

Joseph Cheah. *Anti-Asian Racism: Myths, Stereotypes, and Catholic Social Teaching*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022. 192 pages. \$26.00. ISBN: 9781626984790

*Anti-Asian Racism* is an exceptional book by Joseph Cheah, on the genealogy and variants of anti-Asian racism in the United States. Cheah describes how public Catholic writings on the topic are frequently indirect in addressing the main issue of White supremacy and thus do not deal holistically with anti-Asian racism. As we see patterns of unrepentant sins continue resurfacing, this work is a powerful analysis of an important topic at an opportune time.

This book has an introduction, three body chapters and a conclusion. The introduction provides an overview of Catholic social teachings on race, defines terms, and outlines the rest of the book. The three long chapters each explore a toxic stereotype directed at Asian Americans, though the contents of each overlap enough that the book does not have to be read linearly to be meaningful. Through all sections, the book directly names the evil of White supremacy. Cheah refuses to gesture vaguely at evil or speak of systemic issues with a passive voice; White supremacy is the evil which stereotypes Asian Americans and has implications for all.

Chapter one, “Yellow Peril,” provides an in-depth history of Asian immigrants stereotyped as “disease-ridden” outsiders, incapable of assimilation. In contrast to the Irish who arrived in the US during the same period and within a few decades were adopted under the label of Whiteness, Asian immigrants were “perpetual foreigners” (more on this in chapter three). Many examples of violence are catalogued here, with public health concerns fallaciously used as excuses for White supremacist attacks, even burning entire Asian areas of cities. Further, because the Irish were Catholic, the Catholic Church advocated for them while participating in racist attacks, especially on the Chinese. Protestant groups were more diverse in approach, with some like Otis Gibson leading efforts reaching out to support and convert Asian immigrants, while others, like Isaac S. Kalloch, argued that evangelization of the Chinese should happen exclusively in China. Interestingly, becoming Christian has consistently been a way for populations to be incorporated in dominant parts of American society. The chapter closes describing how the Yellow Peril myth has resonances with AAPI experiences in the present day, especially around COVID-19. Hate crimes, inaccurate blurring between nationality and ethnicity, and “techno-Orientalism” (racialized fear of Chinese technology) have all trended toward normalization in the past few years, but the connections of each to the late 1800s is clearly explained.

Chapter two is about the “Model Minority Myth,” succinctly summarized as a “divide and conquer strategy, designed to keep the structure of White supremacy intact” (67-68). Focusing on how Asian Americans do not fit into a Black-White vertical hierarchy, instead being a part of an insider-outsider spectrum as described by Angelo Ancheta (71), Cheah writes directly, “Asian Americans were successful not necessarily because we were able to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, so to speak, but because we were allowed to succeed for geopolitical reasons during the Cold War” (67). Again, the topics in this chapter are timely given the U.S. Supreme Court’s ongoing discussions around affirmative action. The scholarship of Ronald Takaki in *Strangers from a Different Shore* is always prescient, though this book uses Takaki to critique the model minority myth, rather than to make any points about affirmative action. Still, the point is consistent: “Since the Civil Rights era, our perceived success has been used as a racial wedge against other people of color, African Americans in particular, to keep White America from having to acknowledge the systemic racism that has prevented the advancement of African Americans” (67). Finally, the litany of anti-Asian hate crimes (92-96)

makes the relevance of this chapter obvious, and in some ways could be read as a both an analysis and a liturgical communal confession.

Chapter three, “Perpetual Foreigner,” is about how Asian-Americans are continuously viewed as foreigners, even incorrectly assumed to speak with accents today. Cheah uses the Korean American theologian Jung Young Lee’s autobiography, *A Life In Between: An American Journey*, to analyze the difficulties of life in-between identities and belongings. Lee’s proposal is to cultivate “in-both” and “in-beyond” as positive self-affirming hybrid identities. The point is again solid: to maintain active agency, resist over-simplified centrism created by White supremacy, and teach Asian-American history in a holistic way to invalidate stereotypes.

Each of the body chapters ends with a conclusion and theological reflection, and the book’s formal “Conclusion” chapter powerfully serves this purpose for the work as a whole. Examining Jesus’s life through the three destructive stereotypes, Cheah’s description of Jesus as “perpetual foreigner” is especially strong, with the other two connections less obvious to me.

The dialogue and critiques of documented Catholic social teachings are sprinkled throughout the book, usually after an aspect of anti-Asian racism has been discussed in depth. Cheah critiques the pastoral letter against racism: *Open Wide Our Hearts* and *Encountering Christ in Harmony*. The chapter “Yellow Peril” focuses on how White supremacy is “America’s original sin,” and is contradictory to *imago Dei* theology. These analyses are well done, with my only wish being that interaction with them were longer.

Editorial of this book come more from obligation to the genre of a “balanced book review” than from any negative impressions. I would have appreciated more interaction with the subject of racial capitalism as a driver of White supremacy, with input from Cedric Robinson, Willie Jennings, Jonathan Tran, or Ronald Takaki in *A Different Mirror*, not just *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Short sections on political economy were good, again I only wish they were more in-depth in their descriptions and in the concomitant social teachings around greed and money. I am also still curious about modes of anti-Asian racism experienced specifically by Asian women – trafficking of Chinese women in the 1800s was covered along with the recent Atlanta spa shootings – but discussing women’s experience via sexual exploitation is at best an incomplete story.

Many of the events described in this work – whether from the year 1880 or 2020 – were difficult to read about, because the pain is still raw for so many. The evils of White supremacy are pluriform with individual as well as social implications. I recommend this book for general readers, not in a vague sense, but in saying that everyone would benefit from reading it, perhaps especially those who are unaware of histories of anti-Asian racism and think this book has nothing to with them.

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