



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Book Review: The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era
The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era

Review by: Sylvia Chong

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 8, No. 1 (February 2013), pp. 182-185

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2013.8.1.182>

Accessed: 13/02/2014 10:25

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

aggressiveness, stood little chance of resisting profound changes in the broader geopolitical climate. Though Lê Duẩn scorned diplomacy, Nguyen argues that he ultimately became dependent on negotiation and popular sympathy around the world, including that of the American antiwar movement, to keep alive the possibility of eventual communist victory.

Whether the “two Lê’s” dominated decision-making in Hà Nội quite to the extent that Nguyen suggests is a question that will no doubt inspire new research. Indeed, Nguyen’s superficial attention to Hồ Chí Minh and other prominent DRV leaders leaves readers wondering how they responded to their marginalization and whether they sought to resist Lê Duẩn’s agenda. Võ Nguyên Giáp’s prominent role in the major North Vietnamese victory in Laos in 1971 suggests that Lê Duẩn’s rivals could sometimes wield significant power. The book suffers from a few other problems as well. Sections covering the Paris negotiations are exceedingly dense, offering readers few signposts to help navigate the stream of complicated bargaining proposals and cast of characters. And Nguyen does too little to develop her intriguing suggestion at the end of the book: that Hà Nội’s ultimate victory owed much to the support of other revolutionary moments and governments in the Third World.

Given Nguyen’s exceptional ambitions and the limitations of her sources, such problems are understandable and perhaps inevitable. In any case, *Hanoi’s War* unquestionably merits the careful attention of scholars of the Vietnam War and of the Cold War more generally. It will no doubt stand as a model of multinational Cold War history and set the agenda for other scholars for years to come.

Mark Atwood Lawrence, University of Texas at Austin

SYLVIA CHONG

The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 353 pages. \$26.95 (paper).

“Why would the problem of identification,” the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks, “not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?” By “identification,” Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the complex

psychical process by which a subject forms its relation to an Other, a relation that is a necessary condition to the formation of political solidarity. At one level, one could identify with an Other—possibly a person, group, or cause—and come to support that Other through empathetic identification. However, identification can also take other forms. One could incorporate the other person into oneself, as in the case of celebrity impersonations. Alternatively, one could identify with another by seeing something real or imagined in the Other that one wishes to disavow in oneself: a perceived defect or fear that one wishes to expunge, and so project that identification onto the Other. In each case, the problem of identification serves as a critical lens through which scholars can understand complex questions about the making and unmaking of political solidarity.

Sylvia Chong's *The Oriental Obscene* draws on this analytical lens to cast a fresh look at the question of race in American cultural politics during the Vietnam War. In particular, Chong examines a critical mass of popular visual media of the period to argue that American culture produced a racial fantasy that conceived of the Vietnamese body as both the source and bearer of obscene violence. Chong focuses her study on the period loosely from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Since Vietnamese did not immigrate to the United States in sizeable numbers until after the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975, American culture rarely based conceptions of the Vietnamese during this period upon actual Vietnamese bodies. Rather, this fantasy—what Chong coins the “oriental obscene”—refers to a “phantasmatic visual presence that dominates the American cultural imaginary in the absence of an Asian American political collectivity that can speak for itself” (21). The term “obscene” refers to the violence either performed by or enacted on the Vietnamese body, which became synonymous with the “oriental body” in American culture. Thus, the “oriental obscene” came into existence through a perceived and enduring cultural idea about the Vietnamese body in celluloid and visual media.

In imagining such a body, American culture created a highly protean and generative fantasy, protean because it was readily adaptable to a variety of social contexts and generative because it helped bolster a variety of political causes. The book's five chapters are organized around permutations of this racial fantasy. Chapter One examines television footage of domestic conflict and protest by political groups circa 1968, even groups that would seem at

first to have no apparent relation to each other. Yet for Chong, these groups, including white counterculture, black power, and the feminist movement, all shared at least one commonality: identification with the Vietnamese in the formation of their respective collective consciousness. For instance, the slogan “No Vietnamese ever called me a Nigger” exemplifies an activist strain of Afro-Orientalism that forged a black-Vietnamese alliance through the process of identification (65). Each of the prior groups shored up, and in some cases founded, its identity through this process, the evidence for which Chong marshals and synthesizes with remarkable savvy. Chapter Two provides an interpretation of the war through a comparison of iconic photographs and their corresponding moving images, reflecting on the ethical questions that these images raise. By looking at photographs and footage of the “Saigon Execution” (1968), the “My Lai Massacre” (1969) and the “Napalm Girl” (1972), Chong shows how identification with the Vietnamese helped spawn the Asian American movement. The slogan “Is this what they do to people who look like me?” illustrates not only a “shared structure of feeling,” Chong explains, but also an embrace of the abjection that the Vietnamese experienced as portrayed in the media (112). Indeed, the book’s investigation into interethnic relations and intergroup solidarity in this and other chapters represents Chong’s most innovative and thought-provoking contribution to what is a burgeoning research frontier. Chapter Three looks at the first wave of Vietnam War films released in 1978—“The Boys in Company C,” “Coming Home,” “Go Tell the Spartans,” and “Apocalypse Now”—to suggest that Vietnam became a metonymic site of American rather than Vietnamese trauma. Most notable is Chong’s painstaking research into the material conditions of film production. Finally, Chapters Four and Five focus on a different kind of fantasy, moving from identification with the Other’s abjection and suffering to one of self-mastery and domination through the popularity of the Asian martial arts in the 1970s. These last two chapters demonstrate the persistence of the oriental obscene in different cultural form. By looking at several martial arts films, the careers of white actors such as Chuck Norris and David Carradine (who frequently performed as Asians) and the popularity of Bruce Lee, Chong demonstrates both the possibility and limits of the Asian martial arts in compensating for a wounded American body politic.

Chong is careful to differentiate her study from other competing schools of thought, especially those that conduct ideology critique. She clearly wishes to go beyond the question of racial stereotype that could be refuted on the grounds of verisimilitude. Rather, by focusing on theories of fantasy, Chong is able to illuminate the slippages and mutability of racial positions. Fantasy or the “phantasmatic,” unlike ideology, cannot be easily demystified through historicization because, for Chong, it implies an involuntary condition resulting from the “larger systems of desire, interpellation, or norms” (13). Chong aptly draws on Benedict Anderson’s idea of the “imagined community” to lend further credence to her argument that like the idea of the nation and its modular character, the racial fantasy of the oriental obscene in American culture may well be an ideational construct but no less a potent one that produced unintended effects. This finding would certainly have powerful implications not only for Asians and Asian Americans, including those of Vietnamese heritage and also those who are somehow perceived as “oriental,” but also for coalition building and for a broad spectrum of social and political activist causes.

That said, *The Oriental Obscene* is less about Vietnam and its people than about complex anxieties and negotiations about race and racialized bodies in American visual culture. These are clearly matters of profound importance. No less important, however, is the status of the Vietnamese. Insofar as they enter the picture, they almost always function as a component of America’s complex psyche. Like the ego in some versions of psychoanalysis, the subject that is America is fundamentally divided, haunted and interrupted by historical others not fully knowable to itself in the moment. In this ethical scenario, one is prompted to ask: How *ought* America respond? Unless “Vietnam” is to become perpetually deferred and unknowable, when does the ego that is America *begin* to understand “Vietnam”—and its people both in the country and the diaspora—in all its complexities, fragments and divisions? These questions merely underscore the need for and continuing relevance of scholarship that examines the trauma and psychic experience of America’s others.

Richard Quang-Anh Tran, National University of Singapore