

Book review

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Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture.

Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture. By Jane Naomi Iwamura. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 232 pp. ISBN 9780199738601 (hardcover), \$99.00; ISBN 9780199738618I (paperback), \$24.95.

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B o o k R e v i e w

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When and where did the figure of the “Oriental monk” in American popular media and culture originate? How has the figure of the Oriental monk been imagined and re-imagined? What does it reveal about the interplay of historical events, cultural translation, and cultural production vis-à-vis Asian religious traditions in the United States? Jane Naomi Iwamura addresses these questions in *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*. Iwamura employs Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” to construct a paradigm of “virtual Orientalism” anchored in a critical racialization perspective. She defines “virtual Orientalism” as a type of “cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media” that “train the consumer to prefer visual representations” and “adds gravitas to the narrative and creates its own scene of virtual encounter” (p. 7). The combination of Orientalization and racialization “serves to blunt the distinctiveness of particular persons and figures” making the popular production of the Oriental monk not only consumable, but immediate and widespread (p. 6). The Oriental monk is not just someone we imagine, but a figure that is made real to us in photographs, in movies, and on pages of popular magazines.

In *Virtual Orientalism*, Iwamura narrates the cultural-historical genealogy of the Oriental monk figure in U.S. popular culture and media, noting its complexities, contradictions, and contemporary manifestations. It is through popular media that the predominately Christian and non-Asian American public consumes, in an accessible and “virtually sensuous” way, Asian religious figures and teachings before only accessible “in the mind’s eye only through the literary word and imagination” (p. 5). Iwamura argues that the commercialization and fetishism of the Oriental monk icon, beginning in the 1950s, and ending with today’s “Spiritual Romance,” has delivered to the spiritual marketplace of American popular culture and media a racialized Oriental monk who is no longer Asian. Iwamura argues, “Although the figure is easily recognizable today, the Oriental monk did not miraculously appear from out of nowhere. Rather, we have been primed for his appearance: trained to identify him from knowledge of his character, which can be traced to a series of historical encounters and imaginative engagements” (p. 6).

Iwamura provides three case studies representing three types of encounters with the Oriental monk figure in American media and popular culture. In chapter two, Iwamura discusses D.T. Suzuki and the American encounter with Zen Buddhism in the 1950s. In chapter three, covering the 1960s, she describes the American encounter with a Hindu monk in the figure of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In chapter four, she analyzes the Hollywood-American invention of

the Oriental monk who is half-Chinese and half-white as visually represented in the 1970s TV series *Kung Fu*. In her concluding chapter, Iwamura discusses new iterations and new imaginations of the Oriental monk who is only stereotypically coded as Asian in cartoon figures such as *Kung Fu Panda*.

In her chapter on Suzuki and the period of Zen's flourishing in the U.S. in the 1950s, Iwamura notes that Suzuki was portrayed as a "mysterious Oriental" whose "wrinkled features" hint at an "ancient wisdom that harked back to an age far beyond his considerable years" (p. 26). The medium through which Suzuki was consumed by the American public was popular and fashion magazines (*Harper's Bazaar*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Vogue*). The combined effect of the racialization and Orientalization of Suzuki in popular magazines produced a persona that was simultaneous incomprehensible yet "wholly comprehensible to his 1950s American audience" (p. 28). The geo-political conditions of post-war America nurtured the representation of defeated Japan in the body and image of Suzuki whose religious teaching emphasized the "universality of humankind that transcended boundaries of nation and race" (p. 32). Although Iwamura did not make this point clear, one may interpret Suzuki's American pupils and/or progenies (e.g., Jack Kerouac and Alan Watts) of the Beat movement as examples of washing Asian elements out of American Zen making it even more attractive to a popular audience.

Chapter three continues the genealogy of the Oriental monk figure in an American popular culture that now included both print media and television. During the 1960s, popular discourse and representation of the Oriental monk revolved around the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Transcendental Meditation movement of the countercultural scene. The Hindu Maharishi gained popular legitimacy through his association with Hollywood celebrities (e.g., the Beatles and Mia Farrow) represented in print and television, and this intensified and increased the visual specter of the Oriental monk, creating the possibility of experiencing the monk in a *hyperreal* manner. Iwamura argues that this hyperreal encounter is a more direct, firsthand, avenue to engage the mysterious yet available Indian guru (p. 108).

Unlike D.T. Suzuki, who was consumed by the American public, Mahesh had both devotees and critics. Critics questioned his spiritual authenticity because he appeared to be a "master of marketing" (pp. 69, 96). Photographs of the guru with his Anglo pupils in popular magazines communicate his mysteriousness and foreignness, while the audience identifies his pupils. The consumers must therefore negotiate the Orientalization of the guru, who at one level represents an underdeveloped and backwards Asia, and, at the same time, employs modern means of communication and travel to spread his teachings (p. 104). This ambivalent reception of the guru, Iwamura argues, reflects the Cold War politics of the time, including U.S.-India geopolitical relations. Due to India's position of nonalignment with not only communist China but also the democratic U.S., American attitudes toward India were ambivalent (p. 67).

The contemporary American representation of the guru is embodied in Deepak Chopra, a trained endocrinologist turned alternative medicine guru and spokesperson for Asian religious spirituality. Although Chopra is South Asian American and does not wear the Hindu monk's clothes, he does speak like one. Chopra's Western image is "diametrically opposed to Mahesh in appearance and style" (p. 110). However, the Orientalization and racialization of

Chopra creates a New Age guru that is digestible to the current American consumer: although he wears Western clothes and is clean-cut, he retains dark features that betray his Indian origins and add creditability and a powerful mystique to his “spiritual mission.” As with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s ambivalent American reception, Chopra, too, is surrounded by both fans and critics. Iwamura argues that “Mahesh and Chopra, as historical figures, demonstrate not only an initiative but also a Westernized flair for promotion that exceeds Virtual Orientalism’s representational bounds” (p. 110).

In chapter four, Iwamura examines an Oriental monk that was created in America’s own image in the 1970s. She writes, “while ‘real’ Oriental monks like the Maharishi Mahesh would disappoint, ones spun directly from imagination could not, as the television and film characters such as Kwai Chang Caine would prove” (p. 111). Virtual Orientalism literally goes to Hollywood with the film and TV series, *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine. Carradine, a white actor, employs “Yellow Face” methods to play a half-Chinese, half-white Shaolin monk who travels the Western frontier in search of his half-brother. This American invention of the Oriental monk marks a clear break between virtual Orientalism and “real” Asian monks and an invention Iwamura interprets as an act of colonization (p. 112). *Kung Fu* allowed the American audience a means to appreciate and experience Asian spiritual teachings, but also served to reinforce U.S. cultural hegemony over Asia. The character of the half-Chinese Buddhist monk “can be read as a hegemonic moment in which American popular imaginary once again re-created its Asian spiritual ‘other’” (p. 115). For three years, the *Kung Fu* series served as the Oriental monk, and its American audience as the monk’s apprentice. The emerging Asian American voices of this period critiqued *Kung Fu* for reinforcing an image of Asian American male masculinity as “soft,” “passive,” and “docile.” One of the most notable Asian American critics was Frank Chin, who noted that the seemingly “good” stereotypes in *Kung Fu* can have harmful effects. The success of the *Kung Fu* film and TV series reflects the historical milieu of the period, a blend of late 1960s Civil Rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protest. Iwamura claims that, “viewed within the context of the ongoing Vietnam War, *Kung Fu* offered indirect political commentary and an attractive alternative” (p. 113) to war, communicated in the show’s philosophical pacifism (p. 114).

Iwamura ends by examining new imaginings of the Oriental monk in American popular media and culture, arguing that the contemporary cachet of Asian religious figures and spiritualities, like the Dalai Lama, and Hollywood celebrities who publicly identify as Buddhist reveals an “unusual type of amnesia—an amnesia that allows its subjects to experience their fascination each time anew” (p. 160). During this moment, however, non-Asian religious appropriators will once again lay hegemonic claim over Asian religious traditions and take the role of “cultural savior,” since Tibetans, as colonial subjects, are unable to do it, themselves.

Virtual Orientalism is a good example of the theoretical gymnastic and pyrotechnic consequences of employing critical Asian American Studies perspectives in the study of religion at the intersection of religion and race. Although this reviewer would have liked more development in the historical and geopolitical discussion in each of the three case studies, and more direct discussion of the structures of power and privilege vis-à-vis race and religion as expressed and experienced in popular media and culture, Iwamura’s goal was to narrate the genealogy of the Oriental monk in American popular culture. This, she succeeded in doing. I also would have wanted to see Iwamura’s thoughts on Asian and Asian American

agency in decolonizing the image and persona of the Oriental monk, something only briefly addressed in Iwamura's coverage of the Asian American critique of *Kung Fu*. This book is recommended for scholars and students interested in Asian religious expressions in the United States and for those interested in religious development at the intersection of race, religion, and American popular media and culture.