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Immigration Policies and the Essentializing of Asian Women
(Or How Suzy Wong made it to San Francisco)

U.S. immigration policies clearly shape and give coherence to its racial formations. Immigration policies implicitly create indicators of acceptability, as well as cast the relationship between the applicant and the nation as a subject/object dynamic. The logic of the mail order bride industry lies in this assumption of an Asian women “morality”, which has been produced and reproduced by decades of federal legislation. Immigration statutes privilege the “good” yellow woman, who will cheerfully and continually fetch her husbands slippers in the evening and iron his tie in the mornings. Mail order bride businesses willingly homogenize the women, and women comply in light of the legal loopholes that they are crawling through. Nowhere are the implications of these statutes more evident than in the recent and meteoric climb of the mail order bride industry, where the self-representation of these women are literally produced to satisfy the U.S. “regulatory” criteria.

In this age of mechanical marvels the Internet is king. A Google search for an “exotic Asian mail order bride” instantly reveals a cache of websites with varying services, some offering mere pen pals while others explicitly provide marital partners. Above all, however, these websites trade in the hopes of both their clients and their brides. This has been true since 1986, which dates as the beginning of the mail order bride industry in the United States. From a handful of catalogues, the Internet allowed for

entrepreneurship and consequently there are now more than 200 “introduction agencies”¹ operating out of the United States. This number is not inclusive of foreign-based agencies that specifically target American men in their advertisements or of the companies, which offer women from Asia and Latin America, as well as Russia. Yet arguably the roots of these industries lie within the United States immigration policy; from the standardization of individual states immigration laws into coherent statutes². The most important of these in the context of the mail order bride industry is the 1875 Page Act Instituted in 1875 the Page Act deflated the rising “yellow tide”, banning not only “dangerous” Asian laborers and felons but also female Asian prostitutes. It regulated gender performance³ by privileging a specific version of the Asian women, the immigrant as a wife. All Asian women had to conform to a strict version of domesticity to fit the U.S.’s vision of acceptable female labor. The federal government defined the women’s role as procreative and subservient to the exclusion of anything else, creating a dichotomy of images. On one hand the independent, licentious Asian female, and out of her shadow grew the “safe” married, docile housewife separated from the society she inhabits. These images are conspicuously present within the “marketing” practices of the mail order bride industry.

The assurance and aggressiveness with which these sites market their “beautiful” and “faithful” Asian brides indicates a disturbing homogeneity and further suggests a certain artificiality. For instance a site called Manillabeauty.com suggests that:

“Most, if not all filipinas are Christian or strongly believe in God. Many of these same women specifically request a Christian man as one of their desired traits in a mate... a Filipina will insist

¹ Constable, Nicole p38. Further Gayle Rubin in “The Traffic in Women” articulates this argument where she argues that there is a general global system of power based on the transfer of women within communities.

² Luibheid, Eithne. Entry Denied. p1

³ Mazumadar, Sucheta. p62

that she make you more comfortable. If that means getting you a glass of iced tea (without you asking) after a long day of work, so be it. She will do everything to shows that she appreciates having you as her man. There are not too many girls like this anymore (especially domestically), but rest assured that this character trait is ingrained in the mind of the average Filipina.”⁴

Examine the confidence with which the author portrays the servile and conservative Phillipina women, an image that can be seen in the assessment criterion of Angel Island inspections. In the 1880’s, Chinese women had to travel by first class cabins, dress well and speak in a “submissive” manner; head down with their eyes on the floor to prove their “goodness”. Similarly a random selection of modern mail order bride web profiles show a pronounced stress of these women’s virtuous natures, eerily in keeping with the Act of 1907 which denied residency for any woman coming to the U.S. for “immoral purposes”⁵.

Everything in these web profiles seems to doggedly reiterate that these women are not only not immoral, they are as wholesome as apple pie. Most of them have some level of higher education, and some kind of low-level white-collar employment. Even Allen who is in the youngest age bracket, is purportedly attending a college nursing program and is ostensibly in line for a decent job once she completes her education. Although there is obviously a disparity in wages between these Asian brides and their potential American spouses, it is undeniable that they are financially independent women. That is to say not crooks. One of the guarantees the websites offer is that these brides are the “genuine” article; poor but seeking only love in a relationship. This is especially important in the light of the International Marriage Fraud Act (1986) that allows the federal government to make quantitative judgments about the quality of a marriage, even

⁴ “Frequently Asked Questions” Manillabeauty.com

⁵ Lubheid p10

⁷ “Channon” Asia Brides

allowing for surprise investigations of residences to ensure the quality of domestic bliss in America. In fact even their profile pictures reflect a sense of “wholesomeness”. Chanon posts on Asia Brides as a twenty-year-old college student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in nursing. She is a Cancer, five feet two inches, weighs about ninety two pounds and is looking for a “good and serious relation with the one I love” and is willing to “do anything and everything in the name of love”⁷. She could be any teenager in her bedroom, putting off her homework to play with her camera⁸, dolling herself and taking pictures in her family’s living room. In fact, most of these profiles present merely an agglomeration of ordinarily dressed women presumably off to do ordinary things. Janet poses in underwear in her ad on Pacific Island Ladies, but she posts on a site that “is a mail order bride website offering Pacific Island ladies willing to marry you”⁹. But she earnestly reminds her loyal viewer that she is “thoughtful, loving, and caring”, just as Shela, Channon, Allen, and Visit are. They all seem very innocuous, claiming not to drink or smoke, and most say that they have never been married or have children. Yet the most glaring consistency is that all of these women are seeking a Western man.

Historically U.S. immigration policy always privileged women married to American citizens over single female immigrants. Even the original quota immigration system for the Chinese exempted the Chinese wives of American citizens¹⁰ from quota restrictions. As recently as 1952 there have been special allowances for Asian brides built into an otherwise restrictive system¹¹. In 1965 the INA reinforced an already punitive system by allotting 74% of immigration slots to reuniting men with their families, 20%

⁸ “Channon”. [Asia Brides](#)

⁹ “Home” [Pacific Island Ladies.com](#)

¹⁰ Daniels, Rogers. “Changes in Immigration Law and Nativism since 1924” p73-74

¹¹ Lubheid p19

for laborers and 6% for refugees, rendering it virtually impossible for single woman to enter the country¹². Single female immigrants discovered that marriage was the only avenue of entry into the U.S., and had to adapt themselves accordingly. One web bride Visit encapsulates their overall ideology when she states on her web page, “I am loving, caring, honest, passionate and God fearing. I am looking for a nice man that's possible for marriage”¹³. Mail order bride web sites make a pointed contrast between the idea of a modern American woman who has “unrealistic expectations of men and relationships”¹⁴, and a foreign bride who only seeks a “good husband” regardless of his age or personality- as long as he is an eligible U.S. citizen. It seems inevitable and obvious to conclude that these women are being carefully scripted into their roles, in their pursuit of opportunity. Yet the final seal of their guarantee of the “virtuousness” of the women they are offering is that “a foreign bride will be permitted to stay in the U.S. only if she remains married to the man who sponsored her entry...if she runs off she will be in violation of the visa...and deported.”¹⁶ The K3 and K1 visas, the requisite visas for the foreign spouse or fiancée of an American citizen to enter the country, require a trial period to validate the woman’s marital intent before permanent resident status will be granted¹⁷. The only exception made to this law is the Violence Against Women Act, although the women are obliged to prove their abuse in order to avoid deportation. This

¹² Lubheid p20

¹³ “Visit”. Asian Kisses.

¹⁴ “MailOrderBrides FAQs” MailOrderBrides.com

¹⁶ MailOrderBrides.com

¹⁷ Lee, Donna R. “Mail Fantasy: Global Sexual Exploitation in the Mail Order Bride Industry and Proposed Legal Situations”p149

abandons the women to the custody of the men as their marriage determines their residency status.

Most Asian women who made it off Angel Island discovered that they had to continue the façade lest they rouse the xenophobia of the natives. Connie Young Yu writes of her great-grandmother, who came to the United States through an arranged marriage with a man in San Francisco, saying that she and the other Chinese wives in their neighborhood rarely left their houses for fear of being mistaken as prostitutes. In fact her great-grandmother only left her house due to the great earthquake that destroyed a great part of Chinatown's shoddy tenements¹⁸. In the subsequent fear of being discovered as a sham, the Asian wife became and remained domesticity engendered in the flesh. This first deception lingers in modern U.S. Immigration law, and consequently there is little real legislation of the mail order bride industry. The only real challenge that the Asian mail order bride industry faces is one of "public relations" and "marketing".

In response to the lack of U.S. regulation of the mail order bride industry, President Aquino outlawed any form of solicitation, including even propositioning Philipinas to join a website of potential brides¹⁹. The industry transparently tries to circumvent this law in their portrayal of the women on their "non coercive penpal" sites. They justify their businesses in light of the delicate and wholesome "pen-pals" who consequently explode out of the database in a numbing array of homogeneousness. This essentialization has forced many mail order brides, much like generations of Chinese women before them, to bind their feet and their ambitions behind the hearth and home. Women who rebel against these ingrained expectations often meet very violence ends. In

¹⁸ Yu Young, Connie. "The World of Our Grandmothers" p33-42

¹⁹ Antogop, Tonton A. p1

1999 Timothy Blackwell shot his pregnant Phillipina mail order wife and her two friends on the day that his divorce proceedings were finalized. His lawyers defended his actions, by stating that “he snapped under the emotional load of a marriage whose reality never came close to expectations”²⁰. A false vision of Asian women is marketed, a false product is “purchased” and “imported” and so the lie struggles on until eventually it and the relationship cracks. There is scant protection in the case of abuse, and even that statute requires puts the burden of proof on the women²¹. In fact, the essentializing of Asian woman continues even in the attempts of the government to “redress” their situation. The International Marriage Brokers Regulation Act¹ requires mail order bride companies to release their client’s criminal history and marriage record to the women, before they can give out release her contact information. Yet the predominant rhetoric tossed around in the judicial courts perpetuates the image of the servile Asian women²², treating “international” marital abuse as some separate and alien phenomenon from “domestic” Internet marriages. In a ruling on the constitutionality of IMBRA, it was upheld against foreign marriage brokers but not the American company Match.com because they apparently do not violate the rights of American women by distributing their information to unvetted men²³. IMBRA only exposes and reinforces the larger structural problem within United States immigration policy, in that the Asian woman is still imagined as the “modest” and “well dressed” woman willingly hobbling herself for a chance at prosperity.

²⁰ Egan p1

²¹ Chan p34

²³ “U.S. Judges Affirms IMBRA: Americans Must Have Criminal Checks Before Contacting Foreigners on Internet” *PRWeb* p1

The creation of “the” Asian woman, cheerfully servile and humbly domestic, by the mail order bride industry is informed by decades of federal immigration statutes. The 1875 Page Act created criteria by which to judge every Asian woman regardless of class, race, or sexuality and these assumptions have been dyed into the wool of legislation. The mail order bride industry profits merely by following the weave of federal logic and transforming ordinary women into extraordinary paragons of virtue. Women like Channon, a twenty year old nursing student, make it to Angel Island intimidated but independent and hobble out the other end, staggering, eyes down, into the yawning gloom. Suzy Wong lives on.

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