

| Book Review |

***Discriminating Sex: White Leisure and the Making of the American "Oriental"***

Amy Sueyoshi. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018, 228 pages

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In summer of 2018, the popularity of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018) sparked discussion in the US regarding how Asians are depicted in popular culture. In the same year, many news articles and blog posts speculated what K-pop idol BTS' popularity in the US meant for Asian Americans. Is the eminence of BTS and *Crazy Rich Asians* a symbol of change in US perception of Asians? If so, what kind of Orientalist stereotypes of Asian-ness are these pop culture contents working against? Among Oriental stereotypes within the US, the prolific images of Asians are those of exotic geishas, docile women, physically adept martial artists and samurai, or effeminate men. Where exactly did these stereotypes originate? Why did these stereotypes gain traction in the mainstream US?

In *Discriminating Sex: White Leisure and the Making of the American "Oriental,"* Amy Sueyoshi points to late 1800s' to early 1900s' San Francisco as the moment when such stereotypes became firmly engrained in the US cultural rhetoric. Through historical analysis of archival materials, including newspaper articles, illustrations, plays, and legal files, Sueyoshi argues that white middle-class San Franciscans evoked Asian masculinity and femininity to define their own sexual and gender identities. In other words, Asian-American bodies became tools the white middle class used to conceal their own befuddlement regarding sexual and gender norms. Since the 1800s, San Francisco has prided itself on being an open and liberal city compared to more conservative parts of the US. However, "the mythical wide and open San Francisco, a city of expansive sexual and racial possibilities, in reality offered freedoms only for a select social class and could do so precisely because of the overwhelming rule of white power and heterosexuality" (p. 133). Some

inhabitants' new-found freedom was at the expense of increased cultural and political restraint upon other inhabitants of the city. The book details such intersections during the period between 1890 and 1924.<sup>1</sup>

The book consists of nine chapters including the Introduction and Epilogue. Each chapter analyzes different stereotypes of Asians and how they emerged. Chapters 1 and 2 establish the historical context of the research by analyzing archival examples of turn-of-the-century San Francisco's cultural obsession with Asians and examines how it was distinct from other forms of racism. Chapters 3 and 4 explore Asian female sexuality intertwined with the newly emergent concept of white middle-class "modern women." More specifically, Chapter 3 discusses the image of Japanese geishas while Chapter 4 tells stories of white middle-class women's sexual explorations juxtaposed with the city's paranoia about Chinese prostitutes.

Chapter 5 deals with Asian masculinity and the evolving history about the "best Oriental." At one point, the "best Oriental" was "cultured Japanese men" but at another point it was the "hard-working Chinese." As 1890s' white middle-class masculinity attempted to carve an ideal masculine model between cultured Victorian manliness and robust masculinity, their interest in Asian masculinity increased. Japanese men were hailed as the ideals embodying both the masculine and the feminine. However, after Japan gained global power, the city created a prototype of Japanese samurai masculinity and argued that it symbolized their automation-like irrationality. The chapter adeptly shows how US-racialized masculinities were tightly interwoven with global politics.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss how white middle-class San Franciscans, while exploring their own sexual boundaries, associated queerness with Asians. While the white performers and artists cross-dressed for leisure activity, Asian attire was constantly judged as queer. The stereotype of effeminate Asian men became reinforced in mainstream media by mocking their traditional attire as effeminate with their supposed dress-like designs. Chapter 7 highlights the aftermath of the 1800s' overt racism against Asians. As the city began to lose interest in publicly exploring its sexuality, media coverage of Asian sexuality also waned. However, in the relative media silence, the previous stereotypes

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<sup>1</sup> The year 1890 saw the first significant wave of Japanese immigration to the US which diversified the Asian population in San Francisco, while 1924 is significant because it is the year that the US enacted the Federal Immigration Act.

of geishas, prostitutes, samurai, and queer Asian men stuck with the public to create an Oriental stereotype which applied to both Japanese and Chinese. The city no longer found it meaningful to distinguish between the two ethnicities.

Apart from discussing the formation of Asian-ness in juxtaposition to Whiteness, in *Discriminating Sex*, Sueyoshi also compares various racialized minority experiences in San Francisco. However, the segments where the book discusses the racial dynamics in San Francisco beyond the White-Asian relations are a bit difficult to follow at times. It is remarkable that a book on Orientalism nuances discussions of race by mentioning the race politics for Black and Mexican, as well as Italian, inhabitants of San Francisco. However, I believe those sections could have been fleshed out even further to highlight the ironies of San Francisco's racial politics. Nonetheless, the book will definitely serve as excellent teaching material; each chapter is concise and can stand on its own and each deals with distinct stereotypes. Individual chapters of the book would be excellent content for teaching classes about Asian-American history, Orientalism, the history of race relations in the US, and many other related topics. The format of the book makes it accessible for instructors looking for reading materials to assign for their class.

Although much academic research analyzes stereotypes of Asians in the US and how they affect the lived experiences of Asian Americans now, there has been less research exploring the origins of those stereotypes. Sueyoshi's book fills that gap. In the current political climate in which the depiction of Asian Americans in popular culture is undergoing a dramatic change, it is profoundly important to explore the histories of the stereotypes which popular culture as well as individual Asian Americans are resisting. *Discriminating Sex* will be helpful not only for academic teaching and research but also for anyone in the general public inquisitive about the origins of Asian-American stereotypes.

## Reference

Chu, J. M. (Producer). (2018). *Crazy rich Asians* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

*Biographical Note:* **Min Joo Lee** is a Ph.D. candidate at UCLA in the Gender Studies department. She received her B.A. in Comparative Literature and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at Williams College. Her current research interest is on Korean television dramas as a transnational media phenomenon. Her dissertation explores Korean drama-inspired Hallyu tourism and the intimate relationships that form between the tourists and local Korean men which complicate Oriental stereotypes of Asian masculinity.  
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