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Mari Yoshihara. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. v + 242 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-514534-2; $71.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514533-5.

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Women's Visions of East Asia

In recent years, there have been a number of important interdisciplinary studies concerning the historical development of Americans' perceptions and representations of Asia. John Kuo Wei Tchen and Christian Klein are just two scholars who have contributed to the burgeoning historiography on American Orientalism, a discourse (revised from the concept developed by the late Edward Said) that sets the United States apart from Asia by subordinating the latter.[1] This new literature shows that American imperialism has not been benign but rather a force in the domination of Asia-Pacific peoples. While this new literature improves our understanding of Americans' visions of Asia and the U.S. imperial project in the Asian Pacific, it does not specifically address white women's role in the discourse. In *Embracing the East*, Mari Yoshihara, an associate professor in the American Studies Department at the University of Hawaii, enhances our understanding of American Orientalism as it pertains to China and Japan, by exploring white women's participation in the discourse. Yoshihara draws on methodologies from literary analysis and cultural studies framed with historical contextualization. She argues that during the period from the 1870s to the 1940s, as the United States developed its informal empire in the Asia-Pacific, middle- and upper-class white women were significant players in the perpetuation and complication of American Orientalism. In some cases, they were complicit in U.S. imperialism, in other situations, they criticized it.[2]

According to Yoshihara, this exceptional form of Orientalism created a binary that subordinated Asia and privileged the United States. It also gendered the "East" as feminine and the "West" as masculine. In a compact yet highly nuanced book, Yoshihara contends that in their engagement with Asia through the discourse, white women found themselves the "other" in the "East." White women benefited from this cultural imperialism in that they "gained material and affective power both in relation to American society and vis-Ã -vis Asian subjects, which brought new meanings to their identities as American women" (p. 6). To support her argument, Yoshihara provides readers with a variety of illuminating "diverse modes and sites" within which white women, as consumers of "Asian" objects, students of cultural texts, and popular and scholarly writers about Asia, contributed to

a gendered construction of Orientalism (p. 10).

One of the ways white women participated in Orientalism was through the consumption of "Asian" goods toward the end of the nineteenth and extending into the early decades of the twentieth century. She traces how white women incorporated Asian objects such as goods and artwork for both personal and household consumption. "Asian" representation extended to the public sphere in the form of world fairs such as the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876, where Asians were displayed as low on the racial hierarchy, spectacles and curiosities. Moreover, upper-class female collectors of Asian art, such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and her sister Lucy Truman Aldrich, modeled the new refinement for middle-class women. To the collectors, Asian art symbolized the pre-modern and a simple pre-industrial past. By bringing Asian objects into their homes, white women were able to connect with Asia, but they did so within the confines of the home or through museum displays. Spurred by rising levels of the middle-class, companies began targeting female consumers in order to popularize Asian-style goods sold through catalogs or specialty stores. Moreover, white women artists such as Mary Cassatt, Bertha Lum and Helen Hyde also incorporated "Asianness," in that they incorporated Asian objects and designs into their work. Yoshihara illustrates how female artists did not necessarily depart from the common vision of a feminized Asia. However, using Asian forms did allow these artists to work in ways that helped produce "Asian" art to an American public fascinated with the East.

White women did more than simply perpetuate stereotypical views of Asia. Yoshihara shows in her complicated discussion of white female actors/singers as Asian heroines on stage, how some women became the discourse. At the same time as Japan was emerging as a world power, on stage these women performed in roles that symbolically tamed this new strength. These New Women "acted" and embodied Asian femininity. Yoshihara highlights a handful of white female performers who took on these "Asian" roles. For example, Blanche Bates and Geraldine Farrar, both of whom played the tragic and naive Cho-Cho-San in the Italian opera *Madame Butterfly*, illustrate their complicated relationship to American Orientalism. In their roles, the women furthered Asian stereotypes, bolstered the image of the New Woman, and enhanced their careers. Similar to the female artists who relied on Asian assistants to develop their "Asian" art, the female leads researched their roles by employing Japanese maids to instruct them in "authentic Asian" womanhood. However, while conveying Japanese femininity, their acting also strengthened their Americanness. Performance extended to poets as well, especially those from the literary modernist school such as Amy Lowell, who incorporated "Asianness" into their translations. Through this medium, Lowell's translations of Chinese poetry produced "gendered constructions of the East and West, established through specific uses of language and form." However, Lowell also questioned "the masculinist vision of U.S. imperialism" (p. 103).

Perhaps white American women's connection with Asia was the strongest where the region was not simply a symbol, but an actual place. Writers Agnes Smedley and Pearl S. Buck, both of whom wrote about China, were crucial in influencing the American public's perceptions. These women were not simply writers–they were advocates for China and spent considerable time there that gave them some authority. Smedley, author of several books on China including *Daughter of Earth* (1929) and *China Fights Back* (1938), resided in China from the late 1920s until 1941, committed to the Communist cause and seeking a superior form of gender and sexual relations that was unavailable to her elsewhere. Of all the women profiled in this book, Buck was arguably the most influential concerning American perceptions of China. A daughter of American missionaries, Buck grew up in China. She returned to the United States in 1934 after publishing the Pulitzer-prize winning *The Good Earth* (1931). In the United States, Buck became an outspoken civil rights activist and promoter of cross-cultural understanding between Asian countries and the United States. Both Smedley's and Buck's writings about China presented positive images to American audiences. Yet, in their books, neither author could present an unmediated China. While Smedley injected her own Western visions of gender and sexuality onto China, Buck ultimately did not challenge the prevailing Orientalism.

Embracing the East is a welcome addition to the literature on American Orientalism and imperialism. Yoshihara introduces us to a group of white women who participated in American Orientalism. This is especially important because historians have traditionally been reluctant to characterize the United States as an empire-builder–most of the conversation has been on white women in the British example.[3] Accordingly, *Embracing the East* contributes to a significant discussion about how white women in the United States have enhanced an imperialistic vision and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes. Some of this analysis in Yoshihara's book is impressive, especially her in-depth discussion about per-

forming "Asia." However, there are places where Yoshihara's argument could benefit from further support or elaboration. For example, if young American women admired the actors as evidenced by fan clubs, did they do so because of their exertion of New Womanhood or because of the performance for a predominantly wealthy audience? It would be helpful, for instance, beyond the small pool of popular "experts" and handful of performers, to know more about how middle-class American women engaged with or interpreted the discourse. In addition, Yoshihara rightly criticizes American Orientalism for its conflation of Asia and Asian peoples, but by only focusing on China and Japan, the author contributes to this monolithic characterization. Finally, the large sections of the book utilizing literary analysis may present a challenge for some historians.

Notes

[1]. The revival of literature on American perceptions of Asia include John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), and Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For Orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

[2]. Important monographs on the interrelationship between the United States, imperialism, and gender, include Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), and Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in the Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[3]. On the European example, see for instance Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

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