



The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient

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Few Westerners escape the images, expectations and misperceptions that lead us to see Asia as exotic, sensual, decadent, dangerous, and mysterious. Despite — and because of — centuries of East-West interaction, the stereotypes of Western literature, stage, and screen remain pervasive icons: the tea-pouring, submissive, sexually available geisha girl; the steely cold dragon lady dominatrix; as well as the portrayal of the Asian male as effeminate and asexual. These "Oriental" illusions color our relations and relationships in ways even well-respected professional "Asia hands" and scholars don't necessarily see. **The Asian Mystique** lays out a provocative challenge to see Asia and Asians as they really are, with unclouded, deeroticized eyes. It traces the origins of Western stereotypes in history and in Hollywood, examines the phenomenon of 'yellow fever,' then goes on a reality tour of Asia's go-go bars, middle-class homes, college campuses, business districts, and corridors of power, providing intimate profiles of women's lives and vivid portraits of the human side of an Asia we usually mythologize too well to really understand. It strips away our misconceptions and stereotypes, revealing instead the fully dimensional human beings beyond our usual perceptions. *The Asian Mystique* is required reading for anyone with interest in or interaction with Asia or Asian-origin people, as well as any serious student or practitioner of East-West relations.

The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient Details

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From Reader Review The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient for online ebook

Calvin Abe says

Author Sheridan Prasso's background as a business journalist living for almost 25 years in different parts of Asia, including China, Japan, Cambodia and Hong Kong has served her well in the writing of *The Asian Mystique*. In this book, she explores, through a combination of her own observations, research, and interviews with distinctive Asian women of various backgrounds, the many deeply-held stereotypes that Westerners have of both Asian women and men.

As a third-generation Asian American man, I found the book compelling, but particularly so from this standpoint: I have never read any in-depth writing that analyzes in such depth and with such insight, long-held stereotypes of the Asian man. Never mind the stereotypes of the domineering dragon lady or the sexually submissive geisha, which are real but have been well-chronicled, I'm more interested in how the guys are depicted. As Ms. Prasso points out, Asian men have long suffered from a series of negative western stereotypes: The emasculated weakling, the evil, cunning devil-like monster (Fu Manchi), the sexual predator of white women. What is remarkable to me is how virtually no one has even touched upon this subject until Prasso did in *The Asian Mystique*. Even Asian writers and journalists have avoided this subject, despite the real impact of these stereotypes even in the present day. Today, Asian men remain at the bottom of the sexual desirability pecking order. Most Asian women, when given a choice, will overwhelmingly opt for the White guy. As far as White women, well, how many White women have you seen with Asian men?

Ms. Prasso takes up the topic of the western emasculation of the Asian male head-on, with notable courage, because undoubtedly, even though well-documented, some would prefer to bitterly dispute this premise. It is noted that even though *The Asian Mystique* has been around for a few years, its analysis is as fresh today as ever. James Shigeta, the once great hope for the Asian male, died earlier this year. He was the one Asian man who actually got the woman, and in one case, in the 1961 feature film "Bridge to the Sun" he actually played the husband of leading lady Carroll Baker! Now, more than 50 years later, all would agree that the idea of an Asian male leading man opposite say, Scarlett Johansson, would be quite unthinkable. I wonder whether the dream of the universally desirable, or at least acceptable, Asian man died along with Mr. Shigeta.

I highly recommend *The Asian Mystique* to anyone interested in the Asia Pacific region and its people, and how the prevailing western view of Asian Pacific people arose out of negative racial stereotypes perpetuated in the mass media and popular culture over a period of many decades. Ms. Prasso does not claim to have all the answers, but embarks on a serious, scholarly analysis of a highly-charged subject and employs her finely-tuned literary and journalistic skills in an informative and entertaining page-turning work that held my rapt attention throughout.

Connie says

"You'll never plumb the Oriental mind, and if you did, it isn't worth the toil" were the words of Rudyard Kipling. The idea of the exotic, dangerous and seductive are still how the West sees the East. These misconceptions paint a picture of Asia and Asian people that is far from the truth - labeling women as submissive China doll/geisha girl types or domineering Dragon Lady/Martial Arts Mistress types and men as emasculated, feminine, and weak. Prasso gives an history of how might these stereotypes developed - usually

it seemed as fiction passed off as nonfiction in the past of travelers who have claimed to have been East. Also, she provides examples from the past to recent times like, Charlie's Angels or the American movies featuring Jackie Chan.

The first half of her book is devoted to the more academic, scholarly aspect on the topic. She summarizes the East West relationship thus far and dedicated two chapters to the portrayal of Asian and Asian people in the media. She also covers "Yellow Fever" and the fetish that people seem to have for Asian culture, women, men, etc. Prasso mentions mail-order brides, the idea of Asians being a model minority, and the racism of Asians whether not it is positive or not.

Her second half consists of narratives of women from different parts of the Asia continent. She talks with real geisha, women politicians, Cathay girls, a prostitute, business women, house wives, and etc. A lot of the book deals with the sexual component of the Asian stereotypes and most of the book seem to delve more into the feminine (meaning women) side of stereotypes. I really want to here more about the male side of things and I would also like to see a book about the East's perceptions on the West, kinda like this one. But overall, a great book for an introduction into Western perceptions on the East.

Sophia says

The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient is a nuanced but somewhat jumbled work examining how Westerners view Asia. Sheridan Prasso, a journalist once based in Asia, contends that the West, through a distorted lens, sees the Orient as a weaker but exotic, sensual and decadent place. The first part of the book is a heavily researched investigation into how that lens was constructed. She documents the first East-West interactions and how they became the basis of continually reinforced prejudices. She also devotes separate chapters to how Hollywood portrays Asian women and men from early 20th century until today.

The second part of the book, "Ten People, Ten Colors," consists of first-hand research involving talking to and following around Asian women. Prasso visits a geisha--the one who inspired Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* but ultimately suing him for misrepresentation--as well as prostitutes, female politicians, Cathay stewardesses, among others in Southeast and East Asia. Here the text is more about the condition of women in Asia, and not the stereotypes thereof. The Indian subcontinent is not a focus of this work.

Ultimately, I *think* the author's message is that being consumers of an Asian Mystique is ultimately deleterious to Westerners, as well as Asians. However, some of this message is diluted since most of the book concerns itself with documenting its existence. *The Asian Mystique* does an admirable job of not showing this as an unidirectional imposition of stereotypes; Asians sometimes play into and perpetuate this facade too.

Amanda says

Sheridan Prasso had visited our campus a few years ago, bearing her international stories and observations regarding Asia -- and notably, Asian women. While the book itself offers substantial commentary on social attitudes and roles of this demographic, it was far more refreshing to listen to Prasso directly. Her personal interviews with women made this easier to apply...despite my tendency to doubt the authority of those who

may not immediately identify with an issue, I respected Prasso's perspectives and conclusions from her travels.

Blessing Waung says

I recall this being one of the very few books in college that my classmates were required to read and truly enjoyed. It was the topic of conversation of many a late night in the dormitories due to its controversial subject matter, based on the myriad misconceptions of Asian females. As one myself, I was asked many questions as to the veracity of the stereotypes including submissiveness, femininity, introversion, and many more.

Since living abroad in Asia for three years as an American-born Chinese, I have experienced firsthand much of the stereotyping and blatant racism as evidenced by the author's research ie. being approached at nightclubs with singsong-y Asian pickup lines and "remasculating" individuals who moved to the East because of their attraction to Oriental women, or as we call it, "yellow fever". It's sad to say that not much has progressed in the past nine years since the book has been published. If anything, the rise of China's economy and eastward movement for job opportunities has calcified many of these stereotypes. As many other readers stated, the author does a wonderful job incorporating anecdotal evidence, a skill from her many years as a journalist. I would love an updated version in the next decade delineating the rise of the Asian-American female in the States and abroad.

This book was compelling whilst in college, but it became indelible once I actually moved to the land where the stereotyping and subject matter began. I will reread it soon.

Patricia says

Very detailed and well-written. It's basically about East-West cultural differences and sometimes there's TMI. All in all it's a Goodread.

Maya says

Parts of it - great.

Parts of it - eh.....

Read this a couple years ago before I moved to China.

Amp Lao says

In the Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient, Sheridan Prasso deconstructs the history of this Western bias toward Eastern fantasy and exoticism. It is a well grounded writing: giving Edward Said heavy literary theory of Orientalism the touch of real live stories. After ten

years of matriculate data collection, hanging out at go-go bars and hopping between countries, Sheri tells stories of women across Asia in different professions, facing different and diverse difficulties: some strive to make ends meet while others struggle to be recognized professionally as equal footing to men. The difficulties one may meet as a woman or as a person elsewhere - something that provokes and challenges that there exists one typical type of exotic Asian girl.

Further, the strength of the Asian Mystique comes from Sheri's longstanding experience and knowledge on Asian history and current affairs as she has been a journalist since the end of 1980s, which allows her to tell these tales in conjunction with socio-economic changes of the country - to contextualize the stories so to speak. The Asian Mystique is a compelling work and should be read by anyone interested in Asian studies, Gender studies and to say the least, the art of writing. The stories of all women in the book are well composed with different voices and various ways of profiling.

The best part? At the very end of the the last chapter, the Asian Mystique deals with how Asian perception to Asian women help to perpetuate these biases. The negative worldview against Asian exoticism is not only western constructed. In fact, it has become the reality of many including amongst Asian.

Internal discrimination is the worst of its kind.

<http://amplao.com/2014/03/11/take-me-...>

Jeeyon says

This is a bit of a cheat, but I'm going to link to a really thorough review by an Amazon user who hit almost all my criticisms and praises of the book, here: <http://www.amazon.com/review/RSGFMY8Z...>

Jada says

I was looking for a good intro book to learn about Asian fetishism and this book was just that. It uses interviews, research, and personal stories to better understand Western fascination with Asia. The book starts with the typical idea of Asia as the "exotic" East and the way it's viewed as seductive and mystical and tries to deconstruct that impression with context and interviews. Prasso's chapters vary in subject and try to understand concepts like Yellow Fever, Hollywood's depiction of Asians throughout history, sex tourism, and the stereotypes associated with Asian culture being viewed as a monolith. Passo will typically start a chapter with an interview or following the interviewee and talking about their culture. Passo is very detailed in her examination and uses multiple sources for historical context. Passo uses differing points of view from either side in an attempt to balance her studies.

But while it's a good read, it's also important to remember that it's not the go-to book on this subject. Passo herself isn't Asian and views Asian culture through an "observer's lens" so she might not understand the cultural context as well as a person who was born and raised in the culture. She barely talks about the role religion might play in culture. Passo also doesn't speak the languages of any country that she goes to and

relies on English or a translator for her interviews . The interviews themselves are also subjective and follow one person or a small group instead of a group of varying ideals. Passo will also make generalization about the people based on the interview . Her book focuses mainly on East and Southeast Asia and doesn't really touch on West or South Asian culture and the way it's viewed by Westerners. The closest she gets to South Asia is Burma (Myanmar). In the chapter on fetishization she also briefly touches on sexual abuse and assault by fetishizers but doesn't go fully into it. She also doesn't have any Asian-American interviews and how they're also subjected to the "Asian Mystique". Almost no interviews with Asian men even though there's a chapter about the way Asian men are portrayed in Western media. Briefly talks on Western intervention in East/Southeast Asia but mostly through a sexual lens and not how that may have influenced Asian culture. Semi-narrowness of sex workers as just looking for money or a greencard but also subverted by interviewing most of the sex workers and hearing their economic struggles.

So is it a dope book to read about the history of the "exotic Orient"? Yeah, totally. But remember when you read it that:

- **It generalizes some cultures**
- **There's a language barrier**
- **There's a pretty big cultural barrier**
- **There's a religious barrier**
- **Focuses on East Asia**
- **Doesn't talk about Asian-Americans**
- **No interviews with Asian men**
- **Narrow view of sex workers**
- **Written by a non-Asian**

Other than that, it's pretty cool.

Ted says

Started out so strong that I felt like I was back in grad-level Asian-American studies or reading engaging course packet material from said classes. However, the book quickly lost its focus after the film section and turned into a diary of impressions about being in Asian bars and observing the unfolding repetitions.

Rebecca says

Generally well researched but entirely lacking in intelligent analysis, a flaw that occasionally results in offensive assumptions and risible incoherencies. Only the first two chapters address Western-constructed Asian exoticism, though this is ostensibly the topic of the book. These chapters are well researched and interesting, and offer a decent--though often overreaching--account of how Asian stereotypes evolved from colonial-era racism and pornography. But from there, the book devolves into a series of interviews utterly bereft of insight or critique, qualities that are desperately needed to sort out the morass of prejudices and sexual politics that Prasso unthinkingly reproduces for her readers.

For example, she frequently undermines her own pronouncements on Asian sexual mores and gender equity.

Asian women who claim to be empowered by stay-at-home housewifery, who sneer at their career-oriented peers, are taken at their word. In fact, Prasso falls over herself to make clear that these women are fully autonomous, utterly content, and that readers must not superimpose Western women's lib notions onto this separate and unique culture. Chapters later, she profiles women from the same country and culture who agitate against entrenched sexism, fighting for the right to have men's jobs at men's pay. These women are heralded as heroes. There is no acknowledgment of the possibility that sexual politics in this country might be complex and contradictory and, here's an idea, a lot like that in the West.

She appears similarly confused about how colonialism in various Asian countries affected local sexual preferences and conceptions of beauty. One moment she claims that Westerners imported their preference for light-skinned women, the next she remembers light skin has traditionally been an indicator of aristocracy and leisure in the region. She vacillates between brash claims against White Devils and the pestilence they visited on the good peoples of Asia (the awful Catholics importing their prudishness and patriarchy!), and the more prosaic reality that sexual politics in all of these cultures has always been fraught and complex. She also seems to have forgotten that there is a history of imperialism, ethnic chauvinism, and sexual variety in Asia that long predates the arrival of Westerners.

The rest of the book is spent trotting around night clubs and red light districts, collecting increasingly lurid stories about how relationships between two economic unequals can look a lot like--shock and dismay!--prostitution. At this point, Prasso simply abandons the project of dissecting Western prejudices in favor of writing first-person accounts of go-go bars.

Worst of all is Prasso's inability to offer any kind of synthesis or analysis of the many self-serving, emotionally fraught testimonies and random prurient anecdotes she has collected. After a token disclaimer that many relationships between white and Asian people are equitable and healthy and, you know, whatever, she quotes at length from online forums for mail-order-bride patrons and Thai sex tourists. Then she offers this account: "A Chinese-American woman I know broke off her engagement to a white man after realizing with horror that it was her very girlish figure, quite literally, that attracted him... After dating him for a year, she suspected pedophilia." Maybe Asian women occupy a suspended state of prepubescence, Prasso is musing, and attraction to Asian women is necessarily sexually perverse. Then she proceeds cheerily on to the next topic without considering the explosive implications of this thought.

Hilariously enough, the stereotypes of Asian women as victims and of Asian women as sexual deviants are the very prejudices she had set out to defy, and yet here she is, using them to sell her book. Classic.

Joseph says

Well I haven't quite finished my review or even started this but can someone suggest to me an equivalent but in more regards to the asian male? She only dedicated one chapter the subject and I understand that, that may not have been more main intent with the book but I'm just simply wondering is there such an equivalent. By the way I did really enjoy the book

Anna says

I was really excited to finally read this book. Asians and Asian-Americans had a big influence over my life,

after all, and I wanted to get to the bottom of the whole Asian girl - White guy thing (since I'm a Caucasian girl who digs Asian guys - never happens in the movies). The book is incredibly well researched, written from a sort of first person when she's describing the amazing women she met all over Asian. The stories are kind of grouped by stereotype (not by country or chronologically) and are definitely well connected within the theme. I was looking for a little more connection as a whole, but it was a little more like a litany or stereotypes with a real-life story that proves that Asians are all just human anyway. I was only slightly disappointed by the writing and journalistic integrity (mostly when she made the same kinds of generalizations about Islamic society as she accused us of making about Asian societies). I was left wanting a central moral or wrap up chapter that sewed all the stories together and gave us some kind of direction on where to go next, or life lessons. Instead, you're kinda like, "wow, that sucks that this stuff happens, I'm really glad I read this book..."

All in all a great read, very informative and juicy in both the history lessons and the contemporary portraits of real people.

Mary says

I didn't expect to find this book as absorbing as I did. A very interesting look at how the popular tropes of the exotic Asian woman/emasculated Asian man got started. The author was able to interview women from different countries and different walks of life, and their words reflect a more complex reality than can be explained by simple stereotypes.
