



FILMS



Debbie Lum, *Seeking Asian Female*

New Day Films, 2012. DVD, 83 minutes (52 minute short version). \$400 (corporations); \$325 (colleagues/universities); \$200 (community colleges); \$200 (community groups); \$100 (public libraries); \$95 (rental). www.newday.com/film/seeking-asian-female.

SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE follows the intersection of three lives. Debbie Lum is a San Francisco filmmaker of American Chinese ancestry who has “always wondered why some men have a thing for Asian women.” Steven Bolstad is a twice-divorced sixty-year-old man, who works as a cashier at San Francisco Airport and has been searching the Internet for a Chinese wife. Sandy (Jianhua) is a thirty-year-old woman from Anhui, China who comes to San Francisco to marry Steven. All three speak in the film—the filmmaker through voiceover commentary, and the other two both in interviews and as they go about their lives.

The film begins when Lum (her voice and camera) enters Steven’s apartment to meet him for the first time. She is there because he will “tell her everything” and “his verbal filter seems broken.” Steven is guileless, open hearted, and trusting. He demonstrates how he searches for potential marriage partners. She notes that his online persona and photo are honest; so honest, in fact, that she marvels he attracts anyone. However, he has corresponded extensively with more than one hundred women and keeps their letters and pictures in binders. His desktop overflows with sheaves of thumbnail headshots from Asian dating/marriage sites, and groans under the weight of hard drives full of pictures. He asks to take Lum’s picture and she tells us (not him) that it is her nightmare—to become another picture on his wall. She has been hit on her whole life by white men because she is Asian, a phenomenon referred to as “yellow fever,” an exploration of which initially appears to be the subtext of the film.

Lum checks in some months later and finds Steven transforming his apartment, removing all the pictures of old girlfriends, and putting the files of Asian women into a storage locker. He has found a bride and is off to China to meet her. Two

weeks later he returns with Sandy who has been given a three-month marriage visa. She came from a rural village and did well in school but her family could not afford to send her to college. She moved to a factory job in the city, worked her way up to an office job, and was able to buy her mother a house in the village. She initially went online to find a Chinese husband. She is an attractive and self-sufficient woman who appears more successful in her own culture and country than Steven is in his. Both express goodwill toward each other despite the awkwardness of their rapid courtship and absence of shared experiences. Steven insists he is head over heels in love.

Things fray almost immediately. Old girlfriends, financial problems, and numerous daily misunderstandings emerge as they try to meld their lives and expectations. This is exacerbated, and possibly caused, by a massive language barrier. They sit at two computers typing into online translation programs and looking at each other's screens. Watching Sandy negotiate life in San Francisco, and make wedding plans with Steven, foregrounds how a newcomer constructs an understanding of life circumstances that are transparent to natives—everything from sticking Chinese labels on packaged food to figuring out the difference between getting a marriage license and a wedding ceremony.

From the outset, the film is implicitly skeptical and critical of an industry that enables a man in America to comb through thousands of computer profiles seeking love; and suspicions that the woman's motivation is to acquire an immigration Green Card. But these edges blur as we experience the couple together through Lum's relaxed observational filming. And the tone of the filmmaker's interactions softens as she comes to know and care about the protagonists. As the story progresses, Lum is increasingly pressed into service as a translator, confidant, and advisor, which generates a confounding ethical axis.

It begins with Lum translating an occasional word, but with no intention of doing so, she becomes an intermediary between Steven and Sandy. Whenever the couple came to an impasse, or when one or the other wanted something communicated or explained, Debbie would be called, even in the middle of the night. Steven looks upon her as a buddy who can help him pick out the perfect wedding ring. Debbie, however, is the only woman friend Sandy can talk to. She is conflicted, often angry, and in a situation different than she expected. At times Steven would be saying something nice, and Sandy would smile and say something hostile in Chinese that Debbie would understand (and subtitle). Lum has three conflicting loyalties, to Steven, to Sandy, and to her film. She comments on and tries to resolve the problem in the film, but ultimately it hangs out as a story line ripe for discussion.

Seeking Asian Female provides extraordinary access to the lives of these two people negotiating the complex issues involved in what used to be termed "mail order brides" but which in today's world of globalized social media comprise an amorphous array of opportunities to meet, interact, and marry. However, the film provides little insight into how the factors of physical attraction, wealth, nationality, compatibility, or agency interact in either the selection of mates and or the prospects for and longevity of these unions. The generalizations are confounded by the particulars; but thanks to the willingness of this couple to participate in the film over more than a year, we are given a wealth of tantalizing hints as to how such relationships work.

The DVD has six short extras on the disc, featuring interviews with a variety of people on subjects related to yellow fever, including Asian men, Asian women, men of

other ethnicities, scholars who have researched this topic, and an Asian matchmaker. They are pointedly less interesting and stimulating than the film, but contribute to the utility of the DVD to promote discussion and reflection on the phenomenon.

John Melville Bishop

Media-Generation