

News and Reviews

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The Japanese Version—A Look Back

>> by Louis Alvarez

It has been over eight years since my co-producer Andrew Kolker and myself completed our one-hour video documentary called *The Japanese Version*, an amusing and provocative look at how the Japanese interpret Western popular culture.

Our original intention had been to gain a national broadcast on PBS and then test the waters to see if there was any interest in distributing the program to schools and universities. As we put our plan into action, we were surprised at every turn. It turned out to be virtually impossible to secure a national "same time everywhere" PBS broadcast for a single hour unconnected to a longer series, so we ended up selling *The Japanese Version* to the Discovery Channel, which aired it at a shorter length with commercial breaks—hardly what a filmmaker dreams of.

In the academic world, however, we were

pleasantly surprised by the interest in using *The Japanese Version* as a teaching tool. We prepared a mailing and began promoting the documentary at academic conferences, aided by our redoubtable advisors David Plath and Ted Bestor. We also undertook a series of screenings sponsored by Japan-America societies in various American cities, which raised the profile of the documentary and enabled us to see how audiences were perceiving it.

The Japanese Version had always been intended as an antidote to what we felt was the prevailing cherry-blossom-Zen-garden- geisha-in-kimono view of Japan among the lay American public.



Our look at Japan started with a tour of a love hotel and ended with an extended look at the fantasies on display in "Ultra Quiz," NTV's long-running travel-to-America quiz show. Here was a

brash, kitschy, loud Japan that frequently resorted to crude stereotypes of Americans while remaining fascinated with what went on beyond its borders. We intended it as an affectionate yet clear-eyed portrait of the culture we had come to love in the six months we lived and worked in Tokyo, and we hoped that it would help humanize a country that seemed to be alternatively deified and demonized by Americans.

Our audiences at public screenings of *The Japanese Version* were uniformly enthusiastic, but in the Q&A that followed a certain pattern would

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Three 19th-century Chinese American women from California, Wyoming, and Alaska, known only as "China Mary." From the documentary series *Ancestors in America*. For review, see page 8.

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Asian Educational Media Service

The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) is a program of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. AEMS offers information about where to find audio-visual media resources for teaching and learning about Asia, and advice about which ones may best suit your needs. In addition to *AEMS News and Reviews*, published twice a year, services include a free call-in/write-in service and a Web site. To add your name to our mailing list, request additional copies of the newsletter to use in workshops or to share with your colleagues, or ask for help in locating resources, please contact us.

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Welcome



From the Center Director

Two years have elapsed since AEMS moved to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. During this period, much has transpired. New media, new people, and new events have helped our program continue to grow and thrive. Our latest news is that Ms. Sarah I. Barbour has been appointed as the new Program Coordinator. With an MA in Film, Television and Radio Studies from Northwestern University and extensive teaching and working experience in Japan, Sarah brings to AEMS not only a knowledge of the region but also a superb professional background. We are fortunate to have secured the services of Sarah who, we are certain, will continue the outstanding achievements of Ms. Rebecca Payne.

In other news, *Makiko's New World*, a documentary video by the AEMS-affiliated Media Production Group (MPG) has continued to attract favorable notice since its premiere last spring. This fall it was screened at the Hopes and Dreams Festival in New Jersey and at the Japan Association in Singapore. We are delighted that it is reaching a wide audience and hope to have it screened at more festivals soon.

The diverse and varied essays and reports included in this issue of *AEMS News and Reviews* is testimony to a wide range of both topical and geographic interests. From *Eternal Seed* (on Indian agriculture), to *Religion in Indonesia: The Way of the Ancestors* (on Toraja religion and culture) to *Sprouts of Capitalism in China* (an account of one man's rise to wealth in new China), these reviews represent an endeavor on our part to be comprehensive in our coverage of Asia and to introduce and report on the leading videos and films available.

AEMS' new Web site continues to be well received; the number of visitors has increased significantly, reaching nearly 10,000 in the past few months. We appreciate the positive response of the users and welcome your comments and suggestions on still better improving the homepage. We also continue to solicit more reviews in order to improve the educational usefulness of the posted materials. Our goal is to provide you the best possible service in each of our areas—Web site, newsletter, and video production. Thank you for your support.

—George T. Yu

The Japanese Version

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always assert itself. Usually the first objection raised was that of skewed selectivity: that we had deliberately chosen unflattering aspects of Japanese culture (such as faux-Christian wedding ceremonies) that were out of the mainstream. If the person objecting was Japanese, they sometimes said, "I am Japanese, yet I have never been to a love hotel," implicitly challenging our statement in the film that love hotels were ubiquitous in big cities and quite popular.

We would point out that the film was clearly labeled as our own personal view of Japan, even to the point of being narrated by my partner Andy, and that it was intended to complement the conventional American view of Japanese culture. But we also noted that in our experience much of Japanese society had a strong lower-middle-class taste which manifested itself in the kitschy decorations of wedding palaces and love hotels. We sympathized with the questioners—who wouldn't prefer to see their culture represented by Kyoto temples rather than humiliating TV game shows?—but felt that we had been true to our own experiences, as well as to the Japan of the late 1980s.

The second common objection to the show was that *The Japanese Version* invited Americans to make fun of the Japanese, and that we were, in essence, laughing at a culture that was unable to defend itself. Interestingly, this objection came almost exclusively from native Americans who had never actually been to Japan, but whose presence at the film screening suggested a sympathetic interest in its culture. Obviously, *The Japanese Version* clashed with the romantic vision of Japan that many Westerners have, mixed perhaps with a whiff of political correctness.

All during the editing of *The Japanese Version* we had made great pains *not* to take cheap shots—it's not our style. We have genuine affection both for Japanese culture and for its occasional lapses in taste. We told our audiences about this, and pointed out that in fact Japan was fully a First World, grown-up nation that needed neither apologies nor protection from well-meaning Westerners; not only that, but Japan was fully capable of condescending to Americans on its own, thank you very much!

It would be around this time in the post-viewing discussion that the counter arguments would start. I remember a woman in Seattle raising her hand to say that she had lived in Japan for seven years and *The Japanese Version* was the first film that had exactly captured the way she felt as

In October, I replaced Rebecca Payne as Program Coordinator of the Asian Educational Media Service. Having done a remarkable job over the last two years of coordinating all aspects of the service, Rebecca has now decided to pursue a graduate degree in Library Sciences. All of us at AEMS wish her well in her studies.

AEMS will continue to provide useful information about Asia-related media sources through its Web site, publications, telephone helpline, and participation in conferences. We will be regularly updating our

Please don't hesitate to get in touch.

The back-and-forth was the greatest compliment a filmmaker could receive from an audience, and suggested that *The Japanese Version* would have some success in the college curriculum, which it did. Today it is in the collections of several hundred universities, and an Internet search indicates it is still an active part of the curriculum.

Ten years after we returned from Japan, and eight years after finishing it, we're still very proud of *The Japanese Version*. We'd love to have an opportunity to go back to Tokyo and see how things have changed. We suspect that while the surface of things may be different—a more widely traveled younger generation, more tasteful love hotels—underneath, the cultural tensions between looking outward and maintaining a purely “Japanese” culture that dominate *The Japanese Version* are still there, as they have been for hundreds of years. ♦

[illegible]

Louis Alvarez and his co-producer/director **Andrew Kolker**, are two-time winners of both the Peabody Award and the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award. Over the past twenty years they have produced critically praised documentaries for their production companies, Kingfish Productions and The Center for New American Media. Their most recently completed project is MOMS (1999).

The Japanese Version was produced by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker for the Center for New American Media (1991). Available from Transit Media. Price is \$99 for purchase, \$65 for rental. The High School Edition is 40 minutes, the Standard Edition is 55 minutes.



CONTRIBUTORS OF WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

>> Produced by Meera Dewan. Distributed by Women Make Movies. 1996. 43 minutes.

The video shows women farmers who have organized to protest the loss of livelihood they attribute to capitalist modernization of agriculture. But we hear very little from the women themselves—instead we hear voice-overs reciting poetry, or see silent depictions of staged agricultural rituals. Terms like “goddess,” “wisdom,” “earth-knowledge,” “crusader,” “queen,” and “magic” feature prominently. For the complexities and tensions of local culture, the filmmakers have substituted their own sentimental imagination of nature-worshipping farmers. We get little sense of women’s lives as family members or as members of a larger community, in part because of the film’s depiction of an idealized rural community without men. The film provides no historical context or examination of the concrete politics of agriculture in India. The discussion of modernization is also thin, largely limited to couplets mocking factory farms.

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>> *The Women Outside* was produced by J.T. Takagi and Hye Jung Park. 1995. 60 minutes.
Camp Arirang was produced by Diana S. Lee and Grace Yoon-Kung Lee. 1995. 28 minutes.
 Both are distributed by Third World Newsreel. 30 minutes.

The Women Outside, unlike *Camp Arirang*, fol-

I would recommend both films for college and university-level courses in Asian Studies, Women's Studies, International Relations, and social science curricula that address Asian history, war and military life, and sexuality. *Olongapo Rose*, a 1988 BBC documentary available in videocassette, would serve as a good comparison for introducing issues related to the U.S. military and women in the Philippines. I would recommend the following published material to serve as textual guides for the viewing and discussion of the films: *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia*, Sandra Sturdevant and Brenda Stolfus,

[illegible]

Olongapo Rose is currently unavailable for distribution in the USA.

>> Directed and narrated by Wen-jie Qin. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources. 1997. 30 minutes.

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>> Produced by BBC Television. Distributed by Films for Humanities and Social Sciences. Four videocassettes, approximately 20 minutes each, accompanied by a CD-ROM. 1998.

Program 2, *The Hi-Tech Road*, is exceptionally useful, tracing the production of electronic consumer goods from the waterfront, where petroleum is imported and processed into plastic, to small workshops, which comprise the vast majority of Japanese companies, to medium size factories for assembly and further production work, and finally on to the factories of Japan's major electronics corporations. While secondary students and undergraduates are familiar with large corporations like Sony and Panasonic, few may be aware that, although such high profile companies sit atop the production chain, 60% of Japan's manufactured goods come from small manufacturing firms, which must constantly adapt to the changing demands of the global economy. Teachers who use this program may want to provide students with an economic update. Japan's economy, mired in recession when this series was



All of the programs focus on the Kansai area. This is a welcome change from the dominant Tokyo-centric view which conflates Tokyo with all

The CD-ROM that accompanies *Japan 2000* contains footage from the videos themselves along with maps and additional film snippets on specific topics such as the 1995 Kansai Earthquake, which are not covered in the videos. The CD-ROM includes sample questions for students to investigate as they peruse the material within, and it also enables students to “splice” together film footage to create their own thematic programs. Although middle school students might find such activities interesting, my own secondary students would not be impressed. This CD-ROM does not make full use of available technology, and I found it to be much less engaging than the video programs themselves. ♦

Japan 2000 is available from Films for Humanities and Sciences. Price is \$129 each for purchase (\$465 for series) and \$75 each for rental. Price for the CD-ROM is \$149.

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Ancestors in the Americas Series, Parts I and II

>> Produced and directed by Loni Ding. Distributed by the Center for Educational Telecommunications (CET), 1997. 60 minutes each.

Coolies, Sailors & Settlers: *Voyage to the New World*, the first film in the *Ancestors in the Americas* series by Loni Ding, one of the foremost filmmakers documenting the Asian American experience, sets the stage for a global understanding of the Asian diaspora. Focusing mainly on the Chinese, and to a lesser extent South Asians and Filipinos, this film documents how the immigration of Asians to the Americas was linked to the transnational movement of capital, goods, and people during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The film makes it very clear that Asian workers were brought to labor in the New World as the African slave trade was in demise. Needed for labor that Europeans and various South Americans were unwilling to perform, Chinese, South Asians, and Filipinos were taken, often against their will or unaware of the conditions they would encounter, to the United States, Cuba, Peru, and Africa. They were brought to work the sugar cane fields of Cuba and Hawaii, the guano pits of Peru, and later, the various developing industries in the American West.

Skillfully combining reenactments, archival footage, stills, oral histories, and interviews with leading Asian American historians, this film follows a line of historical inquiry that has gained prominence in recent years: The Asian presence in America should not begin with the immigration of

Chinese to the gold fields of California, but instead, should be viewed as a larger process, one involving Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos (and later Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asians) venturing to parts of the Americas well before the Gold Rush in California. The film notes that the Philippines was a region where East met West. Colonized by the Spanish in the 16th century, Chinese emigrants had long settled there as well. Once the Spanish established a trade network between the Philippines and Mexico, Filipino and Chinese sailors began appearing in Mexico.

Filipinos, in fact, settled in Louisiana as early as the 1760s. The trade between the British colonies in North America and China and India brought Chinese sailors to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston years before the America Revolution and the tea thrown overboard in the Boston Tea Party was certainly of Asian origin. Thus, Asia has long been a part of American history.

(Lest we forget, the New World was “discovered” by Europeans looking for Asia.) Some Chinese sailors jumped ship in these American harbors and some eventually married working-class Irish women, forming some of America’s first Asian-Caucasian families.

Others, however, were not as lucky. Tricked by unscrupulous labor agents and local crimps, Chinese and Indian laborers were taken to Africa, Cuba, and other parts of Latin America as part of

the infamous coolie trade. Ding includes fascinating footage of coolies digging guano on the islands off the coast of Peru, remarking that many died in less than a year. The film also points out that some of the Chinese escaped from the brutalities of the guano islands or the sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean to come to the United States, bringing with them a “Chino-Latino” culture.

Throughout the film, Asian immigrants are portrayed as active agents, attempting to shape their own destinies. Although they faced many hardships and obstacles, they are seen to exercise their rights and wills in seeking to claim their place in America. This first installment ends with a moving reenactment of a young Chinese woman braiding her husband’s queue as he prepares to leave for America, the Gold Mountain. The anxiety of separation is palpable as he thinks to himself, “I need not fear slavery, I will not be whipped or herded like so many pigs,” and she wonders when and if he will return, and if he dies, who will tend his grave or carry on the family name.

This scene serves as a segue to *Chinese in the Frontier West*, the second installment in the series, which focuses on the Chinese in the history of the development of the American West, especially in California. Acknowledging that there is a marked lack of a Chinese presence in much of the recorded history of the region, the narrator ponders, “What is history when the recorder does not record and the camera does not see? Find our history and tell it.” Thus Loni Ding sets out to restore Chinese to the history of the American West.

Through pictures and interviews with historians, the American West is seen as multiracial and multicultural, with many people and their attendant cultures coming into contact with each other, many for the first time. The Chinese were vital players in the history of California, and throughout the film they are depicted as strong, intelligent, and determined to build lives in America. They were among the early miners during the Gold Rush, and later went on to become pioneers in the agricultural and fishing industries. By 1870, three-quarters of the laborers in California’s agricultural fields were Chinese; and it was the Chinese who first fished for abalone, sea urchins, and other sea life, helping to establish one of the West’s most lucrative industries. In addition, Chinese were instrumental in manning the fish canneries on the West Coast and they were also engaged in light industry, manufacturing cigars, shoes, and other items.


However, the Chinese arrival in the United States coincided with the national debate over slavery. Perceived as a racial Other, akin to enslaved Africans, Chinese were seen as competition for free White labor and racially inferior. Therefore, they

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Despite these restrictions, Chinese immigrants and their offspring sought ways to resist this oppression. Often accused of being docile and unassimilable, Chinese proved they understood the American judicial system very well. According to one scholar interviewed in the film, it would be hard to find a discriminatory law aimed at the Chinese that they did not challenge. From the 1850s on, the Chinese sought justice in the courts, bringing over 170 cases to the United States Supreme Court. Although they often lost, when they won, they established precedents in American civil rights law, rights that would benefit all Americans.

Herein lies one of the important messages of this film series. The Asian presence in America has been long, complex, and vital to the development of modern American society. These films are insightful, informative, and at times, very moving. They are to be recommended to anyone interested in Asian American history and how that history fits into the larger global history of migration and settlement. ♦


K. Scott Wong is an Associate Professor of History at Williams College where he teaches courses on Asian American history, comparative immigration history, history of the American West, American Studies, and theories of race and ethnicity. His articles have appeared in a variety of academic journals and anthologies, and he is the co-editor of *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era*. He is currently writing a book on the impact of the Second World War on Chinese Americans.

Coolies, Sailors, & Settlers: Voyage to the New World and *Chinese in the Frontier West* are available from the Center for Educational Telecommunications (CET). Price is \$265 for each.



COURTESY OF NAATA

>> Directed by Ramona S. Diaz. Distributed by NAATA. 1995. 56 minutes.

S*pirits Rising* is a dramatic film about women in the Philippines. In a stunning introduction, President Corazon Aquino dispassionately talks about the death of her husband as he returned to the Philippines from exile. The film then interweaves the history of the Filipina with contemporary interviews with influential women. The result is a splendid film, of great interest to men and women who want to understand the Philippines and the role of women in the modern world.

The film is appropriate for high school and college classrooms that are focused on the Philippines, "Third World Societies," or women in the world. The speakers are clear, concise, straightforward and insightful. The speakers state that traditionally politics in the Philippines has been the domain of men. The feminist movement did not catch on until contemporary times. The symbol of the Filipina was "Maria Clara," the epitome of all feminine virtues. The rise of women participants in organizations and in political parties was an astonishing event that eventuated in the election of Corazon Aquino as the nation's president and made the notion of Maria Clara passe.

Slightly less than an hour long, the film is captivating from beginning to end. Viewers will learn

Spirits Rising is about power as much as it is about women. It deserves a large audience.

Imelda Marcos, former First Lady, gives a surreal account of the downfall of Marcos ("I gave Ferdinand a woman's heart, so he was defeated").

Spirits Rising is about People's Power as much as it is about Philippines women. The film deserves a huge audience. This film was directed, produced, and edited by Philippines women. ♦

Clark Neher is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University. He has written extensively on the politics of Southeast Asia. His most recent book, with Ross Marlay, is *Patriots and Tyrants: Ten Asian Leaders*.

Spirits Rising is available from NAATA. Price is \$265 for purchase and \$75 for rental.

>> Produced and narrated by Christine Choy. Directed by J.T. Takagi. Distributed by Third World Newsreel. 1991. 56 minutes.

...anyone who sees
the film will go away
with an empathetic
understanding of the
losses Koreans
continue to suffer...

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Koreans
to suffer...

The filmmakers follow Moo-Jae Pak, a successful Korean-American man living in Columbus, Ohio, in the late 1980s, as he contemplates his trip to North Korea. After trying for years to visit his sister, from whom he has been separated for thirty-seven years, North Korea has finally given him permission to enter the country. The filmmakers dub in country music and show Mr. Pak gardening outside his house. The film then shifts focus to the broader historical and political background that separated families like Mr. Pak's. A considerable amount of time is spent describing the military context, with footage of soldiers in South Korea and in the North, and interviews with American servicemen stationed in South Korea and a retired American Rear Admiral.

When discussing the scenes of economic life in North and South Korea, teachers will have to make their students aware that the film was shot in the late eighties and produced in 1991, well before North Korea's famine and South Korea's economic crisis, and before the death of Kim Il Sung in the North and the rise of democratization in the South. But if Korean economics and politics are fast moving targets, national and family division remains the same. That part of the film seems, sadly, to be timeless. As the producer acknowledges, the film is, like Korea itself, incomplete. ♦

Homes Apart is available from Third World Newsreel. Price is \$225 for purchase and \$75 for rental.

>> Produced by Peter Montagnon. Directed by Malcolm Feuerstein. Part of *The Long Search* film series. Distributed by Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc. 1978. 52 minutes.

The opening scene, of a young Toraja girl gazing out the window of a traditional Toraja house as melancholic bamboo flute music quivers in the air, sets the tone for the series narrator's confessions of his expectations for this installment of *The Long Search*: "If the human race had a childhood and it was anything like a human childhood it would have been spent very near its mother and its mother would have been mother earth, whose lap we all lay in...this was to be the search back to simplicity, back to childhood, back to something primal." As the film progresses, however, we discover that a number of his preconceptions surrounding indigenous religions are challenged by this expedition to the Toraja highlands. Early on in the film we are introduced to Eric Crystal, one of the first American anthropologists to conduct extensive research on Sa'dan Toraja religion and politics, who plays the role of guide and translator in this film. His deep respect for Toraja culture and his appreciation of the complexity of *aluk to dolo* ("the way of the ancestors") religion have clearly left their mark on this film. As the narrator concludes, "'Primal' isn't very easy to nail down...it doesn't mean simple: Toraja ceremonies are very complicated. It doesn't mean stage one in a two stage operation. In other words, it is not a beginner's class. The nearest meaning for 'primal' I can find is 'not available for export.'" Eric Crystal's enthusiastic observations and translations during the course of the film do much to enliven the film. Moreover, his long-standing relationships with the two *aluk to dolo* ceremonial specialists (*to minaa*) featured in the film may also account for the candor with which they relate their experiences.

As the film's narrator notes, the funeral we witness is momentous for another unexpected reason: it is the first Toraja ceremony to be advertised abroad as a tourist attraction. As we watch a group of sarong-clad foreign tourists solemnly walking in procession into the funeral arena, Eric Crystal speculates that these foreign tourists come seeking a genuine religious experience and expresses his interest in talking with them as anthropological subjects. For anthropologists of tourism, this film has an added significance, then, as it captures in celluloid Toraja tourism in an embryonic stage. Some observers of the Toraja world have even speculated that this film played an inadvertent role in promoting Tana Toraja Regency as a touristic destination.

The film concludes with the observation that what seems to worry outside observers is the very thing many Toraja would see as progress. As the narrator notes, “but who are we to be telling anyone that their strength is their booklessness, their strength is their churchlessness, their strength is their lack of a bureaucracy, when they can see for themselves that Islam prospers with a book, Christianity prospers with a church, and government prospers with a block of offices.” Although it was filmed almost two decades ago, *Religion in Indonesia: The Way of the Ancestors* continues to be a useful resource for high school and college courses on religion, Southeast Asian Studies, and anthropology. ♦

Religion in Indonesia: The Way of the Ancestors
is available from Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc.
Price is \$99.95.

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Bullfrog Films, P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547. Tel: 800-543-3764. Fax: 610-370-1978. E-mail: bullfrog@igc.org. Web site: <http://www.bullfrog-films.com>.

Center for Educational Telecommunications, 1940 Hearst Avenue, Berkley, CA 94709. Tel: 510-848-1656. Fax: 510-841-1263. Web site: <http://www.cetel.org>.

Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02172. Tel: 800-569-6621. Fax: 617-926-9519. E-mail: docued@der.org. Web site: <http://der.org/docued>.

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The Media Guild, 11722 Sorrento Valley Road, Suite E, San Diego, CA 92121. Tel: 800-886-9191 or 619-755-9191. Fax: 619-755-4931. Web site: <http://www.mediaguild.com>.

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Third World Newsreel, 545 8th Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018. Tel: 212-947-9277. Fax: 212-594-6417. E-mail: twn@twn.org. Web site: <http://www.twn.org>.

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