

Off-White: Yellowface and Chinglish by Anglo-American Culture

SHENG-MEI MA

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Sheng-Mei Ma's newest monograph explores the literary construction of orientalism(s) through the metaphor of "off-white." In this collection of essays, he illuminates the voicing of characters and creation of places in literature and film that play to Western constructions of the other, anchoring his analysis on the writings of Fanon, Bakhtin, Said and Freud. Using texts from the 20th and 21st centuries and written by artists of both European and Asian ancestry, he argues "that Anglo-American culture does not so much relinquish its old habits over the Orient and Orientals as repurpose them" (p. 10).

Off-White opens with a discussion of the role of missionaries, merchants and diplomats in the creation of what Ma describes as "Chinglish," a deviation of normative speech that is tied to racial constructions of inferiority and superiority. His case study is Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of European-American missionaries, who spent most of her life in China. Despite claims of fluency, Buck uses "off-white" dialogue in portions of her novels and not her supposed knowledge of the language. Film adaptations support the orientalist practices found in her novels through music and the hiring of white actors to play Chinese characters. The next chapter shifts to explore how tropes found in British colonist fictions are subsequently recycled in American ethnic literature, looking at Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976). Although not mentioned, Ma's critique is reminiscent of Frank Chin's indictment of Kingston's work for its portrayal of Chinese gender roles and patriarchy. The next two chapters explore detective fiction and film, starting with Sherlock Holmes, and the use of "Incidental Orientalism" (p. 73). At the same time, other European writers incorporate techno-orientalism in their detective storytelling: the characterization of Asians and Asian Americans as simultaneously primitive and adept with computers, machines and other gadgets.

Most of the other chapters explore the ways in which both Asian and Asian American fiction and film manipulate the systems of power inherent in orientalist discourses and, at times, potentially reaffirm stereotypes. Ma analyses, for example, *Ghost in the Shell* (1989), which started as a manga by Masamune Shirow before becoming a cartoon series and later a live-action film starring Scarlett Johansson. In this chapter, he critiques the "universal whiteness" (p. 103) of the story's protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi, which has become the default in Japanese manga and anime. Other chapters compellingly describe how China's current status in the world relates to other permutations of orientalism(s). Ma highlights how Chinese literature and film, such as Rao Pingru's 2013 *Pingru meitang: wolia de gushi* (*Our Story: A Memoir of Love and Life in China* [trans. Nicky Harman, 2018]), orientalize non-Han Chinese, the majority of whom live in western regions of the country, and revise understandings of the past to conform with current social and political agendas. In another essay, the author notes the rising numbers of international students from the mainland traveling to his home university, which, like many American land grant institutions, have turned to overseas recruitment to offset budget shortfalls. He argues that "instructors find themselves negotiating the ideals of liberal arts education" with students' "objective of returning home to China with a piece of paper ready to be mounted on the office wall" (p. 194). These issues play out in the classroom with students navigating their own ideological baggage and the need for English language

proficiency, all of which is driven by the hope of earning a degree from a prestigious American college or university.

While this book provides important insight into the changing nature of orientalist discourses, there are places where *Off-White* could make stronger, more compelling arguments. Jumping across periodizations and geographies not only confuses readers, but also reifies the flattening of temporal and spatial differences that other scholars argue are key to understanding the complexity and pervasiveness of the construction of racial categories. The avoidance of Freud's psychoanalysis, which was largely debunked in the late 20th century, and the incorporation of the Birmingham School's theories about popular culture would help situate how orientalism(s) circulate among producers and consumers. For academics, that also means recognizing that audiences might not relate to what we suppose the meaning of a text to be.

Despite these criticisms, *Off-White's* explorations of 20th and 21st centuries orientalism(s), moving beyond Edward Said's original permutation in *Orientalism* (1978), is a laudable goal. Graduate students and scholars interested in both cultural studies and literature should find many of the ideas that Ma has put forth to push the conversation about the constructed nature of race in new directions that are potentially provocative. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the persistence of power relations inherent in the othering of people and places that continue to play out in popular culture on a global scale.

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Chinese Folklore Studies Today: Discourse and Practice

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The academic study of the customs of rural peasants and other local populations began in the early 19th century in Germany, Britain and other European countries. Its emphasis was on the classification of material for comparative analysis, including folktales, ballads and myths. After the Second World War, folklore studies began to include people in urban centres as well. All of this developed in a religious context dominated by monotheistic religious traditions that had long been studied by church historians and theologians, so locally based religious activities of ordinary people were generally not a focus of observation, unless perhaps they included beliefs and activities considered heterodox. This cultural context helped shape the development of folklore studies in the West and elsewhere.

Pages 5–18 of this book include a discussion of the history of folklore studies in China, noting that its early forms were influenced by Japanese scholars and by scholars at Peking University. In 1925, Gu Jiegang and four colleagues at Peking University organized a survey trip to a temple in a suburb of Beijing to study a popular pilgrimage (p. 8). In my view this study of a local religious tradition was a good start, but one that seems not to have been emphasized in later decades. I have enjoyed reading all the essays in this book, but regret the lack of engagement of its authors with the rich and lively scholarship on Chinese local religion that has