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Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song: Review

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Abstract

The most compelling aspect of *Mei Mei: A Daughter's Song* is its enduring power as cultural critique. On the surface, the subject matter is the universal conflict between mother and daughter, but this radio docudrama by Taiwanese-American producer Dmae Roberts is in fact an ambitious exploration of the complex meanings of race, hybridity and cultural 'mixedness' that outline the contours of identity in multicultural societies such as the US.

As an Asian-American 'minority' discourse, this documentary disrupts the dominant 'white vs other' understanding of culture by exploring Roberts' ambivalence about her own biracial identity (her mother is Taiwanese, her father is 'white' American). Roberts' feelings of alienation and frustration growing up American and hiding her Asian-ness underscore the shame she feels about her mother, who in turn is disappointed in her not so dutiful daughter. This tension serves as a metaphor for larger racial and cultural tensions, issues that have even more resonance today than when *Mei Mei* was first broadcast in 1989.

This article examines how Roberts achieves this cultural critique in under 27 minutes by layering first person narrative, dialogue, actuality and dramatic fairy tale elements in Taiwanese, Chinese, and English into a sometimes playful, sometimes haunting soundscape. The fact that the foreign language sonic elements or the mother's broken English may be incomprehensible is not just about adding texture, but about a rich subtext that invites the listener to experience this docudrama as a form of intercultural theatre.

Mei Mei is intelligent radio, intensely personal in tone yet conceptually grand in scope. It is the work of a generous producer.

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Keywords

diaspora, identity, hybridity, Taiwanese, Asian American, Asian Australian, family

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Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song: Review

Producer: Dmae Roberts
National Public Radio (NPR), 1989, c.27mins

Reviewer: Masako Fukui

Link to [Audio](https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184) of *Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song*:

<https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

Link to [Transcript](http://www.prx.org/pieces/7184/transcripts/7184) of *Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song*

<http://www.prx.org/pieces/7184/transcripts/7184>

Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song was first broadcast on American NPR network in 1989. Notable for being the first Taiwanese American documentary on public radio, producer Dmae Roberts won the prestigious George Foster Peabody award for this radio docudrama in 1990. Since then, *Mei Mei* has been rebroadcast in other English-speaking regions including the UK, Canada and Australia.

In 2014, Roberts reworked the audio documentary into a half-hour film, layering photographs, live and archival footage, as well as animation, onto the original audio. While the story is now more than 25 years old, its film version continues to reach new audiences. *Mei Mei's* timelessness is a testament to the powerfully evocative nature of this documentary.

Two narrative strands

The aural experience of *Mei Mei* is like breathing in a story. The soundscape is richly layered with the cacophony of streetscapes and traffic, temple ambience, Chinese opera recordings, a children's choir, as well as a fairytale narrated in Taiwanese and English. For non-Mandarin or non-Taiwanese speakers, much of this audio is incomprehensible, contributing to a somewhat hazy yet evocative sonic backdrop to this intimate and ambitious story.

Narrator Roberts states at the outset that the structural premise is a daughter's journey with her mother back to their birthplace, Taiwan. The hope is that the trip would 'make us closer, help me understand

her better'. But rather than allowing the story to progress towards an unknown ending, Roberts reveals the outcome in the first minute of the documentary. 'The fights got bigger, more intense and now we don't speak to each other.' This departure from linear storytelling works because *Mei Mei* is in fact two narrative strands that intertwine to tell a much larger story.

The first strand is the harrowing childhood history of Roberts' mother, Chu-Yin, in occupied Taiwan during World War II. Sold into servitude at the age of two for a payment of a mere 'Japanese, twenty yen', she endured abuse, survived beatings and starvation, was sold again to another family, dodged bombings and in one particularly heartbreaking scene, she recounts her attempts to commit suicide by hanging, not just once, but three times.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

At 13:28-13:44

Mother (Chu-Yin): I was thirteen and fourteen. I tried to suicide three times.

Dmae: How?

Mother: Tried to hang.

Dmae: You tried to hang yourself?

Mother: Yeah.

Dmae: Three times?

Mother: Yeah.

Dmae: How come?

Mother: Because I didn't want to live. That's why how come.

Nothing happy to live for.

The second narrative strand charts the daughter's complex feelings towards her mother. Growing up in rural 'white' America, Roberts acutely sensed that she was 'different: half Taiwanese'.

Unsurprisingly, the dominant emotion directed at her mother is 'shame' for being different from other mothers.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

At 00:56-1:20

Dmae: I know I was ashamed of her. The way she embarrassed me, calling out to me from the other end of a K-Mart store, yelling at the top of her lungs. Everyone in Taiwan yells. I understand that, at least now. Other mothers were reserved, educated, went to PTA meetings, baked cookies. I pronounced fork 'hork' because my mother couldn't say fs very well.

But Roberts' emotional trajectory shifts as it intersects with her mother's story. These shifts are reflected in the changing tonal qualities of Roberts' voice. For example, when attempting to elicit her mother's life story in a conventional interview type exchange early in the documentary, Roberts sounds like a detached interrogator—exasperated, impatient, devoid of empathy.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

At 3:15-3:50

Dmae: How long ago was it last time you were in Taiwan?

Mother: I told you 25 year. Why you want me to repeat?

Dmae: Try to pretend you haven't told me anything okay. Just try to pretend that. It'll make it a lot easier. So how come they sold you?

Mother: I don't know. They say they cannot take care of me.

Dmae: Was it really sold or was it just adopting?

Mother: They say they sold.

Dmae: For how much?

Mother: That's Japanese, twenty yen.

Dmae: Twenty yen?

Mother: I don't know, they need the money.

Dmae: How'd you feel?

Mother: I don't have any feel.

And as Roberts delves further into her mother's past, the boundary between mother and daughter recedes, and a more reflective tone is adopted, tinged with resigned empathy.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

At 21:06-21:34

Dmae: Later I learned that her outbursts were a result of her not being able to communicate her frustration in this foreign language, this foreign country. Hoping to live the rich American life. She would always have to work, still works. And she wanted a daughter who would be her partner, who would help her run that Chinese restaurant of her dreams. Someone who could read and write, who could keep the books, who could speak and be taken seriously. And that was never me.

Mother-daughter tension as metaphor

By about midway through the story, we begin to wonder what the tension between mother and daughter might really signify. Should we take it at face value and just see it as a gap in generational expectations, an expression of mutual disappointment, or is their ongoing conflict a metaphor for Roberts' own internal conflict as biracial/Asian-American? Or perhaps the tension is meant to point to larger racial, cultural tensions that exist in multicultural societies?

Some indication of what Roberts might mean is at the very start of the documentary when we 'overhear' her making a mental note to herself. 'Just remember, this isn't about me. It's about my mother. About growing up with her. Just remember that.' Yet as the documentary progresses, Roberts begins to interiorise her mother's narrative, so that by the end of *Mei Mei*, we are not only convinced of the depth of Roberts' connection and 'fierce loyalty' to her mother, but that there is some, if not a lot of Chu-Yin in Dmae.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

16:50-17:41

Dmae: After the war in 1945, there was even more poverty, even less food. Girls there just didn't leave their families. But she did. I had to admire her guts. I remember a fiery young woman when I was five who once disrupted a whole Taiwanese police station because someone stole our suitcases. God, the way she fought. People were hanging out the window to watch my mother fighting the police. Later on, I adopted that fierceness when we fought together. Yet, I protected her from the people who didn't understand her, made fun of her accent, tried to treat her as a

simple child when she was not. I had and still have this fierce loyalty to my Mama.

Of course, the mother and daughter never reconcile, but this lack of resolution feels satisfying because a linear link between an 'authentic' ethnic past (mother) and a multicultural present (daughter) would be misrepresentation. It may be easy to assume that aspects that are similar to the mother constitute the daughter's 'Taiwanese' or 'Asian' side. But identity is more complex than that. After all, cultural and racial identities are not static but always evolving. And there are certainly aspects of the mother that are decidedly 'un-Asian' as there are aspects of Roberts that are 'un-American'.

If indeed the mother-daughter tension can be seen as a ring-in for racial and cultural conflict in general, I sense that by deliberately presenting Asian, American or biracial as ambiguous categories, Roberts is challenging us to question our own identities and what it means to interiorise other people's narratives.

Race, identity and Secret Asian Woman

In cultural studies today, the idea that we actively incorporate others' stories into our own to create new subjectivities is a popular idea. This is not about colonising narrative, but about recognising the other in the 'imagined community'¹ posited by renowned scholar Benedict Anderson, in which there is what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls 'a gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences'.² Personally, I like the term 'mixed-up', because it emphasises engagement, entanglement and a complexity that is an inevitable result of everyday intercultural conversations. 'Mixed-up' is vastly different from a static, idealised, racial essentialism that was once seen as the determining feature of one's identity.

But the concept of cultural 'fluidity' that seems fashionable today does not diminish the importance of race. Racism is rampant, perhaps more so with increasing globalisation and porous borders, pointing to the dangers of de-emphasising race in identity. And while not

¹ Anderson, Benedict, 1983. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.

² Geertz, Clifford, 1988. *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Polity Press: Cambridge, p.148

explicitly addressing race, *Mei Mei* is implicitly all about race because it complexifies Roberts' biracial identity.

Roberts has created many works that more explicitly address race in other contexts. In *Secret Asian Woman*³ for example, a half hour radio documentary produced in 2008, Roberts investigated the motives and emotions associated with her need to hide her Taiwanese-ness/Asian-ness by 'passing' as white. Part personal narrative, part conventional interviews with mixed-race Americans, Roberts investigates with great humour and insight the racism behind terms like 'half-breed' or 'oriental' and the damaging prejudices enshrined in the submissive, exotic Asian woman stereotype promoted in popular culture.

Roberts explains at the conclusion to *Secret Asian Woman* that anger at the racism directed at her in subtle and not so subtle ways throughout her life drives her to create works exploring her mixed-race identity. And she unequivocally declares at the end of the documentary, 'I'm not a Secret Asian. I AM Asian. There.'

As an Asian-Australian woman of Japanese background, I want to argue that the term 'secret Asian' still holds possibilities. After all, if we are to understand identity as an ongoing project that has the potential to evolve with each intercultural encounter, there may be undiscovered (rather than deliberately hidden), parts of our identities. In *Secret Asian Woman*, the 'secret' is debunked, stripped of its transformative power, but in the less dialectical documentary work *Mei Mei*, there are still 'secret' identities to be explored.

Intercultural theatre

And it is in *Mei Mei's* richly layered evocative soundscape that these 'secrets' await discovery. For me, each encounter with *Mei Mei* evokes different feelings and multiple understandings. The Rong Shing Children's Choir's ethereal singing behind the narration of the dragon king fairytale, for example, is so dreamlike that it instantly teleports me to another space and time.

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184> At 1:40-2:20

³ Link to audio for Secret Asian Woman <https://beta.prx.org/stories/23753>

This is why I prefer to see *Mei Mei* as intercultural theatre rather than a radio documentary. *Mei Mei* has many dramatic elements, such as the evocative multi-language narration of Chu-Yin's story set against a background of Chinese and Taiwanese singing, fire crackers going off, cymbals, cars, marketplace and temple ambience. The effect is to transport us elsewhere, but where that elsewhere is depends on one's race, background, and knowledge of Mandarin or Taiwanese language.

As a Japanese-Australian, Japan's brutal colonial history in Asia implicates me indirectly in mother Chu-Yin's traumatic past. So *my* recognition of her personal story will be undoubtedly different from others who do not share my cultural lineage. Perhaps someone from a colonised or war-torn country can recognise themselves in the abuse, mistreatment, and childhood traumas of Chu-Yin. This recognition of the other's 'performance' of identity in the context of this radio docudrama is an opportunity to identify with difference and to explore, remake and reimagine new cultural viewpoints, an idea compellingly explored by the Canadian theatre studies academic, Richard Knowles, in his analysis of how hybrid and diasporic identities are performed in multicultural societies.⁴ In this sense, *Mei Mei* creates individual, intercultural encounters between the listener and the narrator/producer/subjects/sonic elements in the documentary.

This is why the foreign language narration and the mother's often indecipherable English have such potent meanings. In one scene, her utterings are repeated as a chorus with a humorous sing-song quality. Is this playful riffing just another layer to the rich texture of the soundscape, or does its 'foreignness' feed into the shame the daughter feels about being different?

Link to audio: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/7184>

At 10:05-10:25

My first encounter with this audio took me straight back to my own childhood growing up in 'white' Australia, cringing when my schoolfriends made fun of me speaking Japanese to my mother. I still remember them reciting sing-songy gibberish interspersed with

⁴ Knowles, Richard Paul. 2010. *Theatre and Interculturalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chinese restaurant menu items. Yet on subsequent encounters with this section of *Mei Mei*, I've found the sounds to be mostly amusing, and just a bit foreign. This may be similar to most people's perceptions.

But what if I were to learn to speak Mandarin and Taiwanese and were able to understand every word in *Mei Mei*? My appreciation of the story would undoubtedly alter, especially my insight into this mother-daughter relationship. And this is why this radio docudrama is intelligent and generous. It allows us the opportunity to discover and rediscover ourselves in this story. *Mei Mei* is indeed a timeless piece of radio.

Conclusion

As audio storytellers and radio producers, our first task is to tell a compelling, informative story. But as media practitioners we also have a responsibility to go further, to inspire, to question, to call people to action. And today, in a 'world in which the complicated entanglement of togetherness in difference has become the rule rather than the exception,'⁵ as the Australian Asian Studies academic Ien Ang notes, Roberts has taken on the formidable task of addressing the thorny issue of identity. Rather than take a dialectical approach, she has opted to fashion a very personal story into an audio piece that is both enchanting and haunting.

APPENDIX

Raw audio recorded for *Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song* is archived at:
<http://meimeiproject.com/historical-archive/raw-audio/>

A collection of Dmae Roberts' other audio features can be found at:
<https://soundcloud.com/dmaeroberts/sets/dmaes-greatest-clips>

⁵ Ang, Ien, 2003. "Together-in-difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity", *Asian Studies Review*, 27(2), p.152.

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Masako Fukui is a bilingual writer and radio documentary producer. She is a regular contributor to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National. Previously, Masako was a radio and print journalist in Tokyo and Sydney working for major Japanese, Australian and American news organisations including Japan's public broadcaster, NHK.

Her radio documentary '[From the pearlers to the bankers: The History of Japanese-Australians](#)' won the Gold Trophy at the 2015 New York Festival World's Best Radio Programs and '[Will Kate Survive Kate](#)' won the Gold Trophy at the 2014 New York Festival World's Best Radio Programs and was also shortlisted for the Radio Creative Feature category at the AIB Awards 2014 (Association of International Broadcasting). It is reviewed in RadioDoc Review Volume 1 [Issue 2](#): see <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol1/iss2/>

AUDIO LINKS:

From the Pearlers to the Bankers: the history of Japanese-Australians
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/from-the-pearlers-to-the-bankers3a-the-history-of-japanese-aus/6035880>

Will Kate Survive
Kate?<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/will-kate-survive-kate3f/5110464>