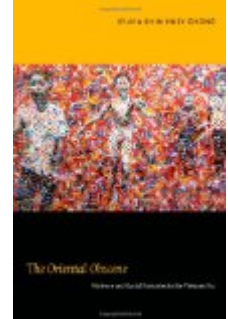


**Sylvia Shin Huey Chong.** *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. xiii + 364 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4854-2.



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**Published on** H-Ethnic (April, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Amy J. Johnson (Brown University)

Scholars and journalists have long debated the influence of visual media in both the outcome and memory of the Vietnam War. The visual experience of witnessing the shocking imagery of death and violence on television made the Vietnam War the “living-room war,” leaving deep imprints on the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans. *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* investigates a broad range of Vietnam War visual representations including photographs, television news, fictional films, and documentaries. In her analysis, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong highlights what she calls the oriental obscene, or how the oriental body is racialized through violence, and draws on psychoanalytic and film theory to elucidate the imagined relations between different racialized subjects in visual representations of the war and its veterans.

Chong argues that 1968 serves as the historical and representational origin of Vietnam era visual culture. National memory of 1968 included imagery of violence in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert

Kennedy, black urban riots in the 1960s, and white and black antiwar protests. Chong contends that within these violent memories a new racial phantasm emerged. The type of racial phantasm, or the “imagined relations ... between different racial subject positions ... that exceed the actual social relations between racialized subjects,” was the oriental obscene that imagined “the American body politic in relation to the Asian body” and also revealed new possibilities for cross-racial identification (pp. 9, 25).

The violent imagery and memories of 1968 linked black and white Americans to the Vietnamese “other.” Black antiwar protestors and veterans related their antiracist struggles to that of the Vietnamese and VietCong. For example, during the 1967 Spring Mobilization to End the War, black antiwar activists who were part of the Harlem contingent carried placards reading “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger,” “They Are Our Brothers Whom We Fight,” and “Black Men Should Fight White Racism, Not Vietnamese Freedom Fighters.” In chapters 2 and 3, Chong ana-

lyzes the infamous photographs, “Saigon Execution,” “Napalm Girl,” and those from the My Lai massacre, and demonstrates how historical narratives of these images reappeared in Hollywood films in the late 1970s about the Vietnam War, like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In both cases, white American veterans dehumanized and emasculated by war and suffering from psychic trauma identify themselves with the violence, suffering, and defeat of the Vietnamese body.

The second half of *The Oriental Obscene* explores the “kung fu craze” in America between 1972 and 1978, and analyzes a variety of films including *Billy Jack* (1971) and *The Street Fighter* (1974), as well as the television series *Kung Fu* (1972), to reveal the fantasy of mastery of body through kung fu, an orientalized mode of violence. The kung fu craze is intimately linked to the so-called Vietnam Syndrome, a perceived need for America to strengthen itself after experiencing defeat. In it, “the American body is orientalized by learning the ‘secret’ technologies of the Asian body and using those technologies to transform itself into an object that can no longer be violated” (p. 206). Chong discusses how second-wave feminists and Third World activists not only embraced martial arts as self-defense, but also envisioned the practice as critiques against the state. Yet it is Bruce Lee and his posthumous popularity that ultimately transfers the oriental obscene of martial arts from a foreign oriental body to American bodies. Representations of Lee as fighting injustice and transcending a racialized status reveal the continued possibilities of cross-racial identification, but also the possibility of “complete bodily mastery” and martial arts’ ability to “compensate for the violence of the Vietnam War” (p. 30).

Chong concludes the book by explaining how representations of the Vietnam War veteran as played by Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and martial artist Chuck Norris in *Missing in Action* (1984-88) began to reframe suf-

fering and mastery of the body as a narrative of white masculinity. This marked the end of the oriental obscene racial phantasm. Chong argues that the violence of the oriental obscene no longer served as a cross-racial critique of American politics. The inclusionary claims of neoconservative multiculturalism in the 1980s muted claims by racial minorities of white dominance, and emphasis on white ethnicity increasingly masked white hegemony. Thus, films like *The Karate Kid* (1984) are firmly entrenched in the discourse of multiculturalism which makes little room for acknowledging racial otherness.

Central to the argument of *The Oriental Obscene* is the visibility of Asians and Asian Americans in representations of the Vietnam War. While the “gook syndrome” racially marked Asians during the Vietnam Era as foreign subhuman enemies and justified American soldiers’ view of the Vietnamese as “the only good gook is a dead gook,” it also allowed Asians within the United States to recognize and protest their shared history of anti-Asian oppression. As Chong explains, Asian Americans formed a pan-ethnic identity that “utilized the Vietnamese--and particularly the VietCong--as a phantasmatic bridge between the myriad of forms of everyday racism experienced by Asians in America and the more spectacular forms of racism displayed in the military actions of the U.S. in Vietnam and broadcast in the mainstream visual media” (p. 103). Asian American soldiers serving during Vietnam faced what Daryl Maeda has termed “common racialization,” and were targeted as enemies or mistaken for Vietnamese and under suspicion for divided loyalties.[1] Such incidents reflected the limits of assimilation for Asians in the United States and further fueled the development of an Asian American political community and identity. Yet Chong notes that few Vietnamese Americans actually played a part in the Asian American movement. Most Vietnamese immigration occurred after the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 and the Refugee Act of 1980. The small

Vietnamese population present before 1975, only 2 percent of the Asian American population, was mostly educated, could speak English, and had connections through the South Vietnamese military or government who could facilitate Vietnamese migration to the United States before the fall of Saigon.

This distinction between the first wave of Vietnamese refugees and the later migrations, often depicted as “the boat people,” is important for Chong’s analysis of the model minority myth embodied by Vietnamese American Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the former South Vietnamese general who executed a VietCong suspect in 1968 on camera in the infamous “Saigon Execution.” Loan moved to the United States in 1975 and opened a restaurant in the suburbs of Washington DC that served American as well as Vietnamese and Chinese dishes, and he experienced relative economic success compared to the returning Vietnam War veterans who had difficulty finding work in the 1970s recession. Chong explains that many Americans read Loan’s success as an unsettling irony that “Americans could not win the war in Vietnam, yet the Vietnamese could come to America and succeed at the American dream, beating Americans at their own game” (p. 166). In 1978, the Immigration and Naturalization Service began proceedings to deport Loan based on Loan’s supposed display of “moral turpitude” in the “Saigon Execution” photograph. President Jimmy Carter later pardoned Loan, which halted the deportation trial process, but Chong argues that Loan’s targeting as morally unfit or unassimilated exposes the “shadowy economic underside of the supposedly positive model minority myth” (p. 164). As oriental “others” and potential economic threats, Loan and other first-wave Vietnamese refugees “could not be fully digested by an American nationality that desired to forget its participation in a failed imperialist endeavor” (p. 170).

Chong’s careful analysis of Loan’s case as a Vietnam War veteran and first-wave Vietnamese

refugee provides important insight on how the war shaped race relations for Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Though Chong provides a discussion of representations of Asian Americans in the 1980s through its racial lens of multiculturalism, she does not elaborate on the representation or adjustment experience of later and larger waves of Vietnamese refugees often perceived as “less ideal models of immigrants success” (p. 268). Chong notes that the “bad violence” or Cobra Kai dojo in *The Karate Kid* is led by a Vietnam War veteran, thus associated with the Vietnam War or with the Vietnamese. Yet the “bad” is offset by the “good” Asian model minority and pacifist Mr. Miyagi who happened to also be a war veteran, but of the decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Unit of Nisei soldiers in World War II. The contrast leads one to wonder whether this distinction among different Asian immigrant groups might have reimagined associations of violence with particular Asian immigrant bodies like those of the later Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees.

*The Oriental Obscene* is a sophisticated analysis of imagined relationships between the United States and the foreign Asian racialized body and offers much insight for scholars interested in mapping meanings and locations of whiteness, blackness, or other racializations during certain historical periods. Chong builds on the foundation of Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s racial formations (*Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* [2nd ed., 1994]) and goes beyond locating differential racializations, or formations of different racial categories defined in relation to white or whiteness. Instead, she centers the orientalized Asian body as what black, white, and Asians in the United States must come to terms with during the Vietnam era. Scholars interested in comparative race studies or with a particular focus on a “racial other” between black and white should consider Chong’s methodology for locating multiracial relationships. Though Chong is upfront about her interest in the imag-

ined rather than actual or social realities, her analysis of cultural texts provides reflections of the real and lived possibilities of cross-racial identification and mobilization.

Note

[1]. Daryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 104.

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**Citation:** Phonshia Nie. Review of Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

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