “excellence” (Chua, 36). To her, the evidence is clear as one of her daughter’s is a piano prodigy who, at age fourteen, played at Carnegie Hall, and her youngest daughter is considered to be a gifted violinist. Additionally, she describes, in detail, some of the things she has never let her daughters do such as attend a sleepover, have a playdate, be in a school play, get any grade less than an A, play any instrument other than the piano and violin, and not be the number one student in every subject except gym and drama. To her, this creates a beneficial environment for her children to grow up in and leads to success. She then explains the differences in Chinese versus American parenting styles. The following paragraph is taken from her book in a debate over whether or not stressing academic success is good for children:

“In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that ‘stressing academic success is not good for children’ or that ‘parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun.’ By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be ‘the best’ students, that ‘academic achievement reflects successful parenting,’ and that if children did not excel at school then there was ‘a problem’ and parents ‘were not doing their job.’” (Chua, 13)

This is an interesting perspective as this is the first stereotype I have found that appears to be created by Asians and Asian Americans rather than from a Western viewpoint. There seems to be

a clear cultural difference between Western and Chinese parenting techniques as Chinese parents have been labeled with an ‘authoritarian’ style of child rearing. As a consequence, this has created pressure for young Asian American kids to achieve high success or be punished for failing. Thus, the ‘Model Minority’ is born. According to a Harvard Law School article, *Asian Americans in the Law*, the “model minority” usually refers to a “minority group perceived as particularly successful” and is “often applied to Asian Americans, who, as a group, are often praised for apparent success across academic, economic, and cultural domains” (“The Model Minority Myth”). This term seems to have been coined during the Civil Rights Movement in a 1966 *New York Times* article titled “Success Story, Japanese American Style”, where sociologist, William Pettersen, used this phrase to describe how despite marginalization, Asian Americans have achieved high success in the United States. Once published, journalism companies around the nation started to distribute similar articles sensationalizing Asian Americans as ‘geniuses’ and ‘whiz-kids.’ However, this term has created extreme expectations for the Asian American population. According to the American Psychological Association, “recent data collected from the National Latino and Asian American Study found that Asian Americans have a 17.30 percent overall lifetime rate of any psychiatric disorder and a 9.19 percent 12-month rate, yet Asian Americans are three times less likely to seek mental health services than Whites” (Nishi). Additionally, in a 2007 survey of individuals in eight Asian American communities including: Asian Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese, participants reported similar sources of stress related to the ‘Model Minority Myth’ that affected their overall mental health. Some of these stresses included, “parental pressure to succeed in academics” and the “pressure to live up to the ‘model minority’” (Nishi). In combining these

results, it is evident that this stereotype has created damaging effects on mental health. Furthermore, it can also create interracial tensions and promote discrimination. According to Sarah-Soonling Blackburn, in her article titled “What is the Model Minority Myth,” she states that some of the negative consequences of this stereotype include that “it erases the differences among individuals, it ignores the diversity of Asian American cultures, it perpetuates the idea that Asian Americans are foreigners, it erases racism against Asian Americans, and it is harmful to the struggle for racial justice” (Blackburn). Similarly, journalist, Bernadette Lim, in her article titled “The Effects of Seeing Asian Americans as a 'Model Minority'” explains that “cultural normalization and perpetuation of the model minority label operates as a racial wedge that divides Asian Americans from communities of color while maintaining white dominance in leadership and politics” (Lim). So although the ‘Tiger Mom’ and ‘Model Minority’ can both be seen as more positive stereotypes, they can also set high and unreasonable expectations, they can reinforce the idea of a racial hierarchy, and they can encourage Euro-Americans to ignore discrimination and prejudice towards the Asian American community.

### **Literature that Enforces and Negates Female Asian Stereotypes**

It is evident through this exploration of the origins of the ‘Geisha,’ ‘China Doll,’ ‘Dragon Lady,’ ‘Tiger Mom,’ and ‘Model Minority,’ that stereotypes can have harmful effects on Asian American women as they set expectations that can lead to discrimination, sexual harassment, and challenges in both their professional and personal lives. As I explore Western theatrical literature and film written by both Euro-American and Asian-American writers, I will continue to examine the implications of these stereotypes on Asian American women. In turn, this will allow me to

open up the conversation to how I, as a theatre scholar and practitioner, can navigate the industry and combat the negative consequences of stereotyping.

### *Geisha and China Doll Literature*

One of the first examples of both the ‘Geisha’ and the ‘China Doll’ stereotype is seen in the short story *Madame Butterfly* written by American lawyer and writer, John Luther Long. Since the publication of this story, there have been numerous adaptations of *Madame Butterfly* from plays, to operas, to musicals. Some of the most famous works include *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* written by David Belasco, *Madama Butterfly* composed by Giacomo Puccini, and *Miss Saigon* composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg. To some, these pieces have been praised for their accuracy in portraying Japanese culture and music and for their tragic love stories.

However, these pieces have also aroused controversy within the Japanese and Vietnamese communities and many Asian American artists, activists, and scholars have objected to its promotion of stereotypes. According to Timothy Yu, in his article titled “What’s Wrong with *Miss Saigon*”, he states that the problem with *Miss Saigon* stems from the continual tradition “that views Asian women as sexual objects to be conquered by the white hero- a stereotype highlighted by the fact that the Vietnamese women in *Miss Saigon* are all prostitutes” (Yu).

Additionally, in a review of *Miss Saigon*, Diep Tran states “If the show was trying to tell the story of Vietnamese people, we do not recognize ourselves or our parents in any of the faces we are seeing on that stage. Instead, all we could see were desperate, pathetic victims—people who were completely different from the resilient, courageous, multifaceted men and women of Little Saigon” (Tran). Trans critique of *Miss Saigon* seems to point towards the question of authorship,

how the characters written in this musical follow a stereotype created from a Western perspective like the 'Geisha' and 'China Doll' rather than from a Vietnamese perspective. In a similar manner, *Madama Butterfly* critics argue that we should reconsider how we view this piece and the implications of the opera itself. In an article written in *The Guardian*, Annilese Miskimmon poses the questions of "How we as a modern audience of the #MeToo era experience this musical masterpiece, written by a white European man about the sexual exploitation and death of an Asian woman? How do we reconcile our enjoyment of this opera while acknowledging that it is an iconic example of Orientalism by a composer who never set foot in Japan?" (Miskimmon). Considering her argument, it poses the question of whether or not our experiences as an audience would change if this piece were written by a Japanese playwright. In *This is Not a True Story*, Preston Choi, an Asian American playwright, addresses this question by confronting the controversy and impact of *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, and *Kumiko the Treasure Hunter*. Set in a fictional world, Choi explores what it would mean if these characters had agency over their lives and were able to change their endings. This play forces an audience to question their acceptance of these characters and makes you think twice about what kind of message we are sending to our Asian American community through continual staging of these shows. After having read the play, one of the most notable differences in Choi's writing is how he portrays CioCio San. Unlike Puccini, Choi comments on the stereotypical and offensive writing of her character and attempts to break the notion that Asian female characters need to follow a stereotype. This is seen as CioCio San fights for agency over her life and speaks to the hypocrisy of having to dedicate her life towards a man who doesn't love her. Another character written to break stereotypes is seen in Choi's inclusion of Kumiko/Takako, a combination of fictional,

Kumiko the Treasure Hunter and non-fictional, Takako Konishi. She functions as a way to speak on the negative implications of characters that are written as offensive stereotypes as she explains to CioCio and Kim that they are fictional characters written as such. He also uses this piece as a way to challenge an audience to question ‘why?’ Why do we accept the notion that both CioCio and Kim must die at the end of the show and why does it bring us to our feet in thunderous applause? What kind of message are we sending to Japanese and Vietnamese women about their role in society in doing this? In my opinion, by promoting shows written by non-Asian authors that tell the story of Japanese and Vietnamese women who must die in order to bring about the ending of the play, it promotes prejudice and sends a message to the Asian American community that we, as a society in 2020, continue to believe in harmful stereotypes. To clarify, other examples that question authorship can be found looking at Broadway musicals. One of the most famous writing duos, Rodgers and Hammerstein II, is known for works like *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Flower Drum Song*, all shows featuring Asian characters. Often praised for their promotion of diversity by inclusion of Asian characters and stories, they wrote numerous shows that gave opportunity to Asian American actors and actresses looking for substantial roles in the theatre. However, many Asian Americans believe that musicals like *The King and I*, “emerge as a blend of awareness of racism and often unconscious use of racist conventions” (Pippin, i). More specifically, in an Honors Thesis project written by Korean American, Loretta M. Pippin, she states that “Rodgers and Hammerstein did not strive for authenticity. Instead they had to create an Eastern ambience within a context that American audiences would find acceptable. If the musical sounded too Siamese, they were afraid audiences would walk out. Americans saw a barbaric man and a country that matched an American idea of



what Siam should look and sound like.” (Pippin, 26). To Pippin and other Asian American audience members, this piece reflects a misconstrued portrayal of the people of Siam and even the Thai government, in 1956, banned the movie version from being played because of its historical and cultural inaccuracies. On the other hand, when the musical *Allegiance* by Jay Kuo was written, it was praised for being the first Asian American Broadway musical with almost an entirely Asian-led team. *Allegiance* is set in a time of the Japanese American internment of WWII and was even inspired by personal experiences from George Takei, who stars as one of the leads. Confronting topics like “immigration, xenophobia, and wartime paranoia,” writer, Jay Kuo, explains that the story of *Allegiance* is told from the Japanese American perspective and that “several cast members were either interned themselves or had family who were” (Tran). He goes on to state that this story comes with a “sense of ownership of the material” because he wrote “from the inside out and not the outside in” (Tran). To Asian American actors like Lea Salonga, another star of the show, this piece is momentous. She declares that “this is the one show that does have an Asian perspective behind it, besides the Asian actors onstage. I don’t think it’s something that Broadway has seen before, but it’s certainly something that Broadway actually needs” (Tran). In comparing shows like *This is Not a True Story* and *Allegiance* to *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, and *The King and I*, the most notable differences are the descriptions of the female Asian characters. In *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, and *The King and I*, the female Asian characters are written to emulate a stereotype whereas in *This is Not a True Story* and *Allegiance* they are written to defy a stereotype. This is evident in both the characters of Kei from *Allegiance* and CioCio San from *This is Not a True Story*. Both women are driven, hard working, and human. They have desires, dreams, and faults and are not written

as stock or two-dimensional characters that lack unique traits and features. This humanistic quality is crucial as it allows an audience to connect and empathize with these women as they follow their stories, rather than focus on a stereotype.

### *Dragon Lady Literature*

Since the creation of the ‘Dragon Lady’ image in association with actress, Anna May Wong, Asian American actresses have become pigeonholed into playing stock characters. However, one of the most interesting aspects about this stereotype is its evolution throughout the years. Initially, the ‘Dragon Lady’ represented a mysterious, manipulative, seductive, but similar to the ‘China Doll,’ submissive woman who usually served a male figure. But since the creation of martial arts films, the image of the ‘Dragon Lady’ has changed. Now, she is more aggressive, dangerous, and even ruthless at times, killing all those who challenge or defy her. Along with this comes the expectation that in order to get cast in a leading role, Asian women must learn martial arts. Lucy Liu is a prime example of an actor who has mainly played characters that follow a more contemporary version of the ‘Dragon Lady’ in films like *Charlie’s Angels*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Man with the Iron Fists*. In an interview with ABC News, Chinese American actress, Ann Hu, explains “I usually get an audition for a supporting role, sidekick or best friend” and “unless I know kung fu, or some kind of knife fighting or sword fighting, or something of that stereotypical nature, it would be hard for me to be seen as having a leading role” (Robinson). Hu recognizes that because of this image change, the opportunities for female Asian American actors have become more limited in an already restrictive industry. In order to combat this, some Asian American playwrights use reappropriation as a way to reclaim words, images, and ideas

that were originally created out of prejudice and bigotry. According to *Grammarist.com* ‘to reappropriate’ has two meanings. First, it means “to appropriate again, as with funds that are taken from one purpose and set apart for a different one” (“Reappropriate”). Second, it means “to appropriate something pejorative and make it positive” (“Reappropriate”). Although sometimes controversial, it is a tactic used to point out the hypocrisy and harmful intent of these words, images, ideas, etc. in hopes of changing its semantics. In *The China Crisis* by Kipp Erante Cheng, one of his characters, The Dragon Lady, is written with the intent of reappropriating the images and words associated with this stereotype. Cheng writes the character to speak in broken English and emphasizes that she is meant to play into the expectations surrounding the ‘Dragon Lady’ stereotype. In a powerful monologue, this character speaks about her role as a cook and as a Chinese American woman in society, emphasizing things such as her language and her defiant nature. However, in the middle of this monologue, she transforms into a beautiful woman and no longer speaks in broken English. When this occurs, the other characters in the play are shocked to see her sudden change in appearance. Now, The Dragon Lady has transformed into her unique self and is unafraid to defy the expectations placed on her. In my opinion, her transformation is supposed to represent how we, as an audience, expect her character to align with an image we have conceived. The moment she defies our ideas of what a ‘Dragon Lady’ should look and sound like, is when we realize that we have placed limitations on her in labeling her as a stereotype. Additionally, another play that is written from an Asian American perspective is *Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston. *Tea* is a new play that follows the lives of five Japanese war brides post-WWII. The play begins with a middle aged Japanese woman, Himiko, who commits suicide. Shortly after her gun goes off, we see the remaining characters of the play during a

gathering for tea while Himiko, now dead, observes from the side. In this play, these women discuss the struggles of dealing with discrimination, alienation, and cultural adaptation as they navigate their new lives in Kansas. However, to me, this play is really about friendship, hope, and reconciliation as the women find council in each other. It's a play about the Asian American experience from a firsthand account as Houston's work reflects personal experiences growing up as a Japanese American in Kansas. The women in this play are strong, outspoken, honest, and vulnerable as they recount their experiences. In other words, these women are well developed characters that defy stereotypes.

### *Tiger Mom and Model Minority Literature*

Unlike the 'Geisha,' 'China Doll,' and 'Dragon Lady,' the 'Tiger Mom' and 'Model Minority' have a fair amount of theatrical literature written from an Asian American perspective. As referred to in its origins, this is likely because both of these stereotypes have been created and reinforced by the Asian and Asian American communities. However, there are stark differences between the literature written from a Western versus Asian American perspective—the main difference being intent. One show, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* by William Finn, highlights the 'Model Minority' stereotype. Known for hits such as “The I Love You Song” and “Magic Foot,” *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* by William Finn is a beloved show often produced in many amateur and professional theatres (“The 25th...Spelling Bee”). It centers around a fictional spelling bee in which a group of six kids compete in hopes of being declared the spelling champion. As each kid approaches the microphone, they reveal personal stories relating to their home life and identity. One kid, Marcy Park, is stated to be an

“overachieving” Asian American (“The 25th...Spelling Bee,” 2018). In her character description, she is stated as “the poster child for the Overachieving Asian” because she can “speak six languages, is a member of all-American hockey, a championship rugby player, plays Chopin and Mozart on multiple instruments, sleeps only three hours a night, hides in the bathroom cabinet, and is tired of always winning” (“The 25th...Spelling Bee”). In other words, she represents the ideal ‘Model Minority.’ Like I mentioned previously, although the ‘Model Minority’ can be seen as a positive stereotype, by extending it into the theatre, it limits the types of roles for Asian American actors and signifies that they must play into stereotypes in order to be successful within the industry. On the other hand, Asian American authorship tends to open up more opportunities for authentic Asian and Asian American stories that have dynamic characters and defy stereotypes. For instance, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan is a famous book about the lives of four Chinese women who fled China in the 1940’s and their four Americanized daughters. The novel focuses on one of the daughters, June Woo, who, after her mother’s death, takes her place in a social group called the Joy Luck Club. It was adapted into a film in 1993 and features famous actors like Tsai Chin, Kieu Chinh, Lisa Lu, and France Nuyen. In a review for the *New York Times*, critic, Janet Maslin, states that the movie is “both sweeping and intimate, a lovely evocation of changing cultures and enduring family ties” (Maslin). In one scene between June and her mother, June discusses the challenges of growing up in a household with a ‘Tiger Mom’ who has placed expectations on her to succeed in every aspect of her life. This scene is one of the most heartfelt moments of the movie where June and her mother develop an understanding for one another. June, having felt the pressure to conform to the ‘Model Minority,’ expresses her frustrations and feelings of unworthiness because of the expectations placed on her. Her mother,

on the other hand, realizes her ‘Tiger Mom’ parenting style has put pressure on her daughter and empathizes with her confessing that she has always been proud of her, stating “I see you” (Tan). It is the complexity of both of these characters and their relationships that indicates they were written to break free from the limitations placed on them by stereotypes and are well-developed, three-dimensional characters, that are alive, ever-changing, and human. These are the kinds of characters I hope to see on the stage and on the screen in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang states “At its core, a stereotype is bad writing: a one- or two-dimensional cutout devoid of humanity, and therefore prone to demonization. Whether one’s characters are cooks, laundry-men, computer scientists or gangsters, if they are all well written, they will exude humanity, which is ultimately the most effective weapon against stereotypes, and the most visceral measure of authenticity” (Hwang et al., xiv). It is of my opinion that one of the best ways to combat this type of writing is through consideration of authorship. Through my research I found that of the literature I read for and about female Asian Americans, literature that was written from a Euro-American perspective tended to follow a stereotype, whether that be the ‘Geisha,’ the ‘China Doll,’ the ‘Dragon Lady,’ the ‘Tiger Mom’ or the ‘Model Minority.’ Alternatively, most of the literature I read that was written from an Asian American perspective, opposed stereotypes or found ways to reclaim them. Instead, the author’s focus was on the character’s story and what made them human, rather than what made them Asian. Through this, it was evident that Asian American authorship provided a more realistic telling of the Asian American experience. Likewise, in my review of Western theatrical

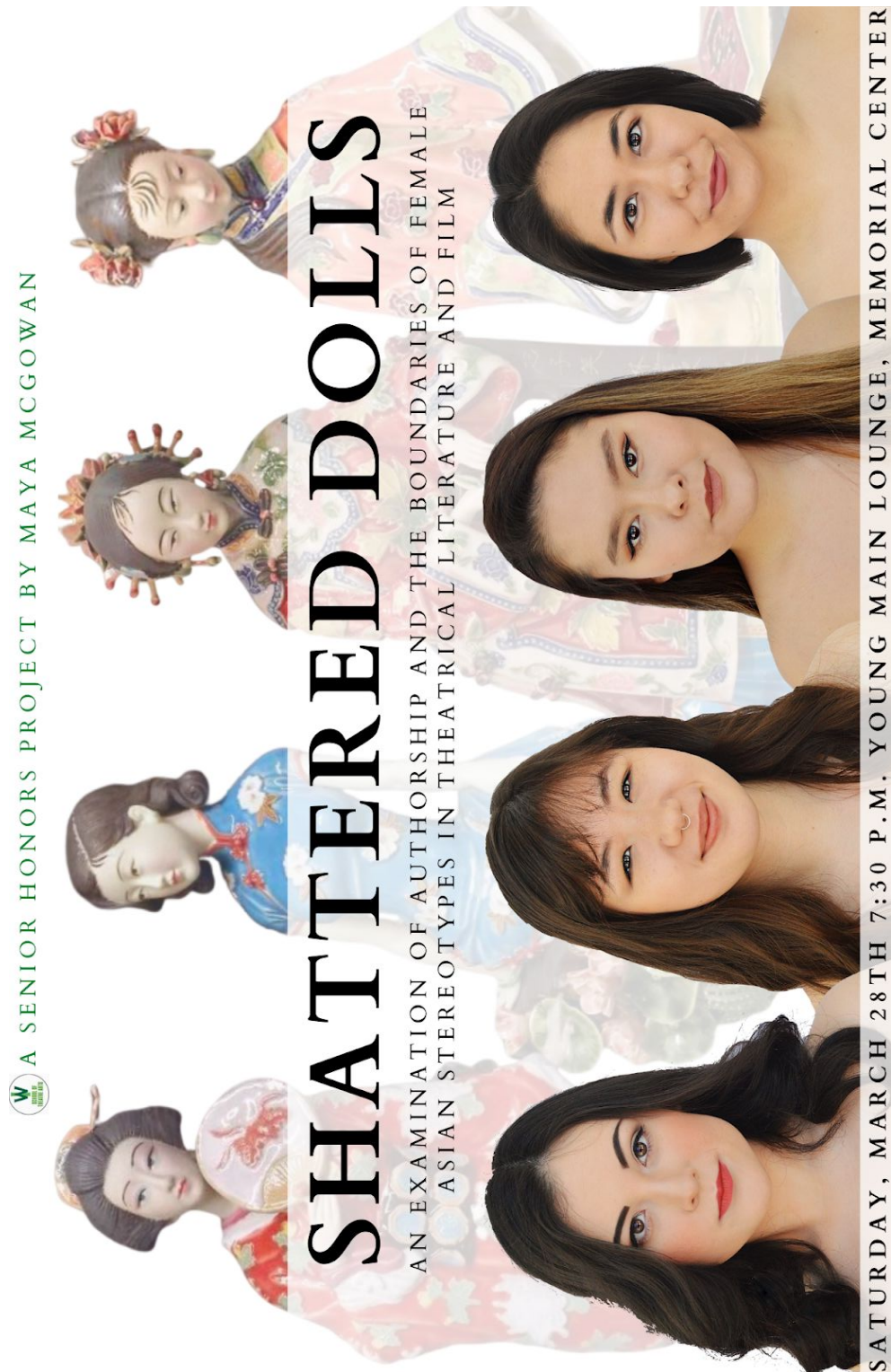
literature and film, I have focussed on a subset of Asian and Asian American stereotypes, noting a lack of authenticity when Euro-American authorship is utilized. To me, what makes a story ‘authentic’ arises from the experiences of the author. For instance, if I were to write a play about Korean Americans, I would be writing from a place of authenticity as I experience what it is like to be a Korean American everyday. This utilization of an Asian American author increases the dimensionality of Asian characters. Additionally, as described by Luk Van Langenhove and Rom Harré in their article titled “Cultural Stereotypes and Positioning Theory,” altering stereotypes “can be achieved by changing the discursive conventions” (Harre and Langenhove, 371). By shifting an author’s viewpoint from that of their upbringing to an alternative perspective, it is also possible to break the stereotypical mold. In this case, authorship can also be addressed in a collaborative manner, providing a similar result of breaking stereotypes and the presentation of more realistic characters. Using the example from earlier, if I were to write a story about Japanese Americans, I would want to collaborate with other individuals that have had the lived experiences of being a Japanese American. This collaboration allows one to speak from a place of authenticity and honesty when writing to someone’s lived perspective.

In response to the opening of the musical *Allegiance*, Diep Tran, an editor for the *American Theatre* journal, proclaims “what’s important now is that there’s also new work that more authentically represents the Asian and Asian American experience, created by Asian and Asian American teams. Kuo and *Allegiance* are a dramatic and long overdue step in that direction” (Tran). I think it’s important to state that we have taken tremendous strides towards increased representation in the theatre. And by highlighting and producing works written from an Asian or


Asian American perspective, we showcase a more representative story. This is how I propose we promote diversity in industries often plagued in prejudice and racism—in producing, sharing, and writing works created from a personal experience through authorship and collaboration. As a Korean American actress about to enter these industries, I believe it is important to share pieces written from an Asian American perspective in hopes that it will inspire other actors, playwrights, producers, and scholars to consider the importance of authorship and to actively participate in finding ways to increase Asian and Asian American representation in the theatre and on screen.



Appendix A: Poster




## Appendix B: Program



A SENIOR HONORS PROJECT  
BY MAYA MCGOWAN

# SHATTERED DOLLS

AN EXAMINATION OF AUTHORSHIP AND  
THE BOUNDARIES OF FEMALE ASIAN  
STEREOTYPES IN THEATRICAL  
LITERATURE AND FILM



### What is a Research Honors Project?

Honors Research is a hallmark of an IWU liberal arts education. Eligible students are invited to embark upon a year-long research or creative arts project with a faculty mentor and a committee of faculty from within and outside of their major department. Students who have a cumulative GPA of 3.25 or higher, meet the first requirement for qualifying for Research Honors. If you are interested in applying for Research Honors, you must also have a 3.5 cumulative GPA in the field in which you want to pursue your research. In addition, students must have completed six courses in the field in which they are pursuing their Research Honors.

### Thank You from Maya McGowan:

A huge thank you to my Advisor, Scott Susong, for your supervision, support, and ability to challenge me to question and form my own opinions.

Thank you to my Honors Committee: Chris Connelly, Leah Nillas, and Bridget Sundin for offering resources and dedicating time towards evaluating my project.

Thank you to Anja, Erika, and Megan for your contributions and for your beautiful performances.

And finally, I would like to thank my family and roommates for proof-reading and offering moral support throughout this process.





PROGRAM ORDER

INTRODUCTION

*Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee..... Maya, Anja, Megan, Erika

GEISHA

*The Waiting Room* by Lisa Loomer..... Megan and Anja  
*Geisha, A Life* by Mineko Iwasaki..... Anja  
"Un bel di vedremo" from *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini..... Maya  
*This Is Not a True Story* by Preston Choi..... Maya, Anja, Megan, Erika

CHINA DOLL

Clip from *The World of Suzie Wong* by John Patrick  
"My Lord and Master" from *The King and I* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II..... Maya  
"Three Little Maids from School Are We"  
from *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan..... Megan, Anja, Erika  
*The World of Extreme Happiness* by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig..... Erika  
"Higher" from *Allegiance* by Jay Kuo..... Megan

DRAGON LADY

Clip from *Thief of Baghdad* by Douglas Fairbanks  
"I Enjoy Being a Girl" from *Flower Drum Song* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II..... Anja  
*The China Crisis* by Kipp Erante Cheng..... Erika  
*Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston..... Maya, Anja, Megan, Erika  
Clip from *Kill Bill* by Quentin Tarantino

TIGER MOM/MODEL MINORITY

Clip from *Glee* by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan  
"I Speak Six Languages"  
from *The 25th...Spelling Bee* by William Finn..... Erika  
*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua..... Megan  
*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan..... Maya and Anja

CONCLUSION

Verbatim Interviews by the Company..... Maya, Anja, Megan, Erika



**MAYA MCGOWAN**  
Maya is delighted to present her Honor's Project, after five months of researching, interviewing, writing, and rehearsing. IWU credits include: K.C. Downing (*My Favorite Year*, Mirza), April (*The Life, Mirza*), Hippolyta (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mirza), Callie (*Stop Kiss*, Mirza), Daisy (*Rhinoceros*, Mirza), Caitlyn (*Edges*, Phoenix). Other credits include: Dantyn June (*Gypsy*, Prairie Fire Theatre), Cousin Hebe (*H.M.S. Pinafore*, Prairie Fire Theatre). She would like to thank everyone who has supported her project and has provided their love and encouragement.



**ANJA SCHRAG**  
Anja is a Theatre Arts and English Lit. double major from Champaign, IL. IWU credits include: Kim (*This is Not a True Story*, Phoenix Theatre), Avery (*The Skyscraper Perspective*, Phoenix Theatre). Other credits include: Mary Magdalene (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, Champaign Central HS), Olive (*The 25th Annual...Spelling Bee*, CCHS), and Abigail Williams (*The Grubbie*, CCHS). She'd like to thank her parents, sister, and brother for all of their support.



**MEGAN BOGGS**  
Megan is thrilled to be a part of a project so special and important as this one. IWU credits include: Mary Magdalene (*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, Mirza) and Beautiful Girl (*The Life, Mirza*). Other credits include: Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*) and Lorraine (*All Shook Up*) with Diamond Head Theatre. Thanks to Maya for all her hard work and for spearheading this night of meaningful art.



**ERIKA HARPER**  
Erika is very excited to be a part of this project alongside the other talented women. She comes from a Highlands Ranch, Colorado and was last seen as Lenora Frigid in the Music Theatre Society's *Cry-Baby: the musical*. IWU credits include: Tracy (*The Life, Mirza*), Assistant Choreographer (*Cry-Baby*, MTS), Ensemble (*Applause*, MTS). Other credits include: Olive Ostrovsky (*The 25th Annual...Spelling Bee*), Andy Lee (*42nd Street*, The Spark). Thanks and love to her family and friends.

WRITTEN BY MAYA MCGOWAN  
DIRECTED BY SCOTT SUSONG

## Appendix C: Script

### **Shattered Dolls**

Written By: Maya McGowan

Directed By: Scott Susong

*Lights up. Images of Geisha, China Doll, Dragon Lady, and Model Minority appear behind each of the girl's faces as they speak. Various slides appear throughout the performance indicating the pieces and authors performed.*

### **Introduction (From Song's of the Dragon Flying to Heaven by Young Jean Lee)**

**Maya:** Hello. Thank you all for coming here today. Your eyes are not worthy of...I mean, my face is not worthy of the strain on your eyes to look at it. My ears are not worth the effort of...um. My voice is not worthy of the effort of your ears to listen to it. It breaks my heart that it's hard for me to say I'm sorry.

**Anja:** I don't even know what the Asian people are doing in this show. All I know is that I come up with all this racist shit, and when minorities get mad I'm like, "Go to hell, you unfashionably angry minorities, this is my sophisticated critique of racism that you are too stupid to understand." But the truth is, if you're a minority and you do super-racist stuff against yourself, then the white people are like, "Oh, you're a 'cool' minority," and they treat you like one of them.

**Megan:** I want to be white. I want to get really annoyed whenever anyone brings up race. I want to say things like, "I don't think of people in terms of race. I find it more interesting to focus on our shared human experience." I want to deny that anything is racist short of slavery and genocide.

**Erika:** I love the white patriarchy with all my heart because I'm ambitious and want power. My whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male. People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really, I'm just a fucking white guy.

**Anja:** And some of you may be thinking, "Oh man, this is a speech about how white people suck. This is so much less complicated and interesting than all the other parts of the show that weren't just about race."

**Maya:** But don't worry. If enough white people hate it, I'll cut it.

**Maya:** Hello and welcome to *Shattered Dolls: An Examination of Authorship and the Boundaries of Female Asian Stereotypes in Theatrical Literature and Film*. For the past six months, I have been working on this project as a cumulative senior thesis. Initially, I had explored several different topics, but here were the things that I knew that I wanted: I knew that I wanted my project to be related to theatre, I knew I wanted it to be about women, and I knew I wanted to use my project as an opportunity to explore myself and promote social change. So after months of researching, I decided to explore female Asian stereotypes within the theatre. It was an opportunity to explore myself as a Korean American actress navigating the industry and because I knew that I could ask several other Asian American actresses in the department to collaborate with. So let me introduce you to my fellow performers for tonight: Anja Schrag, a freshman BA in Theatre Arts, Megan Boggs, a sophomore Music Theatre major, and Erika Harper, a sophomore Music Theatre major. Tonight, we will be performing pieces for you that both enforce and negate the usage of an Asian stereotype. When you see these pieces, I challenge you to think about their implications and how we, as a community, can “shatter” the expectations placed on us through stereotypes. At this time if you would please turn off all cell phones and give your attention to us as this lecture demonstration is about to start.

### **The Geisha**

**Maya:** According to Kelly Foreman, in her article titled *Bad Girls Confined: Okuni, Geisha, and the Negotiation of Female Performance Space*, geisha are defined as “women who study classical Japanese music and dance, perform music and dance for parties in order to pay for their art lessons and elaborate public stage performances, and are officially registered with a central office.” However, in Western culture, the term “geisha girl” has been historically misused. During the Allied occupation of Japan, women known as “geisha (pronounced geesha) girls” were prostitutes who served American GI’s stationed in the country. They would dress up in traditional “geisha” looking attire and thus would be difficult to distinguish from the actual hired “geisha girls” used in court entertainment. Since then, the term “geisha girl” has become a Westernized term to describe all female Japanese prostitutes and workers. Eventually, this would perpetuate the misconception that all geisha are prostitutes, thus, creating the stereotype of the sexualized “Geisha.” Let’s take a look at some theatrical literature that enforces and negates this stereotype.

**Erika:** *The Waiting Room* by Lisa Loomer is a dark comedy that explores beauty standards in different cultures. In this scene we will see Forgiveness, a Chinese woman from the 1700’s, who is concerned about her bound feet and Victoria, a 19th century corseted woman, who seeks an oophorectomy discuss the challenges of societal expectations placed on them as women to achieve a standard of beauty in order to please their husbands. Often praised as a feminist piece

of literature, the *New York Times* applauds the play for addressing “not only the ways in which women have always been victims of their cultures’ ideals of beauty, but also the inhumanity of the medical establishment and the corruption of the American pharmaceutical industry.” However, let’s take a look at the opening scene of the play.

Scene from *The Waiting Room* by Lisa Loomer

Anja as Forgiveness and Megan as Victoria

*The Waiting Room. Three chairs and a table with magazines.*

FORGIVENESS: Pretty. Pretty, pretty ... (*Shows Victoria a magazine.*) Pretty, huh?

VICTORIA: (*Politely.*) Yes. (*She goes back to her book.*)

FORGIVENESS: (*Eager to chat.*) Long wait, huh?

VICTORIA: He's thorough. (*A bloodcurdling scream offstage. The women barely react.*)

FORGIVENESS: Good doctor.

VICTORIA: Oh yes. (*Forgiveness smiles. Victoria remembers her manners and holds out her hand.*) Ah - Victoria Smoot.

FORGIVENESS: Forgiveness From Heaven. (*Forgiveness doesn't know what to do with Victoria's extended hand. She gives it a little tap.*)

VICTORIA: How do you do. (*She starts to go back to her book.*)

FORGIVENESS: Oh, fine. (*Smiles.*) Little problem with little toe.

VICTORIA: Well, I'm sure the doctor will fix it.

FORGIVENESS: Fell off this morning.

VICTORIA: I'm so sorry. And your family? Your husband is well?

FORGIVENESS: (*Smiles, covering pain.*) With other wives this week.

VICTORIA: Nice for you ... (*Sniffs.*) By the way, do you smell something - untoward?

FORGIVENESS: (*Proudly.*) My feet!

VICTORIA: I beg your pardon?

FORGIVENESS: My feet. Stink bad, huh?

VICTORIA: No, no, not — *too* awfully.

FORGIVENESS: I would wash them, but my husband, he's crazy for the smell. Likes to eat watermelon seeds from the toes. Almonds. (*Delighted.*) Dirt.

VICTORIA: Well ... (*What can she say?*) I love your shoes. (*She starts to go back to her book.*)

FORGIVENESS: Size three.

VICTORIA: Three *inches*!?

FORGIVENESS: (*Competitive.*) What size your waist?

VICTORIA: Sixteen. I got my first corset quite young.

FORGIVENESS: How young?

VICTORIA: Fourteen!

FORGIVENESS: (*Tops her; shows feet.*) I was five. (*Almost hopeful.*) Corset hurts bad, huh?

VICTORIA: Oh, no. Only when I breathe.

FORGIVENESS: My feet, just first couple years.

VICTORIA: Really?

FORGIVENESS: One day mother say to me, "Forgiveness From Heaven, today is lucky day by the moon. Time to start binding..."

VICTORIA: Ah.

FORGIVENESS: *(Like a recipe.)* Then mother takes bandage, place on inside of instep, and carry over small toes to force them in and towards the sole. Then bandage is wrapped around heel nice and forcefully, so heel and toes are drawn close, real close together.

VICTORIA: I see. *(It slips out.)* Why?

FORGIVENESS: Make feet pretty for future husband! *(Laughs.)* That night, I tried to run away in the forest-my feet were on fire! But mother found me and forced me to walk. She was a good girl when her feet were bound and never cried.

VICTORIA: *(Sighs.)* And so your poor feet never grew.

FORGIVENESS: *(Recounts her ordeal with a cheeriness bordering on relish.)* Got smaller! Soon the flesh became putrescent, and little pieces sloughed off from the sole as toes began to putrefy. *(Laughs.)* When I ate salted fish, my feet would swell and pus would drip - oh terrible! *(This is making Victoria rather ill.)* Mother would remove bindings, lance corns with a needle, and wipe the pus and blood and dead flesh.... And every two weeks I changed shoes, each pair one quarter inch smaller. *(Victoria starts to gag and gets out her smelling salts.)* And after two years, my feet were practically dead - so no more pain! Finally, all the bones were broken and four toes bent in nice neat row towards plantar. *(Victoria falls back in her chair, faint. Forgiveness concludes, triumphantly.)* And when I was nine ... father betrothed me to my husband!

VICTORIA: Well. *(Pause.)* I love your shoes. *(A scream offstage.)*

FORGIVENESS: And what are *you* being treated for?

VICTORIA: Me? Oh ... *(Yawns.)* Hysteria.

FORGIVENESS: Hys - teria?

VICTORIA: It's a disease of the ovaries.

FORGIVENESS: Hurts bad, huh?

VICTORIA: *(Condescending.)* No, no, no. You see, the ovaries control the personality. I've done some reading on the matter. Though my husband says that reading makes me worse. Romantic novels especially. *(Proud.)* My husband is a doctor. *(Victoria has a tic. Whenever she says the word "husband," her lower arm flings out from the waist, as if to swat someone.)*



FORGIVENESS: Lucky. He has treated you?

VICTORIA: Well, he did prescribe the rest cure.

FORGIVENESS: Nice and peaceful?

VICTORIA: *(Like Forgiveness, Victoria too tries to put a good spin on things.)* Oh very. Six weeks on one's back in a dimly lit room. No reading, no visitors, no ... potty.

FORGIVENESS: Worked good?

VICTORIA: Well, I came out screaming, actually. But it was hardly my husband's fault. It seems - well, it seems I've had too much education and my uterus has atrophied commensurately.

FORGIVENESS: Glad I never went to school.

VICTORIA: Lucky.

FORGIVENESS: When I was a little girl, my husband liked my little feet so much, I never left the bedroom.

VICTORIA: Well, children need rest.

FORGIVENESS: Men crazy for the golden lotus. Feel much love and pity for your suffering ... *(She gets up and demonstrates.)* The tiny steps, the whispered walk ... *(Makes a circle.)* And bound feet make buttocks larger, more attractive.

VICTORIA: Well, I assure you, it's a lot less fuss to wear a bustle -

FORGIVENESS: Bustle? Not natural! Also, foot binding makes vagina tighter. *(Victoria has another tic, sex makes her nose twitch.)* When I walk, whole lower part of my body is in state of tension, so vagina becomes like little fist!

VICTORIA: *(After a beat.)* Mrs. From Heaven, you do know erotic tendencies are one of the primary symptoms of ovarian disease -

FORGIVENESS: *(Worried.)* Erotic tendencies are symptom of disease?

VICTORIA: Obviously you do not keep abreast of modern science.

FORGIVENESS: But what if husband *insists* on erotic tendencies?

VICTORIA: Well, that's not your "tendency," dear, that's your *duty*.

**Erika:** One of the most defining characteristics of Forgiveness is her use of broken English and her bound feet. Although written to be a feminist piece of literature, Forgiveness is described in ways that reflect characteristics surrounding the "Geisha." This can be problematic as she is the only character tied to race and written to reflect a Western idea of how we view Asian women. This also brings up a good question of whether or not it would be different if an Asian woman were to write about these characters. Under these circumstances, do you believe the character of Forgiveness would still be written to portray a stereotype?

**Maya:** In her autobiographical tale, Mineko Iwasaki tells the story of how she became the most successful geisha of her generation. However, you might recognize her name most famously attached to the book, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, written by Arthur Golden. While writing *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden interviewed Iwasaki for background information used in the novel and promised her confidentiality. Yet, upon publication, Golden had given acknowledgement to Iwasaki, causing her to face backlash and even death threats. Following its release, she criticised his work and stated that "she felt totally betrayed by him and by the book." As a response, Mineko Iwasaki writes her autobiography and states "there is much mystery and misunderstanding about what it means to be a geisha. I hope this story will help explain what it is really like and will also serve as a record of this unique component of Japan's cultural history." Let's take a look at an excerpt from her book.

Monologue from *Geisha, A Life* by Mineko Iwasaki

Anja as Mineko

My name is Mineko. I moved into the Iwasaki geisha house when I was five and began my artistic training when I was six. I adored the dance. It became my passion and object of greatest devotion. I was determined to become the best and I did. The dance is what kept me going when the other requirements of the profession felt too heavy to bear. Literally. I weigh 90 pounds. A full kimono with hair ornaments can easily weigh 40 pounds. It was a lot to carry. As I matured in the profession, I became increasingly disillusioned with the intransigence of the archaic system and tried to initiate reforms that would increase the educational opportunities, financial independence, and professional rights of the women who worked there. I was so discouraged by my inability to effect change that I finally decided to abdicate my position and retire, which I did at the height of my success, when I was twenty-nine years old. I closed down the Iwasaki geisha

house, packed up the priceless kimono, and left Gion Kobu. Now, the karyukai is changing. It is not clear what lies ahead for Japanese society. I am afraid that the traditional culture of Gion Kobu and the other karyukai will cease to exist in the near future. The thought that little will remain of the glorious tradition beyond its external forms fills me with sorrow.

**Megan:** Known as one of the most beloved opera's, *Madama Butterfly* is based on the original short story written by John Luther Long. In this opera we meet Pinkerton, an American naval lieutenant, and Cio-Cio San, a Japanese former geisha girl, who is arranged to be married to Pinkerton. In the first act, we are introduced to these characters as they become newlyweds. But as the curtain rises on Act II, we find out that Pinkerton has left Nagasaki and has been away for three years. In this scene, we will see Cio-Cio San explain to her maid, Suzuki, her belief that "one day" Pinkerton will return and they will be reunited. Although she holds this belief, in the end Cio-Cio San ends up committing suicide, having learned that the man she loves re-married and was not coming back for her. Let's examine this piece.

"Un bel di vedremo" from *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini

**Maya** as Cio-Cio San; Sung in Italian

Mi metto là sul ciglio del colle e aspetto,  
 E aspetto gran tempo  
 E non mi pesa,  
 La lunga attesa.  
 E uscito dalla folla cittadina,  
 Un uomo, un picciol punto  
 S'avvia per la collina.  
 Chi sarà? Chi sarà?  
 E come sarà giunto  
 Che dirà? Che dirà?  
 Chiamerà Butterfly dalla lontana.  
 Io senza dar risposta  
 Me ne starò nascosta  
 Un po' per celia  
 E un po' per non morire  
 Al primo incontro;  
 Ed egli alquanto in pena  
 Chiamerà, chiamerà:  
 "Piccina mogliettina,  
 Olezzo di verbena"  
 I nomi che mi dava al suo venire.

Tutto questo avverrà,  
 Te lo prometto.  
 Tienti la tua paura,  
 Io con sicura fede l'aspetto.

**Megan:** Filled with devotion and hope, this aria is considered to be one of the most popular pieces in the soprano repertoire. However, many critics argue that we should reconsider how we view this piece and the implications of the opera itself. For instance, in an article written in *The Guardian*, it poses the questions of “how we as a modern audience of the #MeToo era experience this musical masterpiece, written by a white European man about the sexual exploitation and death of an Asian woman? And how do we reconcile our enjoyment of this opera while acknowledging that it is an iconic example of Orientalism by a composer who never set foot in Japan?” Considering these questions, how would our experience as an audience member change if this piece was written by an Asian playwright? Let’s take a look at our last piece of this section. *This is Not a True Story* by Preston Choi is a new play that confronts the controversy and impact of *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, and *Kumiko the Treasure Hunter*. Set in a fictional world, Choi explores what it would mean if these characters had agency over their lives and were able to change their endings. This play forces us to question our acceptance of these characters and perhaps make us think twice about what kind of message we are sending to our Asian American community through continual staging of these shows. Let’s take a look at an excerpt from this piece.

Scene from *This is Not a True Story* by Preston Choi  
 Maya as CioCio, Anja as Kim, and Erika as Kumiko/Takako

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: I know where I’ve heard of you before. You’re in plays.

KIM: What do you mean we’re in plays?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: You’re characters in plays. You’re from an opera and you’re from a musical.

KIM & CIOCIO: But I’m a terrible singer.

CIOCIO: What do you mean characters?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Characters, you know, like from stories, books. You read about them.

KIM: Oh I don’t know how to read.

CIOCIO: Me neither.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: You don't know how to read?

CIOCIO: Girls aren't taught how to read where I come from.

KIM: The schools were burned to the ground, not that they would have let me go anyway.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: No one ever taught you?

CIOCIO: We just answered that question rather clearly.

KIM: Yeah it sounds like you're just rubbing it in at this point.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: That's why nothing seemed strange, you couldn't recognize it.

CIOCIO: You're making me feel dumb, and I don't appreciate that.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Sorry. Just, that's why nothing seemed strange to you, you didn't know any better.

CIOCIO: Again, it feels like you're talking down to us-

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: CioCio remember how I said you sounded European?

CIOCIO: Vaguely.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: That's because you come from an Italian opera. You're usually played by a European opera singer.

CIOCIO: Played by?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Like, someone pretends to be you.

CIOCIO: You know I am a fifteen year old Japanese girl, but there have been times I felt like I have the body of a middle aged Italian woman.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: You were made like a hundred years ago.

CIOCIO: Made? Don't you mean born?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: No you were written.

CIOCIO: Excuse me?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: And you Kim, you're from an adaptation of CioCio's story, except they put the story in Vietnam and it's written in English.

KIM: I'm sorry, an adaptation?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: When they tell a story again, but in a different way.

CIOCIO: I'm sorry I'm still a little hung up on the idea of me being written and not born.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Well I guess writing a character is a less painful version of birth.

CIOCIO: Are you a character too?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Yes and no.

KIM: Are we also yes and no's.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: No, sort of, you were written by old European men. I think I'm a hybrid. A fictional and non-fictional person.

KIM: Non-fictional.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: That means something true, not made up, something real.

CIOCIO: Aren't we all made up? We were all made, everyone was made somehow, therefore we're all made up.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: But you're not real.

CIOCIO: I feel pretty real.

KIM: Yeah.

CIOCIO: I think we've both lived pretty full lives.

KIM: Yeah, I've lost my whole family, met my husband one day before marrying him, lost him in the chaos of war, raised my child in the fallout of Vietnam, and then killed myself.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Then how come in all the years you spent surviving with your child you decided to kill yourself? How could you not think of a different solution?

KIM: I didn't have a choice.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: But if you really think about it, you did. You didn't have to kill yourself. The only reason you killed yourself is because she killed herself, and you're an adaptation of her.

KIM: Again you're hurting my head.

CIOCIO: I chose to kill myself, I chose an honorable death like my father-

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: And you killed yourself because he wrote that you killed yourself. You didn't decide to kill yourself, your author did.

CIOCIO: Um... I believe in Jesus and God, not in authors.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: If you were well written characters you wouldn't have killed yourselves because you had plenty of other options to choose from, your authors just wanted you to die for dramatic effect.

CIOCIO: I didn't have a choice?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Well you're not exactly well written. You're a stereotype-

CIOCIO: A stereotype?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: A distorted version of the truth, a harmful one.

CIOCIO: Harmful, I'm harmful?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Well-

KIM: Sorry, could you explain badly written one more time, please.

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Okay. CioCio was written a long time ago, like a hundred years ago, and she was a character in a famous opera.

CIOCIO: I'm famous?

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Sort of. People vaguely know who you are, you're like culturally significant. The opera is called *Madama Butterfly*, so you can be happy to know you're at least the main character of your life story. Kim was written around fifteen years ago. They were inspired by the opera *Madama Butterfly* and so they made the musical *Miss Saigon*. They've been performing your stories and I believe that is why everything is repeating.

KIM: People keep telling our story-

KUMIKO/TAKAKO: Which is why we've been doing this over and over.

**Maya:** After having seen both a selection from *Madama Butterfly* and *This is Not a True Story*, do you see any differences in how the character of CioCio San is portrayed? To me, both of these pieces point to the importance of authorship. Puccini, although having written a beautiful score in *Madama Butterfly*, writes a stereotypical portrayal of the character of CioCio San representing a Western misconception of the East. For instance, she is written to be a "Geesha" (the misconstrued term that all geisha are prostitutes), she is submissive, and she is in need of saving by Western forces, a characteristic common of the "China Doll," a stereotype we will explore in our next section. On the other hand, Choi, an Asian American playwright comments on the stereotypical and offensive writing of her character and attempts to break the notion that Asian female characters need to follow a stereotype. This is seen as CioCio San fights for agency over her life and speaks to the hypocrisy of having to dedicate her life towards a man who doesn't love her. Additionally, we see that Choi uses the character of Kumiko/Takako as a voice to speak on the negative implications of characters that are written as offensive stereotypes. He also uses this piece as a way to challenge us, as an audience, to question "why?" Why do we accept the notion that both CioCio and Kim must die at the end of the show and why does it bring us to our feet in thunderous applause? What kind of message are we sending to Asian women about their role in society in doing this? Now let's take a look at our next stereotype, the "China Doll."

### **The China Doll**

**Maya:** The Chinese equivalent to "Geisha" is known as the "China Doll". According to Maythee Rojas, in her book titled *Women of Color in Feminism*, "Asian women have been typically



portrayed as innocent, docile, and eager to be saved by Western armed forces.” Similarly, the usage of the word “doll” implies features of beauty, smallness, and fragility. This idea of fragility is perpetuated in the usage of the term “China Doll” in association to Asian women. It implies stereotypes of how Asian women should look and act a certain way, implicating them to mere breakable objects. It is this concept of “fragility” that enforces the idea that the Asian female is in need of saving by Western forces and the white man. Let’s look at some examples of the “China Doll.” Released in 1960, *The World of Suzie Wong* was a British-American romantic drama film written by John Patrick starring William Holden and Nancy Kwan. This film follows the story of American architect, Robert Lomax, who falls in love with a bargirl from Hong Kong, Suzie Wong. Initially, this film was praised for it’s “love conquers all” theme and for being one of the first films where an Asian female actor was in a leading role on the big screen. However, since it’s release, it has received major criticism as well. In 2013, the Japanese American Citizens League called out the film for being a part of the “persistent strain in our culture that refuses to move beyond the stereotype of Asian women as exotic and subservient.” Additionally, other critics have claimed that this film helped “set the standard for a whole genre of representation: the duplicitous, hypersexual, yet childlike Asian woman in need of rescue.” In other words, the “China Doll” stereotype. Let’s view the trailer from this film.

Clip from *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnepiAcqb\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnepiAcqb_g)

**Anja:** *The King and I* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II is a musical that premiered in 1951 that is based on Margaret Landon’s novel, *Anna and the King of Siam*. It follows the story of Anna Leonowens, an American governess, who travels to Bangkok to teach English and Western values to the King’s wives and children. However, upon arrival, Anna is horrified by some of the King’s principles and ends up teaching not only the wives and children, but the King himself how to bring Siam into the modern world. Displaying a conflict between Eastern and Western cultures, this musical is known as Rodgers and Hammerstein’s most complex work. However, critics like Dominic Cavendish from the *Telegraph*, states *The King and I* is “one of the most problematic musicals of the 20th Century American canon.” Cavendish believes that in “putting its story on stage” it risks being “reductive, stereotyping, caricaturing, and compounding at worst the racial aspects of the West’s colonialist past.” Let’s examine a character in *The King and I* that could embody these qualities of the “China Doll” and thus represent a stereotype.

“My Lord and Master” from *The King and I* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II

**Maya** as Tuptim

He is pleased with me!

My Lord and Master

Declares he's pleased with me-  
 What does he mean?  
 What does he know of me  
 This lord and master?  
 When he has looked at me what has he seen?  
 Something young  
 Soft and slim,  
 Painted cheek,  
 Tap'ring limb,  
 Smiling lips  
 All for him,  
 Eyes that shine  
 Just for him-  
 So he thinks...  
 Just for him!  
 Though the man may be  
 My Lord and Master,  
 Though he may study me  
 As hard as he can,  
 The smile beneath my smile  
 He'll never see  
 He'll never know  
 I love another man  
 He'll never know,  
 I love another man.

**Maya:** *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan is one of the most popular and widely performed operas by amateur and professional groups today. It is known for being a lighthearted musical comedy set in an imaginary Japanese town called Titipu, drawing inspiration from the opening of Japan to the West in the mid-1850's. Andrew Crowther, a Gilbert biographer, explains that *The Mikado* "does not portray any of the characters as being 'racially inferior' or indeed fundamentally any different from British people. The point of the opera is to reflect British culture through the lens of an invented 'other', a fantasy Japan that has only the most superficial resemblance to reality." Considering this idea, let's take a look at a song from this opera.

"Three Little Maids from School" from *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan

Megan as Yum-Yum, Anja as Peep-Bo, and Erika as Pitti-Sing

YUM-YUM, PEEP-BO, & PITTI-SING:

Three little maids from school are we  
Pert as a school-girl well can be  
Filled to the brim with girlish glee  
Three little maids from school!

YUM-YUM:

Everything is a source of fun. (Chuckle)

PEEP-BO:

Nobody's safe, for we care for none! (Chuckle)

PITTI-SING:

Life is a joke that's just begun! (Chuckle)

YUM-YUM, PEEP-BO, & PITTI-SING:

Three little maids from school!  
Three little maids who, all unwary  
Come from a ladies' seminary  
Freed from its genius tutelary-  
Three little maids from school  
Three little maids from school!

YUM-YUM:

One little maid is a bride, Yum-Yum-

PEEP-BO:

Two little maids in attendance come-

PITTI-SING:

Three little maids is the total sum

YUM-YUM, PEEP-BO, & PITTI-SING:

Three little maids from school!

YUM-YUM:

From three little maids take one away

PEEP-BO:

Two little maids remain, and they-

PITTI-SING:

Won't have to wait very long, they say-

YUM-YUM, PEEP-BO, & PITTI-SING:

Three little maids from school!

Three little maids from school!

Three little maids who, all unwary

Come from a ladies' seminary

Freed from its genius tutelary-

Three little maids from school!

Three little maids from school!

**Maya:** This piece is by far the most critiqued number from the opera within the Asian American community and with good reason. As we can see through Megan, Anja, and Erika's performances, these characters are meant to represent qualities of the "China Doll," emphasizing things such as their size, their obedient nature, and their innocence. So, despite Gilbert and Sullivan's intent to create a fictional piece set in Japan that comments on English tropes, the characters are still written as stereotypes which has unfortunately led to a history in America of practicing yellow-face when producing this piece. Blogger and activist, Erin Quill, states that "the problem is not what Gilbert and Sullivan intended, because they did intend a respectful production. But in America, people have incorporated this terrible Kabuki makeup, they've incorporated shuffling and bowing and accents, they've adopted anachronisms... They've adopted racist tropes that they throw in to make themselves feel superior, and to be able to get a laugh." In order to combat this, do you believe that as an audience member, you would view this piece differently if it was performed by an all-Asian cast or written by an Asian team?

**Megan:** *The World of Extreme Happiness* by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig is a contemporary play about a young Chinese factory worker who attempts to overcome poverty despite the adversity she faces. The playwright explains that her inspiration for this piece comes from the fact that she is "a part of the Chinese diaspora and finds the experiences of Chinese migrants—both within their own country, and to other parts of the world—endlessly fascinating." In this play, the protagonist, Sunny, is determined to escape her life in rural China and forge a new identity in the city. Her character is ambitious, determined, and optimistic as she believes her new job will financially support her family and provide her with opportunities. But instead, it unfolds a capitalist system that benefits itself by destroying its own people. In an interview with the Goodman Theatre, Cowhig indicates that "there is no western protagonist that the audience is invited or expected to latch on to and use as a way to experience the play." Rather, Cowhig

forces audiences to latch on to an all Asian cast as “**they** are our journey of empathy and discovery.” Let’s take a look at this piece.

Monologue from *The World of Extreme Happiness* by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig

Erika as Sunny

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed foreigners, press and business people- good morning. My name is Sunny Li, and I am here to tell you how leaving the countryside to work in a city factory gave me the opportunity to transform my life and have some success. Back home it was- it was my job to grow food. I was a bad farmer. My plants got sick. My neighbor, she told me to stop being an idiot and taught me how to feed vegetables. I became a good farmer but I knew if I didn't leave I'd marry a farmer and spend my life trying to make boy babies. So I went to Shenzhen. To the factory. I didn't know it wouldn't matter how much I looked like a city person- or how many people I tricked, because my ID card said peasant. City people. They think they can burn through peasants. Like a- natural resource. To them we're coal. We don't have the same rights, but...but we're supposed to make them rich. I want to say- to all my fellow migrant workers who are watching me right now -that I protest- and I ask that you protest with me. Ask- demand that you...that you get the same rights as people born in the city. If they say no...go on strike. Stop working. Let city people -try to live- for a single day without us. Stop selling them food and digging out coal. Stop building their houses and sewing their clothes. Chop off my arms- I can still strike. Hack off my legs- I can still walk. Rip out my heart- I will mysteriously recover. I can bathe in boiling oil and come out cleaner than I went in.

Anja: *Allegiance* by Jay Kuo is known as the first Broadway musical created and directed by Asian Americans and has a predominantly Asian American cast. It's set in a time of the Japanese American internment of WWII and was even inspired by personal experiences from George Takei, who stars as one of the leads. Confronting topics like “immigration, xenophobia, and wartime paranoia,” writer, Jay Kuo, explains that the story of *Allegiance* is told from the Japanese American perspective and that “several cast members were either interned themselves or had family who were.” He goes on to state that this story comes with a “sense of ownership of the material” because he wrote “from the inside out and not the outside in.” To Asian American actors like Lea Salonga, another star of the show, this piece is momentous. She declares that “this is the one show that does have an Asian perspective behind it, besides the Asian actors onstage. I don't think it's something that Broadway has seen before, but it's certainly something that Broadway actually needs.” Let's take a look at a number from this musical.

“Higher” from *Allegiance* by Jay Kuo

Megan as Kei

There once was a little girl playing on a swing set  
 That her grandpa built by the sycamore tree near the rusty farmyard gate  
 While her mama pinned the laundry the little girl would cry out loud  
 “Push me higher, push me higher, push me I can’t wait”  
 Her mama would push a couple times but there was laundry still to do  
 So she learned to use her own strength, pull her own weight, push on through  
 To swing higher, higher than before  
 Higher, but afraid to reach for something more  
 Higher, higher towards the sky  
 Until the day she bent to kiss her mama a last goodbye  
 There once was little boy who rode that swing set  
 He had a licorice twist from the store in town and two knobby skinned-up knees  
 And while his sister pin the laundry, the little boy would cry out loud,  
 “Push me higher, push me higher, push me, pretty please!”  
 The girl would push a couple times but there was laundry still to do  
 Then she watched, amazed, as that little boy simply pulled his own weight through  
 To swing higher, higher than she dared  
 Higher, how he swings so high and not be scared?  
 Higher, he could touch the sky  
 Right then she knew that he would also one day tell her goodbye  
 That little boy, he seemed so sure, was it something never taught to her?  
 How the years passed quickly by that girl’s a woman still afraid to try.  
 Is it too late to start again, get back that feeling I had then?  
 But now my life is upside down  
 There’s no more farm, there’s no more town, and no use asking why  
 But I won’t let it pass me by  
 Life won’t pass me by  
 I’ll fly  
 Get back on that swing  
 Higher, soaring higher up than anything  
 Higher, I want something more  
 I dreamed I’d reach for greater things  
 My eyes upon those golden rings  
 I’ll take what chance the future brings  
 And soar

**Maya:** To me, the importance of authorship is evident as both Kei from *Allegiance* and Sunny from *The World of Extreme Happiness*, are characters that defy Asian stereotypes. Both women are driven, hard working, and human. They have desires, dreams, and faults like all of us and are

not written as stock or two-dimensional characters that lack unique traits and features. This humanistic quality is crucial as it allows us, as audience members, to connect and empathize with these women as we follow their stories. So now that we've seen some pieces that utilize and refute the "China Doll" stereotype, let's take a look at our next example, the "Dragon Lady."

### **The Dragon Lady**

**Maya:** The idea of the "Dragon Lady" is that Asian women who fall under this stereotype are considered to be strong, mysterious, deceitful, powerful, seductive, manipulative, and more. According to Sheridan Prasso, in her book titled, *The Asian Mystique*, China's Empress Dowager Cixi is "the reason we think 'Dragon Lady' in association with Asian women who yield power." However, it is clear through her story that what brought upon this image was yet another misconception of the East, similar to the "Geisha" and "China Doll." So how did this happen? In 1898, the Empress Dowager went after a group of political reformers including a man named Kang Yu-wei who started a reformation movement through the Hundred Days' Reform. This reform included radical ideas like changing the government to a constitutional monarchy and practicing capitalism. Because the Empress Dowager was an opponent of this reform, Kang began to make false accusations against her in hopes of starting a revolution. Some of these statements include calling her an "evil hag" and a "depraved palace concubine." Eventually, the *Times* of London would get ahold of these accusations and print articles describing her as deceitful and ruthless, thus creating the "Dragon Lady" stereotype. Since then, this term has been associated with many characters in Hollywood films including American actress, Anna May Wong. Because her characters had similar qualities associated with the Empress, this paved a path that influenced the types of roles for Asian Americans and set a precedent for future casting decisions. Eventually, this would lead to Wong's departure from Hollywood as she would spend her lifetime promoting herself to be seen beyond the limitations of this stereotype. Let's take a look at one of the earliest examples of Anna May Wong featured as the "Dragon Lady" in *The Thief of Baghdad*.

Clip from *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924)

<https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/thief-of-bagdad-1924>

**Megan:** *Flower Drum Song* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II premiered on Broadway in 1958. This musical was considered to be a "breakthrough" for its time as it was one of the first Broadway musicals written to feature an all Asian cast. It ran for 600 performances and then disappeared from Broadway, regarded as "quaint, patronizing, old-fashioned, and inauthentic" as it was a show created by non-Asians about Asian Americans. It wasn't until Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang, was given special permission to re-write the book for a revival of the musical in 2002, that it gained more attention. In his "Introduction," Hwang writes, "I

began work on the musical with the intention of creating a more ‘authentic’ *Flower Drum Song*” and was “convinced of the need to create characters who burst from the page or stage with the richness, complexity, and contradictions of real people.” So let’s take a look at a number from the original musical that showcases qualities of a stereotype in which Hwang would later need to develop in order to create a more complex and dynamic character through his book.

“I Enjoy Being a Girl” from *Flower Drum Song* by Rodgers and Hammerstein II  
 Anja as Linda Low

I’m a girl, and by me that’s only great!  
 I am proud that my silhouette is curvy,  
 That I walk with a sweet and girlish gait  
 With my hips kind of swivelly and swervy.  
 I adore being dressed in something frilly  
 When my date comes to get me at my place  
 Out I go with my Joe or John or Billy,  
 Like a filly who is ready for the race!  
 When I have a brand new hairdo  
 With my eyelashes all in curl,  
 I float as the clouds on air do,  
 I enjoy being a girl!  
 When men say I’m cute and funny  
 And my teeth aren’t teeth, but pearl,  
 I just lap it up like honey  
 I enjoy being a girl!  
 I flip when a fellow sends me flowers,  
 I drool over dresses made of lace,  
 I talk on the telephone for hours  
 With a pound and a half of cream upon my face!  
 I’m strictly a female female  
 And my future I hope will be  
 In the home of a brave and free male  
 Who’ll enjoy being a guy having a girl...like...me.

**Megan:** As we can see, Linda Low possesses similar qualities to the “Dragon Lady.” She is seductive and alluring, she seeks approval from American men and in return is rewarded with power and wealth. Although a non-conventional example of the “Dragon Lady,” it is clear that her tactics and objectives are written in comparison to this stereotype. Now having seen an example from the original score, what do you think David Henry Hwang could have done to



create a more “authentic” book that showcased the humanity of these Asian American characters like Linda?

**Maya:** In order to combat the negative implications of stereotyping, some Asian American playwrights use reappropriation as a way to reclaim words, images, and ideas that were originally created out of prejudice and bigotry. According to *Grammarist.com* “to reappropriate” has two meanings. First, it means “to appropriate again, as with funds that are taken from one purpose and set apart for a different one.” Second, it means “to appropriate something pejorative and make it positive.” Although sometimes controversial, it is a tactic used to point out the hypocrisy and harmful intent of these words, images, ideas, etc. in hopes of changing its semantics. In *The China Crisis* by Kipp Erante Cheng, one of his characters, The Dragon Lady, is written with the intent of reappropriating the images and words associated with this stereotype. Let’s take a look at a monologue by her character to see an example of this.

Monologue from *The China Crisis* by Kipp Erante Cheng  
Erika as Dragon Lady

I Dragon lady. I cook long time. I cook Hunan egg rolls for Golden Chopstix Restaurant. That’s all. Low Fat, I meet him only once, maybe twice. He sample Hunan egg rolls and say best he ever have. He ask me go work at El Loco Pagoda restaurant, bring secret recipe to his restaurant. I say no, but he push me. But I no tell. No price worth selling secret from many generations from China. There are things you not know about Chinese people. There are things about Chinese people you will never understand. (*Transforms into a beautiful woman.*) There are things about us that you will never be able to get a handle on. You can only wonder and hope that maybe one day you will be able to get a little closer to what it really means to be Chinese. The Golden Chopstix restaurant is filled with the unexpected. Like all Chinese restaurants, our restaurant is a place filled with mysteries. I’m not just here to fry egg rolls. I have a brain, too! If I have to fry one more Hunan egg roll, I’ll just scream!

**Maya:** *Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston is a new play that follows the lives of five Japanese war brides post-WWII. The play begins with a middle aged Japanese woman, Himiko, who commits suicide. Shortly after her gun goes off, we see the remaining characters of the play during a gathering for tea while Himiko, now dead, observes from the side. They discuss the struggles of dealing with discrimination, alienation, and cultural adaptation as they navigate their new lives in Kansas. However, to me, this play is really about friendship, hope, and reconciliation as the women find council in each other. It’s a play about the Asian American experience from a firsthand account as Houston’s work reflects personal experiences growing up as a Japanese American in Kansas. The women in this play are strong, outspoken, honest, and vulnerable as

they recount their experiences. In other words, these women are well developed characters that defy stereotypes. Let's take a look at a scene between them.

Scene from *Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston

Megan as Teruko, Anja as Atsuko, Erika as Setsuko, and Maya as Himiko

TERUKO: The only time we have taken tea together is whenever something bad happened to a Japanese "war bride." We have the best tea and realize how little we understand about each others' choices: in husbands, in raising our children, in whether or not we choose to embrace Amerika. Amerikans don't want us. Japanese Amerikans too busy feeling bad themselves. We can't go back to Japan. That's why I say family is the most important thing. What makes us the most happiest? Our children. Our children.

ATSUKO: Can you believe it? My mom won't let me go out for cheerleading. She said it's too "sexual." "Don't do skiing. Japanese don't ski. Don't do motorcycle. Don't do skydive." She even thinks life insurance guarantees you don't die. When I was born, she bought me a hundred thousand dollar policy.

SETSUKO: My mother worries about life, not death. "Did you eat your raw egg and fermented soy beans today? Did you have a bowel movement?" Mom's so funny. We were separated in a store and, over the intercom, I heard: "Japanese mother lost in dry goods. Will her daughter please claim her?"

TERUKO: My mother doesn't worry about anything except my dad. When she starts licking the bottom of his shoes and gets that look in her eye, I can say, "Mom, hi, I'm going to join the Marines, become a lesbian, screw the football team." She'd just say, "Okay Linda. That's good. Have to fix dinner for sugar pie now."

ATSUKO: Man, the only thing that really bugs me after all these years is having to take my shoes off in the house.

SETSUKO: I thought I was going to die when my date picked me up for the homecoming dance. While he waited for me, my mother put shower caps over his shoes!

TERUKO: Mieke, what about your mother? She came to our house wearing that blonde wig? She slurped her tea and crocheted those green and purple poodle toilet paper covers. Ugh.

HIMIKO: You guys don't know anything about what life really is. Don't ask me about my mother. Because then you're asking me about myself...and I don't know who the hell I am. I was

born in a storm and it's never stopped raining. My only blessing is Mieko, my half-Japanese girl. I love her so much, but she was born in my storm, too. So it was a Saturday in May, Mieko wants to make me worry, so she hitchhikes. She's gone three days. The last time I saw Mieko is in the dusk. She looks so Japanese, her shoulders curving like gentle hills. "Perfect kimono shoulders," her grandmother would say. Mieko came home today. Someone made her dirty, stabbed her in the chest many times and then raped her as she died. Left a broom inside my little girl's body. Her brassiere was shredded by the knife. There is no one for me; there never was. Billy, is that you? Before it's too late, tell me the truth. You loved me, didn't you? Once there was nobody like me. I see you there waiting in the mist, your strong arms ready to hold me for one last dance. But I'm going another way. Like bamboo, I sway back and forth in the wind, bending but never breaking. Never again. I have a long walk ahead of me. All ties are unbound, as completely as if they never existed.

**Megan:** If you are a fan of Quentin Tarantino, then you are familiar with some of his most popular works including *Pulp Fiction*, *Inglorious Bastards*, *Django Unchained* and the *Kill Bill* series. Although *Kill Bill* might be known most famously for its leading actor, Uma Thurman, it also features an Asian American actress, Lucy Liu, who plays the leader of a Japanese crime syndicate. In this clip, we will see Liu's character, O-Ren Ishii, speaking with the other members of the organization. As you watch, notice the differences between Anna May Wong's "Dragon Lady" versus this more contemporary version.

Clip from *Kill Bill* (2003)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLvz5E61UNs>

**Megan:** One of the most interesting things about this stereotype is its evolution throughout the years. Initially, the "Dragon Lady" represented a mysterious, manipulative, seductive, but similar to the "China Doll," submissive woman who usually served a male figure. But since the creation of martial arts films, the image of the "Dragon Lady" has changed. Now, she is more aggressive, dangerous, and even ruthless at times, killing all those who challenge or defy her. Along with this comes the expectation that in order to get cast in a leading role, Asian women must learn martial arts. Lucy Liu is a prime example of an actor who has mainly played characters that follow a more contemporary version of the "Dragon Lady" in films like *Charlie's Angels* and *The Man with the Iron Fists*. In an interview with ABC News, Chinese American actress, Ann Hu, explains "I usually get an audition for a supporting role, sidekick or best friend" and "unless I know kung fu, or some kind of knife fighting or sword fighting, or something of that stereotypical nature, it would be hard for me to be seen as having a leading role." Hu recognizes that because of this image change, the opportunities for female Asian American actors has become more limited in an already restrictive industry. It's important to recognize this as an audience and to consider the implications on a group of people that have historically been

marginalized even to this day. It is because of many Western misconceptions of the East that we have created and enforced these stereotypes through the media and through art. However, there are also stereotypes that the Asian and Asian American communities have produced as well. This brings us to our last examples, the “Model Minority” and the “Tiger Mom.”

### **The Tiger Mom and Model Minority**

**Maya:** According to Harvard Law School’s journal, *Asian Americans in the Law*, the “model minority” usually refers to a “minority group perceived as particularly successful” and is “often applied to Asian Americans, who, as a group, are often praised for apparent success across academic, economic, and cultural domains.” This term seems to have been coined during the Civil Rights Movement in a 1966 *New York Times* article titled “Success Story, Japanese American Style,” where sociologist, William Peterson, uses this phrase to describe how despite marginalization, Asian Americans have achieved high success in the United States. Once published, journalism companies around the nation started to distribute similar articles sensationalizing Asian American kids as “geniuses” and “whiz-kids.” Let’s first look at a few examples from pieces that showcase the “Model Minority” stereotype starting with the musical comedy-drama TV show, *Glee*. Written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, *Glee* follows the lives of “a group of ambitious misfits trying to escape the harsh realities of high school by joining a glee club.” Two of these students are written to be Asian characters, Tina Cohen-Chang and Mike Chang. In this clip, we will see Mike and Tina discuss expectations associated with the “Model Minority” in an episode titled “Asian F.”

Clip from *Glee* (2009)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzsPuhUI0Yw>

**Anja:** Known for hits such as “The I Love You Song” and “Magic Foot,” *The 25th Annual Putnum County Spelling Bee* by William Finn is a beloved show often produced in many amateur and professional theatres. It centers around a fictional spelling bee in which a group of six kids compete in hopes of being declared the spelling champion. As each kid approaches the microphone, they start to reveal personal stories related to their home life and identity. One kid, Marcy Park, is stated to be an “over-achieving” Asian American. In her character description, she is stated as “the poster child for the Over-Achieving Asian” because she can “speak six languages, is a member of all-American hockey, a championship rugby player, plays Chopin and Mozart on multiple instruments, sleeps only three hours a night, hides in the bathroom cabinet, and is tired of always winning.” In other words, she represents the ideal “Model Minority.” Let’s take a look at a number from this show that features Marcy.

“I Speak Six Languages” from *The 25th Annual Putnum County Spelling Bee* by William Finn

Erika as Marcy

I speak six languages  
 Every language easy  
 Easy as the recipe for making Jell-O  
 I speak six languages  
 And I can say hello in at least seven more  
 To excel in athletics is not difficult if one has the temperament  
 Apparently I have the temperament  
 Yes I score some goals  
 So unfazed am I as my life unscrolls  
 Unamazed am I  
 I don't like to brag and I won't 'cause I don't have to  
 But  
 I speak six languages  
 All-American in hockey and everytime I stretch  
 I stretch without getting sore  
 I speak six languages  
 And I like the theme from Rocky  
 Though I play Mozart more  
 I achieve my goals  
 So unfazed am I as my life unscrolls  
 Unamazed am I  
 Winning is a job from which I get no real enjoyment  
 Je peux parler six langues  
 Carda idio maes simple  
 Jerro oh yo no reshipe no yesashesades  
 Ja gavaru shetz yatzukim  
 V'ani yodat shalom  
 Im noch mindesterns sieben mehr  
 I speak six languages  
 I am so sick and tired  
 Of always being the best and the brightest at every mass  
 Six lousy languages  
 And for my height  
 I'm the lightest of the girls in my class  
 That's  
 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

**Maya:** Another common stereotype of the Asian American woman stems from the “Tiger Mom.” Although first mentioned in the 19th century, this term was made popular by Amy Chua in her book titled, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In this book, Chua discusses her methods relating to Chinese parenting. Chua states that by raising her children in the “Chinese way” and supporting “punishingly hard work,” it yields “excellence.” To her, this creates a beneficial environment for her children to grow up in and leads to success. Let’s take a look at an excerpt from her book that describes her methods.

Monologue from *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua

Megan as Amy

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereo-typically successful kids. Well, here are some things my daughters were never allowed to do: have a playdate, be in a school play, complain about not being in a school play, watch TV or play computer games, get any grade less than an A, not be the #1 student in every subject except gym and drama, and play any instrument other than the piano or violin. I’m using the term “Chinese mother” loosely. I know some mothers of Chinese heritage who are *not* Chinese mothers. Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies out there showing marked differences between Chinese and Westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said that “stressing academic success is not good for children.” By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. The Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in math; (3) you must never compliment your children in public; (4) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (5) that medal must be gold.

**Maya:** *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is an interesting piece because it is one of the few pieces we have seen today that is created and perpetuated by the Asian and Asian American community. And in terms of the relationship to the “Model Minority,” it appears that the idea of the “Tiger Mom” is meant to encourage and even enforce kids to comply with this stereotype. However, the biggest difference between these two stereotypes and the previous ones mentioned, is the idea of authorship. Although stereotypes, in general, can set unrealistic expectations about a particular group of people, the core of the problem stems from whether or not the stereotype is created as a form of oppression or as a characteristic created by a group of people about that group of people. Let’s take a look at another example from an Asian American perspective in *The Joy Luck Club*.

**Erika:** *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan is a famous book about the lives of four Asian women who fled China in the 1940's and their four Americanized daughters. The novel focuses on one of the daughters, June Woo, who, after her mother's death, takes her place in a social group called the Joy Luck Club. It was adapted into a film in 1993 and features famous actors like Tsai Chin, Kieu Chinh, Lisa Lu, and France Nuyen. In a review for the *New York Times*, critic, Janet Maslin, states that the movie is "both sweeping and intimate, a lovely evocation of changing cultures and enduring family ties." Now let's take a look at a flashback from this movie. In this scene, we will see June discuss the challenges of growing up in a household with a "Tiger Mom" who has placed expectations on her to succeed in every aspect of her life.

Scene from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

Anja as June and Maya as Suyuan (June's Mother)

*Kitchen. Washing Dishes.*

JUNE: I see you didn't touch your crab.

SUYUAN: Like I said at dinner, not hungry. What? You're mad at Waverly?

JUNE: How could I be mad at someone with all that style? It's just a shame that I wasn't born that way.

SUYUAN: So it's me you're mad at?

JUNE: No. I'm just sorry you got stuck with such a loser, that I've always been so disappointing.

SUYUAN: What do you mean disappointing? Piano?

JUNE: Everything- my grades, my job, not getting married, everything you expected of me.

SUYUAN: I do not expect anything. Never expect. Only hope. Only hoping best for you. It's not wrong to hope.

JUNE: No? Well it hurts. Because everytime you hope for something I couldn't deliver, it hurt. It hurt me mommy. And no matter what you hope for, I'll never be more than what I am. And you never see that, what I really am.

SUYUAN: *(Takes necklace off and puts it in June's hand)* You, since you're baby time, I wear this next to my heart. Now you wear next to yours. It will help you know, I see you. I see you.



That bad crab, only you tried to take it. Everybody else want best quality. You were thinking different. Waverly took best quality crab, you took worst. Because you have best quality heart.

SUYUAN: (*Puts necklace around June*) You have style no one can teach. Must be born this way. I see you.

**Maya:** This scene is one of the most heartfelt moments of the movie where you see June and her mother develop an understanding for one another. June, having felt the pressure to conform to the “Model Minority,” expresses her frustrations and feelings of unworthiness because of the expectations placed on her. Her mother, on the other hand, realizes her “Tiger Mom” parenting style has put pressure on her daughter and empathizes with her explaining that she loves her and has always been proud of her, stating “I see you.” It is this complexity of both of these characters and their relationships that indicates they were written to break free from the limitations placed on them by stereotypes and are well-developed, three-dimensional characters, that are alive, ever-changing, and human. The kind of characters we hope to see on the stage and on the screen.

### Conclusion

**Maya:** Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang states “At its core, a stereotype is bad writing: a one- or two-dimensional cutout devoid of humanity, and therefore prone to demonization. Whether one’s characters are cooks, laundry-men, computer scientists or gangsters, if they are all well written, they will exude humanity, which is ultimately the most effective weapon against stereotypes, and the most visceral measure of authenticity.” It is of my opinion that one of the best ways to combat this type of writing is through consideration of authorship. Through my research I found that of the literature I read for and about female Asian Americans, those that were written from a non-Asian perspective tended to follow a stereotype, whether that be the “Geisha,” the “China Doll,” the “Dragon Lady,” the “Model Minority,” or even the “Tiger Mom.” However, most of the literature I read that was written from an Asian perspective, opposed stereotypes or found ways to reclaim them. Instead, the author’s focus was on the character’s story and what made them human, rather than what made them Asian. In response to the opening of the musical *Allegiance*, Diep Tran, an editor for the *American Theatre* journal, proclaims “what’s important now is that there’s also new work that more authentically represents the Asian and Asian American experience, created by Asian and Asian American teams. Kuo and *Allegiance* are a dramatic and long overdue step in that direction.” I think it’s important to state that we have taken tremendous strides towards representation in the theatre. And in highlighting and producing works written from an Asian or Asian American perspective, we showcase a more representative and personal story that is authentic and honest. **This** is how we promote diversity in industries often plagued in prejudice and racism. Through producing, sharing, and writing works created from a more personal experience through authorship. And as



a Korean American actor about to enter this industry, these are the works that I want to share with you in hopes that it will inspire you to consider what authorship means to you. So now let us, four Asian American actors, tell you what authorship means to us.

*Images of Geisha, China Doll, Dragon Lady, and Model Minority fade behind each of the girl's faces as they speak. Verbatim Monologues by the Company.*

**Erika:** My perspective or like just even like my mom, like she moved to America like wanting to like fill this like American dream she left everything behind in Japan and like obviously that's an important story and no matter like if someone, if some white person took that story and decided to turn it to a musical, it just wouldn't be the same because like it's I don't know it's, I think it's important to like no matter how many like stories like like *Miss Saigon* that you share, it would be different because it's actually coming from the actual perspective and there's something different and vulnerable and emotional and actually true about it and because like like anyone can like fix like the bad things and try to make them better so it's more appealing but like our stories should be told from like, the b, like the plain truth, yeah.

**Megan:** I just think that, just in general, I think that there is a stig-stigma on Asians in society and I think that art should reflect uh reality and I think with the current state of art right now, it's not, it's not, it's not reflecting reality. It's not making anybody question their current beliefs um and it's allowing people to continue to believe in harmful and hurtful stereotypes against just a lot of races um and so I think giving a voice and people finding their voices to speak on behalf of like their own experiences as an Asian person gives that reality back to the artform. You know? And not somebody else's version of that reality um but that it is, that it is their own reality uh that I think is so important going forward. We need to get rid of these old notions and outdated notions and understand that like a group of people is not their not meant to be like stereotyped, their not meant to be tokenized you know?

**Anja:** I think it's important that people are telling their own story, because you can't really speak for anyone else like I think even, it's tough for like I don't know for it to be like the inverse like for an Asian writer to write about like a white or like a black family or character like it's not quite the same perspective. So I think I would like, yeah, I think, I think it would be good because it's just I think if it's your story and it's your experiences, you're gonna get it more correct than other people will. Theatre sh- like, is becoming more diverse, or like should be, like that we should consider everyone who wants to be involved and who's creating in it instead of kind of focusing on older things or only like a few people I think like just expanding your horizons I guess.

**Maya:** I think authorship is important to me because it's so important for someone to tell their own experiences, to tell their own stories because it is what they lived in it's what they've experienced throughout their life and you can't speak for someone else and say that they've experienced this because everyone's story is their own. Um so even if I wasn't looking at asian literature specifically if I was looking at you know female literature, just itself. The type of experiences that a female experiences versus a male or a non-binary individual are very different and it would be a different story if it came from someone else who didn't live through those experiences. I think there is a sense of accuracy and accountability if it's written from someone's own experiences.

*Blackout.*

\*The archival filming of *Shattered Dolls* took place on April 21, 2020\*

<https://youtu.be/YPIYeCrjOek>

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