H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Henry Yu. *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 262 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515127-5.

Reviewed by Roger Daniels (Department of History, University of Cincinnati)

Published on H-Ethnic (October, 2001)

A New Way of Thinking about Old Ways of Thinking

A New Way of Thinking about Old Ways of Thinking

Henry Yu's *Thinking Orientals* is a major contribution to Asian American history. A third generation Chinese Canadian whose 1995 History Ph.D. is from Princeton, he now teaches at UCLA. The book is a history of a cohort of Asian American intellectuals, both immigrant and native-born, and a spirited analysis of elite thinking about "Orientals." It is most engagingly written with an occasional post-modern cast that will put off some readers but not this one. Much of the review that follows will focus on this or that concept or detail with which I disagree or would modify, however, the reader should not be misled into thinking that this work is not important. It is one of the most important recent works about Asian Americans. And although it is never wise to make too much of a single monograph, it would not come as a surprise if Yu were to become a major figure in the field.

Thinking Orientals is a work of intellectual history, a rare phenomenon in the Asian American field. Yu's focus is on Robert E. Park and other sociologists at or produced by the University of Chicago, their interactions with the Pacific Coast Survey of Race Relations, and, above all, with the Asian American intellectuals whom they recruited and trained. Although the Chicago Department of Sociology is perhaps the most studied and best documented academic department in the United States (at least ten other monographic works have focused on it since 1977) Yu is able to provide new and exciting perspectives and insights by examining Park and his colleagues primarily through the prism of their relations with the Asian American/Asian graduate students and junior colleagues whom they trained. Among the latter we get to meet and learn about not only scholars well known to specialists in the field–Rose Hum Lee, S. Frank Miyamoto, Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi, Tamotsu Shibutani, and Paul Chan Pang Siu–but also the lesser known Lucy Jen Huang, Yukiko Kimura, Beulah Ong Kwoh, Margaret M. Lam, Jitsuichi Masuoka, Eugene Shigemi Uyeki, and Ching-Chao Wu. These scholars are not only discussed in the text but are given capsule biographies as are their mentors. (Bingham Dai has a biography but seems to have fallen out of the text.) The mentors include many of the first cohort of sociologists to study Asian Americans. In addition to Park, the chief of these are Emory S. Bogardus, Clarence E. Glick, Forrest LaViolette, Andrew W. Lind, and Jesse F. Steiner.

Although Yu's publisher calls this book "the first intellectual history of Asian Americans" his own statements are much more modest and accurate. This study shows how crucial thinking about Orientals has been to the formulations of some of the most prominent theorists about race and culture in modern American intellectual life. The Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago serves as the central locus for almost everything in this book. (p. vi) During the 1920s, social scientists and missionary social reformers created the institutional practices that defined Orientals, drew Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans into an elite white social world, and further created new knowledge about Orientals in the United States. These institutional practices, which I emphasize in labeling the institutional construction of the Oriental problem in America, were at the heart of American Orientalism as a structure that constrained the lives of Asians in the United States (p. 79).

This focus on Chicago is both a strength and a weakness. The urbanist Sam Bass Warner once wrote an essay called "If All the World Were Philadelphia." Sometimes Yu forgets the subjunctive mood and writes as if all of

American Orientalism and race relations generally was Chicago and Chicago-related. A collateral shortcoming is to write, most of the time, as if American Orientalism was born in the 1920: e.g. "the inception of the Oriental Problem in the 1920s" (p. 188). In fact, of course, there was an American discourse about the Orient and Orientals even before there were any sizable number of Asians in the United States. Yu could argue that what existed in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries was not really "Orientalism" as he conceives it, but Yu's neglect of the accretion of attitudes and stereotypes that the thinkers he treats had to deal with and which were, willy-nilly, part of their Weltanschauung, robs his study of an important element.

One of the crucial elements that Yu does bring to his tour de force about what he calls "American Orientalism" is a wide ranging awareness of what it meant to be an outsider in academe in the years before–and after–World War II. He notes that in the 1920s and 1930s non-Protestant whites were also "marginal outsiders" (p. 201) but seems to believe that such prejudices have all but disappeared, a contention that many in that category would dispute. And in a curious and somewhat slipshod endnote dealing with the "model minority" phenomenon, which collapses several arguments into one and ignores the considerable scholarly discourse on this topic and its embrace by numerous Asian Americans, he writes "the success of ethnic whites such as Irish, Italians, and Jewish Americans in becoming indistinct has everything to do with *their ability to not be colored*." (my emphasis) The note ends with a prediction "Considering the continuing exoticization of Asian Americans, however, it is highly unlikely that Orientals will ever be seen as white" (en. 3, pp. 246-47). I find the rhetoric of the final sentence striking. Yu's use of the archaic "Orientals" in a contemporary and future context is notable, especially as he had pointed out in the preface that Yuji Ichioka had helped to make the term obsolete (p. viii and en. 3, p. 215) and repeated the point in the text itself. The use of the term "white" as if it were a biological constant rather than the social construct that many (most?) contemporary scholars of rac e now believe it to be is at odds with the thrust of most of Yu's discourse. And, unpleasant as it may be to say, the history of Asian Americans has long been punctuated by both verbal and behavioral stress on their "non-blackness." There is no index reference to "model minority," which is mentioned more than once, and it is not really useful, even for proper names: eg. there is no entry for Ichioka.

I was also disappointed that Yu did not have more to say about the famous/infamous Japanese Evacuation and Resettlement Study led by Dorothy Swaine Thomas which engaged several of the intellectuals he focuses on. However he merely notes the controversy in an endnote without weighing in (en. 20, p. 237).

There are a few minor errors of fact: "Japan Association" should be "Japanese Associations of America" (p. 75) and the American conquest of the Philippines was atrocious, but in no wise "genocidal pacification" (p. 152). On the same page, and elsewhere, Yu writes that the 1965 immigration act "reopened America to Asians." What the 1965 act did was to enlarge the reopenings that occurred between 1943 and 1952.

Despite these complaints, as indicated above, I find this is a thoughtful and exciting work which should stimulate research on other aspects of sophisticated intellectual discourse about the place of Asian Americans in American life and thought. One aspect of this that cries out for analysis is the ongoing perceptions of Asian Americans about not only members of their own particular ethnic group but also about others.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-ethnic

Citation: Roger Daniels. Review of Yu, Henry, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5611

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.