

## *Introduction*

ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN:  
Triple Blessing or Triple Curse?

NIKKI A. TOYAMA

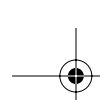
**I** arrived in Thailand, the third leg of my trip. I had visited the urban slums of Cairo and Nairobi, and now I was in Bangkok. I was working on a project looking at the vulnerability of women among the urban poor. My project brought me to the red-light district of Bangkok.

I immediately felt at home in Thailand. The support railings in the trains stood at the perfect height for me to reach. I blended in with the crowd and fit in the local clothes sizes, and the food was amazing.

One day, while waiting for a friend, I sat on the steps outside a mall. Looking around, I noticed signs in Japanese and discreet entrances—the Japanese red-light district. This area catered to Japanese businessmen. We had been working, a few streets over, in the American red-light district. There Thai women catered to an American clientele. With my eyes now open, I began to notice other districts for German, British, French clients. Thai women were made available to all these men. I had no idea there was a district for each group. The streets extended for blocks—row after row of brothels and bars.

That night, I went back to the Japanese red-light district. I walked and asked God, “What do you want me to see?” I prayed for the women who worked in that area and for the men who were their patrons. I prayed for the





wives and daughters of the men coming to these bars. I prayed against the broken systems in our society that promote and provide space for these industries. As I watched women call men into the bars, I prayed. After a couple of hours, I went home.

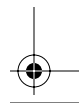
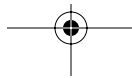
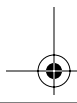
As I rode home on the train, I wondered what it meant for me, a Japanese American Christian. A Caucasian man approached me to ask a question. Before speaking, he looked over my body, from my legs to my face, though I was wearing very conservative missionary clothes. He was shameless. He did not try to mask his appraisal: he looked over my body as if assessing a product. I recognized this look—I had seen it repeatedly in the red-light district as the men entered the bars.

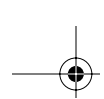
I had never felt so violated. The country marketed its sex industry too well, and I, though an outsider, felt its burden. Behaviors like freely staring at women's bodies were tolerated and promoted even. In that place, as an Asian woman, I was told, in effect, that my only contribution was as a sexual object.

I ran home from the train that night. I went to the room I shared with six others. Thankful that it was empty, I sat on my bed, a mat in the only air-conditioned corner of a slum church, and cried. I cried for myself, but then I cried for the women of Thailand.

I had visited urban slums in two other countries, Kenya and Egypt. Even though both places were significantly poorer (the monthly income in Nairobi was \$30, Cairo \$60, Bangkok \$120), very few parents there would sell their little daughters into prostitution as parents do in Thailand. What makes a country and its families treat its women with so little regard? I thought of the women I met in the Kibera slum in Nairobi—as poor as they were, they would never sell their children.

Misogyny runs deep in Asia. Families abandon little baby girls in the Chinese countryside, waiting for a son. In Japan, college-educated girls are openly discriminated against in the workplace—they are passed over for promotions because it is assumed they will leave the workplace once they marry. The sex trade in Asia continues to enslave women; Taiwan has the highest per capita prostitution rate, while Japan has criminal syndicates kid-





napping and trafficking women all over Asia. Thailand was the capital of sex trafficking until Cambodia gained that dubious distinction. *Why does Asia hate its women?*

Just as I was getting ready to shake my fist at God in anger, he reminded me that he weeps more for these women than I do. God weeps for these women, who are made in his image. He looks at each of them and sees a precious daughter. Where others see a prostitute, he sees his child. He wants to speak words of dignity and tell her that she's beloved. Others say "worthless," "useless," "less than," but he speaks the word *chosen*. She is chosen by him to steward the gift of being a woman and an Asian.

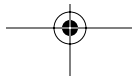
Jesus knows personally the pain of being judged, misunderstood, underestimated. He knows what it means to be shunned by others and have your body bought and sold. He knows the depth of the sorrow and the pain of the women in the red-light district of Bangkok. I could catch only a glimpse.

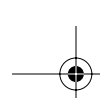
***My identity as an Asian American and my identity as a woman are just beginning to merge within me as a singular identity, and I am feeling a missionary zeal to let others know about it.***

MITSUYE YAMADA

That night, as I prayed for the women, I found myself blaming their ethnicity and their gender for their situations. The prostitution that I witnessed, the lack of options for Asian women, the attitudes of the community did not connect with what I thought was God's truth. Are they made in his image? Are they precious and chosen? Does God care about their situation? That night, God began to show me that he did not make a mistake—one ethnicity or gender is not better than another. He had chosen to make each of those women Thai and female. And in the same way, I was not a mistake. God chose to make me Japanese and female. The process of embracing my gender and my ethnicity began that night.

I had spent most of my academic life trying to overcome the perceived flaws of my gender and of my race. In class I would speak first and speak often. I played sports during free time—basketball, football, ultimate. I didn't want to be some Asian girl who was scared of being dirty. I loved the





look of surprise from the guys on the field when they asked, “Do you play?”

Over the years I began to see how some “flaws” of my gender and race became God’s tools for redemption. I hated my grandparents’ refusal to tell me stories of what it was like to be Japanese American during World War II. But God returned that back to me as the gift of long-suffering. I hated the way my friends clumped together at social gatherings, so I asserted my independence. But God returned it to me as the gift of interdependence. I despised my programmed politeness that kept me from saying the angry words that boiled up within me. But God returned that to me as graciousness.

God reassured me that of all the ethnicities and genders he could have chosen for me, he chose Asian and female. He took my flaws and redeemed them to be used for his kingdom. My gender and ethnicity are God’s gift to me—not an obstacle to overcome. These are my gifts to steward for others and for his kingdom.



**MORE THAN SERVING TEA**

Asian Pacific Islander women live in tension. We live between “Asian” and “American,” “woman” and “daughter.” Society has strong scripts for people of different ethnicities. And within those scripts, Asian culture has expectations and socially appropriate roles. Navigating multiple worlds is an everyday reality for the authors of this book. Kathy was a successful journalist who became a powerful manager in a nonprofit organization. But when she returns home, her father-in-law expects her to cut him fruit and make him a sandwich. I go from being a conference speaker one moment to being mistaken for a college freshman the next. We may be women of impressive accomplishments, but we are regularly called “cute” and mistaken for teens because of our size.

The roads to being a woman, being Asian, being American, being a Christian are each paved and well marked. But when they are combined, which road do we choose? Asian Pacific Islander women and our situations are as diverse as the many glorious body types that we come in. We want to share our stories of the ways that we’ve navigated the journey. We want to share our experiences, our struggles, our discoveries, in the hope of helping more





women discover the truth about who God made them to be and how that can be used to accomplish his purposes.

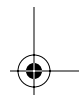
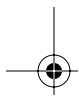
Serving tea or chai is the women's role in many Asian Pacific Islander family circles. Often, young girls are taught the rituals. Stir the pot this way, hold your wrist just so, serve the most important guest first. The rituals pass down, from mother to daughter, secrets of the kitchen. Serving tea is a stereotype, but it also embodies great features of Asian culture—hospitality and service. Serving tea may be a simple act, but sometimes we are serving more than tea. At times, this cultural act is serving comfort, care or compassion to friends or family.

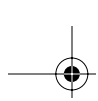
But Asian women are not limited to serving tea and sympathy. In this day of grande Tazo tea from Starbucks (two bags, please), women do more than serve tea. We serve our communities, our companies, our churches and our God. We want to embrace the positive attributes of Asian traditions and celebrate the gifts that culture brings to God's kingdom while letting go of the stereotypes that limit women to that role.

Each culture has unique gifts that help us to know God. From the Jews we learn about Jesus the Messiah, a sacrificial Lamb slain for the forgiveness of sins. From the Greeks we learn about God as the God of heaven and earth, the Maker of all things. From black American culture we learn about a God who loves justice. From Latino culture we learn about God's *familia*. Does our Asian culture have a gift that reflects a unique aspect of God? Specifically, is there something in being an Asian American woman that God has given us to share with the wider family?

Each of the writers in this book shares from her interactions mentoring a variety of young Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islander women around the country. We are from the East Coast, West Coast and Midwest. We hope and dream that women will discover that their gender and their ethnicity are God's gift to them. We want to share our stories and our journeys to help others navigate the paths linking family, culture, community, society and God.

This book stretches the boundaries past the place where typical "Asian" books leave off. Many Asian American books refer just to East Asia—Korea,





China, Taiwan, Japan. This book includes the voices of our sisters from South Asia (Pakistan, India) and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand). As authors, we also tried to represent the voices of our biracial sisters; in addition, we tried to include the stories of women who grew up in different environments—adopted, raised in Asian communities, raised in non-Asian communities. Many other categories differentiate and pull us together—Islander versus mainland, immigration generation. One challenge was speaking from a Pakistani Christian perspective, fully aware of the Muslim tension. Throughout the book, different authors use “Asian American” or “Asian Pacific Islander.” Each term works well for different communities, so each writer uses her own words.

This book was written for Asian Pacific Islander women and for the people who care for them. The process of giving voice to these experiences, a process of tears, fears, late nights and too much caffeine, was also a redemptive journey for us, our families and our communities. May the same be true for you.



**Box**  
pulled  
Asian American

I check “other”  
again

