1 Making Introductions

I'd travel miles and miles and miles to find the place, with treasures much more rich than gold.
I just want a heart that captures my soul . . .
I'm willing to wait for lasting treasure, with promises that won't ever break.
Someone help me find the merchant of love, with a full guarantee.

JOAN ARMATRADING, "Merchant of Love," from *What's Inside*, 1995

POPULAR IMAGES

In newspapers, magazines, talk shows, and among the general public in the United States, images of so-called "mail-order brides" tend to echo two different but interconnected stereotypes of Asian women. One is the sweet and innocent, sexual-romantic "oriental doll" or "lotus blossom"; the other is the conniving, devious, and shrewd "dragon lady." These two images did not originate with contemporary Asian brides, but rather are deeply rooted in much older popular stereotypes of Asian women. Such images have long been reproduced and popularized in what Renee Tajima describes as simplistic, inaccurate, persistent, and unchanging images of Asian women over time in Hollywood films.[1] As lotus blossoms, Asian women are seen as an "utterly feminine, delicate, and welcome respites from their often loud, independent American counterparts."[2] As dragon ladies, prostitutes, and devious aggressors, they represent the threat of foreign women's hyperagency. These images underlie the simplistic, dualistic images of mail-order brides as either willing and helpless victims of controlling western men, or alternatively as shrewd foreigners out for a green card and a free meal ticket through marriage fraud and immigration scams that dupe innocent U.S. men.[3] Inaccurate though they are, such popular images of Asians and Asian-Americans are rarely far from the surface of representations of so-called mail-order brides.

A large body of scholarly work focuses on mail-order bride catalogs and the images they portray. In one of the earliest articles, Ara Wilson observes that catalogs "encourage a voyeuristic objectification of Oriental women as 'other'" in contrast to liberated western feminists.[4] Venny Villapando de-

scribes the catalogs as part of the mail-order bride business that involves "an Asian woman" who "dreams she will meet and marry someone rich and powerful, someone to rescue her and free her from poverty-stricken bondage" and "an American man" who "dreams he will meet and marry someone passive, obedient, nonthreatening, and virginal, someone to devote her entire life to him, serving him and making no demands."[5] Rona Halualani argues that mail-order bride catalogs diminish women's attempts to assert agency, and create a "collage of economic, sexual, and racial hegemonic discourses [that] celebrate dominant Anglo patriarchal capitalist ideology by fashioning an ideal product—the colonized Pilipina 'Oriental Butterfly' doll."[6] Kathryn Robinson points to the way in which catalogs present Asia as "a site of fantasy for men in an era when they feel that 'traditional' values of male pre-eminence in the family are being undermined," and Roland Tolentino considers how "the discourse of mail-order brides is situated in the historical positioning of Filipina bodies into a transnational space inscribed in colonial, militarist, and capitalist histories."[7]

Many of these authors acknowledge the limitations of studies based exclusively or primarily on catalogs. Wilson concludes with a recommendation that "the anthropological gaze must look up from the pages of the mail-order marriage catalogue to encounter the American men and Southeast Asian women beyond the representations."[8] Similarly, in an excellent critique of the market metaphor in relation to so-called "mail-order brides," Robinson recognizes that "there have been few studies that focus on the women themselves: their motivations and aspirations, how they come to advertise on the web sites, or what their experiences are once marriages have been contracted."[9] In her analysis of the Australian discourse on Filipino brides, Elizabeth Holt also points to the absence of women's voices and to the discursive absence of men and women as anything other than common stereotypes. Anna Tsing reminds us that "there is another way to read these catalogues," and Wilson and Robinson both observe that analyses of catalogs and texts leave us wondering about the "real people" behind the listings.[10]

In contrast to studies that focus more narrowly on catalogs and thus risk reducing men and women to a single voice and a single depersonalized image, this book takes a closer ethnographic look at the lives behind the catalog listings and questions simplistic images of controlling men and powerless women that are often simultaneously criticized by and reinscribed in such studies. Moira, Netty, Faith, and Bob's stories—and the stories that follow in later chapters—suggest the variety of aspirations, motivations, and experiences of women and men involved in correspondence relationships.

At various stages of the process of correspondence and courtship, women and men express initiative, make choices, and exert control. To say that they are active agents in the process of correspondence, however, is not to say that women and men are not influenced by ideologies of gender, race, and nationality, that their actions are not limited by social, structural and cultural factors. Nor is it my intent to romanticize or idealize the courtships or the marriages. The women, I hope to show, are far more than the products—or the two-dimensional reflections—of an orientalist gaze, and the men are more than consumers of—or adherents to—an orientalist fantasy.

The main purpose of this chapter is to introduce Moira, Netty, Faith, and Bob. Based on interviews, face-to-face encounters, and Internet communications that span two years or more, their stories, presented in my words, contrast sharply with many popular and scholarly ideas about mail-order brides and women in catalogs. While analyses of catalogs provide insightful critiques of gender ideologies and of the objectification and commodification of Asian women, they also reveal an important gap between scholarly interpretations of catalogs and actual lived experiences as expressed by women and men.[11] This gap provides an opening through which to begin to critically rethink and reconceptualize correspondence relationships and the notion of mail-order brides. In the course of introducing these individuals, I also provide a preliminary sense of my research methods, the interface between my face-to-face field research and my textual and Internet research, and the ways in which I was drawn into people's lives as researcher, sometimes as confidant, advisor, and friend, topics that I expand on in chapter 2. These sketches contribute to my wider argument that ethnographic research can differ in important ways from analyses that are based solely or primarily on textual sources.

MOIRA

Moira is from Beijing and is one of about forty women from China and the Philippines whom I first contacted via an Internet introduction agency in 1999 and then later met in person. As I got to know her over the course of two years, I learned why she wanted to meet an American man, her experiences with the men she had written to, her near decision to "give up" on meeting men via the Internet, and then in late summer of 2000, her correspondence with a U.S. man she thought might be "the one." Like those of many others in this book, Moira's experiences should be considered neither typical nor entirely unique.

Moira is one of many urban Chinese professionals who experienced the post-Mao reforms up close. With the PRC's "opening up" to the West and to the United States beginning in the late 1970s, economic and social relations have developed in ways that were unheard of during the Maoist era.[12] Moira knew several women who—as a result of this new openness—had met foreign men and gone to live abroad. Twenty-five years ago, due to frosty relations between communist China and the capitalist West, such relationships would not have been permissible or possible, and would not likely have been so appealing to either party. It was in this context of greater sociocultural openness and radical change that Moira wondered, when I first met her, whether she might be fortunate enough to meet the right man and share the fate of several of her friends and co-workers who now live abroad.

Like most of the women I initially met over the Internet, Moira's name was listed with a large agency aimed at introducing women of different nationalities to western men. Her listing included the following information:

> Age: 45; Country: China; City: Beijing; Height: 5'5" (165 cm.); Weight: 120 lbs. (54 kg.); Smokes: no; Drinks: no; Religion: unspecified; Children: yes; Education: university; Profession: engineer; Marital status: divorced; Contact by: e-mail.

In her mid-forties, she was older than many Chinese women listed by the agency, the majority of whom were in their thirties, and she was considerably older than most Filipinas, most of whom were in their twenties or early thirties. Like many Chinese women I encountered, she was divorced and had one child. In contrast, the vast majority of Filipinas listed are single, and a few are widowed (divorce is illegal in the Philippines).

When I first saw Moira's listing, it did not include her photograph, but rather the agency's standard tiny, black-outline silhouette of a shapely woman in a short skirt and high heels, with wavy shoulder-length hair, hand on her hip, and a caption reading "sorry no picture." Moira's self-description (which she later explained had been copied almost verbatim by a number of colleagues who later submitted their own names to the agency) stated: "I am a warm-hearted, easy-going, tender, sincere, caring, educated, Chinese woman, 1.65 cm tall, 54 kg in weight, black hair. I am divorced and have a 17 years daughter. Honest, reliable, faithful, intelligent with a good sense of humor. [Looking for] a soulmate" *[sic]*." She listed her work unit (a state-run engineering firm), her e-mail address, and telephone numbers.

The first e-mail message I sent to Moira explained that I was a woman researcher who hoped to meet and interview Filipina and Chinese women

who were in the process of writing to or trying to meet foreign pen pals. Her first response reflected confusion about who I was:

> "From your letter, I wonder if you want to seek a pen pal or not? . . . My description says . . . I want to share my life with someone who appreciates being loved and wanted. My major goal in life is to make a home, have a family and fulfillment of a happy marriage. I love all the things in the family that is possible under my power. Because I enjoy the house very clean and tidy. I enjoy weaving, sewing and cooking but they are all Chinese tastes. I'm fond of flowers, green grass, sunny days, warm beaches, holding hands, slow walks, lyrics of music, slow swimming and so on. My dislike: rude people, unwashed people, liars, frivolous people, unreliable people. . . . Once again, I really want to meet a man to love and to be loved in return. If you were that man please tell me more about yourself. I am looking forward to hearing from you soon. Sincerely, Moira"

My response began: "Dear Moira, Thank you for writing back. I am sorry that my message was not clear. I am not looking for a marriage partner. I am a woman (lady) professor who is doing research about correspondence marriage." She answered promptly and apologized for her mistake. "I am already making you as my friend, although we haven't seen each other. I hope you do too," she wrote, "Hope to see you soon." We corresponded several times and she expressed interest in helping with my research. We met at her workplace in Beijing in the summer of 1999 and numerous times in 2000, and kept in touch via e-mail while I was in the United States. During my visits we spent many hours together and I had the opportunity to get to know her, her co-worker Lu, and other women she knew who were writing to pen pals abroad.

On a July morning in 1999, in the middle of a severe heat wave, Moira met me at the gate of her work unit. The large enclosed compound housed residences, office buildings, dining halls, and large grassy areas. Moira showed me where I could park my bicycle and accompanied me to her office in a spacious, air-conditioned, multistory brick building. She offered me tea and showed me her desk, her computer, and photographs of herself and her co-workers. She gave me a glossy brochure that described her work unit, and showed me around the neatly manicured grounds, which included a huge statue of Chairman Mao. With a very pale, wide face, Moira was stylish but conservatively dressed by contemporary Chinese standards, and wore only a touch of makeup. She seemed very organized, with a cheerful and outgoing personality. Her spoken English was better than her written English. Although her occupation was listed by the agency as "engineer," her job actually entailed making arrangements for foreign engineers (often

Russians), coordinating their meetings with their Chinese counterparts, helping them to communicate, and making sure they knew their way around the institute's guest house and facilities. She was sometimes extremely busy at work; other times she had time to chat with co-workers, write to pen pals, or meet with visitors.

Our visit, the first of many, lasted several hours. Moira agreed to be interviewed, and I jotted down notes as she spoke. Later we had many less structured conversations over meals, on outings, or in her office, about pen pals, her life, and her friends. She introduced me to several colleagues: a woman who had lived in Texas with her Chinese husband for several years; Lu, who was listed with the same introduction agency and was corresponding with many of the same men as Moira, and toward whom Moira felt quite competitive; and another—a man—who had listed his wife with the agency using a description very much like Moira's, in the hopes that she would meet someone else, divorce him, and leave. Moira confirmed that his wife was not a pleasant person and she spoke little English, so he wrote to pen pals on her behalf and with her full knowledge. Puzzled by this story, I wondered whether he planned to use his wife as a way to get to the United States himself. Moira doubted it, and simply thought that his wife had agreed to leave him on condition that she find a foreign husband.

Like many Chinese women I met, Moira was divorced, and her parents had suffered during the turmoil and tragedy of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). As engineers, intellectuals, and experts, Moira's parents were criticized and sent to work in labor camps in the northern oil fields, where they underwent political reeducation. Moira and her elder sister went to work in the countryside, where they remained for several years. In the 1960s, as a teenager, Moira went to work in a rural factory for five years, followed by two and a half years in the army, and then in the mid-1970s, when the worst of the Cultural Revolution was over, she attended a year and a half of college, mainly studying English. In 1979 she went to work in a Beijing factory. There she met her husband, a co-worker at the factory, and they were married in 1980.

Moira described her marriage and divorce in sad, hushed tones. She had been married for thirteen years when she learned of her husband's infidelity. Deeply hurt and unable to trust him, she filed for divorce in 1993, a time when the divorce rate in China was beginning to rise and divorce was no longer quite as shameful and humiliating as it had been before. As she recalled, "maybe it was a mistake to divorce him" since he never remarried, but she "didn't love him anymore, couldn't trust him, and felt deeply hurt."

Her parents urged her to meet other men, but it was "difficult to open my heart to someone else."

Like many other divorced Chinese women in their thirties and forties, Moira commented on the difficulty of meeting suitable local men. Many single men her age or a bit older are interested in much younger women or have little interest in remarrying. Jen, manager of a pen pal agency in Beijing, echoed similar sentiments. As she explained, "The women who are in the most difficult situation in China are those who are educated, professional women in their mid-thirties and forties or older who are divorced. Local men want younger women and often are not comfortable with a woman who is successful or who earns more money than they do." From her experience working at the agency, Jen found western men to be less interested in very young women than Chinese men were.

Moira did not trust local men and thought foreign men might be different. She reasoned that since Americans are often well off, they would not be interested in her for her money or her flat, and since divorce is common in the United States, they would not look down on her for being divorced. Thus, when Lu suggested she write to foreign men to "help her to forget the past," she gave it a try. When I first spoke to her, Moira was optimistic. This would help her "change my life, find a good man, leave this place, and forget."

In the summer of 2000, she spoke of giving up her comfortable white-collar job and the small but newly remodeled apartment she owned. As we sat in her air-conditioned living room, sheltered from the Beijing heat, her miniature Pekinese dog scratched at our legs, and I stared at the newly papered, wall-to-wall image of what appeared to be a scene from the Swiss Alps. Moira said she would be happy to work very hard in the United States if she met the right person. She dreamed of opening a small restaurant, even just a small food truck at first, if she met a man who was supportive of this plan. But she would be willing to stay at home and cook and clean if her husband preferred. To my initial surprise, yet like many Chinese women who prefer not to work, Moira seemed quite willing to quit her job and commit herself to a husband.[13] Having her own business, no matter how small, or becoming a housewife was to her—under the right circumstances—preferable to her current situation, in which she was reasonably well paid and comfortable, but stuck in a job that seemed to hold little opportunity or chance of advancement. Her lack of work satisfaction and her status as a divorced woman were key factors in her desire to meet a foreign man and go abroad. She imagined America as a more "modern" place

with more open-minded people, where she could escape her past and begin anew.

Moira and Lu knew four women who were engaged or married to their pen pals. One was living with her husband in Germany and seemed very happy. A second, whom I had the chance to meet in 2000, was married to a Chinese-American man but remained in China for the time being. She was ambivalent about leaving Beijing, and it was unclear whether he felt any urgency about bringing her to the United States. A third woman was awaiting her fiancée visa. Although she was not certain that she would marry her fiancé, she had agreed to visit him in the United States and to decide whether or not to marry him when she was there.[14] The fourth woman—whom Lu and Moira worried about—had left for New Jersey on a fiancée visa two years earlier. She did not write often, but her communications expressed dissatisfaction. Her husband was an automobile mechanic who was not highly motivated. His wife was frustrated by his lack of diligence and frugality. She had begun to work part-time as a clerk, to save money, but he spent what money she earned and she was concerned about their future.

The men Moira had written to in 1999 and early 2000 were disappointing. When she wrote and asked, "Am I the only one?" they either stopped writing or she stopped writing to them. Meanwhile, Lu (who received letters from some of the same pen pals) received three male visitors from the United States. The first had written to Moira for a while, and she was unimpressed by him in person. The other flirted with Moira although he had come to visit Lu; this bothered Moira, it seemed, more than it bothered Lu. Lu was not interested in him and she encouraged Moira to write to him, but she had no desire to do so. The third was an ex-convict whom Lu liked but considered too risky.

Moira and Lu described various men, asking my reaction and trying not to give away their opinions. One U.S. man had sent Lu photographs of his family, his home, and of his Chinese ex- fiancée at their engagement party in the United States before she had called off the engagement and returned to China. What did I think of that? Another sent Lu photographs and magazine clippings of women dressed in the style he preferred. As he explained to Lu, in his role as company manager he attended many formal functions, and required a partner who was stylish and elegant to help entertain his clients. He asked for Lu's dress size and measurements. As we spoke, I noticed Lu had lost some weight since the year before, and she wore a loose, dark brown, polyester pant suit, and a touch of makeup. I asked how she felt about him wanting to dress her in a certain way. Both she and Moira rolled

their eyes, grimaced, and burst out giggling. They agreed that none of these men seemed worth the trouble.

Lu was a few years older than Moira, was also divorced, and had a son in his early twenties. She had been married for ten years. Her ex-husband had a violent temper and was verbally and physically abusive. After her divorce, she was involved with a Chinese man for almost nine years; two years earlier he had left her for a much younger woman with whom he now lived, unmarried. I had originally contacted Lu at the same time I had written to Moira, but she did not respond. Only later and coincidentally did I meet her.

I clearly remembered Lu's photograph because I had been surprised to learn that she was in her late forties. The photograph was, as Moira put it (with some resentment), "a glamour shot" or an "art photo" that made Lu look twenty years younger and bore little resemblance to her in person. While sending this photograph could be interpreted as simply an attempt to attract greater male attention, there is a cultural side to the story that may not be so obvious. Chinese studio shots—which I was told spread to China from Hong Kong and Taiwan—have gained great popularity in recent years. These photographs have different implications than professional photographs in the United States. In a Chinese studio shot, a woman or man might look radically different from her or his everyday self. The subjects of these photographs often resemble models or movie stars, an image that is enhanced with make-up, costumes, props, air brushing, and photo enhancement. Such photographs are expensive and often prominently displayed (sometimes poster size) as status symbols in homes. To look "one's best" even if it does not look "like you," is not considered wrong or dishonest. While in the West the aim of a professional photograph is to make the person look as attractive as possible, it is also expected to capture a "likeness" of the person and to remain inherently recognizable. This photograph made Lu look like a dashing rock star in her twenties, not a woman approaching fifty. As such it portrayed an imaginary self.

As a result of the stunning studio photograph, Lu received several dozen letters. She answered seven, but her English was not as good as Moira's, and after a few communications, men complained that she did not write often enough. Only later—when men expressed interest in her appearance and asked for more photographs—did Lu begin to realize that they seemed to lack an understanding of the likely distance between her everyday appearance and the glamour shot. She became concerned about attracting a man for superficial reasons, and once asked me point-blank, "Do American

men care much about women's bodies?" Eventually she sent her pen pals some more "natural" shots, at which point several seemed to lose interest. Indeed, many men sought "attractive" women and were wary of being duped by a photograph. Moira told me a cautionary tale she had heard from a friend about a foreign man who had sent a picture of a handsome model cut out from a magazine. When his pen pal met him in person he turned out to be ugly, old, and bald. His pen pal walked right out of the airport lobby and refused to speak to him. I heard similar tales from men as well.

Moira and Lu contrast with many common stereotypes of mail-order brides. They submitted their names and information to the agency on their own initiative, without familial or economic pressure, after learning about the procedure from friends and colleagues. They selected which information and which photographs to list, and the information was not edited or changed. Tsing argues that "the catalogues, like much scholarship, create a gaze in which we victimize and homogenize," and she urges us to see that "the photographs and letters that American men interpret as signs of sexy selflessness are, for the women who chose to send them in, features of a search for self-actualization."[15] As I argue later, all men do not read these images in the same way, yet I agree with Tsing that women's listings and their own intentions often resist common assumptions of "sexy selflessness" or that they are "exotic, docile and poor."[16]

Moira and Lu had good jobs, reasonable salaries by local standards, and comfortable lifestyles. Both thought going abroad would be a good opportunity for their children, but in neither case was this their main motivation. Their children's fathers were in Beijing and both hoped, but neither took for granted, that their children would go abroad. Both were motivated in part by dissatisfaction with romantic relationships in China and with their limited romantic possibilities as middle-aged, divorced women, and they hoped to find more suitable men abroad. Unlike many other Chinese women I spoke to, neither Moira nor Lu expressed a preference for men in white-collar positions. They preferred men who posted clean-cut looking photographs of themselves in a suit and tie, and balked at pictures of men in muscle shirts or tank tops showing off tattoos. They claimed that hard-working, honest men in any occupation would be okay.[17]

In the late summer of 2000, shortly after I received Moira's e-mail saying she was giving up on pen pals, she began writing to Pat, a fifty-five-year-old businessman from South Carolina. She wrote to say that she had finally met a very nice man and that she had given him my telephone number, so that I could tell him more about her. He phoned my office. At first it was reminiscent of giving a job recommendation for a student, but soon

he seemed more eager to impress me with *his* qualifications, government connections, finances, and his suitability for Moira. He said he was very well off, and the person he married would not need to work, but could if she wanted to. He described himself as physically fit, and a "Southern gentleman" who held women in very high regard, put them on a pedestal, considered them equals. He was a "kind and romantic man" who would "always do right by her." He liked Moira and hoped to arrange for her to visit. When he learned that it would be extremely difficult for her, as a PRC citizen, to get a tourist visa to come to the United States, he went to visit her instead.

NETTY

Like Moira, Netty is a professional Chinese woman; she owns her own flat and listed her name with several introduction agencies. The differences between Moira and Netty, however, are greater than their similarities. Netty is an extremely fashionable and stylish Cantonese woman who works as an office manager in a small firm in Hong Kong's Central District. She was born and raised in the (then) British colony. When I met her she was forty, but she had listed her age as thirty-four because, in her words, "people always think I'm much younger than I look." She received about fifteen or twenty messages a day, most of them from men in Hong Kong. Most were not from the agency through which I had contacted her and Moira but through a less marriage-oriented and more dating-type list.[18] Netty said she deleted the majority of the messages she received, especially those from Chinese men, any men with "dark skin," or any men whom she considered unattractive.[19] She did not automatically delete messages from older men, as long as they were attractive, or from men who were married or divorced, although as far as she knew, she had not arranged to meet any married men in person. So far, she had agreed to meet in person ten men she had corresponded with through the Internet. Several were expatriates who lived and worked in Hong Kong; the rest were in Hong Kong for conferences or business.

Netty's friends describe her as "formidable," and she is indeed stylish and self-assured. She suggested we meet for a drink at an upscale bar in the Central District. The clientele was largely non-Chinese professionals. She knew the waiters by name and ordered her usual nonalcoholic mixed drink. I ordered the same and was shocked to find that our two drinks cost well over US$25. She answered my interview questions and described one man

who wanted her to come to the United States and marry him. When she asked him flippantly, "How do you expect me to do that?" he answered, "It's simple. One, put all your stuff in storage; two, say good-bye to your family and friends and have a big party; three, come and join me." She laughed and shrugged him off. "He wouldn't even come and see me first!" She was appalled that he imagined she would drop her job, her friends, her career, her dog, and even her hamsters. She imagined such women might exist, but she was not one of them. She hoped to meet a different sort of man: one who was romantic and gentlemanly, one who might fit into her life in Hong Kong on a short-term basis.

Netty was unique among the women I encountered because she claimed she was not looking for a "lifetime partner." Her goal, she said, was to have fun, not to marry. Although she later backtracked on this point and expressed some ambivalence, she was not optimistic about meeting a marriage partner and she doubted that she was the marrying type. She wanted to have a good time, and if she happened to meet the "one," so be it. She was not attracted to Chinese men and preferred westerners or Europeans of any nationality. Living in Hong Kong, she had many opportunities to meet foreign and expatriate men. She found them "more handsome, more romantic, and more chivalrous" than local men. She pointed to a group of Cantonese businessmen who had entered the bar. "See how unattractive they are?" she said. "Western men open doors for you, compliment you, and take care of you. Local men only do this until they get you into bed."

While I was in Hong Kong, Netty was looking forward to meeting Len, an Australian banker who was in town for a week on business. By e-mail, he seemed interesting, but as she explained, "you never know how it will be in person," so she always leaves herself an "out." Netty agreed to meet him at his room in an upscale Tsimshatsui hotel where he drank a beer and she drank mango juice as they watched *You've Got Mail* on the pay-per-view television. After about an hour Len whispered in her ear and tried to kiss her. She became annoyed and told him it was difficult to watch the movie, but his advances continued. Shortly afterwards her cell phone rang; she answered it, abruptly made her apologies, and left. The first time she meets a man she always arranges for a friend to call her about an hour into the date. If she likes him, she lets the call go. If not, she tells her date that her father has just been admitted into the hospital for heart surgery. She told Len she had to rush to the hospital and assured him that if her father pulled through she would be in touch in a few days and would try to meet him for dinner before he left town.

Netty urged me to accompany her on her second and final date with Len.

As she explained, she couldn't stand to be alone with him, but he had offered to buy us dinner, and it would be good for my research. She had told him I was a friend whom she wanted to spend time with before I left town, and under pressure, Len had invited me along. Each time Len stepped outside for a cigarette (she insisted he not smoke in the restaurant), Netty talked about a Danish man whom she had recently met from the Internet. Originally she had told him she couldn't see him because a friend had come to visit for the week, but after her first date with Len, she called him back to say that her "girlfriend" from Australia had changed a lot, had kids now, and that they had grown apart. His response was, "It's so sad when that happens, but now you'll have time to see me." Of all the men she had met so far, she liked him best and looked forward to meeting him again.

BOB AND FAITH

Faith and Bob are a Filipino-American couple who had been married fifteen years when I met them in the Philippines in August 1999. At that time, Bob was close to eighty and Faith was in her early forties. They had two preteen children, and they lived in an upscale housing development outside of Cebu City. Although Faith wanted a part-time job, she agreed to stay at home because Bob preferred it that way. Bob was retired but active in the local Rotary Club and a number of other local philanthropic and business organizations. As he explained, he far preferred the local Filipino community to the "scruffy" expatriate Americans. The decor of their home included a life-size sculpture of an American eagle, a prominently displayed American flag, and a carved elephant. "I like eagles and elephants," Bob laughed, "because I'm American and Republican."

Bob was a retired professional who had, until he met Faith, spent most of his life in the United States. He had served in the U.S. military, had been a prisoner of war of the Japanese, and had been the mayor of a small eastern U.S. city for six years. He began his story of how he and Faith met and married with his first conscious memory of meeting Filipinos in the United States just before his first wife died. He had been briefly hospitalized for minor surgery. When he awoke from the anesthetic, the Filipino doctor was holding his hand, and the Filipina nurse took very good care of him. After his first wife—to whom he had been happily married for several decades—died in the early 1980s, he was miserable. He described the year following her death as the worst time of his life, even worse than the time he spent as a POW. After she died, he returned to the hospital for a checkup. Learn-

ing of his bereavement, the Filipina nurse gave him the names and addresses of several women friends in the Philippines, urging him to write to them. He wrote to three women. One thought him too old and passed his letter on to Faith, who was twenty-four at the time. As Faith explained, her friend had many pen pals, so she had asked if she might have Bob's letter. She promptly wrote, gave her mother her letter to mail, and began to count the days until his reply. After two weeks she was devastated to learn that her mother had not mailed the letter. Despite the initial delay, she and Bob began corresponding regularly. Meanwhile, Faith had received a visa to emigrate to Canada, but she decided not to go despite her parents' mild objections. Instead she chose to wait in Cebu to meet Bob.

Initially devastated by the loss of his wife, Bob decided to travel to Europe and Asia. He continued to write to Faith, looked forward to her letters, and then went to meet her in person. Faith had not received the telegram he had sent to inform her of his arrival, so when he appeared at her doorstep, Faith's clothes were dripping wet from the laundry she had been doing. Faith's father was so embarrassed at the sight of an unexpected foreigner arriving in a chauffeur-driven car that he fled to Faith's sister's house. Bob invited Faith to dinner at the Cebu Plaza Hotel, where her married sister accompanied them as a chaperone.[20] He proposed, and then asked her parents for their permission. Bob and Faith's original plan was to secure a fiancée visa so that they could get married in the United States in the presence of some of Faith's relatives. Like many Filipino families who know of women who have been "taken advantage of" but never married, Faith's parents and her brother vehemently objected to the plan of her marriage abroad. They preferred that Faith and Bob be married in the Catholic church *before* leaving the country, as it would be more honorable and respectable. More than half the couples I met ultimately chose to marry in the United States because the visa process is frequently considerably shorter for a foreign fiancée than for a foreign spouse, but this is often a sensitive issue for Filipinas and their families who consider the church marriage in the Philippines an important means of assuring the sanctity of the marriage.[21] Succumbing to family pressure, Bob and Faith were married in Cebu. Two weeks later Bob returned to the United States. He was told by the INS that it could take up to a year for Faith to receive a visa and join him.

Spending time in politics and in the military had taught Bob to "start at the top." So he wrote letters to then-president Ronald Reagan, Nancy Reagan, his congressman, and his state representative, explaining the situation and his position as an "upstanding citizen." After only three months, thanks to a letter of support from Nancy Reagan, Faith's visa was granted and she

joined Bob in the United States. At the time of my research (1998–2001), many couples complained that the spousal visa for women from the Philippines often takes over a year, and many criticized those who exert political influence to expedite their cases at the expense of other who were ahead of them in line.

Within five years of her arrival in the United States, Faith became a U.S. citizen, and in the next several years she and Bob had two children. Despite relatives and a few good friends, Faith was not happy in the United States. She was concerned about their finances because Bob's retirement income was limited and he did not want her to work. Thus, after a few years, at her prompting, they returned to the Philippines to be near her family, and where their income would stretch much further. Their children attended a good private school; they had a nice house, a household helper, and a cook, and they saved for their children's college education.[22] One major concern was medical care, but Bob traveled to Manila for regular checkups.

As the three of us sat in their spacious living room, Faith described the joy she felt upon meeting Bob. She had never had a boyfriend and she thought very highly of Americans; several of her relatives had moved to the United States. She was attracted to older men, she explained, because they could provide "the love of a husband, a father, and a grandfather all in one." At first Bob's adult children from his first marriage strongly opposed their relationship. Faith was not put off. She thought it "only natural" that they be protective of their father. Bob was less patient with their criticism. He drew the line when his daughter-in-law referred to Faith as a "prostitute" and his son urged him to have her sign a prenuptial agreement. Other men often reported similar experiences with the hostility, mistrust, and prejudice expressed by U.S. family members and friends toward their foreign partners. Despite his children's objections, Bob refused a prenuptial agreement. Eventually his children came to like and trust Faith. As Bob explained, when his first wife died, he longed for a family again. Like many other men who initially wrote to several women, Bob knew "from the day he first met her" that Faith was "the one." He had been writing to two other women at the time, but after he met Faith in person, he went to see them to explain that he had met the woman he would marry.

DISRUPTING THE HOMOGENIZING GAZE

Moira, Netty, and Faith are very different from one another, and they bear little resemblance to the images of women in catalogs, or of notions about

mail-order brides in the U.S. popular media. These women were not desperate, economically or otherwise. They did not write to just anyone. They were not pressured by families, brokers, or economic circumstances to form relationships with foreigners, and none of them were eager to leave their local communities. Of the three, Faith had the most difficult economic situation, but she had already obtained a visa to go to Canada when she met Bob, and she chose to forego that opportunity and remain in the Philippines to pursue their relationship. Later, rather than settle permanently in the United States, she convinced Bob to settle near her natal family in the Philippines.

As I argue in the chapters that follow, political economy—global and local patterns of power—plays a role in these relationships and in the gender ideologies that promote a perception of the attractiveness and desirability of western (usually white) men and Asian women. As Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson have argued, "'Sites of desire' are formed by confluences of culture" and involve border crossings and "fluid terrain in the exchange of desires" rather than simple unidirectional flows of power or desire.[23] Yet I also ask how personal circumstances, personality, imagination, serendipity, and other imponderables also factor in. Social inequalities that are tied to political economy, class, imperialism, race, gender, and mobility do not mean that Moira, Netty, Faith, and others cannot imagine various options, choose from among them, and react in different ways. Nor does it mean that love or emotional ties are absent or unimportant. Moira, Netty, and Faith made informed decisions about whether and with whom to correspond, and whether or not to meet in person. None of them hinted at desperation or a sense that they were "forced" to accept a foreign man's proposal. None of them wanted to marry just any foreign man. The "right man" meant something different to each of them, yet also reflected contemporary "cartographies of desire," or cultural mappings of imaginable relationships.[24]

Moira, Netty, Faith and Bob's stories, and those of many others, form the core of this book, and it is from such stories that my analyses are spun. These narratives, fragments of conversations, and excerpts from e-mail messages have undergone various forms of editing. They have been edited for the benefit of a researcher who is sometimes viewed as a friend, and some stories, such as those of Faith and Bob, have been shaped by repeated telling, refining, and romanticizing with the passage of time. I have selected which fragments to present and how to weave them together in an effort to illustrate the humanity and the texture of lives rather than as hard and fast facts or data.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, ethnographers continue to struggle with questions of representation, about ethnographers' ability to "give voice" to our subjects or to distort their voices, and the risks and possible benefits of speaking for them and about them in our texts.[25] Contemporary feminists have shared this concern, but are torn between a more practical and political stance that aims to advance women's rights and a need to acknowledge women's different voices and experiences, concerns that are at the forefront of the "feminist ethnographies" of the 1990s.[26]

Although feminist anthropologists have long criticized the notion of a "universal woman"—with singular interests and a shared identity—there still exist many contexts in which nonwestern women are measured by the yardstick of western middle-class feminists.[27] Despite recognition that women's needs and interests may be as diverse and heterogeneous as the social and cultural groups from which they come, some scholars and activists still adhere to a rescue narrative in which "other"—especially nonwestern—women are viewed as helpless, powerless victims in need of protection by others who are more educated, outspoken, powerful, and assumed to be more enlightened.[28] As Chandra Mohanty has so eloquently written, viewing Third World women primarily as victims of local men, local religions, and local family structures creates a pattern of domination—a form of discursive colonization—whereby western women are the yardstick by which progress is measured.[29] The term "mail-order brides" discursively colonizes Third World women. The term evokes a homogenous image of foreign women who are helpless, oppressed, "trafficked," and thus in need of rescue. The mail-order bride is a ready symbol of female subordination, male power, and gendered and racialized images of Asian women. The problem with this symbol is that it predefines women as victims and prematurely forecloses on the possibility of their being otherwise.

This is not to say that foreign brides cannot become victims; such cases are well known and popularized by the news media.[30] Yet the image is flawed and misleading because it defines a woman solely as a victim and conflates all foreign brides as such. Most significantly, this image neglects the local voices and the insider's perspective long called for by ethnographers and feminists. Moira, Netty, Faith, Bob, Ben, and others who met and pursued a relationship by correspondence do not fit (or identify with) the notions of "trafficking" or mail-order brides. The views and experiences of characters in this book are meant to resist reduction to simplistic stereotypes and to resist the homogenizing gaze of popular images that blur the differences between those who actively pursue this method of meeting a spouse and those who are somehow "forced" or manipulated into a marriage under

false pretenses. To say that women express agency—they make choices and negotiate their situations—is not to romanticize or to ignore the structural and ideological factors that constrain their choices.

Troubling to some critics is that many women who opt to marry U.S. men—like Moira—express a preference to remain at home and not to work if there is no financial need to do so, and a willingness to define themselves primarily as wives and mothers. Should we assume that they are acting out of a gendered false consciousness?[31] To argue that some men prefer wives whom they imagine they can "control" and that some women willingly devote themselves to the roles of wife and mother begs the question of what we mean by power and control.

A common assumption is that the men "have power" in these relationships and women do not. Following Michel Foucault, I argue that power is best understood in terms of location and circumstances, rather than merely assuming that power is something that some have and others do not.[32] As Judith Butler explains, also drawing on Foucault, a subject may simultaneously "resist" and "recuperate" power, thus forming what she calls a "bind of agency."[33] Women may resist certain forms of gender inequality, but in so doing they can simultaneously reproduce these structures. Despite their national, class, and educational backgrounds (which vary greatly), and despite the wider global political economic power structures in which these relationships take place, women such as Moira, Netty, and Faith nonetheless demonstrate a degree of power, creativity, and initiative in their choices regarding correspondence, and in their relationships as well. They exert some control over the process of courtship and the conditions under which a marriage takes place, even as they simultaneously reinscribe certain conditions of gender inequality and subordination. Their partners, we should remember, are also subject to power even while they resist the gender dislocations they encounter in the United States and look for partners abroad. Men and women are both subject to bureaucratic and state forms of power which they simultaneously resist and reinscribe through their encounters.

This book is meant to contribute to a growing literature on the engendering of transnational processes. Overall I argue that women involved in correspondence relationships are not merely pawns of global political economy or the victims of sexual exploitation, nor are men simply the agents of western sexual imperialism. In the pages that follow, I aim to convey some of the complex and subtle ways in which personal experiences and life trajectories articulate with historical factors, political economy, and global imaginaries to produce (and sometimes deter) relationships between Chinese women, Filipinas, and U.S. men.