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The Model Minority as Gook

In *Year of the Dragon*, Michael Cimino's 1982 film about organized crime in New York's Chinatown, an elderly Chinese woman and her teenage granddaughter have an audience with Joey Tai, a prominent businessman and ruthless mobster. The grandmother asks Tai for money to send the young woman to Columbia University. Tai gives her the tuition money and, in good Chinese avuncular fashion, admonishes the young woman to work hard and listen to her grandmother. We next see this teenage honor student, now dressed in a tight silver lamé miniskirt, shooting up a restaurant with an Uzi. After a wild, running gunfight, the white hero of the story, Stanley White, a decorated Vietnam veteran who is now captain of the Chinatown precinct, shoots the girl down in the streets of Chinatown.

The contradictory figure of this young woman, simultaneously an honor-roll student and a "gangsta," replays the popular Vietnam War trope of the female Viet Cong fighter emerging from a crowd of friendly villagers to kill or try to kill the American savior. She is symbolic of the deeply contradictory and contested representation of the Asian American as permanent resident alien: both model minority, productive and acquiescent, and yellow peril, the Viet Cong, invisible and destructive.

The Crisis: The Long Year of 1974

The year 1974 encompassed Watergate, the OPEC oil crisis, and the fall of Saigon. On August 9, 1974, millions of American television viewers watched as their president, the disgraced Richard Milhous Nixon, stepped into a waiting helicopter and escaped into exile in California. Nine months later, millions of American viewers saw Graham Martin, the last American proconsul in Vietnam, clamber aboard another waiting helicopter, abandoning hundreds of "loyal" Vietnamese in the embassy compound below. Defeat in Vietnam signified the early end of the American Century.

By 1974, inflation fueled by Vietnam war spending, the Eurodollar crisis, the OPEC oil crisis, and the end of the Bretton Woods international monetary system all signaled the erosion of the structure of accumulation that had been shaped by the Fordist Compromise. The downturn in the American economy, which coincided with a long downturn in the world economy, was experienced as "stagflation," an unprecedented combination of flat growth and double-digit inflation. By the end of the 1970s, the attempt to dampen inflation had also resulted in a double-digit unemployment rate; in the election campaign of 1979, Ronald Reagan could campaign on the issue of a "misery index" for the U.S. economy.

The crises of the mid-1970s set the stage for the global restructuring of capital and the process of "de-industrialization" in the United States, which dominated the economic news in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] In the massive reorganization of the social structure of accumulation that began in the early 1970s, Fordism was replaced by what geographer David Harvey has called flexible accumulation.[2] Dominated by multinational corporations and the almost instantaneous transfer of funds across the globe, flexible accumulation has been marked by a shift of economic growth to new commanding sectors of the economy—financial and professional services, which are marked by a high rate of return and a short turnaround time on investment.

The reorganization of the social structure of accumulation has entailed the relocation of manufacturing from high-wage to low-wage environments, both across national boundaries and from region to region within a country. Heavy industry and the manufacturing of durable consumer goods, traditionally the strongholds of high-wage organized labor, have been either abandoned to imports or shifted overseas or to the areas where organized labor is weakest. In the manufacturing sector, the use of outsourced materials has become an increasingly large part of the production process. By 1990, imported components were used in more than half of domestic manufacturing.[3] Akira Morita, the former chairman of the Sony Corporation, called this dramatic expansion of outsourcing the "Hollowing of America."[4]

Since the mid-1970s, the process of de-industrialization in America and the failure of attendant Keynesian approaches to solve the dilemma of

capitalist economic crisis has been marked by a struggle over the dismantling of the democratic welfare state and the restoration of bourgeois class hegemony.[5] Since the 1970s, management has fiercely pressured organized labor to give back many of the gains in wages, retirement, and health care benefits that had been made under Fordism and to accept the reassertion of management control over production schedules, mandatory overtime, and work rules. Despite the continued gap between union and nonunion wages, membership in unions dropped in the 1980s from 23.8 percent to 16.3 percent among nonagricultural workers.[6] The only sector of the economy where labor did make gains in membership was in the expanding low-wage, service sector of the labor force among hotel and food service, clerical, health care, and public employees.

By 1980, the state had retreated from intervention on behalf of the Fordist Compromise to support capital's attack on labor. The state's retreat from the Fordist Compromise has included the sharp reduction, if not abandonment, of its regulatory responsibilities in the work place, and its mediation between labor and management. In the 1980s, the state became openly hostile toward organized labor and the unorganized poor. In the wake of its abandonment of the most privileged stratum of the working class (organized manufacturing labor) the state is in the process in the 1990s of ending subsidies to the poor, racial minorities, children, and the elderly—those who had not originally been included in the Fordist Compromise but who had demanded a place at the table in the wake of the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty in the 1960s.

David Harvey observes that the collapse of the Fordist structure of accumulation, with its large-scale production and long-term planning, and the emergence of flexible accumulation, with its emphasis on the rapid transfers of capital, technology, and short run production, is experienced culturally as a crisis of time and space: a collapse of boundaries—particularly national boundaries—and standards, and the rise of relativism and multiculturalism.[7] Both restorationist narratives, which represent Asian Americans as the model minority, and dystopic narratives, which depict Asian Americans as the domestic Viet Cong, articulate the collapse of the Fordist structure of accumulation as a boundary crisis, a breakdown both of national borders and of internal boundaries.

The Model Minority and the Neoconservative Racial Project

In the neoconservative narrative of post-Fordist national restoration, Asian America embodies the nation's hope for a return to hegemony in the global marketplace through discipline, obedience, and return to family values. The restorationist narrative constructs a nostalgic imagery of American society and culture that the model minority is mobilized to revivify. Asian American habits of behavior are seen as the secret weapons of national restoration; on the other hand, it is precisely from their otherness that this behavior is supposed to originate. The Asian American model minority is thus a simulacrum of both an imaginary Asian tradition from which it is wishfully constructed and an American culture for which it serves as a nostalgic mirror. The model minority can operate as the paragon of conservative virtues that all Americans should emulate only if Asian Americans remain *like* "us" but utterly are *not* "us."

Howard Winant observes that the conservative strategy has been to dress up class as race and to return to a Social Darwinian war of all against all. As the Edsalls and others have shown, conservatives since the Nixon administration have used race as a wedge issue to split the alliance between working-class whites and racial minorities that had ensured congressional Democratic majorities in the post-war era.[8] Neoconservatives could not deploy an overt appeal to a theory of racial supremacy, however. Liberalism's great achievement has been to relieve race, at least in so far as it could be defined in biological terms, of its explanatory power over behavior, substituting culture or ethnicity. Displacing race with ethnicity, however, invited a social amnesia with respect to race as a historical experience and a social reality for millions. Once race is set aside as a false category, an appeal to a color-blind ideal can invoke the principle of racial equality without addressing the claims of historically racialized minorities. In the process of honing a covert appeal to white racial privilege, conservatives turned the liberal discourse of racial equality on its head. The color-blind society of Myrdal's American creed is not understood as a promise but assumed to be the actually existing condition of American society. The race problem is assumed to have been resolved with the dismantling of state-sponsored racial discrimination in the 1960s.

Although the intent of liberal ethnicity theorists had been to substitute culture for race as a means of opening up social mobility through ethnic assimilation, the rhetoric of culture could also reify cultural difference as immutable and resistant to historical change. In the current crisis, the family, both as a socioeconomic unit and as a trope of nationhood, has become the principal site of ideological struggle. Conservatives have encoded the appeal to race in terms of the family, allowing race to be at the same time ubiquitous and publicly invisible. Debates around labor force issues, wage structure, reproductive rights, racial equity, and national identity have all become encoded in the Right's effort to reconstruct "traditional family values" as an ideological response to the crisis of post-Fordism.

Even Moynihan's early characterization of the matriarchal black family as "a tangle of pathology" able to reproduce itself "without help from white racism" suggested that the "culture of poverty" could be understood without reference to poverty itself. Increasingly the discussion of poverty focused on the multigenerational and self-reproducing. The metaphor of black pathology displaced analysis of social crisis, the effects of massive unemployment, poverty, and the collapse of family life. Since it was the dysfunctionality of the black family, and not genetics, that determined black behavior (not, of course poverty or discrimination), race could be encoded as cultural difference into public debates over social policy.

In the 1980s, African Americans were constantly identified with social chaos and violence: witness Ronald Reagan's invocation of the infamous unnamed "welfare queen," George Bush's use of black rapist Willie Horton in ads during his first presidential campaign, tales of "wilding" black teenagers, even the sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas, President Bush's black conservative nominee to the Supreme Court. Although race was made to disappear as a category of analysis, dressed up as cultural difference it became ubiquitous as a coded trope in the discussion of social policy; it is nowhere and yet everywhere. Although the appeal to culture appears to be non-biological, hence non-racist, in fact it has become a mode of perpetuating race as a category of immutable cultural difference.

The model minority representation of Asian Americans that had originated in the Cold War and gained visibility in the mid-1960s has been expanded and transformed to fit the current crisis. Asian cultural difference is held to be a source of social capital. A mythic Asian American family, the imagined product of an ahistorical and reified Asian "traditional" culture, is a central image, expanded to fit a wider target. Increasingly, the imagined Asian American family has been upheld as a model not only to blacks and Latinos but to working-class and middle-class whites as well. In the updated model minority story fitted to the ideological demands of the post-Fordist crisis, not only social conservatism but also productivity is emphasized. Recent articles in the national press on Asian Americans emphasize their persistence in overcoming language barriers, their superior disciplinary and motivational roles as parents, and their "intact" families' success at savings.[9]

Twenty years after Asian Americans were first heralded as a potential model for the upward mobility of nonwhites in American society, David Bell theorized Asian American success in an 1985 essay in the *New Republic,* "The Triumph of Asian Americans." Bell summarized Asian American virtues as "self-sufficiency" and proclaimed this the secret to Asian

American success. At the center of such self-sufficiency he placed the traditional Asian American family, an "intact" family, significant in three ways: It provides a secure environment for children; it pushes those children to work harder; and it fosters savings.[10]

The *New Republic* did not hesitate to make an invidious comparison between Asian and African Americans. Bell's article characterizing Asian Americans as a self-sufficient racial minority that made no demands for institutional change followed an article in the same issue titled "Brown's Blacks." This article excoriated black students at Brown University for protesting a recent spate of assaults on minority students on campus and demanding greater representation among the faculty and in the curriculum. While the student protesters at Brown had been a broad coalition of Asian, Latino, and black students and had gained substantial support among white students at the liberal campus, the *New Republic* article ignored the multiracial aspect of the protest and chose to characterize the movement as solely a black protest, the black students as malcontents, and the troubles on campus as yet another negative result of misguided affirmative action. When read back to back, the comparison between the "good," self-disciplined and submissive Asian Americans and the ungrateful and complaining blacks could not have been made more clear.

In 1988, a news report that ten of the twelve winners of the prestigious Westinghouse Prizes for achievement in science among high school students were Asian American prompted Stephen Graubard, a history professor at Brown University and the editor of *Daedalus,* the prestigious journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, to publish an essay in the *New York Times* titled "Why Do Asian Pupils Win Those Prizes?" In a series of paradigmatic questions, Graubard laid out the implications of the traditional Asian American family model for all other Americans.

> Is the "stability" [of a dual parent family and a single family home] almost a prerequisite for school accomplishment? . . .
>
> If so, what is to be done for those hundreds of thousands of other New York children, many of illegitimate birth, who live with one parent, often in public housing, knowing little outside their dilapidated housing and decaying neighborhoods?

Graubard does not answer his own questions, but the family to which his questions lead us is unmistakable. It is the traditional Asian American family, presumed to be intact and self sufficient, and certain to be disciplinary and motivational.

> Do [non-Asian students] have teachers prepared to tell them that personal appearance matters, that a price is paid for spiked hair and blue lipstick? . . .

Who, for the impoverished black or Puerto Rican student, advises something other than the conventional educational path?

In Graubard's view it is not only African American and Latino families who will do well to learn from Asian Americans. In a peculiar formulation of racial and ethnic difference, Graubard asks, "What would it take for Puerto Rican, black and *white children of certain ethnic origins* to become serious competitors for such honors, and what would such an academic 'revolution' mean?" [Emphasis added.]

In Graubard's view, it is not only racial and ethnic minorities (including those mysterious "white children of certain ethnic origins") who should learn from the disciplined and motivated traditional Asian American family; America's middle class can also improve its performance by taking a lesson from Asian America. After all, the glittering prizes now captured by Asian American students had once been the patrimony of middle-class white students. Graubard asks what has happened to those students: "What about the others [of the middle class]? . . . Are the children of such families reaching out and securing the great prizes? . . . The children of the middle class, who are much more privileged but appear both indolent and incompetent . . ."[11]

For both Bell and Graubard, Asian American "success" is a product of an unspecified and decontextualized traditional Asian culture. Tradition is reduced to the values of obedience, discipline, and motivation enacted by the family, those traditions most valued in the late capitalist economy. In contrast, at the heart of the economic and academic difficulties of black, Hispanic, working-class, and even middle-class America is the cultural pathology of family structures that tolerate spiked hair and blue lipstick.

What distinguishes the model minority myth as a hegemonic mode of racial representation is not primarily its distance from reality but rather its power to dominate or displace other social facts. Ideological hegemony operates through its power to absorb, co-opt, or displace oppositional views, to tie a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of images and representations into an explanatory whole. It is the location of specific images and representations within the hegemonic paradigm that endows those images with ideological power.

The hegemonic power of culture as the new defining category of difference can be seen in an August 1987 cover story of *Time* Magazine, "The New Whiz Kids." This article attempts to provide a more balanced and informed picture of the educational achievements of young Asian Americans. It showcases their scholastic triumphs but also discusses both the institutional barriers that still stand in the way of Asian American students and the cost in stress that many pay for such success.

The article quotes extensively from a variety of experts on education, including scholars who study Asian American communities. Nevertheless, both the structure of the inquiry and the outcome of the article's conclusions are built around the reified concept of the "traditional" Asian family. The *Time* writers cite Professor William Liu of the University of Illinois at Chicago who asserts that Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese students perform better because "the Confucian ethic drives people to work, excel and repay the debt they owe their parents." The article contrasts this information to the observation of Professor Ruben G. Rumbaut, a sociologist at San Diego State University, that "Laotians and Cambodians, who do somewhat less well, have a gentler Buddhist approach to life."[12]

Assigning the differences in achievement and social mobility of various Asian American ethnic groups to assumed differences between a disciplined Confucian tradition (supposedly shared by Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese) and a "gentler" Buddhist tradition (shared by Laotians and Cambodians) is, at best, astoundingly simplistic. Whatever impact a millennium of Buddhism may have had on China, Japan, or Vietnam is gently ignored. The high proportion of ethnic Chinese among the Cambodian and Laotian immigrant communities is also ignored. The high proportion of second-, third-, and fourth-generation American-born and middle-class Japanese Americans is ignored. Perhaps the most important ignored factor is the higher educational and occupational skill levels, and greater capital, that Chinese, Korean, and first-wave Vietnamese brought with them to the United States. Indeed, the entire history of Asia, a region in which social and cultural change has been nothing less than revolutionary in the twentieth century, is ignored in this rush to reify traditional culture as the key to Asian American success.

In their rush to judgment on the cultural superiority of Asian Americans, these commentators almost completely ignore recent Asian American history. Indeed, although these articles draw heavily on the images of recent Asian immigrants, all but the most self-evident facts about the revolutionary changes in the demography of Asian America since 1965 are elided by the hegemonic status of culture as the determining variable of social mobility. Bell, Graubard, and *Time* Magazine fail to ask even the most basic questions about the American economy and the place of Asians, blacks, Latinos, or "whites of certain ethnic origins" within it.

Recent Asian American history offers a different interpretative paradigm for understanding patterns of Asian American economic success and hardship. Since 1970, the Asian/Pacific Islander population (to use the Census Bureau's designation) has been the fastest growing nonwhite minority in America. Between 1970 and 1994, the Asian American

population grew from 1.4 million to 8.8 million people.[13] The huge growth through immigration of the Asian American population has not been evenly distributed across ethnic groups, class, or sex. While there has been considerable economic success among Asian Americans, they also experience undeniable poverty. Both phenomena can be explained more accurately by the realities of Asian immigration patterns than by the secrets of traditional Asian family values.[14]

The explosion of the Asian/Pacific Islander population was due primarily to massive immigration from Asia after the passage of Immigration Reform Act of 1965. In addition to dismantling the national quota system that had been designed to exclude Asian immigration, the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 contained two provisions that encouraged immigration from Asia. The new policy favored the entry of scientific, technical, and professional personnel, and it gave preference to family members of immigrants already resident in the United States.

The most significant factor in accounting for Asian American economic prosperity—and that undermines the notion of Asian American cultural superiority—is the fact that a large proportion of this new Asian immigration was already middle-class on arrival in the United States. The 1965 immigration act favoring technical and scientific personnel and those who met specific occupational needs (particularly medical personnel) not only encouraged immigration from Asia, where economic development policies had created a pool of well-educated technical personnel eager to emigrate, but it also made likely the successful economic integration of Asian immigrants in the 1970s. Between 1965 and the mid-1970s, the majority of immigrants from Asia were middle-class professionals.[15]

In addition to their immediate integration into the professional, technical, and managerial sectors of the work force, the large proportion of middle-class immigrants among Asian Americans resulted in a second generation of children who were academically advantaged. Thus the "brain drain" from Asia in the 1970s resulted in an Asian American population that was already highly educated. According to the Census Bureau's 1994 statistics, slightly more Asian Americans than non-Hispanic whites over the age of twenty-five had completed four years of high school, and almost twice as many had completed college.[16]

In some respects Asian immigration has matched the demand for capital and labor at both ends of the post-Fordist economy. Since the late 1970s, the demand for semiskilled, unskilled, and entrepreneurial labor in the new low-wage manufacturing and service sectors of the post-Fordist economy has been met in large part by Asian and Latin American immigrants. Although the absolute number of professionals among

Asian immigrants has remained high, since the mid 1970s they no longer make up the majority of immigrants from Asia. Working-class immigrants and refugees now make up the majority of Asian immigrants. In particular, women now outnumber men among immigrants from Asian countries. Some come independently as workers; others come as spouses to American citizens and as permanent resident aliens. Many have had work experience in Asia—in the needle trades, electronic assembly work, institutional custodial or housekeeping work, or food service. Some come with semiprofessional skills, particularly in the health industry, as nurses and technicians.[17] In sum, Asian Americans, particularly immigrant Asian workers, have a highly visible position in both ends of the post-Fordist economy, in what urban sociologist Saskia Sassen has called "global cities"—the command centers for serving the financial needs of the new transnational economy.

The suggestion of parity between Asian Americans and non-Hispanic white Americans is, therefore, deceptive. The figure cited most often to illustrate the Asian American success story is the median income of Asian American families ($42,250 in the 1980s and -90s), slightly higher than the median income for white families. When controlled for geography and the number of wage earners per family, however, the income of Asian Americans falls short of that for non-Hispanic white Americans.[18]

Despite the fact that a large number of Asian Americans are successful, a disproportionate number of Asian Americans are poor. In 1990, while 8 percent of non-Hispanic white families had incomes below the Federal poverty guidelines, 11 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander families had incomes below the poverty guidelines. In 1994, despite their higher educational attainment and similar family income, the poverty rate for Asian/Pacific Islander families was almost double that of non-Hispanic white families. Among families with high school educated householders, the poverty rate was almost twice that of non-Hispanic white families; among college-educated householders, the poverty rate of Asian/Pacific Islander families was almost three times that of non-Hispanic white families. The poverty rate for Asian/Pacific Islander married couples was more than twice that of white married couples.[19]

The Asian American as Gook

The model minority concept as theorized by Bell, Graubard, and *Time* Magazine singles out for praise those values most closely identified with the Protestant work ethic. Obedience, self-control, individualism, and loyalty to the needs of the nuclear family, as opposed to either anarchic libertarianism (spiked hair and blue lipstick) or social consciousness

(black radicalisms), are mobilized in an imagined Asian American tradition that is deployed in the attempt to restore American hegemony in the global marketplace.

The model minority has two faces. The myth presents Asian Americans as silent and disciplined; this is their secret to success. At the same time, this silence and discipline is used in constructing the Asian American as a new yellow peril. In contemporary dystopian narratives of post-Fordist urban America, the Asian American is both identified with the enemy that defeated the United States in Vietnam and figured as the agent of the current collapse of the American empire. The Vietnam War story, told as the tragedy of America's lost innocence, works as a master narrative of national collapse while defining the post-Fordist crisis as a product of invasion and betrayal.

The constant refrain in Vietnam War narratives is that the Americans are unable to see and know, and thereby to conquer, the Viet Cong—reason enough for My Lai, free fire zones, tiger cages, and, ultimately, defeat. The supposed invisibility of the Viet Cong led to the racialization of the Vietnam War. "Gook" became the most common racial epithet used by Americans to describe Vietnamese, enemy and ally alike. Indeed, the supposed invisibility of the communist enemy led American soldiers, who measured the war in body counts, to invoke the "mere gook rule," whereby any dead Vietnamese could be counted as a dead enemy.

The term "gook" has a long history in the American vocabulary of race and in the American imperial career in Asia and the Pacific. A bastardization of the Korean *hankuk* (Korean), or *mikuk* (American), it was used by Americans in the Korean War to refer to North and South Koreans and Chinese alike. The term also has links to "goo-goo," used by American soldiers used to describe Filipino insurgents at the turn of the century.

Such broad ethnic inclusiveness makes this racial epithet emblematic in describing Asian Americans as the ubiquitous and invisible enemy. Asian Americans, figured as gooks, the flip side of the model minority, become the scapegoats onto which anxiety over economic decline and the psychic trauma of the Vietnam War can be transferred. They appear silently, like the Viet Cong, as an alien threat in these narratives of multicultural dystopia and besieged nationhood, at once ubiquitous and invisible, ersatz and inauthentic.

The myth that America lost the war in southeast Asia because it had been betrayed by the liberal elite mobilizes a populist working-class rejection of liberal economic and social policy and lays the foundation for an attempt to restore American hegemony by revitalizing an undivided American people. The theme of betrayal as the cause of America's fall from grace attributes the defeat of the United States in southeast Asia to the sapping of American strength as a result of radical divisiveness and liberal tolerance. This breakdown of American unity is reflected in the breakdown of the traditional American nuclear family. The embattled nuclear family becomes a trope for national unity beset by the divisiveness of feminism, multiculturalism, and class conflict. In this dystopian vision of post-Vietnam America, the Asian American model minority becomes the enemy within, economically productive but culturally inauthentic, and thus unsuitable as model for national restoration.

Race Wars in the Global City: *Blade Runner*

Four towering blast furnaces belch flame and smoke into the night air over densely built Los Angeles in the year 2019. Shot from above the city, the opening scene of Ridley Scott's dystopian vision of the post-Fordist City of Angels recalls J.M.W. Turner's painting of satanic mills lighting up the night over the English midlands at beginning of the industrial revolution. No longer the low-slung, endlessly expanding metropolis crisscrossed with sprawling freeways, Scott's LA is a dense, dark, constricted cityscape, the imploding dark star of the American empire. *Blade Runner*'s vision of the global city as a social Darwinist nightmare is a catastrophic representation of the crisis of the post-Fordist present.

In the global cities—New York, London, Los Angeles, Hong Kong—are concentrated huge numbers of financial service agents and a corps of professional and semiprofessional support personnel ranging from stockbrokers, lawyers, and bankers to media consultants, medical personnel, and celebrity chefs. Supporting this professional and managerial elite are the new hewers of wood and drawers of water: millions of low-wage, mostly unorganized, mostly nonwhite, mostly immigrant army of waiters, chambermaids, housekeepers, orderlies, and day-care workers.

Sassen observes that in the 1980s foreign capital flowed into the new manufacturing sectors in Los Angeles and New York, making the United States a net importer of capital.[20] Of particular importance in the transition to flexible accumulation has been the rapid relocation of production, accompanied by the rise of competitive capitalist centers in east Asia—not only reconstructed Japan, but also Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea. The internationalization of capital means that immigrant workers in Los Angeles and New York are not exploited by U.S. capital alone. Industrial LA is just as much an imperial venture as plants in the Philippines. Los Angeles is thus both a First World and a Third World city.

While industrial production in the older, more highly organized, more

capital-intensive sectors of the manufacturing economy (heavy industry, automotive and durable goods) has been transferred overseas or to non-union regions of the United States, a new manufacturing sector has enjoyed phenomenal growth in the global cities. Since the early 1970s, manufacturing industries have increasingly relied on rapid changes in fashion to keep up demand in periods of real income decline. This has resulted in the introduction of on-demand production in many areas of manufacturing. New technologies in communications, design, and production allow the rapid transfer of capital and reorientation of machinery to produce new products.

This also means that the highest profit margins occur during the early phases of production, rather than in the giant mass production associated with the Fordist economy. David Harvey observes that in the new manufacturing sectors that do not rely on high technology, capitalists have reintroduced pre-Fordist decentralized systems of production, such as family-directed home sweatshops and semi-coerced labor at underground subcontracting plants employing illegal immigrants. The shift to on-demand and decentralized manufacturing processes has created huge new markets for temporary, part-time, and migrant labor. The system of decentralized production is also highly ethnicized, with ethnic networks of capital formation, business associations, supply networks, and labor recruitment. Paul Ong and Edna Bonacich report that as many as 85 percent of garment industry subcontractors in Los Angeles are Korean, Chinese, or Vietnamese immigrants, and the great majority of their workers are Latino.[21] In other cities, such as San Francisco and New York, Asian immigrants make up a large percentage of garment workers.

David Harvey has observed that *Blade Runner* maps the post-Fordist economic geography of the global city, with its dense imagery of the totalizing multinational corporation and its decentralized mode of production that relies on a myriad of small ethnic subcontractors and armies of Third-World manufacturing and service workers. At the apex of *Blade Runner*'s LA is the totalitarian Tyrell Corporation, a giant postnational biotechnology conglomerate. Tyrell produces life itself, albeit synthetic life. Its project is to replace all authentic life with simulacra (true copies for which no originals exist). At the top of this synthetic chain of beings are replicants, genetically engineered androids. The corporation's control over human life is symbolized in its headquarters building, a fortress of massive proportions that visually recalls an Aztec temple of human sacrifice. State and civil society are collapsed and subsumed to the totalitarian power of the Tyrell Corporation. Just as LAPD helicopters do today, police hovercraft skim over the future city, keeping vigilance from a distance over the teeming masses on the ground. Reflecting the huge

growth in the 1980s and 1990s of what David Gordon calls the guardian sector of the economy and the increasing privatization of security, police, and prisons, the state is reduced to its role as guardian of order and brought under the aegis of the corporation.

Reflecting contemporary Los Angeles, *Blade Runner*'s decentralized mode of production is elaborately racialized. At the service and manufacturing end, the work force is principally Oriental, represented by Chew (Phillip Hong) the specialized producer of replicant eyes ("I only do eyes"). The economy that supplies parts to the giant Tyrell Corporation is made up of small workshops peopled in the main by ethnic, mainly Asian, labor. A Cambodian woman, a specialist in exotic animals, is the lab technician who examines simulated reptile scales. On the street, beneath garish neon lights and a giant video screen on whose soundtrack a female announcer hawks the opportunity to remake life "off world," the multiracial denizens of Los Angeles buy synthetic fish at a sushi stand from a Japanese vendor. Only the weak, the diseased, the perverse, and the cops are left in the city; the powerful, wealthy, and healthy have all abandoned America with Richard Nixon for off world, the galactic suburbs. Once the epicenter of the golden California dream, the City of Angels is now a congested hybrid of downtown Tokyo and New York. The giant video screen advertises the only good life. The disembodied voice intones, "A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure. New climate, recreational facilities . . . absolutely free." Off world is not only a chance to rebuild and reinvigorate the body with new climate and adventure; it also offers nostalgic possibilities of racial and class restoration. The advertisement goes on to encourage would-be pioneers to bring a slave, in the body of a replicant, with them. "Use your new friend as a personal body servant or a tireless field hand—the custom-tailored genetically engineered humanoid replicant designed especially for your needs."

The United States might no longer be the unchallenged master of the post-Fordist global political economy, but the colonization of off world is still couched in nationalist terms. "So come on America, let's put our team up there." The director's cut of the film, released in 1992, added the following line, underscoring America's dependence on Asian and Latino capital and labor: "This announcement is brought to you by the Shimato-Dominguez Corporation—helping America into the New World."

Blade Runner signifies a post-Vietnam multiculturalism as racial degeneration. A 1980s pop song boasted that it never rains in southern California, but in Ridley Scott's Los Angeles, it always rains. In 2019 the city lives in a impenetrable smog, its environmental degradation an emblem of

the social degeneracy brought about by the domination of global capital and labor migration. Apart from the Asian worker drones, the police, and the street urchins, the only humans left in LA are freaks of nature or freaks of culture. Scott's vision of the multiculturalism of the global city is a visualization of what Lothrop Stoddard sixty years earlier had called "disgenic mongrelization."

In this film adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* Decker (Harrison Ford) is a blade runner, a twenty-first-century bounty hunter, expert in identifying and killing replicants who have slipped back to Earth from off-world space colonies where they perform labor as coolies, mercenaries, and body servants. Brought out of retirement for a special assignment, Decker sets out to hunt down and exterminate a group of six replicants who have returned to Earth to find a way to extend their foreshortened lifespan.

At one level, as a story told from the ambivalent point of view of the blade runner, replicants can be seen as escaped slaves from the off-world mining and plantation colonies. At another level, set against the context of the American Century's end, replicants can also be seen as representing the betrayed victims of America's imperial adventures coming home to roost: the Vietnamese abandoned at the American embassy, the Hmong warriors of the CIA's secret war in Laos, traumatized black and white GIs, victims of Agent Orange, hundreds if not thousands of POWs and MIAs, the assassinated Diem brothers. "Retirement," the euphemism for the assassination of replicants, is reminiscent of "termination with extreme prejudice," the U.S. government's euphemism for assassination. Like Vietnam War survivors who can bear witness to My Lai, free fire zones, Project Phoenix, and the Hanoi Hilton, the replicants serve as witnesses to America's betrayal of its liberal promise. Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), the leader of the replicants, confesses to having carried out unnamed but morally distasteful tasks for his human masters. "I've done . . . questionable things. [But] nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn't let you into heaven for." In his dying soliloquy, Batty tells Decker, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die."

Like the Asian American model minority, replicants are the perfect workers, virtually indistinguishable from humans (to all but their owners and the blade runners) yet completely inauthentic. Replicants can be expected to perform humanly, yet need not be treated humanely. Since they are products of genetic engineering, replicants are, materially, human. Genetically customized to their assigned tasks, replicant humans

are more efficient than actual humans in their physical capacities. Like the model minority, replicants can represent perfectibility and perfect malleability; since they are simulacra, they are completely inauthentic.

In a movie in which considerable attention is paid to the creation of polyglot ethnicities (the police captain, played by Edward Olmos, is a mulatto of unspecified origins who speaks a creole that sounds like Malay-Indonesian; street urchins speak ersatz German), the ubiquitous Asian paraphernalia and a conspicuous absence of black bodies underscores the role of the Asian as the alien, an Orientalizing presence. The extremely pale hue of the two principal replicants, Batty and Pris (Darryl Hannah), underscores the social constructedness of race and its markers, the effect of whiteface minstrelsy.

As in Bierce's "The Haunted Valley," the use of the eyes as the sole physical marker of difference accentuates the constructed nature of the difference between replicant humans and natural humans. The two are indistinguishable except for a faint glow in the eyes of the replicant. This glow can be discerned only with the use of high technology in an examination. The examination scene brings to mind the interrogation of thousands of Chinese immigrants detained at Angel Island. Eye symbolism is visible everywhere in *Blade Runner,* from the opening scene to replicant owls to the light bulbs on the broken-down Bradbury building. The symbol of authenticity, eyes are a fetishized commodity. In Chew's shop, called Eye World, Chew and one of his replicants, Leon, handle the eyes. Batty, the leader of the renegade replicants, plays with glass-encased eyes in his apartment. In his search for Tyrell, his creator, Batty tries to get answers from Chew, the eye maker. In an ironic statement, Batty says to Chew, "If only you could see what I have seen with your eyes." Batty has been a witness through the eyes that Chew has manufactured for him. If eyes are the principal markers of authenticity, they are also a vulnerable target. Tyrell has huge glasses, both to make his eyes appear bigger and to protect them. Leon tries to kill Decker by poking out his eyes. Batty finally kills Tyrell, pressing his thumbs into his creator's eyes.

The Tyrell Corporation has given the replicants life but has purposely truncated that life. The physical difference that is engineered into the replicant and that motivates the replicants' search for their history is a genetic code that gives them only four years of life. In the view of their creator, Tyrell, their truncated lifespans are compensated for by the intensity of the lives they are given. When Batty finally confronts him as son to father, Tyrell tells him, "The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long . . . and you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy." The replicant's key to solving their problem of survival is to construct a history for themselves as individuals, to identify their inception dates, and

as a group to find the design of their system—a desperate search for assimilation.

The critical difference between natural humans and replicants parallels the difference between "real Americans" and the Oriental American. Both the android "new friend" and the model minority are people without history; both are simulacra whom a programmed historical memory simultaneously renders functional and inauthentic. Both replicant and model minority are critical to production but, lacking history, are necessarily sterile in the reproduction of a national narrative. The paradox of economic productivity and cultural sterility is underscored in *Blade Runner* through the highlighted role of the Asian worker in producing replicants. This reproduction of labor power can be understood as the literal reproduction of labor, in which the original model minority produces an improved, more productive work force, one that cannot threaten the national identity by reproducing itself.

New York as Saigon: *Year of the Dragon*

If *Blade Runner* is a parable of the backwash of the Vietnam War, Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon,* released in 1985, is its literal reenactment. New York's Chinatown is the last domino of the Vietnam War. While sharing *Blade Runner*'s penchant for Orientalizing spectacle and pastiche, *Year of the Dragon* (screenplay by Michael Cimino and Oliver Stone) situates the new Asian immigration squarely within the Vietnam War narrative. In Manhattan in 1985, as in southeast Asia a decade earlier, the spectacle of the Orient masks revolution and invasion.

The film opens with the spectacle of a lion dance and a lunar new year's parade complete with synthesized, Orientalized jazz soundtrack. Ornately costumed, masked dancers and firecrackers contribute to detailed and absorbing visual and aural spectacle. In a nearby restaurant, Jackie Wong, a longtime Chinatown crime boss, is assassinated. As the lion dance turns into a gang fight and shoot-out, the dancing and the fighting, the dancers and the fighters become indistinguishable. Later, during Jackie Wong's funeral, two teenage Chinese gang members shake down an Italian American shopkeeper across Canal Street. The shopkeeper, invoking what heretofore had been a Mafia-protected Little Italy, dismissively curses them: "Cross Canal Street, you little chink scumbag, you're going to end up with a wire around your neck." The "little chink scumbags" curse him in a patois of Chinese-English and then shoot him. The shooting signals the armed crossing of old ethnic boundaries and the invasion of new Chinese immigrants into old ethnic American turf.

As one police official warns, "Chinese are coming across Canal Street and taking over the drug trade, banks, and real estate."

The introduction of the film's antihero protagonist, Stanley White, a Vietnam veteran, makes explicit the film's argument that the struggle to contain the Chinese in New York is a chapter of the Vietnam War. White is the new sheriff in town; given the command of the Chinatown precinct, he takes it upon himself to clean up Chinatown. For him, Asian Americans, and new immigrants in particular, are the enemy. White's superiors warn him to proceed cautiously, lest he upset the comfortable relationship between the police and old Chinatown bosses. They warn him that organized crime is an integral part of ancient Chinese culture. "The Mafia concept is not even Italian, it's Chinese," says his superior. For White, his police superiors are like the liberals who dictated Vietnam War policy. They want Chinese expansion to be contained but not defeated. They warn him, "You want to attack Chinatown with the Eighty-second Airborne. This isn't Vietnam."

But for White, New York's Chinatown *is* Vietnam; Asian America *is* the ground on which the Vietnam War can be fought again and again, and this time won for white America. Echoing the accusation that liberal elites abandoned America in southeast Asia, White asks, "Will they let us win this time?" White mobilizes the central myth around which the master narrative of the Vietnam War is organized: the ubiquitousness and invisibility of the Asian enemy. White fiddles with his Marine lapel pin, looks through the window at an American flag, and baldly conflating Asian Americans with his former Vietnamese enemies, declares, "The difference was, there I never saw the goddamned enemy, here they are right in front of your eyes—they don't have a jungle to hide in."

Although *Year of the Dragon* trades on the themes of the Vietnam War, it makes use of many of the same narrative conventions that Sax Rohmer deployed in his Fu Manchu series. The contemporary yellow peril, the invasion of new Chinese immigrants and their gangs, are embodied in the figure of Joey Tai (John Lone). His physical appearance and mannerisms recall Fu Manchu's; he is tall, slender, elegant, and androgynous, hinting at sadomasochistic sexual ambivalence.

Much like Sax Rohmer, Cimino deploys spectacle and makes use of a pastiche imagery of different Asian cultures to create a universal Oriental otherness. Like Fu Manchu, Joey Tai is presented as an urbane and sophisticated criminal mastermind. Both avoid personal violence, preferring to send out their multiethnic minions to do their bidding. (Though Tai's thugs are principally Asian, his chief lieutenant is a Mandarin-speaking African American.) Both Fu Manchu and Joey Tai command Oriental

"At least here we can see them": Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) faces off with Joey Tai (John Lone) in *Year of the Dragon*.
Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Archives

gangs in the West and secret armies in southeast Asia. In a scene of extraordinary Orientalist excess, Joey Tai is shown surrounded by a teeming horde of armed guerrillas, entering the camp of an aging Kuomintang Chinese warlord who is his heroin supplier in the Thai hinterlands.

Just as Nayland Smith, the former agent of empire in Burma, "knows" the otherwise unknowable Orient, Stanley White, the Vietnam veteran, "knows" Asians and therefore Chinatown. White recruits an ambitious, if vacuous, female Asian American television reporter, Tracy Tzu (Ariane), by telling her the inside story of Chinatown. In juxtaposing White's intimate knowledge of the Chinese community with Tracy Tzu's ignorance of it, Cimino establishes White's Orientalist authority over the Asian American story.

Cimino uses the gaze of Tracy Tzu's television camera to colonize Chinatown. In a scene reminiscent of Nayland Smith exposing the dark corridors of opium dens in Fu Manchu's Limehouse, Tzu's television camera penetrates the veil of Chinatown, moving from banks above ground to subterranean gambling dens, from gaudy gilt and red restaurants to the dark and dank cellars where workers toil below ground. The audience is led to believe that it can see both the public exterior and secret interior of Asian American life.

Much as Sax Rohmer uses a bigoted and ignorant policeman as a buffoonish foil for Nayland Smith's Orientalist erudition, Cimino deploys Stanley White's own overt racism as a foil for the film's Orientalist position. The criticism and rejection of White's most overtly racist comments and views by his own colleagues and supporters paradoxically serve to reinforce the essential correctness of his viewpoint. His racism is presented as excessive and potentially damaging to his righteous crusade against the Chinese. In the end, Stanley White, for all his racism, is validated by the two "good" Chinese, Tracy Tzu, who submits to his rape, and his rookie subordinate, Herbert, who submits to his racism.

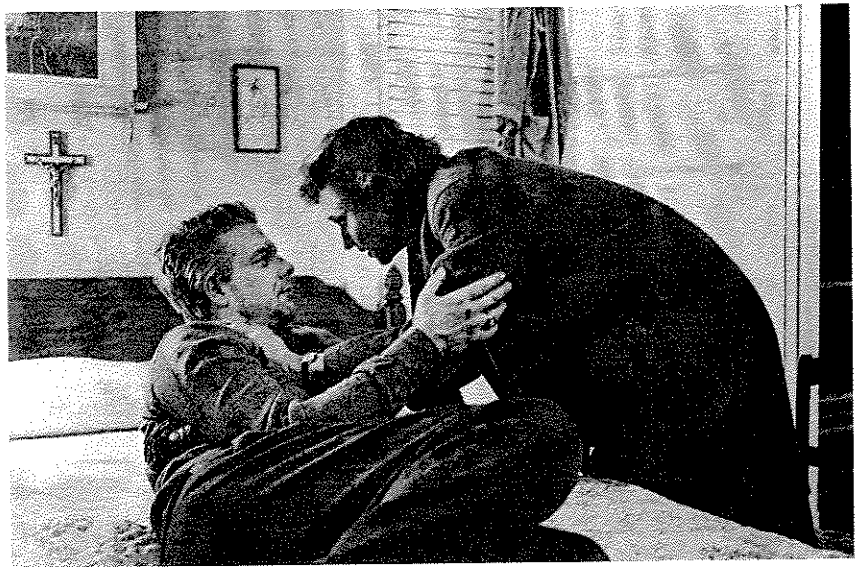
At the heart of the confrontation between Stanley White and Joey Tai is the class struggle in the post-Fordist political economy. Both Joey Tai and Stanley White are in rebellion against their immigrant elders. Both are brash and ruthless: Tai, the new immigrant, and White, the new white ethnic. Both challenge the old, corrupt, venal, and compliant older immigrant generation. Both Tai and White strive to break out of their respective ethnic ghettos into the American dream. Outwardly Joey Tai is a successful young businessman, a pillar of the Chinese community, a model of the emergent new immigrant success story. Lone's Joey Tai, like Hayakawa's Hisuru Tori in *The Cheat*, is contemporary, modish, and sophisticated. Joey Tai is impeccably dressed and elegant, while Stanley White sports a designer haircut and, most important, has changed his name from Wyscinski to White. It is Joey Tai who seems to be most at ease with the privilege that his power and wealth have given him. White, on the other hand, is mired in bitter class resentments against both the upper classes and the recent immigrants who aspire to upper-class privilege. Joey Tai represents the new ethnic entrepreneurial capital. His resources are global: his extended family and his financial network. Stanley White represents the abandoned rust-belt economy. His resources are local: his nuclear family and his racist instincts. The class struggle between Joey Tai and Stanley White is overdetermined by race, Stanley Wyscinski's trump card in the class struggle. The son of Polish immigrants, Wyscinski can become white, a transformation that Joey Tai can never make.

Ultimately the class struggle between Stanley White and Joey Tai is fought out in the arena of sexuality. As Gina Marchetti observes, it is presented as an explicitly homosocial struggle over the control of women and an implicitly homoerotic sadomasochistic relationship between the two men.[22] Class has long been a common signifier of difference within the homoerotic, simultaneously expressing and containing class struggle

within the realm of the sexual. In *Year of the Dragon,* this veiled, homoerotically charged class struggle gives us a restorationist narrative of patriarchy and racial subordination in populist drag.

Stanley White is torn between two women: his wife Connie, a white ethnic working-class feminist, and Tracy Tzu, the yuppie Oriental television reporter. To White, the Vietnam vet, Connie is the embodiment of an unwelcomed post-Vietnam feminism. When Stanley returns home late, after his first meeting with Tracy, Connie emerges from the kitchen, not with a hot dinner, but with a monkey wrench in her greasy hands. She announces angrily that the washing machine is broken, that she has to go to work, and that Stanley can fix it.

When Stanley follows Connie up to the bedroom, his Marine fatigue jacket is left hanging on the newel post of the staircase and carries the emasculating weight of the defeat in Vietnam.[23] Connie is emblematic of the new feminism; she is financially independent, a nurse, and moreover, she is in control of her sexuality. Connie demands sex timed for reproduction, but Stanley has continually arrived too late or has been otherwise unable to perform. Connie's anger is palpable. When Stanley misreads Connie's anger and, oblivious to the real issue, says that he will



"You're living in the past": Connie White (Caroline Cava) confronts Stanley White in the bedroom.
Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Archives

buy her a new washing machine, she, echoing the sentiments of his police superiors, snaps, "You're living in the past."

The figure of Tracy Tzu is created in stark contrast to that of Connie White. Tracy Tzu is a junior member of the media elite, another emergent class stratum of the post-Fordist political economy, and one that Stanley White, as a precinct captain, must learn to deal with. Tracy Tzu is played with remarkable woodenness by Ariane, a model with little acting experience. Although controversial at the time, this casting precisely fits the requirements of the Orientalized female as newscaster. Epitomized by Connie Chung, though now simulated in virtually every major television market in the nation, the Orientalized female, constructed without subjectivity, is perfectly suited to be a news reader. She is attractive and reliable, not only because she can be spoken to and through, but also because she can be trusted not to speak for herself.

Tracy Tzu comes from an upper-class family, not unlike the ones that abandoned White and his friends in Vietnam. Unlike White, who went to Vietnam, Tracy Tzu has gone to the university. She flaunts both her upper-class privilege and her sexuality before White. Stanley White says that he hated her "kind" when he was in Vietnam. Stanley's sexual conquest of Tracy Tzu is an act of both racial and class revenge and, by extension, may be seen as a homosexual rape of Joey Tai. Tracy Tzu appears as androgynous as Joey Tai. Her pale skin, aquiline nose, and slim hips, her short-cropped, slicked-back hair, and elegant clothes make her a virtual double for Tai.

The androgyny of Tracy Tzu is accentuated by her stark black costumes, which contrast with the casual house clothes or nurses' whites of the earthier and potentially reproductive Connie. Tracy Tzu's apartment is appointed in minimalist white and black; Connie White's house is in what appears to be a working-class white ethnic neighborhood. (When Stanley White returns home after dinner with Tracy Tzu, the block is lit by the light of the neighborhood Catholic church.) The upper-class sterility of Tracy Tzu's apartment is directly contrasted to the fecundity of the ethnic home with its pictures of Jesus, a cross, medallions of saints, and pictures of family on the bedroom wall.

It is only after avenging America's defeat in southeast Asia on Tracy Tzu's body that Stanley White can return home to Connie and attempt to fulfill his role as husband and protector, although this gesture comes too late. Joey Tai has sent assassins who kill Connie. Later Tai sends a gang of Asian thugs to rape Tracy Tzu, thereby asserting Tai's claim over the Asian woman. In this post-Vietnam scenario, Stanley White, the Vietnam vet, fails both as husband and protector, while the new immigrant,

Chinatown spectacle: Stanley White with Tracy Tzu (Arianne) in a Chinese restaurant. Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Archives

Joey Tai, his family visible in the background in photographs and at ceremonies, is able to adopt a public persona as a generous and respected father and community leader.

Year of the Dragon rejects the claim that Asian Americans are a model minority. Instead, it figures them as gooks. Far from providing the model for the patriarchal restoration, which Stanley White yearns for, the new Asian immigrant godfather, Joey Tai, destroys the "real American" family and replaces it with a simulacrum. The figure of the honor student turned "gangbanger" reveals the model minority to be the Viet Cong.

The three "good" Asian American characters underscore the film's rejection of Asian immigrant claims to America. Tracy Tzu's ambivalent position as both object of desire and seductive destroyer of the family is only redeemed by her collaboration with White and her ultimate devotion to him. The second "good" Chinese is Herbert Kuang, a recently immigrated police cadet, who is dragooned into Stanley White's service. Like most sidekicks, Kuang is a buffoonish character whose worth is measured only in his Gunga Din–like devotion to his racial superior. But even Kuang grows weary of White's racial abuse. He launches into a short soliloquy on Asian Americans, asserting that Chinese are no longer

coolies or houseboys and that he will not die for White. Of course, after White cajoles him into spying on Joey Tai, he is discovered and does die for White. Kuang's gesture of resistance, momentarily compelling, becomes completely irrelevant as an intervention against White's racism, and his death paradoxically ratifies White's racist judgments.

The third "good Chinese" is an elderly worker in an underground bean sprout factory who discovers the bodies of several gang members and reports his discovery to the police. He later appears at Connie White's funeral and is acknowledged in passing by Stanley White. This character, who remains silent except for his dutiful report to the police, represents the good, older generation of Chinese immigrants who knew their place.

In the early 1980s, the mounting trade deficit with Japan, driven in no small part by the preference of American consumers for Japanese automobiles, prompted some American business and labor leaders, especially in the auto industry, to accuse Japan of waging an undeclared trade war. In 1984, Lee Iaccoca, a former president of the Ford Motor Company and self-styled populist maverick, elaborated on this theme of invisible war and elite betrayal in his immensely popular autobiography:

> Right now we're in the midst of another major war with Japan. This time it's not a shooting war and I guess we can be thankful for that. The current conflict is a trade war. But because our government refuses to see this war for what it really is, we're well on the road to defeat.[24]

Year of the Dragon is an attempt to "bring the war home," this time to win it. While Stanley White's overt racism is dutifully condemned by all of his associates—his superiors, Connie, Tracy, Herbert—they are all figured as liberals, well-meaning but hopelessly naive. In the task of exposing the model minority as a new incarnation of the Viet Cong, race is the only lens that allows White, and the audience, to flush the invisible enemy out of the jungle into the city where "here, at least, you could see them."

In 1985, in Iacocca's Detroit, two furloughed autoworkers, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitze, encountered Vincent Chin, a Chinese American automotive engineer, in a strip club. Ebens and Nitze taunted Chin as a "Jap," the enemy of the American auto industry. Chin took exception, and a fight ensued. After retreating to a nearby McDonald's, Eben and Nitze armed themselves with baseball bats and went in search of Chin. They found him a block away and beat him to death on the spot. After their conviction for manslaughter, trial judge Irving Kaufman released both men with a fine, stating that they were good citizens and represented no threat to the community.