

Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race. By Sean Metzger. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014; pp. xii + 300. \$85 cloth, \$32 paper, \$31.99 e-book.

The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday. By Ju Yon Kim. New York and London: New York University Press, 2015; pp. x + 287. \$89 cloth, \$28 paper, \$23.80 e-book.

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Reviewed by Esther Kim Lee, *University of Maryland, College Park*

In the past few years, a number of scholars have questioned how Asia, as an episteme, functions in performance. This group of scholars, which includes Lucy San Mae Pablo Burns, Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, and Eng-Beng Lim, interrogate Asia as an unstable, constructed, and ultimately performative concept that nevertheless has a material and immediate impact on the lives of those who look phenotypically like Asians or Asian Americans. It is this very contradiction—the performative and the material—that has led the scholars to engage in an enriched discussion across the fields of critical race studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, Asian diaspora studies, law, and Asian American theatre. *Chinese Looks* and *The Racial Mundane* exemplify this welcomed paradigm-challenging set of queries and discussions. Both books are grounded in thorough research of multiple historical periods and performative genres, and their authors, using wide-ranging examples and case studies from theatre, film, novels, fashion, and performance art, illuminate how Asia—in its manifold meanings and iterations—is performed.

Both Metzger and Kim focus on the quotidian to interrogate how aesthetics and politics intersect in performance. By quotidian, the authors cite clothing, hair, habits, and what Kim calls the mundane. From the perspective of European and Euro-American cultures, the Asian body has been historically marked as different, exotic, and strange, and stereotypes of Asian men and women have been perpetuated through theatre, film, fashion, and other expressions of culture. Such stereotypes have stemmed from the surface or “looks,” as Metzger puts it in the title, of the body as perceived by those who do not understand what they are seeing. An Asian body onstage, onscreen, or in everyday life can thus be seen as more theatrical than other unmarked bodies. Metzger and Kim choose to use the quotidian as the site of critical inquiry in order to draw attention to how the Asian body has navigated the complex signifying system of racial formation.

Chinese Looks begins with the story of Metzger’s memory of his maternal grandmother wearing her *qipao*, “a short-sleeved, silk sheath topped with a mandarin collar and fastened over her left breast” (1). The memory of his grandmother’s clothing functions as a cornerstone in Metzger’s study of how fashion and “everyday adornment” can explicate macrohistorical issues such as Sino-American relations, race, politics, economics, and national belonging; in particular, he is interested in discovering how attire can generate “layers of meaning” (5). By coining the term “the skein of race,” Metzger emphasizes the theatrical aspects of fashion and interprets clothing as analogous to racialized skin (12). Spanning

150 years, the book is divided into three parts organized chronologically: “The Queue,” “The *Qipao*,” and “The Mao Suit.” The first part, which contains two chapters, examines the queue, or the long braided hair worn by men loyal to the late Qing dynasty. Because many laborers from China to the United States in the nineteenth century wore the queue, the hairstyle became the “dominant visual signifier of Chineseness” in the American imagination (21). The first chapter focuses on Charles Parsloe, a white actor who specialized in yellowface acting in comedies and frontier melodramas starting in the 1870s; the second investigates the use of the queue in films that featured yellowface performance. In each chapter, Metzger describes how the queue was dramatized as both an extension of racialized performance and a material realization of both frontier and urban anxieties of white Americans, which were exemplified by the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The second part of *Chinese Looks* showcases three chapters that examine the *qipao*, one of the most recognizable pieces of Chinese clothing in the twentieth century. Worn by iconic actresses such as Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Maggie Cheung, the form-fitting gown with mandarin collar engendered what Metzger calls “material fantasies” of Chinese and Chinese American femininity (22). The three chapters span almost the entire twentieth century, with examples ranging from early cinema to a late twentieth-century Hong Kong film. The films cited in the chapters had transnational production and distribution, and Metzger carefully traces how they circulated among the United States, China, and Hong Kong. The third part examines images of the Mao suit, which was associated with gender equality and communism. In his comparative analysis of Mao suits and the *qipao*, Metzger suggests that the “different looks” provided “competing visions of Chineseness . . . particularly during the Cold War” (163). The examples of the Mao suit cited in the book are multiple and widely diverse, and Metzger deftly analyzes all of the transformations and contradictions that the suit represented. In the People’s Republic of China, the Mao suit stood for Chinese communism and the quotidian lives of its people; but in the United States, starting in the late 1960s, the suit became fashionable and was marketed as an “unexpected Christmas gift” sold at Bloomingdale’s (166). Metzger describes a number of case studies from theatre, film, and fashion to explicate how the Mao suit was used and then repurposed to facilitate “heterochronic Chineseness” (233).

Ju Yon Kim’s *Racial Mundane* also complicates notions of race as it relates to the body and the quotidian. Whereas Metzger’s book focuses on the production and reception of Chineseness transnationally, Kim’s book is more grounded in Asian American studies with a focus on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans. Her central question revolves around “the critical relationship among racialization, theatricality, and the mundane,” and she sums up her main argument with the statement: “[W]hen racialized, the mundane takes on a theatrical quality that accentuates its ambiguous relationship to the body” (9). Asian Americans have an ambiguous relationship to the mundane because it can represent, at once, assimilation and racialization. Kim articulates her argument in her Introduction with the aptly descriptive subtitle “Ambiguous Habits and the Paradox of Asian American Racial Formation.” As Kim explains, Asian American have been historically judged as looking and behaving differently than others in so-called American culture, as

exemplified by Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad construction sites choosing to eat rice instead of bread. Such mundane behavior was used to justify racism and immigration restrictions against Asians. Indeed, habitual behaviors have often been cited throughout US history to imagine “real” Americans. Using theories of theatre and performance studies, and others, Kim interrogates the stakes of invoking quotidian practices to make claims about racial differences.

The Racial Mundane is organized into four chapters, each of which provides close readings of the selected case studies from theatre, novel, and film. The first chapter compares two plays from the early twentieth century: J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton Jr.’s *The Yellow Jacket* and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. Though these plays are not by or about Asian Americans, Kim correctly emphasizes the significance of their popularity during the height of anti-Asian immigration policies, and she pays particular attention to the role of the Chinese property man in *The Yellow Jacket*, who influenced not only Wilder’s play but also American conventions of spectatorship. Kim continues her elaboration of the mundane and racialization in Chapter 2 by turning her attention to how everyday rituals are related to a sense of community in Velina Hasu Houston’s play *Tea* and Joy Kogawa’s novel *Itsuka*, both of which are about Japanese North Americans after World War II. Kim’s approach to the texts is comparative and literary, and she applies the same kind and caliber of analysis to her reading of Elizabeth Wong’s play *Kimchee and Chitlins* and Anna Deavere Smith’s solo show *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* in Chapter 3. In this chapter, Kim identifies cross-racial performances of the mundane as both a critical focal point of examination and possible “openings” for performances to “mediate interracial conflicts” (170). The fourth and the last chapter of *The Racial Mundane* best illustrates Kim’s description of the paradox of inscribing Asian Americans as both ideal and impossible Americans. She provides in-depth and nuanced readings of the film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (directed by Justin Lin) and Lauren Yee’s play *Ching Chong Chinaman* with a rigorous examination of the stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities and embodiments of the yellow peril. The mundane—such as doing homework or taking family photos—highlights the paradox of the paired and contradictory stereotypes, and Kim identifies works by Asian American filmmakers, novelists, and playwrights that underscore the lived meaning of that paradox.

Chinese Looks and *The Racial Mundane* end with an Epilogue and an Afterword, respectively, to signal how the study of the relationship between the quotidian and racialization can be extended to other genres. Metzger examines how the tuxedo has come to symbolize a global notion of masculinity by scrutinizing the actor Jackie Chan’s fashioning of the attire in popular films, and Kim suggests that YouTube and other online sites have emerged as popular venues for Asian Americans to showcase their everyday behaviors. Both books present new insights into how race, body, performance, and the quotidian intersect, and the analyses provided by Metzger and Kim should inspire other scholars to expand further the critical examination of Asia in the fields of theatre and performance studies.

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