

2006 MAASA Presidential Address

Infantasia: A Meditation on International Adoption and American Studies¹

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To begin my talk, I offer a preface. Some years ago, in an enchanted place called Iowa City, I was a student in Rich Horwitz's introductory graduate seminar in American studies. I don't remember what the topic that week was, nor do I remember the person who raised the point—it may well have been me. But someone in that class made the suggestion that their personal experience in a given aspect of American studies provided a knowledge base that previous research and writing had simply not addressed. Rich listened attentively and then remarked: "Well, it's been my personal experience that most research based on personal experience is a bogus pile of crap." As this paper, though more of a meditation at this point than a research project, is based on personal experience, I thought it would be wise to let you know from the start exactly what to expect.

My personal experience with American studies has changed in the past few years. As some of you know, my wife and I adopted a daughter, Lin Xianglan, now Emma Lin Xianglan, from China in November 2002; we adopted our second daughter, Lu Chenguang, now Hannah Lu Chenguang, in March 2005. There is much to be said about the process of international adoption, and I intend to say at least some of that in a few minutes. For now, however, let me just state that an important—and overt—part of that process for the parents is the acceptance that their babies are being introduced to a strange new culture, and the need to understand how strange that culture is going to seem. Most of us, then, become

students of American culture, examining what we have taken for granted, as much as we become students of the Chinese culture that the babies are leaving.

It is from that point that this story begins, in December 2002, with Emma and her baba sitting in front of the TV set in the family room. Having no idea what an 11-month-old child would be interested in, I channel-surfed kids' programming for a few days. She liked Elmo, but she didn't seem to care for the rest of *Sesame Street*. *Teletubbies* was okay, but the rest of the PBS stuff was too narrative-driven and not particularly eye-catching (I'm being polite) in terms of animation. *SpongeBob* was funny at first, but then it got too loud and scary. And *The Wiggles* was four-months down the road. So I pondered: what would be visually stimulating but not tied to a narrative in which Emma would lose interest? And there, on the video shelf, was a plausible answer: *Fantasia*. Pretty pictures, pretty music, and we could skip the scary story parts. I popped in the video—and much to my pleasure, it worked. She loved the first part of Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue in D minor," especially Leopold Stokowski directing the orchestra. Though she lost interest in the abstract parts of the visuals, by the end she was waving her arms in the air as if she were the boss of the Philadelphia Orchestra—which actually revealed far more of her character than I recognized at the time. Next came the *Nutcracker Suite*. She wasn't as enamored by the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies" as I had hoped—too delicate, I supposed. But then, to my horror, came That Which I Had Forgotten: The "Chinese Dance," with its seven coolie-hatted, slanted-eyed mushrooms shuffling around as if in bound feet and fungoid *qi paos*. I couldn't even look at it.

Instead of watching the cartoon, then, I watched Emma. And learned: she adored the mushrooms. She bounced up and down and laughed. She demanded to see it again... a demand to which I dutifully responded, feeling like something between a foolish Pandorus and the devil into which Bald Mountain transforms in the final segment of the film. I don't remember much else of our first viewing of *Fantasia*, except that nothing, save Stokowski conducting, was anywhere near as enjoyable as those "Chinese" dancing mushrooms.

As you can gather, my immediate response to this was to condemn myself, to condemn Disney, to condemn the whole racist and hegemonic enterprise of American entertainment, be it from 1940 or from 2002. I would guess that that would be—or is—the response of most, if not all of you, listening to this. That that is our immediate response, however, points out how meaningless that response has become. Of course the Chinese dance in *Fantasia* is racist; of course it can be read as an ur-moment in Disney's colonization of the world; anyone, we believe, can and should be able to see that. But what understandings exist beyond those "of courses"? How do we explain, outside of basic medical and psychological processes, the genuine delight of an eleven-month-old girl, sitting in a house 10,000 miles from those in which she had begun her life, in images of mushrooms representing the people with whom she had lived for all but a week of that life? I don't pretend to have the answers yet to those questions, but I want to suggest, in the time I have remaining, ways in which we can consider

adoption in general, transnational adoption in specific, and even those dancing mushrooms in *Fantasia* as things that might move us beyond the “of courses” that largely define American studies.

“Adoption” is a word that I suspect makes many uncomfortable when it’s introduced to discuss the ways in which American culture develops. “Hegemony” and “assimilation” are much cleaner, more surgical terms, denoting the ways in which the imperial power of the American state seduces and traduces elements that might upset the culture into joining and then being swallowed up by its mainstream. And on many occasions, those are precisely the terms and processes we need to use to describe the functioning of American culture. But on at least as many more occasions, we use those terms to describe something far messier, far more unpredictable. I have argued, for example, at great length elsewhere that what might be defined as the “assimilation” of British television by an imperialistic American entertainment industry is instead a relationship in which the latent power of that being assimilated becomes as strong as that of the assimilator, so that for a period of time in the 1970s and early 1980s, it is almost as plausible to argue that American television has become subject to British cultural imperialism.

Adoption is troublesome, as metaphor and as fact. As verbal metaphor, it is legalistic and cultural, a product of human will, desire, and/or need—the root meaning of “adopt” is “to choose for oneself”—as opposed to the more organic and natural processes implied by hegemony (from the Greek “leader”) and assimilation. As visual metaphor, it endows size, authority, and power to one partner in the relationship as it equally diminishes the other partner. As historical metaphor, it seems to elide the social and economic conditions of and physical and spiritual suffering visited upon groups—African slaves, Chinese laborers, Native Americans, etc., etc.—the United States has “chosen for itself” to make part of its whole. As historical fact, adoption has been equally fraught with difficulty. Though common in Rome—the word “*alumnus*” means “foster child”—legal adoption disappeared during the first millennium C.E., to return in most Western societies only at the end of the second millennium.

Adoption in the United States has, at least on the surface, been a relatively benign process. It was first legalized in Massachusetts in 1851; almost all states passed similar laws by the turn of the century, more than twenty-five years before Britain did the same. Still, as Barbara Melosh relates in her history of American adoption, *Strangers and Kin*, adoption was but a marginal element of the progressive reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While women reformers particularly active in child welfare issues were helping shut down Dickensian orphanages, they were more interested in a paid foster parent model for those children than they were adoption. Spurred by a booming economy, the rise of a professional middle class, and the development of social work as a profession unto itself, adoption gained acceptability in the 1920s as a means of rearing children who were otherwise homeless. A second boom in adoption coincided with the post-World War II baby boom, when adoption was

presented by politicians, social workers, and religious leaders in the 1950s as both the “best solution,” to quote Melosh, for a rapid increase in babies born out of wedlock: the baby would have a secure home, the mother would be able to restart her presumably ruined life, and a husband and wife, possibly infertile, could enact the ideology of family so central to the time.

But while numbers increased and adoption itself became an endorsed procedure in the 1950s, two new and different problems emerged. First was the issue of race. As the socioeconomic profile I just outlined would suggest, adoption was strictly a “best solution” for whites. The legal adoption of African American babies was never promoted or encouraged, although longstanding traditions of informal, extralegal adoption arrangements in black communities, as well as Native American communities, somewhat mitigated against that overt discrimination. Nonetheless, adoption agencies sought out specifically white middle-class homeowners as the market for available white babies. For a few years in the 1960s and early 1970s, transracial adoptions of a sort became more accepted, according to Claudia Castaneda, because of factors including the legalization of abortion, an increasing acceptance of unwed mothers, and the civil rights movement. But almost all “transracial” adoptions placed children of color in the same middle-class white families who had been the beneficiaries of the 1950s adoption boom. Concern over this practice led the National Association of Black Social Workers to demand a ban on the process in 1972, reducing domestic transracial adoptions to a mere handful each year. Similarly, American Indian activists curtailed an ongoing federal effort to place Indian babies in white homes with the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, which mandated tribal control of Indian adoptions.

The second problem that emerged with the adoption boom was a more personal one. Early adoption laws had assumed that adopted children would be able to learn the identity of their birth parents. That option began to close in the 1930s, and by the 1950s, it was almost impossible for adopted children, using birth certificates that literally erased from existence their birth parents’ identities, to know of their genetic backgrounds. This legal secrecy compounded the social secrecy shared by many mid-century adoptees; it wasn’t necessary, especially given the visual similarity, for anyone to know that they were different. The social stigma of adoption began to fade in the 1960s, and with the efforts of adoption activists to obtain more open records, as well as the development of open adoption processes in which the child has regular contact with his/her birth parents, part of the veil of secrecy has been lifted from both adoption and adoptees—part, but not all.

Both of those problems with intranational adoptions in the “best solution” era became writ even larger with the beginnings of transnational adoption in the 1950s. When Harry and Bertha Holt, a Christian couple from Oregon, received permission from the federal government to travel to Korea in 1955 to adopt Korean War orphans, a new understanding of adoption, as well as a new market, opened in the United States. As American studies scholar Susie Woo’s ongoing

project dealing with the first wave of Korean adoptees to American families shows, the “best solution” for those children involved an equation of adoption with assimilation. *Life Magazine* profiles of early Korean adoptees stressed how they were becoming American, to the point of wearing cowboy suits. Anthropologist Toby Volkman tells the story of Korean adoptee Nathan Adolfsen, whose Minnesotan family never discussed his adoption or his homeland, and whose mother wanted him to be “a little Scandinavian.” The dual issues of race and secrecy, so prominent in American adoptions during the 1950s and 1960s, created a unique double bind for these early Asian adoptees: while both race and adoption were openly visible to anyone who looked, they had to be concealed from the child.

Those issues have abated over time with transnational adoptions, as they have with American adoption as a whole. American parents involved in transnational adoptions today are urged, if not required, to familiarize themselves with their child’s native culture and to be sure that their child learns about their own cultural heritage. Many, obviously including our family, retain the native name as part of the full American name. For adoption scholar and lawyer Elizabeth Bartolet, as cited by Castaneda, this move in transnational adoption represents a significant assault on naturalized norms of racehood and nationality: the transnationally adoptive home is indeed a small world, after all. But, Castaneda points out, that understanding elides both the economic realities and the social and historical contexts of the adoption transaction itself.

American adoptions from China exemplify these problematics further. When those adoptions began around fifteen years ago, the availability of (overwhelmingly female) babies was deemed to be because of the Chinese one-child policy combined with a preference for a male heir; harsh penalties for bearing children out of wedlock also played some role in the abandonments that would eventually lead to transnational adoptions. For some adoptive parents, then, the notion of “rescue” became primary—babies had to be saved from a cruel and unjust system, with the secret behind the abandonment of any given baby offering tacit support to that narrative. At the same time, however, the construction of parent as “rescuer” simply restates the economic power American (and other Western) adoptive parents have in the process—economic power recognized and welcomed by Chinese authorities. International adoption at its base level is a commodity exchange, with wealthy Americans as buyers, developing Chinese as sellers, and little Chinese girls as the things bought and sold. And yet, to flip the coin again, seeing the referral photo of an emaciated 12-pound six-month-old Lin Xianglan, whose two-sizes-too-big frock couldn’t begin to cover the fiery blotches of eczema on her arms, chest, and legs, makes one intimately aware that there are worse things to happen to an infant body than commodification.

Adoption is difficult. Adoption is a moment when the seam between the personal and the political is most uncomfortably visible, and a place where that seam can most easily be rent. And that, I believe, is precisely its value as a model to American studies. Adoption—and particularly transnational adoption—forces

us to examine the problems of a process that is at its core spiritually and socially beneficial, just as it forces us to consider the benefits of a process that is at its core culturally and politically problematic. It recovers the elegance of Kenneth Burke's "both/and" philosophy, one that defined American studies at its origin in the 1930s and that has been increasingly marginalized as our field has followed cultural studies down the path of hegemony and assimilation toward a dogma that is, in its fullest expression, as imperialistic as the practice it opposes; one that defines American culture as the Borg, against which resistance is futile, and toward which legitimate contribution is meaningless.

To illustrate my point, and to haul myself back to turf on which I feel far more comfortable than that on which I have just trod, I want to offer a brief analysis of the artifact without which this meditation would not exist: the 1940 animated film *Fantasia*. Two-thirds of a century on, *Fantasia* can easily be seen as the most boldly American project of that most bold American entrepreneur, Walt Disney. Commercially, the film was originally designed and marketed as a two-hour-long Barnumesque spectacular, with roadshow engagements and reserved seat ticketing at limited venues around the country. Disney even considered rotating new segments in and out of the film, making it new—and keeping it running—perpetually. Technically, it was replete with numerous innovations in filmmaking, ranging from the elaborate multiplane camera equipment used to create a three-dimensional effect to the "Fantasound" sound design, a special recording and playback system that anticipated the development of stereo more than a decade later. Thematically, it was as aggressively middlebrow as a film could be, bringing together the low comedy of the animated cartoon with the high arts of classical music, dance, and mythology.

Its evident immediate failure is perhaps equally American in its scope. Both the oncoming war effort and labor troubles truncated the development of Fantasound in-theater equipment; that technology was the basis of the roadshow exhibition idea, which in turn met an early end. Distributor RKO then demanded the film be shortened for wide release, with the remaining 88-minute *Fantasia* to be shown in the neighborhood theaters in which *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had been a huge hit. The movie was ridiculed by music critics upon its November 1940 release. Dorothy Thompson in the *New York Herald Tribune* typified the response: "I left the theater in a condition bordering on nervous breakdown. I felt as though I had been subjected to an assault, but I had no desire to throw myself in adoration before the two masters who were responsible for the brutalization of sensibility in this remarkable nightmare." Film critics, focusing on the imagery, were somewhat kinder—*New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther called it "simply terrific," and radical documentarian Pare Lorentz praised it for having brought classical music "out of the temple, [making] it work to surround, and support, and synchronize a brilliantly drawn series of animated color sketches"—but reviews overall were barely more than mixed. With all the theatrical ballyhoo gone, and critics not urging their readers to rush out and see the movie, the public response to *Fantasia* was beyond disappointing.

The movie didn't recoup its \$2 million-plus costs—four times the budget of the average live-action Hollywood film in 1940—until its sixth re-release in 1969, when college students and soon-to-be college students found the combination of music and “animated color sketches” even more exhilarating than turning on, so to speak, *Live Dead* and setting a cut-up plastic six-pack holder on fire.

Though the Americanness of *Fantasia* as process and product is inarguable, what most discussions elide is that the film could not have existed without the contributions of sources drawn, literally and figuratively, far from American shores. First and foremost of those contributions is that of Disney's collaborator Leopold Stokowski. A Barnumesque figure himself, who affected a phony Eastern European accent and reveled in the theatricality of conducting a symphony orchestra, Stokowski was born of an Irish mother and a Polish father in London, where he received his musical training. By the time he began working with Disney on “The Sorcerer's Apprentice,” a Silly Symphony short that quickly turned into *Fantasia*, Stokowski had worked in the United States for some thirty years. In that time, he had distinguished himself on the one hand as a high modernist who introduced unappreciative American audiences to Mahler, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and their own Ives and Antheil, and on the other hand as a populist who relished the new media of radio and film for what they offered him personally as a celebrity and professionally as a means of bringing *Kultur* to the masses. His comments to the *New York Times* about *Fantasia* in 1941 reveal a sensibility that is similarly bifurcated, between that of a New Deal leftist and that of a still-outside observer of American life: “When Americans are gradually approaching their ideal of a good life for everybody in which a privileged few have ceased to retain for themselves all the benefits of wealth and leisure, and culture is no longer an esoteric religion guarded by a few high priests, *Fantasia* may be a quickening influence.”

What Stokowski most specifically brought to *Fantasia*, according to Robin Allan, was the music—which is all European. As leader of the group selecting the program for the movie, Stokowski argued that the music had to be music as recognizable in Warsaw, Dublin, or London as it was in Los Angeles. Others in the group voiced some concern about the lack of American music, but Stokowski, a leading advocate for modern American music, demurred: “This picture is for the world. I like this picture because it is new; this will come to the whole world as an explosion.” And so the program for *Fantasia* includes the classical Germans Bach, Beethoven, and Schubert; the romantic and modern Russians Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Stravinsky; and the French Dukas and Italian Ponchielli for good measure.

Robin Allan's extraordinary book *Walt Disney and Europe* chronicles in exhaustive detail the European influences on the American art of the Disney feature animated film. In Allan's analysis, *Fantasia*, as one might imagine at this point, is a panoply of European drawing and design, ranging from Art Deco to German expressionism to nineteenth-century book illustration—even the “colour organ,”

a European keyboard instrument that, some four decades before any Fillmore West light shows, theatrically projected color light patterns onto a screen.

American critics of the final work, however, apparently felt that *Fantasia*'s European qualities were not European enough. Those critics, both recounted and exemplified by Richard Schickel in *The Disney Version*, were particularly upset by the Stravinsky, Bach, and Beethoven sections, both because Disney and Stokowski rearranged the musical elements of each, and because the animated color sketches of, respectively, dinosaurs, abstracted musical instruments, and frolicking centaurs did not pay proper homage to the works they accompanied. The response to the *Nutcracker Suite* segment, however, was not nearly so vicious, even though two of its sections, as well as the Christmas-based narrative from which the piece was adapted, were dropped for the film. The reason, both Allan and Jennifer Fisher in her book "*Nutcracker*" *Nation* argue, is that Tchaikovsky's ballet and its orchestral accompaniment were already viewed by the highbrow classical music audience as *déclassé*, pretenders to that about which great art should be. With critics regarding the *Nutcracker* as beneath their dignity to begin with, the radical changes Disney and Stokowski made were not really of concern.

Again, Allan points out the numerous European influences on the Disney-Stokowski *Nutcracker*: the British Pre-Raphaelites and illustrator Gustave Dore, whose detailed drawings of the small portions of nature and the fairies who animated them define much of the *Fantasia* version; French artist Honore Daumier; Warner Brothers art director Anton Grot, a Polish émigré, and directors William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt, native Germans, whose collaboration on the 1935 film version of *Midsummer's Night Dream* lent atmospheric to the whole. The story developer of the *Nutcracker* sequence—the person most responsible for its creation and final appearance—was an Englishwoman, Sylvia Holland; much of the dance work was choreographed on sketchpad by Hungarian Jules Engel; the key special effects animators were the Italian Ugo D'Orsi and the Chinese émigré Cy Young.

It's somewhat ironic, then, that the Chinese mushroom sequence is perhaps the most American in the whole *Nutcracker*. The mushrooms themselves were the idea of British artist John Walbridge, who (wisely) modified an original idea of the tea dancers as lizards wearing coolie hats dancing before a Mandarin frog. The primary animator of the dance, however, was Art Babbitt, born in Omaha, raised in Sioux City, Iowa. Though Babbitt's wife, the future (following their divorce) Marge Champion, was a dancer who modeled the movements of the hippos in the "Dance of the Hours," he instead relied on an American male dance model for the mushrooms' little jump-step move: Curly Howard of the Three Stooges. Babbitt was also responsible for naming the littlest mushroom Hop Low: the name and image were used prominently in advertising the film, and Hop Low salt and pepper shakers became its most successful promotional device.

It's wise at this point to step back from *Fantasia* itself and examine the larger contexts within which the Chinese mushrooms came to life. 1940 marks a turning point for the portrayal of Asian-Americans in American film. While the 1930s had seen popular film series based around Asian detectives—Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, Mr. Wong—that would end in 1941, with Hollywood then embarking on what film historian Karla Fuller, following a 1942 *Variety* headline, calls the “Me No Moto” campaign. Those popular characters of the 1930s, however, were Asian in name only, as Hollywood studios practiced a curious two-step around their origins: To preserve those characters’ Otherness while making them racially safe for a primarily white theatergoing audience, studios cast white actors of European backgrounds—so-called “yellow-facing”—in the Asian roles: the British Boris Karloff as Mr. Wong (as well as the earlier villain Fu Manchu), the Swede Warner Oland as Charlie Chan, the Hungarian/German Peter Lorre as Mr. Moto. Asian actors were reduced to playing either comic second banana roles or stereotypical inscrutable evildoers. Romantic roles were also impossible for Asian actors after the 1934 Production Code banned any screen portrayal of interracial relationships. Most famously, the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, who had built a substantial career in silent films, had to go to Europe after losing several lead roles to American “yellow-face” actress Myrna Loy and being repeatedly cast as a “Dragon Lady.” When she returned to test for MGM’s 1937 adaptation of Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*, she lost the roles of O Lan and Lotus to European actresses because, according to the film’s producers, “she didn’t look Chinese enough.”

Hop Low and his friends, then, enter a cinematic culture that, while amenable to their presence for the moment, nonetheless seeks to contain them within a dominant white racial paradigm—a definition visible in the mushrooms’ racialized almond eyes. Things were not much different in the world of classical dance, the other visual context in which the *Fantasia Nutcracker* operates. According to Jennifer Fisher in “*Nutcracker*” *Nation*, most performances of the Chinese tea dance in the ballet then and now frequently center on a moment when the dancer(s) pop up en pointe with index fingers held to each side of the head, a position widely considered “*the* balletic emblem of ‘Chineseness’”—although it does not occur in any native Chinese dance forms. The rhythmic bowing of the mushrooms in *Fantasia* and their tiny steps between the Curly-inspired jumps at least have some connection with Chinese culture and dance, Fisher argues, although the sequence as a whole, particularly given the way that the “universal” cuteness and innocence of Hop Low deflects attention from specific ethnic characteristics, can hardly be called a sensitive rendering of Chinese dance.

It is the importance of the mushroom dance and *Fantasia*’s *Nutcracker Suite* as a whole to Fisher’s larger thesis, however, that makes her work of particular significance here. Tchaikovsky’s ballet, at the time of *Fantasia*’s release, had not had a full-length American production. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, one of many dance troupes formed by Russian expatriates following the Revolution, toured an abbreviated version of the *Nutcracker* through the United States at

regular intervals beginning in fall 1940—at exactly the same time that *Fantasia* opened. In other words, while the *Nutcracker* music was fairly well known (and denigrated) in the States, few Americans would have had any idea as to its balletic—its visual—element at the time that Disney and Stokowski introduced Hop Low and friends to movie audiences. The ballet in its native land had long been criticized for its “childishness”; dance was serious business in both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and a ballet that messed up the stage with children and the music with a children’s story had never been widely appreciated. What *Fantasia* directly helped accomplish in the United States, Fisher argues, with its dancing fairies, flora, fauna, and fungus, was a liberation from the forced seriousness of Russian interpretations that limited both performance and popular appreciation there. Disney and Stokowski’s middlebrow juxtaposition of classical music and exquisitely drawn but child-centered animated sketches began to make, of both the ballet and the music, something new and different of the *Nutcracker* for New World audiences. To use Fisher’s own words, after *Fantasia*: “*The Nutcracker*, something of a ‘bad seed’ in its homeland... was about to be adopted and make good elsewhere.”

So *Fantasia* itself can be regarded as an American work created out of adoptions that made good elsewhere. This is not to say that every adoption was a happy one. Award-winning German abstract filmmaker and expatriate Oskar Fischinger, for example, was brought in to work on the “Toccata and Fugue” section; after numerous disagreements with senior Disney animators and Disney himself over how abstract abstract should be, he left the studio, referring to the sequence as “the most inartistic product of a factory.” On another level, British *Nutcracker* story developer Sylvia Holland found herself the target of complaints by several American animators who didn’t like a woman boss and felt that she was “feminizing” their work. Nor is it to say that those adoptions override dominant constructions of race, ethnicity, or gender in American life, as the dancing mushrooms and the Orientalist Arabic fish dance that follows in the *Fantasia Nutcracker* indicate.

The story of *Fantasia*, in other words, is not one that offers simply happy endings. It is also, however, a story with a simple lesson: To address *Fantasia* as just another American product of what would become a global symbol of American cultural imperialism without considering its many adopted contributions is not just to deny whatever comedy, grace, or beauty the film may offer—it is to deny its Americanness as well. On one, the more political, hand, I hope for an American studies that can again examine those contributions to our culture, however they might be manifested, as such, and not just as dainty truffles to be inhaled by an ever-rapacious, ever-growing swine.

On the other, more personal (and by far more important to me), hand, I hope for an American studies that can begin, as Susie Woo has done, to document and analyze the relationship between the children who have found their way to our shores and homes through international adoption and the culture into which they have been adopted. I hope for an American studies that will confound both

those who see that relationship as the romantic fulfillment of a social ideal and those who see it as an inevitable erasure of all that makes them special, whatever their place of origin. I hope for an American studies that will examine their contributions to American society and culture, contributions without which we are less than we might be. This will take effort. It means field work. It means longitudinal studies. It means re-energizing the social scientific elements of our field, elements that have become marginalized in favor of, say, tedious parlor-room analyses of cartoons. But the result, I have to believe, is not just a renewed vision for American studies but a renewed vision of “Americanness” that takes into equal account its promises and its problems, its strivings and its failings.

All appearances to the contrary, I am not a fool—and I do not take you as such, either. I am terribly aware that all this has come to you from a fifty-year-old white guy who stands on the parental side of the adoptive relationship. Mine cannot and should not be the final words on this. My greatest hope is that they are but a beginning, opening the way for the stories that Lin Xianglan, abandoned in Yihuang, China, early in 2002, and Lu Chenguang, abandoned in Nanfeng, China, in spring 2004, now Emma and Hannah of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, will tell in years to come, perhaps at gatherings such as this—stories with the delicacy and the humor, the elegance and the power, to supplant those told by seven dewy mushrooms with a funny little hop and slanted little eyes.

Notes

1. I thank my colleagues on the MAASA board for the privilege of serving as president for the past year, and for allowing me to present this talk. In particular I acknowledge past presidents Lauren Rabinowitz and Cheryl Lester, who have served as mentors and advisors, both in example and in deed. And finally, a huge thanks to Matt Mancini and the rest of the folks at St. Louis University who organized this wonderful gathering of the students and teachers who continue to make our little enterprise the outstanding example of American studies scholarship that it is.

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