



The absent mother in *Broken Blossoms*: the New Woman among the denizens of Chinatown.
Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Archives

of the twentieth century, journalist Louis Beck in *New York Chinatown*, the progressive urban social reformers Helen Campbell and Thomas Knox in *Lights and Shadows of New York*, and Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* all described in lurid detail the moral corruption of New York's Chinatown.

In both the DeMille and Griffith films, Asian immigrant men are not redeemed either by their social assimilation (*The Cheat*) or by sympathetic and noble behavior (*Broken Blossoms*); their race renders them irredeemable. In both cases, the irreducible difference of race is revealed through the Asian man's (unrealized) desire for sexual relations with a white woman. In the critical scene of thwarted desire in each film, the white heroine "instinctively" draws away, much as the Supreme Court would later say that the great majority of "our people" will "instinctively reject assimilation" [with Asians].

Tori's relationship with Edith in *The Cheat* reveals the presumed limits of assimilation. In the bright light of white society, Tori appears as

the totally assimilated, completely acceptable member of the community, which he enters with the eager assistance of middle-class white women. These women are attracted to him, and he is most at ease with them. However, branding his possessions in the shadowy corners of his own house, Tori is unmasked as Fu Manchu. He is driven by a compulsive need to possess and to colonize the white woman. Such consumption and colonization is sterile; it can not reproduce the national family. While Tori is capable of social assimilation, morally he remains unassimilable.

Unlike Tori, whose good looks hide his moral corruption, Cheng Huan, while he appears to be morally acceptable, is physically repulsive. He is the inversion of Fu Manchu and Tori. Cheng Huan, also called the Yellow Man, and who Lucy calls "Chinky," is, at the level of the narrative, a sympathetic protagonist, yet his sickly appearance gives him an almost inhuman quality. Even though he offers himself as Lucy's protector and intervenes when Evil Eye, another denizen of Chinatown, importunes her, Cheng Huan, no matter how moral, cannot hope to assume the heroic mantle of the white man. Unlike Owen Wister's *Virginian* or Sax Rohmer's *Nayland Smith*, whose masculinity is defined by emotional control, Cheng Huan is controlled by his desire for Lucy. The Yellow Man's desire, even though it remains repressed, makes the relationship between "The Chink and the Little Girl" (the title of the Thomas Burke short story from which the film was adapted) unacceptable and destined to end in tragedy. Cheng Huan and Lucy cannot be allowed to come to the aid of the nation; their union cannot reproduce the national family. The producer of *The Birth of a Nation*, while captivating his audience with the imagination of interracial love, cannot in the end tolerate miscegenation.

Both *The Cheat* and *Broken Blossoms* portrayed the Asian male immigrant as undermining national strength by seducing the white woman and subverting the already weakened white family. In both films, True Womanhood, in the form of the protective and moral mother and the wifely moral anchor of vital masculinity, is the missing ingredient for the resurrection of the national family. Both films construct a nostalgia for True Womanhood lost to the Oriental. In *The Cheat*, Edith's true womanhood, her moral center and presumed maternal instinct, is lost to the seduction of the consumer culture. Her relationship with Tori is merely an extension of that broader seduction. It is only his attempted rape, and the ensuing open racial struggle, that can bring her back to her senses and reunite Edith with Richard to reconstitute the racially pure national family.

In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith also stresses the centrality of the family

to the restoration of the nation. The reproduction of the nation can only be accomplished through the restoration of the mother to the family center. It is the mother's death or abandonment that has allowed the family to devolve into violence and exposed the child to the dangers of the street (and marketplace). Linda Gordon observes that "Moving the locus of sexual abuse outside the home let fathers off the hook, but not mothers. 'Incest' or 'carnal abuse' was reclassified as moral neglect, which was by definition a mother's crime."⁶⁸ The strong but uncontrolled working-class hero Battling Borrows cannot be the hope for the future of the nation or the race unless the True Woman is returned to provide moral ballast. The warning that a woman on the streets gives to Lucy against marriage and prostitution is a warning to the nation. It warns that a degraded working-class family can not be a source of national rejuvenation.

The Rising Tide of Color

In 1920, Lothrop Stoddard, a founding father of the American eugenics movement, published *The Rising Tide of Color*, a racial jeremiad against immigration. The book was hugely popular and went through fourteen editions in just three years. Stoddard warned of a racial apocalypse: the white world stood at the brink of "the supreme crisis of the ages. . . . The White race and with it a million years of human evolution might soon be irretrievably lost, swamped by the triumphant colored races, who will obliterate the white man by elimination or absorption."⁶⁹

Stoddard believed the principal "colored" threat to white civilization and the white race came from Asia. Stoddard concluded that the question of "Asiatic" immigration was the "Supreme phase of the colored peril. . . . It threatens not merely our supremacy or prosperity, but our very race-existence, the well-springs of being, the sacred heritage of our children."⁷⁰

The Rising Tide of Color used the powerful metaphor of a flood of brown and yellow races threatening to break through what Stoddard called the "inner dikes" (the racial homelands of the Anglo-Saxons) to swamp white civilization. Surrounding the core of white civilization were outer dikes, "the vast areas of the world which were under white political control, but largely inhabited by peoples of color," and the inner dikes, areas including Canada, the United States, and Australia, that were "peopled wholly or largely by whites." These inner dikes, Stoddard insisted, "have become part of the race heritage, which should be defended to the last extremity."⁷¹

In identifying the threat from the East, Stoddard was in the mainstream of racial geopolitical theory. Stoddard was a protégé of Madison

Grant, a New York patrician lawyer whose 1916 book *The Passing of a Great Race* had popularized the idea that the "Nordic Races," of which the "Anglo-Saxon race" was a branch, were faced with "race suicide." Madison Grant had identified three racial stocks among white Americans: the Nordic, the Alpine, and the Mediterranean. Of these, the Nordic, including its Anglo-Saxon branch, was the physically, morally, and intellectually superior but paradoxically the most endangered race of humankind.

The Passing of a Great Race put in easily understandable if crudely social Darwinist terms the cultural anxieties that beset much of middle-class America in the early decades of the century. The book re-articulated the Anglo-Saxon myth in terms of the anxiety about "race suicide" that had been popular in American culture since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Grant warned that Nordic "blood" was highly "specialized" and therefore more vulnerable to "devaluation" through miscegenation not only with nonwhites but with lesser whites of "Alpine and Mediterranean" stock. In addition, "over-civilization" had weakened the Nordic martial spirit, leaving Anglo-Saxon civilization nearly defenseless. In Grant's pessimistic view, the Nordic bloodline of the United States was being diluted and degraded by the arrival of even those "free white persons"—Italians, Slavs and Jews—whom the Supreme Court in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (struggling to define whiteness to include Europeans of all hues while excluding Asians no matter what their complexion) described as "dark eyed and swarthy" but also "unquestionably kin, and readily amalgamable by marriage" to those already here.⁷²

Although at the turn of the century the idea of a Yellow Peril had been the stock in trade of military strategists and propagandists, Lothrop Stoddard, writing in 1920, did not believe the Yellow Peril to be a threat from foreign arms. In *The Rising Tide of Color*, he summed up his vision of the "colored peril of arms":

The brown and yellow races possess great military potentialities. These (barring the action of certain ill-understood emotional stimuli) are unlikely to flame out in spontaneous fanaticism, but . . . are very likely to be mobilized for political reasons like revolt against white dominion or for social reasons like overpopulation. The black race offers no real danger except as the tool of Pan-Islamism. As for the red men of the Americas, they are of merely local significance.⁷³

For Stoddard, neither military force nor economic competition posed the principal colored threat to white civilization. He believed that white civilization was in imminent danger of being swamped by the rising tide of colored immigration. He saw immigration, assimilation, and miscegenation between yellow and brown and white as the vehicle for the Asiatic swamping of white civilization and, ultimately, for the total absorption of

the white race. For Stoddard, the anti-imperialists' turn-of-the-century admonitions had come home to haunt the republic.

The Rising Tide of Color was a eugenicist critique of imperialism as well as a racialist jeremiad against immigration. At the heart of his argument lay the new "science" of eugenics, which held that Nordic blood carried "superior" or "more specialized" genetic material and was vulnerable to "dilution" by the blood of "lesser breeds." Here, Stoddard summed up this "scientific" case against miscegenation. "Of course, the more primitive a type is, the more prepotent it is. This is why crossings with the Negro are uniformly fatal. Whites, Amerindians, or Asiatics—all are alike vanquished by the invincible prepotency of the more primitive, generalized, and lower Negro blood."⁷⁴

Stoddard argued that imperialism, though the inevitable expression of white racial supremacy, had led humanity unwittingly to a "disgenic," potentially disastrous pass. Modern urban and industrial life, he wrote, had been "one sided, abnormal, unhealthy . . . disgenic." In addition to the ill effects of immigration and miscegenation, the modern world was moving toward the "replacement of the more valuable by the less valuable elements of the population. . . . All over the civilized world racial values are diminishing, and the logical end of this disgenic process is racial bankruptcy and the collapse of civilization."⁷⁵

Modernity, imperialism, and technology had shortened the geographical distance between races. The extension of white civilization throughout the world via colonialism had awakened millions in the colored world to the advantages of Western civilization and had aroused their resentment against the imposition of white dominion. At the same time, the expansion of white civilization and Western technology throughout the world had broken down "natural" boundaries and made travel more efficient, making international migration possible for millions. White dominion over Asia was the most significant arena for this change. The immediate danger was, therefore, not miscegenation between white and black, but "that the white stocks may be swamped by Asiatic blood."⁷⁶

Stoddard believed that the defeat of white civilization meant racial death. In the past, the boundaries of civilization had not been coterminous with those of race. The white race could always rely on a reserve army of "white barbarians" (such as Battling Burrows) to forward the militant mission of the race. But by 1920, modernization had spread civilization to all the tribes of the white race and left the race without its redemptive army of "unspoiled, well-endowed barbarians to step forward and 'carry on.'"⁷⁷

For Stoddard, the great threat of Asiatic immigration was exacerbated by a tendency toward race suicide from within the inner dikes. Stod-

dard, who shared the class elitism of his mentor Madison Grant, saw class struggle in racial terms. Over-civilization, over-consumption, and collapse of purpose had led the middle classes to forget their racial mission. "Two things are necessary for the continued existence of a race," Stoddard warned: "it must remain itself and it must breed its best." Even as the colored tide from the East threatened to breach the inner dikes, the strength of the white race was already threatened by "mongrelization" from within. The mongrelization and "devaluation" of the Nordic bloodline in America had already been brought about both by the migrations of various Alpine and Mediterranean European racial stocks and the "amalgamation with those already here."

For Stoddard, democracy—the dangerously mistaken idea of equality—was another important aspect of the general disgenic tendency in modernity. Echoing *The Birth of a Nation*, Stoddard used the "disastrous" experience of Reconstruction to demonstrate the danger in the fallacy of racial equality. Stoddard, however, did not share Griffith's enthusiasm for a populist racial revival; he saw class struggle in racial terms as well. For Stoddard, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 represented both social and racial apocalypse. Should the proletarian revolution, which in another book he calls the revolt of the *untermenschen*, spread, "the [white] race, summarily drained of its good blood, would sink like lead into the depths of degenerate barbarism." However, this degenerate barbarism would not produce the "well endowed" white barbarians that Stoddard believed had come to the aid of the race in the past.

In no less lurid images than those Sax Rohmer used to describe the Orientalized fantasy world of Fu Manchu, whose Asiatic minions maneuvered to "pave a path for the Yellow Peril" into the citadel of white civilization, Stoddard warned that Bolshevism sought to enlist the colored races in its grand assault on civilization.⁷⁸ "Meanwhile Lenine [sic], surrounded by his Chinese executioners, sits behind the Kremlin walls, a modern Jenghis Khan plotting the plunder of a world."⁷⁹

For Stoddard, the Red Menace and the Yellow Peril had come together; in his apocalyptic vision, Lenin had become the handmaiden of Fu Manchu.

In every corner of the globe, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the United States, Bolshevik agitators whisper in the ears of discontented colored men their schemes of hatred and revenge. Every nationalist aspiration, every political grievance, every social discrimination, is fuel for Bolshevism's hellish incitement to racial as well as to class war.⁸⁰

For Stoddard, the need to shore up the inner dikes of Northern European white civilization could not have been more desperate. In 1922,

the same year that the Supreme Court held that Takao Ozawa could not become white through assimilation, Congress established restrictive quotas on immigration from Southern and Central European nations and ended immigration from all of Asia.

Defining Whiteness: The Limits of the "Common Hurtage"

In 1922 and 1923, two naturalization cases involving Asian immigrants, *Takao Ozawa v. The United States* and *The United States v. Baghat Singh Thind*, brought the struggle to define whiteness and the idea of race itself to the Supreme Court.⁸¹ Ozawa was from Japan and had lived in the United States for twenty-six years. Thind, from India, had already been a naturalized citizen but had it taken away by a federal court.

Takao Ozawa arrived in the United States as a nineteen-year-old from Tanegawa prefecture in Japan in 1894. He worked as a domestic while he attended and graduated from Berkeley High School and then enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1902, Ozawa filed a declaration of intent to become a naturalized U.S. citizen with the U.S. District Court in Alameda County, Calif. In 1914, Ozawa petitioned to become a naturalized U.S. citizen. After his petitions were turned down by lower federal courts in Northern California and Hawaii where he resided, Ozawa took his case to the United States Supreme Court. When the high court heard his case in 1922, it was two decades after he had first declared his intent to seek citizenship and twenty-eight years after he had first settled in the United States.

In the three decades since Ozawa's arrival in the United States, the country had gone through a period of intense anxiety about "alien" elements in its midst. Immigrants from Europe (who outnumbered Asian immigrants by 100 to 1) swelled America's cities and were viewed by native-born and "old stock" Anglo-Americans with apprehension. In the early decades of the century, concerted efforts were made to assimilate these "foreign elements" into American society through a crash program of "100 Percent Americanization."⁸²

Ozawa and his lawyers argued that he was in fact a perfectly assimilated, 100 percent American. The Japanese, they argued, were not like the Chinese, who had been explicitly excluded from immigration to the United States and prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens. Japanese immigrants, the majority of whom were farmers and farm laborers, had begun to immigrate after 1885, just after the Chinese exclusion act had gone into effect and the tide of anti-Chinese violence had reached its apex. Unlike the Chinese government, which had never supervised emigration, the Japanese government, aware of the Chinese experience,

took pains to select and prepare Japanese emigrants for life in America. In addition, Japanese emigrants were encouraged to bring their families and to settle in the United States. The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, which curtailed Japanese labor immigration, had explicitly exempted women who intended to marry Japanese men already resident in America from its prohibitions on Japanese immigration.

Although the Japanese consulate had not wanted Ozawa to appeal the lower court's denial of his petition, Ozawa had substantial support in the Japanese American community. He drafted his own brief attesting to the extent of his assimilation into American society.

In name, I am not an American, but at heart I am a true American. . . . (1) I did not report my name, my marriage, or the names of my children to the Japanese consulate in Honolulu, notwithstanding all Japanese subjects are requested to do so. . . . (2) I do not have any connection with any Japanese churches or schools, or any Japanese organizations here or elsewhere. (3) I am sending my children to an American church and American school in place of a Japanese one. (4) Most of the time I use the American (English) language at home, so that my children cannot speak the Japanese language. (5) I educated myself in American schools for nearly eleven years by supporting myself. (6) I have lived continuously within the United States for nearly twenty-eight years. (7) I chose as my wife one educated in American schools . . . instead of one educated in Japan. (8) I have steadily prepared to return the kindness which our Uncle Sam has extended me—so it is my honest hope to do something good to the United States before I bid a farewell to this world.⁸³

The US Supreme Court ruled unanimously that no matter how assimilated he was, Ozawa could not become a naturalized American citizen. The issue was race, specifically the meaning of "free white person." Ozawa's attorneys, citing the Dred Scott case among others, had argued that the term "white person" had been constructed by the Court to mean "a person without negro blood."⁸⁴ The Court, however, rejected that reasoning and adopted a definition of white person as "a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race."⁸⁵ This category was a racial category and not a matter of individual color or complexion. Justice Sutherland wrote:

Manifestly, the test afforded by the mere color of skin of each individual is impracticable as that differs greatly among persons of the same race, even among Anglo-Saxons, ranging by imperceptible gradation from the fair blond to the swarthy brunette, the latter being darker than many of the lighter hued persons of the brown or yellow races. Hence to adopt the color test alone would result in a confused overlapping of races and a gradual merging of one into the other, without any practical line of separation.⁸⁶

In the case of Takao Ozawa, his "100 percent American" habits notwithstanding, the Supreme Court drew a bright line of race between Caucasian and nonwhite. Although Ozawa might well have been more Americanized than the proscribed Chinese, the degree of Ozawa's assimilation was irrelevant to the Court. The principle issue was his claim to whiteness. Differences of complexion could be subsumed within the racial definition of whiteness, which the Court now identified as the "popularly understood Caucasian race"; since the Japanese were not among those included in the "popular" category of Caucasian, Ozawa could not sustain the argument that he was not Negro and therefore white.

In the following year, the Supreme Court took up the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from India. Between 1907 and 1914, some 6,000 Asian Indians had immigrated to the United States from the Indian subcontinent, either directly or via China, the Philippines, or Canada. The majority of these immigrants were Sikhs, mostly farmers who had left the plague-stricken and economically depressed Punjab; others were veterans of the British forces that had suppressed the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900.⁸⁷ The great majority of these immigrants settled in Washington and Oregon, where they were employed in forestry, and in the Central and Imperial valleys of California, where they were farmers and farm workers. A smaller but not insignificant number of Asian Indian immigrants were students, mainly Bengali, many of whom had already become involved in the growing nationalist movement in India. Although the majority of these immigrants practiced the Sikh religion, some were Hindu and others Muslim and Parsee. Regardless of their religious affiliation, the U.S. government classified all immigrants from the Indian subcontinent under the rubric "Hindoo." "Hindoos" were among those who were prohibited from immigration to America under the provisions of the 1917 Immigration Act that had established the Asiatic Barred Zone.

Like Ozawa, Bhagat Thind had come to the United States as a young man. He had attended the University of California and had been granted citizenship by the federal court in Oregon on the grounds that he was able to prove himself Caucasian. His attorney had argued that, as a Hindu of high caste, Thind was descended from Aryan stock and ethnologically speaking was a Caucasian and thus a "free white person," eligible to become a naturalized American. The federal court in Oregon agreed.

Since several scores of Indian immigrants had become naturalized citizens under this reasoning, U.S. government officials saw this "loop-hole" as threatening, and the federal government appealed the lower court ruling granting Thind naturalization rights. The United States Su-

preme Court, not wanting "Hindoo" citizens, notwithstanding their ethnological status as Caucasians, ruled against Bhagat Thind. The court held that Thind's ethnological argument, while plausible, was irrelevant. It asserted that racial categories were contingent not on ethnology or linguistics but on contemporary popular standards. Writing for the majority, Justice Sutherland asserted that "it may be true that the blonde Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today."⁸⁸

On the other hand, Sutherland stated that the term Caucasian was a scientific term that had no meaning to the 1790 framers of the first Naturalization Act and thus constituted a poor test of the commonly understood idea of a "free white person." Sutherland held that "free white person" were words of "familiar speech that were used by the original framers of the law . . . intended to include one type of man whom they knew as white." These, Sutherland noted, were immigrants principally from the British Isles and Northern Europe. The Court acknowledged that successive immigration from Southern and Central Europe had brought "the Slavs and dark eyed swarthy people of Alpine and Mediterranean stock" to America but held that these immigrants were "unquestionably kin to those already here and readily amalgamated with them."⁸⁹

With behavior and color (in *Ozawa*) and now science ruled out, the court turned to the ideology of "common sense" as the way in which race would be evaluated. The true test of "whiteness" was in the eyes of the common man. "What we now hold is that the words 'free white person' are words of common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man, synonymous with the word 'Caucasian' only as that word is popularly understood."⁹⁰

"Hindoos," regardless of their lineage, were not among those "unquestionably kin" or "readily amalgamated with" that legal fiction the common (white) man. In describing the ethnic assimilation of Americans of European descent and the "instinctive" recognition and rejection of assimilation for American children of Indian immigrants, the court created an impermeable distinction between ethnicity and race.

The children of English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, and other European parentage, quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that the children born in this country of Hindu parentage would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry. . . .

What we suggest is merely racial difference, [not superiority or inferiority]

and it is of such character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation.⁹¹

In the *Ozawa* and *Thind* cases, the Supreme Court articulated the relationship between ethnicity, race, and ideology. In *Ozawa*, the court held that while gradations of color might exist, gradations of race did not. European immigrants from “blond to swarthy brunette” could be amalgamated into a “Caucasian” race; Asian immigrants, however assimilated, could not. Ethnology had its limits, however: despite any common ancestor that he may have shared with modern Caucasians in the “dim reaches of antiquity,” Bhagat Thind was declared ineligible for citizenship on the grounds that, although Caucasian, he was not white. The court held that the ultimate arbiter of whiteness is not science but popular ideology. The *Ozawa* and *Thind* rulings established “common understanding” as the popular standard on which “race” was to be defined, impervious to cultural assimilation or science. In cases where the bright line of race might be crossed, as in the case of mixed-race individuals, the “one drop” rule of racial hypo-descent could be invoked. Thus science was brought back into the debate on race but within limits, as the handmaiden of popular ideology. In 1934, in *Morrison et al v. California*, a case involving a conspiracy to violate California’s Alien Land Law, which prohibited Asians (as aliens ineligible for citizenship) from purchasing or leasing agricultural land in California, Justice Cardozo, citing both the *Ozawa* and *Thind* decisions, declared that “men are not white if the strain of colored blood in them is a half or a quarter, or, not improbably even less, the governing test always . . . being that of *common understanding*.”⁹² [emphasis added].

The “common understanding” on which Justice Cardozo relied defined the “inner dikes” of racial purity necessary for the protection of the national family and the reproduction of the race. The cases of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Thind reflected the judgment of ordinary Americans fully awakened to the Yellow Peril that the “common hurtage” which could bring together Saxon and Celt, Polish, French, Slavs and Italians, African and Armenian, could not admit the Oriental.

5

The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth

Racist Love

In 1974, the writer Frank Chin expressed it this way: “Whites love us because we’re not black.”¹ The elevation of Asian Americans to the position of model minority had less to do with the actual success of Asian Americans than to the perceived failure—or worse, refusal—of African Americans to assimilate. Asian Americans were “not black” in two significant ways: They were both politically silent and ethnically assimilable.

The Cold War construction of Asian America as a model minority that could become ethnically assimilated, despite what *U.S. News and World Report* euphemistically called its “racial disadvantage,” reveals the contradiction between the continuing reproduction of racial difference and the process of ethnic assimilation. The representation of Asian Americans as a *racial* minority whose apparently successful *ethnic* assimilation was a result of stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement was a critically important narrative of ethnic liberalism that simultaneously promoted racial equality and sought to contain demands for social transformation. The representation of the Asian American as the paragon of ethnic virtue, who the *U.S. News and World Report* editors thought should be emulated by “Negroes and other minorities,” reflected not so much Asian success as the triumph of an emergent discourse of race in which cultural difference replaced biological difference as the new determinant of social outcomes. Although the deployment of Asian Americans