Portrait of a Patriot's Son: Philip Ahn and Korean Diasporic Identities in Hollywood

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Portrait of a Patriot’s Son: Philip Ahn and Korean Diasporic Identities in Hollywood

by Hye Seung Chung

Abstract: This essay examines the life and career of Philip Ahn (1905–78), the first Korean American actor to appear in Hollywood movies. His on-screen and off-screen personas are situated in a transnational context of Korean colonial diaspora in hopes of recuperating his pioneering status in both American and South Korean film industries.

Over the past decade, Korean faces have become more conspicuous in Hollywood productions. In *The Truth about Charlie* (Jonathan Demme, 2002), for example, a supporting character, originally conceived as Japanese, was rewritten as Korean at the request of veteran Korean film comedian Chung-hun Pak (Joon-Hoon Park), whom Demme had grown fond of after seeing him in Yi Myoeng-se’s *Nowhere to Hide* (Injông sajong pôlgôt òpda, 1999). Also in 2002, Korean Americans Rick Yune and Will Yun Lee were seen as sinister North Korean villains in the James Bond movie *Die Another Day* (Lee Tamahori, 2002). Although criticized by South Koreans for collaborating in Hollywood’s representation of North Korea as an “Axis of Evil,” Yune made a strong impression on international Bond fans. Margaret Cho, another high-profile Korean American player, has produced successful concert films including *I’m the One That I Want* (Lionel Coleman, 2000) and *Notorious C.H.O.* (Lorene Machado, 2002). More recently, John Cho played Harold, one of the two leads in New Line Cinema’s unconventional buddy film *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (Danny Leiner, 2004), establishing a new role model for up-and-coming Asian American actors.

But despite this recent emergence of Koreans and Korean Americans in Hollywood, few younger moviegoers know Philip Ahn, the first actor of Korean descent to become a Hollywood “star.” I put the word *star* in quotations since mainstream audiences were more likely to label Ahn a supporting or character actor. He was certainly no Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck, Humphrey Bogart, or John Wayne, although he shared screen time with these and many other Hollywood stars.

Although Ahn was promoted as an ethnic star at various points in his prolific career (especially during his early years at Paramount), he never achieved the status
of a top-billed star, which was a “whites only” club in classical Hollywood cinema. In this article, I hope to recuperate Ahn for the pioneering role he played in the U.S. and South Korean film industries.

Ahn was once called the “Oriental Clark Gable” in Hollywood, where he played leading roles opposite Anna May Wong and was a distinguished character actor until his death in 1978. His career should be recuperated as part of Korean film and cultural history on two grounds: first, Ahn endeavored time and again to enter the South Korean film industry as a leader, actor, and producer, although he lost many opportunities because of political and economic conditions; and, second, Ahn’s direct and indirect manifestations in American film and television of Korean diasporic identities deserve critical attention in the broader context of transnational Korean media. By foregrounding his biography, which intersects two different national and film histories, I hope to demonstrate not only the interdisciplinary scope of my project but also the intricate relationship between diasporic screen identities and the homeland (both real and imaginary).

How the “Oriental Clark Gable” Became a “Yellow Monster.” Reverently referred to by his followers as Teacher Tosan (“Island Mountain”), Philip Ahn’s father, An Ch’ang-ho, was an anticolonial revolutionary and a statesman, reformer, educator, and writer, as well as a pioneering leader of the first wave of Korean immigrants to hit American shores. In 1902, at the age of twenty-three, An Ch’ang-ho and his eighteen-year-old bride, Yi Hae-ryŏn (Helen Lee), sailed for America, becoming the first married couple from Korea to enter the United States. After arriving in San Francisco, Tosan soon became an organizer and reformer in the Korean immigrant community. Ushering in reforms that would improve the living conditions of Korean laborers, Tosan cleaned and beautified the homes of his fellow countrymen and motivated them to become model citizens so that they could show the world the Korean capacity for independence. In 1903, Tosan established the Friendship Society (Ch’inmokhŏi). The first Korean diaspora association on American soil, it evolved into the United Korean Association (Kongniphyŏphŏi) two years later to serve the wider population.

After moving to a farming community in Riverside, California, Tosan continued his efforts to better the lives of immigrants through his intercity community network, based in San Francisco. In 1907, Tosan returned to Korea under the Japanese protectorate rule and created the New People’s Society (Sinminhŏi). He also founded and served as principal of the Taesŏng School in Pyŏngyang. In 1910, immediately before Japan’s annexation of Korea, Tosan, hunted by the Japanese police, escaped his homeland. One year later, he returned to the United States via China, Russia, and Europe. He then unified many U.S. Korean associations into the Korean National Association (KNA: Kungminhŏi). The KNA performed diplomatic functions for overseas Koreans and provided education for the children of immigrants. In 1913, An Ch’ang-ho established the Young Korean Academy (Hŭngsadan), a globally networked Korean leadership-training organization that remains in operation today. In 1919, five years after he and his family had moved to Los Angeles, Tosan left for Shanghai, where he served as the interim
prime minister and minister of labor for the exiled Korean Provisional Government (KPG). Arrested by Japanese forces in 1932, the unbending patriot spent many of his final years in prison and under house arrest in Korea until he died in 1938 from injuries resulting from torture and imprisonment.

Tosan had five children—Philip, Philson, Susan, Soorah, and Ralph—all of whom were born and raised in America. Born in a mission in Los Angeles on March 29, 1905, Philip was one of the first Korean Americans born in the continental United States. Like his father, Philip was a leader of the second-generation Korean community in Southern California, where he organized the first Korean American youth group (Ip’al, or Two-Eight Club) and supervised assimilation and social activities of immigrant children during the 1920s.

As the eldest son in a poor immigrant family, Philip shouldered the responsibility of aiding his mother (who worked as a cleaning lady, a cook, and a seamstress) and supporting his younger siblings while his father was absent. Philip began selling newspapers at the age of nine and subsequently took various menial jobs to support his family.

While still a young boy, Ahn began to show his talent in drama and public persuasion, gifts he inherited from Tosan, a bell-toned orator who gave many emotional, patriotic speeches in Korea, the United States, Mexico, Manchuria, and China. As
a teenager, Ahn acted in school and church plays, in which he first demonstrated his charismatic voice, perhaps his greatest natural asset.

In the 1920s, Ahn’s family lived one block away from Anna May Wong’s house, in Los Angeles. Anna May and Philip went to the same school and became close friends and confidants. Silent-screen legend Douglas Fairbanks Sr. spotted the high school student when Ahn accompanied Anna May to the set of The Thief of Baghdad (Raoul Walsh, 1924), in which the Chinese American actress played a Mongolian slave girl. Fairbanks Sr. gave Ahn a screen test and offered him a minor role.

Flushed with pride, Philip hurried home to deliver the good news, only to encounter fierce disapproval from his mother, who said, “No son of mine is going to get mixed up with those awful people.” As an immigrant woman from a Confucian society, Philip’s mother thought actors occupied the bottom strata of the mother country’s traditional caste system. Friends and elders likewise strongly denounced actors, whom they labeled kwangdaes (clowns). However, when Tosan returned home for the last time, in 1925, the visionary scholar—known for thinking outside the box—gave his son permission to act, stating, “Film is also an art; all I ask is that if you want to become an actor, be the best that you possibly can.”

In 1936, Philip got another lucky break. As a student of foreign commerce at the University of Southern California, he applied for a part-time position at Paramount Studios, where many USC students worked as extras. But instead of being offered a minor role, Philip was given a chance to audition for director Lewis Milestone, who was searching for a Chinese comedian to appear in a Bing Crosby musical entitled Anything Goes (Lewis Milestone, 1936). The American-born Korean’s English was so perfect, however, that Milestone turned him down, saying he was looking for someone who spoke pidgin English. On his way out, Philip had a flash of inspiration. He sauntered back to Milestone’s desk. “You like . . . aligh,” he said. “You no likee me . . . aligh. Me no care. Hip sabee? Me go school . . . aligh.” The director broke into laughter and said, “Okay . . . the part’s yours!”

In 1936 alone, Philip Ahn appeared in five films, playing supporting roles opposite Gary Cooper, Mae West, and Shirley Temple. Ahn had dynamic supporting roles in these films: the loyal aide, Oxford, to Akim Tamiroff’s titular general in Paramount’s Oriental epic The General Died at Dawn (Lewis Milestone, 1936); the endearing Chinese guardian Sun Lo, who gives fortune-cookie wisdom to Shirley Temple in the musical Stowaway (William A. Seiter, 1936); and double agent Hong Kong Cholly, who poses as the pidgin English–speaking sidekick of Larry “Buster” Crabbe in Red Barry (Ford Beebe, Alan James, 1938) so as to infiltrate the police.

Concurrent with Ahn’s debut as an actor, Anna May Wong returned from a year-long trip to China and signed a new contract with Paramount, which provided her with sympathetic roles (departing from her “dragon lady” persona) in a series of grade-B detective and crime pictures, including Daughter of Shanghai (Robert Florey, 1937), Dangerous to Know (Robert Florey, 1938), King of Chinatown (Nick Grinde, 1939), and Island of Lost Men (Kurt Neumann, 1939). Because the Production Code prohibited portraying interracial couples, an Asian American romantic hero was needed to play opposite Wong. Ahn thus landed his first leading role opposite his childhood friend. In Daughter of Shanghai, Ahn and Wong dismantled Asian
Figure 2. Philip Ahn as a young man, before he entered the film industry. Courtesy of the Ahn family.

Figure 3. Philip Ahn around the time of his Hollywood debut. Courtesy of the Ahn family.
stereotypes by playing, respectively, an FBI agent and a quasi-detective who jointly solve a murder case and emerge as a romantic couple. The screen duo was reunited in *King of Chinatown*, a gangster film set in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Ahn plays a lawyer who romantically pursues Wong, who plays a medical doctor.

During Ahn’s prewar career at Paramount, the studio promoted him as Chinese. The publicity campaign for *Daughter of Shanghai*, for example, includes a short article on Ahn entitled “Chinese Star Makes Debut in Lead Role,” which opens as follows: “Ever hear of a Chinese who couldn’t speak Chinese? Philip Ahn is one!” By identifying Ahn as an assimilated Chinese American unable to speak his ancestral language, Paramount attempted to conceal the fact that Ahn was unable to speak Chinese because he was Korean. Ahn’s exceptional Korean heritage was masked to facilitate a comfortable, homogeneous “Chinese” coupling that allayed any anxieties mainstream audiences might have had concerning ethnic or racial mixing. Fan-magazine discourse further solidified the myth of this ideal couple by promoting an unverifiable rumor of an off-screen romantic union between the two.

After *Daughter of Shanghai* and *King of Chinatown*, Hollywood gossip columns predicted Ahn and Wong’s engagement. Wong reportedly remarked: “It would be like marrying my brother.” Neither of the two actors ever married, and both were rumored to be gay, although ethnic newspapers often interpreted Ahn’s bachelorhood as the result of his taking on responsibilities for his younger siblings, as well as his piety to his mother, with whom he lived until her death in 1969, only nine years before he succumbed to lung cancer.

Figure 4. Alumni of the Central Junior High School in Los Angeles, Philip Ahn and Anna May Wong remained close friends throughout their professional careers. Courtesy of the Ahn family.
Figure 5. Ahn and Wong as the sound era’s first self-representing Asian American romantic couple in Paramount’s *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

*Daughter of Shanghai* and *King of Chinatown* represent the only romantic leads Ahn played among the hundred or so titles in his filmography. As Hollywood realigned its modes of representation in the wake of Pearl Harbor and U.S. involvement in World War II, Ahn increasingly played Japanese characters (in lieu of Japanese American actors, many of whom faced internment). During this time, Ahn earned such appellations as “the man we love to hate” and the “leering yellow monster” while appearing in a number of anti–Rising Sun propaganda and war films, including *Behind the Rising Sun* (Edward Dmytryk, 1943), *The Purple Heart* (Lewis Milestone, 1944), *Back to Bataan* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945), and *Blood on the Sun* (Frank Lloyd, 1945).

During the war, the studios and media capitalized on Ahn’s Korean American identity by actively promoting his father’s involvement in anti-Japanese struggles and underscoring Ahn’s commitment to America’s war efforts against Japan both as an American citizen and the son of a renowned Korean nationalist. Later, one of the questions interviewers often asked Ahn was whether the death of his father at the hands of the Japanese affected his portrayal of Japanese characters during the war years. In a 1978 television interview, Ahn responded:

In those days, the Japanese were the enemies of the United States, and they were more viciously the enemy, at that time, of the Koreans. And of course, being of Korean
ancestry, at that time, I had tremendous, shall we say, hatred for the Japanese. . . . So when I got a Japanese role that calls for me to be vicious . . . I played it to the hilt. I had fun doing it.13

In another interview, Ahn acknowledged his pride in contributing to anti-Japanese propaganda. “True, I hated the Japanese,” he said, “but I told myself that if I was going to play the enemy, I was going to play him as viciously as I could. In Back to Bataan, I slapped little children and went so far as to hang a teacher from an American flagpole. I took pride in being the most evil man alive.”14

American studies professor Thomas Doherty notes that Ahn “sacrificed his ethnic pride to contribute to the war effort as morale-enhancing Japanese villains.”15 In reality, Ahn’s self-esteem as a Korean patriot’s son was further solidified the more his roles called for him to play wicked Japanese. To quote Ahn, “I felt that the more vicious I portrayed [the Japanese], the more I was accomplishing.”16 Any pleasure Ahn derived from his imaginary revenge was undermined by hate mail, threats on his life, and other evidence of his lack of popularity.

In February 1945, Ahn finally joined the U.S. Army, after getting deferments because producers wanted him to appear in their films.17 Although his short-lived military career and temporary dissociation with Hollywood effectively halted the hate mail, Ahn became permanently branded as a “bad guy” because of the many roles as villains he had played in World War II propaganda movies.

Lost Projects, Forgotten Histories. As the relationship between Japan and America began to deteriorate during Ahn’s early years in Hollywood, exhibition of American films in colonial Korea gradually dwindled until they were completely banned. During the postwar occupation by the American military government, a branch of the Central Motion Picture Exchange (an overseas arm of the New York–based Motion Picture Export Association) was established and import of Hollywood films resumed, increasing by 1949 to 90 percent of the films on South Korean screens.18

Interrupted by the Korean War, the influx of Hollywood action adventures, melodramas, musicals, and westerns regained momentum in 1953. Accordingly, several titles in Philip Ahn’s filmography were released in South Korea in the 1950s, including Fair Wind to Java (Joseph Kane, 1953), Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing (Henry King, 1955), and Battle Hymn (Douglas Sirk, 1957). But by the time Koreans had become cognizant of Ahn as an actor, his role in Hollywood had changed. All of the films in which he played substantial and positive roles, such as Daughter of Shanghai, China (John Farrow, 1943), and The Story of Dr. Wassell (Cecil B. DeMille, 1944), had been produced before or during World War II. Ahn returned to Hollywood in September 1946, after serving in the army, but he was no longer “a much-in-demand actor for wartime oriental roles” (as a Paramount press kit had described him in 1943).19 Lavish epics based on Pearl S. Buck’s novels, such as MGM’s The Good Earth (Sidney Franklin, 1937) and Dragon Seed (Harold S. Bucquet, Jack Conway, 1944) and Pacific War and espionage pictures were things of the past. While he appeared in fifty-seven films between 1936 and 1945, Ahn was in only forty-one between 1946 and 1960 and in just fifteen between 1961 and 1978. He made up for
this precipitous decline by taking bit parts in television series. He made more than eighty TV appearances between 1955 and 1978 and played Master Kan for three years (1973–75) on _Kung Fu_. However, with the exception of _Kung Fu_ and _M*A*S*H_ (1972–83), Ahn’s television career failed to reach audiences in South Korea, where the Television Age did not begin until the 1970s.

In the novel _The Life and Death of the Hollywood Kid_ (Hollitudũ k’idũ úi saengae, 1992), by journalist Ahn Junghyo (An Chŏng-hyo), the narrator describes Philip Ahn as follows:

Having regarded textbook heroes such as Yi Sun-sin and King Sejong as imaginary rather than real-life figures, I could not comprehend how Tosan An Ch’ang-ho’s son Philip Ahn was living in Hollywood, had an American-style name, and worked as an actor. Although Philip Ahn surely played a Korean in _Battle Hymn_, he was cast as a Javanese in _Fair Wind to Java_; a Chinese uncle in _Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing_ . . . a Japanese in _The Teahouse of the August Moon_. . . ; and as a Chinese mentor in the recent television series _Kung Fu_ which stars David Carradine . . . . As an actor who monopolized Oriental supporting and bit roles during the 1950s and 1960s, Philip Ahn was a person who could not at all be connected to our reality of the time, notwithstanding his Korean face.

In this nostalgic, semiautobiographical novel about a postwar adolescent’s obsession with classical Hollywood films as a means of momentary escape from poverty, Ahn is remembered as both an enigmatic and crystalline as a figure—someone who simultaneously resists and facilitates categorization. The narrator confesses his difficulties in understanding the father-son relationship between Tosan—a national hero comparable to King Sejong (a much-admired fifteenth-century monarch who foresaw many scientific and scholarly inventions, including _hangu_ , the Korean alphabet) and Admiral Yi Sun-sin (a sixteenth-century naval hero who defended the country from Japanese invasion)—and Hollywood’s “Oriental” actor. Instead of being proud or pleased to see a Korean sharing the frame with popular American idols such as Rock Hudson, William Holden, and Jennifer Jones, Ahn Junghyo’s narrator identifies Ahn as an unfamiliar and contradictory individual who bears no relation to the people of his generation.

This lack of identification with Ahn stems from discontinuities in the histories of Korea and Korean Americans. Although Tosan’s achievements in Korea and in the KPG in Shanghai have been lionized in history textbooks, his leadership among early Korean immigrants to the United States and the success of his American-born children have flown under the radar screen of the majority of South Koreans. While older-generation film buffs (such as Ahn Junghyo, who was born in 1941) still remember that Tosan’s son appeared in popular films of their youth, many younger South Koreans have never heard of him. Even members of Ahn Junghyo’s generation have no memory or knowledge of Philip Ahn’s prewar and wartime career and thus pigeonhole him as a 1950s–60s actor.

Philip Ahn visited his ancestral homeland for the first time in March 1959. The _Choson Daily_ (Chosŏn ilbo) introduced Ahn as a Hollywood actor “whose name is familiar to us for the role of an old man in _Chŏnsongga_ [Battle Hymn], released two years ago.” In his interview with Ahn in _International Film_ (Kukje yŏnghwach’i), a monthly film magazine, Korean director Yi Pyŏng-il likewise told him: “In South
Korea, you are known as the son of great patriot Tosan and your performance in Chŏnsŏngga [Battle Hymn] is well publicized; nevertheless, we do not know much about you.24 Although Battle Hymn was undoubtedly the most famous of Ahn’s films in South Korea, most viewers had probably noticed his name and face first in 1956, in Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing, a year before Battle Hymn was released.

Apart from the presence of glamorous Hollywood stars and high production values, these two films had special appeal to South Koreans because they foregrounded the Korean War. In Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing, Ahn plays Third Uncle, a Chinese patriarch who reluctantly surrenders his Eurasian niece Han Suyin (Jennifer Jones), a superstitious medical doctor, to an American suitor in Hong Kong named Mark Elliot (William Holden). The couple is burdened by racially tinged gossip, as well as by Mark’s inability to obtain a divorce. The romance ends tragically when Mark, working as a war correspondent, is killed in Korea. Retitled Mojo (“Affectionate Love”), this sentimental melodrama was enormously popular among South Korean audiences, who most likely sympathized enough with the cruel fate of the young lovers to bypass the inauthenticity of having an all-American girl in the role of a Eurasian.

Battle Hymn likewise enjoyed great appeal in South Korea, where it was re-run on television each year on June 25 (the commemoration of the Korean War) throughout the 1980s, long after it had been forgotten in the United States. Based on a memoir, Battle Hymn tells the story of Colonel Dean E. Hess (Rock Hudson), an Ohio minister-turned-combat pilot who earned the appellation “Father of Korean Orphans.” In December 1950, Hess saved one thousand children by airlifting them from a crumbling Seoul to safety some sixty miles off the southern coast of the peninsula (on Cheju Island), where he helped establish the Orphan’s Home of Korea. Ahn plays an old ivory carver from Pusan named Lu Wan. A converted Christian, Lu Wan not only assists Hess with the orphans but also inspires him with religious wisdom. But despite his spiritual maturity, Lu Wan is an enfeebled Korean who lacks the technical proficiency and physical potency of the American hero.

Philip Ahn’s emasculated, traditional characters in Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing and Battle Hymn pale in comparison with his more dynamic and modern roles in Daughter of Shanghai (federal investigator), King of Chinatown (attorney), The Story of Dr. Wassell (medical assistant), and Shock Corridor (Samuel Fuller, 1963; psychoanalyst). These films were never theatrically released in South Korea. The South Korean press has nevertheless emphasized the importance of Ahn’s role as a Korean in Battle Hymn. In the interviews in both Chosŏn ilbo and Kukje yŏnghwasa, Ahn and the interviewers identify that role as Ahn’s most memorable and important, as well as his role in The Story of Dr. Wassell (a World War II biopic in which Ahn plays a young Chinese assistant to a real-life naval hero played by Gary Cooper). In American interviews, however, Ahn never said Battle Hymn was his favorite work. Rather, he cited The Story of Dr. Wassell and his amiable working relationship with director Cecil B. DeMille.

Another focus of South Korean publicity was Ahn’s heartwarming reunion with twenty-five children at the Orphan’s Home, who were sent to Hollywood to appear in Hess’s biopic. According to an article in the Korean Daily (Han’guk ilbo) dated
March 16, 1959, the children ardently welcomed Ahn, calling him “Grandpa,” and performed traditional music and dance for him as they did for Rock Hudson onscreen. But despite efforts by the South Korean media to bridge the gap between Ahn and his homeland, Ahn’s Hollywood career was not fully appreciated because of the ban on showing American grade-B movies and wartime anti-Japanese films in Korea.

Further, the press about the films Ahn made in the 1950s was filled with misinformation. For example, accompanying the article in Kukje yŏnghwat was a still from Love Is a Many Splendored Thing in which Richard Loo was mistakenly identified as Ahn. Along with Ahn, Hawaiian-born Chinese American Loo was habitually cast as a Japanese villain. Subsequently, in an obituary for Loo in the French journal Cine Revue, a picture of Ahn in Kung Fu was used instead of one of Loo. This confusion speaks to the interchangeability of Asian actors, regardless of nationality and ethnicity. It is ironic that Loo was mistaken for Ahn in South Korea since World War II propaganda films had not even been shown there.

**Philip Ahn’s Roles in the Korean Film Industry.** One might wonder how to contextualize Ahn’s career in the history of Korean media given that he never appeared in a Korean film. The best way is to focus on Ahn’s effort to advance the Korean film industry, beginning in the late 1940s. On February 28, 1949, the first ROK president, Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŏng-man), sent a letter to the actor encouraging Ahn to become involved:

> It is my sincere advice to you to come and help develop the motion picture industry in Korea. There are a number of organizations that are engaged in its development, but like everything else, it must have an experienced leader to direct it properly. I have no idea what I can do to help you, but I assure you I will do anything in my power. In fact, you do not need much of anyone’s help. If you only manage to come, they will all be glad to get your help and direction and will be glad to assist you. I would not tie up with any one particular organization. You can see what we have and choose the one you think best.

Considering that the reconstruction of South Korea’s film industry only began in 1946 (with the revision of propaganda-oriented Japanese censorship laws) and fewer than fifty domestic films were made in the following three years (up to 1949), the leadership role President Rhee proposed could have been Ahn’s ticket to prominence in the South Korean film history. Regrettably, the opportunity was lost. Rhee’s second letter to Ahn, dated December 8, 1949, contains passages that might explain why Ahn never repatriated:

> I have received your letter and am glad that you have decided to help in the film industry. It is a noble idea and I appreciate your spirit. Of all of the Koreans at home and abroad, you are the logical one to undertake this enterprise since you have spent so many years in preparing yourself for bigger things for our nation. . . . However, my advice to you is not to scrap everything there in order to build up something here at the beginning. The living conditions, money exchange difficulties, lack of housing, etc., combine to make the situation somewhat impractical for anyone who has lived in America for so many years. Some of our people who have come from Hawaii and the United States to spend the rest of their lives have packed up and gone back because of these difficult
living conditions. I would advise you, therefore, not to make final arrangements until after you have been here and seen the situation.27

In spite of Tosan’s wish for his children to return to and work for the betterment of Korea, none of his five children realized their father’s dream. Philip made the best effort to this end, but the difficulties of adjustment, as suggested in Rhee’s letter, as well as the ensuing civil war, seem to have discouraged him from going to South Korea. One might also question the sincerity and commitment of Rhee’s invitation in light of his political rivalry with Ahn’s father in the KPG and the Korean American community as well as his intolerance of any challenge to his power. As John Cha, who wrote a biography of Philip’s sister Susan Ahn Cuddy, notes:

After the Japanese retreated from Korea, Syngman Rhee’s political machinery also kept Tosan in obscurity. . . . Tosan and Hŭngsadan were taboo during the Rhee regime. . . . It was no secret that Rhee’s people (Tongjihŏ) and Tosan’s people were antagonistic toward each other from way back when, even though Tosan himself had always supported Rhee.28

According to Philip Ahn’s brother Ralph, when Philip visited South Korea in 1959, he was surveilled by the secret police. On one occasion, Rhee confided to Philip that “if your father was alive, we would not have this problem,” an allusion to the mounting opposition to Rhee’s regime and to Tosan’s skills as a mediator.29

After Rhee was forced to step down as president in 1960, Ahn was offered another opportunity to enter the Korean film industry—this time as an actor. Screenwriter Ch’oe Kŭm-dong wrote to him on May 6, 1960:

I have renewed my resolution to film the life of “Ahn Tosan,”... As I wrote to you last year, there were many difficulties in the way of realizing our aims to film this patriot’s life. But now things have changed and we may be free to make this movie without any hesitation. . . . I sincerely wish you will play your father’s part in the film. This will meet the enthusiastic welcome from our people. You said you are not good at your mother tongue, Korean. But I think this will not matter. We will locate the scenes in Korea first and then we, you and our location team, will go over to America to [scout locations] there. . . . Production will begin in September this year and I will begin to write the scenario now.30

Although many anti-Japanese films were made in postliberation South Korea during Rhee’s rule, only a few films about the lives of patriots were allowed to be adapted for the screen, including Kongjŏng hwangje wa ŭsa An Chung-gŭn (King Kojŏng and Martyr An Chung-gŭn, Chŏn Ch’ang-gŭn, 1959), about a prominent revolutionary who assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese resident-general in Korea, in 1909; Yu Kwan-sun (Yun Pong-ch’um, 1959) about the “Jeanne d’arc of Korea,” who was martyred for her leadership in the March First Movement of 1919; and Tongnip hyŏphŏt wa chŏnyŏn Yi Sŭngman (Independence Society and Young Syngman Rhee; Sin Sang-ok, 1959). As Ch’oe Kŭm-dong insinuated in his letter, Rhee probably would not have allowed cinematic tribute to be paid to Tosan, which could have undermined his own authority. However, in the wake of the April 19 revolution and Rhee’s departure, the political climate democratized and film
censorship relaxed until May 16, 1961, when Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) seized power through military coup.

For reasons that remain unclear, Ch’oe never made his film about Tosan. Perhaps it was because of a lack of financing and the lack of popularity of nationalistic biopics or because the Park Chung Hee regime, which normalized diplomacy with Japan in 1965, discouraged the production of films with anti-Japanese themes. Nevertheless, a film about Tosan remained Ahn’s lifelong dream. Just a few days before he died, Ahn confided to friends and relatives that he was torn between whether to produce a documentary or a commercial feature film about his father.

As Ch’oe’s letter reveals, Ahn seems to have regarded his deficiency in his mother language as an obstacle to a career as an actor in South Korea. But actually he could speak Korean reasonably well. He had learned the language primarily from his mother. Her Korean was understandably old-fashioned, and she spoke with a thick North Korean accent. There is a trace of a similar North Korean accent, as well as awkward, grammatically incorrect expressions when Ahn speaks Korean in Charlie Chan in Honolulu (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1938), I Spy (“An American Empress,” December 25, 1967), and M*A*S*H (“Hawkeye,” January 13, 1976).

In the 1959 interview with Kukje yŏnghwawa, Ahn asked the interviewer, director Yi Pyŏng-il, if his Korean sounded strange. Yi politely answered: “Yes, your accent is a little unusual, . . . but for a person born and raised in America, you speak fluently.” Ahn even told Yi that if he could get a good part in a Korean film, he would practice the language every night. Ahn’s lack of confidence in speaking Korean probably contributed to his subsequent pursuit of U.S.-ROK coproductions as a producer (rather than an actor), following his 1959 trip across the Pacific.

Yi seems to have given the green light to the idea of a coproduction in that he mentioned the South Korean film industry’s increased interest in pursuing foreign coproducers and his personal desire to collaborate with Hollywood studios. Coincidentally or not, Ahn had his own plans for such a coproduction and, on his trip back to America, he stopped by the Tokyo branch of Columbia Pictures International to discuss the possibility of a joint partnership with the studio. Walter Briggs of the New York Herald Tribune was present at the meeting. In a newspaper article entitled “Actor Is a Villain at Home, a Hero in Korea,” Briggs announced Ahn’s plans:

Mr. Ahn discovered considerable interest among Korean movie producers for a coproduction with an American film company. “I would like to do one suitable for the international market,” he states enthusiastically, “that would mirror Korean traditions yet capitalize on the drama inherent in the ‘static war’ between Communism and the Free World that exists across the Thirty-eighth Parallel.” Mr. Ahn visualizes joining two or three American stars with Korean talent in a picture that would be shot entirely in Korea. . . . “I want to produce a good picture,” Mr. Ahn says. “The Americans would help give it pace, something that most Oriental films lack. It would be a true picture of life in that troubled land.”

No one had ever shot a Hollywood movie entirely on location in Korea before. In the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, films set in Asia were shot primarily on back lots and location shots inserted, as in Soldier of Fortune (Edward Dmytryk, 1955), Love Is a
Many-Splendored Thing, The Teahouse of the August Moon (Daniel Mann, 1956), and The World of Suzie Wong (Richard Quine, 1960). Battle Hymn, for example, was shot entirely in studios and in Arizona. One of the first Korean War films, Samuel Fuller’s The Steel Helmet (1951), was shot in Griffith Park in Southern California, as well as on artificial sets (filled with Chinese and Indian props). Such inauthentic images of Korea were perpetuated in American media as late as the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Robert Altman’s movie M*A*S*H (1970) and on the television series spawned by the film (1972–83), in which Korea was depicted as a nondescript, mountainous rural backdrop occasionally peopled with pidgin English–speaking farmers, orphans, profiteers, and “business girls” adorned in Vietnamese hats and Chinese garb. Ahn wanted to make a film that realistically depicted his homeland. On April 6, 1959, a couple of weeks after his return from Seoul, he wrote to Rhee, notifying him of a preliminary plan to join with Columbia Pictures:

Columbia is the most active motion picture studio from the point of view of foreign co-production... They are interested in reaching the same contractual basis in Korea as the Governments of, for example, England, Japan and Italy have previously agreed to... Unfortunately, up until now, most movies dealing with Korea have shown it during the War and we are hopeful that this [co-production] will prove to Westerners that there is more to our country than foxholes and mud... The profits can be plowed back into the embryo Korean film industry, enabling further technical development which will eventually result in world release of our better Korean films.33

The transfer of power from Rhee to Park Chung Hee did not deter Ahn’s resolve to bring the first U.S.–South Korean coproduction to fruition. On November 6, 1962, Ahn took a giant leap toward realizing his dream by entering into a coproduction contract with Shin Films—the first Korean film company remotely resembling a Hollywood studio—run by legendary director Shin Sang-ok (Sin Sang-ok), who was supported by Park Chung Hee. The project was provisionally entitled A Long Way from Home and was to be an adaptation of a Korean War novel by Vern Sneider about the bond that develops between young South Korean siblings and some American GIs who save them. According to the contract, Shin Films was to supply financing of $350,000, while Philip Ahn Productions was to provide the story, the script, the male lead and other American acting personnel, the American technical crew, the director, and partial mechanical, technical, and photographic equipment. The net profits were to be shared at a 70 percent (Shin) to 30 percent (Ahn) ratio. Ahn first invited his mentor and friend Lewis Milestone to be director. Ahn had made four films with Milestone, including Anything Goes, The General Died at Dawn, The Purple Heart, and Halls of Montezuma (1950). In his place, Milestone recommended Tay Garnett, who accepted the offer and agreed to review the scripts and serve as an adviser. The main candidates for the male lead were Jeffrey Hunter and Audie Murphy (the latter a less favored choice because of his low marquee value in South Korea).

The project developed smoothly until the South Korean government withheld its approval of Shin’s application for financing. In a letter dated February 18, 1963, Hong Man-kil, in the Foreign Department of Shin Films, notified Ahn that their coproduction had been delayed on the grounds that the ROK government had
begun taking stronger measures to “prevent the consumption of scarce dollars” in light of a foreign funds shortage and the weak economy. Although Hong suggested the possibility of resuming the project as soon as the situation improved, Yi Chae-myung, president of Asia Motion Pictures, who had met with Shin Sang-ok to discuss the status of the coproduction on Ahn’s behalf, confirmed in a letter to Ahn dated February 21, 1963, that the project had been halted.

Although his coproduction plans misfired, the Tosan Memorial Committee, headed by Ahn and his South Korean counterparts, gained strong support from Park Chung Hee and the city of Seoul to construct Tosan Memorial Park. The eight-acre commemorative and burial site for Tosan and his wife opened in Kangnam, a newly developed region south of the Han River, on November 10, 1973. The opening ceremony was attended by thousands of citizens and high officials, including Prime Minister Kim Chong-p’il.

Philip Ahn never gave up his dream of producing a film about Korea. In the final years of his life, he purchased the rights to Pearl S. Buck’s *The New Year* (1968), with a view to adapting the story for the big screen. The book tells the story of Christopher Winters, a Harvard-educated lawyer and politician who reconnects with his half-Korean son, whom he abandoned during the Korean War. In a January 1970 issue of *San Fernando Valley and Que Magazine*, John Ringo Graham reported that Philip Ahn was “actively working on a project that is certain to bring recognition to him as a Korean.” Exposing the source of the project as Buck’s novel, Graham added, “When this happens, it will fulfill a life-long ambition.” Sadly, this project also remained unaccomplished.

As a token of esteem for Ahn, the city of Los Angeles, under Mayor Tom Bradley, proclaimed November 14, 1984, Philip Ahn Day and posthumously honored the actor with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Among Ahn’s contemporary actors of Asian descent, only Anna May Wong and Keye Luke have received stars. Amid festive Korean dancing and music, the dedication ceremony was attended by four hundred members of the film industry and Korean communities. The star (at 6211 Hollywood Boulevard) sadly goes unnoticed by hundreds of Korean tourists and immigrants passing by each day.

“*I Am Korean*: The Many Displaced Identities of the First Korean in Hollywood. Let us now return to the previous proposition that Ahn’s career should be recognized as part of South Korea’s film history. First, evidence from his personal papers demonstrates that he endeavored time and again to enter the South Korean film industry as a leader, actor, and producer, although, regrettably, he lost many opportunities for political and economic reasons. Second, Ahn’s direct and indirect manifestations of Korean diasporic identities in American film and television deserve critical attention in the broader context of transnational Korean cinema.

Rather than employing the notion of national cinema as a geographically confined concept, we need to acknowledge a deterritorialized, diasporic space pertaining to Korean history and culture both *inside* and *around* Hollywood texts, at the center
of which is the often-peripheralized Philip Ahn. It has become difficult to separate his images in anti-Japanese propaganda films from the ideological impetus of the Great Korea Independence Spirit (*Taehan tongnip chŏngsin*), symbolized by Tosan An Ch’ang-ho, who was himself a kind of liminal figure. In this respect, Ahn’s Hollywood career parallels that of Kim Yŏm (known as Jin Yan in China), the “Emperor of 1930s Shanghai Movies.”

Kim’s father, one of Korea’s first surgeons, was an ardent supporter and financier of the Korean independence movement. In 1912, at the age of two, Kim Yŏm migrated to the northern part of Manchuria with his family. Determined to become an actor, seventeen-year-old Kim went to Shanghai, where in 1929 he debuted in a silent movie. A matinee idol during the 1930s, he played leads opposite such famous actresses as Ruan Ling-yu and Chen Yan-yan. Like Ahn, Kim expressed the anticolonial spirit he inherited from his father in his performances in resistance films such as *The Big Road* (*Da Lu*, Sun Yu, 1935).

Not only were Ahn and Kim both sons of patriots and emblems of colonial diaspora, but they also both explored and widened avenues for expressing the anti-Japanese sentiment of Korean people, whose freedom of speech, native language, and historical traditions had been either lost or forbidden during the years of occupation. Both actors had also had to displace and disguise their ethnic identities.

Ahn’s wartime career in Hollywood—his onscreen oscillation between Chinese allies and Japanese enemies—not only registers the imperative of cross-ethnic masquerade as a means of survival for a minority actor but also reflects the theme of displacement vis-à-vis that era’s Korean and Korean American identity politics. In the collective consciousness of Koreans (domestic and overseas), the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and World War II functioned as surrogates for a war for independence. When Koreans in America first heard the news of the Pearl Harbor attack, they exploded, “*Taehan tongnip manse!*” (“Long live Korean independence!”) and cried for joy. For them, the American involvement in the war against Japan meant much more than protecting the world from fascists; it signified long-dreamed-of independence for their homeland.

Just as Shanghai and Chungking provided bases for exiled KPG leaders, and Manchuria became a battleground for Korean guerillas, Hollywood offered Ahn an imaginary national space where he could carry on his father’s legacy by acting in anti-Japanese movies. What was forbidden and repressed in colonial Korean films under the strict censorship of the Japanese government could be freely expressed in Hollywood as well as in prefall Shanghai.

In *China Girl* (Henry Hathaway, 1942), for example, Ahn embodies the very image of Tosan in his performance of Dr. Young, a dignified Chinese educator who unwaveringly gives lessons in patriotism to a classroom full of orphans despite the threat to life posed by the Japanese bombs. In *China*, Ahn plays the valiant Chinese guerilla leader Lin Cho, a cross-ethnic personification of a member of the Korean Independence Army (Kwangbogun) who fought against Japanese troops in China, Burma, and India. Later, in *Kung Fu*, the paternalistic role of Kan, Senior Reverend and Grand Master of Martial Arts of the Shaolin Temple, afforded Ahn the last chance to “play his father” in a displaced form. In a 1973 interview, Ahn admits to
feeling a strong sense of identification with Tosan’s philosophy while acting in the series: “So much of what Kung Fu says is what my father taught me. He preached brotherhood and peace in Korea. . . . His inspiration [has] been of enormous help to me in my being able to project the essence of oriental philosophy in the Kung Fu series.”

Unlike Kim Yöm, all of whose characters were Chinese, Ahn occasionally played Koreans. His most memorable and complex Korean role was as Dr. Kim in RKO’s China Sky (Ray Enright, 1945), one of the last entries in Hollywood’s “China cycle” of films made during the 1930s and 1940s. Based on a Pearl S. Buck story originally published in Collier’s magazine, China Sky represents an anomaly in Ahn’s list of “China films” in that he played a Korean character for the first time not only in his career but in the history of Hollywood.

Dr. Kim works in an American charity hospital in the remote mountain village of Wan Li. A communications and supply center for Chinese guerrillas, the ancient village endures Japanese bombing every day. Kim resents being subordinate to two American doctors, including Dr. Gray Thompson (played by western icon Randolph Scott), who is married to a beautiful woman named Louise (Ellen Drew). Dr. Kim’s fiancée, Siu-Mei (Carol Thurston), falls in love with guerrilla chief Chen-Ta (Anthony Quinn), who turns up at the hospital with a seriously wounded Japanese prisoner, Colonel Yasuda (Richard Loo). Conniving and treacherous, Yasuda boldly confronts Dr. Kim about his heritage:

YASUDA: You are not Chinese.
KIM: I am Korean.
YASUDA: You may deceive these stupid people here. Me, you cannot deceive.
KIM: My mother is Korean.
YASUDA: And your father?
KIM (angrily): My father is dead.
YASUDA: But he lived to give you life and he was Japanese.
KIM: I am known as Korean and that’s how I wish it to be.

Kim initially rejects Yasuda’s call for collaboration, but changes his mind when the Japanese colonel incites Kim’s jealousy of Chen-Ta and his hatred for Americans. Kim administers medicine to the prisoner as a way to bring on a relapse and thereby prevent Yasuda from being handed over to Chen-Ta. However, Yasuda then blackmails Kim by threatening to expose his half-Japanese heritage to his fiancée and enlists Kim to persuade Louise to send a coded message, under her husband’s name, that would supposedly bring an airplane in which to escape. Thanks to Dr. Thompson’s intervention, Kim discovers that he has been double-crossed and that the message was not to send a plane but to instruct Japanese paratroopers to attack the guerrillas’ ammunitions stockpile. When Kim yells, “This treachery I will not share,” Yasuda shoots him and escapes. While Kim receives his redemption, peacefully dying in the arms of Siu-Mei, Dr. Thompson, joined by farmers and Chen-Ta’s guerrillas, defeat Yasuda and his paratroopers.

It is ironic that the first Korean role Tosan’s son played was as a Japanese collaborator. However, Ahn seems to have interpreted the role positively. In a December
1944 article in the *Los Angeles Daily News*, David Hanna reports on an interview he conducted with Ahn:

> His last stint in *China Sky*, he feels, is one of the most important he has played—psychologically, that is. It is the role of Dr. Kim Phillip, a man who is half Japanese and half Korean. This influence of both nationalities weighs heavily on his conscience, but ultimately his loyalty to Korea asserts itself.42

Ahn saw Dr. Kim’s redemption as a manifestation of the character’s “good” Korean side. To support this theory, Ahn strategically inserted a Korean word in a scene that displays the doctor’s guilty conscience. Unlike Yasuda, who speaks heavily accented English, the American-trained Kim speaks English fluently. Nevertheless, Dr. Kim utters one foreign word after betraying his colleagues, “May hananim forgive me for what I have done.” In the final script, dated July 12, 1944, the English word *Buddha* was used in place of “hananim.”43 The substitution of *Buddha* is significant for two reasons. As an encoded message to bilingual and bicultural audiences, the Korean word signifying God serves as a self-reflexive manifestation of the actor’s true ethnicity, which had been habitually masked. At the same time, the change from *Buddha* to *God* reflects Ahn’s religious identity as a devout Presbyterian. One cannot be certain...
if the idea of using a Korean word came from director Ray Enright, screenwriters Brenda Weisberg and Joseph Hoffman, or Philip Ahn. One can imagine, however, that the latter had creative leeway. It was likely a conscious decision on Ahn’s part to implicitly defy Hollywood’s typecasting of Orientals as all-encompassing Buddhist others—a practice oblivious to and negligent of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of religions in Asia. With the utterance of the word hananim, Ahn may also have wanted to emphasize his character’s “good” Christian half.

*China Sky* was a kind of “coming out” for Ahn. He identified himself as Korean three times in the narrative, self-consciously commenting on his own diasporic identity. The self-reflexivity in the above-quoted confrontation between Yasuda and Kim is multilayered: Chinese American actor Richard Loo tells Philip Ahn, “You are not Chinese,” reflecting the voice of Chinese audiences who had seen Ahn habitually playing Chinese characters; the Korean American actor publicly reveals his true ethnicity heretofore displaced in his screen roles: “I am Korean”—words that had never been uttered in American cinema; and Ahn virtually plays himself when he says, “My mother is Korean. . . . My father is dead.” Not only does the scene implicate the cross-ethnic recognition of otherness and commonality between the two Asian American performers but it also symbolizes the precarious status of Koreans in America in the wake of the Pacific War.

Despite the widespread anticolonial movements among Korean immigrants, U.S. government policies had conflated Koreans and Japanese. Having been classified as subjects of Japan in the 1940 Alien Registration Act, Koreans became identified as “enemy aliens” in the wake of America’s declaration of war against Japan. Insulted and enraged, Koreans protested, demanding reclassification. The KNA recommended that compatriots wear a badge identifying themselves as Korean to protect their security. But despite the misclassification, Koreans began to earn respect and recognition for their exceptional contributions to the war effort. United under the KPG’s slogan, “To fight for America is to fight for Korea!” ten thousand immigrants committed their savings and labor, purchasing more than $239,000 worth of war bonds during 1942–43, serving the government as translators and instructors in the Japanese language, and volunteering for the National Guard and Red Cross. In this context, Ahn’s emphatic declaration of his ethnicity allegorizes a collective statement on the part of Korean immigrants in America during the war.

It is noteworthy that *China Sky* was released in 1945, the year Korea officially resurfaced on the map of American foreign policy. Since 1905, when Theodore Roosevelt had sanctioned the Japanese control of Korea in exchange for U.S. monopoly in the Philippines (through the Taft-Katsura Memorandum), the American government had disregarded the “Korean problem.” During the war, America expressed its support for the Koreans suffering under Japanese colonization, a concern made official in the 1943 Cairo Declaration, in which the United States, Great Britain, and China collectively committed to furthering Korean independence.

Also in 1943, United Artists released *Jack London* (Alfred Santell) an adventure biopic concerning the titular American novelist-turned-war correspondent who witnesses Japan’s brutal incursion into Korea during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), as well as learns of Japan’s plan to conquer China and the West using
Korea as a steppingstone. Jack London was the first American film to represent Korea, aside from silent travelogues made during the first decade of the twentieth century. However, in Jack London, Korea is nothing but a nondescript, poverty-stricken landscape populated with stoic-looking crowds wearing Chinese garb who silently watch as Japanese troops pass by with Russian prisoners. In comparison, China Sky personifies Korea, in the figure of Dr. Kim, as an enemy-by-proxy—a perception that many Americans held during the Pacific War. The confusion about Korean loyalty is expressed by the protagonist, Dr. Thompson, when he is informed that Kim is collaborating with Yasuda: “I can’t understand this. Why should Dr. Kim like to help the Japs? Koreans have done everything possible to defeat the Japs.” Although the Japanese character and viewers are privy to Dr. Kim’s secret, the Chinese and Americans remain in the dark about why Dr. Kim is collaborating.

To put a rhetorical spin on Dr. Thompson’s question—why would a Korean character help the Japanese?—we need to turn to Buck’s original story and earlier scripts, in which Dr. Kim is a corrupt, anti-American Chinese doctor who collaborates with the enemy. In a New York Times article dated September 24, 1944, producer Maurice Geraghty is quoted as saying that “the principal opposition against the previous scripts was that they called for the showing of Chinese groups working in collaboration with the Japanese enemy. All is sweetness and light on the score, now. . . . because the collaborationists are represented as half-breed Japanese-Koreans.” In other words, Korean ethnicity was exploited as a way to avoid presenting a negative image of the Chinese, one of America’s most prized allies during World War II. The American film industry and the State Department’s apprehension attending censorship of Hollywood’s China films became conspicuous since Shanghai Express (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), The Bitter Tea of General Yen (Frank Capra, 1933), and The General Died at Dawn had all been banned in China after seriously agitating government authorities and citizens. Moreover, Washington’s influence over Hollywood had gained momentum as the Bureau of Motion Pictures of the Office of War Information (OWI)—the Roosevelt administration’s propaganda agency—regulated the political content of wartime films from 1942 to 1945. The OWI propagandists pressured the studios to rectify ethnic stereotypes of the Allies (particularly the British and the Chinese). In this context, RKO studio heads and creative personnel opted to place the blame on Koreans—Japanese colonial subjects—rather than risk dishonoring an Allied nation. Regardless of the negative traits of Hollywood’s first Korean character in China Sky, and the problem of misusing Korean ethnicity to appease the U.S. and Chinese governments, Ahn’s bald declaration “I am Korean” is historically significant, particularly because it expresses a predivision, pre–Cold War Korean identity that all but disappeared in 1950s Korean War films, in which cookie-cutter stereotypes proliferated.

**Min, Chin, or a Position In-between?** On October 1, 2003, I presented an early version of this article at a cinema symposium in Seoul. Following my talk, Daughter of Shanghai was shown. This hard-to-find “B” movie had never been released in South Korea. My presentation and the film were greeted with enthusiasm by Korean film scholars, who encouraged my further research on Ahn and his legacy. I was particularly
touched when a lecturer told me that he was deeply moved seeing Tosan’s son onscreen. I suddenly realized that Philip Ahn had not been forgotten in South Korea. Perhaps Philip Ahn Cuddy is right when he says that non-Koreans know his uncle better than do Koreans or Korean Americans. After all, Charlie Chan fans rhapsodize about the radical difference between Ahn’s two roles in the series—the amiable yet nerdy son-in-law (Wing Fu) in *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* and the shrewd, sinister murder suspect Captain Kong in *The Chinese Ring* (William Beaudine, 1947). Anna May Wong aficionados remember Ahn for playing opposite the Chinese American goddess, who was rumored to be his real-life romantic partner. For American war-film buffs, Ahn is “the most sought-after villain of all, with his nasal, flat voice and his masklike face that looked as if it had been carved out of India rubber.” Fans of the TV series *Kung Fu* remember him as Master Kan, who tests young Caine, the Eurasian protagonist, with a physical/philosophical mind game: “As quickly as you can . . . snatch the pebble from my hand. . . . When you can take the pebble from my hand, it will be time for you to leave.” The phrase “Snatch the pebble from my hand” became one of the most frequently quoted lines of the 1970s.

South Koreans do not share these cultural memories with Americans. At the Seoul conference, one professor said: “Philip Ahn was a star, wasn’t he? He was famous, but we just don’t know him in Korea.” I was hesitant to answer. Was he a star? Americans have called him everything but a star: an Oriental actor, a character actor, a supporting actor, a sidekick, a third wheel. I was then reminded of something David Jung, a former Chinatown resident, said about Anna May Wong: “The Chinese people accepted second best. . . . They accepted her saying, ‘Well, somebody made it.’ Anna May Wong was actually a star; outside of the Chinese community, she was just an actress but she was a star in our community.” Ahn was accepted in a similar way in the Korean American community. Philip Ahn’s correspondence file (retained in the family archive) includes a letter, dated September 20, 1974, from a twenty-year-old college student named Lisa Min. Min introduces herself as “an insatiable movie and television buff” and confesses her ambition to become an actress. Soliciting Ahn’s advice vis-à-vis her career, she writes: “You are the only actor [by whom] I have ever felt empowered to write. I have always felt a kinship to you when watching you in *Kung Fu* or one of your past movies, because, like myself, you are Korean.”

The same performance that empowered Min provoked the exact opposite reaction in other Asian Americans. For example, Frank Chin, a Chinese American playwright, vehemently attacked the racial politics behind and in *Kung Fu* in a *New York Times* article. He cynically compares the evolution of apes with that of images of Chinese in mainstream media.

In 40 years, apes went from a naked, hairy King Kong, gigantic with nitwit sex fantasies about little human women, to a talking chimpanzee leading his fellow apes in a battle to take over the planet. We’ve progressed from Fu Manchu, the male Dragon Lady of silent movies, to Charlie Chan and then to Kung Fu on TV. We’ve made no progress at all. We’re still made out to be the likes of Keye Luke, Bensen Fong, Philip Ahn and Victor Sen Yung at our worst and middling, and David Carradine—talking like he’s in a trance—at our best.
Accompanying the piece is a close-up publicity shot of a bald, wizened Philip Ahn in Master Kan makeup, epitomizing the anachronistic Oriental fiercely denounced in Chin’s article.

Min’s and Chin’s conflicting interpretations of Ahn’s legacy represent the dilemmas and difficulties that scholars of early Asian American performers inevitably face. On the one hand, these pioneers were inspirational role models for younger Asian American actors. On the other hand, the careers of these performers comprise a composite of Oriental stereotypes condemned by today’s Asian American activists, who have benefited from increased political agency and institutional access to independent filmmaking.

Ultimately, Philip Ahn was a minor character actor who made major contributions to the construction of Asian images in Hollywood and American television from the 1930s to the 1970s. His case demonstrates the need to expand and revise traditional conceptions of stardom to properly address the rich tradition of ethnic performers who were barred from leading roles, not because they lacked talent but because of historically specific racial attitudes in the industry and society. In commemoration
of the centennial of Philip Ahn’s birth, I would like to invoke Rudolph Arnheim’s manifesto in praise of character actors: “Let us dethrone the studios’ values and take a look around outside, and we will be astonished to see that in this, our real world, there aren’t any leading men to be seen, only characters!”

Notes
I am grateful to the Ahn family, particularly Susan Ahn Cuddy, Ralph Ahn, and Philip Ahn Cuddy, for opening their family archive to me and sharing memories of Philip Ahn. Thanks also to Nancy Abelmann, David Scott Diffrient, Esther Kim Lee, Chon Noriega, and Brian Taves for reading early versions of my manuscript and providing insightful suggestions.

1. *Die Another Day* came under fire months prior to its December 2002 release in South Korea for what was perceived as insulting national pride and distorting reality. When the film finally arrived with the shortened title *Another Day*, hundreds of Koreans picketed theaters while thousands of Netizens inundated cyberspace with critical invectives against the film as well as Rick Yune and Will Yun Lee, whose North Korean characters were given significant screen time. The 007 boycott intensified as part of a general anti-American movement triggered by the acquittal of two U.S. soldiers whose armored vehicle accidentally ran over and killed two Korean schoolgirls in June 2002.

2. Paramount press kit (presumed to have been written in 1943), Philip Ahn clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.


4. The State Department recognized the KNA as the representative of overseas Koreans in 1913, discrediting Japan’s claim that Koreans in America were imperial subjects of Japan. Cha, *Willow Tree Shade*, 50.

5. Huıngsadan was conceived as a model for Korean democracy as well as a revolutionary training organization that developed future leaders for postliberation Korea.

6. According to the 1920 U.S. Census, six Korean Americans born on the U.S. mainland were of Philip Ahn’s age and six others were one to seven years older than he was. I am grateful to Kenneth Klein for sharing this information with me.

7. Philip’s youngest brother, Ralph, said that Philip taught club members how to dance and arranged meetings between the boys and girls. Ralph Ahn, interview with the author, August 18, 2003, Los Angeles.


9. Ibid.

10. The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 specifically prohibited miscegenation between white and black characters, but in practice the exclusion expanded to other racial minorities, such as Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. See Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema,” in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 45.


17. Among these producers was Cecil B. DeMille, who wrote a letter to the Los Angeles local draft board on January 5, 1943:

We are producing a navy motion picture entitled The Story of Dr. Wassell . . . We have selected Mr. Ahn for an important role. . . . The part of “Ping” in the script, which has been in preparation since April, 1942, has been definitely fitted to Mr. Ahn’s abilities and any substitution . . . might well be detrimental to the production.

Philip Ahn correspondence file, Ahn Family Collection, Northridge, California.


19. Philip Ahn clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library.

20. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of films and television programs in which Ahn appeared because many of his bit parts are uncredited. Most newspaper articles list the number of roles at two hundred to three hundred. The statistics can also vary depending on whether individual episodes of Kung Fu (three seasons) are counted separately.


25. Richard Loo clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library.


27. Ibid.


29. Interview with the author, August 18, 2003, Los Angeles.


33. Philip Ahn correspondence file, Ahn family collection.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

37. Other Asian American stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame include Sessue Hayakawa, Bruce Lee, Mako, Pat Morita, Sabu, and George Takei. Following Hayakawa, Sabu and Anna May Wong, who received their stars in 1960 when the Walk was inaugurated, Philip Ahn's was the first star for an Asian American actor in nearly a quarter of a century.


39. The Korean Independence Army (KIA) was established in September 1940 as a military arm of the KPG, then located in Chungking. With the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, the KIA declared war against Japan and cooperated with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) for secret guerrilla plans. They actively helped draft Korean soldiers escape the Japanese Army on Chinese fronts. They also fought with the Allies in Burma and India.


41. Along with *China Sky, First Yank into Tokyo* (Gordon Douglas, 1945)—also released by RKO—features a Korean character (played by Chinese American actor Keye Luke) who helps the American hero infiltrate a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and sacrifices his life for the cause of freedom.


43. *China Sky*, RKO script files, UCLA Arts Library Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

44. RKO producers likely wanted to evade evoking a particular religion (i.e., Buddhism) in association with the immoral character since the Office of War Information (OWI) expressed concerns over earlier scripts featuring religious references uttered by Asian characters of different ethnicities—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—who equally appeal to Buddha for blessing and vindication of their actions. *China Sky* Motion Picture Reviews and Analyses files, box 3513, OWI files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.


46. Ibid., 367.

47. *China Sky* clipping files, Margaret Herrick Library.


50. Cuddy, “Philip Ahn: Born in America.”


