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What Does It Mean to Teach Asian Religions during This Moment of Anti-Asian Hate?

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I taught courses on East Asian religions very much the way that I was taught the material when I was a university student. I would cover the main figures, beliefs, and practices of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and popular religions in China, Korea, and Japan while developing the students' critical thinking, reading and writing skills. However, during the pandemic, the anti-Asian Asian racism and violence that I and others racialized as "Asian" experienced profoundly changed the way I think of myself as a scholar and teacher of Asia.

One of my first reactions in the face of anti-Asian hate was to research the topic in more detail. I was shocked at both my ignorance and what I would find. Although some have dismissed this anti-Asian hate as an anomalous phenomenon associated with the pandemic, in fact, anti-Asian hate has deep historical roots that began in the era of European colonialism. It was further exacerbated by the United States' exclusionary immigration policies that began with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and that was partially rectified by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This anti-Asian hate continues to ebb and flow, resurfacing in various forms throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anti-Asian hate is a trope deeply embedded in the U.S. psyche.

As a teacher of Asian religion, it may seem that we are automatically acting as a force against anti-Asian hate because we encourage inter-cultural dialogue. However, there are implicit assumptions within Asian studies and religious studies that left unacknowledged, continue to perpetuate the idea of Asians as wholly "other." In the context of North America, South America, and Europe, the concept of Asians as wholly "other" manifests in the phenomenon of Asians being viewed as perpetual foreigners despite having lived in these places for generations. One way we can begin to dismantle these implicit structures in our Asian religion courses is to: (1) demonstrate how the category of "Asian" is a constructed category and to uncover the implicit power structure it embodies, (2) acknowledge the Orientalist and colonialist roots of Asian studies and religious studies, and (3) incorporate Asian American history and methodologies into relevant Asian studies courses.

Deconstructing the Category of "Asian" vis-à-vis the History of European Colonialism and Race in the United States

The religious studies theorist Jonathan Z. Smith once famously observed that "'Religion' is not a native category" in his article "Religion, Religions, Religious" (269). I would argue, so too, with the category of "Asian." What Smith meant by his remark is that the term "religion" "is not a first-person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible or the content of the term" (269). Smith spends the rest of the article explaining how the term "religion" meant different things at different points in European and American history. Perhaps most significantly, he points out how "it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define" (281). In this way, the term is fundamental to "establishing a disciplinary horizon" for the field of religious studies.

Smith's article is required reading in many religious studies classes. Countless undergraduate and graduate students have devoted hours to deconstructing and debating the term "religion" as result of it. I propose that in courses on Asian religion, instructors need to introduce to students how the category of "Asian" is constructed, very much in the same way that we analyze the term "religion" in religious studies classes more generally. Even more importantly, we need to point out the deep power imbalances that the term "Asian" has come to embody.

Very much the same way that Smith pointed out that the term "religion" was used by outsiders to describe a group of people, the term "Asian" was also not created by the people that the term signifies. The use of the term "Asyan" or "Asian" in the early modern period in England was used to describe the western peninsula of Asia, which is roughly modern-day turkey (OED). This is in contrast to the modern usage of the term as describing persons of East or Southeast Asian

descent in North America and South Asian descent in Britain (OED). The referent for the category of "Asian" remains a shifting one. In the early 20th century, U.S. immigration documents considered the Chinese to be a race separate from Korean, Filipino, and Indians who were categorized as "Other" (Brown). From 1920 to 1940, the US census classified Indians as "Hindus" regardless of their religion. From 1960–1990, the US census grouped Hawaiian, Samoan and Guamanian people into the "Asian" category as well (Brown). In 2000, a new category was created for this latter group, "Pacific Islander" (Brown).

The concept of biological race began in the late fifteenth century when European ships discovered different peoples on their travels (Anemone 14). The notion of "race" in the United States in particular was influenced by a misinterpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution and by the imperial subjugation of Asia, Africa and Latin America by Europe (Lockman 77). The Euro-American individuals who came up with this system believed that the superiority of Europeans was due to biological characteristic of the "white" (Lockman 77). The artificial hierarchy of race replaced the artificial hierarchy of socio-economic class as a way to structure society and to keep those in power on top (Anemone 15). This artificial act of dividing humanity into "races" and placing them into a hierarchy with the highest category being "white," the lowest category "black," and other "people of colour" such as indigenous, Asians, and Latinx individuals in the middle is rooted in Euro-American colonialism. This concept was used by Europeans and Americans of European descent to justify taking the land of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, and the exploitation of people of color as indentured laborers working under inhumane conditions in order to satisfy their capitalistic greed. From 1500–1888, 10–12 million African slaves were transported to the Americas to make their economies possible (Lee). From 1838–1917, driven by civil war, drought, famine, or poverty, 419,000 South Asians migrated to the British West Indies and 140,000 Chinese men went to Cuba/Peru to work on the plantations as "coolies," or indentured laborers. These phenomena contributed to the stereotype of people of color being labor responsible for work "deemed too dirty, dangerous or degrading for white men" (Lee). Although these particular events happened over a century ago, the stereotypes that arose from them still resurface in contemporary times in insidious ways.

Another way to deconstruct the category of "Asian" is to demonstrate how people categorized as "Asian" in North America, South America, and Europe are actually very diverse. They come from a variety of nations and are diverse in terms of language, culture, and histories. However, once they arrived in the United States, they were largely treated by U.S. society in similar fashion due to "exclusionary immigration laws, restrictive naturalization laws, labor market segregation, and patterns of ghettoization" (Michael Omi and Howard Winant, 472). In Asian

religions courses, we generally assume that "Asian" is a natural category and we seldom deconstruct it. And yet, inherently embedded in this concept are structural hierarchies that perpetuate the notion of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Learning about "Asian culture" or "Asian religion" is not enough to dismantle these ideas. It is also necessary to think deeper about the assumptions that underly the very categories we use to lump people into a single category in the first place. Thus, very much like how the racial description of "white" or "black" are socially constructed categories, so too is the category of "Asian."

Acknowledging the Orientalist, Colonialist, and Imperialist Roots of Religious Studies and Asian Studies

By the nineteenth century, large parts of Asia and the Muslim world were subject to the colonial rule of European powers. This was also the moment when the modern academic disciplines, including disciplines that studied aspects of these conquered societies first emerged (Lockman 67, Masuzawa 15). Particularly relevant to this paper are the fields of Orientalism, anthropology, and religious studies. Moreover, during this period, writers, philosophers, and poets of the Romantic movement were influenced by Orientalism and began to idealize the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese civilizations as offering an "inaccessible source of wisdom" that could serve as antidote to rationalistic, materialistic West (Lockman 69). The flip side of this was the exoticization of their subjects as alien and mysterious (Lockman 70). The idealization and exoticization of Muslim and other civilizations existed within the greater context of helping to justify European rule. This cultural tendency to idealize or exoticize Asia and Islamic civilizations continues to resurface in dominant Euro-American culture today.

The academic field of religious studies and the category of "world religions" bears the imprint of European imperialism and colonialism. As Tomoko Masuzawa observes, world religions "as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy, which quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world" (20). For example, Max Müller, one of the founding fathers of the field of religious studies, decided how to classify the religions of Asia in his *Sacred Books of the East* (Sun 60-1). He classified Confucianism as a world religion, when most Chinese would not consider Confucianism to be a religion.

Asian Studies has roots in Oriental studies but also belongs to Area Studies. Area Studies arose during the Cold War period after WWII. Officials and academics from the United Sates saw the Middle East, North Africa, Asia as being of strategic importance. The purpose of Area Studies was to "produc[e] policy-relevant knowledge" in order to maintain the United States as a global power

(Lockman 123, 127). In contrast to Oriental studies that viewed civilization as static, area studies saw polities as constantly adapting to new political, social, and cultural circumstances.

There exists an abundance of literature on the orientalist, colonialist, and imperialist roots of Religious Studies and Asian Studies. In my home field of Buddhist studies in particular, Donald Lopez and others have done some trailblazing work on this topic.[1] And yet, how many of us actively adopt these resources into our research and classroom teaching? I know that some of us do. I myself have incorporated, for example, excerpts from Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-La* in my coverage of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in my Tibetan Religions course. However, incorporating these sources in a piecemeal fashion is not enough. We need to demonstrate epistemological awareness of the history and basic assumptions of our academic fields. We need to incorporate this self-reflexiveness about our academic fields in a more systematic way in our courses.

Asian Americans: An Invisible History

Finally, incorporating resources from Asian American studies into our courses on Asian religions can help to dismantle the idea of Asians and Asian Americans as being perpetual foreigners. For example, in my Buddhism in America course, we discuss the history of Buddhism in the United States from the Transcendentalists until the present. Popular textbooks for this topic, including Richard Seager's *Buddhism in America* and Charles Prebish's and Kenneth Tanaka's *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, discuss the crucial contributions of Asian immigrant communities to Buddhism in the United States. In their discussion of Buddhism among these immigrant communities, these textbooks discuss the discrimination and violence experienced by Asian American communities such as the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in the internment camps of WWII. However, these standard textbooks do not analyze the intersection of Buddhism in the United States and race in-depth. Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge* is the most recent book that demonstrates the inadequacy of current models within Buddhist studies to understand the intersections of Buddhism and race among Asian American communities in the United States.

In order to analyze this topic in a robust manner, we need resources from other academic fields such as Asian American Studies. For example, in my Buddhism in America course, we discuss the appropriation and popularization of Buddhism by the Beat poets in the 1950s. However, what we do not discuss is the way in which their representation of Buddhism embodies Orientalist attitudes and how it racializes Asians. An excellent resource to help us analyze this topic is Jane Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism*. In this book, Iwamura analyzes the way in which the trope of the Oriental Monk has informed our understanding of key

figures in Asian American religions, including D.T. Suzuki. She demonstrates how despite the Oriental Monk being a seemingly positive stereotype, it is nevertheless a stereotype that needs to be held up alongside that of "such easily recognizable figures as the inscrutable Oriental, evil Fu Manchus, Yellow Peril, heathen Chinee, and Dragon Ladies" (8–9). Such stereotypes only serve to further the idea of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

In my Buddhism in America course, I discuss the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This law changed the face of Buddhism in America by opening the doors to immigrants from all over the world after the previous immigrant restrictions beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. However, this is not enough. In a course on Buddhism in America, it is necessary to incorporate the history of Asian Americans more systematically through source texts such as Erika Lee's *A History of Asian America*. Despite the lasting contributions that migrants from Japan, Korea, and China made to building the United States—whether through the building of Pacific Railroad or the plantations in Hawai'i—very little is known about the religious life of these communities. More research and teaching on the subject will render visible the invisibility of Asian American history in conventional presentations of American history. In the words of Erika Lee, teaching and learning about Asian American history is not only about "filling gaps" but is "also about combating racism" (Lee). She writes, "In the absence of any real knowledge about Asian Americans and their long history in the US, stereotypes flourish, repeating the fantasies of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, exotic sexual objects, and model minorities who do not encounter racism" (Lee).

Conclusion

As the celebrated historian Erika Lee testified before Congress in the wake of anti-Asian racism and violence since the onset of the COVID pandemic, the rise in incidents of anti-Asian hate "are not random acts perpetrated by deranged individuals. They are an expression of our country's long history of systemic racism and racial violence targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders" (Lee "Testimony"). She adds, "They will not simply go away after the pandemic" (Lee "Testimony").

Our classrooms in Asian religions and Asian studies represents a crucial arena for uncovering these histories in order to understand why this violence against those racialized as Asian continues in the United States and beyond. In this paper, I have proposed three modest interventions: to demonstrate how the category of "Asian" is constructed; to acknowledge the Orientalist and colonialist roots of our academic fields; and to incorporate more Asian American history and methodologies into our courses. Of course, there is much more that we can do. But we have to start somewhere. Uncovering histories may seem like a passive

approach in comparison to protests and marches. Nevertheless, as Bee Nguyen, the Georgia state representative, noted in response to the Atlanta spa shootings of March 2021: the fact that the long history of Asian American violence in the US was erased and "not told . . [is] very intentionally to make us keep our heads down, to pit communities of color against each other, to make us adhere to this model minority myth." Uncovering histories can be a powerful course of action that contributes to the dismantling of the very structures that perpetuate anti-Asian hate and violence.

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Note

[1] *Prisoners of Shangri la, Curators of the Buddha.*

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