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The intellectual and cultural history of Asian Americans has been dominated by Orientalism, a structure of ideas and representations that has defined Asia as an exotic place that is antithetical in every way to the US. As a direct result, Americans whose ancestors have come from Asia have been considered perpetual foreigners, marked because their bodies are considered different from other Americans. Orientalism can be found in important American social theories and in cultural representations such as movies, television, and literature. More than just a set of representations, however, Orientalism as a relationship of unequal power has structured the way that Asian Americans have struggled to live in the US, marginalizing them and constraining their ability to find a meaningful place for themselves in America.

Between 1860 and 1945, Asian Americans were regarded as a threat to a united white America, an “Oriental problem” that needed to be solved. Ironically, in the last four decades, Asian Americans have increasingly come to be seen as a “model minority,” the exemplary solution to the racial problems of the America. However they are viewed, Asian Americans have been treated as different, at worst as foreign invaders

and at best as exotic Americans who are not quite the same as everyone else.

Unlike European immigrants who blended into whiteness, Asian Americans, like African Americans, have always been valued and denigrated for what was assumed to be unique about them. Tracing ancestry to a wide variety of geographic origins all around Asia and the Pacific Islands, Asian Americans have little to unite them in the US except for parallels in oppressive treatment by whites. The very designation of "Asian Americans" as a single group has been created out of a sense of a shared history of being treated in a similar manner throughout America's history, and central to that similar treatment has been Orientalism. The very idea that people migrating from the continent of Asia were somehow connected to each other and should be treated similarly was the consequence of the concept of Orientalism. Similar to, yet different than long standing European representations of the inhabitants of what is now known as the Middle East, American conceptions of the Orient in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focused more on China and Japan. Although Biblical scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also referred to the "Near East" as the "Orient," most Americans understood the term Oriental to define the Far East. The very conception of Asia as a singular place has been derived from definitions of the monolithic Orient. Therefore, the boundaries of who can be understood to be Asian American both in the present and in the past are open to debate,

having been powerfully affected by changing ideas about who and what was Oriental.

Orientalism

Long before Asian immigrants came in significant numbers to the shores of the US, the cultural meanings of a mythical Orient had shaped American history. The Americas as a dominion of Europe was an accidental creation founded on the desire that Europeans held for goods from the Orient. The first European explorers accidentally arrived at the "New World" while searching for a new trade route to Asia. As an imagined locale, the exotic Orient had been one of the foundational ideas of European exploration and, subsequently, American definitions of the larger world. At various moments, East Asian civilizations in China, Japan, and Korea have been lumped together as Oriental, and at other times South and Southeast Asian societies in the subcontinent of India and Indochina (the present-day nations of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) have also been defined as Oriental.

From the United States' first moments as a nation, the cultural and spiritual life of white Americans has been marked by a fascination for the Orient. During the period of British colonization of North America, merchants in the colonies were not allowed to trade directly with China,

and so one of the first significant acts of national economic independence in the 1790s for the new American republic was participation in the lucrative China trade. It was the desire for the luxurious goods of the Orient--spices, silk, tea, and porcelain--that built the wealth of many early American merchants in New England.

Early elites such as George Washington carefully cultivated an ideal of themselves as cultured by proudly decorating their homes with porcelain tea sets and tasteful chinoiseries, and the exotic cachet of Oriental objects has been a crucial element of class distinction in the US ever since. In the 1890s and 1920s, Japanese art objects were eagerly sought by American collectors, and since the 1980s automobiles and electronics produced in Asia and bearing the brand names of Toyota and Sony have come to dominate American consumption patterns.

Missionaries and Asian Americans

Like the desire created by Oriental goods, the spiritual call to save lost Asian souls has been a constant pull for American missionaries. Protestant missions to Asia and the Pacific Islands began by the 1820s, marking a long-term obsession with converting "heathens" across the Pacific. By the twentieth century, China and Japan had become the two most significant destinations for American missionaries, and South Korea became one of the most successful conversion projects in American

evangelical history. Christian ideas, along with theories about science and modernity that placed Asia behind Europe and the West in the progress of civilization, were often appropriated by Asian students and intellectuals searching for a syncretic set of beliefs to respond to intrusions into their home countries by Europeans. Many of these students migrated between Asia and the US under the auspices of American Protestant missionary organizations that set up schools in China and Japan. After the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, when a group of Chinese revolutionaries tried unsuccessfully to expel Americans and Europeans from China, the indemnity fund paid to the US. by the Chinese government became the most prominent source of funding for Chinese students traveling abroad. For the next three decades, hundreds of Chinese students, most of them converted Christians initially trained in missionary schools, came to the US for college degrees. Some of the stayed after their schooling, forming the first significant group of Asian American intellectuals.

In the opposite direction, religious traditions associated with Asia such as Buddhism have been embraced by many Americans searching for alternative forms of spirituality. Such a longing for the seemingly mystical aspects of Eastern spirituality was evident during the 1890s, but has become particularly prominent since the late 1960s. The hunger of non-Asian Americans for exotic Oriental traditions such as martial arts has often been a distinguishing feature of their dissatisfaction with what they understand to be American culture.

Early History: Chinese Americans

The cultural and intellectual history of Asian Americans has been dominated by the idea that Orientals are forever foreign, and migrants from Asia as well as those born in the US have constantly struggled to define a place for themselves within the US. When Chinese males migrated to the gold fields of California in the 1850s and became the first significant group of Asians to reside in the continental United States, cultural representations of the Orient had already marked them as alien and exotic. Labor conflicts with ethnic white workers, particularly Irish migrant laborers competing for the same work, fueled anti-Chinese violence, and during the 1870s organized lynching and arson drove most Chinese out of small towns in the West and into urban ghettos like San Francisco's Chinatown. White supremacist organizations such as the Native Sons of the Golden West, and labor organizations such as the Workingman's Party agitated for the complete exclusion of Chinese from the US, arguing that Asians were impossible to assimilate into America.

Beginning in 1870, when naturalization as an American citizen was restricted to "white persons and persons of African descent, the idea of Asians as alien to America was enshrined in a series of legislative acts. On the state level, anti-miscegenation laws in the 1870s and 1880s made it illegal for Asians to marry whites in most western states, and in the 1910s

and 1920s, several states made it illegal for alien Asians to own land.

Legally excluded by an act of Congress in 1882, Chinese laborers were cut off from further migration to the US, and though merchants and students were still allowed, the number of Chinese in the country steadily declined from around 100,000.

Japanese Americans

Between 1880 and 1924, large numbers of Japanese immigrants came to the West Coast, but anti-Oriental organizations decrying a “Yellow Peril” and an “Oriental problem” transferred onto them the political rhetoric and cultural representations used to exclude the Chinese. The popularity of pulp fiction novels such as Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu series used the threat of a Chinese evil genius to encapsulate and promote a fear of “Asiatics” in general. Asian men were portrayed in images and in prose preying on helpless white women, in particular using opium to drug them into submission. Representations of Asian women were dominated by characterizations as prostitutes. Alternating between stereotypes of Asian women as sexually dominant, and of them as compliant and submissive, Asian women existed in imagery as sexual slaves for white men. Theories about the higher birth rate of Orientals plugged into nightmares about the overwhelming of European culture by the primitive fecundity of nonwhite people.

By 1924, anti-Asian agitation had succeeded in eliminating Japanese immigration to the US. The Immigration Act of 1924 had a formative effect on the US, ending decades of massive migration from Eastern and Southern Europe, but it merely continued a longer history of anti-Asian exclusion. Smaller streams of Korean and East Indian immigrants were also cut off, and significant Asian immigration did not resume until reforms of immigration law in 1965.

Colonization of the Philippines

The inequities in power that contribute to the definitions of Orientalism are best exemplified by the role of the US military in Asian American history. From the gunboats that forced the opening of Japan to foreign trade in the middle of the nineteenth century, to those that annexed Hawaii and the Philippines and enforced the territorial rights of American citizens in China in 1900, American military presence has been a factor in how Americans have treated Asians at home and abroad, and how Asians have experienced life both in America and as emigrants from their home country.

The American annexation of the Philippine islands after the Spanish-American War of 1898 is a prominent example of the centrality of the US military in Asian American history. Philippine nationalist forces had done much of the fighting to defeat the Spanish during the war, but despite

promises that they would be granted independence if they allied with the US, the American army spent almost five years in a bloody campaign to wipe out forces opposing American rule. Estimates vary, but it is probable that hundreds of thousands of Philippine civilians were killed or died from the deliberate starvation policies that the US. Army used to pacify resistance. Importantly, the military had learned these techniques in genocidal campaigns against natives in the American West.

The similar treatment of Native Americans and Philippine nationalists by the US. military highlights a parallel that has distinguished the treatment of Filipino Americans from the forms of American Orientalism that affected Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Serving the needs of military power and the hierarchies of violent American colonial rule, social theories and cultural representations of Philippine citizens were dominated by the portrayals of natives as primitive. Unlike the seemingly positive valuations of exotic civilization which Orientalist definitions often bestowed upon China and Japan, American representations of Philippine natives were characterized by the language of anthropology, describing them in a manner parallel to Native Americans. Civilization and modernity laid with the acceptance of American ideals and political rule, and the retention of native culture was defined as atavism at the same time that it signified disloyalty to the US.

Even American missionaries, who had fought against anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese agitation in the US by extolling the accomplishments of thousands of years of Oriental civilization, did not extend such arguments to the Philippines. Against American imperialism by principle, many missionaries opposed annexation, but at the same time believed that the predominantly Catholic Philippines needed the civilizing influence of American Protestants.

Filipino Americans

Almost immediately after the American annexation of the Philippines, an American-controlled education system was instituted in the islands, inculcating a pro-American ideology that controlled the Philippines even after formal independence at the end of World War II. Elite educated students came to the US from the Philippines to attend college, but often found that despite their privileged, educated background, they were at best being treated as civilized savages.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the growing demand for agricultural labor created a migrant work force of male Filipino workers on the West Coast. Filipinos were exempt from the 1924 laws that excluded Asian immigrants because they were technically American subjects living in a US territory, even if they had no rights as citizens. Like the Chinese and Japanese, Filipino migrants met with violence from whites, and further migration

was cut off in 1935 when Filipinos were declared to no longer be American subjects. The Repatriation Act offered one-way tickets to the Philippines to resident Filipinos, under the condition that they agree not to return to the US.

The hypocrisy of American ill-treatment of Filipino workers in the 1930s was immortalized by the Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart. Bulosan, like many of his friends and colleagues, had been educated in the Philippines in an American school system. He described how Filipinos coming to the US had already been taught to love the ideas of democracy and fair play that America seemingly represented, but the harsh realities of racism and the difficult life of migrant agricultural work constantly undermined such ideals.

A scathing indictment of American racism, Bulosan's work also captures the dynamic that almost all Asian American writers faced for much of American history: the juxtaposition between endemic racial practices in the US and ideal principles of democracy and equality that promised a better world. By the 1920s, a sizable second generation of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans had begun to come of age, and unlike their parents who were not legally allowed to become naturalized Americans, they were citizens born in the United States. Educated in American schools, they fought for the hope contained in American political rhetoric. For most Asian American intellectuals between 1920 and

1970, the only hope for improving the situation of Asians in America was to champion those idealistic promises and to challenge the racial exclusion of Asians as un-American. In the words of the title of Bulosan's novel, "America is in the heart," and it was particularly in the hearts of those Filipino American immigrants who suffered at the hands of white Americans and yet remained truer to American ideals than their tormentors.

Orientalism and Asian American Identity

American Orientalism has structured the manner in which European Americans have dealt with ideas, goods, and immigrants from Asia; however, it has also had a profound effect on Asian American conceptions of themselves. Because white Americans treated them as exotic foreigners, second-generation Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans often tried to erase any connections to their Asian parentage. Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans were lumped together as Orientals, and because they were treated in similar ways, their reactions were similar. Perpetually questioned as to how American they could be, they constantly tried to prove that they were 100 percent American. However, even though Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans were excluded by white racism from most neighborhoods, and thus forced to live in neighborhoods bordering on each other, their social lives and self-identification were often with their

individual communities. A history of conflicts between China and Japan during much of the early twentieth century, culminating in warfare between 1931-1945, resonated in Chinese American and Japanese American enclaves; the Japanese invasion of the Philippines during World War II led to incidents of Filipino American violence against Japanese Americans, and Japanese colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945 created a legacy of animosity between Korean Americans and Japanese Americans.

Since the knowledge of white Americans about Asian Americans was structured by the linking together of them as Orientals, the self-understanding of intellectuals who entered American institutions of scholarship reflected this structure. For instance, at the most important institution producing knowledge about Asian Americans during the period between 1920 and 1965, the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology, Chinese American and Japanese American students were recruited to study what the white sociologists considered the "Oriental problem:" the question of whether Orientals could be assimilated into American society. Drawn into academic institutions that were overwhelmingly white and male, these students created knowledge that answered the interests of their colleagues, and at the same time came to understand themselves through the social theories that they learned.

Under the leadership of social theorists such as Robert E. Park, William I. Thomas, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth, social scientific research at Chicago and at a number of universities on the West Coast and in Hawaii were dominated by University of Chicago-trained social scientists. These sociologists, who created the foundation for much of American social scientific theory on culture, urban studies, labor relations, family life, race relations, and immigration, began a research program that focused upon those they termed "Oriental Americans." They were specifically interested in the possibilities of cultural assimilation, the wholesale adoption by American-born Orientals of American culture to the extent that they were culturally identical to white Americans. Having already studied the cultural assimilation of immigrants from Europe, the Chicago sociologists were hopeful that Asian Americans, as immigrants and racial minorities, offered a link between these studies and research on African Americans.

The white sociologists found that second-generation Chinese American and Japanese American students not only made perfect researchers, but that they were the ideal subjects for research. Proving that cultural assimilation was possible, these second-generation Oriental Americans were American in every sense except their skin color. In the words of Robert Park, they were like Americans in exotic Halloween masks, identical in behavior, speech, and ideas to white Americans.

The Chicago sociologists' theories drew extensively upon the experiences described by their Chinese American and Japanese American subjects. For instance, in 1924 a young Japanese American student named Kazuo Kawai gave a long interview on the difficulties he had experienced being accepted as an American in the US and also as a Japanese in Japan. The Chicago sociologists used his testimony, and many others like his, to generalize social theories about marginalization. The American-born students saw themselves caught between two worlds, alien to the Asian cultures of their parents, and yet denied entrance into the white American culture that they had learned in school. Interestingly, when other students of Chinese and Japanese heritage came to study at the University of Chicago and at the numerous American universities that taught Chicago social theories, these students came to understand themselves with the help of the definitions they found in these theories.

Divided Identity

One of the most important Chicago-trained sociologists to study Asian Americans was the Chinese American sociologist Rose Hum Lee. Receiving her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1947, Lee became committed to the project of assimilating Chinese Americans into mainstream American society. Her research work directed anger at any obstacle to the integration of Orientals, whether it was Chinatown organizations that sheltered Chinese Americans and thus kept them apart

from whites, or white Americans who hypocritically claimed their lack of racism while simultaneously excluding Asians from their neighborhoods and workplaces. One of the most interesting qualities of Lee's research and life was how her theories regarding cultural assimilation reflected her own difficulties as a Chinese American woman. Much of Lee's commitment to American assimilation was derived from her belief that American culture offered modern gender roles to women, and that traditional Chinese culture denied women the freedom to accomplish what she herself had managed.

Within Lee's theories, the opposition between what was Chinese and what was American was stark. Her existence within American society could only make sense if some traits of her life were associated with American culture, and other parts were associated with a traditional China that was exotic and different. It was telling that those traits that her white American colleagues and friends found most acceptable, such as ancient Chinese philosophy, religion, calligraphy and painting, were also the ones Lee valued, and those traits that were viewed in a negative light were those that Lee herself wanted Chinese Americans to eradicate.

In a very different manner, the Chinese American novelist Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior (1978) expresses the tensions involved in definitions of identity that attempt to extricate what is American and what is Asian. Kingston's novel exemplifies through its metaphor of ghosts the

haunting ephemeral quality of ethnic identity. As a memoir about childhood in the US, it shows how the meaning of what exists in America and the memories of what was there in China are impossible to distinguish.

American readers responded favorably to Kingston's descriptions of an exotic and haunting Chinese past, and the popular reception and continuing sales of her book point to her powerful lyric prose style, but also to the continuing desire for the exotic that her text fulfills. Like Rose Hum Lee's need to calculate what were desirable and undesirable Chinese traits in the context of American colleagues who valued her for being Chinese, Kingston and other Asian American writers face a market for cultural representations of Asian Americans that commodifies the exotic. Regardless of the intentions of Asian American writers and artists, the reception of their work by a larger public often reflects this desire for what is uniquely Oriental about them.

History, Memory and Asian American Identity

The haunting presence of the past, in particular memories passed down of ancestors' lives, is a narrative of ethnic identity that extends beyond Kingston's metaphor of ghosts from a faraway land. The presence of the past within present Asian American identity has also been powerfully demonstrated by memories of the forced internment of over 120,000

Japanese Americans during World War II. Although almost two-thirds were American citizens by birth, Japanese Americans were treated as foreigners without constitutional rights, and the traumatic effects of being stripped of their possessions and exiled to barbed wire camps far from their homes left a lasting effect on their identity as Japanese Americans. Sansei (third-generation) Japanese Americans growing up in the 1970s discovered in their own lives the lingering effects of what had happened to their parents and grandparents. Pushing for some form of redress for internment, Japanese Americans of all ages underwent a process of rediscovering the power and meaning of the past, joined by other Asian Americans who recognized that it might have easily been themselves who were interned.

Asian American studies, and other forms of ethnic studies that came into being in the 1970s, was a direct reaction to the exclusion and exoticization of Asians in America. The very term "Asian American" was coined by activists and intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to the exotic connotations of the term "Oriental." Valuing a past that had its roots in Asia, yet emphatically sounding a right to be treated as Americans, Asian American activists turned Orientalism on its head. The pursuit of Asian American studies arose as part of a larger political challenge to the oppression and marginalization of Asians in the United States and around the world, in particular in light of the racism displayed during American wars in Southeast Asia. Many of the proponents of Asian American

consciousness were American-born Chinese and Japanese Americans, but they joined with recent immigrants and with other people of color both in the US and around the world against racism.

By the 1970s, changes in immigration had transformed American society. For the first time since the 1920s and 1930s, migrants from Asia were entering the US. in large numbers. New legislation in 1965 replaced immigration laws which had barred Asians for over forty years. Though the framers of the legislation had anticipated only a small number of Asian immigrants as a result of the reform, the laws proved pivotal in allowing new and significant numbers of Asian immigrants. By the 1970s, migrants from the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea and India began to emigrate to the US to fill jobs in the burgeoning economy. This new generation of migrants was different from earlier waves of mostly male laborers. Often coming over as family units, large numbers of highly educated and skilled economic immigrants proved a boon to the US economy, sometimes transforming high-tech industries. The majority of Asian immigrants were unskilled workers, but these high-profile professionals joined a growing number of second- and third-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans in white-collar jobs that had previously barred Asians.

The Model Minority Myth

The high levels of education among recent Asian immigrants, combined with the drive for success shown by many children of immigrants, has led to a new characterization of Asian Americans as a "model minority." The seeds of the description of Asian Americans' exemplary status had been planted during the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942. Forced to prove their loyalty, Japanese Americans evinced a super-patriotism that allowed for little dissension, and was marked by the demand for overachievement. The 442nd Regiment, a segregated Japanese American unit that suffered horrendous casualties during World War II, was lionized for its sacrifice and used as an example to prove the unquestionable loyalty of Japanese Americans. Such extolations of the achievements of Japanese Americans continued after the war, as Japanese American intellectuals and those who had supported them, including many social scientists at the University of Chicago, produced studies that argued that the Confucian culture of Japanese Americans had helped them achieve success in the United States.

By the late 1960s and during the 1970s, the exemplary status of Japanese Americans was extended to other Asian American groups, and the myth of a model minority was accepted by many Asian Americans, as well as those white Americans who argued that African Americans and other groups that had suffered racism should follow the lead of Asians. Rather than just ascribing success to hard work and sacrifice, much of the rhetoric of the model minority has explained Asian American achievement as the

result of some unique Asian quality such as Confucianism, an exoticization that has continued to define Asian Americans as essentially foreign. In addition, the pitting of Asian Americans against other racial minorities has had divisive effects to this day.

War and Asian Americans

The impact of war has also continued to be central to the history of Asian Americans since 1965. By the 1980s, two of the most significant groups of recent Asian immigrants were from the former American colony of the Philippines and from South Korea, which has had a significant American military and cultural presence since the Korean War of 1950 to 1953. As a result of the Vietnam War that ended in 1975, tens of thousands of former allies from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos came as refugees to the United States. Hmong and other nomadic tribes recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to fight secretly against the North Vietnamese have had the most difficult time in the US. Thrust suddenly into urban America, these refugees of American wars have found their exile to an unwelcoming US particularly difficult. A sizable portion still live in poverty, and they continue to struggle in their adjustment to a new home.

As with the colonization of the Philippines, American military presence has continued to be a major factor in the cultural representations of Pacific Islanders. Residents and migrants from Samoa, Guam, and other Pacific

islands dominated by the US since World War II share the characterizations that have marked native Hawaiians and Filipinos. Often portrayed through the lens of sexual recreation for American servicemen, Pacific Islanders, in particular women, have been viewed as sexually available and ascribed with primitive sexuality.

Different Forms of Orientalism

The label of primitive that was applied to Filipino Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century has continued to place all Pacific Islanders in a hierarchy of civilization that reduces them to a third world, underdeveloped status. This “Polynesian” variant of Orientalism has served to separate Pacific Islanders from other Asian Americans because of the different way they have been treated. For instance, even though there has been an enormous influx of highly educated Filipino immigrants since the 1970s, particularly in the medical professions, Filipino Americans are seldom envisioned as model minorities in the same way most East Asian immigrants are.

The variations between the forms of Orientalism that have defined differing groups of migrants from Asia and the Pacific have had important results. The question of who is Orientalized and in what ways has affected which immigrant groups are even present in cultural representations of Asian Americans. Korean Americans and for the most part Vietnamese

Americans have found themselves linked with Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, suffering and benefiting from Orientalist definitions that grant them an exotic, civilized culture.

Left out have been Pacific Islanders and South Asians. Earlier migrations of laborers from India, in particular from the Punjab, went in significant numbers to Canada and other British colonies, and some made their way to the United States, but they have rarely been considered by Americans as Oriental in the same manner as the Chinese and Japanese. Especially in comparison to the massive Orientalist discourse concerning India that marks British cultural history, South Asians in the US have been completely ignored. Recent South Asian immigrants have faced the question of whether to identify with other Asian Americans, in particular in response to the effects of a model minority characterization that has divided highly educated South Asian migrants.

In a similar manner to successful professionals among other Asian American groups, South Asian Americans have had to choose between identifying themselves with white Americans who have applauded their achievements and granted them honorary white status, or retaining an awareness of the continuing effects that Orientalism has had not only on themselves, but other less successful Asian American groups. One of the arguments for an Asian American pan-ethnicity is that different strains of

Orientalism, in particular the “primitive Polynesians” and “civilized Orientals,” have had much in common.

For the last seventy years, Asian American intellectuals and artists have been caught between the need to create knowledge and cultural representations that are valuable within a market dominated by the desires of whites, and a need to help through their knowledge others who have been similarly treated as Orientals. Asian Americans have been commodified for being exotic and different at the same time that they have been marginalized for the same reasons. Always tied to some other far away place, and marked with the desire for and abhorrence of the foreign that suffuses the use of the term Oriental, Asian Americans continue to struggle to define themselves as part of the American social body.

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