

# Transnational Legitimization of an Actor: The Life and Career of Soon-Tek Oh<sup>1</sup>

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He is the voice of the father in the Disney animation film *Mulan* (1998). He is Sensei in the Hollywood hit film *Beverly Hills Ninja* (1997). He is Lieutenant Hip in the 007 film *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974). These examples may trigger memories of Soon-Tek Oh in the minds of many Americans.<sup>2</sup> Some would vaguely remember him as the “oriental” actor whose face often gets confused with those of other Asian and Asian American actors, such as Mako and James Hong. Theatre aficionados may remember him for his award-winning role in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Pacific Overtures* in the 1970s, but more Americans will know him as the quintessential “oriental” man in Hollywood. This is not the legacy Soon-Tek Oh wanted. He would prefer to be remembered as an artist, an actor who played Hamlet, Romeo, and Osvold Alving; who founded theatre companies; who promoted cultural awareness for Korean Americans; and who taught youths with all of his integrity. He wanted to be a “great actor,” who transcended all markings, especially racial ones, and who was recognized for his talent as an artist. He has sought what I describe in this essay as “legitimization” as a respected actor at every crucial point in his life.<sup>3</sup>

Soon-Tek Oh was the first Korean actor to appear in American mainstream theatre, film, or television.<sup>4</sup> He left Korea for Hollywood in 1959 as a young man, seeking to learn the craft of filmmaking. For over thirty years, Oh played multiple roles as an actor and in real life, as what David Palumbo-Liu describes as an “active agent” who participates in “the constitution of what ‘America’ was and is at any given moment” (2). He literally represented and embodied Asian images as a performer on screen and stage. His body was the canvas on which modern America projected its conceptualizations of Asia and Asian America.<sup>5</sup> But, away from Hollywood and Broadway, Oh actively occupied and navigated other multiple cultural spaces. In the space defined as

“Asian American theatre,” Oh voiced his resistance to Hollywood’s racism, and in the space of the Korean American community, he promoted a particular form of ethnocentric cultural nationalism. Later in his life, he returned to Korea as a professor to teach western styles of acting. His decision to return to his “homeland,” as I discuss in this essay, was a way of talking back to Hollywood and mainstream America; hence, it was more of an act of gaining leverage for his sociocultural redefinition than a permanent move for personal resettlement. He crossed various boundaries, balancing his bio-ethnic identity and social worth, on the one hand, with the desires to dislodge and exceed such fixity, on the other.

Indeed, Soon-Tek Oh was as versatile in real life as he was on stage and screen; he often subverted established cultural paradigms by straddling multiple cultural spaces. To use Aihwa Ong’s term, he has been a “flexible citizen” without aligning himself with the “cosmopolitan” entrepreneurs of global capitalism, however implicated he may be in such forces and their cultural effects. He has both resisted and taken advantage of essentialism and homogenization, as an “ethnic” actor and a transnational subject. In this essay, I tell the story of Soon-Tek Oh’s multifaceted life and career, not merely as an individual passage, but also as an emergent pattern of life and action, indicative of potential or actual possibilities of human agency in our present moment in history. Oh’s career provides a complex case study for examining how an Asian actor’s body has been marked in the topology of Hollywood’s global hegemony. Moreover, the case study further illuminates a shift within Asian American studies towards transnational inquiries. As noted by Inderpal Grewal, Akhil Gupta, and Aihwa Ong, “Transnational media, markets, and migration are altering the constitution of subjects by changing how nations are imagined, citizenship is experienced, and identities are formed” (661). Soon-Tek Oh, as a transnational subject, has certainly gone through many changes by adapting and surviving, and to a certain degree, transforming. Like all “successful” actors, he has seemed lucky many times, and his story appears exceptional. And yet, what is involved in the story may well exceed the assumed meanings of a singular case of the “fortunate.” The essay concludes with Oh’s current activities in Korean academia. I argue that his choice to return to Korea as a professor signifies his sense of an ultimate legitimization of his life and career as an actor. I also discuss how such a legitimization challenges the current paradigms of Asian American politics and Pacific transnationality.

ASIAN/AMERICAN ACTORS, HOLLYWOOD PARADIGM,  
TRANSNATIONAL SHIFTS

Soon-Tek Oh was not the first Asian or Asian American actor to perceive his “homeland” as the ideal alternative to Hollywood and as a place to find recognition and validity. Philip Ahn tried several times to find his place in Korea.

Although Ahn was born in the United States and could not speak Korean fluently, he made several attempts to work in Korea as an actor and producer. In 1962, Ahn entered a co-production contract with Shin Films, which was, according to Hye Seung Chung, “the first and only Korean film company remotely resembling a Hollywood studio, run by legendary director Shin Sang-ok” (21). Ahn was devastatingly disappointed when the Park Jung Hee regime put a halt to the production. (Filmmaking was deemed insignificant and hence was written off the list of priority for post-war nation rebuilding in Korea.) Until his death in 1978, Ahn was never recognized in Korea, despite his lifetime dream of claiming the homeland of his famous father.<sup>6</sup> The silent movie star Anna May Wong (1905–61) also looked to the homeland of her grandparents, mainland China, when she was emotionally depleted from playing Chinese villains who always died at the end of the film. She left Hollywood vowing “never [to] act for the film again!” (S. Choi 137). However, Wong was surprised to find a hostile audience in war-torn China, with its massive daily scenes of social pain and human suffering. She was criticized by a range of Chinese critics and audiences for portraying negative images of Chinese people for westerners and hence serving their big-power politics. And, in any case, she was seen as too American to be Chinese. It was in Europe that she was treated as a celebrity.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa (1890–1973) also left Hollywood for his homeland but stayed only a few months. He was the first Asian male actor to play major roles in Hollywood. As a handsome actor, he also commanded a salary that rivaled those of Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin. But at the height of anti-Asian sentiment in America during the 1920s, Hayakawa seemed to have lost his patience with racism in Hollywood.<sup>8</sup> Like Wong, Hayakawa found a certain acceptance and admiration in European countries, especially England and France.

Unlike Philip Ahn, Anna May Wong, and Sessue Hayakawa, Soon-Tek Oh received a warm welcome back to his “homeland” in the 1990s. Racism in Hollywood may have been the same in the late twentieth century as it was in the 1920s, but Korea and its place in the rapidly shifting world order had drastically changed. Filmmaking, once thought of as irrelevant to the growth of the country, is now seen as the new frontier of Korea’s move towards becoming a leader in the world economy and culture.<sup>9</sup> Filmmakers and actors are increasingly recognized as “artists” in the public discourse while becoming visibly prized economic commodities on the markets. Indeed, many describe the early twenty-first century as the “renaissance” of Korean film, constitutive and emblematic of Korea’s repositioning in an increasingly globalized world and world economy. Since the 1990s, Korean directors and actors have received numerous international film awards, and young, ambitious artists are leaving Korea to work in Hollywood. Concomitantly, the process of filmmaking in America has become increasingly transnational and global, and Asian film (especially Hong Kong film) has significantly influenced Hollywood.<sup>10</sup>

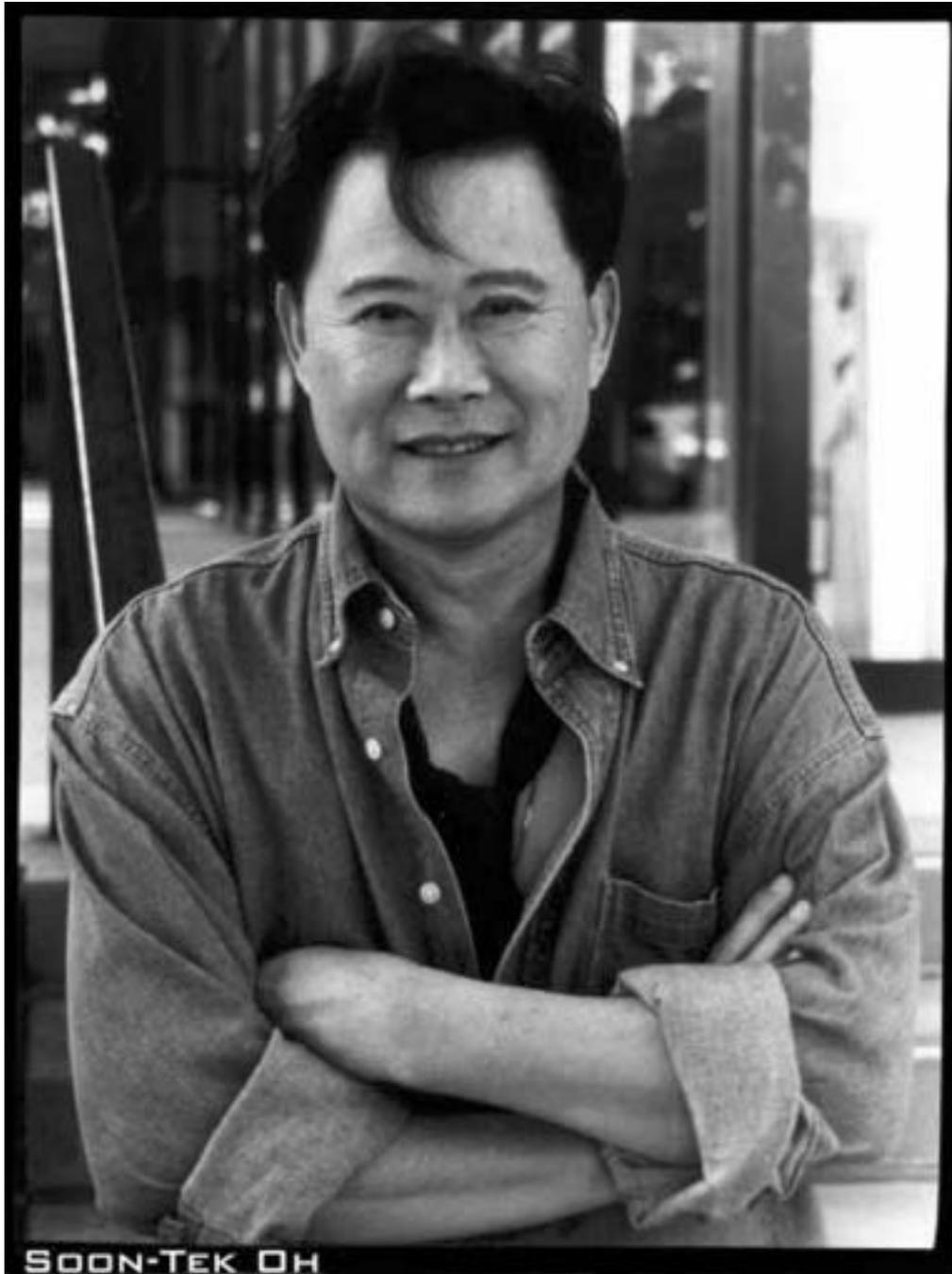
Thus, it should not be a surprise that Soon-Tek Oh, with his Hollywood experience, would be in demand in Korea.

THEATRICAL LEGITIMACY AND UNMARKED IDENTITY:  
A SOJOURNER BECOMES AN ACTOR

In theatre history, the term “legitimate” means something quite specific. The term “legitimate theatre” emerged during the seventeenth century in Britain to identify the legal theatres in London permitted to present five-act plays. Also called Royal Theatres or Patent Theatres, the legitimate theatres in London promoted “high culture” and literariness of drama. In the nineteenth century, both in Britain and the United States, “legitimate drama” meant classic plays such as those by Shakespeare and Molière. And in New York City, “legitimate theatre” was established in the late nineteenth century to distinguish it from popular entertainments, such as vaudeville, films, burlesque, minstrel shows, and melodramas.<sup>11</sup> Although, as Mark Hodin points out, the distinction between the “highbrow” legitimate theatre and “lowbrow” entertainment was often blurred, the former was markedly “white,” while the latter was “ethnic.” Hodin argues that the promotion of “legitimate theatre” by N.Y.C. critics was to locate “*cultural legitimacy in unmarked identity*, promising to restore for the dominant classes a threatened social order by confirming the dominion of ‘white’ authority in an ‘ethnic’ commercial landscape” (212; emphasis added). Legitimate theatre promoted the literary values of “great plays,” written by white authors and performed by white actors for white audiences. Thus, the signature of legitimacy for American “legitimate theatre” derived from the exclusion of non-whites (especially Jews and blacks), who had “marked” identities.

Hodin describes whiteness as “unmarked identity,” but it was not neutral; whiteness was visibly endowed with cultural prestige as the “standard” and “real.” A “great actor” in N.Y.C. legitimate theatre would almost always be a white actor, who would have the freedom to perform any role, including non-white ones. The white body was seen as a blank canvas, a universal being, and an essential identity. The white actor was defined in opposition to the ethnic actor, whose cultural specificity could not disappear behind the character he or she played. So, “cultural legitimacy in unmarked identity” was a process of privileging the white body as the ideal and inscribing the non-white body as its other – namely, “illegitimate.”

In the twentieth century, the process of enacting “cultural legitimacy in unmarked identity” was adopted by the film and television industry. Such legitimacy marked the ideal goal and monopolized universal value while underlining all aspects of the American entertainment industry. White actors were once again seen as the embodiment of the unmarked identity that could take on any role. Thus, white actors, wearing “oriental” yellow-face makeup, were



A recent photo of Soon-Tek Oh. Since the early 1960s, Oh has acted in film, television, and theatre in the United States. He also co-founded the East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company. Photo courtesy of Soon-Tek Oh.

accepted as more “Asian” than the real Asians in film and television.<sup>12</sup> Actual Asian actors were relegated to playing minor stereotypical roles, and Asian male actors were especially mistreated in the American acting industry.<sup>13</sup>

In this stark reality, Soon-Tek Oh spent his past thirty years as an actor

seeking his version of “cultural legitimacy in unmarked identity.” I am not implying that he wanted to become “white,” but I do posit that he wanted to be a “great actor,” who could transcend his marked ethnicity. Of course, he could never become “just an actor” in the United States as an Asian man. Oh found a unique niche for himself as a character actor by playing a wide array of Asian characters (mostly Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese; rarely Korean). In fact, his national identity was virtually irrelevant. He played roles that were created by those who knew nothing about Korean culture. He was, like all actors, at the mercy of those who focused on the bottom line of entertainment: profit. As an “ethnic” actor, moreover, he did not possess, in the United States, a neutral body that could alleviate the degrees of human objectification and its pain that such a bottom line dictated. As Karen Shimakawa has said, the Asian body has been marked as an “abject” and made “other, foreign, abnormal, *not-American*” (17; emphasis original).

Growing up in the Kwangju region of Korea, Soon-Tek Oh dreamed of Hollywood. As a middle school student, he snuck into movie theatres, risking expulsion from school, and watched films that he describes as “U.S. Army recyclers,” ones that Koreans enjoyed in the second-hand showings after they had been seen by U.S. soldiers stationed in Korea (Yoon 6). Born in 1933, Oh grew up during the most difficult years in recent Korean history. The after-effects of the Japanese occupation (1910–45) and the Korean War (1950–53) included poverty, political chaos, and despair. Undoubtedly, films from the United States provided a delectable escape from reality for many Koreans, but it also provided powerful neocolonial values to culturally starved minds.<sup>14</sup> Oh was enthralled by what he saw: “I didn’t know what was entailed in film-making. But I was fascinated by that world. [...] Soon after the Korean War, the country was like a desert, devastated. We didn’t have enough textbooks. So imagine what [film] would do to a younger mind. I wanted to be in that world” (6). In college, Oh most enjoyed films by Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Jean Renoir, and Jean Cocteau. He often spent the entire day at the theatres and read script excerpts from Japanese film magazines. He made attempts to study film on his own, analyzing its form. But there were no opportunities in Korea at the time to pursue formal studies in film, and Oh’s family did not approve of his artistic aspirations (Telephone interview).

Korean society has had a long history of anti-theatrical prejudice and has viewed any profession related to the performing arts as lowly.<sup>15</sup> The combination of Confucianism, a closed society, and a fear of visual pleasure, among other factors, has led to explicit discrimination against singers, musicians, actors, and more recently, filmmakers. Such artists are called *tdan-t-da-ra*, a derogatory term meaning performers or theatrical people. During the Choseon dynasty (1392–1910), traveling street performers ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy, even below slaves. They were, indeed, “bastard” citizens, without any respect or cultural legitimacy. In twentieth-century Korea, the formal caste system was abolished, but performers continued to face discrimina-

tion. The infusion of western values into Korean society has drastically changed the status of performers to resemble that in the United States, but anti-theatrical prejudice has continued to affect how society perceives its performers. And during the time Soon-Tek Oh was growing up, the prejudice against the performing arts was much deeper than it is in the twenty-first century.

When Soon-Tek Oh was preparing to enter college in the 1950s, theatre and film were not considered legitimate academic disciplines and were not taught in higher education. (Drama was included in literature departments and studied for its literary, not theatrical, values.) Because there were no opportunities to major in theatre or film, Soon-Tek Oh wanted to study literature or philosophy as the next best option, but following the wishes of his parents, he majored in International Studies at Yonsei University. Oh's father was a civil servant, and his brother was a consul to Australia and foreign affairs secretary under President Syngman Rhee. His family thus expected Oh to pursue a career in politics, and he was set to become an international lawyer. However, after graduating from college and fulfilling the military requirement in Korea, he made a bold move, defying the wishes of his parents. He decided to study film in Los Angeles. With his older brother's help, Oh obtained a visa and an airplane ticket and left Korea in 1959 (Telephone interview). In Korean immigration history, the years between 1950 and 1964 are described as the "second wave," during which those leaving Korea for the United States consisted mainly of war brides, orphans, and students. Approximately six-thousand students came to the United States in those years (Yu and Choe 4).<sup>16</sup> To the best of Oh's knowledge, he was the only student out of the six thousand to pursue studies in film and theatre (Telephone interview).

At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Soon-Tek Oh took a number of classes, including directing and editing, but he found acting classes most fascinating.<sup>17</sup> His inquisitiveness and talent caught the attention of the acting professor Henry Goodman, who encouraged him to study acting formally at a conservatory. Heeding his advice, Oh left Los Angeles for New York City and attended the prestigious Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in the acting program famous for producing such stars and "great actors" as Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Gregory Peck, and Steve McQueen. Oh was the only Asian student in his competitive class, but he remembers not having time to feel intimidated during a first year at the conservatory "full of dreams and hopes" (Yoon 7). According to Oh, he did not encounter any explicit racism from the teachers or classmates. The biggest challenge for Oh was the English language; he often had difficulty finding classmates to practice scenes with him. Needless to say, Oh was surprised to find out that he was one of only sixteen students out of 138 to be invited back to attend the second year of training at the Neighborhood Playhouse (7).

Oh did not immediately accept the invitation. His initial plan was to return to Korea to work as an actor. And he was supporting himself by working as a

waiter and barely getting by. Spending an extra year in New York City was not part of his plan, but an unexpected savior came his way. The film producer Joseph E. Levine heard about Oh and agreed to have his company finance Oh's expenses in New York City, including tuition and living expenses. Moreover, Levine offered Oh a role in a film he was producing in Hollywood. Oh was the only student to receive such an offer from Levine, and he did not turn away from such an extraordinary opportunity (Telephone interview).

Upon graduating from Neighborhood Playhouse, Oh returned to Los Angeles. Once again, he wanted to return to Korea, but his parents demanded a graduate degree from a university, not recognizing Neighborhood Playhouse as a legitimate school. Oh personally did not think that a degree mattered to an actor's career, but he nevertheless returned to UCLA to pursue an MFA in acting and playwriting. For his parents, the graduate degree legitimized Oh's career choice.

In only a few years since arriving in the United States, Soon-Tek Oh had already received top-notch training in western acting. He acquired the same skills as did his white classmates, and more importantly, he apparently saw himself as an unmarked actor, ready to tackle any role offered to him. But the reality outside the environment of classroom was starkly different. Within the power structure of American theatre and film, he was merely an "oriental" actor with an ostensible (and marketable) accent.

CONTRADICTIONS OF AN "ORIENTAL" ACTOR:  
BETWEEN HOLLYWOOD AND ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE

In the mid-1960s, as Soon-Tek Oh was finishing his MFA degree in acting and playwriting at UCLA, he was full of ambition. His plans to return to Korea were once again postponed because his family advised him to stay away from the political instabilities (Telephone interview).<sup>18</sup> He was also finding opportunities as an actor in Los Angeles: he was starring in UCLA theatre productions and playing minor roles on television. Additionally, he was asked to join the East West Players (EWP), a new theatre group formed by "oriental" actors.<sup>19</sup>

Racial marking as an "oriental" actor pulled Soon-Tek Oh in two directions. First, he was automatically typecast in stereotypical roles. The only roles available for an Asian American male actor were two-dimensional, often effeminate or hyper-masculine stereotypes, which included houseboy, laundry man, Confucius master, martial arts expert, evil foreigner, pidgin-speaking heathen, and, of course, the vicious Japanese soldier.<sup>20</sup> As Robert G. Lee notes, these images were "frequently contradictory, often to the point of appearing mutually exclusive," but they were powerful (xi). Secondly, he participated in the newly emerging political solidarity formed by the members of the EWP. The purpose of the EWP was to create a venue for showcasing "ori-

ental” actors playing non-stereotypical roles to Hollywood producers and non-Asian audiences and thereby improve their image. This collective exposure, the members thought, would lead to better roles. It was the beginning of what Frank Ching would later describe as “oriental” actors’ “fight for jobs and image” (65). The EWP’s agendas were thus both artistic and political.

The actors’ coalition broadly coincided with the Asian American Movement (which would emerge in the late 1960s) and implemented the spirit of the civil rights movement that called for equal rights for all members of society. But what brought Asian American actors together, as Sung Hee Choi points out, was “not a common political or aesthetic belief but their *personal* experiences – the shared treatment and frustration they experienced in the theatre and film industry” (212; emphasis original). Actors of wide-ranging background (by ethnicity or acting experience) came together because of the shared experiences of being treated as “oriental” actors. The actors’ activism resembled the civil rights and later women’s rights movements, which emphasized the transformation of personal issues into political activism through coalitions. Moreover, as a group, the actors identified themselves racially (Asian) rather than ethnically (Chinese, Japanese, etc.), as did other minority groups in the 1960s struggling for group rights and recognition (Omi and Winant 20).<sup>21</sup> Actors turned their personal frustrations into artistic and political activism and agreed to “fight for jobs and image” together.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Soon-Tek Oh was asked to join the EWP, the company had already showcased its first production, *Rashomon*.<sup>23</sup> Led by the Japanese American actor Mako, the cast of *Rashomon* consisted of experienced “oriental” actors, including Pat Li, Guy Lee, Beulah Quo, and George Takei (Kurahashi 16).<sup>24</sup> The EWP prepared to present additional showings of the production, but a number of personnel changes took place, including in the position of the director. Soon-Tek Oh was asked by the incoming director Norman Gerard, who had seen Oh perform in UCLA theatre productions, to play the role of the Husband. The role was initially assigned to George Takei, but he left the group to join the cast of “Star Trek” to play one of very few Asian characters on television in the 1960s. At first Oh turned down the role because he saw it insignificant, but when Gerard explained that the role of the husband would be expanded to include a long monologue, Oh decided to join the group (Telephone interview). With Oh in the cast, the group presented nine additional performances in Hollywood.

Of the actors in the EWP, Mako emerged as the leader and a strong advocate for rigorous acting training.<sup>25</sup> While most actors thought of the group as a stepping-stone towards better jobs in film and television, Mako insisted that quality acting was the best weapon against “oriental” stereotypes and wanted to shape the EWP into a repertory theatre with a “solid foundation in workshop” (Paik 14). Although some actors objected because they wanted a “white man” to teach them acting, Mako taught the first acting classes at the EWP. As

the acting teacher, Mako's prominence and leadership at the EWP began to increase.<sup>26</sup> Mako and Oh developed a strong personal and professional friendship. Oh's educational background (he went to a Japanese-taught school until the fourth grade) and his familiarity with the Japanese language and culture may well have been an enabling factor for such a friendship. The two men, along with Beulah Quo, Guy Lee, Yet Lock, and Yuki Shimoda, became the core members of the EWP.

Although the founding members of the EWP were full of creativity and showed potential as artists, none of them had experience in theatre management. Soon-Tek Oh was elected to serve as the executive director, partly because he was attending a UCLA graduate program that required theatre management as part of the coursework.<sup>27</sup> Oh's responsibility as the executive director was vastly inclusive. He took care of just about everything and anything that needed to be done, from building sets to janitorial work.

In 1967, the year that the EWP officially became a non-profit theatre company, Soon-Tek Oh summarized the accomplishments and goals of the EWP on behalf of the company:

The company has been introducing a unique theatre to the western world – the amalgamation of East and West in its ultimate form, as well as providing opportunities for Orientals to extend the scope and depth of their theatrical talents. It is now [a] well-known fact that the nation's only all-Oriental acting company, through its remarkable achievements since 1965, has been a decisive influence in amending the debasing Hollywood image of Oriental actors. (Letter)

Soon-Tek Oh never sought to be an activist; he dreamed of becoming a "great actor," an actor recognized only for his "performing talent." But for an actor marked "oriental," such recognition was out of reach. Cultural legitimacy in the American entertainment industry was located in a white, "unmarked identity," and Oh was at the mercy of the race-based, commercial power structure. Oh and others of the EWP challenged the cultural legitimacy of Hollywood's hegemony and thereby became political activists out of necessity. To be an actor with a socially marked body, simply put, was to be an activist for social change.

The EWP was a showcase theatre company for Hollywood directors and producers, so Oh felt strongly about presenting a diverse mix of plays that could feature Asian American actors at their best. Generally, the EWP strove to produce three types of shows: (1) canonized western plays in either western or eastern settings, (2) traditional Asian theatre performed in English, and (3) original plays by Asian American writers.<sup>28</sup> At the time, Asian American plays were virtually non-existent. Because Soon-Tek Oh was at the time pursuing an MFA degree in playwriting, his plays premiered at the EWP as original Asian American works. In 1967, the EWP filled its first official season

with two of Oh's plays. The first play, *Martyrs Can't Go Home*, was written as his master's thesis at UCLA and had received the 1965 UCLA Harry Kurnitz Creative Writing award for foreign students.<sup>29</sup> The EWP production featured Korean music (especially *Arirang*, a Korean folk song) adapted by C. Barnard Jackson. The second play by Soon-Tek Oh was *Camels Were Two-Legged in Peking*, which was adapted from Lao-She's renowned novel *The Rickshaw Boy* (1936), one of the masterpieces of modern Chinese literature that was considered problematic by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).<sup>30</sup>

In 1968, the EWP received a US\$38,500 grant from the Ford Foundation, which required that the money be spent between June 1968 and May 1970: (1) to prepare and stimulate original plays, (2) to train actors in a workshop situation, and (3) to develop each season's productions (Kurahashi 49). For the first requirement, Soon-Tek Oh proposed an annual playwriting contest. The first was held in 1968, with a first prize of US\$1,000. The EWP's board of directors thought the contest "would help the community at large become aware of the East-West Players [*sic*] and this would aid us in searching out potential material and artists".<sup>31</sup> The winner of the first contest was Henry Woon, whose play, *Now You See, Now You Don't*, dealt with racism in the workplace and a Chinese American man's personal activism to change it.<sup>32</sup> And the second prize was given to Soon-Tek Oh for his play *Tondemonai: Never Happen*.

*Tondemonai* was Oh's most daring play and the first Asian American play to deal with the sensitive topics of Japanese internment camps, interracial marriage, and homosexuality.<sup>33</sup> But it also caused trouble for the EWP and ultimately led to eviction.<sup>34</sup> After the eviction, the EWP faced challenges that almost broke up the company. The members disagreed on the goals of the EWP, and the financial restraint on top of the lack of organization led to divisions. Soon-Tek Oh was also burned out by the intense job he had held without any pay for several years (Telephone interview). And he had fundamental disagreements with Mako about the future of the EWP. Oh argued for a season that consisted of "two classics, one east and one west, and one original and one showcase" because "it's a voluntary organization of actors, and we needed to be showcased" (Personal interview). Mako wanted to focus on developing original Asian American plays. Soon-Tek Oh and Mako also disagreed on the type of space the EWP should obtain (Telephone interview). Moreover, Oh's acting career had been on a virtual standstill while he toiled for the EWP. In 1971, Oh resigned as the executive director and officially left the company. He would return occasionally to act and help behind the scenes, but he never took an administrative position after his resignation.

Oh's disagreement with Mako about the direction of EWP stemmed partly from the two actors' differing views on Asian American politics. Although Mako also came to the United States to study as a young man, he strongly

sympathized with the rhetoric of cultural nationalism and the Asian American Movement. Soon-Tek Oh, in the early 1970s, was more interested in developing his acting career. While he understood the importance of Asian American issues, he saw himself first as an actor. Moreover, he saw himself as a Korean émigré, a sojourner (Telephone interview).

In 1972, Oh briefly visited Korea and returned to the United States with a renewed determination to pursue acting as his career.<sup>35</sup> And he made a list of roles he would not play: laundry man, pidgin speaking “oriental,” Chinaman with a cue, and houseboy, all of which he considered demeaning and effeminate. He had played some of these roles at the beginning of his career in the 1960s, but his experience at the EWP gave him the confidence and the political awareness to resist Hollywood’s stereotypical portrayals of Asians by being selective. Such a “selective politics,” if one may call it that, was made known as he repeated the list to producers and directors who sought to cast him. Oh managed to stay away from the blatantly stereotypical “oriental” roles, but he was limited to playing only Asian or Asian American parts written by white authors. And most of those were inevitably variations of familiar stereotypes.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, Soon-Tek Oh played numerous roles in film and television. His first substantive role was as a Vietnamese soldier in *The Final War of Olly Winter* (1967), an Emmy-nominated show that aired as the first of the CBS Playhouse series. But his fans remember him most for his television appearances in “Kung Fu,” “Hawaii Five-O,” and “M\*A\*S\*H.” Some of his characters were named Lao, Vic Tanaka, Tom Wong, Kwan Chen, Yi Lien, Korean Solider, Dr. Syn Paik, and Robert Kwon. The only show in which he played a Korean character was “M\*A\*S\*H”; in others, he portrayed other Asian nationalities, especially Japanese and Chinese. In film, he landed a co-starring role as Lieutenant Hip in the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974).

By the mid-1970s, Soon-Tek Oh was working regularly, appearing in a number of television shows and receiving offers to appear in feature films. Oh was finding a professional niche in Hollywood. In film and television, he was becoming a character actor, portraying various images of the accepted notions of Asianness. He knew the stereotypes he was portraying were problematic, but he also understood them as part of the system he had to navigate with a critical eye: “In TV and movies the script is already fixed by the time the actor gets it. There is very little room for change. I have refused roles that I thought were too stereotypical, but there are always others who are either hungry or don’t care, so they do it” (qtd. in Vickery). Soon-Tek Oh’s “selective politics” was not empty in that he accepted playing stereotypical roles in order to build up a professional career and get to a point where he would have the choice to reject them. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Oh was an actor in demand and he did have more control over the types of roles he chose to play.

In 1981, Soon-Tek Oh was offered a role that would earn him an Emmy nomination. The role was the character Lee, in the television miniseries version of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. The 1955 film version starring James Dean had cut the character of Lee because the director Elia Kazan supposedly could not find an Asian actor to play the part. The creative team of the television miniseries wanted to be as true to the Steinbeck text as possible, so they prioritized the casting of an Asian actor for the role. In fact, Soon-Tek Oh was the first actor to be cast (Telephone interview). When he was asked to audition for the role, Oh was performing at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Oh told the director Harvey Hart his by now usual list of roles he did not perform: "I don't do laundry man; I don't do houseboy; I don't do pidgin." According to Oh, Hart asked him to first read the novel before making a decision. Oh had three hours to read the long novel in his hotel. Oh skipped to the section that introduced Lee and read the description of him as a "pigtailed Chinese cook." Oh immediately called Hart and told him he would not play the part. Hart asked Oh what page he was on and began to read later passages with Oh over the telephone. Lee is later revealed in the novel as a UC Berkeley graduate Chinese American, whom Steinbeck uses to communicate his social messages. The role became one of Oh's favorites in his career (Telephone interview). With the role and the Emmy nomination, Oh was suddenly "discovered" in Hollywood.

THE BROADWAY DEBUT:  
NAVIGATING HOMOGENIZING LABELS

In theatre, Oh had already been "discovered" in 1976, when he co-starred in the production of *Pacific Overtures*, a musical by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman.<sup>36</sup> Harold Prince, an influential Broadway director, decided to cast the new Sondheim musical with all Asian American actors for all roles, including white characters. (And he made the distinction between Asian and Asian American actors and insisted that his cast be all Americans of Asian descent. He also knew the term "oriental actor" was not culturally acceptable.) The Prince–Sondheim concept was intellectually radical and artistically risky. It featured Kabuki styles in acting and choreography, Japanese pentatonic scales in the music, and English-speaking Asian American actors (mostly male) without much Broadway experience. Prince and Sondheim did not want to create another *Madam Butterfly* or *The King and I*, which they thought were western treatments of eastern subjects, namely profoundly "orientalistic," as Edward Said would put it. The musical was to capture the conflict between east and west. Prince and Sondheim did not pretend to be experts on Japan or attempt to represent the most realistic story about Japan; they experimented freely with contradictory styles and concepts.

When it came to casting, Harold Prince faced the challenge of finding

Asian American actors to fill all sixty-one parts. Because he wanted to keep the Kabuki tradition of males playing female parts, he sought mostly male Asian American actors who could sing, dance, and act. Asian American actresses were seen on Broadway in shows like *Flower Drum Song* and *World of Suzie Wong*, but no show had demanded male actors in large number or featured them in principal roles. When the musical opened in January 1976, every established Asian American actor had been auditioned and selected. The cast read like an all-star list of Asian American male actors: Mako, Soon-Tek Oh, Sab Shimono, Yuki Shimoda, Alvin Ing, Ernest Abuba, Gedde Watanabe, Ernest Harada, and so on. A total of thirty Asian Americans, plus one non-Asian American actor (Isao Sato, a Japanese actor), made up the company. According to Harold Prince, it took “a year and half and three different people making seven different trips to the West Coast to put the company together” (Ross 24). The casting director, Joanna Merlin, had the difficult task of seeking out talent and leaving “no stone unturned in hunting for Asian Americans” (24). They saw about 250 actors around the country and continued to audition after the show opened because some actors were coming down with the flu during the run. Despite the difficulties and suggestions that he audition Puerto Rican actors “who look Oriental,” Prince stayed committed to keeping the cast mainly of Asian Americans: “This is an American musical done by Americans playing Asian roles, and that’s intentional” (27).

Soon-Tek Oh played three Japanese roles: Storyteller, Tamate (a female role), and Swordsman. Because of his appearances on television and film (especially the 007 movie), Oh was the most recognizable actor in the cast. His name and photos were prominently used in advertisements for the musical.<sup>37</sup> In the 1960s, he was involuntarily marked as an “oriental” actor and thus illegitimate in the context of American theatre history, but in 1976, he represented the group of “Asian American” actors on a legitimate N.Y.C. stage. Oh was not completely comfortable with the pan-ethnic, homogenizing label, “Asian American,” but he accepted it without question when it gave him the opportunity to make a Broadway debut. For most Asian Americans, the acceptance of the label signifies a political commitment to “build a common identity and a common culture” (Liu 123; qtd. in Dirlik 34).<sup>38</sup> But, for Oh, the label was acceptable only when it became an asset rather than a liability in his acting career. In 1971, he left the East West Players when the company shifted its focus to building an Asian American culture rather than showcasing actors for Hollywood producers and directors. He prioritized his acting career over political commitment. However, when mainstream American theatre demanded “Asian American” actors, Oh willingly represented them in a Broadway show that promoted and marketed the label.

In 1979, Oh returned to the EWP to co-star with Mako in a revival of the musical, which was received warmly by the Los Angeles critics.<sup>39</sup> Oh was awarded the Drama-Logue Critic Award for Best Performance. In both the

N.Y.C. and L.A. productions, Oh was the only Korean actor in the cast, which consisted mostly of Japanese and Chinese American actors. Oh wore Kabuki-style makeup and costumes to transform into a visual embodiment of Japaneseness. Because of the hostile history between Japan and Korea, Japanese cultural expressions, including literature, music, theatre, and film, were banned in Korea until the late 1990s. And modern Korean nationalisms have been partly articulated as an anti-Japanese, anti-American ideology. So a Korean actor looking quintessentially Japanese would never have been possible or acceptable in Korea. In fact, it would have caused much uproar during the 1970s, when President Park Jung Hee emphasized nationalism in building up the economy.<sup>40</sup>

In embodying the Japanese characters created by whites, Soon-Tek Oh was occupying a unique cultural space, one that existed transnationally between Korea and the United States.<sup>41</sup> On the surface, the space was Asian American, which absorbed Oh's Korean background into an homogenizing pan-ethnicity and "freed" him to play any Asian role. But on a deeper level, the space was full of contradictions and ironies. Josephine Lee points out that when the logic of civil rights rhetoric is applied to what she calls the "racial actor" (the opposite of the white actor), we cannot avoid the "paradox of color-blind casting" as the "paradox of the ideology of liberal integrationism" ("Racial Actors, Liberal Myths" 94). Lee's argument addresses cross-racial casting, but it is also readily applicable to intra-racial casting:

On the one hand, since integrationism honed its racial philosophy in response to open demonstrations of racial inequality, it had to acknowledge and disprove the significance of existing differences and group affinities. On the other hand, integrationism saw these traits simply as exterior "masks" over an integral self, which must ultimately be rejected or at least relegated to secondary importance in order to achieve its ideal of color-blindness. Any emphasis on racial identity that would complicate the individual's entry into an unqualified "American" identity had to be discarded. Race thus became the actor's false mask over a more "universal" humanness; nonetheless it was a mask that maintained its stubborn presence no matter how hard one worked to eradicate it. (94)

Accordingly, Soon-Tek Oh's Broadway debut in *Pacific Overtures* was possible because the label "Asian American actor" both erased and emphasized this ethnicity. In other words, he was cast in Japanese roles both despite of and because of his bio-ethnically defined "Korean" background. It seems that the label "Asian American" neutralized Oh's body, just as the label "white" neutralizes Euro-American bodies, but such neutrality did not entail, for him, the universality inherent in Euro-American bodies. The implicit message behind this cross-cultural casting was that, beneath the specific ethnic surface ("false mask"), the Asian American actor had a "true self," a "univer-

sal” humanness which the actor, by the very definition of being bio-ethnically “Asian,” could not possess.<sup>42</sup>

As Josephine Lee’s critique of liberal integrationism reveals, the application of the label “Asian American” to actors is highly complicated, even problematic, but Soon-Tek Oh was quite successful at turning the contradiction to his advantage. Indeed, he navigated through the “cracks” of cultural paradoxes instead of getting trapped by them. He may even have thought that the neutralizing effect of the label “Asian American” brought him closer to becoming the “great actor.” The label may have been a “false mask” charged with profoundly problematic implications, but it also placed a marked body on the map of otherwise unmarked cultural rubrics of legitimacy in the American mainstream theatre.

#### KOREAN AMERICAN NATIONALISM:

##### THE FOUNDER OF THE KOREAN AMERICAN THEATRE ENSEMBLE

In the late 1970s, Soon-Tek Oh’s search for his sense of legitimacy as a “great actor” intensified, as he negotiated the various labels he had acquired. In some venues, he was still an “oriental” actor, and in others, he was an “Asian American” actor. He wore different “false masks” to further his acting career. But in 1978, Soon-Tek Oh started a theatre company in Los Angeles that he named Korean American Theatre Ensemble and carved out a space in which he could, at least theoretically, “be himself.” He had attended the production of a Korean play, *Bae-bi-jang-jun*, in L.A. and noticed that the audience consisted of first generation immigrant Korean adults and that their children were conspicuously absent. Oh was concerned with the 1.5 generation (those born in Korea and raised in the United States) and with second-generation Korean Americans, who did not speak Korean and had trouble communicating with their parents, who did not speak English (Personal interview).

I started wondering what happens to the Korean American family. The parents go home and watch Korean mini-series [on video], and the kids watch American [television], and then they go out and function [separately]. So, I began to wonder what happens to family communal experiences? I was very typical of other Korean parents – communication becomes very difficult because of the language problems as well as living pressures and [lack of time]. (qtd. in Vickery)

Oh observed the Korean American youths’ alienation from the Korean community and from the American society. Moreover, they lacked an understanding of the value of Korean culture. Oh applied for a city grant to start a bilingual theatre company to promote cultural education and communal experience for Korean Americans (Personal interview).

With the Korean American Theatre Ensemble, Oh created a forum for

Korean Americans to talk about experiences other than what their parents would tell them (as Oh puts it, “Eat, study hard, go to bed, be a nice boy, be a nice girl”) (Personal interview). He also encouraged parents to get involved in the creative process. He instilled in the minds of the younger generation that cultural education leads to what he called “pride.” Without “pride,” he told the youths, “you will always be a secondary citizen” (Personal interview). By speaking of “pride,” Soon-Tek Oh evoked a unique sense of Korean American nationalism, which I see as a form of ethnocentric cultural nationalism that acknowledges the “homeland” as the cultural “root.”<sup>43</sup> According to Min-Jung Kim, one feature of nationalism is “the formation of collective identity around the use of national symbols, shared cultural values, and historical experience” (377). The symbols, values, and history used by Soon-Tek Oh were rooted in his idea of Korea, which was also a site for activating memory: he wanted Korean American youths to “remember and know their ancestry.” And such remembrance was motivated by the desire to rise above the power structure and institutions of legitimacy that fix him as an “oriental actor.”

In 1979, Oh produced a show titled *Ka-ju-ta-ryung* [literally “Ballad of California”; titled *Have You Heard* in English]. It was a bilingual production about Korean American youths done in a style that featured traditional Korean theatre such as *Madang-nori* [arena play or outdoor yard play] and traditional dance, music, and folktales, as well as components of contemporary American popular culture. Oh wanted to demonstrate that Korean culture, as tradition, is “not something you only see in museums” (Personal interview). The show was produced annually until 1991, and Oh witnessed the young Korean Americans’ preference for popular culture change from “twist in the 1970s, break-dance in the 1980s, and rap in the 1990s” (Personal interview).

On 29 April 1992, the Los Angeles riot shook the core of the L.A. Korean American community like an earthquake and inflicted extraordinary damage on its physical and spiritual foundations. The riot was a wake-up call for Oh. Although the Ensemble had continued to benefit Korean American youths for over two decades, he realized that the focus on ethnicity had led to a separatist mentality. Oh changed the name of the group to Society of Heritage Performers (SHP) and shifted the agenda towards featuring commonalities among all cultural traditions. Oh states, “Everyone has a heritage. That’s what we wanted to bring to the stage” (Hong). The basic format of the activities resembled that of the Korean American Theatre Ensemble, but the SHP intentionally involved participants from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds in profoundly transracial ways. Soon-Tek Oh especially made a point of working with African American and Mexican American youths.

According to Philip Chung, who assisted in starting SHP, Oh’s main goal was to “create a space where young Asian American artists, particularly Korean Americans, could develop their craft and present interesting Korean

and Asian American work” (E-mail to the author). But, they also wanted to be as inclusive as possible. The initial form of Korean American nationalism evoked by Soon-Tek Oh evolved in the 1990s to integrate issues relevant to Asian Americans and other minorities in the United States. In some ways, Oh came full circle back to Asian American theatre with SHP. In 1971, he left the East West Players because he chose to focus on his acting career instead of help build an Asian American culture and community. With the Korean American Theatre Ensemble, he emphasized Korean culture and history in defining the ideal outlook for Korean Americans. But the “pride” of Korean American nationalism, as Oh articulated it in the 1970s, did not teach the youths how they should live as Americans alongside other different groups. After the L.A. Riot, Oh embraced the political urgency and ideological premise of the civil rights movement and the Asian American Movement. Accordingly, SHP placed emphasis on Korean American history and its relation to the histories of other U.S. minorities.<sup>44</sup>

The annual production of *Have You Heard* continued, with a diverse group of young artists who worked as an ensemble to address contemporary Korean American experiences. In 1997, *Have You Heard* was performed in Seoul, Korea, as part of the International Theatre Festival. The bilingual performance was presented at Jeongdong Theatre, a central venue in Seoul’s theatre community. The Seoul debut of *Have You Heard* signified Soon-Tek Oh’s grand return to Korea. When he left Korea in 1959, he had intended to return after finishing his studies. But the combination of political instability in Korea and a fortunate turn of events in the United States led Oh to have an active career as an actor. In 1997, he returned to his homeland with the young artists he had taught and nurtured. He also had an impressive résumé that could not be matched by anyone in Korea. He was *the* pioneering Korean actor with experience in Hollywood and Broadway. According to Oh, the audiences of *Have You Heard* in Seoul included all the major Korean producers and directors, who came to “check out” the Korean American show. After the show, Oh remembers, they did not want to leave. They waited with bouquets of flowers in their arms to talk to Oh and the cast (Personal interview). It certainly seemed like a warm welcome back home for Soon-Tek Oh. But it was also a complex welcome that raised a number of questions: Did they welcome Oh’s career as a Hollywood star and Broadway actor? or Was it his leadership in the Korean American theatre that enthused them? Was his share in the making of an Asian American political legacy against racism and for social transformation recognized, however tacitly or indirectly, on such occasion? or, Could the welcome have reflected a certain version of neocolonial desire to embrace an “American” product and its implied symbolic capital worldwide? The high visibility of such transnational performance is unmistakable; its implications, however, are far from transparent.

TALKING BACK TO HOLLYWOOD:  
 “SENSEI” AND A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Also in 1997, Soon-Tek Oh co-starred in the Hollywood film *Beverly Hills Ninja*, featuring the comedian Chris Farley. Oh played the role of “Sensei,” who teaches Farley’s character the ways of Ninja. The film was a hit, and Oh’s memorable portrayal of the Confucius martial arts master impressed many. According to Oh, his phone started to ring as never before. The callers offered Oh numerous versions of Sensei and other popular Asian male stereotypes. The role was not demeaning (it was, in fact, quite dignified in comparison to other characters in the film), but it nevertheless was one of the most popular stereotypes of Asian men in film and television.<sup>45</sup> The experience was a wake-up call for Oh:

People call you because suddenly they discover you – after something like thirty years. And that is the reality of Hollywood. To pay your bills you do what you have to do. You thought you’ve already graduated from that level [of having to play stereotypes], so there is an emotional stress of adjusting to that. But if you start to refuse jobs because you’ve starred in a picture – because you’re not about to do supporting or bit roles for somebody else – you get phased out because there are no jobs, no roles. It takes a little adjustment psychologically. And that requires tenacity. (Yoon 9)

Oh was a veteran actor with an Emmy nomination and Broadway performance under his belt, but the industry still saw him primarily as an “oriental” actor, a label Oh thought he had shed. He had played his fair share of stereotypes and minor roles, and in the 1990s, American culture was supposed to be more sensitive to minority issues. He had changed as an actor, but apparently, the American society had not. *Beverly Hills Ninja* made him “famous,” but Oh had to question whether that was, indeed, what he had sought. After thirty years, was he the “great actor” he strove to become? or was he still an “oriental” character actor in Hollywood? Had there been any change or transformation? Where was his legitimization? or, to be more precise, Was his sense of legitimacy – as a “great actor” partaking in the art of humanity beyond the social degradations enforced by American orientalism – ever actualizable?

Soon-Tek Oh had traversed two career paths since the beginning: first, he wore a “false mask” as either an “oriental” actor or the politically designated, but still bio-ethnically defined, “Asian American” actor in the American entertainment industry; and secondly, he promoted a unique form of Korean American nationalism and culture. He made efforts to merge the two by rejecting stereotypical roles and taking advantage of his “fame” to support his community work. But in the 1990s, the gap between the two paths had widened to the point that Oh had to choose one and abandon the other. He had



On the set of *Yellow* (1997), an independent film written and directed by Chris Chan Lee. Lee directs Soon-Tek Oh, who plays a Korean immigrant and an overbearing father to a “Gen-X” son. Photo courtesy of Chris Chan Lee.

managed to negotiate the two paths by making compromises, but when he saw that nothing had really changed in Hollywood, he knew he had to make a tough decision.

Oh was also closely following the emergence of the new socio-political view of the younger generation of Asian Americans. The comedienne and actress Margaret Cho, for instance, surprised America with her raunchy self-deprecating humor, the kind that dispelled Asian stereotypes. She made fun of the Hollywood portrayal of Asians and essentially called for a total abandoning of those stereotypical images.<sup>46</sup> Oh also encouraged the young writers of the Society of Heritage Performers to create meaningful Asian and Asian American roles, not taking the easy way out and recycling Hollywood images. With the younger writers and performers looking up to him with both appreciation and respectful criticism, Oh could no longer make compromises.

Oh ignored the calls from Hollywood producers and directors. Instead, he turned his focus to at least three agendas: (1) supporting emerging Asian American artists, (2) producing and acting in independent films, (3) and writing plays and screenplays based on Korean history.<sup>47</sup> More recently, however, Soon-Tek Oh seems to have found much satisfaction in teaching in Korea, across the Pacific Ocean and supposedly far away from the boundaries of the American acting industry.

In 1997, following the successful presentation of *Have You Heard* in Seoul,

he was invited to teach at the newly formed Korean National University of Arts (KNUA) for the Master Acting Workshop of the School of Drama. KNUA reflected the Korean government's acknowledgement of the importance of the arts, and its School of Drama was the first of its kind in Korean history.<sup>48</sup> The KNUA School of Drama emphasizes a curriculum consisting of both traditional Korean and western styles of acting. As the only Korean actor with an extensive experience in both Hollywood and American theatre, Oh was sought out by the Dean of KNUA, who wanted an experienced professional actor to teach the western style of acting. In 1997, Oh taught for a semester and returned to the United States, but the calls from Korea continued to ring. In 2001, Oh was invited back to KNUA, and he intended to teach only for a semester again. However, as Oh puts it, he became "impressed with the students" and has remained (Telephone interview).

In Korea, professors are respected, reflecting the influence of Confucianism and its modern variations.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the status of the college professor is the polar opposite of the status of the actor: strictly speaking, the image of *tdan-tan-ra*, the lowly performers, has not entirely disappeared, while professors still embody the classic image of the scholar-teacher, who for centuries has been the most respected figure. Oh's current job in Korea is a prestigious position at a government-sponsored, preeminent university of the arts. Moreover, students and colleagues do not see him as an actor who made a career out of playing supporting roles as an "oriental" actor; they see him as a successful actor with an impressive career in both Hollywood and Broadway, the meanings of which may or may not be questioned in their minds. Oh has also impressed many as a leader of Korean American theatre. He has accomplished what all ambitious actors in Korea seem to desire but can only fantasize. Young Korean actors dream of Hollywood as Oh had done after the Korean War. Apparently, they see in Oh possibilities, and Oh sees in them the sense of legitimization he has sought all his life on the other side of the Pacific but has never really attained. Could it become attainable amid the bi-continental and/or transnational routes that he seems to be opening and inhabiting?

Soon-Tek Oh refuses to play the Confucius master in Hollywood films, but in the contemporary context of Korean society, he seems at ease with the traditional image of the older, male teacher-master. Oh's position also perpetuates the neocolonial ideology that privileges American education in Korean universities. It is in this complex space that Oh continues to search for the possibilities of legitimization and, to a significant degree, appears to have attained what he has been searching for. This legitimacy has real value in Korea because it is located in Korea's higher education system that validates American degrees, along with a range of mainstream American cultural values. For Oh, however, the respected position of professorship in Korea is not a random choice but a continuation of his "fight for jobs and image," as well as his ultimate "talk back" to Hollywood. In the context of his lifelong resistance to

Hollywood stereotypes, the professor job in Korea offers Oh a redemptive sign and site of legitimization. Indeed, the image Oh projects in Korea is the opposite of the stereotypes he both portrayed and resisted as an actor on the other side of the Pacific: in the United States, he was marginalized, effeminized, and often confused with other “oriental” actors; in Korea, he is at the center of the cultural life of the nation, has reclaimed masculinity, and is recognized as the only Korean actor with extensive Hollywood experience.

KNUA’s identification of Oh as a teacher reflects a new form of Korean nationalism in the twenty-first century. The President of KNUA, Geon-yong Lee, in a statement on the university Web site, acknowledges neocolonial influences and pressures while envisioning a nationalistic agenda in the age of globalization:

Now, the world is changing rapidly, and so is the arts world. Globalization makes the cultural boundaries less and less distinct, and the modes of production and distribution of arts are shifting day by day. Modernism, the foundation of the Western arts for the last centuries, is in search of a new paradigm, and digital technologies and concepts are promising new possibilities in arts. I believe this is the time that *Korea can be the center of the arts world*. In the past, we were busy assimilating ourselves to the Western civilization. Due to the tragic history of Korea, Koreans even experienced identity crises during the Westernization. However, Korea went through it well, and developed a unique form of arts and culture that embraces the Western arts and culture together with the original spirit of our own. What we learn from history is that the time of cultural integration and hybridization is not the time of frustrations but the time of opportunities, and yes, today, new types of the arts are coming into view. (emphasis added)

Thus, KNUA’s nationalistic vision (“Korea can be the center of the arts world”) and global vision (“[c]ultural integration is an opportunity”) are presented as an alternative to the domination of western arts. The ideal alternative is the cutting-edge hybridization of western and Korean arts and culture in the twenty-first century. Since the 1970s, Soon-Tek Oh has promoted a similar kind of hybridization with the Korean American Theatre Ensemble and the Society of Heritage Performers. Although his aspiration with Korean American youths was not as ambitious as KNUA president’s vision, Oh’s version of Korean American nationalism has many commonalities with the new form of Korean cultural nationalism invoked in the above quotation.

Indeed, Oh did seem to have the ideal combination of experiences to teach at KNUA in the twenty-first century. Not only had he played an extensive list of roles in American theatre, film, and television; he had been a leader in creating an east-west hybrid culture that nevertheless underscored the value of nationalistic Korean culture (what the KNUA president calls “original spirit of our own”). Moreover, he was an older male possessing exclusive wisdom, the

familiar model of *sunseng-nim* [“teacher” in Korean; pronounced “sensei” in Japanese]. However, Oh’s role as *sunseng-nim* against a nationalistic backdrop also raises complex questions about the transnational implications of the emerging systems of cultural production, signification, and hegemony in today’s global economy and structures of power relations.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:  
PERSONAL JOURNEYS AND TRANSNATIONAL PARADIGMS

In 2002, the Korean actor Cha In-Pyo made headlines when it was revealed that he was offered a role in the 007 film *Die Another Day* (2002) but refused because the film denigrated Koreans.<sup>50</sup> Cha was instantaneously made into a national hero and praised for not selling out. But some criticized him for letting “nationalism” get in the way of his acting career. When a mega-producer of Hollywood calls, how is a “Korean actor” supposed to respond? Does he accept any role in order to have a career as an actor, no matter how demeaning and stereotypical? or, Does he pick and choose the kinds of roles he wants to play? The Korean public debated these questions together for the first time in 2002.<sup>51</sup>

Hollywood has been going global, and it has been knocking on the doors of Korea, which is Hollywood’s tenth largest box office market. The questions raised around Cha In-Pyo’s decision were too familiar to Soon-Tek Oh, since he had grappled with them for most of his life. But in my last interview with him, Soon-Tek Oh seemed to be freed from the questions (Telephone interview, 9 Dec 2004). He said he was ignoring calls from his agent telling him to audition for upcoming Hollywood films.<sup>52</sup> Instead, he was immersed in acting theory. In particular, he was searching for ways to develop what he calls the theories of “kinetic poetics.” In Korea, his body was not marked as an “oriental” and he did not have to wear a “false mask.” Nor did he have to navigate the hyphenated and homogenizing identities imposed by American culture. He seemed liberated as an actor and as a transnational subject.

But is he the “great actor” he had dreamed of becoming? Is his professorial position truly a legitimization, or is it a form of critical refusal of American racism that nonetheless partakes in neocolonialism and conservatism in Korea? And what kind of transnational subject does his trajectory designate in the twenty-first century? Unlike Philip Ahn, Anna May Wong, and Sessue Hayakawa, who tried but failed to survive as actors in their “homelands,” Oh has found recognition and validation in Korea in the twenty-first century. How such recognition and validation may enable his many remaining years of work and life unfolding across the Pacific should be a question of importance for scholars working on Asian diaspora in performance, which is a vital component in the critical study of a tension-ridden and rapidly unfolding era of globalization and its cultural productions.

In the summer of 2001, I spoke to Soon-Tek Oh before he left for Korea to

start teaching at KNUA (Personal interview). When I asked how I could reach him for follow-up questions, he replied that his phone number in Los Angeles would remain connected and that he would be regularly checking his answering machine. He has not given up on America and its Hollywood; in fact, he may be waiting for the role of his lifetime, the one that can make him a “great actor.” Four years later, Oh continues to teach in Korea without losing his connection to America. It is uncertain whether he will remain in the traditional, respected position or whether or when he will venture back to Hollywood. One can never guess who might be calling next. Oh continues to straddle two cultures, two identities, in a hopeful state of mind.

#### NOTES

- 1 I wish to thank Yan Haiping for her editorial guidance on this essay, which could not have been completed without her encouragement, patience, and thoughtful criticism. I also thank Professor Kwang Su Kim of Hanshin University in Korea for providing information on Korean academia.
- 2 Soon-Tek Oh’s name has been spelled in a number of different ways, including Soon-Teck Oh and Soon-Taik Oh.
- 3 The term “legitimization” connotes a number of distinguishable meanings. The common definition of the word applies to legal conformity and hereditary rights. A child born out of wedlock, for instance, has been called illegitimate in both the legal public sphere and that of private family affairs.

Beyond the common usage, the terms “legitimate,” “legitimacy,” and “legitimization” have been articulated by sociologists, legal scholars, philosophers, and cultural theorists. For instance, the sociologist Max Weber uses the term “legitimacy” as part of his explication of social and political economy. Weber sees legitimacy as the accepted process that gives power to authority in a social order. In other words, “authority” is defined as legitimate forms of domination and the legitimacy is created, not necessarily by rationality, but by consent. According to Weber, “Legitimacy may be ascribed to an order by those acting subject to it in the following ways: (a) By tradition; a belief in the legitimacy of what has always existed; (b) by virtue of affectual attitudes, especially emotional, legitimizing the validity of what is newly revealed or a model to imitate; (c) by virtue of a rational belief in its absolute value, thus lending it the validity of an absolute and final commitment; (d) because it has been established in a manner which is recognized to be *legal*” (130). Weber’s theory influenced Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which was also based on the assumption that the dominant power in a society derives from legitimacy and consent, not from force.

My use of the term “legitimization” follows Weber’s and Gramsci, but it is also more general, referring not only to the social formations of power but also to the sense of being accepted as “real,” “valid,” and “authentic,” culturally and aesthetically. In a later section, I discuss the term in a theatrical context.

- 4 There is a profound distinction between “Korean actor” and “Korean American actor.” The former denotes an actor born in Korea who identifies himself or herself mainly as Korean. The latter includes those born in Korea or the United States. For Korean American actors, identification as *American* actors is more important than the ties to Korea. Soon-Tek Oh can be called both, but he calls himself a “Korean actor” and uses the label “Korean American” to refer to the younger *il-chom-oh-se* [1.5-generation] or *i-se* [second-generation] Korean descendents in the United States. For a discussion of 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans, see Kim and Yu.

The actor Philip Ahn (1905–78) was the first Korean born in the United States to appear in American film and television, but Soon-Tek Oh was the first Korean national to venture into the American entertainment industry. Philip Ahn was, in fact, reportedly the first Korean American born in the continental United States (not Hawaii, to which Koreans first immigrated). Along with Anna May Wong, Philip Ahn was the first Asian American actor to receive wide recognition for his acting. He appeared in over two-hundred screen and television roles.

- 5 Palumbu-Liu’s description of the Asian body, when applied to Oh, is considerably illuminating: “[...] the body is also part of a materialist discourse. It is a cultural text that does not simply stand alone as an idealized presence; it is a corporeality imbricated within an economy of representation and power, which is itself situated within the logic of race and class in the United States” (119).
- 6 Philip Ahn’s father was the famous Korean nationalist Chang Ho Ahn, a revered anticolonial public figure struggling against the Japanese in the early twentieth century.
- 7 See two recent biographical studies of Anna May Wong by Hodges and Chan. Also see Gottlieb.
- 8 Sessue Hayakawa surprised his friends and colleagues by suddenly returning to Japan (where he was born and had lived until leaving for the United States to attend the University of Chicago). He later revealed that the decision was the result of a quarrel he had with the head of a motion picture company, who called him “chink” and used other “unpardonable insults” (S. Choi 121). See Sessue Hayakawa’s autobiography, *Zen Showed Me the Way: To Peace, Happiness, and Tranquility*.
- 9 In 1993, President Kim Young Sam received startling news from an adviser. The profits from the Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic Park* (directed by Steven Spielberg) equalled those from the export of 60,000 Hyundai cars (Gee and Mason). As Masao Miyoshi argues, Hollywood film’s global hegemony operates on the “near total quantification of its qualities: either a film is a blockbuster or not, whether it ha[s] made \$100 million in the first week or not, and little else finally matters” (259). In 1994, the Korean government changed the Motion Picture Law to encourage investment from corporations.
- 10 For example, the Taiwanese American director Ang Lee’s film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a Mandarin-language film featuring actors from several coun-

tries (including America) and produced by a Hong Kong producer. The film crew was even more diverse. The film was financed by Columbia TriStar Asia (a new Hong Kong-based division of Sony) and Sony Classics Pictures in the United States.

Hollywood products have had a worldwide impact from the beginning of its history. For a discussion of the national/transnational tension framing Hollywood global popularity, see Semati and Sotirin. Also, see ch. nine in Scott.

- 11 See Levine; Smith; Murphy; Miller; Hodin. In the 1942 publication of *A Dictionary of American English* (Chicago UP), the entry for legitimate theatre is “Of or pertaining to stage plays having recognized theatrical and literary merit; in later use, designating plays, theatres, etc., belonging to that part of the show business concerned with drama rather than with the circus, vaudeville, moving pictures, etc.” (qtd. in Hodin, 212n4).
- 12 While blackface has disappeared in American theatre and film, yellow-face continues to appear on stage and silver screen. In 1989, Jonathan Pryce appeared in the London production of the musical *Miss Saigon* in wearing yellow-face makeup. It led to the famous *Miss Saigon* controversy in NYC the following year. In the popular television show, *Mad TV*, a white actress played a Chinese woman, Mrs. Swan, in yellow-face makeup, from 1997 to 2002. For a study of the origins of yellow-face, see Moon.
- 13 Asian actresses were seen as “exotic” and often got to play major roles. But they almost always portrayed stereotypical roles created by white writers and directors. Asian male actors had less opportunity to play major roles. White male lead with Asian female lead was common, but Asian male lead with white female lead was extremely rare.
- 14 When Japanese colonialism ended in Korea in 1945, the United States became the *de facto* controller of the peninsula. Decolonization (from Japan) coincided with neocolonialism (of the United States) during and after the Korean War. The majority of Koreans (in South Korea) viewed the American military as the “savior” that liberated them from the Japanese. Korea, indeed, became a “neocolony” of the United States, desiring American culture and providing cheap labor for U.S. corporations. The United States continues to have dominant power in Korea, militarily, economically, and culturally. The films Oh watched were not all American made but were packaged for the American military and were thus seen by Koreans as an American product.
- 15 I’m using the term “anti-theatrical prejudice” as articulated by Barish.
- 16 The “first wave” (1903–24) Korean immigrants to the United States were mostly laborers, exiles, and picture brides. The majority of immigrants currently residing in the United States came during the “third wave” (1965–present) and were families who took advantage of changes in U.S. immigration law in 1965 that got rid of the national-origin quota system based on race. The post-1965 immigrants were mostly professionals and their relatives. According to the U.S. Census, as of the year 2000, there were 1,076,872 Koreans and Korean Americans living in the

- United States and approximately a quarter (23.96 percent) of them lived in Southern California (Yu and Choe 4–5, 12). Also see Barnes and Bennett.
- 17 Soon-Tek Oh initially enrolled in the cinema department at the University of Southern California (USC). Oh quickly realized that the USC program emphasized documentary filmmaking and he wanted to study feature filmmaking. So he transferred to the motion pictures department at the University of California, Los Angeles (Telephone interview).
  - 18 In 1961, General Park Chung Hee led a military coup that overthrew the Second Republic in South Korea. Two years later, he became the president and would remain in power for eighteen years.
  - 19 In 1965, the term “Asian American” had not been invented yet, so both Asian and Asian American actors were called “oriental” actors. Historian Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” in the second half of the 1960s, as he and others of the Asian American Movement rejected “oriental” as racist and imperialistic. See Ichioka et al. For studies on the Asian American Movement, see Wei; Louie, and Omatsu.
  - 20 Ironically, the Korean American actor Philip Ahn was the most recognizable actor to portray evil Japanese soldiers. He did his best to make the Japanese look inhuman because he saw his work as a continuation of his father’s fight against the Japanese. A biographical essay written by his nephew, Philip Ahn Cuddy, describes his motivation: “He played many roles as the cruel Japanese officer who tortured American flyers and soldiers for information. He once said making people hate the Japanese was a way for him to actively participate in the Independence Movement of Korea, in which his father had been a great leader against imperialism. He played his roles so well that he was personally attacked by people who took the movies seriously. Hate mail, threats on his life, and other manifestations of his unpopularity soon convinced Ahn one way to stop it was to quit acting and join the Army. He served the United States with distinction.”
  - 21 Also see Espiritu for a study on the formation of “reactive solidarities” and self-identification in racial and pan-ethnic terms (135). It should be emphasized that the pan-ethnic coalition of Asian Americans became more obvious as an ideological framework in the 1970s, but in the 1960s, “oriental” actors came together by the route of personal frustration, not necessarily because of a fully developed ideological consciousness.
  - 22 During the period of the 1960s and 1970s, several Asian American actors’ coalitions were formed. Many disappeared as quickly as they appeared, but three groups made their marks on history with different purposes and results: the East West Players (Los Angeles), the Oriental Actors of America (New York City), and the Theatre Ensemble of Asians (Seattle).
  - 23 The stage version of *Rashomon*, adapted by Fay and Michael Kanin, is based on a film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. The story is about a court trial in a double-crime of rape and murder. In ancient Japan, a bandit sees a woman who is passing through the woods with her husband. The bandit becomes infatuated with the

woman and decides to rape her. He takes the husband to the bush, ties him up, and rapes the woman. Later, the husband is found dead with a stab wound to the chest. A woodcutter witnesses this and is later called to testify during the trial, along with the wife, the bandit, and a medium of the dead husband. The story is told by the woodcutter who, after the trial, stops at the Rashomon gate to avoid rain. The woodcutter tells his listeners about how each witness told the judge his or her own distinct version of the story. The versions contradicted one another, although each witness sincerely believed in his or her testimony.

- 24 See Kurahashi for a detailed description of EWP's founding and subsequent years.
- 25 Mako was born in Japan and came to the United States to study architecture. He developed an interest in theatre while building sets for theatre productions. He studied acting at the Pasadena Playhouse (Personal interview).
- 26 In fact, Mako's role as the leader of the group became even more obvious when he received a nomination for Best Supporting Actor Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, for his role in the film *The Sand Pebbles* (1966). The publicity created around Mako and the EWP brought both administrative organization within the company and community and financial support (Kurahashi 26–7).
- 27 According to Oh, he made a deal with his professor at UCLA to receive a course credit for working as the executive director of the EWP.
- 28 See Kurahashi 29–42 for descriptions of the three types of shows.
- 29 The play is an anti-war drama set during the Korean War. It deals with the tragic fate of a family living in North Korea and features two sons who join the North Korean army; one sympathizes with the communists, while the other one does not care about ideology. Their mother, who is Japanese, wishes to return to Japan, and the father is a doctor and a humanitarian who sacrifices himself for his sons. The play criticizes the Korean War, which destroys the humanity and dignity of the characters.
- 30 The novel depicts a young man who struggles to realize his dream of personal prosperity and happiness in the context of the Republican China in the early years of the twentieth century. He, however, is ultimately ruined by the conditions of a then semi-colonial Chinese society, conditions that turn such a dream to human bankruptcy. Severely denounced by the Red Guards in 1966 during the early months of the Cultural Revolution and evidently not understanding why his work, profoundly critical of “old China,” was considered as “politically poisonous,” the author Lao She committed suicide.
- 31 Board of Directors meeting minutes, 26 June 1968; qtd. in Kurahashi 49.
- 32 Yuko Kurahashi summarizes the play: “The central character is a Chinese draftsman, Don, who cannot get a raise while his white co-workers, with less skill and experience, are promoted. Don interviews for a different job. However, every time he clarifies his determination not to work overtime without pay, he is rejected. Finally, he organizes a group called S.O.A.P. (Society of American Principles) to protect him and his colleagues from working overtime” (49).

- 33 When asked why he chose to focus on a Japanese American theme and not a Korean American one, Oh explained that Japanese topics were more accessible for him. For instance, he was not aware of the Korean laborers in Hawaii sugar plantations. He observed that the Nisei (second-generation) Japanese Americans were too embarrassed or scared to talk about the internment camp experience. Oh, as an outsider, was in a better position to deal with it as a dramatist (Telephone interview). *Tondemonai* is about Koju, a Japanese American man born in the United States and educated in Japan. The play is a memory play about his days in the Manzanar internment camp. He is a closet homosexual who marries a white woman, who ends up killing herself when her adulterous relationship is revealed. His father also kills himself because he cannot deal with the shame of being relocated. The play exposed topics that were considered taboo in the Japanese American community. The style of the play was experimental. Because of its controversial subject matter, the play received extremely mixed reviews (Kurahashi 50–1).
- 34 The EWP was, at the time, using the basement of a church as its rehearsal and performing space for a nominal fee. But the end of the church basement period began when a church deacon walked into a rehearsal of Soon-Tek Oh's *Tondemonai-Never Happen*. According to Mako, the actors were "almost naked," and one of the actors got out of bed and put on his underpants in dim light when they were visited. Not surprisingly, the church leaders found the play inappropriate and demanded to review all plays before rehearsals. The church also responded by calling the fire inspector who made expensive demands. With the possibility of censorship looming, the EWP could not continue its residence there, and the congregation voted to evict the company (Personal interview, 22 July 1999). Also see Kurahashi, 50.
- 35 According to Oh, an accident "messed up" his face in 1972, and he had to go to Korea to recuperate. While recovering, he a friend suggested he teach, and he taught at Suh-Kang University as a guest professor and at the Seoul Institute of the Arts (formerly The Drama Center) as an artist-in-residence. As early as the 1970s, Oh had already begun situating himself as a teacher in Korea.
- 36 *Pacific Overtures* tells the story of the opening of Japan to the west, from the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy in Tokyo Bay in 1853 to the modernized Japan of 1975.
- 37 For instance, an ad in *Variety* features one picture of Oh wearing a western-style suit (quite similar to the way he looks in the 007 film *The Man with the Golden Gun*) and three pictures of Oh in the three Japanese roles in the musical (*Pacific Overtures*). The ad also includes six quotes from theatre reviewers. Sylvie Drake of the *Los Angeles Times* is quoted as saying, "There is such a great deal to admire – Soon-Teck Oh is a sensitive variety [*sic*] of roles, both male and female" (qtd. in *Pacific Overtures*).
- 38 John M. Liu summaries the intention of the activists who coined the term "Asian American" in 1968: "they knew Asian Americans could only be successful in their struggles if they developed an alternative way of seeing and living along with their political demands. It was no accident that the counter culture movement developed

during the student, civil rights, women's and ethnic movements. The demand for political change was simultaneously a call to transform the ways in which people did and saw things – that is, a call for a different cultural nexus” (qtd. in Dirlik 34–35).

- 39 The reception of the musical in New York City was mixed: Howard Kissel described it as “a brilliant triumph of sophistication, taste and craft,” while Walter Kerr criticized it as “dull and immobile” (qtd. in Wong). In Los Angeles, the reception was generally more positive. For instance, T.E. Foreman of the *Riverside Press-Enterprise* described the production as “more enjoyable than the elaborate spectacle that originated on Broadway” (qtd. in Kurahashi 122).
- 40 Rachael Miyung Joo describes this process of generating Korean nationalism “vis-à-vis the U.S. and Japan” as “double deferral.” She uses the concept of “double deferral” in examining the Korean baseball player Chan Ho Park and his symbolic status as “Korean success” in the United States, in comparison to Japanese baseball players (Joo 317). Also see C. Choi. It should also be noted that Soon-Tek Oh, like most Koreans of his generation, was quite comfortable with Japanese culture. According to Oh, his family owned more Japanese books than Korean books, so he grew up reading Japanese literature in Japanese (Telephone interview). Koreans during the 1960s and 1970s feared (and despised) the Japanese and their cultural power, but at the same time, as John Lie argues, “[C]olonial nostalgia and Japanese economic might combined to create a powerful countercurrent of pro-Japanese sentiments, especially among the South Korean elite” (59). I am not saying that Soon-Tek Oh was pro-Japanese; instead, I am suggesting that his embodiment of Japanese characters could be read favorably by Korean elite audiences.
- 41 Oh's role in his first production with the East West Players was also Japanese: Husband in *Rashomon*.
- 42 Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince acknowledged Asian American actors as Americans, but they nevertheless had them perform a westernized version of Kabuki theatre. They were pathfinders in casting a Broadway show with Asian Americans, but they did not seem to realize that the vast majority of Asian Americans were as unfamiliar with the Japanese theatre form as were they. Their Asian America seems to have been more intercultural than multicultural.
- 43 Asian American cultural nationalism, on the other hand, looks to the history of the United States to find the “roots” of Asian America (Dirlik 34). It is also a combination of racial cultural nationalism (“I'm yellow, and I'm proud.) and American nationalism (“I'm an American.”).
- 44 In 1995, Lodestone Theatre Ensemble emerged as a subgroup within SHP as a venue to create experimental Korean American and Asian American works. Ironically, in the 1990s, the East West Players became the primary site for showcasing Asian American actors to Hollywood producers and directors, while Lodestone Theatre Ensemble was a major site for developing original Asian American plays. The EWP is now what Soon-Tek Oh envisioned (but could not pursue) in the early 1970s, and Lodestone, the company he founded, represents the Asian American

goals he rejected when he left the EWP. The description on Lodestone's Web site is, in fact, quite similar to the agenda of the EWP: "The idea for the Society of Heritage Performers / Lodestone Theatre Ensemble began in 1992 and was fully realized in 1995 as a response to the Los Angeles riots that ripped apart ethnic communities and continued racial stereotyping that has dominated mass media. It was Mr. Soon-Tek Oh's vision that acknowledged the power of these stereotypes, and recognized that only through the presentation of honest and truthful portrayals of Asian and Asian American culture could there be a genuine dialogue which would lead to greater understanding" ("Past Events").

- 45 The image of the Asian martial arts master became popular with the 1970s television show *Kung Fu* and later in films such as *Karate Kid* (1984).
- 46 Margaret Cho began performing as a stand-up comedian in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, she starred in the Asian American sitcom, *All American Girl*, which was cancelled in the first season. Starting in the late 1990s, Cho toured with her solo performance show, *I'm the One That I Want*, to sold-out crowds. In the show, she pokes fun at the racist ways in which Hollywood has represented Asians. For example, Cho describes the show *Kung Fu* (starring the white actor David Carradine) as "Hey! That guy's not Chinese!!"
- 47 An example of the first agenda is the Asian American film *Yellow*, directed by Chris Chan Lee. The film was one of the first Asian American films to receive wide distribution and was heralded as a generation-X film deconstructing the model-minority stereotype of Asian Americans. The script was read at a workshop at the Society of Heritage Performers. Soon-Tek Oh appeared in the film as a strict Korean father who runs a liquor store and whose expectations push his son to the brink of self-destruction. Oh worked on the film voluntarily, receiving only allowances for transportation. He also starred in and produced the independent film *Last Mountain* (2000), in which he plays a homeless man chasing a unicorn. In terms of writing, he has written a play on the Kwangju uprising in the spring of 1980 and a screenplay about Korean history between 1880 and 1920 titled *Fire in the Water*. He also continues to perform on stage. In 1998, for instance, he starred in Silas Jones' *Canned Goods*, a play about race identity in South Central Los Angeles. The play premiered at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota.
- 48 In Korea, theatre departments are almost always housed with film departments. The main purpose of such departments is to produce actors, most of whom desired to act in film and television. Theatre history and dramatic literature are usually taught in literature departments. For instance, Korea University's English department has produced a number of scholars of theatre. The top universities in Korea do not have theatre departments, reflecting Korea's long tradition of anti-theatrical prejudice. Thus, the establishment of the Korean National University of Arts is historically and culturally significant. According to the president of the university: "The Korean National University of Arts (KNUA) was established based on four missions: first, to preserve the meaning and the role of classical arts that think highly of the beautiful and the sublime, second, to inherit and cherish our tradi-

tional arts as they are good resources for the contemporary arts, third, to promote the birth of new arts by accepting the new possibilities of digital technologies, and fourth, to stand up as the center of the arts world with enthusiastic participations in theoretical and practical activities on arts. Under this ambitious and pioneering atmosphere, all the artistic challenges will be exerted and another new possibility of arts will emerge in KNUA” (G. Lee).

- 49 In Korea, higher education is seen as an absolute necessity for a “successful” life. For instance, graduating from a prestigious college opens doors to social and economic opportunities available only to the tight community of its alumni. College professors not only command the respect due to the “teacher–master” status of Confucius’ teachings but also enjoy the societal reverence for modern higher education. According to a popular maxim attributed to Confucius, one should not even step on the shadow of one’s teacher.
- 50 Cha was offered the role of Colonel Moon, who seeks to unite the two Koreas through a war. According to Cha, the film was using “another country’s current climate for its own entertainment purposes” (qtd. in *The Man Who Said ‘No’ to Bond*). Cha and his supporters objected to the film’s portrayal of North Korea as part of “an axis of evil.” In addition, they found some scenes offensive: for example, the final scene depicts a love scene in a Buddhist Temple (which is taboo in Korea) and Korea is visually represented as a pre-industrial farming country. The Korean American actor Rick Yune, who played the North Korean villain, Zao, was criticized by the Korean public for portraying a negative image of Koreans (Brooke).
- 51 The debate was even more relevant because of the tight presidential election that polarized the country in the same year. The debate, as well as the presidential election, was also fueled by the public outcry over the acquittal of two U.S. soldiers who killed two Korean middle school girls while driving a tank under the influence of alcohol. (The U.S. military took full custody of the soldiers and they were never tried in a Korean court.) The older conservatives, most of whom had firsthand experience with the Korean War supported a pro-America presidential candidate, while the younger generation of voters preferred a liberal candidate who opposed Bush’s unilateral reversal of the North–South Korean negotiations. The younger generation praised Cha’s decision to refuse Hollywood’s offer and saw it as a rejection of America’s cultural ignorance and degradation of Korea. The Korea Federation of University Student Councils (*Hanchongnyon*) called for the cancellation of the production of the film (Barber 14). The conservatives were mostly silent about Cha’s decision, but they did raise criticism when the incumbent liberal party openly supported him and politicized a personal decision. Many younger Koreans (who are the intended audience for the *Bond* film) boycotted the film, and those who watched it objected to the portrayal of North Koreans as the new Hollywood villain. *JoongAng Ilbo*, a major Korean newspaper, echoed the criticism: “North Korean criminals in the movie are no different from Iraqi, Cuban or Russian terrorists, who easily commit mass murders in Hollywood action movies” (qtd. in Brooke).

52 Most recently, Oh turned down his agent's request to audition for the upcoming film based on the bestseller book *Memoirs of a Geisha* (a Steven Spielberg film in production, 2005).

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