



Rice Asian Studies Review

Volume 7
2023-2024 Issue

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ABOUT RICE ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW

Rice Asian Studies Review (RASR) is an undergraduate peer-reviewed journal promoting Asian, Asian American, and Asian Diasporic Studies research and creative work by students at Rice University. RASR aspires to offer a lively venue for intellectual exchange and production of knowledge against the backdrop of the intensifying twenty-first century globalization. In particular, reflecting the changing subject matters and methodologies of Asian Studies, RASR critically updates and expands on parameters of Asian Studies as a scholarly discipline through the publication of rigorously selected high-quality work by Rice undergraduate students. An interdisciplinary journal, RASR invites students of all specializations to participate in our endeavors of critical engagement with transnational Asia.



From left to right: Muriel Taylor-Adair, Kelly Guo, Sophia Govea, Gina Matos, Matthew Ahn, Matt Banschbach, Rijuta Vallishayee, Maya Habraken, Bryson Jun, Hoang Nguyen, Lily Remington
Photo taken by Kirstie Qian

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The seventh volume of RASR would not have been possible without the generous support of Rice's Department of Transnational Asian Studies (DoTAS). We are profoundly indebted to Hae Hun Matos, Department Administrator of DoTAS, and Dr. Sonia Ryang, our faculty advisor. As this volume's editorial board endeavored to make bold changes to the journal, Ms. Matos and Dr. Ryang have continuously supported RASR and helped us maintain its standards for high-quality academic publishing. Without their tireless advice and encouragement throughout this entire process, from recruiting our team of editors to delivering the final copy to authors, RASR would not have been possible.

We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Kelsey Norman, Dr. Nathan Citino, Dr. Kevin Schoenberger, Dr. Jing Li, Dr. Robert Englebretson, Dr. Jaymin Kim, and Dr. Shih-Shan Susan Huang for serving as reviewers for RASR. They generously took the time to provide valuable insights and suggestions for the editorial board and the authors, and in doing so, helped ensure the journal's academic caliber. We are extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from the immense body of expertise on Rice's campus.

Finally, the RASR editors would like to thank our contributing authors and artists. We are lucky to be able to publish articles and creative pieces concerning a wide range of academic disciplines, geographic areas, and experiences. This would not have been possible without the diverse talents and interests of Rice undergraduate students. As we hope the research and artistry contained in these pages will inspire both new ideas and new scholars, we also thank you, the reader, for reading our journal.

In putting together the seventh volume of the Rice Asian Studies Review (RASR), we made many exciting changes. For this issue, we sought to expand the journal offerings from strictly academic works to include creative submissions such as poetry, art, and photography. This addition is crucial in showing how knowledge of Asia and Asian communities can be spread in many ways beyond the traditional research article. Additionally, we took a radical step in changing the journal's cover to reflect how "Asia" transcends concepts of borders or countries. To showcase this idea of transnationality, the cover uses the symbol of rivers, which can not only define borders but also cut across them. In the same vein, people may be defined by their circumstances, but they can also move and defy these labels. We believe this change parallels the spirit of transnationality that sets the Department of Transnational Asian Studies (DoTAS) at Rice University apart.

In this issue, we bring forth a diverse selection of academic articles and creative works that speak to our reinforced commitment to representing Asia and Asian communities through myriad lenses. In "The Aesthetic Behind Asian Avant-Garde Music," Richard Li makes the case for the existence of "East Asian Vanguardism" as a hybrid musical aesthetic created by contemporary East Asian composers. Meanwhile, Emilia Cichocki explores how cultural norms and employment policies jointly impact Chinese American mothers in "The Mandates of Motherhood." The themes of transnationality present in these two articles are also echoed in the poignant poetry of Ashley Wang and Lana Nguyen. Interspersed among these written works are artworks by Eric Chen, Sachi Kishinchandani, and Advika Rajeev, which further demonstrate the mosaic that makes up Asian cultures and communities across the globe.

This path-breaking issue of RASR is published alongside thrilling developments in our community. As DoTAS moved from Lovett Hall to Herring Hall, the sense of community among our students has also grown, evidenced by the revitalization of the Rice Asian Studies Organization (RASO). Altogether, we hope RASR will contribute to this growth by inspiring students and scholars to study Asia with fresh perspectives. Our editorial board feels enthusiasm and responsibility as we look back at our legacy to forge new ground, and it is with this sentiment that we present the seventh volume of our journal.

Hoang Nguyen & Lily Remington, Editors-in-Chief

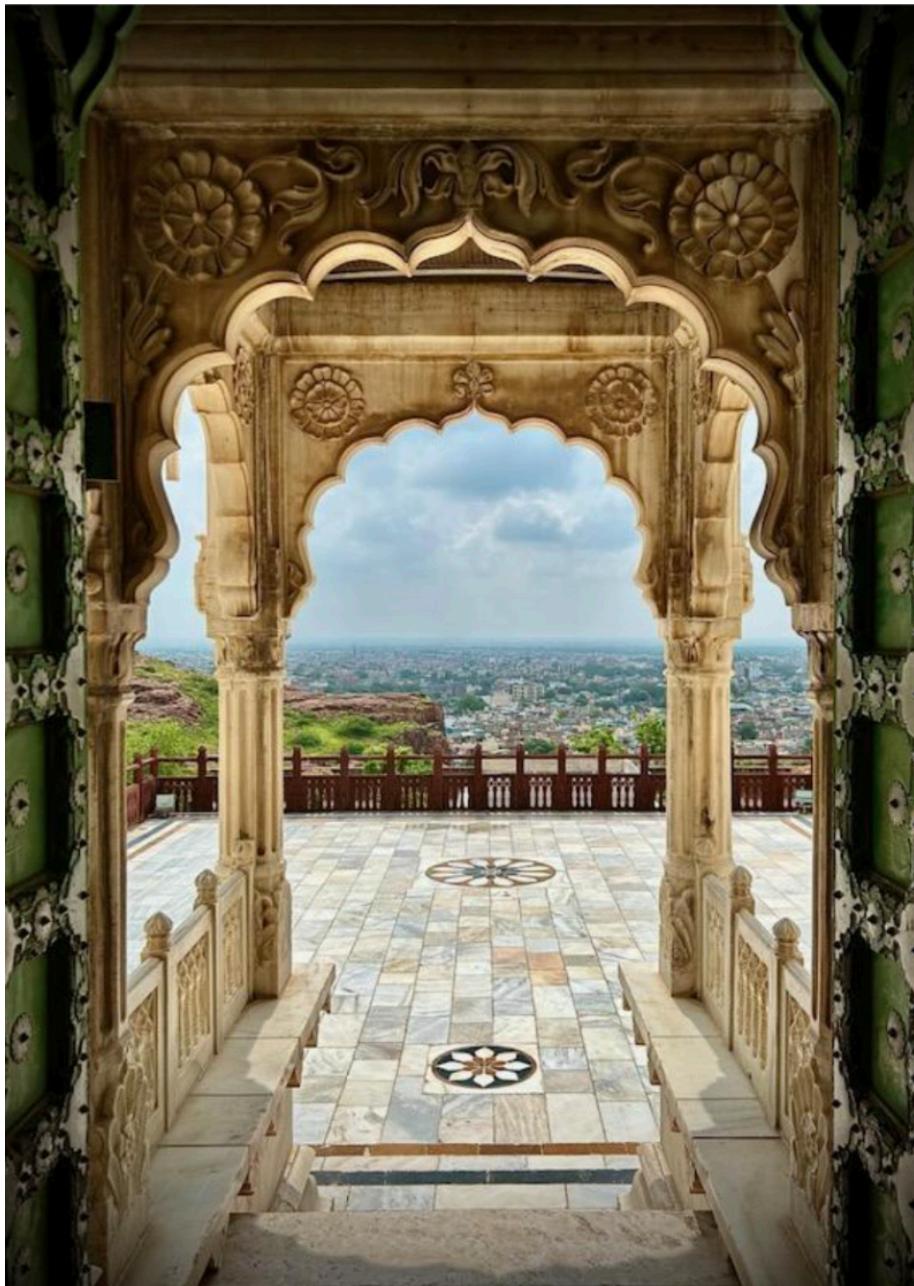
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Gateway

Sachi Kishinchandani



Pune's Flowers

Sachi Kishinchandani



The Aesthetic Behind Asian Avant-Garde Music: Fusion of Native Asian and Contemporary Western Techniques in Works by East Asian Composers

Richard (Yicheng) Li

ABSTRACT

Academic musicology tends to focus on works within the context of Western traditions, while ethnomusicology tends to focus on regional folk traditions. Scholars rarely study works by contemporary East Asian composers due to the high demand for intellectuality in Western music theory as well as the historical and cultural backgrounds of certain Asian artworks. However, by analyzing them through both a theoretical and cultural framework, discoveries with relevance to both fields may be made. Using this method to dissect works by contemporary East Asian composers such as Tōru Takemitsu, Chen Yi, and Qigang Chen, this paper proposes the existence of a unique musical aesthetic, "East Asian Vanguardism," created by a fusion of Western techniques with elements of each composer's Asian heritage.

Musicologists regard the turn of the twentieth century as one of the most revolutionary periods in the history of music. During this period, Second Viennese School composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern, among others, directly confronted the concept of tonality, a defining characteristic of Western music since the early 1600s (Donat, 1972). These composers are termed "avant-garde" due to the set of new musical languages they were able to introduce to the world. This set of languages became extremely influential to composers who came after them, yet was socially unacceptable in the context of the artistic standards of their time. Less well-known to the public—but arguably no less revolutionary—is a new school of composition known for its fusion of East Asian music traditions with Western contemporary techniques.

In the context of Western classical mu-

sic, "contemporary music" often refers to works composed during the period from the early twentieth century up to the present day, most of which are known for their complexity, innovation, and even provocation, when compared with works that came before them (Donat, 1972). The combination of techniques used in works from this school is arguably no less musically revolutionary an endeavor than the innovations of the Second Viennese School. This is a movement that began with Chou Wen-Chung and Tōru Takemitsu and continues today with composers such as Chen Yi and Qigang Chen.

In successfully attempting to represent their Asian heritage through the use of authentic Asian music while following the principles of Western music contemporary to their time, these composers mark themselves out as very artistically innovative under the contexts of both Eastern and Western music. Furthermore,

I would argue that their works can be deemed avant-garde in the same sense as those of the Second Viennese School, in that they also introduced a new musical language by creating cultural fusion in music without the involvement of any cultural stereotypes. A term that I coined based on my research, “pentatonic romanticism” refers to such “conventionally established or commercially exploited forms of cultural representation” in Western music, which are easily identifiable through the use of the pentatonic scale (Utz, 2003). Based on this understanding, I coined the additional term “East Asian Vanguardism” to describe this movement, especially its critical attitude towards the pre-established form of cultural fusion noted above, pentatonic romanticism. It is worth mentioning that within the context of music, the term “Vanguardism” can be used in relation to boundary-pushing artwork that breaks with precedents, and is not to be confused with Vladimir Lenin’s political ideology of the same name.

In this paper, I will first explain the aesthetic behind “East Asian Vanguardism,” describing its historical background and characteristics, before contrasting it with “pentatonic romanticism.” Lastly, I will introduce three examples that highlight different aspects of fusion and analyze them using both theoretical and socio-cultural frameworks.

AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURAL FUSION IN MUSIC – THE PROBLEM WITH “PENTATONIC ROMANTICISM”

As mentioned earlier, the composers of cultural fusion music are considered avant-garde due to their use of authentic Asian music within a contemporary Western context (Utz, 2003). In other words, they intentionally go beyond merely superficial pentatonic

romanticism, which defined most earlier attempts at East-West fusion by Westerners. The most famous examples of such attempts are late-19th-century Italian composer Giacomo Puccini’s operas *Turandot* and *Madama Butterfly*. While these works have achieved great commercial and critical success, they have contributed to a widely accepted misconception that certain Westernized folksongs from Asia are “authentic” Asian music (Utz, 2003). Despite such works having opened the gate to the exploration of Asian music cultures, their extensive usage of the pentatonic scale has created such a strong association between it and Asian music that many listeners mistake otherwise Western compositions for authentic Asian folk songs, even though “pentatonicism” itself is a phenomenon shared by music cultures around the world.

Thus, although many Asian musical systems are based around pentatonic scales, this does not imply that any piece of music using a pentatonic scale should be considered “Asian.” Asian musical traditions are composed of their unique tuning systems, textures, and timbres, and these are the aspects of Asian music that the composers mentioned above have focused on. Furthermore, these composers have employed traditional Asian instruments, orchestration techniques, and extra-musical elements such as calligraphy and literature in their works—a major distinction between their works and music based on the concept of pentatonic romanticism. Professionally trained in Western traditions, they also strive to find structural commonalities between traditional Asian music and Western atonal music.

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY OF “EAST ASIAN VANGUARDISM”

In the years following World War II, Ja-

pan's attitude towards American culture and ideologies shifted dramatically as the country came under Allied occupation. The Japanese, traumatized by years of horrendous warfare, started to idolize the wealthy and seemingly self-confident "leader of the free world" by emulating every aspect of its culture, from food to music and Hollywood movies. As a result, Western music came to be viewed as more fashionable and modernistic than the products of Japan's own musical traditions (Metzler, 2007). It was in this environment that Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996), a Japanese composer credited as the pioneer of cultural fusion music, started his musical training under the heavy influence of American composers:

Right after the war, I listened constantly to American music over the Armed Forces Radio. I also went very, very frequently to the Library of the Civil Information and Education branch of the U.S. Occupation government. There I also sought out American music. Through hearing the music of Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and such great American composers, I was introduced to an unknown world, and I gradually began to develop a sense of my own musical taste (Takemitsu, 1989).

But it wasn't until later in his career that Takemitsu would develop a fascination for traditional Japanese music. Upon experiencing a performance of Japanese puppet theater (*bunraku*), he was shocked by the great timbral potential of instruments from his own culture that he had failed to recognize before. From that point on, he became devoted to the study of Japanese musical traditions, with a particular focus on differences between Japanese

and Western traditions.

While Takemitsu is regarded as the first to attempt cultural fusion in music, the credit for "translating" authentic East Asian harmony and rhythm into the terms of contemporary Western music goes to Chinese composer Chou Wen-Chung (1923-2019). While Takemitsu remained in his hometown throughout most of his career, Chou moved to the U.S. at an early age to complete his graduate composition studies under renowned composers such as Edgard Varèse. It was only after moving abroad that Chou began to take his Chinese heritage seriously, conducting intensive research on classical Chinese music and literature, which he referenced extensively in his later compositions (Chang, 2001).

Similar to the postwar era in Japan, the decade immediately following the Cultural Revolution in China in the late 1970s also witnessed a series of reforms highly influenced by the United States. Deng Xiaoping, the newly appointed leader of the Chinese Communist Party after the death of Mao in 1976, initiated a series of economic reforms with the goal of reconnecting China with the global economy. During this time, China saw a huge influx of Western products and cultural values (Yu, 2008). As both Western powers and the Chinese Communist Party sought to reconcile their diplomatic relationships, members of a new generation of Chinese composers who had just completed their undergraduate studies at the recently reopened Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing were being selected to further polish their craft in the West. Most of these composers went to the U.S. to study with Chou (who was on the composition faculty at Columbia at the time), while a few others went to Europe. Among them were some of the most renowned composers living today,

such as Tan Dun, Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Bright Shang, and Qigang Chen. Under the guidance of Chou and other composers, these composers also expanded their musical vocabulary by looking back at their traditions, history, and cultural backgrounds (Utz, 2003).

Thus, the two core elements of the “East Asian Vanguardism” school of composition can be summarized as: 1) a reimagining of traditional East Asian music through the employment of contemporary Western composition techniques, or vice versa; and 2) a refutation of the preconceived and misleading notation of “Asian music” represented by pentatonic romanticism. Composers whose works follow this practice generally began their musical training in Western traditions but were heavily influenced by the native music of their own respective cultures, which they rediscovered later in their careers. In the case of all of the composers studied, their prior encounters with Western music helped them to appreciate the music of their own cultures in new ways. While my research for this paper focused solely on this group of composers, it is important to note that other possible configurations of cultural fusion in music also exist, such as the case of contemporary Western composers heavily influenced by Asian musical traditions, or the case of traditionally-trained Asian composers influenced by contemporary Western music. For instance, works by the French composer Claude Debussy and American experimentalist composer John Cage show heavy influences from Balinese gamelan music, while the traditionally-trained Chinese pipa player Wu Man became an expert in the contemporary pipa repertoire, most of which are composed by classically-trained composers, including the three that I will be discussing in this paper.

LARGE-SCALE PITCH ORGANIZATION IN TAKEMITSU'S NOVEMBER STEPS

To any classical music enthusiast, Tōru Takemitsu is a name that needs no further introduction. Regarded by many as one of the greatest Asian composers who ever lived, his works played a crucial role in shaping the aesthetics of East Asian Vanguardism. Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in 1967, *November Steps* was arguably the first attempt at cultural fusion within the context of contemporary classical music. The composer’s ambition to achieve cultural fusion is put on full display in the instrumentation alone, as it is scored for the *shakuhachi*, the Japanese vertical bamboo flute, and the *biwa*, the Japanese lute, along with a full Western orchestra (Takemitsu, 1989).

Perhaps the most notable deviation from traditional Western music is that the overall quality of the soundscape holds superiority over the individual pitches instead of the other way around, as seen in most Western classical compositions. But this in no way suggests that the pitches themselves are of no importance. In fact, the pitch material in *November Steps* was carefully crafted by Takemitsu employing traditional Japanese music theory to achieve an East Asian avant-garde soundscape. Most traditional Japanese music—especially works that were played in the imperial court—is built upon a symmetrical hexachord system consisting of two sets of “nuclear tones,” each with three different pitches (Smaldone, 1989). These nuclear tones form the pitch center of the music, serving as cornerstones that hold the entire piece together. Takemitsu referenced this system by also creating two sets of nuclear tones to organize the pitches and guide listeners through the dense yet extremely detailed orchestral texture (Figure 1). To highlight those nuclear tones played primarily by the strings, Takemitsu

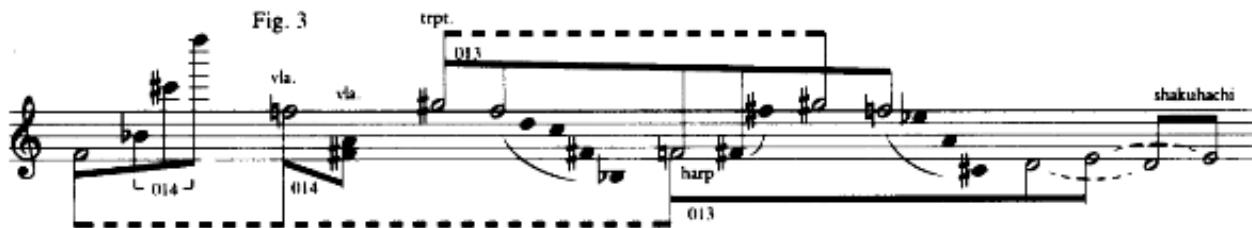


Figure 1: Reduced score of the opening orchestral tutti in *November Steps* (Smaldone, 1989)

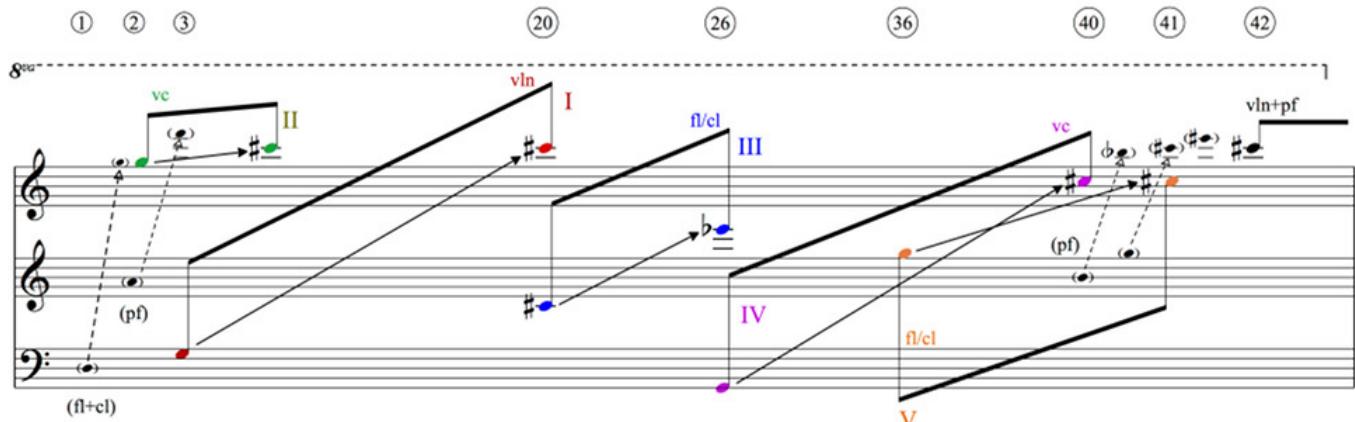


Figure 2: Reduced score of ascending motions in *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (Rao, 2020)

su doubled them with the harp in a move reminiscent of Japanese chamber music, in which the *shamisen* (a plucked string instrument) is usually doubled with the *shakuhachi*, since the timbre generated by both instruments are a combination of sustained and plucked attacks (Smaldone, 1989). Cultural fusion created in this manner can be considered avant-garde since it is achieved through aspects of music other than just pitch, such as orchestration and timbre.

EXTRA-MUSICAL ELEMENTS IN CHEN YI'S HAPPY RAIN ON A SPRING NIGHT

While studying composition at the Central Conservatory, Chen Yi (b. 1953) was ex-

posed to traditional Chinese instrumental music as well as Western music theory. She was also introduced to ethnomusicology during that time when collecting folk songs from the countryside. During her doctoral studies at Columbia University, she was inspired by Chou to incorporate extra-musical Chinese elements into her compositions, mainly literature and calligraphy (Rao, 2020).

Happy Rain on a Spring Night is a 2004 composition by Chen scored for a Pierrot ensemble.¹ The piece is inspired by a Tang Dynasty poem of the same name by Du Fu. In this case, Chen used cultural fusion to recreate the vivid imagery described in the poem. Thematic ideas in the piece were created using pitches



Figure 3: Score excerpt of *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (Chen, 2020)

selected to match the tones produced when reciting the poem (Figure 2). This was possible since four different tones are available for each character in Mandarin, a feature absent in most European languages. Although the golden ratio, a prominent feature of many contemporary Western works, is used to structure the proportions of the piece, Chen also followed a Chinese tradition known as *ci* (词), a poetic form popular during the Song dynasty. Since Du Fu lived during the earlier Tang Dynasty and couldn't have written poems according to this

tradition, I believe that the composer chose to incorporate this element simply to add depth and richness to the cultural fusion that she had cultivated as part of a greater scheme. *Ci* has very distinct patterns of tones and a variable number of characters per line. By applying this form to music and placing it within the broader context of the golden ratio, a complex system is formed that highlights the beauty of nature, the theme of the poem that this piece is based upon (Chen, 2020).

On a larger scale, the whole piece is

structured around a concept frequently used in the construction of Chinese calligraphy known as *shi* (勢), which can be roughly translated as tendency, or momentum. "Musical *shi*" is established through a series of overlapping, ascending motions created by different instruments, generating an inner energy that pushes the music forward throughout the piece (Figure 3) (Rao, 2020). In this case, the composer used Western music and its notation as a tool for contextualizing and then reimagining a traditional Chinese art form, calligraphy. This somewhat abstract idea took the cultural fusion in this piece to a whole new level, mainly

due to the fact that extra-musical cultural elements were heavily involved in the process.

INCORPORATION OF PEKING OPERA TECHNIQUES IN QIGANG CHEN'S *YI*

Unlike his classmates from the Central Conservatory who immigrated to the U.S. to further pursue their careers, such as Chen Yi, Qigang Chen (b. 1951) moved to Paris upon graduating, where he became the last student of famed 20th-century French composer Olivier Messiaen. Chen later served as the musical director of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and is among the most frequently performed living



Figure 4: Score excerpt of *Yi* (Rao, 2017)

composers today (Chen, 2019).

Yi is a clarinet quintet written early in Chen's career in 1987 while he was still studying under Messiaen. This piece is a great example of the presence of references to Asian musical traditions without the use of pitch, a technique also employed by Takemitsu in *November Steps* through orchestral doubling. The rhythms in this piece closely follow the gestures of *jinla manchang* (緊拉慢唱), a Peking Opera technique that calls for two different tempi to be present simultaneously (Rao, 2017). In *Yi*, fast-paced fragments (highlighted in green in the score) are played interactively by the strings, while the clarinet "flows" a melody in the highest register of the instrument on top, creating music that exists in different time continuums simultaneously (Figure 4). In common with the work of Takemitsu, Chen's writing here can be considered avant-garde, as both composers create fusion by manipulating the overall texture and rhythm of the piece in addition to using certain pitches. Although Chen's intentions might be too subtle for many to notice, especially those unfamiliar with both musical traditions, *Yi* did achieve cultural fusion in a way that is idiomatic to both cultures.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

Just like those "musical revolutionaries" from the Second Viennese School in the early 1900s, the composers mentioned above also undeniably launched a revolution in music, one which I have termed "East Asian Vanguardism." This revolution, pioneered by Takemitsu and Chou in the 1950s and further developed by next-generation composers such as Chen Yi and Qigang Chen in the late 1970s, not only brought in fresh perspectives on cultural fusion in music but also contributed to the pres-

ervation and celebration of the rich traditions of East Asian civilizations. The growing popularity of this aesthetic also elicited interest among many Western composers and musicians in multidisciplinary cross-cultural collaborations, thus broadening their perspective on traditional Asian music beyond the superficial pentatonic romanticism. Over the past few decades, contemporary classical music communities have witnessed the gradual acceptance of cultural fusion in music, and the cultivation of a globalized music community no longer restricted by ethnic or cultural barriers appears achievable in the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. A chamber music group that includes flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, and a very common type of ensemble for composers to write for in the 21st century.

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**FRESHMAN, JONES COLLEGE
MUSIC COMPOSITION**

As a Chinese-American composer, Richard has always been intrigued by other Asian composers and the ways their heritage is represented in their works. Through this paper he wrote in Fall 2023 for FWIS 176: Introduction to East Asian Performance Studies, he hopes to promote contemporary classical music written by Asian composers through a detailed analysis of their works. Richard would like to express his deepest gratitude to Dr. Casey Schoenberger and the editorial board of RASR, without whose support this publication would not have been possible.

in my dreams i'm the perfect karaoke partner

Ashley Wang

& i know all the lyrics to all the mando & somehow even the canto pop songs but only from the 90s & maybe the 80s & maybe let's throw in a couple hits from the 2000s, some late-career a-meい for good measure after the wong fei, yes that looks great— do you wanna choose the next song go ahead i say but instead of singing the ayis start testing me, those ever-overlapping voices asking me do you know this song i used to listen to when i was young & still pretty like you i belt out ballads like i'm liu ruoying's long-lost daughter, i've got fans filming me fervently like they're at my vegas concert, i maintain flawless breath support; at some point everyone strongly considers bursting into applause but they're too busy standing rooted in their awe, open-mouthed at the sheer breadth of my cultural knowledge, so deep you could crack it open and find a one-way plane ticket & dusty photo album inside what did you expect? one of my jie jies whispers to an ayi who's gaping a bit, alight with joy, she may be american but she was born to two shanghainese of course she's cultured & as i nod & smile at them & my mouth warps itself around the words *xiang wo zhe yang wei ai chi kuang* i start to forget i'm whisper singing to myself in this empty american car, with my one-and-a-half-lingual tongue, no audience in sight.

NOTES

A-Mei: Indigenous Taiwanese singer who's been called the "Queen of Mandopop"

Wong Fei: Faye Wong, Hong Kong Cantopop singer and actress

Ayi: 阿姨 / *Āyí*; in this case, "auntie" (not familial)

Liu Ruoying: Rene Liu, prolific Taiwanese singer, actress, and director

Jie Jie: 姐姐 / *Jiějiě*; "older sister" (not necessarily familial)

Xiang wo zhe yang wei ai chi kuang: *Xiàng wǒ zhè yàng wèi ài chī kuáng* / 像我这样为爱痴狂; lyric from Rene Liu's 1995 song "Crazy For Love"

dishes to immortalize

Ashley Wang

scallion pancake. watch it brown as your fingertips slowly warm above the stovetop, face flushing. what a beautiful thing it is to make yourself breakfast after months away from home, away from food you almost forgot you loved. if timed properly, the pancake hardens in the pan, delivers its signature crunch. you lick the salt off your lips, smile a little too wide.

//

eggs & tomatoes. there's rivers of tomato juice on the cutting board; pour them in with the brightly colored yolk before cooking. maybe the egg tastes just slightly better this way, maybe it makes no difference—but you've been raised to be clean & consistent, if nothing else.

you heard a story once about a boy whose family fed him so much egg & tomato stir-fry that he became severely allergic to both. you laughed at the time, but now you wonder if you're approaching that point. is three eggs too many for one person?

//

instant noodles. ironically, eaten only at home & rarely at college, where you can't let yourself be a midnight mess (unless it's friday). relish in the relief of zero nutritional content, then glance down & see you've slurped it all up in 10 minutes.

the first time you learned how to use chopsticks, you were eating chicken-flavored instant noodles on a plane to shanghai. you almost miss that 15-hour flight, your neon childhood wonder, that time when you were still able to daydream. you would make up stories for strangers whose dialects you didn't understand, eavesdrop too often. now, you fly to texas & the lack of mandarin dizzies you.

//

bok choy with garlic. two of your favorite vegetables. the center of a piece of bok choy, that miniature duplicate, is like a tender little flower peeking out.

your mom says her father always gave her the center, the heartiest part, of the bok choy to eat (she believes children should always eat well, consume love in the form of food). she wants to do the same for you, except you think the leaf is the best part. you tell her so whenever you see her, sliding one between your front teeth.

//

fried rice. stereotypical, delicious, devastatingly easy to prepare. you must be emotionally distraught, & it must be two a.m. be gentle, cautious with yourself, as if painting over an old windowpane. more importantly, don't oversalt the eggs.

//

spring rolls. your mom's favorite to make with you every time you're home, which these days she says feels like never. you remind her you call every week at college, & she reminds you she's seen you every day for 18 years.

go to the supermarket together, say little as you perform your usual rituals. buy far too many *wangwang* crackers (with her approval). watch her peruse the vegetables, try to stop counting her gray hairs.

in the kitchen, slice the mushroom, carrot, & lettuce diligently. use two knives for efficiency—careful with your fingers. then, relish in the folding process, the all-consuming calm of it. after you've made about 50 spring rolls each, almost singe your tongue with eagerness to eat what you've been toiling at for hours. finally: heated oil, a crunch, & layers of warm, warm textures. it's that feeling again—you've been displaced; the flavors are like family, flying you home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ASHLEY WANG

Ashley Wang (she/her) is a junior at Duncan majoring in English with a Creative Writing Concentration and minoring in Asian Studies. She is a poetry section editor for *R2: The Rice Review*. In her free time, she can be found listening to Victoria Monét and playing through the (unofficial) NYT Connections archive.

Philadelphia Chinatown

Eric Chen



The Mandates of Motherhood: Interactions between the Social Pressure of Parenthood and Professional Advancement Among Chinese American Women

Emilia Cichocki

ABSTRACT

The arrival of women in the professional workforce, especially since the late 1970s, seemingly opened up opportunities for independence from the gender norms that had historically restricted them to marriage and motherhood. However, in the United States, women continue to simultaneously encounter social pressure to have children and employment policies that hinder the careers of new mothers. This analysis seeks to explore how Chinese American women exist at the forefront of this interaction, facing expectations of parenthood from Chinese and American sources while experiencing limited access to paid maternity leave and workplace support. It examines the elements that contribute to pressure around reproduction in Chinese American communities, drawing on individual accounts of Chinese social conventions and American prejudice against childless women. Additionally, it argues that Chinese American women who become mothers are subject to systematic discrepancies in areas such as paid maternity leave and company assistance, resulting in either a rapid and damagingly strenuous return to work or the loss of career opportunities. This combination of factors evidences a major, yet often overlooked, barrier to the professional stability of Chinese American women. Addressing and exploring this issue is critical if changes that provide a means to advance gender and economic equality are to be implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, the cultural and social position of women within American society has undergone significant shifts. The maintenance of normative gender constructs, which historically confined women to the role of housewives or caregivers, has increasingly given way to an emphasis on private agency and liberation. The growing presence of women in diverse workforces is both an indicator of and contributor to this phenomenon, with participation in the employment market seemingly providing them with an outlet for the pursuit of individual goals and autonomy. However, the reality for many working women in America is considerably less promising, with

Chinese American women facing a unique combination of difficulties.

Among working-age women, the median age of marriage in the United States continues to rise as priorities change and women pursue opportunities for further education or career development.¹ Despite such trends, women continue to encounter significant social pressure to start families, both from popular media and from within established belief systems.² Balancing traditional expectations of motherhood with professional aspirations poses a challenge to modern women—stigmatization of voluntary childlessness amplifies pressure to have children, while gender discrimination in the workplace harms new

mothers. Specifically, the combination of child-bearing expectations with insufficiently paid maternity leave targets career women who become parents, often forcing them to choose between starting families or working, the latter option often leading them to face considerable health and occupational challenges.³

This issue disproportionately affects Chinese American women, who are subject to influences from both Chinese and American societal values.⁴ Perceived pressure to begin a family is prevalent among Chinese Americans, shaping attitudes that result in childbirth. Simultaneously, deficiencies in maternity leave among minorities lead to decreased assistance in work environments, placing Chinese American mothers at risk of lost personal or employment opportunities.

Although much discourse exists around the social emphasis on childbearing and poor working policies as separate phenomena, the relationship between them and cultural-specific disparities warrant further analysis. This paper seeks to explore how pressure to have children is compounded by inadequate maternity leave policies to impair the professional prospects of women, with a particular focus on the Chinese American experience within the past fifty years. In particular, it argues that such pressure arises and is disseminated through enduring Chinese social norms, attitudes towards women propagated in the American media, and unequal employment practices throughout the U.S. job market. In particular, inequalities in paid maternity leave represent a lack of support for Chinese American working mothers, leading them to suffer systematic disadvantages in their pursuit of careers and livelihoods.

It is worth noting that the term "Chinese American" refers to an extensive and hetero-

geneous demographic with a diverse range of experiences.⁵ A variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical factors is intrinsically linked to the addressed issues. However, most existing sources do not fully confront the complexity of such distinctions. Consequently, while relying on research that admittedly often involves a degree of generalization, this paper aims to present an appropriate synthesis of current arguments regarding the intersection between motherhood and career.

CHINESE CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON PRESSURE TO HAVE CHILDREN

The existence of social pressure to have children comprises a substantial factor in the lives of Chinese American women and emerges from an interplay between aspects of American and Chinese culture. Following transitions to the United States in the last half-century, Chinese immigrants have often retained many of their hereditary traditions, resulting in the flourishing of ethnic enclaves that preserve and impart these customs to later generations.⁶ In both recent immigrant enclaves and established Chinese American circles, therefore, attitudes concerning childbirth remain highly affected by Chinese cultural precedents around parenthood and associated government policies.⁷ As such, a thorough examination of these values is necessary to contextualize Chinese American standpoints.

The interaction between feminine identity and motherhood in China has been shaped by the modern political and social landscape, governed largely by Confucian philosophy.⁸ The principles of "piety, harmony and benevolence" hold central positions of importance in Confucianism, with particular weight placed upon the fulfillment of filial duty.⁹ Embedded within Confucian thought is an inherent and

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oppressive genderization that regards women as an extension of familial desires rather than as independent entities. The prioritization of marriage as a key component of the ethical system promotes a patriarchal perspective of family in which womanhood is dependent upon the "ability to fully integrate into her husband's patrilineage."¹⁰ Additionally, Confucianism places heavy emphasis on reproduction, both as a vehicle for the extension of life and as a manifestation of filial piety; the failure of a wife to bear children may constitute "grounds for her expulsion."¹¹ Marriage and motherhood thus become codified as intrinsic duties of a woman. With a lack of offspring considered "the biggest vice violating...filial piety," women become vessels for the continuation of the ancestral line, and their primary worth arises from success in marital or parental positions.¹²

The Cultural Revolution, which labeled Confucianism as antiquated and reactionary, eliminated much of the associated thought in the 1960s to 1970s in favor of Maoist propositions.¹³ However, the late 20th century saw a revitalization of Confucianism, likely as a way to "fill in the 'ideology vacuum' of the country" through "a [nostalgic] religious movement."¹⁴ The resurgence of Confucian principles within Chinese society reestablished its influence on childbearing attitudes, and continues to generate notable social pressure around marriage and childbearing. Scholar Yi-Chen Su argues that although young Chinese women increasingly choose to delay motherhood, the influence of Confucianism and the resultant pressure to have children have not lessened in recent years.¹⁵ Reminiscent of this belief is the emergence of the derogatory term 剩女 (*shèngnǚ*). Translated as "leftover woman," this phrase refers to women who remain single beyond the age of 27, the perceived upper limit

for marriage.¹⁶ So-called leftover women have reported significant pressure to begin families, materializing in parental demands and media stigmatization. Chinese news outlets often place blame on these women for being single, highlighting the potential negative consequences of their circumstances, including isolation and their assumed failure to fulfill their familial duties. Simultaneously, stereotypical television portrayals craft a derogatory image of leftover women as relationship-oriented and "eager to sell themselves off".¹⁷

The work of sociologist Yingchun Ji sheds light on the societal and parental assumptions placed upon leftover women. Her interviews with thirty unmarried Chinese women reveal common themes of marriage-associated strain and the governance of private life by customary gender relations, which Ji traces to the contemporary persistence "of [the] patriarchal Confucian tradition."¹⁸ Almost all interviewees recounted tension arising from "[intensified] normative marriage expectations" of social circles and familial expectations of "marriage as an ultimate goal," admitting feelings of shame and guilt amidst parental disappointment.¹⁹ During these interviews, several women confessed that being single brought public ridicule, and one participant had even moved to a smaller town "where it would be easier to meet men and stop rumors" as a result of community pressure.²⁰ Similar results have been detailed by gender studies researcher Shaofen Tang, whose analysis of cultural violence—widely accepted practices that support structural inequity—against leftover women found that verbal techniques of devaluation, sympathy, and shame were often employed as coercion tactics to force marriage.²¹

Finally, the current Chinese political climate has generated further pressure to have

children. Between 1980 and 2015, the Chinese government instituted a one-child policy in order to curb birth rates in the face of overpopulation.²² Although the measure succeeded in temporarily restricting population growth, it resulted in an inverted population pyramid or 4-2-1 system. This model leaves fewer young adults to care for members of older generations, amplifying the stress felt by children to provide for themselves as well as their elder relatives.²³

As a means of rectifying this state of affairs, the Chinese government passed a two-child policy in 2015 and a three-child policy in 2021.²⁴ These policies permitted multiple births per couple and created greater reproductive freedom, but their implementation has increasingly been accompanied by financial subsidies, including housing credit for larger families and childcare allowances.²⁵ In providing such benefits, the authorities have incentivized a rise in the birth rate, accentuating the importance of offspring and the accompanying role of women.²⁶ Consequently, pressure to have children has transcended its original status as a strictly social phenomenon and has become a feature of an analogous governmental directive.

As evidenced in the lived experiences of leftover women, single Chinese women continue to encounter systematic and standardized social pressure to begin families. The prominence of filial piety and patriarchal attitudes within Chinese society stem from early Confucian values and contribute to "extreme negative perceptions and social stigma" towards single women, with procreation perceived as a broader cultural duty.²⁷ Similarly, recent shifts in government approaches have placed an additional priority on childbirth. This combination of elements results in the placing

of heavy expectations upon Chinese women to marry and reproduce, the effects of which endure cross-culturally into the Chinese American domain.

AMERICAN SOURCES OF SOCIAL PRESSURE TO HAVE CHILDREN

Following their arrival in the United States as immigrants, working-age Chinese American women inevitably need to adjust to American perceptions towards marriage and childbirth. The idea of a woman as a maternal figure is pervasive throughout American culture—exemplified by the enduring caricature of the housewife—and the position of women in both private and social spheres has generally been that of a central caretaker.²⁸ Historically, the secondary nature of education and employment opportunities for women has redistributed importance to a woman's willingness to act as a wife and mother.²⁹ Hence, reproduction has become conventionalized within American culture as a moral imperative for women; although women are no longer confined to such roles, traditional attitudes persist in current thought and continue to strengthen pressure to have children.

Despite modern movements towards an egalitarian gender ideology, American stigmatization of childless women remains prominent. Scholars have noted that having children is associated with the beliefs that parenthood is a social responsibility and that women "gain purpose in their life as they enter motherhood."³⁰ Correspondingly, voluntarily childless women are subject to normalized accusations of selfishness as a result of their supposed prioritization of personal desires;³¹ the stereotypical notion that women without children "are desperate and unfulfilled" emerges from these views.³²

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The combination of factors that shapes such sentiments is naturally complex, and cannot be considered here in its entirety. Nonetheless, due to its relevance in constructing collective attitudes, several studies have proposed media portrayal to be an essential component.³³ Ostracism or erasure of childless women has been mirrored and reflected in popular films and the print media, which present having children as a "tacitly assumed [requirement] of a fulfilled life."³⁴ Balanced representation of women without children is rare—instead, childlessness is overwhelmingly depicted as leading to discontent, immorality, or desperation, exacerbating the unfavorable judgment surrounding childless individuals.

Four archetypes of childless women in the print media were established by researchers Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich,³⁵ including sympathy-worthy women, career women, artifacts of feminism, and reprimanded women.³⁶ Similar results were found in an analysis of terms present in coverage of childless women by the Associated Press.³⁷ Clusters of themes were overwhelmingly derogatory and characterized by pitying or threatening undertones, a tendency that researchers attributed to both religious values and an increase in pro-natalist frames.³⁸ Regardless of the classification into which each example of news portrayal falls, accounts and opinions towards childless women in each remain highly negative. Researchers have emphasized the use of emotive language when reporting on each group, arguing that the purpose of doing so is to alarm and threaten women—especially in the career and reprimanded categories—into "paying attention to their...fertility."³⁹ Media tropes generally suggest that childlessness is a missed opportunity and a moral failing, thus contributing to the stigmatization of childless

women as a core and damaging part of their public identity.

Similar phenomena are seen in the fictionalizations of childless women, particularly in the domain of film. Professor and researcher of political communication Cristina Archetti has examined representations of childlessness in popular movies, noting several common and underlying findings. Childless women in film are often "weird, cold, neurotic and hysterical," living "disordered lives," the implication being that they are unable to take care of themselves as adults. Heightened rates of depression and suicide are troubling themes amongst these characters, as "ordinary women without children... have no reason to live."⁴⁰ In addition, positive portrayals occur almost exclusively for women superheroes or astronauts (in films such as *Wonder Woman* and *Gravity*). Archetti argues that this is indicative of a social double standard in which childlessness is acceptable for a man, but for a woman only when "she is devoting herself to a higher cause for the sake of the entire humanity."⁴¹

In suggesting that having children is an obligation that can only be overridden by greater humanitarian goals and that childless women are unfulfilled or irresponsible, child-bearing and motherhood become acts of morality as well as necessary steps toward maturity. Such narratives, coupled with those found in the print media, serve to reinforce the social stigmatization of childlessness; whether their childlessness is voluntary or involuntary, women without children continue to face exclusionary attacks on their femininity and moral character.

It is noteworthy that these sentiments are often directed towards childless but married women, while single mothers face an equivalent but independent stigma.⁴² This

may suggest that pressure to have children is felt predominantly by married women, while single women are not similarly influenced. However, anecdotal evidence and interviews from members of the latter group indicate that the converse is true; as a result of narratives surrounding childlessness, single women feel not only pressure to become mothers, but also to enter long-term relationships and marry as perceived prerequisites.⁴³ Single women interviewed in a 2023 study expressed regret and guilt over being unmarried and childless, with one participant believing that "it's so looked down upon" and claiming that "this shame had a lot to do with the media."⁴⁴ A similar investigation conducted in 2011 revealed that single women "experience more pronounced pressure" to conform to the standard family model than single men, with interviewees feeling that there was "a distinct significance attached to grandchildren."⁴⁵ The status of being unmarried does not appear to modulate social demand to have children, and the ramifications of poor media portrayals extend beyond married and childless women.

Negative framing of childless women is not restricted to the media, appearing in wider societal sentiments that result in quantifiable consequences. A 2016 study conducted by psychologist Leslie Ashburn-Nardo examined the affective reaction of young adults toward married women with and without children. Participants demonstrated higher levels of moral outrage toward the latter group, who were rated significantly less psychologically and personally fulfilled. Women without children were perceived less positively than those with children, with such attitudes likely attributed to a belief that they were "violating the prescribed social role of parenthood."⁴⁶ Comparable results were discovered in an analogous 2018

study, which tested ratings of childless subjects along several dimensions. Involuntarily childless women were perceived as more immature and as having lower levels of life satisfaction, while voluntarily childless women were considered significantly more selfish.⁴⁷ Taken together, the findings indicate prominent stigmatization of childlessness and reveal the unfavorable attributes associated with this status.

A desire to avoid these ascriptions, alongside internalized and social opinion, places pressure on women in the United States to marry and become mothers. As Ashburn-Nardo proposes, the invective around childlessness means that "many young people view children as a necessary ingredient for fulfilling lives," culminating in "tremendous pressure to have children, not only from others...but also internally."⁴⁸ Statistics from the Pew Research Center support this conclusion, demonstrating that marriage and parenthood are consistently ranked top priorities by Chinese Americans.⁴⁹ Similarly, a recent poll found that over 40% of American women reported feeling pressure to have children, with only 20% of men feeling the same.⁵⁰

INTERSECTION OF AMERICAN AND CHINESE CULTURAL NORMS IN CHINESE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

The treatment of childless women in American culture perpetuates myths of formulaic behavior that enhance social expectations around marriage and childbirth. Chinese American women are likewise affected by their consumption of the aforementioned modalities of media. Little direct research has examined the internalization of marriage and motherhood bias by Chinese Americans. However, their contact with American media has been shown

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to alter their value structures and personal perceptions. In a study published in 1998, Chinese American women expressed having internalized stereotypes and prejudices seen in popular Western media,⁵¹ while a 2023 study attributed the fact that second-generation Chinese Americans demonstrated a greater alignment with American value systems at least in part to media distribution and use.⁵²

The introduction of Western principles adds a further element of social coercion for Chinese American women to have children, suggesting that such pressure may be mediated through an interaction of Chinese and American beliefs. American culture typically casts childless women in a negative light, depicting them as immoral and selfish. Concurrently, elements of modern Chinese culture represent parenthood as a necessity. Chinese American women, both married and unmarried, are thus vulnerable to heightened pressure to have children. Semi-structured interviews with unmarried and childless Chinese American women reveal such sentiment. Regardless of their respective individual preferences, participants in a 2000 study detailed the parental and social pressure that they faced to become mothers, stating that they "often felt increasing pressure from [their] family and community to marry" and were "raised...to see children as the goal of marriage."⁵³ Their attitudes are reminiscent of both Chinese and American cultural standards, suggesting that both are major determinants of childbearing expectations.

In essence, the reductionist treatment of women found in Chinese social norms and the types of widespread American bias detailed above lead to assumptions concerning relationships, marriage, and eventual motherhood. Despite a recent trend toward delaying

these events, Chinese Americans continue to follow traditional patterns of behavior, placing greater emphasis on parenthood as "one of the most important things" than their non-Chinese American counterparts.⁵⁴ Statements by Chinese American women attest to this, documenting enduring social and private influence in relation to natalism. The accumulation of Chinese and American customs, therefore, forces Chinese American women into a compromised space in which pressure to marry and have children is propagated to a disproportionate extent.

WORKPLACE POLICIES AND RESULTANT CAREER HARM TO MOTHERS

As a result of personal choice and social pressure, many American (including Chinese American) women choose to have children while continuing to maintain careers, requiring them to balance the demands of parenthood with professional ambition.⁵⁵ Despite the overall decline in birth rates, the number of working mothers has continued to hit record highs. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of companies in the United States do not provide adequate support for female employees, most clearly demonstrated in a lack of paid maternity leave and discriminatory hiring practices. This absence of assistance engenders what is known colloquially as the "motherhood penalty," referencing the drop in salary and disappearance of opportunities for promotion that women commonly face once they become mothers.⁵⁶ This inequality often compels women to prioritize either family or career; those who choose both encounter considerable mental and physical health challenges.

Standardized maternity leave conditions in the United States continue to lag behind those in other developed countries.⁵⁷

The United States has no federal law guaranteeing paid parental leave and is classified by the World Bank as the only high-income nation without such a requirement.⁵⁸ Instead, companies can set workplace-specific policies, leading to marked inconsistencies in access to paid maternity leave. Statistics from the Bureau of Labor show that only approximately 24% of private sector employees have paid family leave, with uneven distribution across income brackets.⁵⁹ Additionally, the average length of paid maternity leave ranges from four to eight weeks, well below the 29-week worldwide average.⁶⁰

Moreover, having children can place female employees at a disadvantage in relation to hiring and salary benefits. A Harvard study discovered that mothers were six times less likely to be hired than childless women, and that they were offered a nearly 8% lower average starting wage.⁶¹ Working mothers have also been found to be less likely to secure promotions than working fathers and childless women.⁶² Despite little quantifiable differences in performance, they are consistently rated lower in potential and commitment by employers, revealing the biases held in professional settings.

Chinese American women are not only confronted by limited occupational support for mothers and the related career and health consequences, but also face significant social pressure to start families. Much research has been conducted on systemic inequalities in paid parental leave, with repeated observations being made that access among marginalized or minority groups is substantially lower than that enjoyed by white employees.⁶³ Due to the relative socioeconomic success of Chinese immigrants and the imminent “model minority” myth, which labels them as “afflu-

ent, well educated, [and] professional,” they are frequently excluded from discussions of racial and ethnic discrimination in the United States.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Chinese Americans—who account for 24% of Asian Americans in the United States and only 1% of the overall population—remain a minority, consequently encountering associated disparities.⁶⁵ A 2021 study on racial inequalities in family leave found that Asian women received fewer weeks of full-pay maternity leave than white employees.⁶⁶ Likewise, according to a 2022 overview of family and medical leave trends over the past decade, Asian women had significantly lower access to paid time off than white workers.⁶⁷

Hence, despite extensive social pressure to have children, companies rarely support—and often penalize—Chinese American employees who choose to begin families. The lack of paid maternity leave creates corresponding drawbacks in advancement and career opportunities for these mothers, who must return to work quickly after having children or risk losing their positions and financial security. Chinese American women are already among the least likely to be promoted to upper management, a phenomenon that is only enhanced by taking time off.⁶⁸ Similarly, leaving one’s job to focus on parenting harms future earning power, with Asian American mothers earning a nationwide average of 90 cents to every dollar paid to white fathers.⁶⁹ Therefore, many Chinese American women elect to begin work soon after childbirth but confront health consequences as a result. New mothers face postpartum changes in physical and emotional well-being that are exacerbated by swift returns to work, including higher rates of depression, fatigue, and the develop-

ment of health issues.⁷⁰

Discourse around working Chinese American mothers explicates the tension between parenthood and career responsibilities. A Chinese American immigrant interviewed in a 2014 study regarding transitions into working motherhood mentioned that her choice to return to work quickly was dependent on "unending departmental work demands" and "tons of work...I just want to take it little by little so that, you know, I will not get strung up when I come back."⁷¹ Her experience echoes feelings of loyalty towards "her roles and duties" as well as concurrent company pressure arising from "nobody [being] officially assigned to take care of...work." Simultaneously, she mentioned the difficulty of returning to work soon after giving birth, stating that "physically it's pretty hard... you did not have the routine for you to follow so, so it was kind of hard and exhausting."⁷² Such opinions are not the exception—the twofold impact of workplace requirements and an absence of company support results in a struggle for balance amongst new Chinese American mothers, who have seen large increases in postpartum depression and who, in recent years, are increasingly less likely to return to work after giving birth.⁷³

Thus, Chinese American women are faced with a modern social and professional landscape simultaneously marked by social expectations that they will start families and policies that penalize them within their careers. With an outlook rooted in Chinese perspectives but magnified by American attitudes, Chinese Americans are met with extreme social pressure to get married and have children. And yet, systematic inequalities within American workplaces—specifically, lack of paid maternity leave or disparities in access—harm working women who become mothers. They

are often faced with the choice of whether to take time off or leave their jobs, potentially hindering future opportunities, or return to work quickly to the detriment of their mental and physical health. Such phenomena hinder the ability of Chinese American women to pursue their personal and occupational aspirations, and pose a considerable barrier to their success.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, women within the United States have seen a rapid divergence between their historically subservient position in society and modern aspirations involving individual autonomy, independence, and careers. However, their emergence into the professional domain has necessitated reconciliation between personal inclinations toward marriage, family, and career development. Regardless of the disruption to traditional gender norms, women remain substantially confined by pre-existing social expectations that relegate them to prescribed roles involving homemaking and motherhood. In addition to the ostracism experienced by those who do not conform to such roles, pressure is also implicated in neglectful company policies and prejudice that obstruct women from advancements in the workforce.

Within the past fifty years, working-age Chinese American women—who make up a minority in the United States—have experienced these effects to an excessive degree. This demographic derives its perspectives towards childbearing from Chinese social values, which are heavily influenced by Confucian beliefs that paint reproduction as the filial duty of women. The consequences of concurrent attitudes within many American companies, specifically the provision of insufficient and unequal paid

maternity leave, impede the careers of Chinese American women who become mothers. Close examination of the treatment of working mothers reveals limited access to paid maternity leave among Asian American employees, as well as implicit damage to career opportunities and financial harm. Consequently, Chinese American women who begin families often have to return to work quickly after giving birth—giving rise to a variety of mental and physical health concerns—or face losing their jobs and earning potential.

As explored in this paper, there is a fundamental discrepancy between the demands placed upon Chinese American women and those on members of other demographic groups in the United States. They are pressured socially to have children but penalized professionally for being mothers. As such, they encounter formalized difficulties in balancing family needs with employment opportunities, commonly resulting in the loss of the latter. The contradictory impacts of these influences therefore represent a notable, systemic, and yet oft-neglected barrier to their progress.

Moving forward, greater investigation of this issue will be crucial if effective remedies are to be developed and implemented. Federal policies rectifying inconsistencies in paid maternity leave represent a promising step towards a formal solution. Nonetheless, intolerance around childless women and damaging stereotypes of Chinese Americans remain socially embedded, a problem that requires the dismantling of inherent biases within the media and in popular thought. Moreover, given the relative significance of the multiple socio-economic factors faced by Chinese American women and the complex nature of their identity, research uncovering such intersectionality may provide an increasingly nuanced account

of their experiences of motherhood. Further acknowledgment and exploration of continued barriers to the achievement of equality will be crucial in addressing the gaps which persist at the intersection between gender, ethnicity, and policy.

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Emilia wrote this manuscript in Fall 2023 as the English translation of a project for CHIN 401: Fourth Year Chinese I. She is interested in the various factors that influence attitudes towards working women, especially culturally-specific expectations surrounding motherhood and childbearing. She views this as an understudied topic with significant ramifications, and hopes to help promote critical discourse on the sociocultural pressures faced by women in the professional realm.

conversations with má

Lana Nguyen

built without substance
nothing much to look at
send a breeze my way
so it'll topple me over

send me back home
into the arms of my má
where i'll stand in the kitchen
and talk to the floor

má,
i'm just a poet
i'll never be the poem
never the stanza
nor the space in between

i can't be anyone's muse
can't even be my own

how could i?

i get bored and sad when i think of myself

so what do i do?
do i wish on a star?
do i put my palms together
like you do every night?
watch buddha with wistful eyes
let my lips tremble
my head fall
as i take my last breath

wish oh wish, oh wish i might
make a wish on a star tonight

give me breasts
give me hips
give me flesh
to grab and to hold
to call my own

but i know it all
i know it well

wishes can't whittle
soaps can't scrub
and powder's can't prune
the sourness of my skin- yellow
but not like
honeycombs, daffodils
or ripe mangoes

yellow like
sickness, jaundice
bruises healing
stains on white cloth
unwashed teeth
vehicle vomit
the stench of home

má,
the woman i want to be
when will she break free?
when will she burst through the seams
and come greet me?

má,
when will i meet her?
when can i see her?
when can i ask her

does she like it?
the slant of her eye
the shortness of her limbs
the flatness of her nose

does she ever
stare in the mirror
and never wish for more?

i hope she says yes
for me and for her
i want her to be
my muse, my muse
me, my muse

my muse, my muse
yes, me, my muse

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

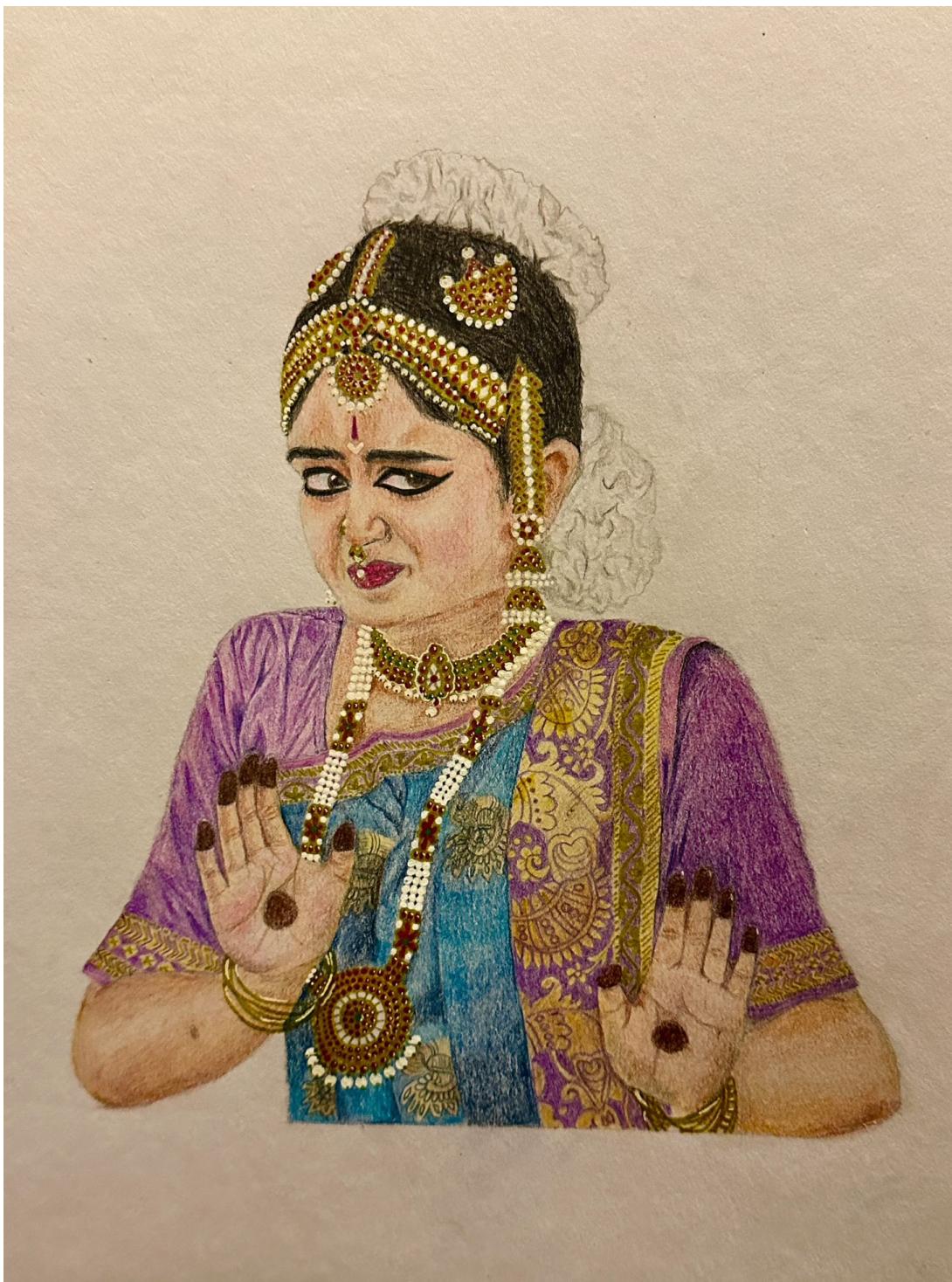


LANA NGUYEN

Lana Nguyen is a freshman at Rice University double majoring in English and History. She likes collecting seashells, and if the opportunity presents itself, will tell you all about her lifelong beach adventures. You may find her reading in her free time. She recommends "Almond" by Sohn Won-Pyeong and "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck.

Bībhatsā

Advika Rajeev



Mountains of Udaipur

Sachi Kishinchandani



ABOUT THE ARTISTS



SACHI KISHINCHANDANI

Sachi Kishinchandani is a Senior at Baker College. In her free time, she likes to mindlessly watch YouTube videos and drink boba so she doesn't have to confront the drab reality of her STEM major.



ADVIKA RAJEEV

Advika is classically trained in the Indian dance form bharatanatyam, and she enjoys tying together her artistic interests in drawing and dance. Her piece, Bibhatsā (which means Disgust), is one of the Navarasas (9 fundamental emotions).



ERIC CHEN

Eric Chen is a pencil artist and enthusiastic nature photographer originally from NYC. He is a QuestBridge Scholar and a double-major in Art and English. Many of his artworks blend surrealist elements with those of grotesque, dream-like, and philosophical and moral themes. His art has been published nationally and internationally across publications like the Vermont Digger, Young Writers Project, Collision Literary Magazine, and has been displayed and recognized by MOMA, the NYCDOE, and many others. When not drawing with his dangerously sharp 4B general's charcoal pencils, he likes conversing with peers in deep philosophical conversations.

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