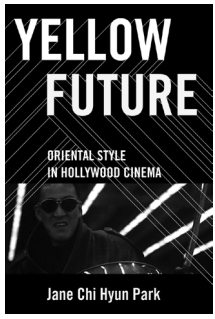
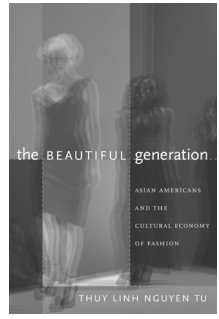
Review Essay

Oriental Style and Asian Chic: The Politics of Racial Visibility in Film and Fashion

Hee-Jung Serenity Joo





YELLOW FUTURE: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema. By Jane Chi Hyun Park. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2010.
THE BEAUTIFUL GENERATION: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion. By Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu. Durham: Duke University Press. 2011.

"If I *like* their race, how can that be racist?" goes the punch line, referring to Asians, in a famous 1990s sitcom. The humor derives from the unexpected delinking of racial difference and racial discrimination when it comes to Asians. The sentiment that Asians are desirable (in certain instances) is a product of the model minority myth, disseminated in the 1960s in an attempt to delegitimize the Civil Rights Movement. William Petersen's "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" was featured in the *New York Times* in 1966. In the same year, *U.S. News and World Report* published an article on Chinese Americans, entitled "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." In both instances, "Asian" values of studiousness, thrift, and a law-abiding nature are compared directly to the

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"delinquency" of "problem minorities," namely African Americans.

Vijay Prashad presents the repercussions of this model minority stereotype for Asian Americans as a reformulation of W. E. B. Du Bois's famous opening to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). At the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois asked African Americans, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Prashad asks, at the turn of the twenty-first century, "How does it feel to be a solution?" Both Jane Chi Hyun Park and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu pick up this question of the increased visibility and incorporation of Asian Americans and Asian cultural markers into different aspects of contemporary mainstream U.S. culture. Park ponders the reasons for the frequency of Asian characters, symbols, and motifs in mainstream Hollywood films. Her most engaging readings take on the interracial complexities of the model minority myth, whether Asians are depicted as industrious workers, wise sages, or kung fu experts. Tu, from a different perspective, turns to the supposed model minorities themselves, successful and up-and-coming Asian American fashion designers. She traces how these designers represent their own career trajectories within the persistence of this myth, as well as how they negotiate their racial identities at different stages of the design process, from conceptualization to production.

Despite their methodological differences, both Park and Tu provide critical analyses of the symbolic and material construction of Asian American racial difference without falling into the three traps that Park identifies as challenges to a critique of racial forms: "denouncing them as simple stereotypes unworthy of scholarly attention, automatically citing them as evidence of the increasing presence (and implied power) of Asians and Asian Americans […], or reclaiming them as subversive tactics that Asian American artists, critics, and audiences can use to resist [hegemonic cultural systems]" (viii-ix). From Hollywood blockbusters to design collections advertised in *Vogue* and *Elle*, both books carefully explore popular representations of Asia as both a racial and aesthetic category in order to uncover the cultural significance of such forms.

Historically, both works are informed by a late-capitalist contextualization of race. As an umbrella term created to consolidate political power and heighten visibility, "Asian American" has accounted for a vast array of peoples and cultures tied together by accidental geography disguised as racial coherence. The 1965 Immigration Act, responsible for ending quotas that had severely restricted migrations from Asia throughout the century, further added to the heterogeneity of this category. A selective immigration process resulted in a new wave of Asian immigrants delineated by class and education, including an educated managerial class, petit bourgeois merchants, and refugees that were a direct result of U.S. imperialist endeavors throughout the Pacific Rim. Domestically, the late twentieth century is also characterized by multiculturalist agendas, both on the part of the state (that celebrates diversity in lieu of emphasizing racial inequalities) as well as capitalism (that commodifies everything, including racial difference). Internationally, Asia enters the global economy, including Japan, the "tiger economies," China, and India. Within the context of such transnational complexities at the

turn of the twenty-first century, Park and Tu provide much needed analyses of the relationship between race and capitalism in popular culture.

In *Yellow Future*, Park argues that the workings of transnational, late capitalism (globalization) have led to the frequent depiction of East Asia and Asians as technologically superior, or at least connected to a sense of the future. Most of her chapters are engaged in some aspect of Orientalism. She draws on and expands upon Edward Said, John Kuo-wei Tchen's distiction between "patrician Orientalism" (of goods) and "commercial Orientalism" (of bodies), David Morley and Kevin Robins's notion of "techno-orientalism," and Wendy Chun's conceptualization of "high-tech Orientalism." The history of American Orientalism is structured by a shuffling between desire and rejection throughout the twentieth century, articulated in the supposed dichotomy of Asians as the "model minority" or the "yellow peril." Yet, as Gary Okihiro and Colleen Lye also observe, both the "good Asian" and "bad Asian" are one coherent product of the "economic efficiency" of capitalism, a system which conflates "Asiatic difference with the liberating *and* dehumanizing mechanisms of capitalism and the technologies that have fueled it" (42).

Within this historical context of Orientalism, Park defines "oriental style" as "the ways in which Hollywood films crystallize and commodify multiple, heterogeneous Asiatic cultures, histories, and aesthetics into a small number of easily recognizable, often interchangeable tropes that help to shape dominant cultural attitudes about Asia and people of Asian descent" (ix). She is careful to posit "oriental style" as at once an "aesthetic product" of commodification and part of an "ongoing historical process of […] racialization" (ix). She focuses on references to East Asia (its cultural aesthetics and its people) in Hollywood films of the last three decades, analyzing the means by which these racial forms are incorporated or marginalized in mainstream Hollywood films, particularly in relation to the narrative of capitalist development. Each of her film chapters begins with detailed historical or theoretical contextualization, yet Park's most salient arguments emerge from her close readings of the films themselves.

Park's critical analysis starts with the oriental style of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). She cites Douglas Pratt, whose explanation for the film's persistence as a cult classic is because "it drips with style" (57). She argues that the distinct "future noir" vision of the film is dependent upon the representations of Asia as a "consumable style" *and* Asians as "invisible worker[s]" (65). Much critical work has been devoted to the film's Orientalist style, yet little has been noted of the actual Asian bodies within it. *Blade Runner*'s plotline of Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) chasing escaped replicants through the streets of Los Angeles is, Park observes, structured around and against the many interactions between its white protagonists and Asian workers. There is Howie Lee (Robert Okazaki), the sushi bar chef who serves Deckard his food as well as serves as his translator; Hannibal Chew (James Hong), the subcontracted engineer who created the replicants' eyes; and the "Cambodian Lady" (Kimiko Hiroshige), unnamed in the film, a "street scientist" who identifies a clue for Deckard. Such

invisible Asian laborers structure the film's narrative of questioning the limits of humanity, literally serving and working for the film's primary (white) characters.

Another aspect of oriental style her book investigates is the role of more prominent Asian American characters in 1980s "buddy films." She notes that scholars such as Robert Lee, Dorinne Kondo, and Gina Marchetti have studied the ways in which Asian characters and styles function as simple narrative devices to help further develop the character of the white male protagonist. From a somewhat different vein, Park argues that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the "oriental buddy" "is an important and necessary complement to the survival of white American masculine identity in an increasingly transnational world" (122). In other words, in order to navigate the new pressures of late capitalism, the white protagonist must learn from and incorporate the teachings of his Asian American "buddy."

In *The Karate Kid* (1984), for example, Daniel Laruso's (Ralph Macchio) working class triumph and emergence "as a new liberal subject [is] curiously dependent on oriental otherness for self-expression" (109). It is significant that he learns karate through acts of manual labor (waxing cars, sanding floors, painting fences) taught by Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita). The nurturing Mr. Miyagi is revealed to be a decorated WWII war veteran, whereas John Kreese (Marin Cove), the psychopathic white "sensei" of the Cobra Kai, is a dishonorably discharged Vietnam War veteran. Park argues that, in a twist to the traditional workings of white patriarchy and capitalism, the film thus sets up Daniel and Mr. Miyagi's father-and-son relationship as the more authentically American one than that of the Cobra Kai, evidenced when Daniel wins the karate tournament by defeating them.

Park further pursues the cultural negotiations triggered by shifting economic relations between Asia and the U.S. in *Gung Ho* (1986), where the threat of Japanese capital is presented as the "new Yellow Peril cloaked as model minority" (81). Hunt Stevenson (Michael Keaton) and Kazihiro Oishi (Gede Watanabe) work together to manage a Japanese automobile plant in Hadleyville, Pennsylvania. Initially, the comedy ensues from the cultural differences in work ethic: Japanese workers are shown as uniform workaholics who are more loyal to the company than their families, whereas American workers are depicted as "fat, lazy, loud, whiny, and undisciplined" (111). Stevenson succeeds at his corporate goals only when he (and the rest of the company) incorporates aspects of Asian culture. The film's resolution depicts all the workers participating in morning calisthenics, a Japanese exercise regime initially ridiculed by the American workers. "Emphatically antiunion," Park argues, "*Gung Ho* conflates Japan with white-collar economic prosperity and hints that the U.S. working class needs to be morally resuscitated by its Japanese competitors" (113). The Japanese presence in the film functions as a means to displace domestic labor disputes indicative of 1980s Reaganomics onto Asia, and outside of the boundaries of the U.S.

Park extends her analysis of how race politics becomes recoded by capitalist interests in the *Rush Hour* series (1998, 2001, 2007), "buddy films" that star two

non-white leads. She notes *Rush Hour 2* is premised on a counterfeiting operation, foregrounding the theme of in/authenticity, and ends in a casino amidst gambling chips (another type of "fake" money). Both Chan's martial arts sequences and Tucker's comedy scenes based on an African American trickster tradition, she argues, are moments when the standard Hollywood action narrative is disrupted, as the actors are so obviously performing essentialized notions of "Asianness" and "Blackness." Thus it becomes unclear whether or not these are moments of their "real" identities. What the film does make clear is that "aligning against 'the man' no longer has so much to do with bonding over an anti-colonial sense of political solidarity as with learning how to play the field of identity politics strategically in order to gain the power to represent oneself as subject—a power that increasingly must be *bought*, with real or fake money" (151).

Alongside the presence of Asian and Asian American characters in film, Park also looks at the shifting oriental style of martial arts. She traces the history of martial arts films in the U.S., from the import of Bruce Lee films in the early 1970s, the "blaxploitation-kung fu hybrid film[s]" of the 1970s, the appropriation of martial arts by white male protagonists in the 1980s (Chuck Norris, Steven Segal, and Jean-Paul Van Damme), the popularity of Hong Kong noir films in the 1990s, and what Joel Silver has coined "hip hop kung fu" films at the turn of the new millennium (129, 143). Park focuses on this most recent phase of martial arts aesthetics, attending briefly to multiracial appropriations of kung fu in films such as the *Kill Bill* dyad (2003, 2004) and *Ghost Dogs* (1999), before turning to *The Matrix* (1999).

Park argues that *The Matrix* is premised and styled upon similar concerns as *Blade Runner*, including a shared Orientalist aesthetic and a racial anxiety that underpins explorations of humanity. Whereas in *Blade Runner* the topic of humanity is explored through the division between humans and replicants who are all unproblematically white, *The Matrix* intentionally presents a multiracial cast of characters. Park explores the impacts of this inclusion of racial difference, what she refers to as a "multicultural Orientalism" (188). Moreover, whereas *Blade Runner* failed upon its initial release, *The Matrix* was wholeheartedly consumed. She argues this shift in reception is in part due to the fact that, at the end of the twentieth century, "racial difference, *properly contained and sanitized through class and/or cultural capital*, is neither ignored nor reviled but rather actively celebrated and portrayed as desirable" (170).

One way this sanitization of racial difference is achieved is through the incorporation of racially ambiguous characters. Park's reading of *The Matrix* relies on what she refers to as the concept of "virtual race," "the technologized performance of racial, ethnic, and cultural traits and styles different from one's own" (170). She reads Neo's (Keanu Reeves) mixed-race identity as one of fluidity, shaped by his relationship with the film's other main characters. Specifically, she suggests that the sparring scene between Neo and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), occurring in the oriental space of the virtual dojo training room, is

when "Thomas Anderson of the predominantly white establishment of the Matrix" is transformed into "Neo of the predominantly black underground resistance" (191). Such incorporations of difference, performed through and against the background of oriental styles, stand in contrast to the repression and rejection of racial difference that marked earlier film such as *Blade Runner*. Park concludes that, in *The Matrix*, "it is precisely the trait of mutability—the ability to move across racial, social, and ontological boundaries via the conditional status of the racially ambiguous model minority—that will save the human race" (194).

Despite her largely positive reading of *The Matrix*, Park concludes her book hesitantly, pondering whether such representations can wholly escape the depoliticizing logic of cultural commodification. Her book as a whole shows the ways in which representations of racial difference have changed in the last few decades for Asian Americans, and her work attests not only to the critical possibilities but also the political necessity of studying them. Regardless of whether they are perceived as exploitation, homage, or empowerment, such Asian American cultural markers will continue to circulate, and it is the responsibility of the critic to engage with them, however superficially (or substantially) they may be presented.

If Park explores the symbolic circulation of Asian racial markers in film, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu turns to fashion, investigating not only representations of Asia in the industry but also the Asian American designers who participate in its production. Her project begins with questioning the reasons for the prominence and popularity of a growing list of Asian American fashion designers. Philip Lim, Doo-Ri Chung, Derek Lam, Jason Wu, and Peter Som, amongst many others, have won prestigious fashion awards, clothed the first lady, and are heading major design labels for the first time (2-3). Tu argues that this "Rise of the Asian Designer" was accompanied by a cultural interest in what anthropologists Carla Jones and Ann Leshkowich term "Asian chic," "the utopian and euphoric embrace of elements of particular Asian traditions that have now come to stand in for an undifferentiated Asia" (2, quoted in Tu 3). Her project attempts to establish a material relationship between these two phenomena.

The organization of *The Beautiful Generation* traces the development of a simple yet insightful observation: Tu wonders if the growing numbers of young Asian American designers in New York have anything to do with the prominence, only a generation before, of Asian immigrant laborers in the garment industry, as laundry owners, tailors, seamstresses, factory managers, and contractors. The first half of her book looks at how certain Asian American designers themselves narrate their success in the industry, paying particular attention to their attitude toward garment production (a field historically dominated by Asian manual labor). The second half provides a critique of the clothes themselves, both how they are advertised in leading fashion magazines and how they interact with the contours of their wearers. As a whole, her book is an attempt to trace "[t]he journey from cloth to clothing, from the hands that sew to the bodies that wear," in order to map out the material and symbolic workings of contemporary globalization,

including moments and instances of collective political re-imagination (26).

Tu observes a conceptual rift within the world of fashion design between designing, work that is characterized as creative, artistic, and innovative, whereas sewing is considered technical, efficient, and methodic. "Though sewing skills certainly help in this profession," states Tu, "they are not considered a requirement" (54). In fact, a sign of a successful designer is often marked by his or her disavowal from sewing (relying instead on pattern makers, the highest class of sewers), evidence that he/she is focused exclusively on the creative process. The value of designers "requires the maintenance of these [class] boundaries" "between the poorly paid labor of sewing and the creative, potentially well-compensated work of design" (55). Within this paradigm, Asians and Asian Americans have historically been associated with the sewer and not the designer, both in terms of their material participation as laborers in garment manufacturing as well as the symbolic representation of the model minority as the hard worker who is smart but unoriginal, diligent yet lacking imagination. As designer Sarah Ma, a child of a sewer, put it, her career was about crossing to "the other side of the assembly line" (38). For such reasons, Tu finds the popular reception of Asian Americans in the capacity of creative designers that much more culturally significant.

Based on her own interviews with over thirty Asian American designers, as well as previously published interviews with others, Tu observes that about half claim a family history of growing up in households devoted to different aspects of the garment industry, and many recount childhoods of helping their parents (19). Notably, many of them did not reiterate the usual split between designer and sewer, creativity and technique, opting instead to represent sewing as "central, not marginal, to fashion design" and the sewer "as expert, rather than unskilled," which "challenge[s] traditional ideas about the sources of expertise and knowledge" in the fashion industry (20). She argues that, because of their specific personal histories of families engaged in the garment industry, Asian American designers are more prone to participating in an "architecture of intimacy," "a mode of working that acknowledges and forges proximity, contact, and affiliation between domains imagined as distinct," whether these domains are labor and art, sewing and designing, or even, Asian and Asian American (34).

Tu then explores the dynamics of entrepreneurial relationships forged by contemporary Asian American designers to sewers and contractors, often constructed as a relationship of "uncle" and "aunty" to "their girls" (21). For designers Jennifer Wang, Gemma Kahng, and Wenlan Chia, for example, their shared ethnicity with sewers and contractors led to small advantages, such as leftover fabric or waived deposits. Designers often referred to such economic interactions as sewers "helping [them] out" when they were struggling to establish their stores and lines, echoing the informal ethnic and familial support systems indicative of their parents' businesses. Tu is careful to state that "[t]he familial narratives produced here function, in effect, to minimize crucial differences," most notably the economic differences between designers (however struggling) and sewers

(87). She admits that what is missing from her analysis here is the perspective and voice of the sewers, due to her limited language skills. Nonetheless, she suggests the familial kinships created between these designers and their sewers/contractors, at the very least, bring "into much closer proximity constituents traditionally seen as quite different" (93). Specifically, they attest to "working in a mode of intimacy" in which designers' attempt "to recognize proximity and affiliation belies the fashion industry's logic of distance and fundamentally challenges the creative economy's ethos of individualism" (22).

Tu takes this theme of intimacy (and distance) and looks at how it structures the acts of commodification and consumption. The links to Park's work are closest in Tu's chapter devoted to analyzing representations of Asia in leading fashion magazines (over 500 issues from 1995 to 2005). Like Park, she is aware of the cyclical nature of Orientalism, but argues that what distinguishes the wave starting in the mid-1990s is that it coexisted with an increasingly visible and politicized population of Asian Americans in urban centers, whereas in the past it functioned often without their presence (109). Within this changed demographic atmosphere, fashion magazine columns and advertisements took on the role of "cultural intermediar[ies]," explaining to readers what Asian culture was (110). Thus, many of the advertisements for Asian fashion during the mid-1990s, such as those for Kenar and Chopard, were shot through an anthropological lens that emphasized realism and authenticity. By the end of the 1990s, however, Tu notices a distinct shift in perspective. Luxury brands such as Christian Dior, Chanel, and Gucci wholly embraced "Asian chic," but defined their designs as "reinterpretation[s]" and "transformation[s]," in contrast to "original" Asian clothing that was depicted merely as "dress," "clothes," or "garments" (116). Fashion labels reiterated the distinction between creative genius and the common labor of sewing in order to justify their exorbitant price tags. The reinterpretation of Asia during this time, an era when Asian economies were rapidly growing, was a means for American companies and consumers to negotiate a collective national anxiety regarding its place in the global economy.

Within this context for all things Asian, the demand for Asian American designers was also high. In the U.S., these designers' relationships to their race at once overdetermined and undermined their work. They were regarded as both "cultural authorities" who possessed intimate knowledge about Asian design, and "ethnic representatives" who knew only about Asian design and nothing else (129). Throughout Asia, these designers were often coveted by governments and companies eager to rebrand their national images as the creative leaders (and no longer sources of cheap labor) of a globalized fashion industry. Designers such as Anna Sui and Vera Wang, to name only two, have been reclaimed by and celebrated in their "home" countries though they were both born and raised in the United States. Tu's interviewees frequently referred to Asia as "home," regardless of whether they had ever spent time there (178). For these designers, though this discourse of home often functions as a means of expanding a consumer market, it nonetheless constitutes a transnational "network of exchange," one through

which they come to understand themselves as ethnic or national subjects" (179, 180). This focus on the non-economic dimensions of economic relationships runs strong throughout the book. As Tu states elsewhere, "economic relationships […] have always exceeded the boundaries of the economic" (200).

A specific example of clothing that expresses the "transnational intimacies" forged by Asian American designers to Asia can be found in the work of Vivienne Tam, particularly her 1994 collaboration with artist Zhang Hongtu for her Mao collection. Tam's collection included gauzy dresses printed with Zhang's already re-imagined pop images of Mao (in pigtails, in sunglasses, with a clown's nose, etc.). Though clearly Mao has become a fetishized commodity at this point, Tu insists that "Mao in this [Tam's] collection may be emptied of ideology, but he remains filled with meaning" (163). Unlike Warhol's reproductions of Marilyn Monroe, which commented on the process of capitalist commodification by the very act of their incessant reproductions, reproductions of Mao had already historically circulated as a marker of fidelity and loyalty to *communism* aligned with the propagandist imperatives of the state. Rather than regard Tam's designs as only commodifications, Tu argues that Tam's fashion reconfigured the icon's meaning and historical significance by critiquing, from the perspective of clothing that interacts with the body, the issues of private/public, exposed/hidden, and authority/secrecy that structured the workings of the Cultural Revolution.

Tu's final chapter further contemplates the significance of Asia to Asian American designers, turning specifically to what, if anything, makes their work "Asian." Over the course of her interviews, Tu observed numerous designers describing their work in analytical terms, not inspirational ones, echoing how they blurred the distinction between design/creativity and sewing/technique. For example, Yukie Ohta, Yeohlee Teng, and Selia Yang emphasized "math problems," "numbers," and "calculations" in their designs; Thuy Diep and others referred to their work as pertaining to "structure and geometry," as in "architecture" (180-81). In an attempt to establish a "cultural genealogy," Tu suggests these attitudes toward design may be traced to the influences of the Japanese Big Three (Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, and Yhoji Yamamoto) of the 1980s. In radical contrast to the European tradition of accentuating parts of the body, these designers emphasized the body as a collective whole, creating garments that required minimal cutting and sewing and that often draped and enveloped the body. For these Japanese designers, design was "not a question of appearance or style but a problem of form," an aesthetic Tu observes in contemporary Asian American fashion design (184).

Tu's emphasis on the politics of concealment and visibility in the works of the Big Three leads her to a brief discussion of the hijab. She suggests the Big Three may have taken their own cues from the hijab, as a form of clothing which aims to protect, not exhibit the body, yet nonetheless expresses a deep ambivalence about "public and private, covering and concealing" within its very act of concealment (194-95). Acknowledging the vast political stakes of discourses surrounding the hijab, Tu argues that it is important to acknowledge that they

have never "existed purely as religious or cultural objects outside of the domain of fashion and untouched by the forces of capital" (197). In other words, she reinscribes fashion within the realm of politics. Her work as a whole reminds readers of Eric Hobsbawm's comments on fashion in *The Age of Extremes*: "Why brilliant fashion-designers, a notoriously non-analytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors, is one of the most obscure questions in history and, for the historian of culture, one of the most central" (quoted in Tu 165).

The dialectics of exposure and concealment also structure the Asian American experience, as subjects who are at times rendered invisible (within the dominant black/white racial paradigm) or hyper-visible (as model minorities or yellow perils). Their histories, too, are marked by the workings of state and capital interests that toggle between invisibility (numerous anti-Asian immigration policies and internment) and visibility (demands for cheap Asian labor and the fetishization of Asian bodies and cultures). Within this context, Tu reads contemporary Asian American designers' works, often influenced directly or indirectly by the Big Three, as attempts to perhaps "refuse to see visibility as the only sign of liberation" (201). Overall, her project provides an alternative framework from which to not only critique the material and symbolic divisions that structure the fashion industry, but also emphasize the ways in which the act of cultural production can attempt to challenge them. "In an industry built on a logic of distance," Tu notes, "they [Asian American designers] have continually struggled to imagine a world of intimacies" (201).

Both *The Beautiful Generation* and *Yellow Future* take seriously what are often overlooked aspects of popular culture—Hollywood films and fashion design—precisely because they are so popular. Park and Tu engage from the perspective of cultural studies the concerns of anti-racism, as both authors highlight the role of culture as one important arena in the ongoing process of racial formation. In an era many are eager to claim as "post-racial," they show the persistence of race in the construction and dissemination of capitalism's narratives. More importantly, they insist on alternative modes of reading and understanding these narratives, and in this process point to the possibilities of re-imagining them.