

Chapter 4

Asian Americans

'Senator Sir, Welcome to the World of Orientalism'

Karen Joe Laidler

In this chapter, Karen Joe Laidler presents various stereotypes of Asian men and women depicted in the popular media. Whether they are stereotypes that depict Asian men as "geeks" or "nerds" or Asian women as hypersexual, exotic prostitutes, Laidler describes how such depictions inaccurately misrepresent the vastly different lives of Asian people. By relying on two case studies, Laidler presents how unemployment, drugs, and familial problems characterize the experiences of many Asian Americans. Unfortunately, the portrayals of Asians as well-assimilated immigrants, who through diligence, hard work, and obedience are working toward the American dream, overshadow the many social problems faced by Asian people.

As a kid, I used to love watching martial arts movies. My friends and I would anxiously wait for the latest Hong Kong releases to come to Diamond Star, our local Chinatown theatre. The heroes and villains, all Chinese, were distinguished by their martial arts skills, the color of their clothing (i.e., white versus black), and their ability to anticipate the other's next move (i.e., clever ver-

sus cunning). The setting of the martial arts battle varied, sometimes in the mysterious but honorific Shaolin tradition, at other times the comedic adventures of drunken kung fu masters or a fast-kicking standoff between the Hong Kong police and local Chinese gangsters.

These Hong Kong martial arts productions gradually attracted the attention of Hollywood, with American-born Chinese Bruce Lee coming back from Hong Kong to feature in U.S. action films like *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Since the early 1970s, Hollywood films featuring Asian martial arts have become a popular mainstay in the U.S. action genre, inspiring the likes of Quentin Tarantino and the major film studios. While some viewers believe this is real progress in recognizing the talents and skills of Asians and Asian American actors, others take a more critical view.

One of the most troubling aspects of Hollywood's embrace of Asian martial arts has entailed a transcontinental transformation—from a Hong Kong expressive art form to Hollywood "orientalism." The cultural context of the heroes and villains in Hong Kong martial arts films has decidedly been reconstructed into a racialized battle between Western and Eastern masculinity. For example, in 1998, *Lethal Weapon IV* championed the Mel Gibson and Danny Glover action duo against Jet Li, a Hong Kong triad gangster, who along with his band of young, violent thugs infiltrates the streets of Los Angeles. This film has been criticized for projecting negative stereotypes of Asian men as being ruthless, excessively violent, and involved in organized crime (Wang 1998). *Romeo Must Die* (2000) followed in the footsteps of *Lethal Weapon IV*, again with the diminutive Jet Li taking on the role of the silent force to be reckoned with when he escapes from a Hong Kong prison (but he was innocent), flying to Oakland, California, to investigate his brother's murder. He walks into a racially fueled battle between two crime families—one Chinese and the other African American. Similar themes and characterizations of mysterious martial arts powers and hyperviolent Chinese gangsterism pervade the film, with Jet Li frustrating his Western

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audiences with his silent emasculated presence (see Kim 2004 for further critique). Although the storyline is a modern-day urban *Romeo and Juliet*, Jet Li, the emasculated Asian man, falls short of love in the end, leaving many wondering why Asian men always fail to get the girl (www.bitterasianmen.com). Although Jackie Chan offers a comedic twist, *Rush Hour* (1998) and *Rush Hour 2* (2001) echo similar themes of deadly and cunning Chinese mobsters operating crime syndicates transnationally.

While Asian men have had an emasculated presence in popular culture, Asian women have been projected in hyper-sexualized terms, most notably the "Oriental beauty" who, as an exotic sex kitten, has a submissive allure about her. From the classic 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong* to the 1990s theater production *Miss Saigon*, Asian women have been sexually constructed as the seductive Asian prostitute who cunningly but subtly pursues a white knight. In the end, she unwittingly falls in love with her white knight, but must face his possible rejection as anything other than a sexual object. The Asian Dragon Lady—with some observers pointing to the character Ling in *Ally McBeal*—represents a slightly different (but still highly sexualized) take on Asian femininity than the Oriental Beauty.

Admittedly some Hollywood contemporary portrayals are more sensitive to the experiences of Asian Americans, allowing Asian American actors and actresses to develop culturally complex characters and to express the diversity of cultures within the Asian American community on U.S. screens. Blockbuster movies such as *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and the television hit series *Lost* are meant to sensitize and enlighten Western audiences to the distinctive culture and heritage of Chinese women and Korean families respectively. *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) offer different takes on Asian masculinity in the American context. But these examples are more the exception than the rule, and, ironically, the deadly and mysterious characterizations of Asian men and women stand in stark contrast to the other popular stereotype of them as the role model minor-

ity who in real terms has come to be known as the nerd or geek. The media, in all their various forms (television, newspapers, magazines, movies, documentaries, etc.) also cast the Asian as the well-assimilated immigrant, who through diligence, hard work, and obedience is working toward the American dream.

As Zia (2000) has observed, the geek is not a new invention but dates back to the 1960s. The geek, in its media presence, is the subordinate, uncomplaining Asian workhorse of white bosses as seen in the television series *Bonanza*, *Green Hornet*, and even *Hawaii Five-O*. The contemporary geek is the *American Idol*, William Hung, who has come to symbolize the struggling, oblivious, asexual Asian American male. Across America, even within the Asian American community, he is loved for his innocent foreign ways, his sincerity, honesty, and humbleness. These are the stereotypical traits associated with Asians as the persevering silent model minority of American society. Yet there are many who question whether he understands that these traits that have made him a popular culture icon—his foreign accent, his naiveté, his harmlessness—are a form of racial self-mockery. Some observers contest his portrayal and the racist reception of such negative stereotyping of Asian Americans (Mizota 2004).

As we can see, these popular images of Asian Americans—the violent gangster with organized crime connections, the geeky model minority, the Asian sex kitten—are largely constructed around hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality (see Chapter 9 for further discussion of these images). By this I mean that the portrayals of the Asian man and woman are constructed in relation to—compared and measured against—the dominant categories of American masculinity and femininity. But why should this be so? Why should Asian men and women be popularly understood in relation to Western notions of masculinity and femininity? Are there issues of power and domination at stake?

From a broader perspective, such typifications do not reflect the diversity and complexity of the 12.5 million people (or 4.5

percent of the total U.S. population) who, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, constitute the Asian Pacific American community (Lai and Arguelles 2003). These typifications also do not reflect the differences in the histories, immigration experiences, and cultural traditions of the more than 34 different ethnic groups that are lumped into the category *Asian Pacific American*. Moreover, images like the model minority mask the real differences among Asian Americans. So although Asian Americans as an aggregate appear to be an "educational success," university admissions and attendance rates for some Asian ethnic groups like Hmong, Laotian, Samoan, Hawaiian, and Guamanian rank among the lowest among all ethnic groups nationally (Lai and Arguelles 2003). Asian Americans as a group appear to be doing well financially, with a median family income of \$59,000 per year (as of 2000), which is higher than whites at \$48,500. Yet this "success" glosses over the fact that, in 2000, Asian Americans as individuals had a lower personal income (median \$20,200) than whites (\$23,640), were concentrated in areas associated with a high cost of living (i.e., the Los Angeles area, New York, the San Francisco Bay area, Honolulu, and Washington, D.C.), and come from larger families than other ethnic groups in the United States (Lai and Arguelles 2003). Asian Americans, like other peoples in the U.S., face a number of social problems from racial violence to domestic violence, substance use, delinquency, poverty, and mental illness.

At first, these images and stereotypes might seem harmless and, sometimes, entertaining. But stereotypes need to be challenged because they take on a life of their own, becoming real, especially for people who have had little or no interaction with those who are being typed. Social typing often is used as a substitute for really knowing the individual or situation. And, as W. I. Thomas said, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (1928, 572). In other words, if we believe that these characterizations are real (even though they aren't true), then we will base our actions on these stereotypes (rather than on what is actually real).

What does this mean? People in positions of power and authority will be making decisions about social policy and community programs based not on the real situation but rather on what is projected as being real (that is, the stereotypes). Let me give you just two examples.

Since the late 1980s, public concern has been captivated by youth gangs and their association with drugs and violence. The media, the police, and several congress representatives have identified Chinese gangs as being especially problematic. They are more dangerous and violent than other minority youth gangs because of their "alleged" links to the Chinese Mafia and organized crime, first linked to international heroin trafficking. According to Senator Sam Nunn,

Chinese organized crime . . . is in many ways as mysterious, if not more so than its portrayal in movies such as *Year of the Dragon*. For example, this criminal subculture is rooted in distinct groups—triads, tongs and gangs—that are completely unfamiliar to most Americans. (U.S. Senate, 1991, 2)

According to a U.S. government website, this view continues to thrive with the threat of Chinese crime groups becoming increasingly global and more threatening with their involvement in other crimes, especially human trafficking (Boltz 1995). Such views gain credence in the media:

Today, Chinese gangs are not just bands of teenagers that once prowled Chinatown exclusively, extorting protection money from shop owners and occasionally mugging tourists. They have evolved into sophisticated groups that deal in narcotics and operate money laundering rackets using legitimate business fronts as covers. They have forged new links with Hong Kong and Taiwan syndicates, which have traditionally dominated the supply of heroin smuggled into the United States. (Leung 1987, A8)

These characterizations about Chinese gangsters—slick, violent, fearless, sophisticated—have taken on a life of their own, and consequently have led to the development of several aggressive law enforcement suppres-

sion policies that specifically targeted Asian gangs (Joe 1994). In the late 1990s, a cross-country police operation called Bytes Dust identified and targeted an even more "dangerous" form of Asian gangs. According to media and police reports, this type of gang has moved beyond its traditional ethnic and hierarchical boundaries. Today's Asian gang purportedly cuts across Asian ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Laotian, and Japanese), exhibits a flexible authority structure as individuals co-join and disband into "crews" solely to engage in criminal opportunities, and is "driven by greed, not loyalty to their organization" (Wallace 1998, A1). This first example demonstrates the unfortunate consequences of negative stereotypes of Asians as the mysterious and deadly foreigner.

The second example is based on the contrasting assumption that Asian Americans are the model minority. One of the many negative consequences of this stereotype is that Asians are assumed to have few personal, familial, or social problems. The Asian immigrant is assumed to go through a period of "adjustment" in which he or she must learn the ways of "becoming American." This adjustment is typically perceived as a temporary feature until the newcomer assimilates. Accordingly, successive generations are absorbed into the mainstream of American culture, and when problems arise, they are due to cultural and generational gaps with their parents. If any social problems arise, they are assumed to be handled internally by the individual or within the tight-knit links of the family or community.

As a result, policymakers have little knowledge about the realities and problems of Asian Americans, and in turn are more likely to divert monies for prevention, intervention, and educational programs to other communities. Many Asian ethnic community organizations—Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese—have joined forces to educate policymakers, and to lobby for and develop culturally appropriate programs like drug treatment in various parts of the United States. They are constantly struggling to survive in a period of governmental cutbacks, and with existing resources can ex-

tend their services only so far to a population that includes a culturally diverse group of people.

It is critical, then, to move beyond these stereotypes and look at the realities of Asian Americans. Among the Asian Americans I know, no one fits the popular characterizations—not that of the model minority without any social problems, nor that of the slick violent gangster, nor that of the erotic, submissive woman. In fact, many of the Asian Americans who I have encountered—in either my social or professional experience—face problems similar to those of other Americans. The reasons and ways of coping with these problems, however, are shaped by different cultural and social factors.

Johnny's Story

I've known Johnny since childhood. We grew up together in San Francisco's Chinatown. It was a very cool place to grow up because the neighborhood was only a few square blocks, with markets and businesses surrounded by apartment buildings and a big housing project. A lot of people lived in this small area, and everyone knew each other (and their business).

The housing project where Johnny lived was especially crowded because several generations often resided under the same roof. Johnny's place was a one-bedroom, and had all sorts of people living there: his grandparents, his mother, his two brothers, his sister, and her husband and baby. He never said where his father was. It was so noisy and packed inside this tiny place that Johnny constantly sought peace and quiet on the street. This is when he started getting into trouble:

I left home at an early age and went to live with my cousin. I was 11, my cousin was 10. At first when I left home it was fun and we stayed out at my friend's house, until it gets all played out. Instead of going home, we just started sleeping on roof tops or at the laundry room at the housing project. We never went outside of Chinatown, stuck mostly around the projects and the markets.

We started hanging around gangs, they were our role model. They gave you a

feeling of power and security because when you are on the street, you know that by hanging around the gang that it sort of makes you feel safe. I would never admit that I was scared. It is more like you want to believe that you are really bad and that you fit in. So we got involved in the gang. I was hanging around the Rainmakers. Most of them were ABCs [i.e., American-born Chinese]. We was just into a lot of mischief stuff, nothing major.

I switched over to the B.D.s because I was more on the streets. We started getting into a lot of fights, especially with the ABCs. The B.D.s were immigrants, born in China or Hong Kong. They were called FOBs [i.e., fresh off the boat]. I didn't really fit into either group, I guess, because even though I was born in China, I came here when I was a baby. So really I am both, I guess. I was caught in the middle because I used to hang around ABCs and FOBs. I tried to stay out of those fights because I knew both sides. I mostly got into the racial fights with white guys. First we were just jumping [beating them up] then later we started taking their money. What was really amazing, though, is when the ABCs and FOBs joined together to fight the black guys at school. Even though the ABCs and FOBs hated each other, they had that common enemy. They said, "we will fight against each other tomorrow, but today we are our own kind." That came first.

I felt more natural with the B.D.s because we all had heart. The Rainmakers were afraid, because they were taught that if you do this you go to jail. But the B.D.s weren't so scared, they would stick up for you, you'd know they'd be right there for you. I think a lot of guys that belonged to the B.D.s joined the gang because there weren't any jobs, and they had nothing else to do but hang out in the street. The B.D.s were FOBs, and they felt that Chinese that lived here didn't like them, that they were too Chinese. The B.D.s felt like outcasts, and so that's why they used to stick together.

Social workers used to come down to Chinatown, they kept telling us that they were trying to get money for us so we could have jobs. Give us something to do. But Chinese don't have problems. They had no trouble. It was that stereotype,

you know. It's the same with drugs, they say that Chinese don't use.

My only income was ripping off: stealing, robbing, strong-arm robbing. Anywhere I could get money. We were into extorting businesses as well, the restaurants and stores. The merchants were expected to "show respect" by paying us protection monies, and they usually paid because they were scared. The Chinese don't get into trouble because they never hear about it, Chinese people don't usually like to go to the police. I guess they don't trust them. That's another reason why those stereotypes live on.

The other things we used to do was cruise, look for girls, and crash parties. When we went to dances, we would push our weight around and most of those dances turned into fights. For me, I enjoyed the fighting. You know, growing up Chinese, you aren't suppose to show that you are hurting, especially if you're hanging out on the street. It is considered weak. It was one way for me to get out my frustration.

I also got a sense of pride and power out of it all, and a sense of belonging. It is like you don't know any other way. I grew up thinking that to be a man, you got to go out there on your own.

By the time I hit my fifteenth birthday, I got sent to Log Cabin [a secure juvenile detention facility]. Later I went to California Youth Authority three times. My cousin and I were always getting arrested. The counselors would look at us with surprise and say, "What are you doing here—you're Chinese." As much as I hate the stereotype, we tried to use it to our advantage, being all humble and stuff, and sometimes they would let us go. But usually, I would be out a month, two months, then I was back in. In and out.

I was really scared, though, when I got sent off. The big tough guys always trying to get the advantage. You're in there, scared as hell, and swearing that you ain't gonna do it again. Then you get out and be with your friends and act like it was nothing. You got to keep up that "I'm bad" image. Reputation is everything. To get a reputation, you gotta establish that you are crazy and will do anything. The more crazy you are, the less people will mess with you. Weird thing is, that you

start believing that you are really that person. You really start to believe the lie.

Everytime I got out, though, being on parole, the police would come by and hassle me. They didn't need a warrant because I was still part of the system. Everytime someone got killed, the police knew how to track you down, thinking you were involved. The fighting in Chinatown got worse, and then three bodies turned up dead underneath the bridge. That's when my cousin and I decided we were just going to stay out of it. We went back to school for a while. My cousin was parking cars down in Chinatown and he got into a hassle with some guys over a parking space. They jumped him and cut his throat and arm. So he started recruiting for his group. I was married by then and had a son. He didn't want me to get involved. But we always watched each other's back. He said, "If you went out there and got killed, I couldn't face my nephew." He wouldn't even hear of me taking care of things from the outside. My cousin really got into it, and finally he got sent away for murder.

I started in the drug scene when I left home, so I was pretty young. The B.D.s weren't into drugs, but the Rainmakers were into smoking weed. I started out sniffing glue. That was the thing. I later got into weed, then downers, sleeping pills, reds, yellows, and later acid. The gangs weren't into using drugs. Neither of the gangs were into it at all. And the B.D.s eventually said that no one was allowed to hang out when they were fucked up because business came first.

I saw myself moving into heavier stuff, I wanted to try everything. I just did it because I liked it. I just kept using, like, sleeping pills, then acid and mescaline, and THC. In my own eyes, it was okay, because the doctors prescribed these [i.e., the sleeping pills]. It wasn't shooting heroin. Heroin was a drug. I kept telling myself, "I ain't no dope fiend or junkie." But eventually I did get into that.

My wife and I split up, and then I got really heavy into the heroin. In Chinatown, even though you don't hear a lot about druggies, most of them break away from everyone they know so you don't see it. And if you don't see it, it ain't a problem, eh? I think they retreat somewhere else in the city because they don't want

anyone to know. It's an embarrassment for them and for their families. You know, everyone seems to know everyone. So it's easier to disappear and no one sees anything.

I been in the drug thing for nearly 20 years, using and dealing, but never with the gang. I broke away and started hanging out in another district of town. Eventually it all came down on me, and I got shot four times because of a bad drug deal. That's when I hit rock bottom.

Johnny tried at several points during the 20 years of his use to get help with his drug problem. He found the first three attempts at treatment unsuccessful, due partly to what he perceived as a lack of appropriateness of the mainstream counseling and intervention strategies. After returning to his old neighborhood, he met an outreach worker, and, after waiting several months, was able to get into a treatment program that was designed specifically to address the cultural issues and problems facing Asian Americans using illicit drugs.

Linda's Story

Linda's experience with drugs was quite different from Johnny's. I met her many years ago when I went to live in Hawaii for a summer. She was going through a difficult time then, trying to stay off the dope (on her own), getting a divorce, and recuperating from breast cancer surgery. She seemed to be constantly maneuvering through an endless number of life's roadblocks. Dope seemed to have a medicinal effect, helping her to cope with all of these obstacles.

She was born in Hong Kong and moved to Hawaii with her mother and stepfather when she was 3 years old. Her mother was from a wealthy merchant-class family in Shanghai. When the Communists took over, her family fled to Hong Kong through an underground network and lived in poverty with a distant cousin. Her mother was 16 and unmarried when she gave birth to Linda. Linda's natural father and his family decided that, given the circumstances, marriage was out of the question. Linda's mother then met and married an American, moved to Hawaii, and had another daughter. They were on wel-

fare for several years until the second daughter was old enough for daycare. Linda believes that her troubles first started when her parents took on extra work to keep afloat on the margins of the working class:

Things started to change, I started to hang around the corner market where all the drug dealers were. I think it was because my parents started being home a lot less. Mom was working all the time. Dad was working two jobs and I think he had somebody on the side as well. It was pretty much just me, alone, with my little sister. We started hanging out, got to know the guys down there. It was better than staying home and watching TV. I was around 12. One of the first things those guys taught me was how to have an attitude. So, of course, I got into my first fight shortly thereafter.

It was with this blonde girl that was after my boyfriend. A little bimbo! I didn't want to fight but everybody kept on telling me that I had to do it. So I did it and I just totally beat the shit out of her. It was horrible. She ran off, and I remember her running down the street with only her panties on. Somehow I had taken off all her clothes, shoes and everything. The cops came with her parents. Nothing happened, though, and the guys all were so proud of me. I felt shitty afterwards, and I went over to her house to apologize. We were friends two days later.

The guys were mostly selling weed and acid. No coke, though. The weed came from the Hawaiian homelands. They would grow it, and then bring it on down to sell. They'd mostly sell joints and small bags to people passing by. A lot of them were cousins, all distantly related. My first joint was with my dad. Back then, they used to have those little rolling machines, and my dad would have ounces of weed in his freezer. So we'd sit there eating ice cream and rolling joints and making bags.

My mom used to smoke dope. I remember watching her smoke dope and doing coke. She denies that she ever did coke. I remember watching her do a couple of lines. I didn't get on with my mom too well. She used to beat the shit out of me, bloody me up, bruise me, hack me with hangers and high heels. She used to drag me out by my hair and throw me

down the stairs and shit. It was wild. When I was 13, we moved to the East side and that's when she started using chairs and lamps and sticks to beat me. She never hit my sister. I think I probably ruined her life. She used to tell me that. She used to say, "Fuck—I hate you!" She hated me, I think, because I pretty much cramped her style. She was so young when she had me. Totally huge responsibility. She was like a party animal and then I just cut the whole scene for her.

I remember the last time she beat me. I couldn't walk. She broke some stick on my back, and I was laid out for four or five days in bed. That was when my stepfather started sexually abusing me. For two years, on and off. He used to protect me from her as much as he could, but he was never at home. She never knew about the abuse.

I left home when I was 14. At first, I ran to my girlfriend's house for a couple of days. Then her parents took me home. The second time, I lived down in the central area for about six months. I had to get out of there. The abuse, physical, sexual, emotional abuse. I knew I would be better off by myself. I used to live on the beach, met some guys down there and sell bogus weed. We'd do deals in hotels and rip people off. You know, I'd set people up and we'd take the money and eat. We just moved from one place to another.

Then one day we were at the poolhall and I met this guy. We stayed together for four and a half years. He was five years older than me. That's when I started doing heavy drugs. At first I took acid. It was so smooth and so good. We used to sell it for our friend. Me and my boyfriend would take acid and stay up for days. When I met him, he was on methadone. We used to live at the poolhall. He made a lot of money, all illegal. Whatever money I made dealing drugs supplemented our income. We made a couple of thousand dollars a month in cash.

He turned me on to Quaaludes, different kinds, Lemons and Rorers. We used to buy them in little Life Savers packet rolls with 10 to a roll. I was doing this for months; everyday I'd take two or three in the morning, and when I started coming down, I'd pop a couple of more. I really liked downs. I started doing reds, Darvons,

and Percodans; whatever we could get, we'd do.

Occasionally I'd be picked up by the police for being a runaway. I'd go to the detention home and from there, I'd get farmed out to social agencies and placements. I'd go to the placement and then I'd stay there for a little while, then I'd run away. I'd always end up back at the poolhall. Sometimes I'd go back home when there was no other placement or the social worker said, "Well, you should try it." And I'd try it, this went on from 14 till I was 17. I'd always leave my mom, though; I always had a boyfriend to run to. When I started college, I went home periodically.

When I was around 16, my first boyfriend and I started doing coke. He taught me how to cook coke, smoke it. Later we were banging it. I shot cocaine for about eight months. I liked it. I entered a surfing contest and I kept on going to the bathroom to shoot up, and it's a good thing he was there. He dragged me out of the bathroom and beat the shit out of me right there in front of all my friends. That's when I quit. Because I knew I was totally fucking out of control.

I stopped smoking dope too. I felt stupid when I smoked. I just was kind of unsociable, withdrawn. I couldn't think clearly, I wanted to eat, watch TV, and vegetate. I don't like just sitting still and not doing anything. If I'm gonna sit someplace, I'd like to be amping so I can think. Dope was boring.

Acid made me laugh. Acid was good. I was dealing that but stopped when I was 18. I was doing a lot of it and hanging out at the beach. One day, I was in the water, I was real high and punched somebody out in swimming. Some guy dropped in on me [i.e., encroached on her space in the water], and I went over there and beat the shit out of him. Later on, the next day, I thought, "That's not really funny, that wasn't really too cool." I think that had a lot to do with me quitting acid. I just had sheets and sheets of the shit.

It got to the point back then that I wasn't making any money. You start off making money. Then you start doing it. Then you start turning people on, and you start doing more. Pretty soon, you're selling just to do it. Next thing, you wake up, and somebody's knocking at your door. They

say, "Hey, you were supposed to give me so much money, 10 days ago. Where's the money? You have no money, you have no drugs."

I eventually dumped that boyfriend. I met somebody else. This other person was a real person. I was with him for two years. He smoked a lot of dope. I still don't smoke dope. We did a lot of coke. We lived together. He was probably the only person that was really supportive of my school. He was totally smart and would work with me. Then we'd go out and party till the sun came up.

After I left him, I partied more and more. I got back into coke. I started working in a nightclub and people would give me coke. I worked days, nights, and on call. So I was up a lot. When I wasn't working, I liked to dance. I had a lot of money and I had a lot of drugs.

After I quit working there, I continued using it, and then one night, I went to a dealer's house to pick up some coke. That's when I saw *Ice*. He said, "You guys want to try this?" We started feeling kinda crispy. It was good. There was no rush like coke; it just kept you up there for a long time. My friends and I went back and got some more of that. Then I started smoking it some, but mostly I stuck with coke. I liked the taste of it. I liked the rush. I liked the numbing effect. My gums and stuff. It would drip down the back of your throat.

I finally quit coke when I got pregnant; that was about three years ago. I quit too because I spent \$10,000 on coke in one month. I married the guy; it was my mother's idea. I should have told her to marry him!

Linda and I became quite close that summer. When the fall came, however, she dropped out of sight. She'd call me about once a month to keep in touch. The calls and letters became less frequent. I hope she didn't started using again.

Discussion

We must ask ourselves now whether the stereotypes of Asian Americans bear any resemblance to the life experiences of Linda and Johnny. Neither of them fits the image of the model minority or the deviant stereo-

types of foreign mysterious devils. Johnny did not fit the image of the slick and sophisticated immigrant gangster, but rather that of the young marginal male who is frustrated with a dense living environment and limited employment opportunities. This situation, combined with intense male peer pressure, was the setting in which Johnny grew up and tried to develop a sense of manhood. Linda also did not fit the stereotype of the submissive, weak, and alluring sex kitten. In fact, she showed an extremely strong and independent character in her attempts to leave a chaotic family situation where her mother physically and emotionally abused her and her stepfather sexually molested her. It was her stepfather who also first introduced her to dope. Her experiences clearly dispel the simplistic characterizations of the obedient and complacent Asian family, and instead illustrate the constraints and problems facing some families more generally.

Equally important, popular characterizations of Asian Americans do not go unrecognized, nor are they passively accepted. Johnny was not blind to the stereotypes of Asians as being obedient, passive, and without social problems. He resisted these images, and instead ironically used them to his advantage when dealing with the police and detention counselors. Linda was also aware of the problems with gender typing in her encounters with authorities when she ran away from home. The authorities—social workers, police, and counselors—wanted her to end her “rebelliousness” and return home to her mother. Assumptions about her “character” and “femininity” rather than her family situation (i.e., physical and sexual abuse) became the basis for juvenile and family court decisions.

One final point merits our discussion. Johnny was also well aware of the implications of Asian American stereotypes. As he rightly points out, when Asian Americans are portrayed and viewed by “outsiders” as having no social problems (like unemployment, illicit drug use, crowded housing, and crime and delinquency), then few efforts will be made to address the realities within *their* community. Moreover, as his experience illustrates, the Asian family and community

cannot internally solve the problems. The social workers with whom he interacted were unable to obtain external resources to develop any employment opportunities or programs.

We must question the complex ways in which stereotypes gain a reality inconsistent with the life experiences of people like Linda and Johnny. If we hide behind these stereotypes and do not address the real issues, then we are setting up Linda and Johnny for failure. It was not until the fourth time that Johnny's attempts to stop using drugs were successful. Linda's strong character may account for her quitting on her own, although it is unclear what she is doing now. Once we have set up people like them for failure, it is all too easy to dismiss them as “evil.”

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