



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

OSUVA Open  
Science

This is a self-archived – parallel published version of this article in the publication archive of the University of Vaasa. It might differ from the original.

## High and Low Art in Narrative Construction of a Photo Essay: When Asian American Women Became Middle Class Americans at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco

**Author(s):** Carter, Karen L.C

**Title:** High and Low Art in Narrative Construction of a Photo Essay: When Asian American Women Became Middle Class Americans at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright** ©2019 South Atlantic Modern Language Association.

### **Please cite the original version:**

Carter, Karen L.C (2019). High and Low Art in Narrative Construction of a Photo Essay: When Asian American Women Became Middle Class Americans at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco. *South Atlantic Review* 84(1), 160-177.

# High and Low Art in Narrative Construction of a Photo Essay: When Asian American Women became Middle-Class Americans at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco

Karen L. Ching Carter

---

*L*ife Magazine's first appearance in 1936 was a sensation that combined information with emotions and entertainment. Through their iconic photo essays, *Life Magazine* editors created a visual worldview of an American middle-class way of life that centered on educational advancement and consumer consumption (Webb 24). Publisher Henry Luce said succinctly, "It [the photo essay] has got to be an essay with a point . . . the mere charm of photo graphic revelation is not enough."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the *Life* reader could embark on a visual journey that would do more than reveal inside knowledge about the subject, but would also have a moral component (Wainright 100). An essay with a point was certainly present in a photo essay published in December 1940 that highlighted Asian American women dancers at the Forbidden City, a Chinese-themed nightclub in San Francisco. The photo essay titled, "Life Goes to the 'Forbidden City': San Franciscans pack Chinatown's No. 1 night club"<sup>2</sup> was a production that provided a look at Asian American culture not seen in mainstream white middle-class America. By analyzing the process that surrounded the publication of this photo essay, I showcase the high and low art of the photo essay's narrative construction by *Life Magazine* editors who highlighted these women dancers and their positioning in American society as middle-class Americans.

*Life* editors targeted the professional middle-class reader. Sheila Webb cites a 1941 study that showed *Life* readers were made up of four distinct groups. 40% of *Life* readers lived in a substantial house and didn't have to pick and choose between luxury items. A second group consisted of 32% of readers who were comfortable in that they lived well, ate well, and had money left to play. A third group (24.8%) was comprised of the middle class called the "backbone of America," while a fourth group (15.9%) was defined as working people who managed

## South Atlantic Review

to maintain a decent standard of living yet who may have lacked some necessities. Thus, the middle-class experience was the primary frame of the magazine, and this focus was evident throughout the magazine's history (Webb 26).

The photo essay, a composition of images held together by texts, holds a unique position in a mass-produced picture magazine like *Life*, in that the pictures are devised to tell a coherent story that blends as both a high and low art. As a high art in photographic display, *Life* editors depicted photographs into a coherent story. As a low art, the story is embedded and juxtaposed in consumption scenarios through advertisements. This paper, which examines the narrative construction of a photo essay on Asian American women dancers, shows how *Life Magazine* editors sought to educate white middle-class Americans about Asian people born in America. But *Life Magazine* editors went beyond illustration and entertainment. A photo essay is meaningful in that *Life* editors told a story showing readers that Asians in America were respectable middle-class Americans.

The photo essay is a narrative construction and thus, an art. As a new art form developed in the twentieth century, the photo essay is primarily image-led, presenting a mix of photographs, captions, typography, and short pieces of text spread over several pages (Sutherland 115). The narrative of the photo essay is built around fragments of images held together by texts. Narratives don't fall from the sky, says Catherine Kohler Riessman. Narratives serve different purposes such as to entertain, to argue, to justify, to persuade, and to even mislead an audience (Riessman 8). But, more importantly, narratives operate within a context that occurs at a historical moment in time. Thus, narrative construction is an art because the narrator makes choices and decisions on the words and images to build a story within a context and about characters that reveals something about the human experience.

Cohen makes a distinction between high and low art as perhaps the distinction between fine art and non-art ("High and Low Thinking" 151). This distinction, Cohen observes, seems to be dependent on the audience ("High and Low Audiences" 137). Some audiences negatively perceive low art as commodified art (O' Sullivan 285)—art as a commodity used for commercial purposes. A good example is the photo essay that is associated with mass-circulated illustrated magazines, such as *Life Magazine* (Sutherland 115). The high circulation of illustrated magazines draws the attention of advertisers seeking to market products to consumers. High art, on the other hand, is distinguished from low art by its sense of "audience exclusion"—by audience exclusion, I mean that the artist is committed to his or her art only. The artist seeks to communicate to the audience a vision of his or her world

*Karen L. Ching Carter*

view (Mitchell 39). The audience may be engaged and appreciate the art, but the art cannot be boiled down to mere decoration (LeBeau); as such, the art is a production of the artist's need for self-expression (Teachout 58).

The boundaries between high and low art have become increasingly blurred through the twentieth century. Most recent research studies the blending of high and low art in literature (O'Sullivan), in lithographic prints from the nineteenth century (Le Beau), in commercial products such as film production (Teachout), in comic art (Roeder), and in the blurred boundaries between popular culture and art (Foreman-Wernet and Dervin). I extend the notion of blending high and low art by examining the photo essay as a narrative construction associated with the mass-produced illustrated magazine.

In contemporary society photos can be high art objects while at the same time low art, as photos can be used for purposes in the commercial world. For example, the Mona Lisa is an indisputable high art painting by Leonardo da Vinci that sits behind bullet-proof glass in the Louvre museum. Yet through the base art of reproduction she is featured in advertisements from cream cakes to micro-computers (Selway 30). Thus, constructing a visual narrative through photos can be a high art because the narrator is focused on expressing his or her world view not only in the actual images, but also in how the photos interact with each other, in the sequencing from the beginning until the end and in the juxtapositions and contrasts established on the page (Sutherland 115). On the other hand, a visual narrative such as a photo essay can be a low art embedded in a popular magazine surrounded by advertisements that are meant for a consumer audience.

The ensuing discussion implies that the photo essay taking up visual representations of Asian women dancers is a multilayered and emotional narrative construction of historiography. The topic of Asian American women dancers had low cultural status in American mainstream society because prior to World War II Asian Americans were in a unique situation. Exclusion and segregation laws isolated Asian immigrants legally, socially, physically, and politically. Unable to integrate into American society, immigrants managed their own economy within Chinatowns or worked in the service industry doing work that no other Anglo American would do (Chun 17). Second-generation Asian Americans were also marginalized as racism continued to play a role against upward mobility. In 1938, the Oriental division of the U.S. Employment Service in San Francisco reported that 90 percent of its placements for Asian Americans were in services, chiefly the culinary trades. In the entertainment industry, Asian American women could get a job selling cigarettes as a "cigarette girl" if they wore a Chinese

## *South Atlantic Review*

dress or a job creating a “Chinese atmosphere” in the theater lobby when a Charlie Chan movie was showing (Takaki 267). The graduating class of 1936 at the University of California had twenty-eight Chinese Americans who were born in the United States. They held degrees in engineering, economics, architecture, optometry, pharmacy, and commerce (Chun 17), yet most firms refused to hire persons of Asian ancestry (Takaki 267). Thus, in this paper I also reflect on concerns that mark an intersection among gender, race, and visual media. I contend that the photo essay contributed to building a middle class American identity for Asian Americans and calibrated a connection between mainstream media (*Life Magazine*) and Asian American women dancers at the Forbidden City Nightclub.

An assemblage of fragmented evidence informs my study. With inspiration from methodology in feminist historiography, I highlight our understanding of narrative construction as an embodied social experience. These methods from feminist historiography inform my current project because they seek to understand phenomena that often are hidden from view as these methods also urge increased emphasis on creativity and innovation (Royster and Kirsch 39). Critical imagination and social circulation are two such complementary methods. They offer strategic approaches in gathering evidence that function to collect multiple viewpoints and interpretations of feminist historiography.

Critical imagination is a tool that takes available artifacts as evidence and looks above and around that evidence to create a qualitative hypothesis about the rhetorical events, sites, and practices that would account for such artifacts (Royster and Kirsch 137). It aims to interrogate the conditions and lives of previously unacknowledged rhetors by hypothesizing not for truth claims, but for what is possible given the facts at hand (71). Employing this method allows a historiographer to look beyond previous assumptions to possibly see something new. The consequences, however, of taking on this method are multiple. Primary is the professional obligation to recognize our role as historiographer and to understand our professional and personal relationship to the work. In effect, as historiographers, we are called upon to keep in balance our own biases, so we can be ethically accountable to local and global analysis.

Social circulation is an analytical effort that uses narrative to interrogate feminist rhetorical practice in which women connect and interact with others. The connections, sometimes called social networks, interact not only through sociopolitical and cultural contexts, but also across generations in time and space (Royster and Kirsch 101). The key activities in social circulation are to re-imagine different domains of discourse, to re-envision cultural flow in specific localities, and to link

## Karen L. Ching Carter

analysis to magnify the impact and consequences of women's rhetoric (98). Because women connect with others and use language with intention in multiple ways, connection with others may be through traditional public address, but may also be in private domains such as quilting or knitting clubs. Yet regardless of public or private domains, both types of group connections are rhetorical in function (101). Aiming to use both critical imagination and social circulation effectively and ethically, I seek an intimate examination of this photo essay.

While my focus is on the narrative construction of the photo essay about Asian American women dancers at the Forbidden City Nightclub, the best way to understand the club and the dancers is to understand the period under consideration. By invoking critical imagination as an analytical method, I look at the context of the dancers' lives interlinked with location, community, and social norms of the time. Through social circulation I seek to capture the meaning of the historical Asian American women dancers and *Life Magazine's* role in constructing the Asian American woman. These methods are useful because historically this was a key moment in time—a time when a new media form, the photographic essay, could convey standards and norms of modernity and the middle-class lifestyle (Webb 2). Thus, through critical imagination and social circulation this analysis is also a broad examination of the content of the December 9, 1940 issue of *Life*. The magazine's journalistic content and advertisements can tell us much about the *Life* audience and about the times in which they were living. Together with the featured photo essay about Asian American women dancers, *Life Magazine* editors had something to say and teach the audience about Asians in America. Thus, I call these women Asian American.

### The Photo Essay

The background to this study describes the *Life Magazine* photo essay and the founding of the Forbidden City Nightclub. See figs. 1-2.

#### *The Life Magazine Photo Essay*

In the December 9, 1940 issue of *Life Magazine* appears a fascinating four-page photo essay on the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco. Beginning on page 124 is a full-page black and white glossy photo of Jadin Wong with her arms crossed gracefully at chest level and her torso engaged in a flowing sensual movement. The last line of the short exposé explains that Jadin is performing the "Moon Goddess" dance. The two paragraph exposé on page 125 is surrounded by cap-

From the pages of



**Fig. 1**

Jadin Wong as Moon Goddess begins the photo essay.

tioned black and white photos featuring an Asian American woman singer, a chorus line of dancers, a couple dancing, and Stanford University students eating with chopsticks. The text informs the reader of the location and place of the story.

The title, "Life Goes to the Forbidden City," is centered in stylized script. Below the title is the subtitle in dark block print. It reads, "San Franciscans pack Chinatown's No. 1 night club." The article is as follows:

At 363 Sutter Street, in San Francisco stands "Forbidden City." The No.1 all-Chinese night club in the U.S. Here each evening



From the pages of



Fig. 2

©1940. Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from LIFE magazine and published with permission of Time Inc. Reproduction in any manner in any language in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. LIFE and the LIFE logo are registered trademarks of Time Inc. Used under license.

The full length photo essay (pp. 124-127) can be found at <https://books.google.com/book?id=QUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpq=PP1&pg=PA126#v=twopage&q&f=false>.



## *South Atlantic Review*

Californians flock to watch a talented floor show that ranges from slumberous oriental moods to hot Western swing. San Francisco is numerically ill equipped with Broadway style cabarets. Its citizenry eats at home, dances at hotels. When "Forbidden City" opened two years ago, it filled a local cultural need. It has prospered ever since.

In décor, 'Forbidden City' blandly jumbles rice-paper screens, lighted fishbowls, college colors and football trophies. Somehow the net result is satisfactory. Its tri nightly floorshow as blandly scrambled congas, tangos, tap numbers and snaky stuff from the Far East. Chinese girls have an extraordinary aptitude for Western dance forms. As singers, not many achieve success according to occidental standards. But slim of body, trim of leg, they dance to any tempo with a fragile charm distinctive to their race. Opposite you see gracious Jadin Wong performing her chaste "Moon Goddess." (*Life* 125)

The photos in the following page's centerfold feature dancing Asian looking women, scantily clad (126-127). They are Jadin Wong; two Chinese chorines dressed as cowgirls; and Noel Toy, a burlesque dancer. The captions specify that the women are educated. The chorines are in college, Jadin is a high school graduate, and Noel Toy majored in French at U.C. Berkeley. Flanking both sides of the centerfold are illustrated advertisements. The outside margin on page 127 is an advertisement for liquor, and the outside margin on page 128 advertises hand lotion.

This photo essay was a miscellaneous small story. According to journalism historian Sheila Webb, *Life* editors wanted to create a community of citizens who with proper training and knowledge could thrive in a new modern society. This view heavily reflected publisher/owner Henry Luce's interest in the modern age, the emergent middle-class consumer culture, and his virtual "obsession with the state of the World and America's role in it" (Wainwright 118). Luce's eyes were on the emerging middle class of an industrializing America. This market desired access to news that was comprehensive and could be read quickly (Childs 4). Luce's concept for *Life* also pushed the technical limits of publishing photographs. When presented with new paper from a supplier, he understood the opportunity it presented for his plans to transform photojournalism (Webb 5).

Thus, photo essays such as "Life Goes to the Forbidden City" reflected Luce's interest in the modern age and a growing middle-class consumer culture. However, this small story of the Forbidden City

## Karen L. Ching Carter

was more than a passing interest. Henry Luce was born in Dengzhou, China in 1898. His parents were Presbyterian missionaries. He went to both Chinese and English boarding schools and thus spent his formative years among the Chinese. He was fascinated with most matters Chinese (Wainwright 78). In fact, the inaugural 1936 issue of *Life* included a story about a Catholic school for Chinese children in San Francisco (78). Loudan Wainwright, a noted colleague and expert on Luce, noted the article's portrayal of "a Catholic school for Chinese children ("Slant eyed and shy") [. . .] where they [children] were taught to say *very* instead of *velly*, to distinguish *he* from *she*" (78). Wainwright notes that in general racist remarks were not uncommon in respectable American journals at the time (77).

Luce's vision for *Life Magazine* has earned the scholarly attention of historians of journalism, including Webb, who notes Luce's deep appreciation for excellence whether in "art, morals or intellect" (2). Webb contends that *Life* editors were constructing for their readers a path to the future (2). Webb also contends that *Life* editors valued education and hard work as a path to advancement, but equally valued arts and culture because "arts and culture" were essential to being a well-rounded citizen (9). As I elaborate below, "Life Goes to the Forbidden City" circulates these same core values in its portrayal of the featured dancers. The exposé and photo captions attest to the dancers as Chinese, as the Forbidden City was a Chinese-themed club; yet the captions simultaneously portray these dancers as American. As I explore in the analysis below, by promoting hard work and education within "Life Goes to the Forbidden City," *Life Magazine* recasts Asians in America as American.

### *The Founding of the Forbidden City Nightclub*

In 1938, Charlie Low, a Chinese American entrepreneur from Winnemucca, Nevada opened in San Francisco a Chinese-themed nightclub and named it the Forbidden City. It was common knowledge in the Chinese community that he opened the club for his wife Lee Ti Ming because she was a singer.<sup>3</sup> With his wife as the star singer, Low didn't need other lead singers, but he needed to hire dancers and musicians. As a Chinese-themed club, the Forbidden City Nightclub was a space where second-generation Asian Americans could perform. An evening's entertainment at the club included a full Chinese or American dinner, floor-show, and late night dancing.<sup>4</sup> When the club first opened, Chinatown was in an uproar over the idea of Chinese girls showing their legs in public (Robbins 22). Yet according to Herb Caen, "It was a classy operation even with the garish Orientalist motifs." (22).

## *South Atlantic Review*

The entrance to the club was not large, but a doorman named Red opened the door and greeted every guest, assisted guests with directions, and provided the aura of safety for the club (23). During the first two years the club did not do well financially and it almost went bankrupt (32). The Board of Trade in San Francisco, however, decided to extend the terms of his loan (31). A very clever entrepreneur and gambler, Low paid the loan back in a few years (32). Shortly thereafter, the Forbidden City began to rise in popularity, particularly among mainstream Americans. *Life magazine* attests that at the time “Life Goes to the Forbidden City” was published, clientele at the Forbidden City Nightclub was “10% Chinese and 90% American.”

### *Life Magazine* Editors: High Art Masterpiece in Sexual Innuendo and Construction of a Middle-Class Narrative

Producing a magazine involves many people. There is most likely a managing editor along with deputy editors, copy-writers, journalists, researchers, and, of course, the photographers. In addition, many of those who write copy, create titles, and edit photos are removed from the event in which the photos were taken and the action experienced. So how can I account for the narrative construction of one photo essay? My methods cannot answer this question. Instead, I use critical imagination and social circulation to attend to the discourses that circulate in and among this photo essay’s text and graphics. From this orientation, we can see the blend between high and low art and racist and gendered assumptions made in the story. I also consider with critical intensity what may not be immediately obvious. In addition, we can track mainstream media that circulate across time, place, and geographical regions. As I invoke this orientation below, I use the term “*Life Magazine* editors” to refer generally to the vision of Luce. Such an analysis reveals the Forbidden City Nightclub as a place frequented by respectable (white middle class) people; a place where passive dignified Asian women perform.

It was an absolute catchy headline: “Life Goes to the “Forbidden City.” In stylized script, the text is placed opposite a full-page photo of dancer Jadin Wong, dressed minimally in Orientalist costume baring her leg in a sensual pose. In block text the subtitle explains: “San Franciscan’s pack Chinatown’s no. 1 night club. As the article’s title “Forbidden City” suggests, *Life* editors made some strong assumptions about its audience. The juxtaposition of the “Forbidden City” title opposite a sensuous-looking Oriental woman invokes a sneaky quality; the jux-

## Karen L. Ching Carter

taposition connotes mystery. In addition, Hollywood often depicted Chinatowns as forbidden places that were foreign, dark and scary,<sup>5</sup> but once inside one could find pleasures in opium, gambling, and prostitution. Thus, the term *forbidden* as used here is imbued within a negative moral valance.

A version of middle-class white values and regional prejudice circulates in the text of the exposé. In the first line, the *Life* editors (based in New York) refer to San Francisco condescendingly: "San Francisco is numerically ill equipped with Broadway style cabarets. Its citizenry eats at home, dances at hotels" (125). Furthermore, the description of the nightclub is contemptuous by alluding to its low art status: "In décor, 'Forbidden City' blandly jumbles rice-paper screens, lighted fishbowls, college colors and football trophies. Somehow the net result is satisfactory. Its tri nightly floorshow as blandly scrambled congas, tangoes, tap numbers and snaky stuff from the Far East" (125). And, apparently, it was impossible for white editors to hear their own smugness peppered with avuncular racism:<sup>6</sup> "Chinese girls have an extraordinary aptitude for Western dance forms. As singers, not many achieve success according to occidental standards" (125). Following a pattern that Webb has found typical of journals, stereotypes circulated in the captions' stories (10): "But slim of body, trim of leg, they dance to any tempo with a fragile charm distinctive to their race" (125).

This photo essay shows us what kinds of stereotypes were in circulation at the time. While the caption for Jadin is respectful in presenting her as "gracious Jadin Wong performing her chaste Dance of the Moon Goddess," Asian women were prototyped in Hollywood roles such as a "mongrel slave, mysterious prostitute, concubine or maid."<sup>7</sup> The caption that Jadin is chaste does not necessarily contradict the picture of her in Moon Goddess attire as she could be interpreted as being forbidden in the sense that under her chaste dance she is a prostitute, mongrel slave, or maid. Thus, *Life* editors positioned Jadin to be consumed by its white audience as Oriental mystery. In this photo, *Life* editors artfully projected their worldview of Asian women.

With the sensuous-looking Jadin as the backdrop to this photo essay, the five photos on the opposite page begin a new paragraph that tells more contextual information about the place in which Jadin performs. The photos at the top and at the bottom of the page illustrate different views of the club in what seems to be in varied slices of time. Unifying the captions, the narrative logic paints the Forbidden City as a place where respectable people (White) attend to watch passively dignified Asian women perform. In the top right corner is singer Li Mei Ting (Low's wife). The caption reads that she sings a hit number, "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." The smaller photo to the left of Li Mei

## *South Atlantic Review*

Ting shows respectably costumed chorus dancers. The caption tells us they are Chinese chorus girls in the midst of a Latin-American jazz rhythm. Moving along the bottom, the photo next to the centerfold features two professionally dressed men with singer Li Mei Ting eating with chopsticks. The caption reads, "Stanford students Louis Reese and Ray Dirkemper thumbingly apply chopsticks to chow mein. More adept is Li Mei." To the right of the Stanford students is a photo of an Asian couple in the midst of a dance performance. The caption tells the reader they are "the dancing Mei Lings dancing a cosmopolitan motif to a number *Claire de Lune*." The photo on the right bottom corner depicts couples from the audience dancing. The caption reads "In conventional ballroom style, Stanford students Ray Dickempter and Robert Breckner dance with Dorothy Sun and Li Mei Ting" (125). These captions imply that the Forbidden City Nightclub is respectable. The entertainment is unique and innocent as the presence of Stanford college students attests, for these young people are America's rising professionals for its consumer class.

Additional photos on the next pages contribute to the essay's circulation of middle class values and consumer culture. Consider for instance the photograph centered on top but divided by the centerfold. It features two Asian dancers in cowboy hats, neckerchiefs, and short-fringed skirts. They twirl lariats. The caption reads:

Chinese chorines twirl lariats in Western number, "Pony Boy." Some of the girls in the floorshow are paying their way through college by working nights at "Forbidden City." In the two years since the club opened, its show has won national fame. Its minimum \$1 weeknights, \$1.50 weekends. Its clientele: 10% Chinese 90% American.

This caption is significant because of the values it commends to readers in its information about the nightclub. Here are performers who dance to pay for college. For an affordable price, here an American audience can consume what was called Oriental culture while at the same time encounter Asian American women who participate in American culture. The caption domesticates the allure of Orientalism in the comfortable familiarity of other white (90% "American") faces.

Below the centerfold to the left is Jadin Wong in the same exotic Oriental costume as in the opening photo on page 124. The caption reads: "Jadin Wong, 21 is a native of San Francisco, a high school graduate. Her father runs a Chinatown store. Miss Wong specializes in Oriental numbers, can also jitterbug." This caption reintroduces Jadin Wong as a native of San Francisco and a high school graduate. The

*Karen L. Ching Carter*

caption presents Jadin as a native of San Francisco—born in America like many members of the audience. She holds the same values as Americans in that she finished high school. Her father, “a hard-working store owner,” is part of the consumer culture that positions Jadin’s family as members of the middle class.

To the right of the centerfold opposite Jadin Wong is Noel Toy tossing a giant balloon. The caption reads, “Noel Toy (“Chinese Sally Rand”) majored in French at U. of C. until money ran out. She doesn’t drink, go out with men. One night last week the bubble broke.” This caption positions Noel both as a college student and morally chaste. Even as money ran out, she remained chaste. Interest is created for the reader in mentioning that the bubble broke once. The bubble breaking could reveal educated and chaste Noel’s naked body, and the idea of seeing a forbidden pleasure teases the audience in eyeing a naked Oriental beauty.

Whether the audience is interested in them or not, advertisements flank these three captioned photos. An ad for Black and White Scotch whiskey is to the far left of the picture centerfold, and an ad for hand and body lotion is to the right of the centerfold pictures. Whether these ads change the readers’ experience in the 1940s we cannot know, but we can speculate that these specific ads were not placed where they are by accident. Reading the two pages (126-127) in an act of critical imagination, I would contend that the ads act as a mediator, creating a complementary narrative that also speak to middle-class values and consumer culture. It could be interpreted to say something like this:

The consumption of Scotch whiskey could enhance your experience of consuming the entertainment of beautiful women dancers. Hand and body lotion can accentuate soft skin that the women dancers use. If you purchase this hand and body lotion you too can have soft skin.

The ads, independent of the dancers’ captioned photos, also speak directly to consumer culture on their own. The Scotch whiskey ad includes the “Black and White” logo with a photo of two dogs and the caption “warm friends.” The hand and body lotion ad is a comic strip story of a woman who wants soft feeling skin so she feels fresh to attend a party. The ad’s purpose is to speak to a woman’s femininity. By definition, ads epitomize consumer culture. Together, the photo essay and the ads are set in the social world of nightclub entertainment. In highlighting consumer culture, the entire narrative is an artful masterpiece in understated sexual innuendo.

## Low Art, Non-Art: Consumer Culture and Education

The ease with which history and journalism scholars explicate *Life Magazine* editors in promoting a middle-class lifestyle and consumer culture makes a case for the residual power of “consumer consumption” in mainstream historiography. *Life* editors after all were quite clear about how to frame each issue of *Life*: “*Life Magazine* heavily reflected publisher/owner Luce’s interest in America’s modern age (Webb 2, cf. Smith 25, Wainwright 118).

In promoting consumer culture through the power of photographs (visual media), the message of consumption is formulated in terms of visual images. In fact, visual consumption of the sensuous Asian woman is the very point that both parties, the Forbidden City dancers and the *Life Magazine* editors, could agree on. However, through critical imagination we can see that the Asian American women dancers were not only objects of consumption for an American audience; *Life Magazine* editors also portrayed them as active participants in an emerging middle class. While the photos of Asian women were on display for the male voyeur, *Life* editors countered the sensual eroticized Asian female by constructing a tale, through the captions, of hardworking Asian American women, and positioned them as working their way through college.

*Life*’s portrayal of Forbidden City dancers circulated alongside other images of upwardly mobile professional women. For *Life Magazine*, such women were an embodiment of the modern age (Webb 3). The Forbidden City photo essay was situated within the paradigm of women who were or would become professionals. On the cover of this same issue is actress Ginger Rogers in her role as Kitty Foyle in *White Collar Girl*, a movie about the problems of the modern working woman. *Life* sent a camera expedition to assist the filmmaker/director, Sam Wood, in illustrating and researching the “U.S. white collar girl” to make the movie. This feature article celebrated a social class that worked for a salary rather than an hourly wage (2). *Life*’s portrayal of an upwardly mobile woman was not only consistent with the theme of modern success, but also embodied what *Life* projected its up-and-coming women readers were wanting to become (10).

Just as critical imagination illuminates nuance in the interplay between the photo essay and its advertisements, so too social circulation illuminates ways that *Life* circulated images of emancipated women re-inventing their future. These portrayals of women, at the time, were rare but extremely important because these portrayals circulated among women readers a version of a successful woman which ran counter to prevailing images in other popular, mass-marketed magazines.<sup>8</sup>



## Karen L. Ching Carter

The social circulation of advertisements also played a crucial role in instilling consumer culture. One can see that *Life* was a picture magazine not just for its photo essays, but for its advertisements. Circulating images of social advancement through training and hard work, *Life* editors endorsed university education as a pathway to an up-and-coming professional's upward mobility (Webb 3). On page three of this issue are two photos side by side with a caption embedded between them. The caption reads, "the little girl who DIDN'T graduate and the little girl who DID!" To the left of the caption is a photo of a girl sick in bed. A report card with C's and D's is embedded within the photo of the girl in bed. To the right of the caption is a smiling girl holding a diploma. To the left of the caption is a photo of the smiling girl, a report card embedded with A's and an A+ for attendance. This is actually an advertisement for Listerine as a cold killer. For Luce, American success through education remained a powerful narrative. The photo essay juxtaposed next to the photo advertisement blurred the line between article and ad in the name of promoting such values.

This issue's remaining articles touched on arts, culture, and science. Subjects chosen for each *Life* issue were usually those that were admired by the editors (Webb 7). Luce was particularly determined to have stories somehow connected to art and culture in almost every issue and the articles "needed to be dramatic, striking, thoughtful, beautiful, charming and inspiring" (Luce qtd. in Wainwright 164). Thus, the Forbidden City and the dancers fit Luce's life experience and interests as his fascination with the Chinese people stemmed from his background and experience growing up in China. In the mix of serious educational themes, the Forbidden City photo essay added lightness and variety for the reader. Wainwright himself admitted, "In *Life's* glossy pages, trivia and vulgar fragments about starlets and hairstyles [were] nestled among splendid color portfolios about the glories of antiquity . . . [and] high minded entreaties of American greatness" (Wainwright qtd. in Baughman 46). This editorial mix was present in this 1940 issue. "Life Goes to the Forbidden City" is followed by, of all things, under the moniker "modern style," a photo essay directed towards women called, "Getting a new type of permanent," a how-to instructional on creating a better permanent wave in one's hair.

## Conclusion

This photo essay of Asian American women dancers at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco shows the blending of high and low art. In 1940, *Life Magazine* took seriously Asian American women

## *South Atlantic Review*

dancers and through them expressed a view of Asians as middle-class Americans. By interrogating historical artifacts through feminist methods of critical imagination and social circulation, I point out how the process of narrative construction reveals photography as a blend of high and low art for mass consumption. On the one hand portraying these women dancers as Chinese within a Chinese-themed theater, *Life* editors simultaneously represented them as Americans who held core American values of education and hard work to achieve social advancement in a modern age. Thus, I assert that this photo essay contributed to redefining Asians in America as respectable Americans.

### Notes

1. Wainright, L. "The Great American Magazine," p. 100.
2. "night club" is two words in the original article. Thus, it is presented here in the original form. When quoting the title, "night club" will be represented as it is in the article as two words.
3. Chun, personal interview, qtd. in Robbins, p.17.
4. *Forbidden City USA.*, Dir. A. Dong, Deep Focus Productions, 1989.
5. Takaki, p. 249. Movies such as *Fu Manchu* and *Charlie Chan* depicted this view of Chinatown.
6. See Wainright, L. "The Great American Magazine," Knopf, 1986, p.77 in reference to a story about Brazil calling the people "incurable and lazy" and stating "that conquistadors added the blood of Negro slaves to their descendants." Such utterly racist comments were common in respectable American journals of the time. Additionally, Webb, S. in "The Tale of Advancement" (2006) explains that the primary audience was assumed White. Stereotypes provided a way to caption a photo (10).
7. Yumiko, Murakami, "Hollywood's Slanted View," *Japan Quarterly*, vol. 46, no 3. 1930s Chinese American film star Anna May Wong played the roles named. She was billed as "lover and villain" by Hollywood publicists.
8. Sheila Webb cites in her study that other popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* portrayed women as self-effacing, and *Reader's Digest* suggested that the primary purpose for a woman was to look beautiful when doing sport (10).

Karen L. Ching Carter

Works Cited

- Asia, Daniel. "The Future of (High) Culture in America." *Academic Questions*, vol 28, no. 1, 2015, pp.73-81.
- Baughman, James. "Who Read Life? The Circulation of America's Favorite Magazine." *Looking at Life Magazine*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Edited by Erika Lee Doss, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001, p. 41.
- Chun, Gloria H. *Of Orphans and Warrior: Inventing Chinese American Culture and Identity*. Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Cohen, Ted. "High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences." *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1999, p. 137.
- . "High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art." *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1993, p. 151.
- Dong, Lorraine. "The Forbidden City Legacy and its Chinese American Women." *Asian American Women and Gender*. Edited by Franklin Ng, Garland Pub, 1998, p. 37.
- Foreman-Wernet, Lois, and Brenda Dervin. "Comparing Arts and Popular Culture Experiences: Applying a Common Methodological Framework." *Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2005, pp. 169-87.
- Le Beau, Bryan F. "Art in the Parlor: Consumer Culture and Currier and Ives." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 30, no.1, 2007, pp. 18-37.
- Life Magazine*. "Life Goes to the Forbidden City, San Franciscans Pack Chinatown's no.1 Night Club." December 9, 1940, pp. 124-127. [books.google.com/books?id=QUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpq=PP1&pg=PA126-v=twopage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=QUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpq=PP1&pg=PA126-v=twopage&q&f=false)
- Mitchell, Pamela. "Why Care About Stories? A Theory of Narrative Art." *Religious Education*, vol. 86, no. 1, 1991, p. 30.
- O'Sullivan, James. "Modernist Intermediality: The False Dichotomy between High Modernism and Mass Culture." *English Studies*, vol. 98, no. 3, 2017, pp. 283-309.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications, 2008.
- Robbins, Trina. *The Golden Age of Chinese Nightclubs: Forbidden City*, Hampton Press, 2010.
- Roeder, Katherine. "Looking High and Low at Comic Art." *American Art*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Gesa E. Kirsch. *Feminist Rhetorical Practice: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies (Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms)*, Southern Illinois UP, 2012.
- Selway, Jennifer. "High Art, Low Art." *The Observer*, vol. 30, 1981.

## *South Atlantic Review*

- Smith, Terry. "Life-Style Modernity; Making Modern America." *Looking at Life Magazine*. Edited by Erika Lee Doss, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001, p. 25.
- Sutherland, Patrick. "The Photo Essay." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2016, pp.115-21.
- Takaki, Ronald T. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Little, Brown, 1989.
- Teachout, Terry. "Masterpieces' without Masters." *Commentary*, vol. 142, no. 1, 2016, pp. 56-9.
- Wainwright, Loudon. *The Great American Magazine: An Inside History of Life*. 1st ed. Knopf, 1986.
- Webb, Sheila. "The Consumer Citizen: Life Magazine's Construction of a Middle-Class Lifestyle Through Consumption Scenarios." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2012, pp. 23-47.
- "The Tale of Advancement." *Journalism History*, vol. 32, no.1, 2006, pp. 2-12.
- Yumiko, Murakami. "Hollywood's Slanted View." *Japan Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1999, p. 54.

## About the Author

Karen L. Ching Carter (PhD, English-Writing Rhetoric and Literacies, 2016) is a senior lecturer at the University of Vaasa, Finland. She teaches courses in academic writing, professional and technical writing, and humanities courses to master's students in business and computer science. Her interest is in studying both visual and textual discourse as narrative to explore the power of language to effectively argue and persuade. She has co-authored studies in English as a Foreign Language in the transfer of prosody—the rhythm, pitch, and tone of speech that speakers use to associate positive and negative meaning to words for persuasion. Email: [kcarter@uwasa.fi](mailto:kcarter@uwasa.fi).