

Glamorous Asians: Essay Excerpt

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When I was growing up in the 1970s in New Jersey, I knew of nothing more glamorous than the Miss America pageant, which everyone in my family, including my grandparents, watched religiously year after year. I have no idea why it was so important to us to see who would be the next Miss America, who would “represent our country,” as the ads used to say, as though we were watching some kind of Presidential showdown. Perhaps it was because we couldn’t imagine a woman becoming President in those days, and so this was the next best thing.

I remember one year there was a Chinese girl, Miss Hawaii, who danced a hula in a grass skirt while juggling a series of white balls on strings. We all rooted for her, naturally, but she didn’t even make the top ten. Most years there were no Asians at all representing any of the fifty states, and so I would root for the brunettes, which was generally a losing battle, too.

Sometimes my grandparents would call us during the pageant and ask who were our favorites, and we would tell them. I could hear them discuss this in Chinese for a few minutes, and then my grandfather would report that he liked that girl, too, but my grandmother thought Miss So-and-So would win instead. Nai-nai didn’t root for candidates; instead, she would try to figure out who was most likely to win. She would judge them just as the real pageant judges were supposed to, or the way Bert Parks told us the judges were supposed to. My grandmother would rate the girls’ talent exhibitions, the swimsuit competition, evening gowns, and the all-important interview. She always gave extra points to the girls who stated “world peace” as their goal for their reigns more so than “an end to hunger” or even the less ambitious but arguably more achievable “literacy.” My grandmother had survived World War II in

China. She knew that it was no good to have food if you didn't have peace because in a war, the soldiers would steal the food and keep it for themselves, so you would starve anyway. And what good was it to be able to read books if you were starving?

Her logic was irrefutable, but my grandmother was never able to pick the winner of the Miss America pageant, not once.

My grandparents, however, remained big fans of the pageant. And they held great hopes that their granddaughter would one day become Miss America.

That is to say, not me, their granddaughter, but rather my younger cousin, Margaret. Margaret could sing and dance and play the piano. She was good in gymnastics and could do a one-handed back flip by the age of four, which she demonstrated on the lawn of our house in New Jersey every time my grandparents came to visit. I used to think of this kind of thing as "showing off," but my grandparents saw it differently. They saw it as Potential, capital P.

In those days, in the '70s, there were only three grandchildren: me, my younger brother, and my cousin. We each had our attributes in our grandparents' eyes. My grandfather used to enumerate them as we ate together on the weekends in Manhattan at my grandparents' favorite Chinese restaurant. Mid-meal, Ye-ye would rise from his seat and walk slowly behind the three of us as we sat in a row around the circular table, munching away. He would put his hand heavily on the very top of my head. I had to stop chewing or I'd choke. He'd say, "Likes to read." There was a pause so that this could sink in, and then he'd say, "Good," and smile. Then he would approach my brother and solemnly put his hand on my brother's bowl cut. "So big, so strong," he'd say, and then, seeing the looks of approval from our parents across the table, he'd declare proudly, "Handsome!" And then he'd step behind my cousin's chair. Margaret was three years younger than I; she was just a little kid and didn't

quite understand the gravity of the situation, the nature of a grandfather inveighing on his grandchildren's essence, possibly their very futures. Instead, she would see Ye-ye coming and start to giggle. My grandfather would then take her head in both his hands, to minimize the squirming, I supposed. "Miss America," he'd say then, and the rest of the table would burst into applause.

After that, my grandmother began to refer to my cousin as "Miss America," rather than by her given name, which I think Nai-nai had had trouble pronouncing in the first place.

When we got together for the holidays, I grew used to my grandmother calling out, "Miss America! Miss America!" and then squealing with delight as Margaret, on cue, burst into a little hopping dance and sashayed through the hall, then down the steps that led to our family room and into my grandmother's arms.

I also got used to the idea that I was the one who liked to read. It was accurate anyway, although I wasn't sure yet why this would turn out to be a "good" thing. Reading seemed neither good nor bad to me but was rather an amoral activity; there were dirty books just as there were the boring textbooks that I was assigned in school, and I knew where to find both kinds in the bookstore in the mall, but I didn't bother going into this distinction with my grandfather, or anyone else in my family, for that matter. I liked to have my secrets.

After I moved to San Francisco when I was an adult, I remember during the 1997 Chinese New Year festivities that there were posters all over Chinatown advertising the contestants for the upcoming Miss Chinatown USA pageant. Chinatowns from all over the country were sending candidates; there was a tiny thumbprint-sized photograph of each girl, and beneath it, the name of her sponsoring group—the Rotary Club, the Lions, King Lee's Grocery—as well as a list of her

attributes. It was hard to get a sense of what the girls looked like—the pictures were very small; some resembled high school senior photos, others, highly retouched “glamour shots,” the kind malls across America offered replete with cheap hair extensions and borrowed feather boas—but I could read each contestant’s achievements quite clearly. One girl from Stanford was double majoring in something like physics and biology, pre-med, with her leisure activities listed as sailing, debate, and the flute. Another girl from Cal-Berkeley was an environmental studies major and had started, I believe, a sustainable agricultural experiment in cactus farming in Costa Rica. Others were more generic, listing activities like “Chinese school” or “piano lessons” as their after-school activities alongside “cheerleading,” “jazz-funk ballet” or “ribbon dancing.”

For some reason, this year had a lot of press coverage of the Miss Chinatown USA pageant in the local Chinese papers. Maybe it was an important anniversary for the pageant, maybe it was a slow news cycle. Or perhaps it was the novelty of the pageant in my eyes that caught my attention and only made it seem as though the rest of the world was paying more attention as well.

Some of the local candidates were interviewed on Chinese cable news, certainly the Stanford and Berkeley girls, as well as a couple of less affluent types from the East Bay who worked in their parents’ restaurants.

I remember thinking that the emphasis was certainly progressive, all this talk of after-school activities and National Honor Society memberships. Most of the girls did not look like beauty queens; they had straight flat hair and wore very little makeup, and I thought the pageant had a very model-minority air to it. There was no discussion of swimsuit competitions or make-up techniques. If I remember correctly, none of these girls actually lived in Chinatown, either.

The candidates answered the newscaster’s questions (in English) with only

mild impatience. No, I don't think a beauty pageant is demeaning, because it's really about my accomplishments. Yes, I'm very proud of my Chinese heritage, but, no, I don't speak Chinese. And no, I don't want to be a model unless I can model part-time while I'm finishing grad school. It seemed as though the Chinatown organizers were caught in a new kind of debate, none of this "to assimilate or not to assimilate" business, none of the class issues of the past. Miss Chinatown now seemed to be about choosing Miss Suburban Princess, and a Miss I-Just-Happen-to-Be-Chinese Suburban Princess, at that.

Perhaps my grandparents' fascination with the Miss America pageant had made me especially interested in the outcome of the Miss Chinatown USA pageant that year, but it's also possible that I had a secret nerd dream in my heart that a *reader* would be crowned a beauty queen. Although I thought that I had managed to convince myself long ago that beauty pageants were not important, I found my heart beating just a little faster now that all the contestants were Chinese and almost all were the kind who liked to read—the "good" girls—and I realized suddenly that I was not immune to the thrill of shallow triumphs that, in my youth, had been the sole province of blondes.

I remember that when I was a little girl, I loved the movie *Godzilla* because, in addition to the really cool giant lizard, the film was filled with glamorous Asians: all those Japanese men with slicked-back hair and smart-looking suits running through the streets of Tokyo. And the Girl Scientist, Emiko Yamane, with her Grace Kelly crisp cotton blouses and A-line skirts, her perfect make-up and unmoving coiffure. The lighting was excellent. Everyone's cheekbones were to die for. In my real life in New Jersey, there were no such glamorous icons. There was only Arnold on *Happy Days*, and he ran a diner, always dressed in a rumpled apron. He squinted and spoke in

broken sentences that, according to the laugh track, were supposed to be hilarious. Even before kids in school started imitating him, adopting a fake accent and pulling the skin back from their eyes, I hated Arnold. I wanted Godzilla to come and step on him immediately. Later, Arnold morphed into Mr. Miyagi, which was somewhat better—at least he knew how to fight, but he still dressed badly, like a beach bum, like the kind of recluse who lived in a house filled with odds and ends, the kind who might turn out to be a wise man or a serial killer, the one whose neighbors, when interviewed on the six o'clock news, always shook their heads about, saying in disbelief, “But he was always such a quiet person.”

After I grew old enough to stay up for the Friday night late-late show, the one that ran after the news, from eleven-thirty to two a.m., I fell in love with the Bruce Lee films that were broadcast then. Bruce Lee was glamorous, all right, sexy and sweaty, leaping and fighting while making sounds like a mountain cat, but the women in his films didn't get to do much. The Asian chicks in shiny qipaos ran for cover while the men fought; they were there to decorate the set, and then they were gone and forgotten, and that disappointed me.

Once when I was nine or ten, I caught a late-night showing of *Shanghai Express*. Forget about Dietrich, in my eyes, it was Anna May Wong's movie. Sure, she was a hooker, that old cliché, and it was she, not the white girl, who was raped by the villain, but still she managed to save everyone on the train in the end, killing the villain (a traitorous warlord, no less!), stabbing him repeatedly with a knife, the whole scene shot as a play of shadows against a billowing sheet. All the while, she was dressed in an embroidered silk gown; she never broke a sweat, her long black hair barely mussed. Afterward, with a roll of her eyes, she let everyone know she'd suffer no fools. As Marlene Dietrich's character, the notorious Shanghai Lily, offers a weak expression of gratitude, “I don't know if I ought to be grateful to you or not,” Anna May

Wong, cool as ice, replies, “It’s of no consequence. I didn’t do it for you. Death canceled his debt to *me*.”

As soon as the movie was over, I ran to look in the bathroom mirror to see if I had any Anna May potential. I experimented with the lighting, flicking the switch on and off, strobe-like, checking my face from various angles, but try as I might, I always looked the same: freckled, round cheeked, bushy eyebrowed. If anything, I looked more like Arnold on *Happy Days* than glamorous Anna May Wong. I turned off the light then, deeply disappointed, and went to bed with one of my books.

When I was growing up, we had exactly one glamorous picture in my father’s photo album. It’s my grandparents’ engagement photo. My grandfather wears a Western style suit and tie, my grandmother a flapper dress. Her hair is marcelled in waves that frame her perfectly round face. They don’t smile—it was considered undignified for Chinese in those days to show their teeth—but they gaze serenely into the camera, their heads tilted slightly toward each other. They look young and prosperous and in love, nothing like the grandparents I knew.

My grandparents were old. At night, they put their dentures in glass jars beside their bed. I remember watching their teeth float in the water when they came to stay at our house in the suburbs during school holidays. By this time, Ye-ye had no hair, and Nai-nai’s hair had turned the color of steel wool. Ye-ye walked with a cane because he’d been injured in a rickshaw accident in Shanghai during World War II. He’d lost so much weight after two heart attacks that his suits hung on his thin frame. My grandmother had stomach pains and hip pains and swollen ankles, and she complained to my parents about this at every family gathering. Their engagement photo had been taken in 1930, well before the wars in China that would cause their teeth to go bad and ruin their health and make the wrinkles form across their faces

like so many cracks in a parched field.

The first time I saw their engagement picture in my father's album, I had to ask him who these people were.

My father laughed at me. "You don't recognize your own grandparents!"

I thought he was lying. "No, tell me who it is!" I insisted. "Tell me!"

But he only shook his head, disappointed in my obtuseness.

When my grandparents came to visit that Christmas, I confronted them with the photo while they were sitting together on our couch, watching the soap operas my grandmother loved so much.

They looked surprised to see the picture. They bent their heads together and squinted, their eyes disappearing into the folds of their skin. They muttered something softly in Chinese, something I couldn't understand, and my grandfather laughed and my grandmother shook her head. Then Nai-nai wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and then on the soft white handkerchief that my grandfather took from his pocket and handed to her. She dabbed her eyes over and over while Ye-ye held her other hand in both of his, patting her fingers softly.

They didn't say anything more about the picture, and I didn't dare ask. Seeing them like this, so intimate, I felt profoundly embarrassed, as though I had walked in on them while they were still half-dressed. . . .

Read the full text in the book GLAMOROUS ASIANS: SHORT STORIES AND ESSAYS

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