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Review

Jane Iwamura,

Virtual Orientalism:

Asian Religions and American Popular Culture

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Faith Voices for the Common Good

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The Making of Lamapalooza

It's a rare opportunity to watch a work unfold that creates a field of study and does it so well. My first encounter with Jane Iwamura's analysis of popular treatments of Asian American religions was as a draft of her dissertation proposal, which I saw in 1997. It was clear from that early work that she was destined to make a major contribution to scholarship in Asian American

religions. She has already done this in essays published along the way, which have influenced how, over the years, I thought about and taught Asian religions and their depiction in popular culture. In addition, I have used her work in Asian American studies classes to expose the near invisibility of Asian American religions in the academic study of religion (Prebish's study of American Buddhism being a particularly egregious example).

Virtual Orientalism is a scholarly tour de force. It is also concise, compelling in its writing, and extraordinarily deft in its handling of sources. It offers a comprehensive look at the years of scholarship that have made Iwamura a leader in the construction of the field of Asian American religions. It will undoubtedly become a crucial text in this growing field of research and scholarship, as well as in American studies, media studies, and religious studies, where studies of Asian American religions are otherwise still quite rare.

The book roots Orientalism in its broader Western trajectory, but uses the lens of the "Oriental Monk" to highlight the particular American story of Orientalism's hegemonic work, especially as it is shaped by U.S. foreign policies in the second half of the twentieth century. Iwamura exposes how "The apparent tolerance and fascination that mark Americans' engagement with Asian spirituality has not yet translated into a full embrace of Asian religions." As she notes,

Americans for the most part, still rally under the monotheistic conception of 'one nation under God.' Hindus are mistaken for Muslims, and Buddhism is taken as a Hollywood trend. At best, images and talk of Asian religions serve as exotica.

The rise of post 9/11 Islamophobia illustrates her point: South Asian Sikhs and Hindus are confused with Arab Muslims, while the largest single population of Muslims in the world, Indonesians, have been mostly invisible.

Iwamura dismantles the romanticism, appropriation, and commercialization of Asian religions and their martial arts through sophisticated interdisciplinary work. In exposing how the ideal of the American Oriental Monk emerged with D. T. Suzuki and Beat Zen in the post-war

period, Iwamura unfolds how orientalism mutates, based on the mask of benevolent paternalism that tends to characterize U.S. imperialism toward Asia. She traces the evolution of narcissistic, consumerist, and androcentric quests for personal fulfillment in white appropriations of Asian religions. She deconstructs the celebrity culture of veneration for exotic Asian leaders, for example the Beatles' flirtation with the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi. She interrogates David Carradine's Western, masculine, countercultural agenda, which shapes his portrayal of the bi-racial monk in the successful TV series *Kung Fu*. She exposes *Kung Fu*'s imperialist nostalgia for the exotic, vanquished east, evidenced in dreamy, incense-smoked flashbacks of a utopic Chinese Buddhist monastery and its wise old—and long-dead—sage.

The book's historical organization is both elegant and forthright. It begins with the D.T. Suzuki era, shows how it leads to the *Kung Fu* moment and all its martial arts spinoffs, such as the *Karate Kid* series, and concludes with the current obsession with the Dalai Lama and Tibet. Iwamura illustrates how each new popular Oriental Monk draws from the success of its predecessors and, yet, how each successive virtual manifestation elicits fascination and mystification anew sans historical reference points.

Her concluding chapter surveys the state of affairs at the turn of the century for the post-boomer generations. She notes the rise of *Kung Fu Panda*, for the children of fans of *Kung Fu*:

For an American audience, whose members increasingly identify themselves as 'spiritual but not religious,' these opportunities of encounter offer a moral touchstone and hip alternative. New media and a host of consumer products further stimulate interest in Oriental Monk-inspired features. Indeed, the work of virtual Orientalism is especially strong in storylines and products aimed at a younger generation, socializing youth not only as consumer agents, but also into a spiritualized, competitive individualism demanded by late capitalism.

Iwamura's final deconstruction of the Oriental Monk focuses on an icon still unfolding and highly revered in the American Orientalist imagination: the Dalai Lama. I have personally found fascinating how even progressive Americans, adamantly opposed to theocracy and

overwhelmingly critical of the pathologies of Catholicism's mandate for clerical celibacy, suspend critical judgment when confronted with the Lama icon; this mystification has long roots. As one scholar of Tibet, Jules Levinson, concerned about the amoral and ahistorical marketing of Tibetan Buddhism, once remarked to me, "American spin masters are neophytes compared to the ancient traditions of Lama handlers in Tibet; they invented spin."

Iwamura lays the context for the current emergence of "Lamapalooza," the term she borrows from Justin Chin in his "Attack of the White Buddhists." She surveys the extent of the cultural fascination with the Dalai Lama and unpacks his consumer-savvy impact on shaping the Western imagination about the ideal Oriental Monk. Unlike the politically unstable status of India, China, Japan, and Korea, which fluctuate from being a problem to U.S. imperialism to being good, well-contained allies, Tibet is the ideal "good" country. It is presented as a pre-modern victim of China, which now threatens American economic hegemony. As the ruler of a virtual country in need of saving, the Dalai Lama makes an ideal Oriental Monk for Western benevolent paternalism. In her deconstruction of the rise of the Lama, Iwamura hopes we can come to understand how

Virtual Orientalism relies on this repetitive promise, on the reliability of iconic performance, and on a Western audience's spiritual needs and desires, as it masks the ideological interests and geopolitical concerns that invisibly drive its cultural imperialist enterprise...it may be a guru one year, and a lama the next. Beyond the fact that the specific heritage of a given representation is dictated by the U.S. political terrain, manifestations of the icon are marked by their relative substitutability in the pop cultural realm...a mass audience is less concerned with distinctiveness of the figure or the religious tradition he represents, but rather with the desires the iconic figure meets and the operations he performs.

While Islam falls outside the parameters of Iwamura's "Oriental Monk," Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism emerged as a Palestinian perspective in relation to British hegemony in the West Asia. The U.S. coup in Iran, orchestrated by Eisenhower at the request of Churchill, placed

the Shah in power to control the interests of British Petroleum—now infamous for the Gulf Oil disaster. The subsequent, anti-American theocracy, the Islamic Republic created in 1979, fueled U.S. perceptions of Islam as evil. At the same time, American hegemony drew its need for exotic wisdom and inner transformation from the non-Muslim countries of East and South Asia.

Asian American studies took Said's *Orientalism* in creative new directions, as Iwamura's work on icons from Hinduism and Buddhism demonstrates. I hope her seminal work on the American fascination with the Oriental Monk might next be put in critical relationship to the icon of the Ayatollah and other such figures drawn from Asian religions in West Asia. As Asian American studies have taught us over the years, "model minority" status always works in tandem with evil others in the American hegemonic imagination. Islamophobia is the other side of the Oriental Monk. With Tibet, we have the "model theocracy," while Muslim countries are granted evil theocracy status. We may discover that Lamapalooza needs Islamophobia.