Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan, editors

Religion and Popular Culture in America

Chapter One

Jane Naomi Iwamura

THE ORIENTAL MONK IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Driving down a busy street in Oakland, California, I was met by the larger-than-life presence of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. He appeared to me in a vision of unparalleled clarity and grace. His direct gaze was gentle, yet intent, and his spiritual repose arresting. For that one moment, the hectic pace of my life was interrupted, and I was transported to another time, another world, another possibility.

Many others who passed that same spot shared a similar vision. To each of us, the Dalai Lama's silent message reverberated: *Think Different*.

The unexpected appearance of such a prominent spiritual figure, in olden days, would undoubtedly be taken as nothing short of a miracle. But in contemporary times, a miracle it is not. The Dalai Lama's "visitation" had been made possible by the Apple Corporation and the spiritual power of advertising. The vision derived its meaning not from a single epiphany, but rather through a series of mass media orientations: glossies in magazines; newspaper photos and references; images in film, television, and the internet. Indeed, at times, His Holiness seemed to be everywhere at once.

The Dalai Lama has become one of the most recognizable spiritual figures of our times. As a non-Christian religious leader, the interest he holds for millions of Americans is unprecedented—save by the Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s. And rather than signaling political threat and religious zealotry, as the Middle Eastern patriarch once did, the Dalai Lama represents an admirable pacifism and spiritual calm ripe for esteem and emulation. Indeed, Americans love the Dalai Lama.

It is this American love and fascination for Eastern spiritual figures such as the Dalai Lama that I am most interested in understanding. Rather than simply recounting the religious and moral qualities these spiritual individuals possess, it is important to discuss the social context from which their attraction emerges. How did the Dalai Lama come to represent all that he does for Americans? Indeed, what exactly does he represent? How have we come to "know" him? Is our ability to embrace someone and something (Tibetan Buddhism) once considered so foreign anything other than a testimony to a newfound openness and progressive understanding?

I'd like to tackle these questions by critically analyzing the history of representation which has contributed to the current image of the Dalai Lama. We "know" the Dalai Lama not simply because of the fact that we may understand his views and admire his actions, but also because we are familiar with the particular role he plays in the popular consciousness of the U.S.—the type of *icon* he has become—the icon of the *Oriental Monk*. To get a sense of what makes the Dalai Lama (and others like him) so popular, we need to get a sense of the history of this icon and how it has been used to express and manage our sense of Asian religions.

The Oriental Monk has enjoyed a long and prominent sojourn in the realm of American popular culture. We have encountered him under different names and guises: as Mahatma Gandhi and as D. T. Suzuki; as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk consumed in flames; as the Beatles' guru, the Maharishi Mahesh; as *Kung Fu*'s Kwai Chang Caine and as Mr. Miyagi in the *Karate Kid*; as Deepak Chopra and, as well, as the Dalai Lama. Although the Oriental Monk appears in these various forms throughout American pop culture, we are always able to recognize him as the representative of an alternative spirituality that draws from the ancient wellsprings of "Eastern" civilization and culture.

Compared with the negative stereotypes of Asians which have historically circulated in the American media (sinister Fu Manchus, inscrutable gangsters, the Yellow Peril, and so on), the icon of the Oriental Monk seems like a noteworthy advance. And indeed, it demonstrates an air of increasing tolerance and respect. But to look at this representation as nothing but admirable progress precludes us from seeing ways in which positive portrayals may reinscribe certain racist notions of the Eastern "other." Indeed, it is important to analyze the icon of the Oriental Monk within the phenomenon of *orientalism*—as part of an orientalist network of representations. According to Edward Said, this network is "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 a clear and unbiased representation of Asian religions, this system of representation reveals the interests and concerns of the Occidental subjectivity from which it emerges.

The Oriental Monk, drawing from this network of representation, includes within its iconic scope a wide range of religious figures (gurus, sages, swamis, masters, teachers) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (South Asian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese). Although individual figures point to a diverse field of encounter, they are homogenized within American popular consciousness and culture. Racialization (more correctly, "orientalization") serves to blunt the distinctiveness of particular persons and figures. Indeed, recognition of any Eastern spiritual guide (real or fictional) is predicated on their conformity to general features paradigmatically encapsulated in the icon of the Oriental Monk: his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, and oftentimes his manner of dress.

In an analysis of the icon of the Oriental Monk as American, we will see a complex dynamic unfold in which orientalist notions of Eastern spiritual heritages and Western disillusionment and desire converge. These notions are configured in a conventionalized narrative with formulaic aspects that demonstrate the *specific* nature of America's engagement with "Eastern," non-Christian traditions, and its use of the Oriental Monk as a means to symbolically express, manage, and work through its troubled spiritual sense of self. Hence, the Oriental Monk as pop cultural icon and narrative tells us a great deal about the religious ethos of twentieth-century America: he details the fears, hopes, and desires of a society in spiritual turmoil and search. In the following discussion, I will follow the Oriental Monk on his journey through American popular consciousness (or rather, follow this consciousness as it journeys through him), and discuss certain highlights along his spiritual path—his mass media "initiation" through silent film (D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*), his "prominence" in 1980s film and television, and his current "reign" in the form of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. We will discover that although the monk travels under different guises, primarily dictated by the geopolitical terrain, his basic mission and tale remain strangely the same.

INITIATION

The Oriental Monk makes 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 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, Battlin' Burrows. The Yellow Man is portrayed as the only one who recognizes Lucy's "beauty which all Limehouse missed." But tragedy ensues: Battlin' Burrows discovers his daughter's whereabouts, beats her to death, and then is shot in turn 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 which 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, Griffith's main contribution resides in the revised introduction of the story, where he locates 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 "[a]dvice 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 both begins and ends the story offers definite spiritual overtones to the tragic tale.

In his essay, "Modernizing White Patriarchy: Re-Viewing D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*," John Kuo Wei Tchen cites the "modernized cultural patriarchy" promoted in the film. This new form of dominance and oppression channels the views and prescriptions of the cultural elite into stereotypical representations set in place and reinforced by character and plot development. Tchen exposes the view which undergirds both early silent films such as *Broken Blossoms* and their successors: "Proper society should be managed so Blacks [can] be segregated and kept in their place, and poor whites, immigrants and native alike, [can] be acculturated into bourgeois society." Within a framework of modernized cultural patriarchy, *Broken Blossoms* can be read as the cultural elite's commentary on the marginalized elements of its society in urbanized areas. More specifically, it marks the filmic origin of a device through which this is accomplished—the figure of the "good Asian":

If anything, [Griffith] eschews the standard stereotype of the "heathen Chinee" already well established in the previous century, and adapts the alternative image of the good-for-the-West "John Chinaman." "John" was the image of the tame, aristocratic, clean, honest, and often Christianized Chinese man promoted by traders, missionaries, and the wealthy who had direct personal interests in promoting good relations with China.

This positive portrayal serves a number of functions: (I) as a "symbolic foil to complain about the abusive, immature authority of lower-class white men" (Battlin' Burrows); (2) to appease China, which the U.S. has "interests" in maintaining good foreign relations with; and (3) to discipline immigrant Chinese who reside in Chinatowns of the West, by providing a representative *measure* and *standard* for the moral behavior of these communities. In these multifarious ways, films such as Griffith's provide a means by which to manage diverse groups via cultural representation rather than through bodily force or direct polemic—a strategy which is the hallmark of the "modernized cultural patriarchy."

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that Tchen emphasizes the "Christian" nature of the Yellow Man's moral and spiritual orientation, since the character is portrayed as definitively Buddhist. I think Tchen is correct in pointing out the "proto-'Christian' values" that the representation masks; at the same time, this easy identification of the Buddhist Yellow Man as Christian in essence misses a significant dimension of Griffith's film. Indeed, Tchen's critical analysis does not account for the brief but crucial encounter between the Yellow Man and two missionizing clergymen in the desolate Limehouse streets:

Christian: "My brother leaves for China tomorrow to convert the heathen." Yellow Man: "I wish him well." (The clergymen then offer the Yellow Man a pamphlet entitled "Hell.")

Unbeknownst to the Christian proselytizers, the Yellow Man is a missionary himself, albeit jaded and discouraged by his own experiences in a foreign land. Hence his well-wishing is cast in a sympathetic, yet ironic, tone. The above exchange can be viewed as a brilliant foreshadowing of the Yellow Man's tragic end ("Hell"), but it also serves as a commentary on Christian mission. The viewer is meant to identify with the Yellow Man's

disillusioned response. Through this identification, one can read Griffith's (and perhaps the audience's) own relation to institutionalized Christianity as ambivalent at best.

Hence, we must struggle with Griffith's portrayal *as such*. The fact that Griffith associates peace, gentleness, sensitivity, and altruism to the Buddha and his followers in the film constitutes a significant moment in popular consciousness. At the very least, it must assume that a "heathen" religion stands on par with its "non-heathen" counterpart, although I believe much more can be read into this moment: *Broken Blossoms* expresses an already established disillusionment with Christianity and quite possibly a budding fascination with alternative modes of moral and spiritual understanding. Griffith, as "cultural midwife," inadvertently ushers this desire into popular consciousness through the Oriental Monk figures of the Yellow Man and his Buddhist teachers.

Of course, *Blossoms* concludes in tragedy, not hope. This ending reinvigorated the film's elite audience—infused them with "a sense of mission" and justified their "paternalistic efforts" within 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." Although this constitutes the intentional aim of Griffith's work, it does not preclude other contrary effects as well: Eastern spirituality has been representationally idealized and operates kindly in its new Western home. In this way, *Broken Blossoms* sets the groundwork for the West's further engagements, and later spiritual identification, with the East. As we will see, 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!*

PROMINENCE

Times have obviously changed since Griffith's day, and, along with them, attitudes towards non-Christian religions. This transformation is for the most part due to the events of the 1960s, which embodied a refreshing challenge to the American Christian establishment (in the form of "alternative" lifestyles and spiritual experimentation) and a new tolerance towards "peoples of color" (in the form of the Civil Rights Movement and 1965 Immigration Act). At the same time, this transformation was underwritten by a sense of loss—a loss configured by the wounds of war (the World Wars, the Vietnam War), the impact of technology and global capitalism, domestic racial strife, and growing disillusionment with traditional forms of religious faith and worship. Out of this context emerged the archetype of the American religious subject as a "spiritual seeker" who journeys in search of new religious ground for reconciliation and healing.

The cultures of Asia offered the unparalleled promise of finding such ground. The search for spiritual renewal in the East found popular expression in *Kung Fu* (1972-75), the first popular offering to make explicit the spiritual underpinnings of Eastern martial arts practice. It is thus the progenitor of both the many martial arts movies that were produced from the early 1970s through the late 1980s, and later representations such as *The Karate*

Kid (1984) and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), which transformed the adult entertainment of *Kung Fu* and its more violent martial arts successors into family-oriented fare.

Kung Fu, The Karate Kid, and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* all share a similar narrative: lone monk figure—oftentimes with no visible family or community, unrecognized by the dominant culture—takes under his wing a fatherless, often parentless, child. This child embodies a tension: for example, *Kung Fu*'s Kwai Chang Caine is half-American, half-Chinese; Daniel in *The Karate Kid* hails from a working class, ethnic background; and, of course, the turtles are mutant. Although these figures half-signify the dominant culture in racial terms, they have an ambivalent relationship with that culture; this allows each to make a break with the Western tradition radical enough to embrace their marginalized half. The Oriental Monk figure seizes this half, develops it, 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 occidental West through the *bridge figure*. Ultimately, the Oriental Monk and his apprentice(s) represent future salvation of the dominant culture—they embody a new hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology.

Hence, the modernized cultural patriarchy set forth decades ago in *Broken Blossoms* becomes firmly established in the '70s and '80s. Like *Blossoms*, these contemporary films enact a commentary on and prescription for ethnic and working-class communities built upon the ideological figure of the spiritual Asian male. But in these later renditions, the Oriental Monk travels down a path not foreseen by Griffith. If *Blossoms* were rewritten in more contemporary terms according to the above narrative, the Yellow Man would arrive as noble and pious as before, but this time as a kung fu master with magical powers. He would rescue Lucy from her depraved, abusive father, care for her, and finally train her in the spiritual ways and practices of the East. Battlin' Burrows, now a frustrated blue-collar worker obsessed with war and guns, would then attempt to reclaim his estranged daughter, and the film would culminate in a final showdown between the two father figures and their respective forms of combat and defense. Lucy would get into the act as well, employing her new talents to disarm her father as gently as possible. The Yellow Man and the girl, through superior human insight and bodily discipline, would triumph over their unruly counterpart. After his definitive defeat, Battlin' would lay aside his weapons, be reunited with his daughter, and the three would join forces to fight evil and corruption in *Blossoms II*. So ends Griffith's classic rewritten for a late-twentieth-century audience—once a cautionary tale and now transfigured into a narrative of spiritual hope and progress.

Indeed, it may appear as if this narrative shift represents a positive trend. Asian religions are no longer portrayed as spiritual systems incompatible with the West, but rather as transformative and life-enhancing influences. But the fact that a particular narrative and representation of Asian spiritual traditions and Asian peoples has become so conventionalized attests to its ideological nature and force. The Oriental Monk figure is portrayed as a desexualized male character who represents the last of his kind. Passing on his spiritual legacy to the West through the bridge figure represents his only hope for

survival. Hence, this narrative implicitly argues that Asian religions are impotent within their racial context of origin, and are only made (re)productive if resituated in a Western context and passed on to white practitioners who possess the daring and innovative sensibilities that their Eastern counterparts presumably lack. In this way, the icon of the Oriental Monk and its contemporary narrative—a construction of "racist love"—may be more insidious than negative stereotypes informed by "racist hate," as it allows for the recognition of peoples and cultures of Asian heritage while simultaneously subjecting them to a narrative of their own obsolescence.

Although its characteristic features have remained consistent over the past two decades, the Oriental Monk narrative has become increasingly condensed over time. We have traveled from the more complex narratives of *Kung Fu* and *Karate Kid* to the extremely concentrated signifiers found in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Alice*. In the original *Kung Fu*, at least half of the movie is given over to explaining Shaolin practices and philosophy. All that remains in *Ninja Turtles* are a few anecdotes thrown in for good measure, and in Woody Allen's *Alice* of the same year (1990), we find the symbol of the Oriental Monk in its crudest form: Allen ironically employs stereotypical "oriental" music and opium den darkness to situate Dr. Yang. Even though Dr. Yang's chain-smoking, caustic persona can be read subversively, he and Chinatown still signal in the viewer's mind Alice's entry into an alternative sense of self. For all the seeming self-reflexivity demonstrated in Allen's ironic invocation of the Oriental Monk figure, Dr. Yang remains merely a symbolic device in the larger plot of Alice's transformation, made productive by a still unchallenged orientalist network of associations.

Along with his condensed form, the Oriental Monk has also acquired more and more fantastic powers in his recent manifestations. Dr. Yang can induce certain states of consciousness and connections with the past through his herbal medications. In *Kung Fu*'s resurrection—*Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* (1993-97)—the extended flashbacks exploring Caine's Chinese philosophical and spiritual training have been replaced by "otherworldly" plots and martial arts scenes filled with implausible stunts. United Paramount Network's *Vanishing Son*, which aired during the same time period (1994-95), did not escape this tendency. Over the course of its short run, the show's protagonist, Jian-Wa Chang, developed supernatural abilities demonstrated by glowing aural meditation scenes and his capacity to connect with the realm of ghosts where his recently deceased brother now resides.

Shifting his disciplined exercise and "grounded" approach into the supernatural arena attests to the full appropriation of the Oriental Monk as America's spiritual "other." Within the categories introduced by early anthropologists to account for the variation in belief systems around the world—magic, science, religion—the Oriental Monk offers an additional alternative: wisdom. This schema, which still resonates in the popular realm, carries with it an implicit racial coding, and in film representations this coding becomes more evident: black magic, white science, oriental wisdom. But as the Oriental Monk narrative becomes more and more conventionalized, the icon condenses and enters the magical realm, to be managed along with other spiritual "alternatives." Indeed, as the Oriental Monk takes on more and more (supernatural) "powers" within the narrative, he

seems to enjoy less and less "power" outside the narrative (i.e., as an antihero and counternarrative challenge).

A final dimension of the Oriental Monk narrative should also be taken note of. Many of the above films and television programs entail a return to the East in some fashion or another: Kwai Chang Caine liberates a camp of his fellow Chinese railroad workers; Mr. Miyagi and Daniel return to Japan in *The Karate Kid II* (1986), to prevent Miyagi's home village from being overrun by a greedy capitalist Japanese gangster; the Turtles and Splinter return to seventeenth-century Japan in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III* (1993); and Alice heads for India to work with Mother Theresa. Here we find that the East also suffers despair and corruption and requires the help of the protagonists. Asia cannot save itself, but looks toward the powers of the newly "enlightened" Westerner: the bridge figure has come to signify salvation not only for Western culture, but for "the Orient" as well. In this way, the modernized cultural patriarchy of the U.S. uses the Oriental Monk and his narrative to transform its disillusionment into a new spiritual imperialism and a renewed sense of mission. The proven success of the Monk now establishes it as one of the reigning icons in American popular cultural consciousness.

REIGN

With much acclaim, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he continued a line of world peacemakers whose vision was shaped by a mixture of profound spirituality and political awareness. The Nobel Peace Prize hurled the Dalai Lama and the small Asian country of Tibet into the public eye, and what happened next only solidified the Dalai Lama's status as an American popular cultural figure. Hollywood actor Richard Gere personally adopted the Dalai Lama's spiritual and political mission as his own, promoting the cause at the 1993 Academy Awards and becoming the Founding Chair of the Tibet House in New York. Many of Gere's contemporaries followed suit: "the Power Buddhist/Free Tibet contingent" includes Harrison Ford, Willem Dafoe, Sharon Stone, Steven Seagal, and Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys. These celebrity endorsements, along with the long history of the Oriental Monk in American popular culture, offered a Buddhist way of life unprecedented Western exposure and initiated the most recent stage in the development of the icon of the Oriental Monk.

With the Dalai Lama, we witness how the disruptions made by actual teachers are continually minimalized by the overpowering representations which have accrued in American popular cultural consciousness. The teacher of Asian origin instantaneously enters the popular culture realm and is transformed into a celebrity; that realm then exploits the reception of his physical and spiritual presence by marketing it for mass contemplation and consumption. This last stage is exemplified by the big movie productions centered around Tibetan Buddhism and/or the life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama which have emerged in the 1990s: Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993), in which a small Euro-American child from Seattle is selected as one of the subsequent reincarnations of the Dalai Lama; Jean Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997); and Martin Scorcese's biopic of the Tibetan spiritual leader, *Kundun* (1997).

In his physical manifestation, the Oriental Monk is now modeled after the Dalai Lama (note the Tibetan, saffron-robed, shaved-head versions in IBM's OS/2 commercials, who are miraculously able to communicate with each other telepathically). Psychically, this new Monk continues the work of its predecessors in the critiquing of American society—its religious and secular preoccupations:

We don't need these Buddhist temples, we don't need these Christian Churches. What we need, [the Dalai Lama] says, are the values of the human heart.... There's a lot of talk about [the baby boomer] generation being materially satisfied, but the next level of need is not satisfied and that's the spiritual level.

Buddhism is seen as one way that we might re-create a sense of spiritual meaning and purpose within a directionless society. Amid widespread despair, those who have found Buddhism have a sense of joy and inspiration.

But this version also constitutes a shift in geopolitical focus and mission. The long history of the icon of the Oriental Monk has demonstrated a preference for the Japanese or Chinese model. Indeed, Japan and China were viewed as cultures possessing great spiritual richness, but their challenge in the arena of international politics and the world market in relation to the U.S. was perceived as fairly contained; this combination of factors made them suitable representatives of the East in the American popular imagination from 1970 to the mid-1980s.

In the 1990s, however, Japan and China appear too formidable, with contemporary patriarchies of their own in place which greatly resemble those of the West, whereas Tibet poses less of a threat and offers Americans a new mold. The Tibetan version of the Monk paradigmatically signifies, through his dress and religious practices, a mythic spiritual past. This Oriental Monk also provides his charges with a concrete political mission: Free Tibet. As the inaugural issue of *Tricycle* succinctly summarizes:

* 1.2 million Tibetans have died (one sixth of the population)

* 70% of Tibet's virgin forest has been clear cut

* More than 6,000 monasteries, temples and historic sites have been looted and razed

* All religious practices have been outlawed.

This scenario includes a third world people who are fighting against a global power (China) for their very physical, cultural, and spiritual existence—a noble cause to align oneself with. Hence the Japanese and Chinese variations of the Oriental Monk have for the most part been traded in for the less compromised Tibetan model.

But unrecognized desires underlie the American interest in this politico-spiritual mission. It is interesting to note how Tibet's predicament mirrors and emerges from America's own guilt within and outside its own borders—the millions of human lives it has taken, the

deforestation it is responsible for, and its judgment on ways of life foreign to a democratic, secular, capitalist model. Indeed, Tibet represents a manageable cosmos where sins—past and present—can be atoned for. Hence, the Tibetan variation of the Oriental Monk enacts an exchange: a model of ethical behavior and spiritual direction for political and economic support. But this exchange serves the West well: America gains not only psychic resolution and healing, but also unchallenged economic and political patriarchal influence over the exiled nation.

The new regime, which the Oriental Monk and his narrative support, operates according to a uniquely twentieth-century system of domination: the "psycho-spiritual plantation system." Sau-ling C. Wong has introduced this concept to speak of "a stratified world of privileged whites and colored servers/caregivers." She elaborates:

people of color collectively become "*ideological caregivers*" for whites, in addition to being their literal caregivers.... "Ideological caregiving" is typically depicted in a benign light in mass culture, with emphasis placed on the benefits accruing to the care-receiver, the volitional participation of the caregiver, and the general mutuality of the exchange. This wish-fulfilling picture expediently flattens the complex social and emotional dynamics generated when mothering is performed by those who are stigmatized and disenfranchised, in virtually every other context, by the care-receivers.

This "ideological caregiver" "functions mainly as a *resource*, subject to appropriation to salve the insecurities of the master/mistress." Wong focuses on American films and novels whose stories take place in the U.S., and astutely details the domestic presence of the "psycho-spiritual plantation system." But the operations of the Oriental Monk as spiritual caregiver and guardian demonstrate that this new form of cultural patriarchy and spiritual imperialism reaches far beyond our borders, into Asia.

I have examined the historical development and complex workings of the icon of the Oriental Monk in a variety of American popular cultural representations. Although the icon transmutes according to the geopolitical situation operating at the time, the narrative he is associated with remains amazingly similar throughout. The icon reflects a disillusionment with Western frameworks, and the hopes and fears attached with alternative spiritualities of the East. American consciousness plagued by the demands of modernity—imperialist strength and will, Christian progress, disembodied instrumental reason, capitalist accumulation and greed—finds peace and resolution through the Oriental Monk. Also present in the narrative is the vision of the "new man," or, more accurately, the "new West," which has learned its lessons well and combines Western initiative with Eastern spiritual know-how. This bridge figure represents salvation, not only for America, but also for Asia. Armed with a new consciousness and mission, the U.S. justifies carrying on its (imperialist) work with renewed vigor and purpose around the globe.

So what am I and others to make of our sighting of His Holiness on that busy street in Oakland? Mass media images surround us in our daily lives—inundate our imagination and reinforce certain associations—without us really taking into account the power of

their repetitive force. Religion, race, class, sexuality, and gender make the representations we encounter meaningful. To understand these dimensions of the popular images we encounter, as well as the sociopolitical contexts in which they are lodged, will inevitably determine whether we will be able to heed the vision to *Think Different* or simply drive on by....

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