

Virtual Orientalism

*Asian Religions and American
Popular Culture*

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For Dad, Des, Declan, and Siân

Virtual Orientalism

I

Introduction

In the spring of 1950, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki arrived in the continental United States for his third extended stay. Like his visits in 1897 and 1939, his arrival went largely unnoticed. Although the aged scholar, at mid-century, was an author of international stature, his work was primarily known to those in the West who held an esoteric interest in Japanese religions and culture. All that would change during his eight-year residency in the United States.

Through the new option of commercial air travel, Suzuki's status as a global figure would be consolidated by side trips to Mexico, Europe, and cities throughout the United States. The influence of this small, unassuming Japanese man was spread not only by plane but also by print; his image would be featured in the pages of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New Yorker*. By the time Suzuki left the United States in 1958, he was no longer an obscure figure but someone whose name and likeness would forever be associated with Zen in the West.

Two decades later, an American television audience viewed the final episode of the popular television series *Kung Fu* on the evening of June 28, 1975. Dubbed TV's first "Eastern Western," *Kung Fu* chronicled the fugitive existence of a mixed-race Shaolin monk, Kwai Chang Caine, on the nineteenth-century American frontier. The series dealt with Caine's transpacific exile, his encounter with European and Asian immigrants, and his flashbacks to his life in China. The show was transnational in nature in terms of not only the plot but also production. *Kung Fu* drew on the talent of Jewish

American writers, Chinese martial arts advisors, and Asian American actors. The success of the series was also buttressed by the growing popularity of martial arts films, both homegrown and internationally made. The show's run was brief—only three seasons—but it would remain vivid in the minds of American television viewers as a novel introduction to Chinese spirituality, and its characters would endure as pop culture icons.

The quarter century between Suzuki's arrival and *Kung Fu*'s departure was a time of change and ferment in U.S. religious history and in U.S. culture in general. This period marked an increase in popular awareness of Asian religions in the United States, as Americans had their first widespread introduction to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Asian spiritualities. The role of mass media was central to this process. Americans triumphed in the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet in the pages of *Life* and despaired in Malcolm Browne's gut-wrenching image of Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation, circulated widely by the Associated Press. In lighter fare, aspects of Eastern spirituality seeped into weekly magazines, book reviews, and television programs. An American audience could follow along as the Beats sought enlightenment "on the road," and the Beatles pursued it in India. These pop culture moments broadened Americans' attitudes about Asian religions and both reflected and shaped the mind-set of a generation.

One could certainly view this period as the opening of the American religious mind or the latest in a series of American Great Awakenings. Will Herberg in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, the oft-cited classic published in 1955, chronicles the movement of Catholicism and Judaism into the American mainstream. While the ethnic consciousness of European immigrant groups slowly faded away, religious identity became more and more significant, according to Herberg, creating a place for Catholicism and Judaism as distinctly American religions. The growing acceptance of these once marginalized religious traditions was promoted by ecumenical activists and liberal scholars and also shepherded along by the popular press.¹ For instance, the lived religion of Jews and Catholics appeared in the pages of magazines such as *Life* for the first time in the 1950s, marking a newfound respect and recognition for these religious faiths. In similar fashion, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian religious traditions gained more positive, widespread exposure in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. Popular media documented these traditions not only as they were practiced in Asia but also as they were transplanted, transformed, and taken up by Anglo practitioners in the United States. Images of college students "tuned in" to the practice of meditation or shots of Western celebrities pursuing their spiritual journeys abroad made for eye-catching copy and also served to foster a wider acceptance of Asian religions in the West.

If Herberg's book had been written two decades later, it might have been titled *Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu*. But such a book has yet to be penned. While scholarly and popular accounts—with their focus on religious pluralism—gesture toward this viewpoint, their claims are not wholly convincing. Americans, for the most part, still rally under the monotheistic conception of "one nation under God." Hindus are mistaken for Muslims,² and Buddhism is taken as a Hollywood trend. At best, images and talk of Asian religions serve as exotica. The apparent openness, tolerance, and fascination that mark Americans' engagement with Asian spirituality have not yet translated into a full embrace of Asian religions. Why is this the case, especially given Americans' wider exposure to foreign cultures, the transformed religious landscape in the United States, and the sea change in Americans' attitudes toward Buddhism and Hinduism?³

What may seem like a paradox—or at the very least a diminished sense of progress—has to do with the ways in which an American audience came to know and, in many cases, embrace Asian religions. Growing tolerance toward Asian peoples and cultures was fostered in a mass-mediated environment in which the role of the visual image took on increasing importance. While this environment allowed a popular engagement with Asian religious traditions, it also relied on and reinforced certain racialized notions of Asianness and Asian religiosity. These notions form patterns of representation that, because they are linked to such positive images, go unchallenged and unseen.

The pages that follow offer close readings of the images of three key Oriental Monk figures that appeared in popular magazines, television, and film. In the quarter of a century from 1950 to 1975, D. T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Kwai Chang Caine in the television series *Kung Fu* each made his appearance on the American scene and gave a mainstream American audience an unprecedented foray into the Asian religious world. While D. T. Suzuki would have a significant impact on a high-culture audience of intellectuals, university students, and cultured readers through his writings on Zen and Japanese culture, he enjoyed minor celebrity in the late 1950s as Beats and elites entertained a Buddhist worldview through his words and certainly his presence. With the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Americans would travel further into the world of "Oriental" mysticism and culture as the American press followed the Beatles and other well-known personalities on their trek to Rishikesh in pursuit of enlightenment and release in the 1960s. Popular media would make accessible in virtually sensuous form spiritual worlds that were once accessible in the mind's eye only through the literary word and imagination. The connection would be made even more immediate and widespread with the television series *Kung Fu* in the early 1970s, as the show's protagonist, Kwai

Chang Caine, and his monk teachers entered American living rooms each week. Here, the camera tracked the appearance of these fictional monk figures and imaginatively presented their religious perspective. Television producers and directors harnessed the full potential of the moving image and, through novel use of shots, flashback, and slow-motion edits, revealed what they understood as the inner world of the show's characters. *King Fu* would also concretize a narrative of cross-cultural encounter that powerfully defines Americans' relationship and views of Asian religions to the present day.

Americans' sense of Asian religions is figured by real-life personalities such as D. T. Suzuki and the Maharishi Mahesh and imaginatively represented in fictional offerings such as *King Fu*. We "know" each of these figures not only because we understand his views and admire his actions but also because we are deeply—even unconsciously—familiar with what he represents and the role that he plays. In U.S. popular culture, he is immediately transformed into a type of icon—the icon of the *Oriental Monk*—onto which we project our assumptions, fears, and hopes.⁴ Although the *Oriental Monk* has appeared to us through the various media vehicles of American pop culture, we recognize him as the representative of an otherworldly (though perhaps not entirely alien) spirituality that draws from the ancient wellsprings of "Eastern" civilization and culture. And as Americans' current love affair with such figures as the Dalai Lama attests, the representation of this icon has only gained in popularity and impact. To get a sense of what makes these personalities so effective and affecting, we need to understand the history of this particular symbol and how it has been used both to express and transform our sense of Asian religions.

The term *Oriental Monk* is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, swamis, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan). Although the range of individual figures points to a heterogeneous field of encounter, all of them are subjected to a homogeneous representational effect as they are absorbed by popular consciousness through mediated culture.

Racialization (more correctly, "orientalization") serves to blunt the distinctiveness of particular persons and figures. Indeed, the recognition of any Eastern spiritual guide, real or fictional, is predicated on his conformity to general features that are paradigmatically encapsulated in the icon of the *Oriental Monk*: his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, his manner of dress, and—most obviously—his peculiar gendered character. Although the figure is easily recognizable today, the *Oriental Monk* did not miraculously appear from out of nowhere. Rather, we have been primed for his appearance: trained to identify him from knowledge of his character, which can be traced to a series of historical encounters and imaginative engagements.

The critical perspective that I develop to investigate the icon of the *Oriental Monk* in American popular culture is informed by the work of Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism*, Said articulates a network of representations "framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire." As a "created body of theory and practice," *Orientalism* divides the world into "two unequal halves, Orient and Occident." Its "detailed logic [is] governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections," as well as a "whole series of 'interests.'" Hence, rather than offering perspicuous insight into its Oriental object, this system of representation reveals much about the Occidental subjectivity from which it emerges.⁵

Unlike its British and French predecessors, this new form of American *Orientalism* is more covert than its predecessors. Much of this has to do with the media through which it is now deployed: photography, film, television, and other electronic media. Gone are the days of direct colonial rule; the United States achieves hegemonic strength through channels that appear benign on their surface. This is not to say that the regime of knowledge these channels support is any less powerful. Indeed, in many ways it is more so, as images of the Orient become deeply embedded in a popular imagination that looks to the magazine page and to the big and small screens for products that are ready for immediate consumption. As Said points out, these new channels of communication rely on "more and more standardized molds," further reinforcing *Orientalism's* hold on Western imagination by limiting alternative possibilities.⁶

The prevalence of this type of cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media is an important element of what I will call *Virtual Orientalism*. The term *virtual* is often associated with computer-simulated environments, such as virtual reality. While the conventional use of virtual reality took root in the late 1980s as the potential of the digital became more fully realized and computers more accessible to the everyday consumer, the type of experiential engagement that such technology has fostered was already encouraged by mechanical forms of visual reproduction—most notably the camera. These forms train the consumer to prefer visual representations, and the visual nature of the image lends the representation an immediacy and ontological gravity that words cannot. Thus, the Asian sage is not simply someone we imagine, but his presence materializes in the photograph or moving picture before us. Buttressed by newspaper or a film's story line, the visual representation adds gravitas to the narrative and creates its own scene of virtual encounter.

The visual also serves as a sensory trigger that ultimately draws in all of the senses. By viewing an *Oriental Monk* figure in a magazine, we not only see his Asian face and manner of dress but also imagine the sound of his accent and

the feel of his robes. Filmic portrayal implicates the senses even more, as we smell the wafting incense made visible in a temple shot. Prompting other sensory associations, our visually informed contact with Asian religious figures in news pictorials, television, and film generates its own simulated environment that brings to life our often unconscious notions about the spiritual East. In this way, Orientalist stereotypes become *embodied* and hence objectified in mediated form. Although their recognition still depends on our imagination, they achieve an existence all their own.

The fact that Americans, on a popular level, have come to know and experience Asian religions and Asian religious figures through mass-mediated representations that are primarily visual in nature has significant social effects. As we live out our lives in front of a screen, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between what is real and what is not (in the most conventional terms), to the point that these images *become* the real for us. Hence a postindustrial, mass-mediated age inaugurates the condition of the *hyperreal*, where images and reproductions (or in Baudrillardian terms, *simulacra*) become "more real than the real." For example, representations of the Dalai Lama—his image as part of an Apple ad or on the cover of a book, Richard Gere's description of him in a magazine interview—may be more real to an American audience than any personal encounter we might have with the actual person. Conversely, Americans who grew up watching *Kung Fu* and feel a special affinity with its protagonist, Kwai Chang Caine, often speak of the fictional character as if he were a real person. Mass media create new configurations of intimacy and attachment that have profoundly affected our epistemological sense. Within this hyperreal environment, orientalized stereotypes begin to take on their own reality and justify their own truths.⁷

As we will see, the change in Americans' perceptions of Asian religions from "heathen" cultures to romanticized traditions should not necessarily be taken as a sign of social progress. Rather, our contemporary attitudes emerge from historical circumstances and political concerns as much as they do from spiritual longing and religious ferment. These viewpoints are also shaped by how we have come to know the spiritual East—namely, through mass media representations and channels of consumption. There is much at work in our pursuit of Asian religions, far beyond the noble desire for universal understanding and world peace.

Preparing the Way

The Oriental Monk constitutes an American stereotype—one that must be placed alongside such easily recognizable figures as the inscrutable Oriental,

evil Fu Manchus, Yellow Peril, heathen Chinese, and Dragon Ladies. Many of these negative portrayals of Asians emerged in American popular culture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, during the first wave of Asian immigration to the United States. These images reflected a widespread ambivalence toward Asia and Asian immigrants and served to embody a collective fear through representation. While many of these negative stereotypes persisted into the second half of the twentieth century, a definite shift occurred after the Second World War. Ominous caricatures were replaced with friendlier, more subservient models: the faithful caregiver, the warm-hearted prostitute, the docile Lotus Blossom, the humorous sidekick, and the model minority. It is during this postwar period that the Oriental Monk would most fully make his entrance on the American scene.

The Oriental Monk was not immaculately conceived however. America's more widespread engagement with Asian religions had begun more than a century before Suzuki's mid-century stay in the United States. As early as 1836, the influence of Hindu thought swept through the writings of Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, informing romantic visions of a transhistorical, transcultural spiritual essence. These writers drew on the "mysterious East" to pose an implicit critique of the effects of industrialization and technological change. (For Whitman, Asian culture is even figured as the source of America's "salvation.") Despite such valorization, Indian religion was still widely viewed as "overly spiritual and sensual,"⁸ especially for Americans weaned on a Protestant work ethic and the bodily subjugation it required.

After these initially enthusiastic forays into Asian religion, Western discourse on Indian culture and religion did not remain so decidedly positive. British literature dedicated to India paints a more ambivalent portrait and deeply influenced American perceptions of the subcontinent. For many British writers, the "Jewel in the Crown" was regarded as "an exotic land of sadhus, snakes and suttee"⁹—a depiction that conveyed the fascination, fear, and feeling of moral superiority of its Anglo occupiers. All around him, the British colonialist found examples of social confusion and spiritual excess that it was his responsibility to contain—if only by literary means. This dynamic is nowhere more obvious than in *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling's "immortal story of a white boy in mysterious India."¹⁰

In Kipling's classic, young Kim O'Hara, the destitute offspring of an Irish color-sergeant in India, embarks on a spiritual journey with his self-appointed lama. The author's portrayal of the lama is for the most part quite sympathetic, but the fact that Kim's spiritual guide is Tibetan distinguishes him from the native "fakirs, Sadhus, Sunmyasis, byragis, mhangs, and mullahs, priests of all

faiths and every degree of raggedness,"¹¹ who live off the goodwill of the people. The difference is significant. For the most part, Indian spiritual mendicants were primarily viewed with an air of suspicion and considered "mountebanks, clever hypocrites, 'fraud-men' rather than 'godmen,' who lead easy, lazy lives at the cost of the common, gullible, superstitious folk."¹² As part of the storehouse of Western cultural memory, Kipling's imperialist view¹³ of Indian religion can be intimately linked to the critical assessments of Oriental Monk figures such as the Maharishi Mahesh in the late 1960s.

While literary works provided vivid portrayals of Oriental Monks to feed the imagination, popular periodicals and newspapers in the 1800s gave Americans their first actual glimpse of Asian religions and religious figures. As Laurie Maffly-Kipp documents, visual representation of Chinese religions in the form of engravings and photographs emerged in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Most of the images that appeared in magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Collier's* focused on cultural scenes and "joss house" architecture. The Chinese themselves were almost always envisioned en masse—as yellow hordes wrapped in strange dress and strange customs. The rare scenes in which individual faces were highlighted were those in which children appeared. These visual choices reflected the prevailing attitudes of the time, which beheld the Chinese and their spiritual traditions with suspicion and disdain and thereby justified anti-immigrant sentiment and nativist fervor.

Still, not all the images of Asian religions that appeared¹⁴ in the popular press were depersonalized and negatively cast. In the spring of 1893, a grand meeting was planned that would bring together clergy of various Christian denominations and emissaries from major religious traditions around the globe. The planning came to fruition in the Parliament of World's Religions, which officially began on September 11, 1893, in Chicago. The gathering featured 194 papers offered by representatives from the religious traditions of Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Parsiism, Jainism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The two-week meeting was covered in varying degrees by the major newspapers across the United States and most thoroughly by the *Chicago Tribune*.

The 1893 Parliament has been rediscovered by religious studies scholars and journalists in recent times, touted as a significant event in U.S. religious history, and upheld as an early example of multifaith engagements, especially between the Christian West and the non-Christian East. In these accounts, Swami Vivekananda and Shaku Soyen are often highlighted as influential figures. Vivekananda is remembered for his resounding first lecture, or "Welcome Address," delivered on September 11, which many credit as the beginning

contributions made less of an impression, but he is heralded as the forerunner of Zen Buddhism in the United States through his training and dispatch of noteworthy figures such as Nyogen Senzaki and D. T. Suzuki.

Although history reserved a prominent place for these two men, other Asian religious emissaries also captured the imaginations of the *Chicago Tribune* and its readers in 1893. In its announcement and preview of the Parliament, the *Tribune* dedicated a full-page spread in its March 5 issue to the meeting's scheduled participants. The seemingly endless lists of names and titles were meant to demonstrate that the event would be "the most representative and remarkable religious gathering that history will ever have been called upon to chronicle."

The engraved likenesses of the representatives that accompanied these lists were perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the article. Many of these images were conventional headshots of Christian ministers in Western attire. Others were visually more arresting because of the person's robes or headgear. (Partenia, the Bishop of Sophia—a representative of the Greek Orthodox tradition—wore an impressive mitre.) The two representatives from the "Orient" were depicted in wider perspective; Ashitsu Jitsuzen, with a monk's shaved scalp and in traditional Japanese robes, is seen from the waist up. It is unclear whether he is sitting in a chair or on the floor. (The lack of a visible chair seems to imply the latter.) Anagarika Dharmapala was the only figure to appear in full-length profile—a choice obviously meant to highlight the "loose flowing white robes of his office" (see fig. 1.1).¹⁵

Even though the exotic characteristics of these Asian religious figures were prominently featured, the engravings differed significantly from the more negative images that dominated the popular media of the time. Ashitsu, Dharmapala, and others appear as individuals—not as part of a large mass or horde of Asians. While their physiognomy differs from the other representatives, their "Asianness" is not exaggerated, and their expressions are natural and seemingly no different from those of their Western counterparts. The black-and-white engravings also disguised skin tone differences (even the African Methodist Bishop appears white). In powerful ways, the images included in the *Tribune* coverage reflected the "spirit of human fellowship" and "reasonably liberal thought" in ways that would prefigure media representations of the Oriental Monk in the century to come.

At the decade's end, on September 1, 1899, two *Jodo Shin Buddhist* priests—Shuye Sonoda and Kakuryo Nishijima—set foot on American soil. Their arrival did not escape the attention of the popular press, which quickly descended on the two men with notebooks and cameras in hand. The image of Sonoda and Nishijima that appeared in the September 13 issue of the

San Francisco Chronicle was perhaps the average American's first sight of Asian religious missionaries (see fig. 1.2). The news caption reads:

The two representatives of the ancient creed . . . have come to convert Japanese and later Americans to the ancient Buddhist faith. They will teach that God is not the creator, but the created; not a real existence; but a figment of the human imagination; and that pure Buddhism is a better moral guide than Christianity. Their priestly robes are as interesting as the lessons that they would present.

The spectacle of the two Buddhist ministers was highlighted by the black-and-white image of the men and the caption's attention to their exotic style of dress. And while the reporter endeavored to keep a journalist's distance, his words betray a religiously competitive attitude that reflects the time and place in which they were written. In truth, the reporter and other critics had little to fear. The two priests had come to minister specifically to Japanese immigrants at their request. Sonoda and Nishijima would help establish the first Japanese American Buddhist Church in San Francisco, which would come to serve as the spiritual, cultural, and social center of the community. After they adopted the usual Western attire of suit and tie, the priests disappeared into the un differentiated mass of Japanese American migrants.

The moving image would do much to spark America's imaginings of Asian religions in the new century. The Oriental Monk made his on-screen debut in D. W. Griffith's classic *Broken Blossoms* or *The Yellow Man and the Girl*. The tale begins in an undesignated Chinese port town where we find the Yellow Man—a devout individual who becomes “convinced that the great nations across the sea need the lessons of the gentle Buddha.” He journeys to the West to “take the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife.” The remainder of the movie chronicles his life in the Limehouse district of London and his encounter with Lucy, a gutter waif (played by Lillian Gish), whom he shelters from her brute of a father, Barthin’ Burrows. The Yellow Man is portrayed as the only one who recognizes Lucy’s “beauty which all Limehouse missed.” But tragedy ensues: Barthin’ Burrows discovers his daughter’s whereabouts, beats her to death, and is then shot by the Yellow Man. The story ends with the Yellow Man, a knife between his ribs, slumped before Lucy and his Buddhist altar.

Griffith’s masterpiece, produced in 1919, offers a tragic adaptation of Thomas Burke’s short story “The Chink and the Girl.” The changes that ensued in the translation of text into film are noteworthy. Most significant is the transformation of Burke’s “Chink”—a “worthless drifter of an Oriental”—into Griffith’s “Yellow Man,” noble and pious in his sense of mission. Indeed,



THE REV. ZITSUZEN ASHITSU, EDITOR OF “SHI-MEIYOKA,” OMI, JAPAN.

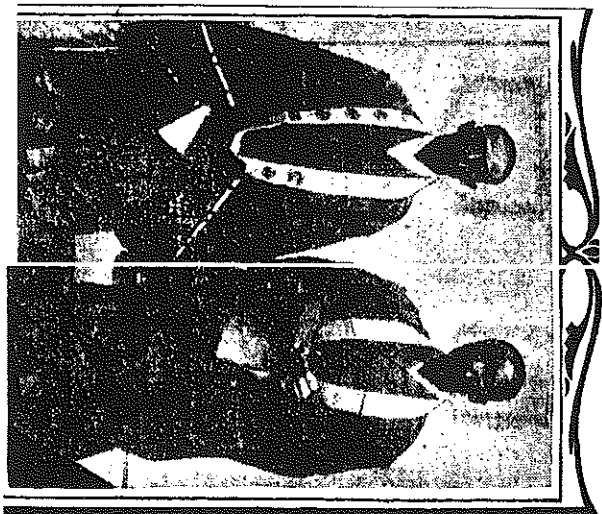


H. DHARMAPALA, SECRETARY OF THE MAHA-BODI SOCIETY, CALCUTTA.

FIGURE 1.1. Images of Ashitsu Jitsuzen (“The Rev. Zitsuzen Ashitsu”) and Anegaitika Dharmapala (“H. Dharmapala”), *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 1891.

MISSIONARIES OF THE BUDDHIST FAITH

Two Representatives of the Ancient Creed
Are in San Francisco to
Proselyte.



DR SHUTE SONODA

REV. KAHIRO NISHIJIMA

DR. SHUTE SONODA and Rev. Kahiro Nishijima, two Buddhist priests who are the sons of Buddhist priests of Japan, have come here to establish a Buddhist mission at 87 York street and to convert Japanese and later Americans to the ancient Buddhist faith. They will teach that God is not a person, but a principle, and that the highest character, not a person, is God. They will also teach that the highest character, not a person, is God. They will also teach that the highest character, not a person, is God.

Their priestly robes are as interesting as the lessons that they would present. As they posed before the camera in a hallway near their rooms in the Occidental Hotel, yesterday they wore the wonderment of all the Japanese who could assemble for a glimpse of the sacred robe.

FIGURE 1.2. *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 13, 1899.

Griffith's main contribution to this early iteration of the Oriental Monk is the revised introduction of the story, where Griffith locates Cheng Huan, the Yellow Man, "in the Temple of Buddha, before his contemplated journey to a foreign land." Here, the Yellow Man gains inspiration and guidance not only from the environment of the temple but also from the Oriental Monks who reside there and provide "advice for a young man's conduct in the world—word for word

such as a fond parent or guardian of our own land would give." Indeed, the motif of the temple—which begins and ends the story—lends a definite spiritual overtone to the tragic tale.

The fact that Griffith associates peace, gentleness, sensitivity, and altruism to the Buddha and his followers constitutes a significant moment in popular consciousness. At the very least, it assumes that a "heathen" religion stands on par with its "nonheathen" counterpart—although I believe much more is at work here. *Broken Blossoms* hints at a subtle but growing disillusionment with institutionalized Christianity and a budding fascination with alternative modes of moral and spiritual understanding. Griffith, as "cultural midwife," ushers this desire into popular consciousness through the Oriental Monk figures of the Yellow Man and his Buddhist teachers.

Although much of what the audience comes to know about the Yellow Man—his Buddhist faith and his mission in the West—is provided in the intertitles, Griffith's unique choice of visuals added a significant layer of meaning. It is here that Americans and other Western viewers caught their first glimpse of a Buddhist temple, best characterized by its smoky, mysterious opulence (see fig. 1.3). One sees the faces of the Chinese monks only briefly; it is their robes that are highlighted as they bow in mutual respect to the Yellow Man. These cues of clothing and gesture are enough to establish the religiosity of these figures. Portraying other aspects of the monks' "Asianness" would have jeopardized the film's potential to invoke in the audience a more tolerant stance toward the Chinese (a stated goal for Griffith).

Cheng Huan is played by American actor Richard Barthelmess in characteristic "yellow face." This version of the Yellow Man, however, differs from other portrayals of Asian men at the time. Except for the taped eyes and non-Western dress, Barthelmess's rendition lacks other outlandish features, such as Fu Manchu's menacing eyebrows and maniacal gaze. The actor's good looks remain fairly intact. As Laurie Maffly Kipp notes in her examination of visual representations of Chinese and Chinese religions at the turn of the century, this cast of whiteness was a way to confer goodness and moral character to its Asian subjects.¹⁵

Of course, *Blossoms* concludes in tragedy, not hope. This ending reassured the film's largely white and Christian audience and infused them with "a sense of mission" and justified their "paternalistic efforts" within their national borders and without. The film's moral lesson rests on a threat: If the Christianized West is unable to care for its children, the noble Buddhist East will. The tone and import of this message is conveyed by the dire consequences of the Yellow Man's intervention (the death of the three main characters); the message is to be taken as a warning for the Christian West to practice what it preaches.

The Yellow Man in the
Temple of Buddha, before
his contemplated journey
to a foreign land.

ES

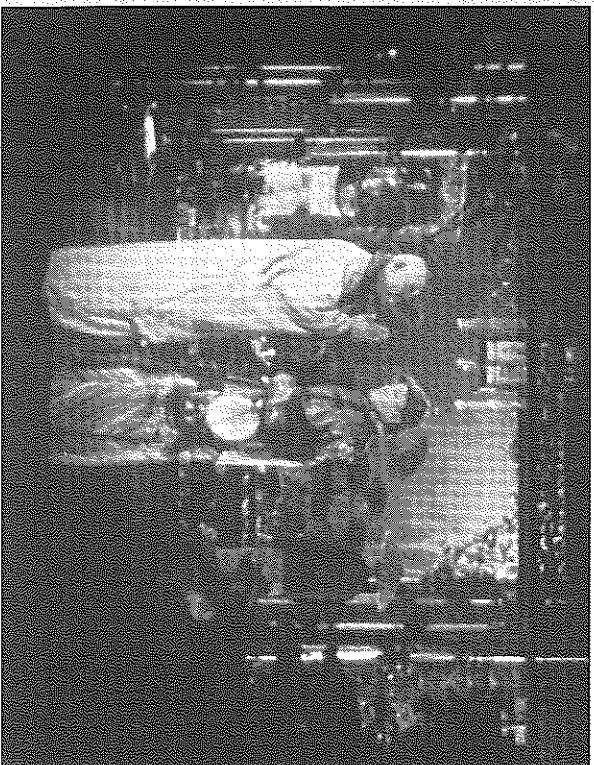


FIGURE 1.3. Intertitle and Chinese temple scenes from D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

Although this is the intentional aim of Griffith's work, it does not preclude other, even contrary effects: Eastern spirituality has been representationally idealized and operates civilly in its new Western home. In this way, *Broken Blossoms* lays the groundwork for the West's further engagements and later

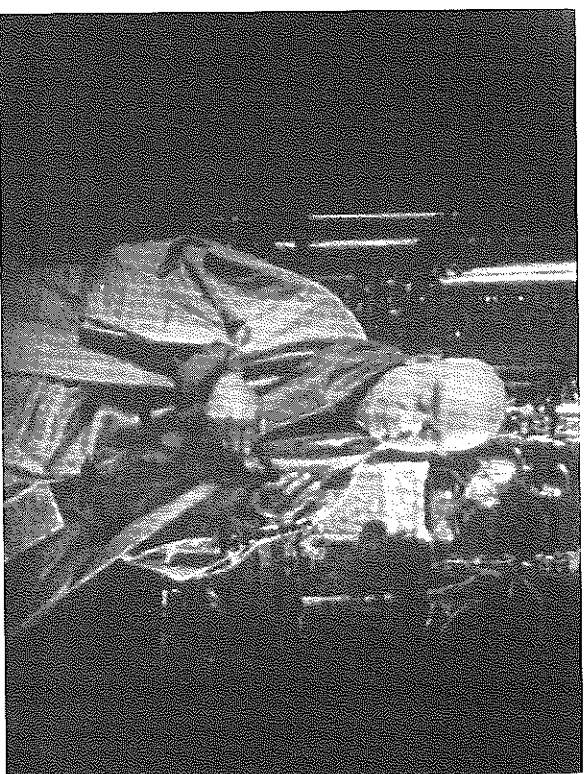


FIGURE 1.3. Continued

spiritual identification with the East. The message will be transformed from one of threat and consequence to one of desire and hope: *If the Christianized West is unable to care for its children, the noble Buddhist East will!*

While *Broken Blossoms*' more favorable representation of Asians and Asian religions was an anomaly at the time, this would steadily change over the

ensuing decades. The most noteworthy transition came in the form of the popular Chinese detective, Charlie Chan. Chan was a creation of author Earl Derr Biggers, who became intrigued in 1919 with real-life Hawaiian police detective Chang Apana. The first of Biggers's novels appeared in 1925, and the Chan serial ran until 1932. The popular movie series commenced with *Charlie Chan Carries On* in 1931 and was followed by thirty-two more films over the next decade. A radio series, comic books, and other paraphernalia also served as vehicles for the unusually insightful Asian detective.

Charlie Chan's place in American popular culture cannot be overestimated. Audiences delighted in Chan's uncanny ability to discern the dishonesty, fraud, and sly maneuvers of his (usually Anglo) criminal subjects. Indeed, the Chinese inspector was able to perceive aspects of situation and character that others could not. Chan's skill appeared innate—or at the very least, inaccessible—which only added to his mystique. This inscrutability, however, was not of a threatening nature. Chan, dressed often in a white Western suit and white hat, was “trustworthy, benevolent, and philosophical” (see fig. 1.4).¹⁷ His affable nature was further conveyed by his mannerisms: “He is a large man, but moves gracefully.” While this grace certainly was meant to reflect Chan's intelligence and civility, it also made the character effeminate and ultimately nonmenacing for the American viewer. (Chan had fathered more than eleven children, and his sexual orientation was never in question however.)

Charlie Chan certainly embodied one of the first positive representations of Asian men. However, there is a further characteristic that makes him a direct precursor to the Oriental Monk: his unparalleled insight into a situation. Chan's approach to a case appeared methodical, but his method remained mysterious. His art of solving the crime seemed inextricably linked to a certain type of wisdom that was remote and inaccessible to even the cleverest of Westerners—Oriental wisdom.

This Oriental wisdom took special form in the convention of the aphorism, a concise saying phrased in such a way that it seemed to reflect an ancient truth: “If strength were all, tiger would not fear scorpion” (*Charlie Chan's Secret*). “Insignificant molehill sometimes more important than conspicuous mountain” (*Charlie Chan in Egypt*); “Confucius say, ‘Luck happy chain of foolish accidents’” (*Charlie Chan at the Opera*). The pithiness of these Chanisms was further enhanced by the omission of key parts of speech, such as articles and verbs, highlighting the speaker's bilingual relationship with English and his nonnative status.

In other words, Chan's incorrect grammar served as a hallmark of difference and marked the detective as someone essentially foreign or alien. However, this difference is redeemed through the aphorism, in which the wisdom of the

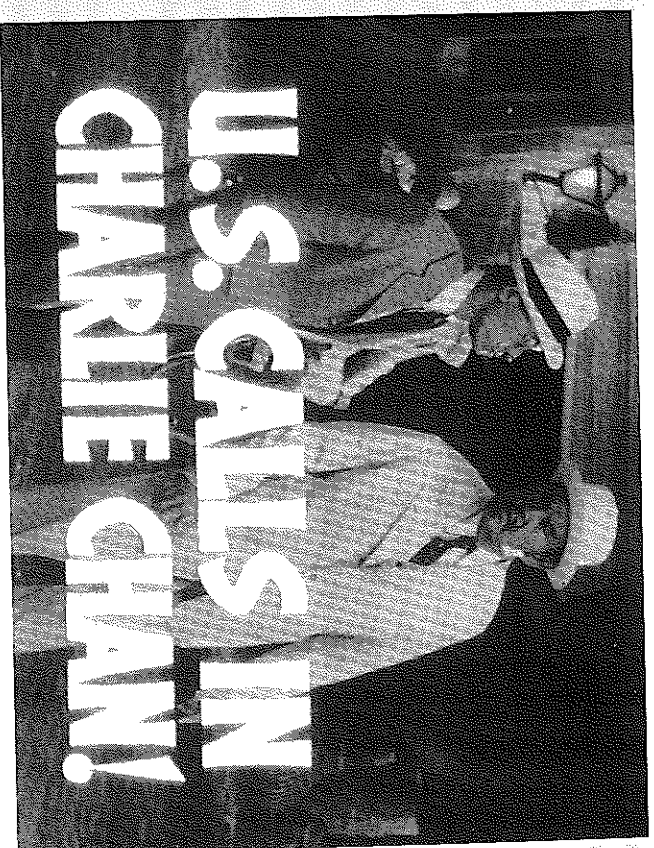


FIGURE 1.4. *Charlie Chan in Panama* (1940).

East and seemingly uncanny powers of discernment are translated for the insight (and delight) of his Western audience. Furthermore, in relation to other stereotypical characters, such as Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu, whose British education made his speech indistinguishable from his Anglo counterparts, it is clear that Chan's English will never be as good as his Chinese. Racial difference is clearly marked, not only by the slant of the protagonist's eyes but also by the elisions in his speech. Yet, Chan's stereotypical accent, along with more visual cues, such as his rotund figure and well-pressed suit, make him a charming and likable figure. The pseudo-Asiatic linguistic form of the aphorism presents Oriental wisdom as mysterious yet unthreatening, easy to digest, and always entertaining.

Monk Story

The figure of the Oriental Monk, then, did not simply appear but was a figure that developed over time. The Cold War and the continuing involvement of the United States along the Pacific Rim demanded a different approach and new representations. By the second half of the twentieth century, the United States and the rest of the West had to confront a dramatically changing Asia. Major transformations included the push toward decolonization and the

industrialization that occurred in many Asian nations, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Bandung conference in Indonesia, and the rise of Communist China. If Asians no longer fit a static portrait, the Oriental Monk provided a stable frame that encouraged an openness (if not a genuine appreciation) for Asian culture. This openness to spiritual alternatives reached full flower in the 1960s. Disillusioned with institutionalized religious practice, many Americans began to look beyond mainstream Christianity for new inspiration and direction. Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow have documented the emergence of "seeker spirituality" during this period—a movement characterized by a yearning for personal experience and transformation and in which the sacred is less closely tied to religious institutions and communal practice, even as it is intimately linked to the individual psyche. Asian religions fit the bill, as did their enigmatic teachers, who seemed to provide the discipline and attention without the stifling structures of church or synagogue.

In the following cultural history of the Oriental Monk as American icon, we will see a complex dynamic unfold in which Orientalist notions of Asian spiritual heritages converge with Western disillusion and desire. These notions are configured in a formalized narrative with ritual aspects that demonstrate the distinctive character of America's engagement with "Eastern," non-Christian traditions. This narrative is quite simple and can be summarized as follows: A lone monk figure—often with no visible family or community—takes under his wing a fatherless, often parentless, child (usually a boy). This child embodies a tension—although he signifies the dominant culture in racial terms, he has an ambivalent relationship with that culture. This allows him to make a break with the Western tradition that is radical enough to allow him to embrace his marginalized self. The Oriental Monk figure discerns this yearning for difference, develops it, and nurtures it. As a result of this relationship, a transmission takes place: Oriental wisdom and spiritual insight is passed from the Oriental Monk figure to the West through the *bridge figure* of the child. Ultimately, the Oriental Monk and his apprentice(s) represent future salvation of the dominant culture—they embody a revitalized hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology.

This distinctive narrative occurs time and again. Although the story of the Oriental Monk has the ability to function as a challenging counternarrative to the dominant culture in particular instances, this popular figuring also firmly establishes a strict religious and racial hierarchy. It also credentializes the monk as an *ideological caregiver* who gains recognition by helping dominant white Americans gain spiritual insight and, often, political mission as they work out the meaning of their existence in modern life.¹⁸ Indeed, the primary significance of the Oriental Monk is that the icon operates as an imaginative

construction, circulating widely and subjectively reinforcing this new system of Western dominance, even in instances when the icon serves as a vehicle for social critique. In addition, the particular way in which Americans write themselves into the story is not a benign, nonideological act; rather, it constructs a *modernized cultural patriarchy*¹⁹ in which Anglo-Americans reimagine themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture and wrest the authority to define these traditions from others.

As Brian Massumi notes, the virtual "requires a multiplication of images." He goes on to note: "The virtual that cannot be felt also cannot but be felt, in its effects. When expressions of its effects are multiplied, the virtual fleetingly appears. Its fleeting is in the cracks between and the surfaces around the images." Orientalist notions of Asian religions in virtual form cannot simply be assigned to a particular image, although their force is palpable. In order to grasp this force, one must "take the images by their virtual centers [and] superimpose them." I follow Massumi's lead here. In the pages that follow, I track Virtual Orientalism's emergence in the American popular imagination through a study of three figures: D. T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Kwai Chang Caine (*Kung Fu*). Although I discuss these figures chronologically, my method is not so much historical as it is genealogical. What I seek to capture is the "overimage of images of self-varying deformation" that allow Virtual Orientalism to appear.²⁰

The 1950s mass media representations of D. T. Suzuki and the American "Zen Boom" are the focus of chapter 2. The popular narrative and image of the Oriental Monk begin to merge in this historical moment. Also, the specific way that Suzuki is portrayed (as a mysterious Oriental) and the medium in which these portrayals appear (the fashion magazine) also mark Eastern spirituality as a "stylized religion" and consumable object.

Chapter 3 examines the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's colorful splash onto the 1960s countercultural scene. Celebrity defines a new authorial framework, as the Maharishi Mahesh and his Transcendental Meditation movement gain legitimacy through the guru's association with well-known entertainment stars in the 1960s. The spectacle of celebrity spiritual seekers lends a *hyperreal dimension* à la Baudrillard to Americans' understanding of Asian religions, as these media engagements surreptitiously offer the sense of a more direct encounter.

Kwai Chang Caine in the popular 1970s TV series *Kung Fu* is the focal point of chapter 4. At this cultural moment, a fictional monk takes his place alongside representations of historical figures, making the *hyperreal effect* complete. America's first "Eastern Western" also marks the rise of a new generation into cultural power—a generation that attempts to selectively blend their parents' ideals with their own countercultural values. With *Kung Fu*, Virtual Orientalism

