

SLIDE SHOW: INTRODUCTION

Bokey

The history that is taught to us has been interpreted and written by the dominant class in every society. It excludes the lives and experiences of the majority of people who are exploited and oppressed by that class.

Women have always been a vital force in society. Yet all of us are aware, on some level, of how the history we've studied has negated the roles women played in the making of that history. We are denied knowledge of ourselves, we are hidden from history because of our sex. In addition, due to aspects of racial and national oppression, we Asian American women have been deprived of our past and recognition of our contributions. We are therefore subjected to a triple oppression -- as women, as working people, and as a racial minority.

We, the Organization of Asian Women, have developed this slide presentation as an understanding of our past and present, about ourselves and women in general, our strengths and contributions, the perpetual resistance of women against their confines, and the deep roots of our oppression. As we read and learned more about the depth and scope of our sisters' struggles in Asia and America, our anger rose and we became increasingly determined to fight against our own subjugation and exploitation.

In presenting such a wide sweep of our history, we are only skimming the surface. This presentation relates to the particularities of Chinese and Japanese women, but we envision this as an ongoing project which will subsequently involve the experiences of Korean, Pilipino, and other Asian women as well.

Our history strengthens us by connecting us to the lives of countless women, whose threads of experience are woven into the fabric of our lives today. We have uncovered only a small part of our past, in the hope that others of you will dig deeper with us.



## SLIDE SHOW SCRIPT

### Feudalism

This character is the symbol for "woman" - "niu" in Chinese and "onna" in Japanese. As Han Suyin has noted:

"The very ideogram for 'woman' denoted subjection, the bar across, horizontal burden of her heavy breasts, the protuberant hips and the crossed bow legs, not quite quadrupedal, but almost.

I have often thought that in today's China... the first thing that should be done is to eradicate totally... some of those odious ideograms which are exact pictures of two millennia of feudal oligarchy, four millennia of woman's inferiority."

### Birdless Summer

Feudalism was an economic system wherein a small, minority landlord class -- owning vast feudal estates -- controlled the lives of the majority of peasants who lived in poverty and servitude to the lords. The peasants possessed little control over their own lives, and were conditioned by law and economic need to uphold this oppressive ruling class who often exploited them to the point of exhaustion and early death, generation after generation.

The agricultural economy required long hours of hard work. Together with their husbands, the women peasants worked to provide for their families' needs. Although their labor was essential for the



continuance of the economy, it was never recognized or compensated in any way, thus reinforcing women's subordinate position in feudal society.

"Hungry, she still weaves.  
Numbed with cold, she still weaves;  
Shuttle after shuttle after shuttle.  
The days are short,  
The weather chill,  
Each length hard to finish.

The rich take their rent;  
The clerk the land tax.  
Knocking repeatedly with urgent insistence.  
Her husband wants to urge her on,  
But has no heart to do so.  
He says nothing,  
But stands beside the loom.

The more she tries to get it done,  
The more her strength fails her.  
She turns away, choking down tears,  
And consoles herself that their  
Neighbors are poorer - and lonelier.  
For they sold their loom,  
And next had to sell their son."

"Complaint of the Weaving Wife"  
Tung Hung-tu

Women worked ceaselessly from dawn to dusk, planting and tilling the fields, grinding corn and pounding rice, weaving on their looms, engaging in a small trade such as sewing to supplement the meagre income, performing all the household chores, and, of course, caring for the children as well as their husbands. They were the first to rise and the last to rest.

"Shall I tell you how their work exhausts them  
By hand and treadle they turn the rollers of wood and iron;  
Feeding the fibre in between their fingers...

Working through darkness by candlelight,  
Forgetful of bed. When energy ebbs, they sing.  
The quilts are cold. Unheard, the waterclock flows over."

Prose poem on Cotton Cloth  
Hsu Hsien-chung

Among the poor peasants, however, women played such a major role in productive work, that they obtained more of a right to speak and make decisions regarding family affairs, thus gaining equal status in the home. The sharing of hardships and responsibilities served to strengthen the couple's love and respect for each other.

"Together, we shall taste the bitterness of life  
and experience cold and hunger...  
Together, we shall go our way, leaning on each other,  
To feed ourselves, we shall pick wild fruit."

Vietnamese folksong

### Peasant Revolts

The condition of the peasants was, at times, so oppressive that, even with the knowledge of possible death, innumerable peasant revolts occurred throughout the feudal history of both China and Japan.

Peasant women participated in the uprisings, particularly rebellions in China organized by the Yellow Turbans and the Red Eyebrows. Numerous secret societies and Taoist religious sects treated men and women on an equal basis, often encouraging women to become leaders. By providing women with an opportunity to fulfill roles traditionally denied to them by Confucian codes of conduct, these secret societies thus appeared as early champions of the rights of Chinese women.

During the White Lotus Rebellion in the 1790's, women formed their own autonomous all-female associations. And women contributed to the fighting in the Taiping peasant rebellions in the 1800's by organizing a separate army corps. At one point, there were forty women's armies formed, with 2,500 soldiers in each unit.

In Japan, wives of samurai often had to defend their homes and



families from marauding bandits, while their husbands were away at war.

Other strong women played dominant roles in shaping Japan's history. Lady Hojo Masako, dubbed 'an untamed and vigorous lioness,' single-handedly ruled the Kamakura Shogunate during a particularly difficult period. And Tomoe, wife of a famous general, handled horses and wielded swords as well as men and accompanied her husband's troops to Kyoto.

Similarly, research reveals a long legacy of courageous Chinese heroines. One such example is that of Shuen Guan who lived during the Jinn Dynasty (265-304). Nicknamed 'Little Tigeress,' she was known for her strength and her ability to fight with swords, spears, and hands. When she was thirteen years old, Shing Chen City was attacked by an army of 30,000 bandits. With only two dozen men, Shuen Guan fought her way past the bandits to a nearby town, where she persuaded General Shyr Lan to assist her in the city's struggle against the enemies. Shuen Guan also fought in the fierce battle that ensued, successfully defending the city.

### Confucianism

Such a feudal agricultural society lasted for 2,000 years in China, and some 700 years in Japan. The backbone of feudal society in these countries was Confucianism, a philosophy which originated in China about 500 B.C. and which was adopted by Japan around the 1600's.

Confucianism taught that no one could rise above the class or sex in which one was born. Its rigid social framework with particular obligations and duties associated with one's status in society immobilized the class structure, and thus was invaluable to the rulers in legislating against change and perpetuating the economic system of feudalism in Asia.



## Confucianism and Women

"Morals forbid her to step out of her  
room. Her only business is the kitchen."

Book of Rites  
Confucius

In China and Japan, the Confucian system of moral codes and precepts preaching submission was institutionalized to keep women in bondage. Male supremacy and authority and the complete subjugation of women was its basic premise. Since women were barred from acquiring an education, they could not even question these Confucian principles which restricted their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

A woman's lot was summed up in the Confucian doctrine of the "Three Obediences," which negated all possibility for a woman's control over her own life. As a child, the daughter was required to obey her father. When married, she owed unconditional obedience to her husband and her husband's parents. And when widowed, she was bound to obey her eldest son.

"She must look to her husband as her  
lord, and must serve him with all  
worship and reverence, not despising  
or thinking lightly of him. The  
great life-long duty of a woman is  
obedience."

Onna Daigaku

A work called, Onna Daigaku (The Greater Learning for Women), set forth the official Confucian codes prevalent in Japan in the seventeenth century, concerning a woman's subservience to men. It stated that the only qualities a woman should possess were obedience, mercy, quietness, and chastity. A wife must never weary of yielding to her husband, herself being content with second place at all times.



"The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness. It is from these that arises the inferiority of women to men."

Onna Daigaku

Thus, forbearance, self-sacrifice, and resignation to her fate were considered virtues in a woman -- virtues of submission. A woman's pleasure came not from asserting her independence, but from learning to want to do what was required of her. She had no conception of rights, only of duties.

The custom of binding women's feet in China so that they could only take pitiful small steps was a stark symbol and bestial reality of their enslavement. And the tightly-bound "obi" or sash worn by Japanese women also reflects the immobility inflicted on Asian women.

### In Defiance of Confucianism

For many women of all classes, one of the few means of escape from the oppressive conditions of their lives was in the romantic literature, often written by women. Numerous myths and legends portrayed romantic heroines meeting their lovers in clandestine meeting places. Other accounts depicted rebellious wives and women who defied the traditional passive roles assigned to them. These stories and dramas, read or told aloud, provided some release from the frustrations and pent-up feelings of everyday family life.

In China, poems and plays were written about the legendary swordswoman, Hua Mu Lan, a peasant girl who disguised herself as a



man and replaced her old and ailing father in battle. For twelve years, she fought and bore many hardships.

"Click, click, forever click, click;  
Mu Lan sits at the door and weaves.  
Listen, and you will not hear the shuttle sound,  
But only hear a girl's sobs and sighs.  
'Oh tell me lady, are you longing for your love?'...  
'Oh no, oh no, I am not thinking of my love...  
But last night I read the battle roll.  
The Khan has ordered a great levy of men...

Oh let me go to the market to buy saddle and horse.  
And ride with the soldiers to take my father's place'...

In the morning she stole from her father and mother's house;  
At night she was camping by the Yellow River's side...  
At dawn she left the river and went on her way...  
A thousand leagues she tramped on the errands of war.  
Frontiers and hills she crossed like a bird in flight..."

"The Ballad of Mu Lan"

The literature written during the T'ang Dynasty (618-906) depicted secret rendezvous between rich and poor lovers, sacrifices made by prostitutes for love, and tales of concubines who escaped from their masters to gain freedom. These liaisons and elopements ignored differences of wealth and class status and appeared to be common occurrences in T'ang society.

Women's defiance of the rigid Confucian mores often led to social ostracism or severe physical punishment. The men, generally, were far less willing to sacrifice their personal objectives for the sake of their love affairs. They usually abandoned their faithful lovers and accepted as brides the women who had been selected by their families. This cowardice of the men stood in sharp contrast to the strength and determination of the women.

"Autumn departs and spring comes  
But my thoughts are only of him.  
His letters become scarcer with the passing of time,  
My closed gates and vermilion door are never visited,



But the sound of women beating clothes on the rocks  
Penetrates the gauze of my bedroom curtains."

"Bedroom Murmurings"  
Enchanted Yu

Many courtesans of the T'ang Dynasty were accomplished poetesses. They wrote candidly and directly of the joys of love and the torment of separation and loneliness. Since feudal society condemned the expression of the desire for love between a man and a woman, these courtesans' poems constituted eloquent acts of protest and resistance.

"I see the waters try to ascend the mountain,  
But the mountain is high and the lake wide.  
I think of him day and night;  
I look for him year after year.

Mountain trees grow in desolate brilliance;  
Wildflowers bloom in abandoned profusion.  
Since parting, I have thought of him ceaselessly  
But in one meeting, everything can be expressed."

"To Chu Fang"  
Seductive Li

In Japan during the years 1100-1400, all of the best literature of the period was written by women. These women writers were from lower aristocratic families who were employed by the Imperial Court. Despite their education and talent, their status at Court was low, both because of their class and because they were women, regarded either as high-class maids or as sex objects. Their brilliant minds and emotional passions could find no outlet other than through their writing in which they poured out their feelings and critical appraisals of the court life around them.

The most well-known work was the, "Genji Monogatari" by Lady Murasaki, in which she wrote of her life in the royal household, depicting the decadence that existed. Her semi-autobiographical account is acclaimed as a classic masterpiece and is recognized today as the forerunner of the development of the novel as a true literary form.



## Infancy

"Most bitter thing it is  
to be born a woman;  
Pushed so low  
we cannot speak..."

Fu Hsien

A female infant was at the lowest rung of the social ladder. She was considered an economic burden because she would be unable to financially support the family, since all trades were locked into the male kinship system. Han Fei, a Confucian thinker in 223 B.C., states:

"If a son is born, then they congratulate each other. If a daughter is born, they (may) kill it. Both these have come out of the mother's womb, and when it is a boy, congratulations; when it is a girl, death!"

### Chinese Philosophy in Classical Times

Female infanticide was a common practice throughout the feudal period; it occurred even as late as 1942 in China. A box of clean ashes was often prepared beside the bed of the mother giving birth in the event a girl was born.

"The midwife or a relative would take the back of a girl baby's head in her hand and turn her face into the ashes... It was very easy."

Woman Warrior  
Maxine Hong Kingston



## Marriage

Marriage during feudalism was an exchange in which a young girl or child bride was sold to the highest bidder, an arrangement made by parents in the interest of the families concerned. "Pingli" -- often called "ritual wealth" or "body price" -- in the form of money, jewels, and other goods, was offered by the groom's parents. The bride's family was never invited to the wedding festivities so as to reinforce the complete severance from her family.

"I see that this, my life,  
Is like the flower on the mountain's edge,  
Whose roots are far away."

Chinese poem in anthology  
Wakan Roei Shu

Since Confucian morality forbid freedom of marriage, a woman was denied the right to choose her future husband. Many young girls were married against their will, forced to accept their parents' choice of a mate.

"The path of life is full of thorns,  
My parents... have married me against my will.  
How sad is my destiny!  
My looking-glass clouds over, my jewels tarnish."

Vietnamese folksong

In 1957, the Chinese Communists published a monograph which contained stories about the resistance of men and women to the pre-arranged marriage system of feudal society. One incident involved Steadfast Chang who loved a man named Buddhist P'ang, but was forced by her family to marry wealthy Little Phoenix Ch'en instead. After encountering many misfortunes, Little Phoenix abandoned Steadfast, who then defied tradition and married Buddhist P'ang, and the two lived a happy, prosperous life together.



- 11 -

Marriage existed as an institution which exploited women's labor. When a man took a wife, his family gained a working unit for household chores and other tasks. In child marriages, an older girl was married to a young boy so as to utilize her labor in the house, as well as to ensure a progeny and a caretaker for the husband's parents.

One of the primary aims of marriage was to, "fulfill the sacred duty of producing male heirs for the perpetuation of the ancestors' lineage." A wife's role, thus, was to bear sons to continue the male patriarchy. If a woman could not produce a male heir, the marriage was often annulled and she was sent back to her family in disgrace -- where she might then be regarded as a second-hand article and sold to a brothel.

During the nineteenth century in China, some women formed 'anti-marriage associations' or organizations of, 'girls who do not go to the family.' They usually consisted of about ten young women who lived together and made solemn vows never to marry and to protect each other from such a fate. These associations constituted strong acts of protest against the prevailing feudal marriage system.

### Divorce

In Japan, a husband could divorce his wife on any one of seven grounds, including "excessive talking." Divorce by her husband left a woman homeless and propertyless, and an object of social contempt by family and community.

~~It was~~ not until the Marriage Law was instituted in 1950, that the right to divorce was finally granted to women in China.



## Prostitution

During hard times in China and Japan, a daughter would be sold as a concubine or a slave. Young girls were also kidnapped or sold into prostitution. Child streetwalkers were frequently seen in the larger towns.

"Among the sellers with their ropes, cages, and water tanks, were the sellers of little girls... There were fathers and mothers selling their daughters, whom they pushed forward and then pulled back again..."

### Woman Warrior

The notorious Yoshiwara district, which played such a prominent part in the art and literature of Japan, was built on the bodies of young girls sold by destitute families. By 1679, there were over 100 licensed quarters throughout Japan; the Yoshiwara consisted of some 150 houses and contained 3,000 courtesans.

The "yujo" or "girl of pleasure" was taught to be adept at dancing, playing the samisen, and carrying on amusing conversations; but her principal function, always, was to offer her body to men for hire and to do so with the greatest possible skill. Training was intensive, and she was, "...beaten with a wooden whip at the slightest sign of negligence or indolence."

The glamour which sometimes surrounded the higher-ranking courtesans did not, however, obscure the harsh fact that these women were essentially prostitutes, whose sexual favors could be bought by anyone able to pay the high price. The brutal methods of recruiting and holding the inmates amounted to little more than an elegant form of slavery.



After the seventeenth century, the institution of "geishas" became a popular one. "Geishas" or "singing girls" were often poor peasants' daughters who were bonded to the owners of geisha houses where men came to be entertained at high prices. From six years of age, the girls underwent rigorous training in the arts of singing, dancing, and conversation, to become full-fledged geishas at sixteen. Unlike courtesans, they were not considered prostitutes, although some might grant sexual favors in the hopes of becoming mistresses or, more rarely, wives of merchants who would buy them out of bondage.

In 1845, an anonymous Chinese authoress wrote a humorous essay which defended the wife's point of view and denounced the man for neglecting his wife. In jest, she prescribed specific punishment for husbands:

"Men are forbidden to have anything to do with women of the brothels... Transgressors will be dealt with according to the statute against treacherous collusion with a foreign state: one hundred heavy blows, and hard manual labor at the front gate of his home."

Courtesans were a bit more fortunate than the women doomed to almost perpetual imprisonment in the imperial harem. Although chosen for their physical beauty, there were thousands of consorts who suffered from a neglected, meaningless existence. A ninth century poet wrote a poem entitled, "A Woman of Shang-yang," about a woman destined to waste the best years of her life in the harem, ignored and unattended:

"A woman of Shang-yang,  
I, myself, slowly aging,  
Seeing my hair turn white.  
The green-clothed eunuchs  
Still guard the harem gates--  
How many springs have passed  
Since they were locked behind me..."



- 14 -

How well I remember, years ago,  
Holding back the tears  
As I parted from my family.  
They helped me into the carriage,  
Forbidding me to cry.  
'Once you enter the palace,  
You will enjoy His Lord's favor'...

An empty room enclosed my whole life there!  
How long were the autumn nights I spent,  
Sleeplessly awaiting the interminable dawn.  
My sole companion was a lone candle,  
Reflecting my shadow along the wall...

I am now the oldest in the harem...  
A woman of Shang-yang,  
I suffered the most bitter distress,  
Both in youth and old age.  
And what was it all for?  
You must have seen the poem by Lu Shang  
In praise of beautiful women;  
Now also look at my poem,  
Telling of a white-haired palace inmate!"

"A Woman of Shang-yang"  
Po Chu-i

### Polygamy and Concubinage

Polygamy was approved by law, and its most common form in China was concubinage. Rich feudal landlords would collect concubines by seizing the daughters of poor peasants who could not pay their taxes or land rent.

Thus, a concubine was usually of lower class origin and suffered from unequal treatment by her exploiters. If she ignored the wishes of the legal wives, she was subjected to verbal humiliation, beatings, and expulsion. Her status remained that of an "unpaid servant," completely dependent on the benevolence of her master and his wives.

Concubinage was encouraged for the purpose of perpetuation of ancestral rites by assuring the birth of sons. Nevertheless, a concubine was also acquired to satisfy the sexual pleasures of her mas-



ter, as well as for utilitarian and economic purposes.

In Japan, concubinage was confined to the upper classes wherein noblemen would provide the emperor or higher noblemen with their daughters as concubines or consorts for the purpose of rising in the social hierarchy.

Feudal laws established double standards -- a man could engage in polygamy and acquire as many wives as he could afford, but a woman had to remain faithful to her one husband.

### Patriarchy

It was through the patriarchal family system that the feudal lords ensured their economic and political power. They vested the patriarch with full authority to govern the family, supervise and control all monetary, educational, and marital matters, and to punish all members of his family.

"A wife married is like a pony bought;  
I'll ride her and whip her as I like."

old Chinese saying

It was considered the "natural" right of a man to discipline his wife, by force if necessary. The Chinese estimate that six out of ten husbands regularly beat their wives.

The economic system was thus preserved by establishing the father as sole ruler over the household and as overseer of the family's obligations to the feudal state.



One of the most basic assumptions of patriarchy was that women were considered to be the property of men -- to be bought, sold, and even killed at their will. In order to keep their "property" intact, Japanese and Chinese men enforced rigid rules protecting their women's chastity.

### Resistance and Liberation

The subordinate position of women during feudalism did not pass unchallenged, but their subjugation, nevertheless, remained an integral part of the institutional structure of society.

Women's lot in Japan grew steadily more oppressive with the consolidation of feudalism, and it was not until the Meiji period (1868) that Japanese women began to collectively organize and fight for their rights.

After the nineteenth century in China, a true women's liberation movement arose in which women resisted and widely protested against the inferior status and traditional roles assigned to them in the family and society.

Women's organizations flourished during the New Culture Movement of 1917 and the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and what had been mainly a rising tide of opinion and individual action, was crystallized into an organized movement which provided the ideological orientation for subsequent social and political developments.

Above all, by this time, a new generation of feminist leaders had arisen from the increasing number of women's and coeducational schools, and an ever-growing following for the movement was created by



its literature.

Among the outstanding examples is that of Ch'iu Chin who published the first "Women's Journal" and organized the "Restoration Army." She was executed in 1907 for her revolutionary activities. Huang-lian Sheng-mu, the "Sacred Mother of the Yellow Lotus," led special units of young girls who operated alongside male units in the Boxer Movement.

This astonishing leap from 2,000 years of total subjugation to the continuing liberation struggle of women in China today, gives inspiring testimony to the reservoir of inner strength and endurance, self-discipline, and perseverance that have characterized women throughout the ages.

Under the cover of deference, women have had to be resourceful in solving their problems. And despite formidable difficulties, it is the women who have maintained the cohesion of the family and community, even in the most alienated cultures.

"We women love our freedom,  
Raise a cup of wine to our efforts for freedom..."

Former practice was deeply humiliating:  
Maidens, young girls were actually mated like cows, mares.  
New light dawns on time of illustrious culture.  
Man's desire to stand alone, supreme, to enslave us  
underlings,  
Must be torn up by the roots.

As raw silk is slowly whitened by boiling,  
Thus shall we slowly cultivate wisdom, understanding,  
learning, study.  
Sustaining weight of responsibility on our shoulders, our heads,  
Heroic women of our land shall never see defeat."

"Strive for Women's Power"  
Ch'iu Chin