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: Toske wa dotoni ni deteuru (Which Side Is the Moon on, 1992), A Street with namida (Swimming in Tears, 1992) and the Fuji Television drama Filipina no okita o okitetachi (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 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 Tsukishima wa namida (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, Japanese, 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-ko," 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, it is not surprising since that is an early perception of Filipina women. Despite the reality that the main profession available to Filipina women in Japan is in "minzoku 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 stereotyped role that these women are allowed to hold within 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 Osokeshi. In 1993, Lisa Co, 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 seedy side. 3) The last scene when Ruby, Toshio (Moreno's boyfriend, played by a Japanese actor) and his mother are leaving candy and rice to the poor of Smoky Moun-tain is irresponsible and patronizing. 4) The hating Japanese used by Ruby and the course Tsogog 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, locine 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 Japa-nese 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 offence.
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 Japayuki-san, 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.
does not seem that he knows her very well, understands her economic responsibilities or her reason for being in Japan. He questions Shirley, Theressa's friend who is married to Yoko-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 Theressa, 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 Theressa, 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, Tsuchiya said that he decided to make the film because media coverage dealing with Filipinos 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 Filipinos 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 Theressa might be considered representative of all Filipinas living in Japan.

I also find it curious that Japanese critics have recognized and awarded Tsuchiya and Filipino to the extent that they have. Tsuchiya swept many of the major critics awards in 1994, and Filipino 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 stereotypic perceptions of Filipinos in Japan without being highly critical. So prevalent are these ideas that a close Filipino 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, stereotypic depictions of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latin Americans, etc. have been questioned and reevaluated. Although one-sided depictions will persist, overt caricatures are less prevalent and, in general, there is some heed paid to avoiding stepping on the toes of certain prominent ethnic communities. Most importantly, these groups are 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 prescribe to "political correctness," commercial media makers necessarily must pay more attention to not offending—making sure that depictions fall within the realms of what is acceptable. It is 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 Meron...

Women who love other women are gradually coming out in Japan, but this does not mean their battle is over. Forced heterosexual marriages, lesbian, 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 of sexual self-determination.

Lesbians and Sexual Self-Determination

By Hara Minako

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...