Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture

By Jane Iwamura

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Saffron-robed monks and long-haired gurus have become familiar characters on the American popular culture scene. Jane Iwamura examines the contemporary fascination with Eastern spirituality and provides a cultural history of the representation of Asian religions in American mass media. Encounters with monks, gurus, bhikkhus, sages, sifus, healers, and masters from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions provided initial engagements with Asian spiritual traditions. *Virtual Orientalism* shows the evolution of these interactions, from direct engagements with specific individuals to mediated relations with a conventionalized icon: the Oriental Monk. Visually and psychically compelling, the Oriental Monk becomes for Americans a "figure of translation"--a convenient symbol for alternative spiritualities and modes of being. Through the figure of the solitary Monk, who generously and purposefully shares his wisdom with the West, Asian religiosity is made manageable-psychologically, socially, and politically--for popular culture consumption. Iwamura's insightful study shows that though popular engagement with Asian religions in the United States has increased, the fact that much of this has taken virtual form makes stereotypical constructions of "the spiritual East" obdurate and especially difficult to challenge.

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Editorial Review

Review
Easily accessible, this work will interest students of American popular culture, media studies, and Asian American religiosity. Highly recommended.
--Choice

"Jane Iwamura has an uncanny and impressive way of combining popular culture, hermeneutics, studies in digitalization, categories of ethnic and racial formation, and US religious studies. This book provides an important introduction to a set of major Orientalist figures in popular genres that has not yet been given adequate scholarly attention. Iwamura's approach to popular culture is very deft: she not only pays close attention to the images at hand, but exposes what she takes to be the national and racial anxieties at play there through a close reading of the images' dissonant interpretations."
--Judith Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley

"*Virtual Orientalism* is a scholarly tour de force. It is also concise, compelling in its writing, and extraordinarily deft in its handling of its sources. It offers a comprehensive look at the years of scholarship that have made Iwamura a leader in the construction of the field of Asian American religions. It will undoubtedly become a crucial text in this growing field of research and scholarship, as well as in American studies, media studies, and religious studies, where studies of Asian American religions are otherwise still quite rare." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

"This elegant account is smartly argued and well illustrated, both visually and metaphorically."*--Madeline Y. Hsu, University of Texas*

"Virtual Orientalism is an enormously significant book, and I would say pathbreakingin its effect. It is original, accessible, and engaginly written. The genius of Iwamura's work is that she opens our eyes to the obvious...and enables us to see that object differently. Iwamura's work is sure to become a classic in race and media studies."*--Carolyn Chen*

"...well researched and useful cultural history of Asian religion in the U.S. from the fifties through the seventies."*--Lisa Nakamura, University of Illinois*

"It's a rare opportunity to watch a work unfold that creates a field of study and does it so well."*Rita Nakashima Brock, Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

"Iwamura's deft interweaving of popular culture, race and ethnicity studies, and religious studies guarantees that this text will establish itself as a must-read in classes on Asian religions in America, and religion and popular culture. Recommended."--*Religious Studies Review*

About the Author

Jane Naomi Iwamura is Visiting Scholar at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Her research focuses on Asian American religions, race and popular culture in the United States (with an emphasis on visual culture), and her publications include the co-edited volume, *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* (2003).

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