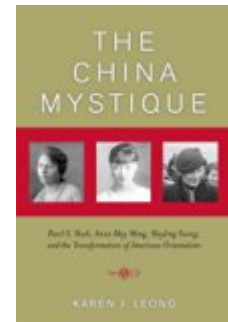


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen J. Leong. *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005. x + 171 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24423-8.

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In this book, Karen J. Leong explores changing attitudes of American people toward China and the Chinese people in the transition period of the 1930s and 1940s when Japan became more aggressive and China emerged as an important ally of the United States. Leong calls this new attitude “the China Mystique” and defines it as “a romanticized, progressive, and highly gendered image of China” that was popularized during that particular period in the United States (p. 1). Leong distinguishes this from the existing American orientalism at the time that presented the Chinese as “primitive, slavish, exotic, manipulative, and amoral” (p. 155). In order to capture Americans’ changing attitudes toward others, she focuses on three women with important transnational ties, author Pearl S. Buck, actor Anna May Wong, and Mayling Soong, all of whom lived in the interstices between America and China. By examining a variety of sources, such as novels, memoirs, diaries, letters, magazines, newspapers, and movies, Leong demonstrates not only that the China mystique was a window through which Americans viewed China, but that it also served as a way for Americans to reconsider their national identity.

In tracing changing American attitudes toward China and the Chinese, Leong examines how those new attitudes influenced her subjects’ lives and careers. American openness toward China helped Buck become an authority on China, provided Wong with new opportunities in her career, and allowed the American public to positively accept Soong. Leong argues, however, that not only were these three women affected by the China mystique, but they also actively developed this positive perception of China. Buck, for example, strove to improve American images of China and the Chinese people by

portraying the “real” China in her 1931 novel, *The Good Earth*. Wong constantly redefined herself and struggled with the orientalist attitudes of the American public in order to overcome her limitations and succeed as a film actor. She also actively challenged American orientalism off screen by criticizing the assumptions inherent in her own role in film. Soong, who became Madame Chiang Kai-shek, capitalized on her American education and knowledge of American culture to project an image of the Chinese possessing similar aspirations as Americans.

Leong’s concern goes further than just illuminating how her subjects were involved in American perceptions of China. Rather, she attempts to show how the changing international context affected American popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s. Leong uses her female actors as windows through which she investigates “how gender shapes racial and national identity formations” (p. 5). After tracing how the previously alienated and orientalized Chinese people became gendered and romanticized, Leong concludes that a gendered notion of China was accepted in American popular culture as it helped the American public come to terms with their country’s changing position in the world. By illustrating how gendered images of China helped American people confirm their own values, Leong demonstrates that the China mystique was not simply a new attitude toward China and the Chinese, but closely related with the changing national identity in the United States.

Leong emphasizes the relationship between the China mystique and Americans’ national identity to reveal the limitations of the China mystique. Despite a mostly positive attitude toward China and the Chinese during the 1930s and 1940s, Americans’ orientalist lens

remained fundamentally in place and only rare individuals attempted to understand China in all its diversity. Instead, the American public at large consumed the China mystique mainly because it was a useful strategy for coping with their identity in a changing world. Leong demonstrates the limits of the China mystique through her three subjects. Buck's orientalist lens and focus on the United States compromised her role as a China expert. Her portrayal of the "real" China and critique of racial prejudice in American society reveals that Buck was more concerned with emphasizing American values, such as democracy, freedom, and opportunity, than she was with presenting China as it really was. Wong had to resort to playing to existing stereotypes of China and the Chinese when she attended the fundraising parties for the Chinese people as the feminized image of China was still dominant among the American public at the time. This shows that her challenge to American orientalism was not completely successful. Soong's positive images of China helped Americans enhance their own national pride and affirm their own values, but never produced any meaningful political results in U.S.-China relations.

In all three instances, Leong argues that the China mystique was not necessarily a new perception among the American people, but rather a variation of traditional American orientalism. Interestingly, though, she does not describe or highlight the continuity between the American orientalism and the China mystique. Although she alludes to feminized or gendered images of China that existed even before 1930s, she does not emphasize or provide direct evidence to support the allusion. Still, this minor flaw does not devalue Leong's work. Her close exploration of the three transnational women who related China and the United States in different ways successfully demonstrates how the transformation of the international contexts of the 1930s and 1940s was entangled with domestic public culture. Moreover, her balanced examination of the particular historical context and the roles Buck, Wong, and Soong played makes her argument persuasive. This book is a good addition both to the growing body of transnational history and to literature that considers how domestic and international contexts are related.

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