UCLA Asian American Studies Center

FEBRUARY 6, 1984

I am writing this letter to enlist your advice and support. I am a student at Vassar College, and three years ago I complained to the administration at Vassar because I believed that a professor of East Asian studies was employing racist and sexist teaching methods. At this time, I was enrolled in an Introduction to Asian Civilization course taught by this particular professor, Donald Gillin.

Professor Gillin did several things in class to give me an impression that his methods were questionable.
1) He continuously told stories containing sexual innuendos in his lectures on Asian history. One story, not quite so subtle, was about a Chinese Empress. He reasoned that she was a feminist because she had had a portrait painted of her ministers waiting in line to perform oral sex on her as she sat nude with her legs spread apart. According to Gillin, in ancient China, only women were allowed to perform oral sex on men, not the other way around. It was considered degrading for men to perform oral sex on women. The Empress, therefore, was a feminist because she demanded equality.

2) He had the class read scenes of explicit pornography which were excerpts from Chinese novels. The novels, The Golden Lotus and The Tales of the Forbidden Palace, gave detailed descriptions of Chinese people and their sexual exploits. In one scene, a man, having had sex with a woman, tells her he needs to go relieve himself. The woman insists that he go in her mouth instead. In another story, a man has a naked woman bound with her legs spread apart. As he eats plums, he tries to throw the pits into her vagina.

3) He Presented a slide show which contains pornographic slides of Asian women. He explained that the purpose of the slides was to present the sexual stereotypes of Asian women. He said that by presenting these slides his students can better understand the stereotypes and thereby, realize that they are inaccurate. For example, he would show a picture of a naked Asian woman with a vibrator and tell the class that "they always portray Asian women with sexual instruments."

When I questioned Gillin in class about the slide show he called me "a naive Asian girl who has been overprotected by her parents" and ignored my protests as ravings of an overly sensitive Asian who was just upset because a white man had to teach her about native culture.

When I approached the administration, they made me feel that my complaints were silly, petty and stupid. They believed that I was overreacting and implied that I lacked knowledge of Asian history and culture for Asian culture "has alot of sex". I was told that sex and erotica were a fundamental part of Asian society. I was also informed that this was an issue that infringed upon the academic freedom of the professor. However, I was assured that the Dean would talk to the professor. Feeling that that was all I could hope for, I dropped the issue.

Then this December, I was informed by a friend that Gillin had shown his slide show again and that he had even added bondage pictures to it. Upon meeting and getting together with other concerned students, I once again approached the administration on the issue that Gillin's

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slide show was offensive and that some action must be taken against him. The other students also questioned Gillin's use of Charlie Chan movies and of Hollywood movies with non-Asians portraying Asians in his class. Those who have had some background in Asian history, in addition, believed that he distorts facts by not putting facts within the context of Asian society and culture.

Despite the testimony of Asian students and former students of Gillin's courses that racism and sexism permeates his lectures and that he misrepresents Asians, the administration seems wary of taking action against Gillin who is tenured and the chairman of the East Asian department.

I believe this to be a serious situation. Because the majority of the students who enroll in the course are ignorant about Asians and Asian culture, they are easily persuaded by Gillin's representation of Asians. When he shows the slide show of nude women, he negatively reinforces the stereotype by not presenting any positive aspects of Asian women. When he shows Charlie Chan movies, he explains that the Chinese community has complained for years about them, then he adds that he personally has loved them since he was a child. Therefore, students leave these movies saying such things as "honorable Number one son" and "Confucius says" without realizing its racist undertones.

The administration at Vassar argues academic freedom prevents them from acting. I believe the rights of academic freedom need to be protected, but where are my rights and the rights of women and Asians not to be humiliated and sexually harassed. I also believe that his teaching methods lack validity and pupose. Should he be protected to continue such practices? How much emphasis should be placed on erotica in Asian Civilization? Does showing pornographic slides of Asian women to illustrate sexual stereotypes that Americans have of Asian women belong in an Introduction to Asian Civilization course?

Racism and sexism permeate Gillin's lectures. I doubt if Black pornography in Africana Studies or European pornography in English literature would be tolerated under the same circumstances by Black or White people, but because of the lack of sensitivity and awareness towards Asians at Vassar, Gillin has been allowed to do as he pleases with his course under the guise of academic freedom. He also has been able to use ignorance as his ally. Students take the course for a gut course and consider the course "funny".

To impress upon the administration and the Vassar community the seriousness of the issue, I would like to present a force of strength by asking Asian individuals and organizations outside of Vassar to write a letter of inquiry to Vassar College about the academic practices of Professor Gillin. Can I receive any help from you in at least bringing an awareness that such practices may be objectionable to Asians?

(cont'd on next page...)

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Letters to Vassar College can be sent to:

--Natalie Marshall, Vice President for Administrative and Student Services.
--Patrick Sullivan, Dean of the College
--Donald Gillin, Professor of East Asian Studies
--Virginia Smith, President, Vassar College
or any other Vassar administrator or faculty member
c/o Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. 12601 (914) 452-7000.

I can be contacted at Box 2755, V.C., Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 12601 (914) 473-6982.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Noriko Ellen Okamoto

Noriko Ellen Okamoto '84

P.S. Although the pornographic readings were not assigned this year, I have found something that may be of interest. In a critique of The Golden Lotus in A History of Chinese Literature by Lai Ming, p. 307, it said:

> Many people have long looked askance at the vivid descriptions of detailed sexual acts which are found in so many passages of the novel. Others consider the novel nothing but pornography, and it is extremely difficult to get an unexpurgated copy of the book in Chinese. When the novel was translated into other languages the frank passages were either deleted or given in Latin. Within the context of the novel these passages are, I think, an integral part of the book. (emphasis mine).

Gillin neither gave a background for the reading nor did he have us read the erotic passage within the context of the novel. Why then did Gillin have us read these excerpts?