



Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 240 pp.  
 Hardback, £60.00; paperback, £15.99. ISBN 978-0-19-973860-1  
 (hardback); ISBN 978-0-19-973861-8 (paperback).

IN THE ongoing debate about the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in media, popular culture, and American historical imaginations, iconic characters who embody certain stereotypes present a certain tension. Charlie Chan is an example of such a tension. Is Chan a negative stereotype—yellowface, fortune-cookie English, slanty-eyed, submissive, and effeminate—or is he a hero who outwits his white counterparts, cleverly and subtly subverting the hegemonic project of white America? Typically, such debates do not consider the critical role religions play in the portrayals and representations of Asians and Asian Americans.

Jane Iwamura eloquently pushes this debate into the religious imagination of Americans. Examining the representation of Asian religions in the mass media, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* offers a new framework for analysis. *Virtual Orientalism*, with its paradigmatic icon, “Oriental Monk,” frames the ways in which Asian Americans and their religious practices have been perceived, represented, and consumed. Americans’ “spiritual romance” (154) with Asian religions has most recently taken the form of their fascination with the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Tibetan cause. Saffron robes and shaved heads appearing in IBM’s OS/2 commercials point to the iconic image of the Dalai Lama as the new Oriental Monk (158).

Iwamura’s project is a historically based genealogy of the birth of the icon, Oriental Monk. Tracing back who begot whom, she shows Charlie Chan along with Fu Manchu, heathen Chinese, and Dragon Ladies as one of a genealogical “father” to the Oriental Monk. Linking Chan’s uncanny ability to solve the crime to “oriental wisdom” [as signified by his pithy fortune-cookie aphorisms] inaccessible to Westerners, Iwamura sets the stage for the birth of Oriental Monk. This icon, as with any icons, is formalized through narratives and rituals. The narrative is formulaic: A lone Oriental Monk “adopts” a fatherless child(ren) (usually a boy). The child, marginalized by his (Western) culture, breaks with the (Western) culture with the help of the Oriental Monk. As a result, the child becomes the bridge, the transmitter of Eastern wisdom to the dominant culture. And ultimately, the Oriental Monk and his “child” become a hope for salvation to save the Western world from “capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology” (17). This narrative is replete with ideological interests of the imperial project. In this narrative, the Anglo Americans “re-imagine

themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture and wrest the authority to define these traditions from others” (17).

Examining this narrative and its performance in the virtual space of media, Iwamura masterfully follows the lives of three “Oriental Monk” characters: D. T. Suzuki, the “missionary” of Zen Buddhism to the West, Maharishi Mahesh, the guru of Transcendental Meditation, and Kwai Chang Caine, a fictional character in the popular television series, *Kung Fu*. Iwamura admonishes us that in the imperial project of *Virtual Orientalism*, characters change and even the virtual space itself may change. The consumer-oriented society demands that new versions of the icon are introduced. “But they play the same role, serve the same function and tell the same story—time and time again. 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” (156).

Her rich and complex treatment of these three figures cannot be summarized in a short review in a way that will do justice to her nuanced, well researched explorations. Rather than summarize her well-written work, I will focus the remainder of the review on the implications of the framework, “Virtual Orientalism,” and its challenges to the study of Asian American religions and communities of faith.

In the changing religious landscape of the United States, Iwamura’s work offers a timely critique of current trends in society in which people identify as “spiritual, not religious.” The 2007 Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey<sup>1</sup> identified the “unaffiliated” as one of the largest growing segments of American society. “Spiritual, not religious” Americans have increased over the last decade and can be found, among other places, in yoga studios and dharma sanghas. Their children are socialized to this Eastern spirituality through popular shows like *The Karate Kid*, *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Kung Fu Panda*, and *The Last Airbender*. Iwamura observes that consumer products are modeled after the “Oriental Monk” are now aimed at the younger generation, “socializing youth not only as consumer agents, but also into a spiritualized, competitive individualism demanded by late capitalism” (156). By introducing new versions of the icon, (now younger) consumers’ hunger for novelty is satisfied. A new generation of Americans feasts on this rich, varied diet of the “Oriental Monk.” One implication of this performance, particularly in a virtual space achieved by the constant streaming of images, is that the icon becomes hyperreal<sup>2</sup>—more real than real. The icon is superimposed on Asian Americans, erasing away their lived realities. While this is not a new tension, with the new generation of spiritualized, competitive, and individualistic consumers, what is “Asian” and who is “Asian” is highly contested. Iwamura writes, “not only does Virtual Orientalism declare an independence

1. For the study in its entirety, see <http://religions.pewforum.org>.

2. See Iwamura’s chapter, “Hyperreal Samadhi: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi” where she traces this hyperreality.

from the real, but it also co-opts or colonizes the real” (104). The imperial Orientalist machine presupposes the power of the insidious hegemony to “own” and “protect” the “orientals.” This presents a challenge to the study of Asian American religions and communities of faith. We are everywhere, and yet we are nowhere. How do we study this when we risk the “Winnie the Pooh syndrome” of “the more he looked inside, the more Piglet wasn’t there”?<sup>3</sup> How could the study of the real, lived, embodied lives in Asian America present an antidote to virtual Orientalism?

In my context as a theological educator, I see another implication to Iwamura’s framework. Concerned with training religious leaders who will be ministering in an increasingly multi-faith/-religious world, as part of the curriculum we engage learning about and converse with people of other faiths. This framework of Virtual Orientalism and the icon of the Oriental Monk challenges us to unearth the imperial project inherent in our (Christian) approach to other faiths. We have seen the proliferation of negative stereotypes and images of Muslims and Islam. How might Iwamura’s project help us to see Islam differently? Who is the Islamic Oriental Monk today for Americans? What function does he serve in religious imaginations of Americans?

Finally, I am reminded of an experience watching Bruce Lee’s *Enter the Dragon* in a movie theater in which the audience was predominantly African Americans. The reaction of the audience made me feel as if I were at a church service with a call and response dynamic. They actively interacted with the film, warning Bruce Lee to “watch out” and clapping when he knocked out the opponent with his flying martial arts skills. I sensed a close connection between this Oriental Monk and this particular community. What might be the connection? The place of martial arts in hip-hop might be a place to look for this connection.<sup>4</sup> How has this icon and Virtual Orientalism affected and impacted the other marginalized communities?

*Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* ends with this quote:

For Americans, the Oriental Monk has certainly arrived.... You can carry him around in your book bag or hang him on your bedroom wall. His image adorns the virtual medication rooms in Second Life. At our immediate disposal and making no demands of his own, he has indeed become virtually ours. But I wonder, is he truly ours?

The lure of ownership of something that cannot be owned—isn’t this the imperial project?

Su Yon Pak  
*Union Theological Seminary, New York*

3. A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, 1928 (New York: Dutton).

4. For an interesting intersection of martial arts and hip-hop, see Chi Tung’s article, “This, That, and the ‘Other’: The RZA on the Miscegenation of Hip-Hop,” in *Asia Pacific Arts*, <http://www.asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=30240>.