

In Search of Ruby Moreno

By Ann Kaneko

Representations of non-Japanese ethnic groups in Japanese popular media are few and far between. In fact, I am sure it is possible to count on two hands the cumulative number of films from the past five years focusing on non-Japanese communities in Japan.

Among these, the Ruby Moreno "series" stands out prominently. Moreno, a Filipina actress based in Japan, starred in three films portraying Filipina women between 1992 and 1993: *Tsuki wa dotchi ni deteru* (*Which Side Is the Moon on*, 1993), *Afureru atsui namida* (*Swimming in Tears*, 1992) and the Fuji Television drama *Fuiripina wo aishita otokotachi* (*Men Who Loved Filipinas*, 1992).

No doubt Moreno owes her popularity to the establishment of the Filipino community in Japan and the canonization of the Filipina hostess as part of Japan's

Among Japan's "newcomers," Filipinas have most often been selected by the mass media as targets of prejudice. Ann Kaneko, a freelance filmmaker and writer, is currently working on a documentary on migrant workers in Japan. She raises the issue of Japan's hidden cultural diversity through the career of Ruby Moreno, a Filipina actress.

seedy sex industry. Aside from the older, more established Korean and Chinese communities, Filipinos are probably the senior members of Japan's "new-comer" Asian groups. Filipina women outnumber men in Japan, and many work as hostesses and entertainers.

I propose to look at the Moreno films as well as *Tsuma wa fuiripina* (*My Wife Is Filipina*, 1992), a documentary focusing on a Japanese-Filipina couple. By examining these films, I hope to gain a better understanding of how Japanese society views Filipina women and how these kinds of media serve in reinforcing these images.

Stereotyping Filipinas

Strongly influenced by the notion of multiculturalism in the United States, I am particularly curious as to how these same ideas hold up within the context of, say, a society like Japan which has traditionally been ethnically closed and isolated. Judging from the situation of Korean-Japanese, Japan, too, has a history of ethnic diversity, but it is hesitant to formulate a public policy which acknowledges this situation. Consequently, immigration laws have not changed, and the current wave of undocumented and documented workers from surrounding Asian countries and *Nikkei* (Japanese descendants) from Latin America are treated in much the same way as the Korean forced laborers who came to Japan 70 years earlier.

Viewing these films, I was struck by the fact that in all of them, the Filipina women are (except in *Namida* in which Moreno is a "Japayuki-san," a woman who has come to Japan to marry a Japanese farmer) hostesses or entertainers (and at times prostitutes). I suppose for those living in Japan, this is not surprising since that is the general perception of Filipina women. Despite the reality that the main profession available to Filipina women in Japan is in "mizu shobai" (entertainment work)," there are also a fair number of women who work in small factories, as domestic helpers, are married to Japanese or are here to study. Given these circumstances, at what point does the image of the Filipina hostess become a stereotype? Why do producers choose to popularize this image, reinforcing this stereotype? I cannot help wondering whether producers as well as Japanese audience members realize that this image of Filipina women is the product of the specialized role that these women are allowed to hold within this society and certainly not one of their own choosing. I wonder how many

uncritical viewers fail to understand or analyze this situation, assuming that all Filipina women (both here and in the Philippines) do this kind of work.

This claim of stereotyping was a main complaint of Filipina women living in Japan speaking out against the television drama *Otokotachi*. In 1993, Liza Go, senior secretary at the Hiroshima Peace and Human Rights Center of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCC), led a group of Filipina women who protested this drama, describing it as "discriminatory." The first issue of the Thinking about Media and Human Rights Group's newsletter outlined the main complaints of these women: 1) Filipina women are stereotypically portrayed as deceptive, opportunistic, money-hungry hostess/prostitutes who willingly jump into bed for their own financial advancement. In addition, the meaner personality traits of Ruby (the hostess played by Moreno), the main character, may be viewed as characteristic of all Filipina women. 2) Japanese media commonly use Smoky Mountain and Ermita as locations to represent the Philippines showing only its extreme poverty or its seedier side. 3) The last scene when Ruby, Toshio (Moreno's boyfriend, played by a Japanese actor) and his mother are tossing candy and rice to the poor of Smoky Mountain is irresponsible and patronizing. 4) The halting Japanese used by Ruby and the coarse Tagalog used by Toshio is also prejudicial, making Ruby appear to be no more than an imbecile, unable to adequately express herself in Japanese.

Upon a viewing of this drama, the claims of these women are quite obvious. In fact, the same has been said in the past about much programming in the United States. By simply exchanging ethnic group, character, locale and language, one could be talking about a number of other shows. None of their claims are new or surprising—except that it is within the context of Japan.

Stereotyping Japanese

However, perhaps what they fail to mention is that not only is the Filipina character caricatured and one-sided but so are the Japanese characters. Toshio is no beacon of responsibility or intelligence and appears to be extremely naive. I think most Japanese would strongly resent being equated with him. Toshio's mother's character, so willing to move to the Philippines, is also highly implausible. I cannot take this program seriously. Of course, this does not lessen the seriousness of its offences

toward the Philippine community. Because of the lack of Filipina representation in general, the influence of this kind of drama has greater effect than it normally would in forming preconceptions of Filipinas. In the case of Japanese, there are other portraits to balance these representations, but there are only few other depictions of Filipinas. Consequently, these images carry much more weight.

Another element which the Filipina women's group failed to mention, but is painfully obvious to me is the tendency to want to patronize Ruby—the poor Filipina woman who comes to earn money to support her family. She's "kawaiso" (pitiful). By distancing the audience with sympathy, it is easier not to take responsibility for the reality that she faces and that is, in turn, the responsibility of the system which puts her in such a situation.

The program is also guilty of trying to superficially pack in all elements of Philippine-Japanese history. That Ruby's father had suffered at the hands of Japanese seems like yet another fact that they wanted to "squeeze in" so that they would receive higher marks on their report card for Japanese-Filipino history.

The degree to which the drama in its entirety is far-fetched and one-sided makes me take a more radical position toward the validity of a business which commodifies and packages stories with so little resonance with reality. It is clear that the story

blends intrigue and romance and has all of the dramatic elements necessary for television—yakuza underworld, boy meets girl, overcoming odds, cinderella rags to riches. Consequently this story was produced because these elements fulfill the needs of dramatic storytelling rather than any interest in rendering truthful or sympathetic portraits of these women or of the reality they face day to day.

Unfortunately, much of the same can be said for Moreno's character in *Tsuki*. This time, she is a little more savvy, speaking in fast-paced, sophisticated Kansai dialect. Despite the efforts of the film's Korean-Japanese makers at tracking the larger issues of race relations in Japan, especially dealing with the situation of Korean-Japanese, their own limited vision of Filipina women prompts them to present a rather stereotypic view of them, no different than the images produced by their Japanese counterparts. Although it is a harder look and is less patronizing, Moreno's character is still the caricatured, streetwise and determined hostess, quite adept at using people to get her way.

In *Namida*, Moreno is plain, without make-up and in simple clothes. Faye (played by Moreno) escapes her husband for Tokyo. The isolated life of rural drudgery is difficult for her to bear, and she wants to go home to her mother in the Philippines. Unlike the other dramas, she is not a hostess in-

involved in the sex industry. Yet in this film, everything is dark and grim. It is hard for me to believe that she could be so solemn. I do not doubt the possibility that she could be so isolated and lonely, but it seems that the makers are afflicted with a kind of patronizing attitude which, in some ways, is equally damaging. In this film, they seem to say, "Look at the plight of the poor Filipina Japayukisan."

Perhaps the biggest drawback of the film is the parallel story of her Japanese neighbors, Asami and Shuichi. They are involved in a violent, masochistic relationship which is supposed to somehow echo the sexual violence in the society. However, it does not ring true. Instead the film seems fractured into two stories which have little to do with each other—Faye's story and theirs. Although the film is careful to separate Faye from the image of the stereotypic hostess, juxtaposing her with her neighbors almost seems to associate her by default with that from which the filmmakers try to disassociate her.

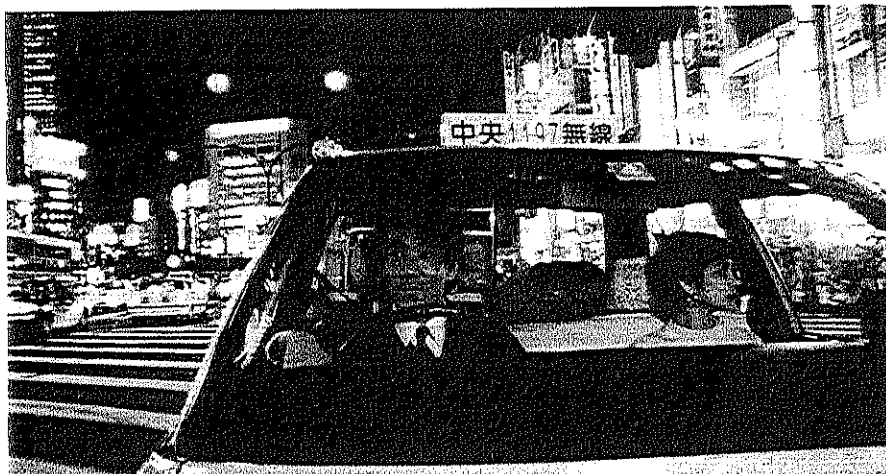
In this film as well, there is an attempt to take a glimpse at the larger cross-section of foreigners living in Japan. At the Chinese restaurant in Tokyo where Faye takes refuge, working as a waitress, where her friend Maria, did before her, many "gaikokujin" (foreigners) gather from many countries spending lighter moments, drinking and talking. Yet in this restaurant, one sees no Japanese and Westerners who come to work at white-collar jobs, day laborers and students mingle freely—quite unlikely.

The Filipina drama does not end in the theaters or on television. For Moreno, the details of her private life were spilled out onto the covers of the tabloids. She revealed that she also was a Japayukisan, that she was older than she had publicly said she was, that she was supporting a handicapped child in the Philippines. In a sense, the media tried to make her acknowledge that she was like the characters she played in the films—a little deceptive, determined and in need of yen. However, this all seemed to me, to be a greater indication of the degree to which she was/is at the mercy of the business that employs her. It wants her to be like the characters she plays. Despite these pressures,

Moreno can be commended for her courage in being critical of the type-cast roles which she is forced to play, stating that she wants to play different roles and develop as an actress.

Of these films, it would seem most likely that *My Wife Is Filipina* would be the closest to presenting elements of the truth since it is based on reality, a documentary. Yet, in fact, it could be the most problematic because viewers might be less apt to be critical of it because it supposedly is a depiction of reality. Terada Yasunori, the director and a film student at the time, decided to document his mar-

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Ruby Moreno in *Tsuki wa Docchini Dotoiru*.

does not seem that he knows her very well, understands her economic responsibilities or her reason for being in Japan. He questions Shirley, Theresa's friend who is married to Yabu-san, another Japanese man, and her answers are guarded. He unabashedly asks Shirley, "Did you marry him for his money?" "Would you have married him if he did not promise to build you a house in Manila?" "Did you love him when you married him?" She smiles embarrassedly when she answers. It seems clear that marriage for her is a practical choice, representing economic stability and a means of supporting her family, not a question of romance.

In his own relationship with Theresa, he does not understand why she must work to support her family, why she wants to send her daughter Yoko back to Manila so that she can work full-time, why her brother does not work in Manila. He is condescending when he speaks to her and her answers are also guarded. In one scene, she openly encourages him to leave her and remarry a Japanese woman who would presumably better fulfill his expectations. Instead of providing understanding, it seems that the film raises more questions as to why he does not understand. And of course, there is the fundamental question as to why he and so many other Japanese men are so attracted to Filipina women. For Theresa, her sexuality and ability to serve men are her goods and Terada was and, in some ways, still continues to be the buyer. Their personal lives mimic the economic relations between the two countries from which they come.

At a November 1994 "international exchange" panel discussion after a screening of his film, Terada said that he decided to make the film because media coverage dealing with Filipinas seemed extremely different than his personal experiences with Filipinas around him. Yet it seems to me that his documentary fails to show anything more than that of the perception which Filipinas already have in Japan, probably due to his own lack of understanding. Indeed, many Filipina men and women who viewed the documentary with me expressed their concern that Theresa might be considered representative of all Filipinas living in Japan.

I also find it curious that Japanese critics have recognized and awarded *Tsuki* and *Filipina* to the extent that they have. *Tsuki* swept many of the major critics awards in 1994, and *Filipina* received prizes at both the 1992 International Student Film Festival and a Japanese Director's Guild Young Director's award. It seems both have been acknowledged because of the topics that they attempt to deal with and the lack of other noteworthy films

rather than on the merit of the films themselves.

Coming from Los Angeles where there is a large, well established Filipino community, it is difficult for me to accept these stereotypical perceptions of Filipinas in Japan without being highly critical. So prevalent are these ideas that a close Filipina friend in Los Angeles refuses to visit Japan for fear of being mistaken as an entertainer and looked down on accordingly.

Increasing numbers of media makers and critics of different ethnic backgrounds emerge in the "multicultural" melting pot of the United States. Consequently, representation of these different groups is no longer taken at "face" value. Especially since the consciousness-raising of the 1960s and 70s, stereotypical depictions of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latin Americans, etc. have been questioned and reevaluated. Although one-sided depictions still persist, overt caricatures are less prevalent; and, in general, there is some heed paid to avoid stepping on the toes of certain more prominent ethnic communities. Most importantly, these groups are now in a better position to portray themselves and those who choose to portray them are forced to do more homework.

As many among liberal circles proscribe to "political correctness," commercial media makers necessarily pay more attention to not offending—making sure that depictions fall within the realms of what is acceptable. It's a cat and mouse game of avoiding bad press. I certainly do not propose this kind of superficial lip service to be an appropriate solution. Yet this is no doubt part of the slow process of working towards greater awareness.

The face of Japanese society is changing slowly, especially since the bubble years when many new faces appeared in urban areas. Yet despite the efforts of the society to make it an uncomfortable stay for these visitors, many of Japan's new residents have learned the language, married Japanese and have children who only speak Japanese. With coming generations of children with mixed identity, hopefully the new complexity of the society will begin to be reflected in the sophistication of the representation of its different members. Perhaps marginalized segments of this society will gain power and begin to be able to represent themselves, taking on the role of providing greater balance to the programming produced by the current financial and political powers which control the media. I try to be hopeful that one day, in Japan, I will be able to meet the real Ruby Moreno... ■

SPECIAL ISSUE

Lesbians and Sexual Self-Determination

By Hara Minako

As a 38-year-old lesbian with a child, I have taken part for the past ten years or so in work to create a safer space for lesbian women in Tokyo.

If it has become easier for women to love women during these ten years, it's because self-identified lesbians and bisexual women have come out to work on lesbian issues, whether in lesbian-only groups, with gay men, or in other women's groups.

Lesbians are now finally acquiring a voice of our own instead of being addressed as pitiful victims or as an invisible minority. Over 20 grassroots groups and newsletters for lesbian/bisexual women now exist in the Tokyo area. Many of them have been started recently by younger women. At least ten major cities throughout Japan have one or more lesbian/gay groups.

Sexual self-determination is, naturally, a major issue for any lesbian, as it is for any woman, but it is not possible to get people to yearn for something that they have never known.

Although an increasing number of straight women are beginning to accept the fact that women may love other women at some point in our lives, they are still slow

Women who love other women are gradually coming out in Japan, but this does not mean their battle is over. Forced heterosexual marriages, lesbophobia, and stereotyped images of lesbians and gays, are continuously created in heterosexual society. Hara Minako, who has long worked on lesbian issues, introduces lesbians' voices and struggles for sexual self-determination.