



ENGAGING ASIAN AMERICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

A Report on the Asia Society's Wallace Foundation LEAD Grant

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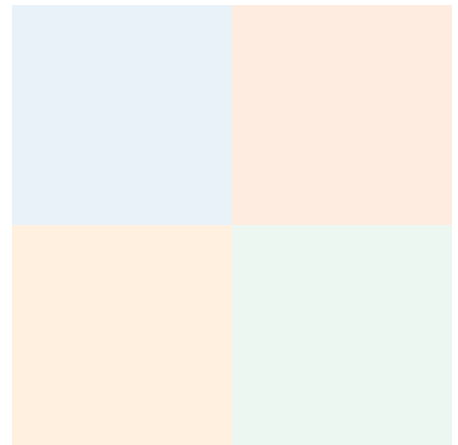
FOREWORD

WHEN JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER III ESTABLISHED the Asia Society in 1956, his concern was chiefly about the lack of understanding Americans had about much of Asia. He could have hardly contemplated that nearly 50 years after the founding of the institution, there would be a visible “Asianization” of America. Today, it is difficult to think of Asian cultures as being remote and wildly exotic, when a wide variety of Asian experiences are available in most cities.

For an institution such as the Asia Society, this means that Asia is not simply a far away place, but also a reality in New York and the rest of the U.S. At the same time, it is essential to understand the differences in the gradation of “Asian-ness” as experienced by those who live in the U.S. and those who continue to live in an Asian country.

Asia Society began to develop some Asian American programming in the late 1980s in recognition of the dramatic changes in the Asian American presence in the U.S. However, it was only in the 1990s that the institution’s engagement with Asian American issues began in any sustained way. Now, Asian Americans are in leadership positions at the board and staff levels, and Asian American scholars, artists, authors and filmmakers routinely participate in the programs of the Society. We have developed a far more nuanced understanding of the diversity of Asian American experiences with direct implications for programming as well as deepened the engagement with various communities.

With the help of the The Wallace Foundation LEAD (Leadership and Excellence in Audience Development) grant over the last four years, Asia Society has been able to create a sustained initiative to examine, expand, and deepen the relationship with selected Asian American communities, while developing a better understanding of Asian American issues that cut across all communities. An important aspect of the grant was to generate a report from our experience which could benefit other organizations who aspire to forge long-term partnerships with Asian American communities and organizations.



Arguably, some observations in this report will seem quite obvious. That there is no cohesiveness to the Asian American communities—there is no defining similarity to their “Asian-ness”—is well known. What may be less obvious is the fact that it is their experience in America, their “American experience” that is more likely to bring together different Asian American groups. Programatically speaking, this suggests separation in terms of cultural programs for ethnically specific communities, especially for older immigrant groups, but greater connection among different communities, when dealing with such issues as generational differences or immigrant experiences in the U.S.

Most importantly, the report is also intended as a gentle reminder to all of us who are engaged in the cultural sphere and who are committed to working with diverse, and often non-traditional communities, that attention to subtle details can pay off over time. Conversely, an inadvertent lack of awareness of cultural differences can derail a project very quickly. Thus, this is less about “reporting” what took place, and more about what we at the Asia Society learned from the process.

Throughout the grant period, a number of departments of the Society worked together to ensure the success of the project. Even though the Wallace grant was specifically meant for the cultural program division of the Society, selected projects were developed in collaboration with the colleagues in the institution’s Asian Social Issues Program. The marketing division under the leadership of Karen Karp was a crucial partner. Special kudos goes to Rachel Cooper, Director of Performing Arts and Public Programs, Linden Chubin, Associate Director of Public Programs and Sunita Mukhi, who was the program officer in charge of the grant for most of its history. Interns Aimy Ko, Pamela Santos, Rupal Patel and Pulak Patel worked with us throughout the grant period and became integral to the project. Many thanks to all of them for being such a valuable part of the team.

Although Asia Society board and staff made a conscious decision in the early 1990s to increase the institutional engagement with Asian American communities and issues relevant to them, it was the strong support provided by the Wallace Foundation that put the work of the Society at a much higher level of sustained commitment. We are deeply grateful to Christine DeVita, President of the Foundation; Michael Moore, Director of Arts Programming; and Rory MacPherson, Senior Officer of Programs for their trust in the possibility of our institutional transformation and their constant encouragement.



Family day celebrating Chinese art and culture with events for children featuring Chinese Theater Workshop. (PHOTO: ELSA RUIZ)

As the Society prepares its next strategic plan, it is clear from deliberations at all levels that Asian Americans are not simply integrated into the fabric of the institution; they are at the front and center, capable of transforming the image and the mission of the institution. In today's interdependent world, it is increasingly difficult to define Asia only in terms of its physical location. The Asian American reality of the last four decades demands a more subtle formulation of the Asian experience as well. Indeed, through the experience of the Lila Wallace LEAD grant, Asia Society is confidently poised to traverse the fluid terrain of Asian American identity as it redefines its mission of connecting Asians and Americans to suit the realities of the 21st century.

Vishakha N. Desai

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President

JULY 2004



Shahzia Sikander, Vishakha Desai, and Shirin Neshat in *Viewpoints*, a panel discussion.

[PHOTO: ELSA RUIZ]

INTRODUCTION

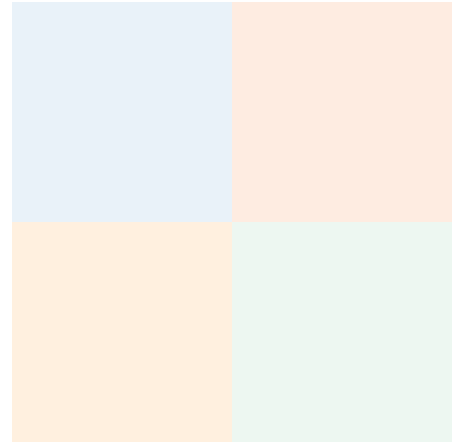
IN 1999, THE ASIA SOCIETY RECEIVED THE Wallace Foundation LEAD (Leadership and Excellence in Audience Development) grant. The grant supported the Society's efforts to examine, expand, and deepen its relationship with Asian American communities through a program of visual, performing, and literary arts, in both traditional and contemporary forms.

With headquarters in New York and branches in Washington D.C., Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Manila, Melbourne, and Shanghai, the Asia Society serves a large national and international audience. Every year, the Society reaches over 500,000 individuals (140,000 in New York alone) through its exhibitions, programs, publications and websites. About one third of the audience is Asian or Asian American.

The LEAD grant was both timely and well targeted. One of the most dramatic recent changes in the United States has been the unprecedented growth of the Asian population. In each of the past three decades, the number of Asian Americans has more than doubled, and today it remains one of the fastest growing segments of American society.

The growth of the Asian American population provides the Asia Society with both a challenge and an opportunity to fulfill its mission: a challenge to actively engage the many communities in the Society's activities, and an opportunity to produce programs that foster communication and understanding among Asians and Americans including Asian Americans.

The Asia Society is actively engaged in the process of understanding who and what is Asian American, expanding the term beyond a simple geographic description to a dynamic definition that includes people of Asian descent living in America, and the various cultures that have evolved here.



A HISTORY OF LINKING THE U.S. AND ASIA THROUGH CULTURE

John D. Rockefeller III founded the Asia Society in 1956 with a strong belief that, in the aftermath of World War II, Americans needed to learn more about Asian countries—their economies, politics, arts, and cultures. Throughout its nearly 50-year history, the Asia Society has introduced museum exhibitions, traditional Asian performing arts, and film to its audiences.

In the early 1960s, the Asian American population in the United States was relatively small. However, with the Immigration Act of 1965 and later, the Refugee Act in 1975, dramatic shifts in immigration patterns brought about an influx of Asian immigrants. This not only increased the Asian population in the usual clusters in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, but also established heretofore non-existent communities in other major cities throughout the country.

The Asian American movement spawned activism and advocacy for the civil rights of Asian Americans and for the formation of Asian American studies and ethnic studies in the academic world. Many of the Asian American civic and arts organizations and academic departments in universities and colleges on the East and West coasts were started and are led today by the activists and cultural workers of this generation. Today, the Asian Americans from this movement continue to be advocates for egalitarian treatment, civic rights, civil liberties, cultural pride, and opportunities for Americans of Asian descent in a pluralist United States.



Lion dance on Asia Society's side walk on Park Avenue in celebration of US Postal Service Year of the Horse Stamp Launch.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Asia Society made a commitment to bring more Asians and Asian Americans into its sphere of activities. Since 1985, when the Society developed an unprecedented program on the Indian American immigrant experience, there has been a significant increase in the Society's Asian American programs. Moreover, the Society made a concerted effort to employ more Asian American staff, to recruit Asian American leaders to the Board of Trustees, and to enlist Asian American advisory groups.

In October 1991, the Asia Society hosted a landmark national event that would redefine its relationship with Asian Americans and Asian American issues. *The Asian American Experience: Looking Ahead* symposium was recognized as the first major national conference ever held on the subject of Asian Americans in mainstream America. The timing of the symposium coincided with the newly released 1990 statistics by the Census Bureau showing a startling increase of the Asian population by an unprecedented 96% from the previous decade. This gained national media attention and put Asian Americans and the Asia Society in the limelight.

As a result of the symposium the Asia Society enacted an Asian American strategic plan in 1992 and onwards. The Society began programming and collaborating with Asian American organizations. Prime examples of these programs are the *Bridges With Asia* conference, the *Crossovers* initiative, and the exhibition *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*.

By developing strategic partnerships with contemporary arts institutions or with community-based organizations (e.g. P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and the Museum of Chinese in the Americas), the institution has been able to expand and further diversify its audience. The following initiatives reflect the Society's first strides towards Asian American programming and audience development.



Audience at a performance by the Hsiao Hsi Yuan Puppet Theater of Taiwan. (PHOTO: LA FRANCES HUI)

GOALS AND STRATEGIES UNDER THE LEAD GRANT

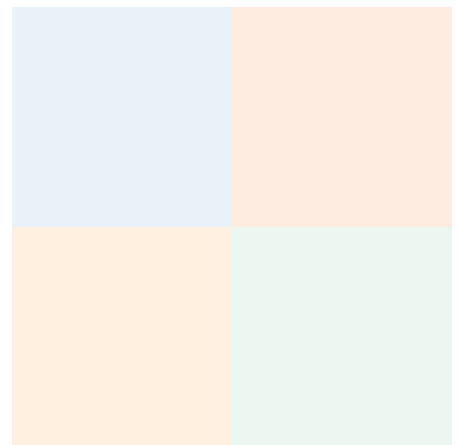
THE OVERALL GOALS OF THE LEAD GRANT

were: to deepen the participation of Asian American communities through advisory panels and institutional partnerships, and to actively solicit feedback from the communities about our programs; to establish the Asia Society as a major center for the presentation of creative arts by Asian American artists; to create multidisciplinary programs that place Asian American arts in a broader perspective and that use artistic expression as a catalyst for historical, social, and political discussions; and to increase Asian American audiences to a total of one third of all Society audiences.

To achieve these objectives, the Asia Society developed a number of key strategies and, in the course of carrying them out, learned important lessons. The following are major categories for strategies implemented, followed by more in-depth case studies for each.

1. MAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

- **Identifying Asian American Community Leaders and Enlisting Their Support.** To better connect with Asian American communities, the Society set up an Asian American Core Advisory Committee as well as a number of other ethnic-specific committees. Initial resistance from some community groups required building trust over time.
- **Increasing the Number of Asians and Asian Americans at the Asia Society.** New members joined the Asia Society from different communities after working on programs with the Society. Many younger Asian Americans (ages 20–35) began to attend programs; not all became members, but many became regular attendees.



2. CREATING RELEVANT PROGRAMMING

- **Forge Ties with Asian American Artists, Organizations, and Communities.** The Society commissioned two new operas and a number of other works by Asian Americans that directly addressed the histories and realities of their communities.
- **Synergy in Programming.** Driving the Asia Society’s programming philosophy is the belief that the important issues brought to light in works of art should be examined and expanded upon in various formats, including panel discussions, workshops, special reports, and interviews on the Society’s websites.
- **Timeliness: Responding to Urgency.** By responding promptly to current events such as 9/11 and the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the Asia Society helped to meet communities’ needs and to promote understanding of the issues.

3. EXPLORING THE DEFINITION OF ASIAN AMERICAN THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE

- **Recognize the Distinctiveness of Communities.** Each community has its own set of unique characteristics, dynamics, and histories. Understanding these in details is crucial to working effectively.
- **Examining Political Complexities.** Through careful programming, the arts can also be used to investigate intra-Asian community relationships, as evidenced by *Forgiveness* [See Box: Forgiveness], a production commissioned by the Asia Society.
- **Exploring Asian American History.** Through performances like Chris B. Millado’s play *L’il Brown Brothers/Nikimalika*, the Asia Society acts as a forum where Asian Americans can explore their early history in America.

FORGIVENESS—A Music Theater Work UNCOVERING CULTURAL GHOSTS

Forgiveness, produced by the Asia Society and co-commissioned with the University Musical Society, the Walker Art Center and in association with The Flynn Theatre for the Performing Arts, exemplifies the ambitious range of the Society’s collaborations.

Conceived and directed by Chen Shi-Zheng and developed over two years in collaboration with composer Eve Beglarian and Noh master Akira Matsui, *Forgiveness* contemporizes a classic Chinese ghost story about glory, betrayal, retribution and finally reconciliation. The piece gives voice to the complex collective memory and emotions of the post-war generation of Chinese, Japanese and Koreans through the use of movement, text and slide projections, and music ranging from Korean vocals and Japanese shakuhachi to a driving hip-hop rant. In the work, the ghosts are a metaphor for the turbulent, intertwining histories of China, Korea, and Japan.

“*Forgiveness* is a visual theater poem, creating dream images that stretch from ancient history to the recent past. It is tied to an urgent need to bear witness to the history of the past century for the present generation, and expos-



Kang Kwon Soon in *Forgiveness*, a multimedia theater piece commissioned by the Asia Society. (PHOTO: RACHEL COOPER)

es in memory, the hope of their finding connections that will allow for an amicable future,” said Rachel Cooper. “*Forgiveness* uncovered buried issues, issues that haven’t before been shared with a larger American audience. In addition to the performances, the company participated in panel discussions, master classes, and workshops.” Audience members were powerfully affected, as captured in this written comment by an audience member:

“Thank you for bringing *Forgiveness* to the stage. I saw it last night. I was moved by the juxtaposition of the histories of Korean, Japanese and Chinese cultures through dance, song and text. For me, the effect was a post-modern commentary on my own history as a third generation Korean American woman. After seeing *Forgiveness*, I felt over a hundred years old, bearing the histories of my grandparents’ on my soul. It evoked a visceral revolt in me. *Forgiveness* gave me a vehicle to visit these thoughts and feelings and gave me a language to speak about them and configure an insightful identity for today.”

- **Reaching Out to the Pan-Asian Diaspora.** The Asia Society increases the number of interactive programs among various Asian countries and communities in response to focus group comments.
- **Presenting Asian Artists in the American Mix.** In an annual series of programs entitled *Crossovers*, the Asia Society created a venue for the works of Asian American artists who are reaching across cultural boundaries.
- **Crossing Generations.** Recognizing that Asian American communities cut across generations as well as cultures, the Asia Society presents programs geared specifically to young audiences or of interest to mixed generations.

4. PROMOTING LONG-TERM COMMITMENTS

- **Establishing Trust with Partners.** The Asia Society and smaller, highly respected organizations like Asian CineVision and the Museum of Chinese in the Americas worked for years to forge productive, equitable partnerships, stressing each partners' strengths, and leading to successful co-productions.
- **Continuity in Programming.** By underscoring the importance of long-term partners and programming, the Asia Society and its partners have built Asian American audiences while managing expectations and limitations.
- **Extending Asia Society's Reach to Specific Communities.** By learning how better to work with and reach Asian American communities, the Asia Society has sought to market and package programs in ways that strengthen ties with Asian American communities. The Society also developed a family of websites (such as www.AsiaSociety.org and www.AsiaSource.org) to allow for better access to Asian American resources.
- **Engaging New Audiences in New Venues.** During the renovation of the Asia Society facilities, at the suggestion of the Asian American Core Committee and with the help of community partners, the Society extended its programming beyond its walls to Chinatown, Queens, and other parts of the city.
- **Acting as a Venue for Special Events.** Asia Society partners had opportunities to make use of the facilities for important events.

These strategies helped the Asia Society deepen its connection to Asian Americans and diverse Asian American communities, and forge long-term partnerships with individual Asian American artists and community organizations. The Lila Wallace grant gave the Asia Society the opportunity to fine-tune these strategies and to learn a great deal in the process. The following sections will look at several projects that served as case studies for the categories listed above.



Putu Wijaya of Indonesia and Ong Keng Seng of Singapore speaking at the Theater Visionaries panel, moderated by Sunita Mukhi of Asia Society

DETAILED CASE STUDY EXAMPLES

1

■ MAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Identifying Asian American Community Leaders and Enlisting Their Support

One of the first steps the Asia Society took after receiving the LEAD grant was to create an Asian American Core Advisory Committee. Subsequently other advisory committees were created to develop important initiatives that involved the Filipino, Indian, Chinese, and Iranian communities. “Our hope is to expand our knowledge of the broad Asian American community,” said Vishakha N. Desai, Senior Vice President and Director of the Museum and Cultural Programs, who along with other key members of Asia Society attended meetings of the committee.

Since the early 1990s, the Society has played a leading role in presenting contemporary arts by Asian and Asian American artists, starting with a major exhibition, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*. “We’ve made a consistent effort to diversify our programs, but it’s been difficult to erase the reputation from 20 years ago,” said Desai.

Building trust and equitable relationships: Initial resistances and eventual alliances

In 1998 and 2002 we held focus groups to examine changes in perceptions of the Asia Society. Members, non-members and artistic and organizational partners came together to discuss how they felt the institution had changed.

One of the most important lessons revealed from the first six months of the project was the dynamics of how Asian Americans relate to the Asia Society. From the Asian American Advisory Committee, a focus group study, and a special meeting with leaders of community-based organizations, it was learned that the Asia Society was sometimes seen as a more traditional and upscale organization. The Society was confronted by both resistance and accolade for receiving the LEAD award.

This resistance became palpable when a search was conducted for members of the Core Advisory Committee. Initially, the Society experienced resistance from important prime movers within the Asian American civic and intellectual circles who were leaders of respected grassroots organizations.

The Asia Society staff met with colleagues from dissenting groups, some of whom subsequently decided to join the Asian American Core Advisory Committee. The Society staff continued to develop collaborative relationships with all of the groups. “It was important for us to continue to engage with these organizations to ensure that we could amplify their voices and understand and respond to their concerns,” said Desai.

“People in the grassroots community were very concerned about if we’d get eaten up by Asia Society.”

(focus group, 2002)



“When the grant came through, there was a lot of anger towards Asia Society about getting a grant to do outreach in a community that it had no historic commitment towards. So maybe [the Society] is trying to change that, and I’m saying today that it has.”

(focus group, 2002)

The shared goals of cultural education became the philosophical reason to collaborate. A more egalitarian exchange of resources was sought so that these grassroots organizations would benefit by collaborating with the Society in the form of contacts, resources, and access to funds.

The Asia Society has contributed in various ways. It created a community of audiences and developed programs for them, and helped provide visibility among audiences that collaborative groups had not as yet tapped. The Society provided infrastructure, contacts, manpower and creative input for collaborative programs. In turn, the Society benefited from the collaborating groups' input, expertise and critiques, which kept the relevance of their Asian American programs up to speed.

The exchange of resources proved mutually beneficial. Whereas these grassroots institutions had access to communities and local knowledge, and credibility in the intellectual circles of the progressive Asian American communities, the Society had access to the mainstream, its infrastructure and professional staff facilitated programs and produced substantial and excellent cultural products.

Successful collaborations emerged from relations nurtured with Fay Matsuda and the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas; Jack Tchen and New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute; Quang Bao of Asian American Writers' Workshop; and Angel Shaw of Asian CineVision, to name a few. Of these major Asian American cultural workers, Angel Shaw agreed to be part of the Core Advisory Committee, while the others remained as active resources and collaborators. "By working with these key players, we not only have the benefit of their experience and intimate knowledge of their constituent communities, but they also become active partners in the Asia Society's programs," said Rachel Cooper, Director of Performing Arts and Public Programs. "Their presence impacts not only the quality and types of the programs presented, but also the programs' success in terms of community support."

Increasing the Number of Asians and Asian Americans at the Asia Society

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Society actively sought to bring more Asians and Asian Americans into all levels of its activities. In the past decade, the number of Asian American staff and trustees has increased by more than 25 percent. In 1994, the Society added a programming position for Asian American programs.



Monami Maulik, Gary Okihiro and Debasish Mishra in the panel *Us and Them*, part of the *America's Crisis* series in Spring 2002.

2 ■ CREATING RELEVANT PROGRAMMING

Forging Ties with Asian American Artists, Organizations, and Communities

In recent years, the Asia Society has focused on supporting Asian American artists, and this emphasis is reflected in its programming. “We want to provide a platform to raise the visibility of Asian and Asian American artists and to introduce them to the larger public,” said Cooper. By commissioning works by outstanding Asian American artists like the composers Jason Kao Hwang and Vijay Iyer, choreographer Yin Mei and playwright Chris Millado, the Society also established itself as a producer of new, groundbreaking works that give voice to the memories and experiences of Asian American communities.

“In the United States there is a tendency to see the pre-modern, traditional arts as the only authentic cultural expressions of Asians and Asian societies, and to devalue artistic forms of the 20th and 21st century that have been influenced by the West as somehow impure or derivative,” said Desai. “The Asia Society is helping to change that perception. Commissioning major new works, both in the visual arts and in the performing arts, is part of our ongoing commitment to foster a more inclusive way of looking at Asian and Asian American artists and to reveal the tremendous dynamism of these artists at work today.”

During the major 2000–2001 renovation, the Asia Society headquarters at 725 Park Avenue was closed for almost two years. In anticipation of the grand reopening in the fall of 2001, the Society commissioned works by a variety of contemporary artists. Three Asian Americans were among nine artists commissioned: Shahzia

Sikander, a Pakistan-born, New York-based artist [See Box: Conversations with Traditions]; Sarah Sze, a first-generation Chinese-American, who built a site-specific installation in a corner of the third-floor gallery; and Korean American Yong Soon Min, whose sculpture incorporating record covers of Asian LPs spreads across the wall at the entrance to the Lila Wallace Auditorium.

CONVERSATIONS WITH TRADITIONS— An Exhibition of Works by Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander BI-LATERAL BANNERS: INDIA AND PAKISTAN

In the entrance of the newly renovated Asia Society headquarters, visitors were greeted by two huge banners and modern translations of traditional Indian styles and themes. Separate yet integrated works of art, one by Nilima Sheikh, one of the most prominent women artists active in India today, and the other by Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistan-born artist trained in Lahore, Pakistan, and at the Rhode Island School of Design.

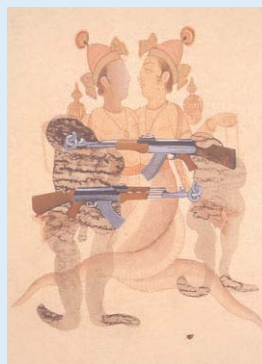
In November 2001, the Asia Society hosted *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander*, a collaborative exhibition of works by the two South Asian artists. The exhibition included some of the artists' earliest works and pieces that were created specifically for this exhibition.

Sheikh and Sikander draw on traditional techniques of Indian miniature painting in their work, though each articulates a very different relationship to pre-modern traditions and contemporary art practice. Sheikh and Sikander make a powerful pair. First and foremost, both artists constantly push the boundaries between the personal and the cultural, not to mention the traditional and the modern.

Almost a generation apart and living in different parts of the world (Sheikh in Vadodara, India and Sikander in New York), they respond to their surroundings and their cultural works in very distinctive ways. At the same time, Sheikh and Sikander are both acutely aware of the complex political realities that imbue cultural productions with references to the past.

Seen together, the works of Sheikh and Sikander provide a rich texture of traditions in a contemporary context. They go beyond the nationalist agenda and seek to develop a form that can simultaneously be about the past and

the present, resisting the globalizing trends toward uniformity of expression to create a personal vision that is culturally rooted. Together, they provide a background against which one can begin to unravel the complexities of the relationship of artistic traditions to the contemporary political and cultural landscape of the subcontinent. South Asian audiences from India and Pakistan found the pairing of these two artists particularly powerful, and appreciated the art and issues explored in the juxtaposition.



Artwork by Shahzia Sikander, commissioned by the Asia Society.

In the performing arts, the Society commissioned and produced four evening-length works: *Forgiveness*, *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*, *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* and *In What Language? A Song Cycle of Lives in Transit*.

The multi-national cultural landscape of New York City was also reflected by the musicians who played at various functions celebrating the reopening: Afghan, Burmese, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, and Filipino artists performed in a variety of traditions and styles. “All of these artists live here in New York,” said Cooper. “They not only represent the cultures of many nations, but also the diversity of New York City, giving voice to the people of this city.”

Synergy in Programming

Driving the Society’s programming is the philosophy that art is often at the heart of exploring difficult issues and can be a point of entry to explore these issues through a variety of related program formats, such as panel discussions, workshops, special reports, and interviews that appear on the Asia Society’s websites. The art becomes a focal point from which audiences can enter into the content in more substantive ways while not compromising the art.

The synergy of programming—tapping on the expertise of all the departments at the Asia Society and many partner organizations—not only expanded the influence and reputation of the central works, but had a multiplying effect in terms of audience.

In commissioning and producing the chamber opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown* in October 2001 [See Box: The Floating Box], the Society, in partnership with the Museum of Chinese in the Americas and Music from China, developed a series of related programs. These included a panel discussion among

THE FLOATING BOX: A STORY IN CHINATOWN —A Contemporary Chamber Opera



Jason Kao Hwang’s chamber opera was created as part of a three-way partnership with the Museum of Chinese in the Americas and Music From China.

Set in the 1980s, *The Floating Box* charts the journey of an immigrant family over continents, languages, and generations. The father, a cook on an American cruise ship, sacrifices his musical talent for the sake of his child. The mother never fully adapts, refusing to learn English and living in the past. It is up to the daughter, raised in the United States and ignorant of her parents’ past, to uncover the secrets that bind them together so that she can move on. Set in a small apartment in New York City’s Chinatown, tales of love, tragedy and heroism, from both China and America, are unveiled in a story which flows freely through time. With music and staging illuminating dreams, memories, and stark realities, *The Floating Box* tells an essential and mythic tale of one family’s loss, transformation and survival.

Although *The Floating Box* tells the story of one family, it speaks for the experience of

countless immigrant families. Jason Kao Hwang, the composer and Catherine Filloux, the work’s librettist, based the opera on stories they gleaned from Chinese living in Manhattan’s Chinatown.

To underscore the complexity of the immigrants’ world, Hwang wove a geography of influences including jazz, blues, rock, samba, Chinese opera, Gregorian chants and show tunes, into a single melodic language. The orchestra included members of Music From China and some of New York’s finest freelance musicians playing a variety of Western and Asian instruments.

This opera supports a traditional concern of the Asian American community to express the experiences of real Asian Americans in defiance of the public’s insatiable appetite for stereotypes—kung fu masters, gang banging drug dealers, or the flowery figures of mythology. However, *The Floating Box* was not created to fulfill the tenets of political correctness, which suffer from its own myopia, rather it brings Asian American characters generally outside the public’s purview, to a full and vivid life on stage.



A performance of *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*. (PHOTO: JACK VARTOOGIAN)

[See also Box: *Note from the Composer: Creating with the Community*, Page 14.]

Asian American artists at the Public Theater and a program about value conflicts between immigrant parents and their first generation children held in Chinatown at the Chatham Square branch of the New York Public Library. Reflecting the problems facing immigrant workers raised in the opera, the Asia Society hosted a panel discussion, *Workers' Rights and Immigrant Communities*, which examined the situation of immigrant workers in Chinatown.

Extracting themes from performances and exhibitions, and linking them to the daily lives of Asian Americans served as a rallying point for large and often overlooked segments of the community, and consequently engaged diverse audiences. In the course of a recent focus group one respondent said: "There's a recognition that there's a change here, largely because of the outreach to various organizations... Who would've gone to the Asia Society to understand the problems of women sweatshop workers? It's astonishing. No one would've ever thought that would happen in the past."

Timeliness: Responding to Urgency

Audiences seek programs that speak to their needs and that reflect current events affecting them and their community. It is imperative that organizations recognize the fluidity of modern life and respond, in some cases by altering long-term projects and in other cases by mounting new programs, relying on the expertise of community leaders.

The programming in the wake of 9/11 was an important example of how the Society and its staff worked with the community to produce programs that offered information, perspective, and a forum in which to better understand the complex situation created for different Asian Americans. "After we learned of what happened, we all gathered here to decide one thing: What could we do to help?" said Desai.

NOTE FROM THE COMPOSER
—Creating with the Community



Composer Jason Kao Hwang giving workshops to children in Chinatown as part of his residency at the Asia Society. (PHOTO: MICHAEL DAMAS)

In 1998 I received a three-year Meet the Composer/New Residencies grant in partnership with the Asia Society, Museum of Chinese in the Americas and Music From China. I worked in the Asian American community of New York City to celebrate our spirit and heritage. In Queens, Music From China and I created a workshop for students as part of the Asia Society's Annenberg project at a local elementary school. In Chinatown, I led a group of high school students at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas who created a CD of music, poems, oral histories and jokes. I also composed works for Music From China, which was performed at their annual Merkin Hall concert and my own concert at the Asia Society. These compositions for Chinese and Western instruments explored sounds, which led to *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*.

For this opera, to create music of the community, librettist Catherine Filloux and I listened to the community by recording over forty hours of oral histories. These included family stories

of both the composer and librettist (who is also an immigrant), and provided the documentary detail and emotional dynamics of an original libretto. Through this process, a public commission became the personal mission of artists seeking to understand their own histories in correspondence with the collective community experience.

On exhibit at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas is a composite photograph which was another inspiration for the libretto. Cynthia Lee, the Museum's deputy director writes, "The photo is in fact a collage of faces of hope-hope for the reunion of a family separated..."

The opera's orchestra of Chinese and Western instruments establishes the physical place, language and psychological landscape of the story. The cultural and timbral bridges within this sound organically expresses the emotional life of each character, who must transcend both silence and massive cultural change. Genre vernacular, including jazz and blues, flow through the score as currents into an ocean, a vast world in which the characters must float and navigate within the confines of a small, Chinatown apartment.

—Jason Kao Hwang



Composite family photo created for the chamber opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*.

Final touches on the newly renovated building on Park Avenue were underway, and the Society was getting ready for its grand reopening. “It was a chaotic, hectic time. But within the staff there was a feeling of deep commitment and unity—in the tragedy, we felt a strong sense of responsibility, the mission to educate and build bridges between people of Asia and the U.S., even more than before,” said Cooper.

The three program divisions of the Asia Society worked to pull together programs that bolstered the Asian American community and provided information to the general public. In cooperation with a wide number of organizations, the Society presented *America’s Crisis: Asian Perspectives*, a multidisciplinary series of policy, business, cultural, and education programs exploring events in the shadow of 9/11. [See Box: America’s Crisis Programming]

AMERICA’S CRISIS PROGRAMMING AFTER 9/11

As the American bombing of Afghanistan took over the front pages of the country, the Asia Society produced a series of programs focusing on Afghanistan, Islam, and the effects on the Asian American communities here. Some programs responded directly to the crisis. In a panel discussion entitled *Surviving the Violence*, women discussed the ways they coped with war and terrorism, and how they restructured their lives, families and communities. The Asia Society also hosted a roundtable discussion entitled *Woman, Muslim, American*, wherein Muslim American women conversed about living in America as practicing Muslims and about how they define their roles in their families and in community life. After showing a film on hate crimes towards South Asians produced by Omusha Communications, we hosted another roundtable discussion, *Us and Them: Bargaining for Rights after 9/11*. This discussion explored how enmity and divi-

siveness amongst minority groups rationalize the sacrifice of human and civil rights within the United States. Included in the discussion was how solidarity among different groups is achieved even when communities are being torn apart.

Other programs served as reminders of Afghanistan’s culture. Music performances celebrated Afghan artists, including Ustad Mahwash, who sung at the Asia Society’s annual dinner, and Homayoun Sakhi, a young virtuoso on the rabob who played with other Afghan musicians living in the United States. This concert took place in the intimate setting of a teahouse on the Society’s 8th floor where audience members sat on a floor in traditional style, while chai and sweets were served. Afghan Americans came especially for this concert from as far as Virginia. The program was preceded by a lecture by ethnomusicologist Lorraine Sakata.



Aisha H.L. al-Adawiya, Daisy Khan, Asma Gull Hasan, Potri Ranka Manis, Zolaykha Sherzad, Zeyba Rahman, participants in the *Woman, Muslim, American* discussion, a part of the America’s Crisis series in Spring 2002.

3 ■ EXPLORING THE DEFINITION OF ASIAN AMERICAN THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE

Recognizing the Distinctiveness of Communities

One of the most important lessons learned—and a lesson that the Asia Society continually revisits—is the differences among various Asian American audiences. “This is something we keep coming back to,” said Desai. “The Asian American community in the United States is very complex and finely nuanced. Asian American audiences in America can be culture-specific, youth oriented or pan-Asian.”

Whether an individual self-identifies as Asian or Asian American, Indian or Indian American, or simply American varies depending on a variety of factors including generation. Immigrants often identify themselves as from their country of origin, whereas second generation—those who were born here—will often see themselves as “hyphenated”: Chinese-American, Filipino-American, Korean-American. Members of the 1.5 generation—those who arrived when they were between eight and sixteen years old—often retain a double identity, for example both Indian and Asian American. “People identify themselves in multiple ways, and how they identify themselves often depends on the context,” said Cooper. “It is important to consider this fluidity in developing the programs.”

Over the years, it has become apparent that when promoting programs, different types of media work better in some communities than others. In the Chinese community in the New York region, the Chinese press—represented by the *World Journal* or *Ming Pao*, for example—is very important. The Iranian community, on the other hand, tends to use e-mail newsletters, websites and direct marketing.



Asia Society

古今聚首 中西匯合 中國絲路寶藏走進亞洲協會博物館

嶄新的亞洲協會博物館推出全新的大型展覽「僧侶與商人：來自四至七世紀中國西北部的絲路珍藏！」為慶祝「亞洲協會」公園大道總部重新開幕，亞洲協會隆重展出二百二十多件來自甘肅和寧夏的古絲路文物，一窺中華文明的源流，以及西方文化與商業行為對古中國的影響。

展覽空間，而且博物館商店面積擴大，表演廳設備更完善。在全新的亞洲協會博物館欣賞古色古香、難得一見的古絲路文物，將是一次豐盛的饗宴。

「僧侶與商人」展覽於2002年1月6日開幕

亞洲協會博物館本季大型展覽還包括：

- 與傳統對話：Nilima Sheikh和Shahzia Sikander畫展
- 創設之舉：亞洲協會約翰遜克萊爾三世大廳收藏品的新藏展

亞洲協會，紐約市公園大道725號(夾東七十街) • www.asiasociety.org (212) 517-ASIA

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Chinese advertisement created for the exhibition *Monks and Merchants*.

Examining Political Complexities

Asian American artists examine a range of issues through their work, including intra-Asian relationships, exploring territory that others shun. In *Forgiveness*, a production commissioned by the Asia Society, director Chen Shi-Zheng, composer Eve Beglarian and choreographer Akira Matsui unearthed the painful shared history of Korea, China, and Japan in the 20th century. The artists felt that the memory of guilt remained alive and volatile, and that young people, who had not directly experienced the horrors, were nonetheless burdened by history and the need for reconciliation. “*Forgiveness* seeks to break through the passed-down, even unconscious hatred and suspicion sometimes evident between Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese and finds ways to acknowledge a brutal past in order to move more positively into the next century,” Chen said. He noted that the performance of the piece was a positive step, weaving the talents of artists trained in traditional art forms from each of the countries involved.



Zhou Long and Akira Matsui in *Forgiveness*, a multi-media theater piece commissioned by the Asia Society. (PHOTO: RACHEL COOPER)

In other instances, the Asia Society confronted current political differences, as in the case of the long-term, on-going India-Pakistan tensions. A panel in conjunction with the Columbia University theatrical presentation of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* explored the history and memory of the India Pakistan partition. A workshop brought together communities of South Asian actors from New York and London to discuss the issues and strategies of working in the U.S. and the U.K. as South Asians. The sense of an important commonality brought people together to create a learning community to share frustrations, successes and strategies.

Exploring Asian American History

Programs that explore Asian American history are also important to Asian American audiences who want to explore the experience of Asian Americans in the United States. “Asia Society can provide a venue where this work can be presented,” said Cooper.

New York’s Ma-Yi Theater Company presented *L’il Brown Brothers/Nikimalika*, written and directed by Chris B. Millado. The play imagines the lives of the indigenous people who were “imported” to the St. Louis World Exposition of 1904. The personal, spiritual and political collide in the bizarre setting at the fair’s Philippine exhibit, where native people were put on display like “circus freaks” and asked to perform their traditional rituals to further exoticize their “savage” nature, with tragic consequences. The play was presented in a small theater in New York’s West Village for a three week run.

On December 9th, 2000 the Asia Society, in collaboration with the Korea Society and NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, presented the New York premiere of *First Person Plural*, by Deann Borshay Liem. This compelling documentary chronicled the filmmaker's struggle to set right a case of mistaken identity and unravel the mysteries surrounding her adoption by an American family from South Korea in the 1960s. Combining archival footage of U.S.-Korea relations and home movies, the film follows one woman's struggle to integrate into her life two different families, cultures, languages and loyalties. Borshay Liem introduced her film and answered questions after the screening to an audience which included a number of adoptees.

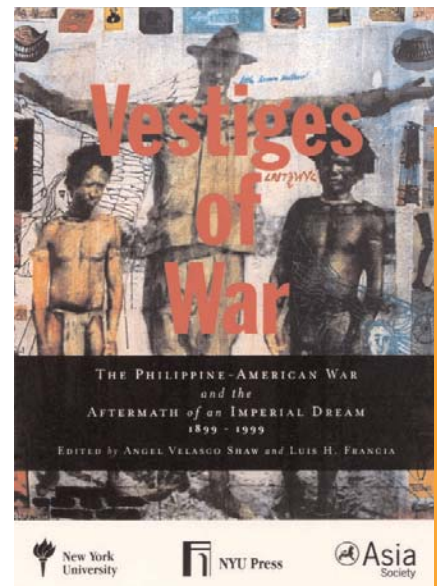
Reaching Out to the Pan-Asian Diaspora

During an audience focus group, several participants commented on the need for venues where Asian Americans could meet and learn from each other. "It's a time when cross-culturalism should be brought out in the open," said one. "We need interactive programs with people who come from different countries," suggested another. "For instance, Iran/Indian programs in which you can discuss differences and similarities, the roots of the music and culture, and how they mingle and are separate."

Taking our lead from the suggestions made at the focus groups, we created a program, *Viewpoints: An Evening with Shirin Neshat and Shahzia Sikander* in December, 2000. New York-based artists Shirin Neshat and Shahzia Sikander talked with Vishakha N. Desai, about the representation of Islam and gender issues in their work. Born in Iran, Neshat's compelling photographs and video installations have been included in many international exhibitions such as the Tenth Biennale of Sydney and the Venice Biennale (1999). Pakistan-born Sikander was trained in miniature painting in Lahore and her multilayered works have been exhibited at the Whitney Biennale and The Drawing Center in Soho, among other prestigious venues.

This engaging, sold-out program brought together members of the arts, Iranian American, and Pakistani American communities. It focused on how Neshat and Sikander's art negotiates issues of tradition and modernity, contemporary social and political concerns, and how this informs their creative process.

In 1999, the Asia Society launched a series called *Asian American Issues Forum* in an effort to bring to light concerns cutting across a number of Asian American communities. Primarily, these programs sought to focus on key issues in America as they relate to the Asian American community. It is clear that it is



Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999 book launch party, co-presented with Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program & Institute at New York University.



Shirin Neshat and Shahzia Sikandar in *Viewpoints* panel.

primarily in the American experience that Asian American communities tend to relate to each other most strongly. In these programs, leaders, scholars, and activists from Asian American communities looked at critical issues of interest to the populations they represent. The programs addressed a variety of issues of common interest to the Asian American community as a whole.

One program, *Seeking a Better Future: Asian Americans in New York City*, used the results from the 2000 U.S. Census as a springboard to engage in a broad ranging discussion. The fact that 30 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in New York City live in overcrowded housing, and that the rate of Asian American and Pacific Islander high-school dropouts is among the highest in the nation were in stark contrast to the stereotypes of the middle-class model minority, held by many mainstream Americans. Held at the Queens Borough Public Library in Flushing, the program was moderated by Somini Sengupta, a metro reporter for *The New York Times*, and included Shamina Singh, former Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders; Jeff Wiesenfeld, former Executive Assistant to the Governor of New York for Community Affairs; and directors of Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, Asian Americans for Equality and the Asian American Federation of New York.

Presenting Asian Artists in the American Mix

The Asia Society has dedicated itself to supporting the commissioning of new work by Asian American artists. The *Crossovers* initiative celebrates the work of contemporary Asian American artists in music, theater, and dance who are expanding artistic horizons and reaching across cultural boundaries to redefine American culture. The performances, accompanied by panel discussions, lecture-demonstrations and workshops, offered audiences an opportunity to learn about the artists and their work and influences behind their cultural cross-fertilizations. Commissioned and produced projects have included *Forgiveness*, *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown*, *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* and *In What Language? A Song Cycle of Lives in Transit*.

Crossing Generations

In recent years, the Society has produced several programs in partnership with organizations that are directly linked to younger Asian Americans. In 2002, the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program & Institute at New York University and SAYA!, the Queens-based South Asian Youth Association, joined with the Asia Society to present an evening of South Asian American hip-hop, titled *Livin' Off the 7* in reference to the subway train that runs from Manhattan to Queens. The number 7 train is the symbol of the varied Asian communities that live in Queens along that route. [See Box: *Livin' Off the 7*, next page].



Ethan Herschenfeld and Li Xiuying performing *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* during the US Postal Service Year of the Horse Stamp Launch.



Zhou Long and Li Xiuying in *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, commissioned by the Asia Society. (PHOTO: JACK VARTOOGIAN)

Part of the *Crossovers* initiative, *Livin' Off the 7* showcased South Asian American hip-hop artists. These artists were beat boxers, rappers, dancers, MCs and DJs whose heritage may be rooted in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, but they also embody the creation of the new American culture. “The partnerships with SAYA! and the A/P/A Studies Program at NYU, brought in a whole new audience, with very different sensibilities from the traditional Asia Society audience,” said Sunita Mukhi, Senior Program Associate for Asian American and Multi-Disciplinary Programs.

While the enthusiastic young fans were well acquainted with the work of Asian American hip-hop artists, the program was a revelation for some older members of the audience who were unfamiliar with the vital contributions Asian Americans are making to popular American music. To set the record straight, the co-producers hosted a panel discussion, *South Asians in the Global Hip-Hop Culture*. “The arts are particularly vital to Asian American communities, not only as a connection to the homeland, but as a way to examine, explore and represent their place in a new American homeland,” said Cooper.

LIVIN' OFF THE 7 —A Night of South Asian Hip-Hop

Asia Society worked together with SAYA! and Diasporadics to present *Livin' Off the 7* in April 2002. *Livin' Off the 7* was the first event of its kind in New York, devoting itself exclusively to showcasing the unique talents of South Asian hip-hop artists. This showcase was dedicated to beat boxers, rappers, dancers, MCs, and DJs whose heritage is rooted in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. While challenging existing stereotypes of South Asians, these performers embody the fertile meeting of their cultures in North America, in the creation of American youth culture.

SAYA!, the Queens-based South Asian Youth Association is a non-profit, community-based organization dedicated to empowering South Asian Youth. Its mission is to promote self-esteem, provide opportunities for growth and development, and build cultural, social and political awareness among young people of South Asian background.

The other co-presenter of this program, Diasporadics, is an organization which is committed to showcasing the work of emerging artists from the South Asian diaspora who explore and advance themes of progressive and social change.

Artists who participated in *Livin' Off the 7* included Gurpeet who imbibes the Punjabi Gharana style of tabla drum; Jugular (aka Nikhil Tumne), a local Toronto beat boxer who takes the art form of local scratches and hip-hop beat imitation to the next level; Raeshem Nijhon, whose music is an eclectic mix of contemporary attitude and classical style; Abstract Vision (aka Fahad Rizvi) and Humanity (aka Asad Rizvi) who were born in Pakistan and are influenced by underground, jungle and other electronic music; Sumeet Bharati whose vocal style is heavily influenced by reggae and hip-hop; Anix Vyas who is from Pennsylvania and has been performing as a beat boxer for three years; Ben Thomas who is influenced by R&B, jazz and funk and plays electric bass, acoustic guitar, piano and drums; Karmacy who delivers a positive message of cultural and social awareness with an intricate mixture of hip-hop music and eastern philosophy; D'Lo whose hip-hop/b-boy flavor creates a dialogue of expression with the audience; and DJ Distraction (aka Nitin), who mixes and cuts, using obscure melodic Indian source material with underground and break beat hip-hop, funk grooves and drum-n-bass.



Film screening of *The #7 Train: An Immigrant Journey*

4 ■ PROMOTING LONG-TERM COMMITMENTS

Establishing Trust With Partners

One of the important lessons learned through the LEAD grant is that relationships—whether they are with communities, groups or individual artists—often need a long developmental period before any project comes to fruition.

“People in the grassroots community were concerned that [they might] get swallowed by the Asia Society,” one collaborator said during a focus group conducted by Asia Link Consulting Group and prepared for the Asia Society. This was certainly not true in the case of the *Asian American International Film Festival*, a co-production of Asian CineVision (ACV) and the Asia Society, which attracted an audience of more than 5,000 in 2003. While the pairing would seem to be natural, in fact there was an eleven-year courtship before the Asia Society convinced Asian CineVision, which founded the festival over two decades ago, to move from its previous venue, the French Institute, to the Asia Society. In discussions with Angel Shaw, the Acting Executive Director of ACV, and John Woo, a board member of ACV, it was clear how important it was for ACV to maintain its independence and continue its role as lead presenter of the festival.

Linden Chubin, Associate Director of Public Programs at the Asia Society, worked hard to create a sense of partnership. “Asian CineVision is a very small, but successful organization,” he said. “They were worried that they would be smothered—that Asian CineVision’s identity, which had been built over decades, would disappear. We had to build a relationship and professional trust on many levels: financial, public relations and content.” In fact, the partnership proved to be mutually advantageous: ACV gained a permanent home for its festival, with Asia Society providing an excellent theater, technical facilities and marketing staff. And in turn, by hosting the festival in its building, the Asia Society attracted a young and ethnically diverse audience. [See Box: New Films, New Audience]

NEW FILMS, NEW AUDIENCE

In July 2002 and July 2003, the Asia Society worked with Asian CineVision (ACV) to co-present the 25th and 26th *Asian American International Film Festival*. It took ten years to get the Festival to the Asia Society, which was previously held at the French Institute. Per discussions and negotiations with Angel Shaw, Acting Executive of ACV and John Woo, board member of ACV, Linden Chubin, Associate Director of Public Programs, was able to flush out mutual needs between the two organizations including visibility, audience and financial arrangements. It was important for ACV to maintain their independence as lead presenter for the festival, given their history as a presenter and establishment as a film resource organization in the community. Vishakha N. Desai, Senior Vice President of the Asia Society and Linden Chubin became advisors to Asian CineVision as they re-evaluated their organizational goals, restructuring their board, staffing, and programming.

For the festival, the Asia Society provided our facilities and assisted with public relations and marketing and worked with the ACV counterpart on all printed materials. *The Village Voice* became a media sponsor and articles not only appeared in the *The Village Voice*, but they also appeared on *IndieWire.com*, and other mainstream and ethnic press. The festival

required cooperation and education of Asia Society staff at all levels, from administration to Information Technology (new box office procedures) and building management. The link up between organizations allowed for ACV to gain further credibility with funders, such as Cadillac, which became the main 2003 festival sponsor.

By linking memberships and exchanging mailing lists, the Asia Society attracted a younger, ethnically diverse audience. The 2002 festival attracted close to 8,000 people. Held over an 8-day period, the festival was one of the largest single events of the Asia Society.

The programs themselves were varied, highlighting US and NY premiere features, documentaries and short films from Asia and by Asian American filmmakers. Many of the films went on to have theatrical releases. Networking opportunities were created to allow filmmakers, particularly young ones, distributors and producers to pitch projects and exchange ideas. Continued visibility of the festival occurred at after parties in downtown New York City, with film trailers being shown to club goers.

Beyond the film festival, Asia Society and ACV continue to collaborate to present special screenings throughout the year.

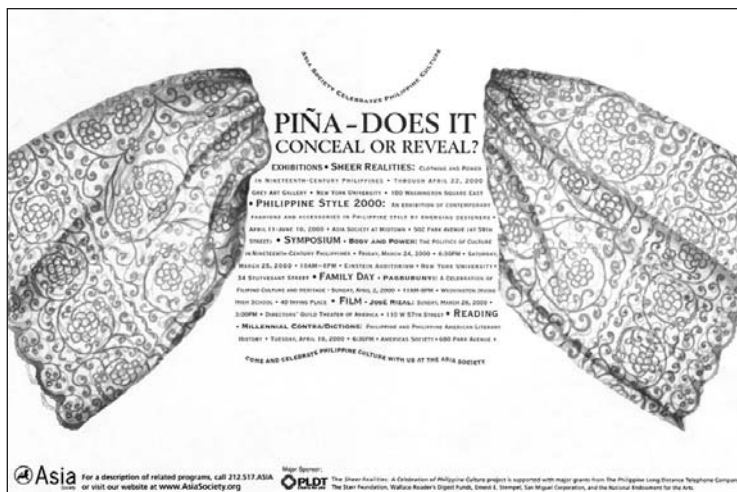
“Asia Society was very generous [with the *Asian American International Film Festival*],” said Shaw. “There was a two-way street there. As grassroots organizations, we need to learn and understand that we too can tap corporate America working with the Asia Society.” At the same time, there was acknowledgement from representatives of major foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation that the Asia Society was successfully partnering with a small, grassroots organization.

“In working with other organizations on projects, it is important to realize the strengths of each partner, and to let them run with it,” said Desai. “One of the things that we try to do when working with others is to clearly delineate what each partner expects of the other and what the main tasks are.”

Continuity in Programming: Maintaining Partners and Audiences While Managing Expectations

By sponsoring on-going programs that stretch over a number of years, the Society and its partner organizations can build on previous successes. Continuity is also important in establishing rapport with audiences and artists, as in the case of Meet the Author, a multi-year series highlighting books by and about Asians and Asian Americans.

Avid readers have been treated to a series of evenings (about 15 annually) featuring Asian and Asian American authors of fiction and non-fiction. In recent years, many of the programs have been cosponsored with partner organizations such as the Asian American Writers’ Workshop and New York University’s Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute. “It’s important that programming not be a one-off, one time effort,” said Desai. “We can’t mount huge projects with every partner every year. However, it’s important to maintain the relationship and continue to offer programs that are relevant to them, either by addressing their concerns or shedding light on their cultures.”



Advertisement created for the exhibition *Sheer Realities*.

With this in mind, the staff at the Society has worked hard to be sure that there were at least some programs of interest to each partner in each performance season. For instance, following the *Asian American International Film Festival*, the Asia Society and Asian CineVision continued to collaborate on smaller programs throughout the year, offering special screenings of Asian films, including *Marooned in Iraq* and *Bollywood/Hollywood*. People who attended the *Asian American Film Festival* were notified of the screenings via cards and targeted e-mails.

Similarly, following the huge success of the Filipino exhibition *Sheer Realities* [See Box: *Sheer Realities*], authors Jessica Hagedorn, Luis H. Francia, and Eric Gamalinda appeared at the Asia Society in the launch of an anthology, *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899–1999*. The readings attracted a large number of Filipino Americans.

SHEER REALITIES—A Celebration of Philippine Culture

COMMUNITIES HARD AT WORK

In 1999, the Asia Society and the Filipino community started planning a Filipino programming initiative which included films, performances, lectures, a symposium and a family-day celebration. The centerpiece was the exhibition, *Sheer Realities: Clothing and Power in Nineteenth-Century Philippines*.

In New York, the Project Outreach Committee of Filipino Americans (POCFA) worked to plan and disseminate information about the series of events, and to build important support in terms of planning, funding, and attendance. The Project Outreach Committee of Filipino Americans was created with the help of the Consulate General of the Philippines, the Philippine Chamber of Commerce, the Asia Society members of Filipino descent, as well as members of the Filipino artist/activist communities. The members of these committees provided important input on the program planning, and also suggested ways in which more Filipino Americans could participate in the programs. In the Philippines, one of our trustees, Doris Magsaysay Ho and the Manila office of the Asia Society set up a committee to help with exhibition logistics and with publicizing events in the Philippines.

In developing the broad range of Filipino programs in the spring of 2000, the Society was able to tap various pockets of the Filipino community in reaching out to community organizations in the United States and in the Philippines for their support. *Sheer Realities* created ripples of excitement and proved to be a great opportunity for many people of Filipino descent and non-Filipinos to see and learn about Filipino culture. Exposure of this culture to non-Filipinos was also a way of validating the presence of Filipinos and Filipino Americans in mainstream America. Through this type of programming, the Asia Society fulfilled its commitment to make itself a center for celebrating Asian American art and culture.

The multidisciplinary programs allowed for the various facets of Filipino culture and the Filipino American experience to be examined. The Asia Society hosted two exhibitions. The first was *Sheer Realities: Clothing and Power in Nineteenth-Century Philippines*, an exhibition that featured fabrics and adornments worn by

the indigenous populations of the Philippines and the clothing and accessories of the elite mestizos (mixed-race Filipinos), which reflected the historic changes that were sweeping the archipelago during the nineteenth century. The second exhibition, *Philippine Style 2000* featured apparel, ornamentation and accessories based on traditional fabrics produced in the Philippines and created by students from the world-renowned Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and Filipino designers.

Performances included *Lil' Brown Brothers/Nikimalika*, which was performed by and co-presented with the Ma-Yi Theater Company, the preeminent Asian American theater company in New York. In this production, indigenous storytellers and colonial mythmakers reenacted their vision of what happened at the St. Louis World exposition of 1904 through ritual, legend and pseudoscientific narratives. The three-week run was presented in the West Village.

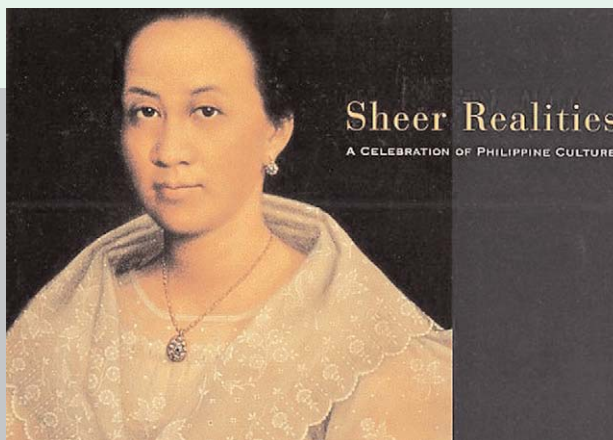
Three films were part of the *Sheer Realities* program: *Jose Rizal, Bontoc Eulogy* and *Perfumed Nightmare*. Whereas *Jose Rizal* provided an evocative retelling of the history of the Filipino national hero Jose Rizal and his struggle against Spanish colonialism, *Bontoc Eulogy* and *Perfumed Nightmare* addressed the plight of Filipinos in diaspora and their encounters with variants of Western orientalism. The films were

models of collaboration with two Filipino American organizations: The Philippine Economic and Cultural Endowment and the New York Chapter of the Knights of Rizal.

Programming for *Sheer Realities* also included a symposium, a lecture and a panel discussion. The symposium, *Body and Power: The Politics of Culture in Nineteenth-Century Philippines*, presented new scholarship on the understanding of nineteenth-century Philippines and on how new interpretations affect the Filipino American community. The lecture, *Millennial Contra/Dictions: Philippine and Philippine American Literary History*, explored questions on what roles contemporary Filipino and Filipino American writers play in the literary histories of both countries. In the discussion, *Filipina Changes America Changes Filipina*, participants discussed and revealed ways in which Filipinos in diverse professions have transformed American society.

The family-day program, entitled *Pagbubunyi*, was co-presented with the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. The program consisted of concerts, workshops, martial arts demonstrations, storytelling, crafts stalls and other activities. The family-day was a prime opportunity to reach out to the Filipino constituency. The Society's presence also indicated that it was interested in creating a relationship with the community.

For Filipino Americans, this program of events showed that there are others who shared interest in Filipino culture and that there is demand and support for this kind of programming. Moreover, the programs brought in many people from different parts of the Filipino American community.



An Invitation to *Sheer Realities: A Celebration of Philippine Culture*.

Extending Asia Society’s Reach to Specific Communities

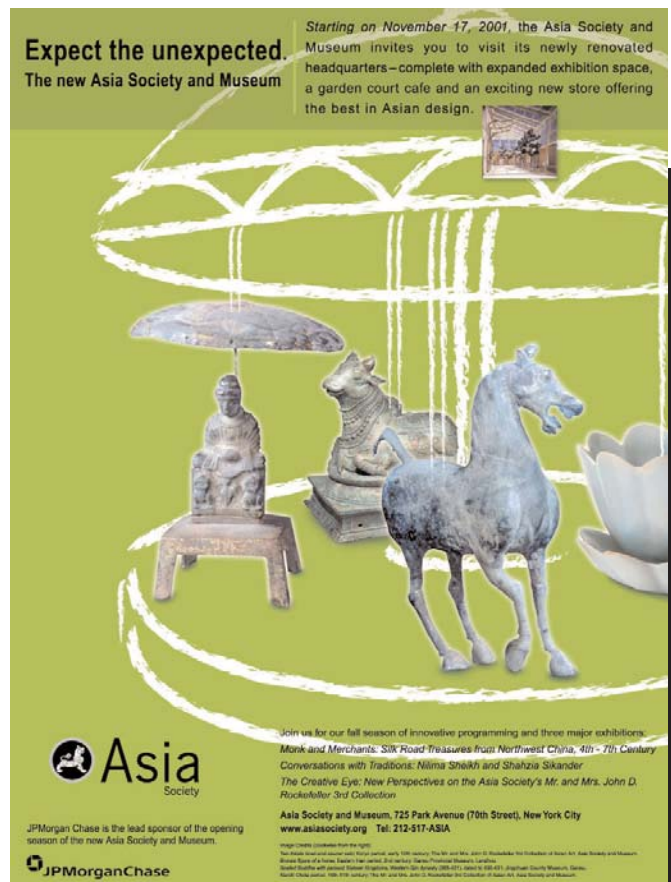
An important part of the effort supported by The Wallace Foundation LEAD grant was to alert a variety of audiences to the programs sponsored by the Asia Society. To do this, Karen Karp, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at the Asia Society, worked in tandem with Asia Society staff and marketing experts at AdmerAsia, an Asian American advertising and marketing firm, to prepare a marketing campaign that targeted specific Asian American groups with messages about the Society and its programs.

Ads were prepared in English and other languages specific to the audiences and placed in the local ethnic press. Ads were prepared “in-language” and “in-culture.” To be sure of the wording and message of the ads, cultural experts were often called in to advise. During the two-month exhibit of *China: Fifty Years Inside the People’s Republic*, the Asia Society museum information was available in Mandarin and Cantonese on its phone line, and Chinese language advertisements were posted throughout New York’s Chinatown.

Building on the strong relations with the ethnic press, which included lists of reporters and editors in print, broadcast and online media, the Asia Society notified the press of upcoming events. When a country-specific program was in the works, journalists representing those communities would often be contacted individually and offered interviews with the artists.

To reach a broader Asian American audience, as well as a more youthful public, the Society worked with an advertising expert, AdmerAsia to create a group of ads. “The Asia Society has been perceived by many younger audiences as very Upper East Side and stuffy,” said Karp. “We wanted to convince them that inside it is a very alive, contemporary, hip institution. We engaged a creative ad person to create posters that would reflect this image and encourage visitors to visit 725 Park Avenue.”

By putting objects from the permanent collection in a contemporary context, such as contrasting a sculpture of the Indian goddess Parvati with modern pop goddesses such as Madonna and J-Lo, the ads alerted potential visitors to the treasures of the museum but attracted their interest by putting them in a humorous, contemporary context.



Advertisement created by AdmerAsia for the reopening of Asia Society

The Society’s marketing staff also placed various artists featured in Asia Society programs on local and national radio and television. Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, for instance, made a number of guest appearances leading up to the premiere of *In What Language?* including radio shows such as Morning Edition, Sound Check and Studio 360, while Jason Kao Hwang was featured on local public television station, WNYE.

In anticipating need from some culturally specific communities, Asia Society arranged to have box office personnel available who were conversant in the appropriate language. It was equally important to have tickets available at local community centers or churches, where many people felt more comfortable buying tickets as part of the community.

In some instances, extending the reach meant taking additional steps, such as chartering buses to make it more feasible for Chinese Americans living in New Jersey to attend the Cloud Gate Dance Company of Taiwan program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a part of New York that many were unfamiliar with and somewhat uneasy to try to find. This created a pre- and post-performance “rolling” community, which one participant described as being an enjoyable part of the overall experience.

Engaging New Audiences in New Venues

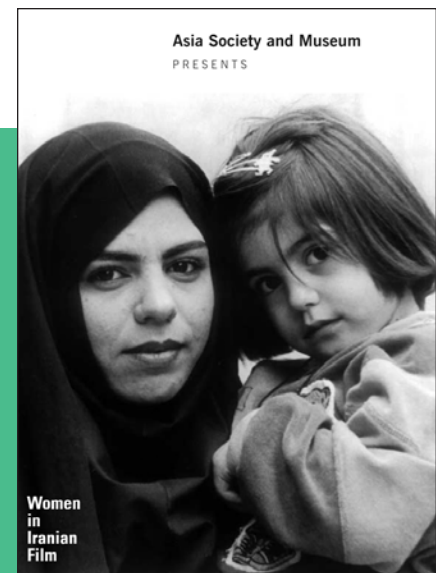
One suggestion by the Asian American Core Committee was that the Society should extend programming beyond its walls—that it should bring the programs to the communities. In fact, during the 20-month renovation of the headquarters, the Society was forced to do just that. “That period was very hectic, but we found that at the various sites we attracted many new audiences—it was an unexpected bonus,” said Desai.

The Asia Society partnered with many community organizations in presenting programs around the city. For example, the Society joined in City Lore’s annual People’s Poetry Gathering by presenting *Mushaira*, an evening of readings by community poets writing in Urdu (with English translations provided) and a concert by the renowned Iranian singer Shahram Nazeri at Cooper Union.

The range of venues helped attract a diverse audience: the Shiva Theater at the Public Theater in the Village was the site for a discussion about the creative process between playwrights and directors; the Queens Borough Public Library in Flushing, Queens was the scene for a panel on life for Asian Americans in New York, while Faluka, a club in the Village, was the site of a lively party after SAYA!’s program of South Asian hip-hop. A discussion that was part of the Asian American Forum series was held at the Chatham Square Branch of the New York Public Library in the heart of Manhattan’s Chinatown. The room was filled to capacity, as old and young joined in a lively discussion about the issues faced by immigrant and second-generation families.



Ajay Naidu in *In What Language? A Song Cycle of Lives in Transit*, commissioned by the Asia Society (PHOTO: JACK VARTOOGIAN)



Advertisement for *Women in Iranian Film*.

The outreach had an impact on attracting new, young audiences to the Asia Society's new renovated space, who found the surroundings as well as the programming more appealing than in the past. Commenting on the new Asia Society, one member of the focus group said: "Fun, younger, food, participation, contemporary arts, more open to various art forms, no judgments. I had thought of the place as a museum—a dry, historical place. Now you could think of it more as a park where you would bring your family."

Acting as a Venue for Special Events

The Society often acted as a venue for important events for its partners. The Filipino community has gathered for a number of years at the Society to celebrate recipients of the Ramon Magsaysay Awards. Established in memory of the Philippines' founding father, the awards are Asia's version of the Nobel Prize, recognizing individuals for their outstanding work and services.

SAYA!, the South Asia Youth Association from Queens, and the Asian American Journalists Association also hosted award dinners at the Society. "Each of these programs attracts a very different group of supporters," said Desai. "What's important in each instance is that individuals who have contributed to their communities through hard work and diligence are recognized—and that their work serves to inspire others. We're proud to be part of this."



Kiran Bedi, winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, speaking at *Pathfinders* Program.

(PHOTO: ELSA RUIZ)

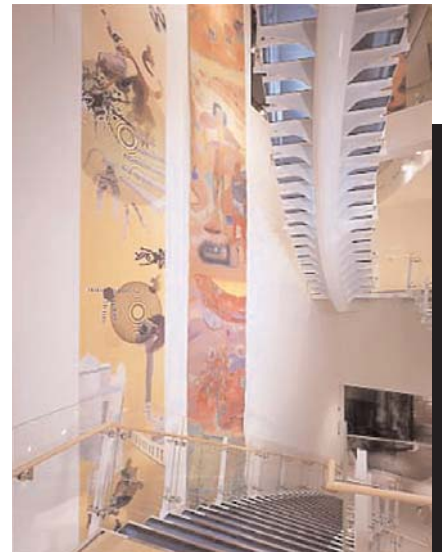
INTO THE FUTURE

TODAY, THE ASIA SOCIETY HAS ESTABLISHED A strong relationship with many Asian American communities but it still has work to do, both to maintain active relationships and to build new ones as well. From 1999 to 2003, annual participation by Asian Americans in Asia Society programs has risen by almost 20,000 attendees. Asians and Asian Americans now account for more than one-third of the Society's total audience, up from 25 percent

just four years ago. A recent study conducted by Asia Link has also confirmed a changing perception of the Asia Society as an institution that represents the interests and concerns of Asian Americans. In 1999, Asian American focus group participants perceived the Asia Society to be less accessible and for some, uninviting. Today those respondents characterized the institution as more progressive and inclusive. "There is a big change... there is more acceptance of every culture... I feel they have evolved," one focus group member said. "I look to the Asia Society to fill a responsibility to make sure that all views and aspects of cultures are shared. I think we need more organizations such as Asia Society." Another focus group participant talked about how the Asia Society image has become more community conscious, "I find them more accessible and the programs more grassroots based... a lot of the events are really interactive, and people can participate."

While the Asia Society is pleased that it has engaged more diverse audiences, the institution realizes that the long-term growth and sustainability of these audiences and relationships require a vigilant, ongoing commitment to Asian Americans as well as to other new audiences.

During the Wallace initiative, the Asia Society learned a number of vital lessons. Among those lessons was the importance of strategic long-term programming commitments as a means of changing perceptions and attracting new audiences. While the institution's mission had long aimed at representing the interests of people of Asia, it was only with the expansion of cultural programming with more contemporary relevance that the Society was able to increase Asian American participation. This was particularly true among audiences under the age of 35, who most consistently attended programs that either featured the works of living artists or addressed current social and political issues.



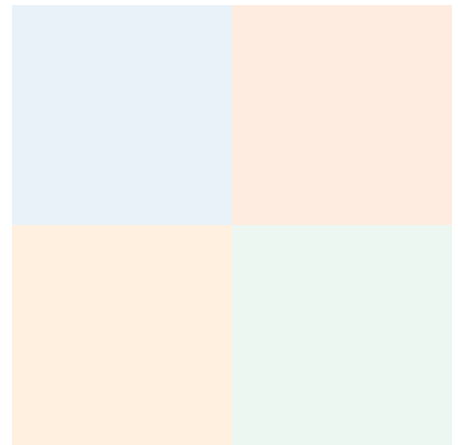
Artwork by Shahzia Sikander and Nilima Sheikh, commissioned by the Asia Society.

The development of closer ties with the Asian American community organizations played an important role in the overall success of the Wallace Foundation LEAD grant period. On-going partnerships with a variety of Asian American cultural organizations, such as Asian CineVision, Asian American Arts Alliance, Asian American Writers' Workshop, and South Asian Women's Creative Collective, provided ongoing guidance and expertise on programming and outreach efforts. Regular meetings and consultations with advisors from these groups led to closer relations with prominent community leaders, and in turn contributed to changing perceptions of the Asia Society's commitment to Asian American interests.

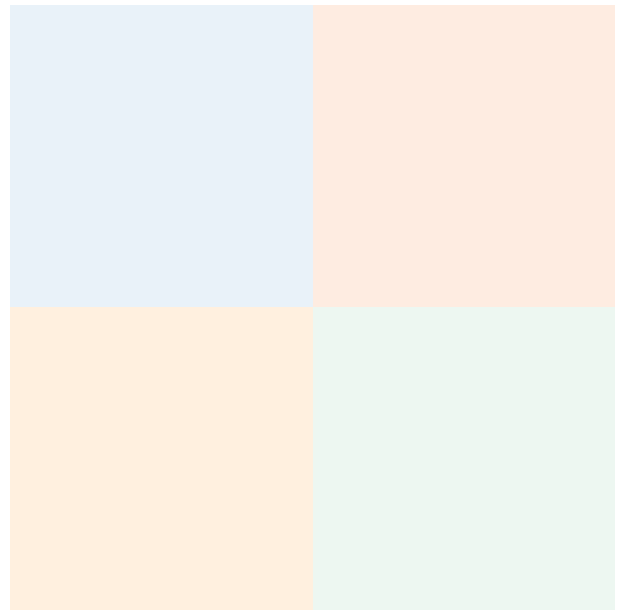
The strengthening of ties with one particular group, Asian CineVision, offers an important case study of how these partnerships have had a continued impact on the Asia Society. This small community organization staffed largely by volunteers has been the organizer of the *Asian American International Film Festival* (AAIFF) for more than 26 years. Prior to their participation on the Asia Society's Advisory Committee, Asian Cinevision's *AAIFF* was presented at a different venue. As the relationship developed, the Asia Society's participation in the *Film Festival* also grew—first as a financial contributor and eventually as an organizing partner and annual host of this event. Today, both organizations consider the other a vital asset: Asian CineVision now has a permanent home for *AAIFF*, while the Asia Society has a community partner with programming expertise in film and special connections to younger Asian American audiences.

Moving ahead, the Asia Society will continue to utilize strategic partnerships with community organizations to develop a core constituency of Asian Americans. In addition to expanding the Asian American Advisory Committee, the Society will maintain a full-time position dedicated to Asian American programs and partnerships. In August 2003, the Society was pleased to welcome Nancy Bulalacao as the new Program Associate for Asian American and Multidisciplinary Programs. Ms. Bulalacao comes to the Asia Society with more than ten years of experience in working with various sectors of the Asian American community.

Through this on-going process of defining and deepening its engagement with Asian American communities, the Asia Society has learned that developing long-term relationships implies a range of roles: as listener, as catalyst, and as convener. But most importantly, it has a greater understanding of how central these relationships are to our mission. It understands that they must be symbiotic relationships and indeed ones that acknowledge a cultural ecology, of which the institution is a partner and player.



The way we listen, discuss, and create programs of mutual benefit, allows us to hope and dream of infinite collaborations and presentations while being realistic about expectations, which is crucial. To be able to build on this work and discuss the interpretations is also of the utmost importance. More than anything, these relationships weave a larger fabric of how we are one part of a larger cultural ecology. With that understanding, we seek not only to sustain, but to deepen these relationships. This on-going process, intrinsic to our identity, animates our work on a daily basis.





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