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The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture:
Race, Religion, and Representation in the Age of Virtual Orientalism

by

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B.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 1988
M.T.S. (Harvard University) 1992

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Abstract

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Jane Naomi Iwamura

Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Judith Butler, Cochair
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This dissertation seeks to understand the public fascination with Asian religious traditions (or "Eastern spirituality") in the U.S. by forging an understanding of their symbolic representation in American popular culture. I explore this symbolic representation through a specific icon—the icon of the Oriental Monk. The term, "Oriental Monk," is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan). Although individual figures point to a heterogeneous field of encounter, they are subjected to a homogenous representational effect, i.e., conformity to the icon. The icon therefore theoretically serves as a mediating structure and visual frame through which popular encounters are sanctioned and managed.

On a historical level, I argue that American mass awareness of Asian religions coincides with the advent of visual media (glossy weeklies, television, and film) and examine how technological transformations have ushered in a new form of Orientalism—*virtual Orientalism*—prevalent since the late 1950s. Although popular engagement with Asian religions in the U.S. has increased, the fact that much of this has taken virtual form make stereotypical constructions of "the spiritual East" obdurate and difficult to counter.

The project tracks virtual Orientalism's emergence through a study of three figures: D.T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Kwai Chang Caine (*Kung Fu*). My analysis is less focused on these individual's religious and philosophical views, but rather on the media representations that inform their popular recognition and success. I demonstrate how these Oriental Monk figures provide social commentary on minority groups, as well as a screen on which larger claims over cultural authority are contested, negotiated, and played out. By examining the representation of particular Monk figures in socio-historical context, the underlying nexus of "Western" interests, desires, and repressions that lend the icon its power are brought to light. Indeed, the icon of Oriental Monk bespeaks not only of Americans' perceptions of the East, but also of their religious self-definition—a self-definition that is informed by larger geopolitical power relations between the U.S. and Asia.

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In Buddhist and Hindu traditions, there is a powerful image of the net of Indra. The net consists of fine jewels that are interwoven into an overall cloth, and each jewel reflects the light of all the others. Indeed, without each particular jewel and the threads that link them together, every other jewel would be less brilliant, less complete. I find this a powerful metaphor to speak about my appreciation for the many individuals who have helped make this dissertation a reality. Indeed, their influence, thoughtfulness, and care are what this project hopefully reflects.

First of all, I would like to thank my committee: Judith Butler, Margaret Miles, Rudy Busto, Michael Mascuch, Sau-ling Wong, and Arthur Quinn. Each of these individuals in their own unique way has had a profound impact on my own thinking, and this dissertation bears the stamp of their influence. Their intellectual rigor—as well as the attention, time, and encouragement they so generously offer—provides the standard and model to which I continually aspire. I owe a special debt to Arthur Quinn. Ever since I took my first undergraduate class with Art, I found his joy of scholarship infectious. Art died soon after my qualifying exams and never had the chance to read the manuscript. But his spirit remains and reminds me constantly of the reason I am doing what I am doing.

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the dissertation, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," appear in their volume, *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (California, 2000).

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INTRODUCTION

In the new millennium, 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 the Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980's. 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 love and fascination that Eastern spiritual figures, such as the Dalai Lama, hold for those in the U.S. that I am most interested in understanding. Rather than simply recounting the religious and moral qualities these individuals possess, it is important to discuss the social context from which our 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 not our ability to embrace someone and something (Tibetan Buddhism) once considered so foreign a testimony to a newfound openness and progressive understanding?

I would like to tackle these questions by critically analyzing the history of representation that 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 what he represents by 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 understand the history of this icon and how it has been used to express and manage our sense of Asian religions.

The icon of 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; and as the Beatle's guru, the Maharishi Mahesh; as *Kung Fu's* Kwai Chang Caine and Mr. Miyagi in the *Karate Kid*; as Deepak Chopra, as well as the Dalai Lama. Although the Oriental Monk has appeared in these various forms throughout American pop culture, we are able to recognize him as the representative of an alternative spirituality that draws from the ancient wellsprings of "Eastern" civilization and culture.

In this project, the term, "Oriental Monk," is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, swamis, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan). Although individual figures point to a heterogeneous field of encounter, they are subjected to a homogenous representational effect. 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, manner of dress.

Monk Story

In an analysis of the Oriental Monk as an American icon, we will see a complex dynamic unfold where 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. This narrative is quite simple and can be summarized as follows: Lone monk figure – oftentimes with no visible family or community—takes under his wing a fatherless, often parentless, child. This child embodies a tension. Although these figures half-signify the dominant culture in racial terms, they have an ambivalent relationship with that culture: this allows them 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 revitalized hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology.

Compared with the negative stereotypes of Asians that have historically circulated in the American media (e.g., sinister Fu Manchus, inscrutable gangsters, Yellow Peril), the icon of the Oriental Monk and its attendant narrative seem like a noteworthy advance. And indeed, the popularity of the figure demonstrates an air of increasing tolerance and respect. But to look at this representation from this level of admiration and progress precludes us from seeing ways in which positive portrayals may re-inscribe certain racist notions of the Eastern "other."

As we will see, the above narrative is played out time and time again. Although the story of the Oriental Monk has the ability to function as a challenging counter-narrative in particular instances, this popular figuring firmly establishes a subjectively technological advance: the *psycho-spiritual plantation system*. Viewing the above narrative through the theoretical framework developed by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong: this system, which depends on a strict economic and racial hierarchy, credentials the monk as *ideological caregiver* who gains

recognition by assisting dominant white Americans gain spiritual orientation and oftentimes, political mission as they work out the meaning of their existence in modern life.¹ Indeed, the special import of the Oriental Monk is that the icon operates as an imaginative construction that is allowed to circulate widely and subjectively reinforce this new system of Western domination. In addition, the particular way in which Americans write themselves into the story is not a benign, non-ideological act, but rather participates in the construction of a *modernized cultural patriarchy*², in which Anglo Americans reimagine themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture and wrest the authority to define these traditions away from others.

Virtual Orientalism

The critical perspective that I will adopt in order to investigate the icon of the Oriental Monk in American popular culture is heavily indebted to the work of Edward Said. In his book, *Orientalism*, Said articulates a network of representations "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 perspicuous insight into its Oriental object, this system of representation reveals much about the Occidental subjectivity from which it emerges.³

¹ Although Sau-ling C. Wong authors and develops these concepts in relation to Asian American literature and film, they are equally relevant here. See "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 174-210; and "Diverted Mothering: Representations of Caregivers of Color in the Age of 'Multiculturalism,'" *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Force (New York: Routledge, 1994) 67-91.

² John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Modernizing White Patriarchy: Re-Viewing D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*," *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1991) 135.

³ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Although Said focuses on 18th and 19th century British and French Orientalisms, he does make reference to the U.S. and intimates a reinvigorated form of Orientalism in the final pages of the book:

If the world has become immediately accessible to a Western citizen living in the electronic age, the Orient too has drawn nearer to him, and is now less a myth perhaps than a place crisscrossed by Western, especially American, interest.

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient."⁴

For those interested in Orientalism's continuing force in the 20th century, Said's brief yet provocative statement deserves attention.

Unlike its British and French predecessors, this new form of Orientalism is more insidious, more covert than its predecessors. Much of this has to do with the media through which it is now deployed: photography, film, television, and other electronic media. Gone are the days of direct colonial rule; the U.S. achieves hegemonic strength through channels that appear benign on their surface. This is not to say that the regime of knowledge these channels allow is any less powerful. Perhaps it is more so, as images of the Orient become vividly portrayed on the big and small screens ready for immediate consumption. As Said points out, these new channels of communication rely upon "more and more standardized molds" further reinforcing Orientalism's hold on Western imagination.

The prevalence of this type of cultural stereotyping by new forms of media is an important element of what I would like to call *virtual Orientalism*. As we continually live out our lives in front of a screen, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between what is real and what is not (in the most conventional terms) to the point that these images become what *are* real for us. Hence, a post-industrial, mass mediated age inaugurates the condition of the *hyperreal*,

⁴ Said 26.

where images and reproductions (or in Baudrillardian terms, *simulacra*) become "more real than the real." Take for example, representations of the Dalai Lama—his image as the part of an Apple ad or on the cover of a book, Richard Gere's description of him in a magazine interview—may be more real to an American audience than any personal encounter we might have with the actual person. Conversely, Americans who grew up watching *Kung Fu* and feel a special affinity with its main protagonist, Kwai Chang Caine, often speak of the fictional character as if he were a real person. Mass media creates new configurations of intimacy and attachment that have profoundly affected our epistemological sense. Within this hyperreal environment, orientalized stereotypes begin to take on their own reality and justify their own truths.⁵

The Floating World of Objects

Virtual Orientalism is also heavily informed by American capitalist consumer culture. Here it is helpful to entertain Baudrillard's conception of 20th century Western society. According to Baudrillard, we have entered into an affluent age in which consumption is the basis of the social order. The objects an individual buys and consumes differentiate her from other consumers, and these objects gain their value not from any direct need or function they fulfill but through their power as signs. The object as sign participates in a system of objects that assists the consumer in (re)creating an "ambient harmony."⁶

For instance, a person may purchase a black onyx *mala* (a string of beads used in Tibetan mantras, prayers, and prostrations) from the Tibetan Treasures mail catalogue. This may become

⁵ Although the hyperreal operates as its own type of reality, this does not mean that its provenance is divorced from the material condition in which we live. The fact that the images that the media projects can be readily identified as "representations," rather than the truth of the matter works to further mask the political, social, and cultural interests involved. At the same time, these images have the force of reality and serve as a conduit of meaning. No doubt, viewers can recognize the Arab terrorists in the Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *True Lies* (1994), as fictional characters ("It's just a movie!"), but one wonders how they significantly reinforce, if not substantively inform, the American viewers' notions of the U.S.-Middle East conflict.

⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1996).

a part of the individual's spiritual practice, but at the same time, it also helps distinguish her from others, i.e., lends the individual her identity. In the person's apartment, the *mala* be just one of the objects I encounter; I may also see that a copy of the the Dalai Lama's autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, on the coffee table, or a Tibetan prayer flag draped across the doorway. In this setting, the *mala* no longer exists as an object to be used in a certain ritual in a particular locale, but rather deployed as a sign of the individual's spiritual interest in Tibetan Buddhism and perhaps their support of the Tibetan Freedom Movement. The ordinary relation between an object, place, and function is lost (or more accurately, reimagined). And the *mala*, along with the other objects in the person's apartment, work together to create an ambience, which gives her and those who enter the apartment a sense of her identity.

In a world where objects operate prevalently as signs, the symbolic order becomes divorced from any material reality (as conventionally defined). This juncture is further exacerbated by the mass media in which images circulate constantly. What is the relationship between these images and consumer objects? Both participate in the same system of objects. As I will later discuss, the portrayal of the Japanese Zen scholar, D.T. Suzuki, in magazines and weeklies must be viewed in conjunction with the American public's fledgling interest in Oriental art and fashion in the late 1950s. A tangible object, like a Japanese shoji screen, is no longer purchased simply for its utilitarian function (to partition off a room). Rather, the consumer buys the shoji screen because he seeks to create a Zen-like ambience in his home and as a way to mark his distinctive taste and identity. The significance of the screen does not draw from the object itself, but relies on the system of objects and their assigned meanings within that system. More specifically, the consumer of the shoji screen has a particular view of Japanese culture and aesthetics that becomes attached to the screen. And this view is not cultivated by the consumer's interaction with a lone object, but with a set of images and objects. Hence, the screen may be envisioned as a decorative in Japanese homes, bleakly furnished in conjunction with a Zen aesthetic. The Zen aesthetic may

then be associated by the monastic practice of Japanese Zen monks. These monks may be further linked to a particular Zen patriarch. These associations, which rely as much on image as they do on concrete objects, comprise the symbolic system from which the shoji screen ultimately gains its meaning for the Western consumer. Hence, the spiritualized image of the Oriental Monk—that on the surface seems to eschew an investment in material attachments—operates in easy conjunction with American capitalism and consumer culture.

An Exposé

In the pages that follow, I will track virtual Orientalism's emergence through a study of three figures: D.T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Kwai Chang Caine (*Kung Fu*). Again, my analysis is less focused on these individual's religious and philosophical views, but rather on the media representations that inform their popular recognition and success. In these early moments in the Oriental Monk's history, we will witness the different ways in which the conventionalized narrative is played out and further defined. Far from neutral representations, these figures provide social commentary on minority groups, as well as provide a screen on which larger claims over cultural authority are contested, negotiated, and played out.

By examining the representation of particular Monk figures in socio-historical context, the underlying nexus of "Western" interests, desires, and repressions that lend the icon its power are brought to light. Indeed, the icon of Oriental Monk bespeaks not only of Americans' perceptions of the East, but also of their religious self-definition—a self-definition that is informed by larger geopolitical power relations between the U.S. and Asia. Indeed, the figure of the Oriental Monk in its variegated forms serves as an illuminating measure of U.S. geopolitical relations with Asia; these forces are mapped onto the icon through aspects of race, class, national origin, and sexuality. Indeed, the monk as spiritual guide acts as spiritual guise for a wide range of ideological interests related to the posture of the U.S. in the global political economy.

This network of power relations is not only internationally informed, but also configured according to interests within the national borders of the U.S. Through the figure of the non-sexual, solitary oriental monk, Asian religiosity and spirituality are made manageable—psychologically, socially, and politically—for dominant culture consumption. Hence, monk as signifier acts as a way to manage Asian American religious communities by *re-*presenting Asian spiritual heritages in a specific way, i.e., reinforcing certain practices, showing what is recognizable and acceptable, etc. The seizure of the Oriental Monk as a popular representation in American culture, therefore, has vast implications for what counts as genuine engagement with Asian religions on the whole and for Asian American self-understanding in particular.

In these various ways, the cultural history that is recounted here is meant as an exposé of the covert life of the Oriental Monk and his jaunt through American popular culture. More specifically, the project seeks to reveal the ideological interests and hegemonic processes that underwrite our encounter, so that we may no longer comfortably revel in our own fascination.



Francis Haar

ZEN'S PERSONALITY | *D.T. Suzuki*

On October 1, 1997, the American reading public was greeted by a surreal sight. The cover of one of its most popular weeklies, *Time* magazine, featured a bleached blonde and serious Brad Pitt, flanked by a group of Asians, with the heading, "America's Fascination with BUDDHISM," emblazoned across the actor's chest. For those who wondered what the Hollywood hunk had to do with the ancient Eastern religion, the subtitles provided the clue: "Up close with BRAD PITT, star of *Seven Years in Tibet*," and "Two new movies, celebrity converts and hundreds of books add zest to Zen."

In the cover article, *Time* reporters, Jeanne McDowell and Richard N. Ostling, contemplate whether a truly indigenized American Buddhism exists. Their overview cites not only established religious centers ("Dens of Dharma"), booming book sales on the subject, and "celebrity Buddha boosters," but also phenomena such as *Zen* blush makeup and the sitcom, *Dharma and Greg*. In the late twentieth century, Buddhism's vocabulary and aura have become part of the American popular imagination. "Zen," and other terminology no longer stand as foreign concepts but carry their own unique meanings in their transplanted environment.

Americans' present "awareness" of this spiritual alternative is a far cry from three decades ago. Up until the 1950s, Zen Buddhism constituted "a subject of considerable mystery to the relatively few people in [the U.S.] who ha[d] heard of it at all."¹ But it is during this period that

¹Winthrop Sargeant, "Profiles: Great Simplicity; Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki," *New Yorker* 31 Aug. 1957: 34.

Zen was able to take root—most notably due to an "unusually captivating, congenial, and enigmatic old man,"² named D.T. Suzuki.

D.T. Suzuki is known as the chief popularizer of Zen and has been heralded as Zen's "missionary" to the West. He wrote prolifically, engaged in critical dialogue with interested intellectuals and practitioners, and served as a general figurehead for the Zen Buddhist movement in the U.S. and Europe. He is known for his influence on famous Buddhist ideologues—from the Beats to Alan Watts—and remains a quintessential representation of Zen Buddhism for many Americans.

In the 1950s, Suzuki enjoyed his second and most extended stay in the U.S. Unlike his first journey to the States made at the request of his teacher, Shaku Soen, in 1897, Suzuki came into his own during this period as an independent thinker and recognized personality. There are several histories and accounts that document this stage of Suzuki's life and its significance to the establishment of American Zen Buddhism³. But these chronicles rarely address the question: What made Zen an integral dimension of America's religious landscape and Suzuki its most significant figure? How did this particular figure at this specific historical juncture allow Zen its unprecedented entrance into American culture?

Undoubtedly, Suzuki's large and influential corpus of writings is an important factor. Suzuki effectively harnessed the power of the printed word. Not only did he write lucid introductions to Zen, Mahayana Buddhism, and Japanese culture, but also (with his wife, Beatrice Lane Suzuki) started the independent journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*, which featured scholarly discussions on Buddhism. These publications lay the groundwork for an "imagined community"⁴

² William R. LaFleur, "Between America and Japan: The Case of Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki," *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Malibu: Undena, 1987) 67.

³ See Rick Field's *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 1992); and Masao Abe, ed., *A Zen Life Remembered: D.T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986).

⁴ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991). Although Benedict Anderson employs this term to speak of the "nation," his conceptualization is salient for my discussion here. Zen adherents "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). They also view themselves ideally as "a deep,

of Zen scholars, practitioners, and general enthusiasts whose members inhabited both sides of the East/West divide. This intellectual foundation allowed ideas and information about Buddhism, in general, and Zen, in particular, to be easily disseminated in college classrooms, coffeehouses, and bookstores.

Suzuki's appeal and influence had much to do with the brand of Zen he presented in these texts.⁵ Zen offered its adherents the opportunity to go beyond logical thinking characteristic of Western religious traditions and philosophy. It proposed a way to live with existential contradiction. Suzuki emphasized certain aspects of Zen, such as *satori*, which embraced within its realm of experience "irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritativeness, affirmation, exhilaration and momentariness."⁶ Suzuki also unleashed Zen from its nativist roots and ritualistic moorings. According to his view, it professed a more universal understanding of humanity that was compatible with all of the great religions and philosophies of humankind. In addition to providing lucid introductions to Zen thought, Suzuki also wrote on Japanese culture, particularly as a paradigmatic expression of Zen philosophy. His understanding presented an American audience with a more positive glimpse into the "oriental mind" of their former WWII enemy. In these ways, Suzuki's writings served as a formidable bridge between East and West.

The contribution of Suzuki's writings to the establishment Zen in the U.S. has long been recognized.⁷ But this still does not account for the reason why Westerners found Suzuki such a

horizontal comradeship" (7).

Suzuki's role in shaping Zen's "imagined community" in the West cannot be underestimated. His English-language works helped Western enthusiasts legitimate their beliefs by allowing them to reference Zen sources and authorities that were both geographically and historically remote. Also, his universalized portrait of Zen flattened out the tradition's hierarchical elements and cleared the way for a Western "fraternity" of Zen proponents.

⁵ Any summary of Suzuki's understanding of Zen cannot help but be cursory; the following is only meant to highlight some of the most popular elements of his thought.

⁶ Fields 205.

⁷ For a general overview of Suzuki's work and its contributions, see Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century*, trans. Joseph S. O'Leary (New York: Weatherhill, 1992); and Masao Abe, ed., *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*.

Recently, Suzuki's presentation of Buddhism has come under harsh criticism in academic circles. Buddhologists, such as Bernard Faure, Robert H. Scharf and others, have ideologically questioned the scholar's work and have provided compelling analyses of its link with Japanese nationalism. See Bernard

compelling presence. Hence, I would like to shift our attention away from his works and explore another dimension of Suzuki's status and peculiar influence: *his image*. Indeed, Suzuki served as a *figure* through which Zen Buddhism was made accessible to a wider English speaking audience. Although the two—Zen Buddhism and D.T. Suzuki—are often taken as distinct forces, I would argue that they symbiotically worked together to shape an American conception of Zen. In this scenario, Suzuki is not simply viewed as a "cultural ambassador" or "translator" of the larger tradition, but the embodiment of that tradition — the *icon* through which Zen Buddhism achieved meaning for those in the West.

Although Suzuki's centrality was unmistakable, it relied upon the contributions of other notable figures as well. In fact, much of Suzuki's intrigue rested upon the fascination and influence his presence held for other personalities, such as Jack Kerouac and Alan Watts, who were also featured as part of the 1950s Zen bandwagon. This nexus of relationships between the different players would lay the foundation for one of the most popular narratives in the U.S. and would reflect American's attitudes toward Asia and its spiritual resources for the next half century. From D.T. Suzuki and the early "Zen boom" in the late 1950s, one can easily discern the shape of things to come.

Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), and "The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism," *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: SUNY P, 1995) 245-81; Robert H. Scharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 107-60; James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1994); and Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).

Suzuki may have participated in a "reverse orientalism of sorts and employed Zen "as an ideological instrument to promote a cultural image of Japan in the West" as Faure contends (*Chan Insights* 86). But studies such as these only appear to look at one side of the rhetorical equation focusing on the author's (i.e., Suzuki's) intention and not on the general orientalist environment in the West in which his work was received. Despite their particular focus, Faure seems aware of the need for further analysis. He writes: "[I]t may be relatively easy to denounce the *nihonjinron* ideology, while it is harder to see the *amerikajinron* (or *furansujinron*) ideology at work in this very process. We need to become aware of our own 'political ontology,' even as we perform the necessary task of deconstructing that of 'philosophical' movements like the Kyoto school" ("Kyoto School" 272).

REPRESENTING SUZUKI

The circulation of public meanings through *images* and *image* was an important "seed" which took root in the 1950s. This decade witnessed the advent of the television age. The rapid change in communications technology produced a new form of mass consciousness—one in which the surface of an object (its ready appearance) gained new stature in determining the object's worth. Television, with its constant flow of visual images helped train its audience to quickly assess the subject at hand, relying more upon the body and bodily rhetorics than ever before.⁸ This focus on the visual was reinforced by the multitude of popular magazines featuring glossy covers and photo-driven layouts (*Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*). Given this new communicative context, D.T. Suzuki's accessible image and intriguing personality would allow Zen its foray into American popular life.

It was within this cultural environment that Americans caught their first glimpse of Suzuki. *Vogue* was the first to make the sighting. Early in 1957, its regular column of cultural trends revealed:

People are talking about...[t]he Columbia University classes of the great Zen Buddhist teacher, Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, who sits in the centre of a mound of books, waving his spectacles with ceremonial elegance while mingling the philosophical abstract with the familiar concrete: "To discover one is a great achievement, to discover zero, a great leap"; or another time: "Have no ulterior purpose in work, then you are free."⁹

This brief, yet intriguing tidbit caught the eye of a *Time* reporter who followed up with a more expanded introduction two weeks later:

In the centuries since the death of its founder in 483 B.C., Buddhism has had little direct impact on the Christian West. Today, however, a Buddhist boomlet is under way in the U.S. Increasing numbers of intellectuals—both faddists and serious students—are becoming interested in a form of Japanese Buddhism called Zen.¹⁰

⁸ In 1956, 20,000 television sets were being purchased per day.

⁹ "People are talking about...Dr. Daisetz Suzuki," *Vogue* 15 Jan. 1957: 98.

¹⁰ "Zen," *Time* 4 Feb. 1957: 65.

By the end of the year, the Zen boomlet" or trend became so widespread that "lecturers on the subject attract[ed] enough attention to be photographed for popular weeklies."¹¹ D.T. Suzuki was by far the most popular of these lecturers to appear—his likeness gracing the pages of *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Review*, and *Time*.

A look at these images is significant, because it gives us of an idea of American's first impressions of Suzuki, as well as of Zen. By all appearances, Suzuki seemed to fit the model of a venerable Eastern sage—wise, noble, aged, and mysteriously foreign. Popular press photographs accentuated Suzuki's physiognomy. His wrinkled features seemed to speak of an ancient wisdom that hearkened back to an age far beyond his considerable years. His not-quite bald, yet closely shaven head added an otherworldly, ascetic quality to his appearance. And his "tiny eyes"¹² helped to racially distinguish him from Western personalities.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that *The Saturday Review*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* all chose portraits highlighting Suzuki in more traditional Japanese attire.¹³



Suzuki, *Saturday Review*
(Photographer: Cecil Beton)

This is particularly strange since Suzuki, during his public appearances, "almost invariably dressed in the neat American sports jacket and slacks that might be worn by any Columbia

¹¹ Daniel J. Bronstein, "Search for Inner Truth," *Saturday Review* 16 Nov. 1957: 22.

¹² *Time* 4 Feb. 1957: 66.

¹³ *The New Yorker* was the only magazine to feature Suzuki in his usual white shirt and bow tie. Otherwise, photographs of him in Western clothing only came into print from the 1960's on.

undergraduate."¹⁴ Representing the Japanese scholar in this way was not without its particular intent. His robe romantically recalled a forever ancient and distant Japan, which added to the overall representation of Suzuki's authority and the authority of the philosophy he espoused.

Suzuki's image relied on more than just the visual texts readily at hand. It also relied upon the reader's imagination. Almost every written popular account of Suzuki during this period describes his appearance, manner, and gesture. Especially admired and emphasized are his "ferocious eyebrows, which project from his forehead like the eyebrows of the angry demons who guard the entrances of Buddhist temples in Japan."



Winthrop Sargeant of the *New Yorker* continues:

These striking ornaments give him an added air of authority, perhaps, but the addition is unnecessary. Dr. Suzuki is obviously a man who thought every thing out long ago and has reached a state of certainty. The certainty appears, is so profound that it needs no emphasis, for it is expressed in quiet, cheerful phrases (marked here and there by the usual Japanese difficulty with the letter "l") and punctuated by smiles and absent-minded rubbings of his forehead. Now and then, he bounces up from his desk to make his certainties even more certain by drawing diagrams on a nearby blackboard, or chalking characters in Chinese or Sanskrit. To the uninitiated, these characters, and the talk that accompanies them, are likely to be enigmatic indeed.¹⁵

"Enigmatic" is a key feature that seemed to contribute to Suzuki's appeal. Although his texts are heralded as lucid introductions to Buddhism and Japanese culture (e.g., *Outline of Mahayana Buddhism*), his persona attracted attention for quite the opposite reason. One of Suzuki's most notorious lectures took place at a symposium on Zen Buddhism and parapsychology. After lecturing for a while on the topic of Zen—virtually ignoring any discussion of parapsychology—he was asked by one of the audience members to expound on the connection between the two. He thought for a moment and replied (to the befuddlement of the crowd): "Absolutely nothing." Indeed, many of those who sat in on Suzuki's talks often could

¹⁴ Sargaent 34.

¹⁵ Sargaent 34.

not follow his enthusiastic chalkboard scribblings or his line of thought. But just the chance to *experience* Suzuki was enough to draw "large and rabid" crowds.

Why were people so drawn to Suzuki if they did not fully understand what he was saying (i.e., if they oftentimes found his "message" fairly incomprehensible)? Suzuki's enigmatic nature drew its power from a long established Western notion of the mysteriousness of the East. In this way, Suzuki's incomprehensibility was wholly comprehensible to his 1950s American audience.¹⁶ Popular accounts of Suzuki's persona—both visual and descriptive—met certain cultural protocols, i.e., it fit into a particular heritage of viewing and understanding the East, allowing a more widespread recognition to take place.

What can account for such a visual portrayal? Suzuki's image, in order to be recognizable to its audience, drew its power from a particular "way of seeing"¹⁷ Japan (and the Japanese people) deeply ingrained in the American psyche. It is an image that speaks powerfully about Americans' attitudes towards their WWII enemy that had evolved in the 1950s.

¹⁶ In her exploration of early-twentieth-century representations of non-Western indigenous peoples in film, Fatimah Tobing Rony notes: "[W]hen the average museum goer views a life group of Hopi dancers handling snakes, or a display of Wolof pottery, or an ethnographic film about trance and dance in Bali, he or she does not see the images for the first time. *The exotic is already known*" (6) (my emphasis). See *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996).

¹⁷ See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger connects how we perceive man-made images (paintings, ad photography) with "what we know or what we believe" (8). Through an insightful comparison of oil paintings and contemporary publicity images, Berger then proceeds to demonstrate how social attitudes are encoded in these images and how "ways of seeing" are historically and culturally informed. He further explains:

Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet although every image embodies a way of seeing our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing" (10).

Here, Berger alludes to the different levels of interpretation involved in a "way of seeing:" the photographer and the spectator. Employing such a framework, we can say that popular press photographs (e.g., of Suzuki) actually involve three: photographer, magazine's editor, and the spectator. When each of these ways of seeing is congruous with one another, one is able to posit a shared socio-cultural imaginary that directs one's sight and shapes one's view.

If one looks at the images of Japan and the Japanese in the previous decade, one finds a fairly unsympathetic portrayal. For instance, *Life* magazine often featured the uncompromising, seemingly hard-hearted Japanese soldier on its covers. During the war period, it was Japan as modern political threat that was popularly represented—disciplined, militaristic, and without humor.



Life covers from left to right: "Japanese Home Guard" (July 10, 1939), "Emperor Hirohito" (June 10, 1940), and "How Strong is Japan?" (August 16, 1943).

After Japan's defeat and occupation by Americans, "friendlier" images began to appear. Take for instance, Miyoshi Umeki and D.T. Suzuki—the former a docile Japanese actress who won an Academy Award for her role in the popular motion picture, *Sayonara* (1957)¹⁸; the latter, an engaging and accessible Buddhist sage.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Sayonara* was also nominated for "Best Picture;" it lost the award to the WWII drama, *Bridge on the River Kwai* which dramatizes the story of American prisoners in a Japanese war camp.

¹⁹ The change in representation is gradual. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942, images of Japan recede from focus. The first Japanese figure to actually grace the cover of *Life* in the postwar period is Prime Minister Yoshida (10 Sept. 1951). Yoshida's image is striking in its "un-Japaneseness"; with smiling eyes, round jowls, and a big stogie pressed between his lips, the Japanese leader resembles a cross between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

A much bigger media splash came at the end of the year, when *Life* dedicated its final issue of the year to "Asia: Its Treaties and Open Markets" (31 Dec. 1951). A Japanese girl in traditional attire—attractive and demure—adorn the cover.

By the mid-50s, Japan enjoyed a newfound popularity in American eyes as witnessed by *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and *Sayonara* (1957). *Teahouse* was later adapted as a Broadway play in 1958.

Miyoshi Umeki (l.)
and Pat Suzuki (r.),
*The Teahouse of the
August Moon*



Suzuki, *Time*

Suzuki seemed particularly "friendly" for several reasons. The first has to do with the way in which he chose to define himself. Suzuki viewed himself as a scholar above all else. As *The New Yorker* article describes:

Dr. Suzuki's status in all this is a peculiar one. He holds aloof from the doings at the First Zen Institute [in New York City]. Though he is deeply revered by everyone connected with the sect, he is neither a monk nor a practicing Zen master. His position is that of a lay theologian—a scholar of and a commentator on Zen principles.²⁰

Indeed, Suzuki's role as scholar allowed a certain representational flexibility. On the one hand, it created a distance between him and the Japanese Zen Buddhist establishment. As commentator, he could speak about the shocking ways in which *satori* or enlightenment was achieved—for example, a master hitting his pupil with a staff—without advocating this seemingly cruel and rigid practice.²¹ On the other hand, he maintained the authority of a teacher, which qualified him as a master of a different sort. Popular accounts liked to feature Suzuki as a living example of the Zen philosophy he espoused.²² "There can be no doubt that the world look[ed] upon him as

²⁰ Sargaent 36.

²¹ This practice was often featured in articles about Zen during the period.

²² Sargaent makes special note:

[D]uring the Second World War, Dr. Suzuki was in Japan, where he held the unwavering interest of the Japanese secret police because of his relentless fight for greater tolerance and understanding and because of his denunciation of militarism in the national cult of Shinto (53).

The critical distance he is able to achieve as a scholar in relation to the harsh practices of Zen Buddhist monks also seems to inform the perception of Suzuki's relation to politics. American commentators such as Sargaent distinguished Suzuki from other Japanese who were portrayed as supporting their government's aggressive acts during WWII without question.

the foremost of the many venerable [Buddhist] sages."²³ Hence, his role as a scholar allowed the press to portray Suzuki as a living master sans the negative characteristics of more traditional Japanese monks.²⁴

Suzuki seemed approachable in a second way. Although he was often described as a "missionary" of Zen, he appeared to wholly lack a missionary's coercive approach. Again, this impression was reinforced by his role as a scholar. His works were viewed as attempt to explicate, rather than convert; all that seemed to be at stake was the intellect and not the soul. Suzuki also exhibited a serious dedication to Zen, but a dedication devoid of the missionary's self-importance. (For instance, he often liked to joke that his Buddhist name, "Daisetsu" meant "Great Stupidity."²⁵)

Perhaps Suzuki seemed most friendly because of his demeanor. He was often described as "soft spoken," "humorous," "charming," and "earnest"—all characteristics shared by the Japanese actresses, like Miyoshi Umeki, so popular at the time. Similar to how these women were portrayed, Suzuki similarly appears attractively passive. He did not insist on his way and often was the one who was eagerly pursued by students; to these religious suitors, he remained

Suzuki's conscientiousness has fallen under scrutiny in recent times (see note 7), but it remained effectively intact in the late 50s (and for at least two subsequent decades).

²³ Sargaent 53.

²⁴ The definition of Suzuki as a scholar is a peculiar one. Although he demonstrated a predisposition towards logical exposition, he also stressed Zen's non-logical dimension. Many American commentators also picked up on Zen's intuitive, anti-intellectual stance when they attempt to explain the sudden interest in Zen during the period. This paradox—the explication of an essentially inexplicable phenomenon—did not seem to undermine Suzuki's scholarly status. He would admit:

The Zen master, generally speaking, despises those who indulge in word- or idea-mongering, and in this respect Hu Shih and myself are great sinners, murderers of Buddhas and patriarchs; we are both destined for Hell (qtd. in Sargaent 36).

Such statements of self-deprecation only added to Suzuki's appeal. Here his "confession" seems sufficient for spiritual pardon and allows him to remain in his scholarly role.

²⁵ Sargaent 49.

"invariably affable,"²⁶ turning no one away. Even in Suzuki's case, it appeared that the only Japan with which Americans could amicably interact was a feminized one.²⁷

Ultimately, Suzuki served as a "non-controversial, genial, reminder of Japan's own religious tradition"²⁸ not only to Japan, but also to those in the U.S. The 50s were a time when America enjoyed great prosperity, as well as a heightened sense of national identity.²⁹ This attitude, along with America's status as a world power, allowed Americans the psychological security, as well as the unprecedented means to explore cultural alternatives in a way that they had never done before. Acknowledging the cultural and religious heritage of defeated Japan seemed like a magnanimous gesture.

Through press accounts and published reflections, an American popular audience encountered a figure that was strangely new, yet comfortably familiar. Suzuki appeared as an affable and idiosyncratic old sage eager to share the treasures of his ancient wisdom.³⁰ He had

²⁶ Sargaent 53.

²⁷ Here, one must also take into account the thousands of Japanese war brides who immigrated back to the U.S. with their GI husbands (under the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act). Unlike women from China who primarily married co-ethnics, Japanese women more often married non-Asian men. See Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) 140.

Such interracial marriages between Japanese women and Euro-American men became somewhat of a phenomenon. For instance, *Life* magazine featured such a union in 1955 in an article written by James Michener, "Pursuit of Happiness by a GI and a Japanese: Marriage Surmounts Barriers of Language and Intolerance," 21 Feb. 1955: 124+.

²⁸ LaFleur, "Between America and Japan" 81.

²⁹ See William L. O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

³⁰ Personal reflections by those who met Suzuki note the ways in which he did *not* fit the image they had expected. These are important to note. For instance, Philip Kapleau remarks:

Having read the romantic novels *The Los Horizon* and *The Razor's Edge*, I expected to be greeted by a sage with long white hair and beard, flowing robes, and crooked walking stick. Instead I came upon a short, clean-shaven, almost bald Japanese who looked for all the world like an editor. His book-lined study, the visor shading his eyes, and his one-finger typing at an old Underwood all strengthened this impression (Abe 204).

Richard DeMartino, in his reminiscence of Suzuki, offers a very similar account (195-6). Alan Watts also mentions the way in which Suzuki did not conform to a different stereotype—one of the austere and seemingly unapproachable Japanese Zen monk.

One of the most shocking features for each of these individuals is how Westernized Suzuki is—his typewriter, the green eyeshade he wears as he types, and the "Western-style section of his house" in Japan where he engaged in his studies. In these ways, he did not fit their image of the timeless and ahistorical sage who stood apart from historical innovations of the West.

traveled great distances to do so, and his interest in cultivating a Western audience's understanding seemed selective and flattering. Furthermore, Suzuki's philosophy emphasized the religious universality of humankind that transcended boundaries of nation and race. This view was most appealing to postwar America and visually reinforced in popular representations. The timeless and engaging nature of Zen could be easily mapped onto the body of one who would become its most cherished propagator.

IMAGE AND STYLE

Although Suzuki worked tirelessly to cultivate a sophisticated understanding of Zen in the West, such understanding was not necessary for the philosophy to attain the status of a popular fad and for Suzuki to garner celebrity. That Suzuki was given media attention had much to do with the venue in which he was initially introduced—the fashion magazine. As mentioned earlier, *Vogue* was the first periodical to make note of Suzuki's popularity in the Columbia classroom. Suzuki and Zen became objects of a particular *style*. Looking through issues of *Vogue* and other magazines of the period, it is evident that objects from Asia carried a certain cultural cachet: oriental art, Japanese homes, Eastern clothing. Suzuki not only served as informant, but also as object alongside others to which one could point in referencing this style.

This is not to say that there were not Americans who took Suzuki and Zen philosophy seriously. But this degree of engagement was never achieved on a popular level. In a 1958 article for *Mademoiselle* magazine entitled, "What is Zen?", Nancy Wilson Ross recounts her conversation with a Zen enthusiast:

On a popular level though, Suzuki's representation remained fairly conventionalized since the press preferred to portray him without his Western accoutrements. Perhaps the only remnant of Western influence is his spectacles that lend Suzuki his scholarly air. In any case, these inflections do not compromise Suzuki's overall role as an Eastern sage. The Underwood typewriter, visor, and modest eyewear all seem antiquated and somewhat obsolete even as they help recall the achievements of Western society. This strange amalgam of East and West would later functionally serve the larger narrative of the Oriental Monk—the Monk's openness to the West symbolized by his use of Western technology, his obsolescence by the outdated-ness of these objects, and the timelessness of his vision through their "classic" nature.

A young New Yorker telling a friend about a cocktail party she had attended described the conversation as uncommonly stimulating, even "fascinating." Everyone present, she said, had been "talking about Zen."³¹

When asked to explain what Zen really was, this New York woman begins: "Zen is a kind of Japanese philosophy, vaguely Buddhist in origin...." She goes on to cite noteworthy individuals who have been influenced by Zen: J.D. Salinger, John Cage, Dizzy Gillespie, Erich Fromm, Painters Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. The young woman continues:

She had an older friend who had faithfully attended for two years the learned Dr. Suzuki's seminars at Columbia, and she had just heard that Harvard was now giving a course in "Zen Meditation," in the Philosophy Department, under the tutelage of a bona fide Japanese master, with Dr. Suzuki standing by to help with the translating. She ended her reply with the abrupt admission that she honestly couldn't explain what Zen was and she feared, alas, it was "already too late to ask."³²

Ross uses this humorous anecdote to characterize the understanding of Zen enthusiasts, "who may be heard loosely applying the word—in the form of an adjective—to everything from styles in painting to personality types and from forms of verse to states of consciousness."³³ Although it goes on to explain Zen in more substantial terms, Ross's article unwittingly serves to reinforce the philosophy as a cultural status marker by discussing the influence of Zen (and Suzuki) on Aldous Huxley's work, *Doors of Perception*. She also compares the Beat generation's eastward turn to the innovative techniques of the Dadaists and Surrealists a generation before. In addition to these references, images of objets d'art are intermingled with the introductory text (including a photograph of a famous wooden sculpture of the Buddha, whose reproduction "hangs on the wall of Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's New York sanctum"³⁴).



³¹ Nancy Wilson Ross, "What is Zen?" *Mademoiselle* Jan. 1958: 64.

³² Nancy Wilson Ross, "What is Zen?" 64.

³³ Nancy Wilson Ross, "What is Zen?" 64.

³⁴ Nancy Wilson Ross, "What is Zen?" 65.

In these various ways, Ross' article helps situate Suzuki's inception into popular consciousness by squarely locating his influence in the realm of artistic culture. She does make an argument for Zen's contemporary relevance in everyday life:

Something has gotten badly out of balance: the "flow of life" has been stopped. The emphasis on fulfilling the appetite for "things" is at an all-time high. Zen invites one to another range of experience.³⁵

However, this appeal is made without importunity and justified by Zen's benign (if not productive) presence in the realm of high culture. Through this association, Suzuki and the philosophy he represents become stylized, and this stylization makes Zen approachable, if not chic.

Hence, referencing Suzuki and dabbling in Zen would take on an almost glamorous aura during the period. The 1950s was an era in which glamour flourished; in their postwar world of abundance, Americans indulged in a new frenzy of consumption based less on need, and more on style. As Stuart Ewen notes in *All Consuming Image: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*:

The power of style, and its emergence as an increasingly important feature in people's lives, cannot be separated from the evolution and sensibility of modernity. Style is a visible reference point by which we have come to understand life *in progress*. People's devotion to the acceleration of varying styles allows them to be connected to the "reality" of a given moment. At the same time they understand that this given moment will give way to yet another, and another, and that as it does, styles will change, again and again.³⁶

Zen's status as fad certainly provided another reason Americans were able to entertain Suzuki's presence. The realization that this fad "will give way to yet another, and another," made a foreign influence palatable. Even if one distinguishes style from fad—the former more enduring than the

³⁵ Nancy Wilson Ross, "What is Zen?" 117.

³⁶ Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Image: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (Basic Books, 1988) 23.

latter—style is traditionally seen as something that does not radically alter the substance of one's being. It simply adorns or enhances.

The style of the cosmopolitan rich as portrayed in such magazines as *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle* increasingly became sources of envy and delight for the 1950s middle-classes who sought ways to escape the monotony of their everyday existence. "A vicarious feeling of superiority-[a] manifestation of class attitudes"³⁷ made this burgeoning group identify more readily with their upper class cousins. Suzuki gained a peculiar sort of legitimacy by the mere fact the New York elite were "talking about" the scholar and dropping his name at cocktail parties.

American's fascination with Zen during the late 50s was not only fostered by the attention it drew in elite circles, but by the way it was embraced in more rowdy camps as well. The Beat Generation and its followers in their own unique interpretation adopted Buddhism as a way to distinguish themselves from "middle-class non-identity"³⁸ and to guide and justify their own pursuits. Unlike their "square" counterparts interested in prestige and wealth, the Beats glorified a shiftless, transitory lifestyle marked by menial odd jobs, poetic entrancements, endless travel, and carefree sex. In the face of stifling convention, the Beat movement presented an attitude of rebelliousness that resonated with the younger generation of the time. Part of their resistance was expressed in terms of Zen—a prominent source of their spiritual inspiration.

Because of the popular attention it received, the Beat movement generated its share of less committed followers. Eugene Burdick remarked:

Most of these people are not hipsters; they are fellow travelers. The Communist Party used to attract a thick fringe of people who were excited by the vision of violence and apocalypse but were utterly sure in their private minds that it would not occur in their time. With the hipsters, it is the same. There is a crowding around of people who are merely curious, who want to see the vision but not be in it, who have a contempt for Squaresville but live there, who dig jazz but don't live it.³⁹

³⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1958) 345.

³⁸ Japhy Ryder's phrase in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 39.

³⁹ Eugene Burdick, "The Innocent Nihilists Adrift in Squaresville," *The Reporter* 3 Apr. 1958: 30-31.

Real or not, these "fellow travelers" helped establish a widely recognized Beat style. Tim A. Ross, in a critical article on the Beat movement, describes this style:

I happened to be in San Francisco during the summer of 1958, and heard an elderly lady, noticing a bearded man passing on the sidewalk, say to her daughter, "Look, there's a beatnik." The beard, a readily seen outward sign of an inner dissent, had already become the badge. With it went sloppy clothes and dark glasses.⁴⁰

Ross notes that the public image of the beatnik is so widespread that it is "instantly recognizable in *Saturday Evening Post* cartoons, on television, on the streets."⁴¹ Along with the beard, sloppy clothes and dark glasses, came an association with those whose lives consisted mainly of "sex, vagabondage, and dabbling in Zen."⁴²

By entering into popular consciousness through the artifice of style, Zen seized upon a growing discontent in American society. It not only offered possible answers, but more importantly, the sheen of glamour and hipness associated with the subcultures—Beat and elite—that embraced it. Introduced in this way, Zen became something to "try on," and "entertain," rather than something that directly challenged American values.

In fact, Zen as *stylized religion* covertly consolidated American national identity and its capitalist orientation. To understand this complex dynamic, one must examine the relationship between U.S. and Japan in the postwar period. During the occupation of Japan (1945-1952), the U.S. set in place economic and political structures that would aid the war-torn country's recovery. During this reconstruction, U.S. forces vowed to minimize its presence and beyond the nation's political structures did not seek to transform Japanese culture. On an international level, this respect of cultural and religious differences served as a sign of American democratic principles.

⁴⁰ Tim A. Ross, "Rise and Fall of the Beats" *The Nation* 27 May 1961: 456.

⁴¹ Tim A. Ross 456.

⁴² Tim A. Ross 457.

The U.S. was not interested in molding Japan into its mirror image (as colonial forces of the past), but rather in the economic opportunity the defeated country held.⁴³

General Eichelberger
and Buddha
Life, October 8, 1945



Indeed, it was Japan's cultural difference that made it such an attractive economic catch. The preservation of the island country's unique identity became a highly marketable source, influencing clothing and household fashions. Drawing from foreign sources, producers could expand the choices available to consumers. Conversely, Americans were given the means of self-expression that an individualistic society demanded. Within this setting, Zen became a convenient import, unassuming and enchanting—supplemented by an interest in Oriental things and supplementing that interest. Suzuki's image played into this dynamic, adding a spiritual depth to this style and its products. The appearance of depth served as a convenient alibi for the mass consumer.⁴⁴

In addition to economic benefits, America's increasing openness to foreign influence also had two significant political and cultural payoffs. First of all, the aestheticization of Japan that took place in the 1950s not only assisted in rehabilitating the image of America's former enemy (and paved the way for economic exchange), but also neutralized it as a political threat. Japan's cultural richness was something for Americans to admire, preserve, and appropriate. Secondly, an

⁴³ Again, see the 31 Dec. 1950 issue of *Life* magazine in which Asia's open markets are advertised as an attraction.

⁴⁴ Both Beat and elite constituencies expressed strong objections to the rampant consumerism of their age. For the Beat, the thoughtless accumulation of wealth had a numbing effect and only disengaged Americans from any genuine form of experience and feeling. The elite related consumerism to mass culture; objects and goods were too readily available to a less discriminating audience and slowly eroded any distinction of taste. Despite these objections, Beat and elite styles were easily co-opted by the American capitalist culture.

interest in Japanese style became an expression of the principle of freedom of choice, helping to distinguish American democracy from its Soviet counterpart. As Stuart Ewen astutely points out: "For decades, one of the most common ways that Americans compared communism and capitalist democracy was to say that communism encouraged sameness, denied individuality, and lacked style."⁴⁵ Americans employed style as a means to distinguish themselves and their tastes from other Americans and craft the uniqueness of their individual identities.

Hence, the appropriation of a Japanese aesthetic helped reinforce dimensions of individuality and freedom already strongly embedded in the American ethos. Furthermore, cultural options imported from around the world (and especially Japan) allowed Americans to disrupt the monotony of a homogenous identity. Whether these options were adopted by the cultural elite or the down-and-out Beat made little difference on a popular level. In fact, the fascination and interest Orientalia held for both factions only added to Zen's overall mystique, and firmly instituted it as an integral dimension of a particular style.⁴⁶ As popularly conceived, Suzuki's image—affable, enigmatic, ancient, and deep—catered perfectly to these trends and offered an encounter with a "real live Oriental" to add to the mix.

ZEN'S STUDENT

So far, we have examined the way in which Suzuki was first represented in the popular press, and how his image participated in an overall stylistic interest in things Japanese during the late 1950s. Suzuki's image must be viewed within a symbolic nexus that places the image of the living thinker alongside other objects of Japanese culture. His presence and philosophy endowed the superficiality of these objects (kimono robes, garden lanterns, oriental furnishings) with a depth and significance that enhanced the appropriation of Japanese culture.

⁴⁵ Ewen 113.

⁴⁶ Indeed, Beat and elite subcultures seem ineluctably opposed in their values. The fact that Zen held interest for both factions helped highlight the philosophy's different valences and its representational potential to captivate different constituencies of a popular audience.

Unfurling Suzuki's image, as a symbol of stylized religion, reveals only half the story. The other half becomes apparent when we examine more broadly the story of Zen's popularization in late 50s America. With Suzuki, Zen had certainly come West. But who would carry on his legacy? Concurrent with Suzuki's American stay, Buddhism was thriving in small centers and being brought to greater attention by individuals such as Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and Ruth Fuller Sasaki. Despite the range and depth of these representations, the popular press would seize upon Watts and Kerouac as the most prominent of the set, and would stage the co-existence of their works as a competition. Would the Zen that emerged in America be "beat" (Kerouac) or would it be "square" (Watts)? Eventually, a figurative compromise would take place between two rivals and give birth to the sage's most promising pupil and rightful heir.

Jack Kerouac and the Zen Lunatics

Suzuki left Columbia in the summer of 1957, and after a seven-month stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts, returned to Japan in 1958. But Zen remained alive and well after his departure. Much of this had to do with two seminal works which appeared in 1958: Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* and Alan Watts' essay, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen."

Jack Kerouac
In 1957



Kerouac was certainly the more famous of the two. He had established a reputation for himself as the "patriarch and prophet" of the Beat generation through his previous work, *On the Road* (1957). *The Dharma Bums* hit the bookstores in the spring of 1958. Whereas *On the Road* chronicled "the cross-country adventures in cars, bars and beds of a bunch of fancy-talking young

bums."⁴⁷ *The Dharma Bums* followed its narrator, Ray Smith, on a journey through mountains and desert in search of a "rucksack revolution." In both books the characters are modeled after Kerouac's own friends. In the case of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac took as his inspiration fellow poet and Zen enthusiast, Gary Snyder, for character Japhy Ryder.

Japhy Ryder is described as "the number one Dharma Bum of them all."⁴⁸ Ray is most impressed with Japhy's austere lifestyle as exhibited by his home:

...Japhy lived in his own shack which was infinitely smaller than ours, about twelve by twelve, with nothing in it but typical Japhy appurtenances that showed his belief in the simple monastic life—no chairs at all, not even one sentimental rocking chair, but just straw mats. In the corner was his famous rucksack with cleaned-up pots and pans all fitting into one another in a compact unit and all tied and put away inside a knotted-up blue bandana. Then his Japanese wooden pata shoes, which he never used, and a pair of black inside-pata socks to pad around softly in over his pretty straw mats, just room for your four toes on one side and your big toe on the other. He had a slew of orange crates all filled with beautiful scholarly books, some of them in Oriental languages, all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D.T. Suzuki and a fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus. He also had an immense collection of valuable general poetry.⁴⁹



Gary Snyder
at home, 1955.

Japhy and Ray share an intense passion for Buddhism ("We had the same favorite Buddhist saint, too: Avalokitesvara, or, in Japanese, Kwannon the Eleven-Headed"⁵⁰). And it is Japhy who introduces Ray to the legendary Zen figure, Han Shan:

"Sip your tea and you'll see; this is good green tea." It was good and I immediately felt calm and warm. "Want me to read you parts of this Han Shan poem? Want me to tell you about Han Shan?"

"Yeah."

"Han Shan you see was a Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and the world and

⁴⁷ "Beat Mystics" *Time* 3 Feb. 1958: 56

⁴⁸ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 9.

⁴⁹ Kerouac 18.

⁵⁰ Kerouac 13.

took off to hide in the mountains."

"Say, that sounds like you."

"In those days you could really do that. He stayed in caves not far from a Buddhist monastery in the Tang Hsing district of T'ien Tai and his only human friend was the funny Zen Lunatic Shih-te who had a job sweeping out the monastery with a straw broom. Shih-te was a poet too but he never wrote much down. Every now and then Han Shan would come down from Cold Mountain in his bark clothing and come into the warm kitchen and wait for food, but none of the monks would ever feed him because he didn't want to join the order and answer the meditation bell three times a day...⁵¹

In Han Shan, modern-day Zen Lunatics, Ray and Japhy, would come to posit a spiritual ancestor.⁵² Misunderstood by society and disillusioned with its practices, they find an outlet in poetry and travel. Kerouac draws an obvious connection between Han Shan and Japhy Ryder. In an informal yet significant way, Han Shan would serve as patriarch and model, and Japhy Ryder, his modern-day incarnation.

Creatively indiscriminate, the Dharma Bums confer the status of "Buddha" to any individual they see fit, including themselves. It does not matter whether the individuals they encounter are poor or rich, Buddhist or Christian, or otherwise. For the narrator (and Kerouac), great wisdom and spirituality exceeds the bounds of convention and can be realized by the least regarded in any given society. It is marked by a high degree of anachronism and non-exclusivity:

This happened to be Japhy's favorite Chinese restaurant, Nam Yuen, and he showed me how to order and how to eat with chopsticks, and told anecdotes about the Zen Lunatics of the Orient and had me going so glad (and we had a bottle of wine on the table) that finally I went over to an old cook in the doorway of the kitchen and asked him "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" (Bodhidharma was the Indian who brought Buddhism eastward to China.)

"I don't care," said the old cook, with lidded eyes, and I told Japhy and he said, "Perfect answer, absolutely perfect. Now you know what I mean by Zen."⁵³

⁵¹ Kerouac 20.

⁵² Indeed, Kerouac dedicates *The Dharma Bums* to Han Shan.

⁵³ Kerouac 16.

Ray's question to the unsuspecting cook is one that Kerouac would later ask Suzuki during their first and only direct encounter.⁵⁴ According to Kerouac, he was summoned by the elder teacher; along with buddies, Lew Welch and Allen Ginsberg, he went to Suzuki's residence:

I rang Mr. Suzuki's door and he did not answer...—suddenly I decided to ring it three times, firmly and slowly, and then he came—he was a small man coming slowly through an old house with panelled wood walls and many books—he had long eyelashes, as everyone knows, which put me in the mind of the saying in the Sutras that the Dharma, like a bush, is slow to take root but once it has taken root it grows huge and firm and can't be hauled up from the ground except by a golden giant whose name is not Tathagata—anyway, Doctor Suzuki made us some green tea, very thick and soupy—he had precisely what idea of what place I should sit, and where my two other friends should sit, the chairs silently, nodding—I said in a loud voice (because he had told us he was a little deaf) "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?—He made no reply—He said, "You three young men sit here quietly & write haikus while I go make some green tea"—He brought us the green tea in cracked old soupbowls of some sort—He told us not to forget about the tea—when we left, he pushed us out the door but once we were out on the sidewalk he began giggling at us and pointing his finger and saying "Don't forget the tea!"—I said "I would like to spend the rest of my life with you"—He held up his finger and said

"Sometime."⁵⁵

In this reminiscence, Suzuki's mystical aura is further cultivated. As in popular accounts, Suzuki's physical features are taken as obvious signs of the old man's wisdom. His gestures are captivating, friendly, and open, yet his words elusive. Although Suzuki never directly responds to the Zen Lunatic's pointed question, Kerouac still leaves with an impression that seems to provide its own answer. He reads intention into Suzuki's every act and word.

Perhaps more significantly is the way Suzuki came to symbolize for Kerouac—even for a brief moment—a living Asian sage. His impulsive devotion ("I would like to spend the rest of my life with you.") attests to a non-rational, immediate recognition of Suzuki's measured

⁵⁴ Before this meeting, Kerouac's knowledge of Suzuki was second-hand at best. Although Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder both had their first encounters with Buddhism via Suzuki's work, there is little evidence that Kerouac had ever read the scholar's books. Ann Charters, in her autobiography on Kerouac, does note that Ginsberg had mentioned his study of Buddhism (including Suzuki's essays) to his fellow Beat, but that Kerouac "wasn't greatly impressed at the time" (191). His brief reference in *Dharma Bums* does relay the fact that he knew who Suzuki was. See Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

⁵⁵ Fields 223-24.

response as sprouting from the same Eastern spiritual wellspring from which the Dharma Bum drew.

From this account, one is given the impression that Suzuki is not personally put off by Kerouac's brand of Buddhism, and is at the very least intrigued by the young writer. But the scholar was philosophically wary of "Beat Zen." He wrote in the *Japan Quarterly*:

Zen is at present evoking unexpected echoes in various fields of Western culture: music, painting, literature semantics, religious philosophy, and psychoanalysis. But as it is in many cases grossly misrepresented and misinterpreted, I undertake here to explain most briefly, as far as language permits, what Zen aims at and what significance it has in the modern world, hoping that Zen will be saved from being too absurdly caricatured.⁵⁶

In the article, Suzuki points out that "Spontaneity is not everything, it must be 'rooted'"⁵⁷—a critical comment aimed at Kerouac's model. Despite these objections, it is Kerouac's dynamic account that becomes popularly available during the late 1950s.⁵⁸ As Gary Snyder would later comment: "We took Dr. Suzuki as our own...."⁵⁹ The connection between Suzuki and the Beats would be further strengthened, as Kerouac's encounter with the Buddhist sage would be recounted time and time again.

⁵⁶ Daisetz T. Suzuki, "Zen in the Modern World," *Japan Quarterly* 5:4 (1958): 452.

⁵⁷ Suzuki, "Zen in the Modern World" 454.

⁵⁸ Per my knowledge, there exist two different versions of Kerouac's encounter with Suzuki—the one recorded by Alfred G. Aronowitz and another published in the *Berkeley Bussei*. Aronowitz's was the first to appear in his article on, "The Beat Generation," *New York Post* 19 Mar. 1959: 22. The journalist provided a more extended version in his October 1960 article for *Escapade* entitled, "The Year of Zen." This account was recently published in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) 80-83.

Kerouac's reminiscence was also printed in *Berkeley Bussei* (1960), a periodical published by the Young Men's Buddhist Association of Berkeley. Rick Fields cites this version in his book, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* 223-224. Field's account was subsequently excerpted by *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 5:1 (1995): 82, and retitled, "Buddhism Beat & Square."

Although the two versions vary somewhat in length, detail, and the succession of the narrative, they are fairly similar in nature. I have relied mainly on the *Bussei* account since it is the most succinct and dynamic. It is also the one which is probably the most widely read because of its inclusion in Fields' popular history of Buddhism in the U.S (now in its third edition).

⁵⁹ Gary Snyder, "On the Road with D.T. Suzuki," *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*, ed. Masao Abe (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) 280.

Alan Watts

Alan Watts was drawn to the East at an early age. Surrounded by his mother's "Oriental treasures"⁶⁰ and imaginatively fed on a diet of Kipling, Watts developed a fascination with Asia. He would later tell *Life* magazine that he first fell in love with the East at age 12. "when he ran across the sinister and inscrutable *Dr. Fu Manchu* and fellow orientals in the literary works of Sax Rohmer."⁶¹ Another childhood turning point came when he visited:

...a small, ruined, and ancient church in which I most earnestly sought the Christian God and didn't find him, and at which point I bought, from a curio shop in Weston-super-Mare, a small image of the Buddha—of the Daibutsu in Makakura. I liked the expression on his face. It wasn't judgmental or frantic, but stately and serene, and the title "Buddha" went along in my mind with buds.⁶²

As he grew into adolescence, the young Watts gained a more formal entrée into Buddhism through several books on Buddhism lent to him by Francis Croshaw (Edwards Holmes's *The Creed of the Buddha*; and Lafcadio Hearn's *Gleanings In Buddha Fields*). Duly impressed, he became an active member in *The Buddhist Lodge* in London, where he had the opportunity to sit in on the lectures of such luminary figures as Tai-hsü, Krishnamurti, Annie Besant and D.T. Suzuki. Of his first impressions of Suzuki, Watts wrote:

He was versed in Japanese, English, Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan, French, Pali, and German, but while attending a meeting of the Buddhist Lodge he would play with a kitten, looking right into its Buddha-nature.⁶³

Watts went on to voraciously read the scholar's works. So inspired, he would attempt to "clarify and popularize" Suzuki's thought in a book called, *The Spirit of Zen*, written at the age of 20. Watts would finally meet the "unofficial master of Zen Buddhism"⁶⁴ a year later in 1936 at the

⁶⁰ Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915-1965* (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 24.

⁶¹ "Eager Exponent of Zen" *Life* 21 Apr. 1961: 88A.

⁶² Watts, *In My Own Way* 27.

⁶³ Watts, *In My Own Way* 78.

⁶⁴ Watts, *In My Own Way* 78.

World Congress of Faiths. Suzuki "stole the scene."⁶⁵ and Watts "attended every lecture and seminar that Suzuki gave" at the Congress.⁶⁶

As captivated with Eastern religions as he appeared to be in his formative years, Watts would embark on a decidedly more Christian-leaning path in the 1940s and would eventually become an Anglican minister. But he would leave the church six years later and resume his prodigious writing career in which he attempted to articulate his unique spiritual vision. In 1956, one of his most popular books, *The Way of Zen*, would be published. It contributed significantly to the heightened interest in Zen exhibited in the late 50s.⁶⁷



Christmas Humphreys,
Alan Watts, and Suzuki

During this time, Watts would meet with Suzuki on several occasions. The elder scholar would continue to serve as the inspiration as well as the touchstone for Watts' views on Zen.⁶⁸ Of Suzuki, he would later say:

⁶⁵ Watts, *In My Own Way* 119.

⁶⁶ Watts, *In My Own Way* 122.

⁶⁷ Watts notes in his autobiography: "It is therefore also said—perhaps with truth—that my easy and free-floating attitude to Zen was largely responsible for the notorious 'Zen boom' which flourished among artists and 'pseudointellectuals' in the late 1950s, and led on to the frivolous 'beat Zen' of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, of Franz Kline's black and white abstractions, and of John Cage's silent concerts" (262) (my emphasis). Although he was certainly one of Zen's most prominent exponents in the 50s, it is difficult to trace the claim that Watts intimates. For instance, Watts and his wife, Dorothy, did entertain Cage at one of their many dinner parties in the early 50s, but it is Suzuki's lectures that seemed to have the most profound effect on the musician. (See Fields 196).

As for the Beats, their view of Buddhism could only be called their own. It is true that Watts met Gary Snyder in the early 50s and was responsible for introducing him to a number of Buddhist luminaries. But collectively, the Beats' interest in Zen was cultivated before they had ever met Watts and included an eclectic mix of influences.

⁶⁸ The intellectual and spiritual connection that Watts felt he shared with Suzuki is unmistakable. Indeed, Watts defends Suzuki's views as vehemently as if he were defending his own:

[T]he time has come for someone to defend him like the swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, and smash his critics to pieces with a wooden oar against their finely tempered steels. I am not,

I have never had a formal teacher (guru or *roshi*) in the spiritual life—only an exemplar, whose example I have not really followed because no sensitive person likes to be mimicked. That exemplar was Suzuki Daisetz...⁶⁹

For Watts, this "exemplar" would become "the most gentle and enlightened person [he had] ever known."⁷⁰

"Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen"

In the summer of 1958, the *Chicago Review* dedicated its issue to the burgeoning phenomenon known as Zen. The respected journal featured writings and translations from all the notable players: D.T. Suzuki, Jack Kerouac, Shinichi Hisamatsu, Philip Whalen, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Nyogen Senzaki, Gary Snyder, Harold E. McCarthy, Akihisa Kondo, and Paul Wienpahl. Perhaps none was quite as widely read or as influential as the essay by Alan W. Watts, entitled, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen." In his overview (which also served as the lead-in article), Watts attempted to make sense of "the extraordinary growth of western interest in Zen," which he attributed to:

...our vague disquiet with the artificiality or 'anti-naturalness' of both Christianity, with its politically ordered cosmology, and technology, with its imperialistic mechanization of a natural world from which man himself feels strangely alien.⁷¹

Although such commentary was insightful, the piece gained its main significance by the way it captured the current dialogue about Zen in the U.S. and the different constituencies involved, and set the terms of the debate for a long time to come.

at present, going to undertake this task, but no one who actually knew the man could possibly question the profundity of his spiritual insight—and I use this phrase advisedly although it is a little trite (*In My Own Way* 119).

⁶⁹ Alan Watts, "The 'Mind-less' Scholar," *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*, ed. Masao Abe (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) 189.

⁷⁰ Watts, *In My Own Way* 78.

⁷¹ Alan Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," *Chicago Review* Summer 1958: 5.

Watts succinctly delineated the unique problem that confronted the Western Zen enthusiast as follows:

[T]he Westerner who is attracted by Zen and who would understand it deeply must have one indispensable qualification; he must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so that he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either "beat" or "square," either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. For Zen is above all the liberation of the mind from conventional thought, and this is something utterly different from rebellion against convention, on the one hand, or adopting of reign conventions, on the other.⁷²

It is clear which type of individuals Watts associates with both Zen "extremes"—beat and square. The word, "beat," is meant to bring to mind the much talked about literary movement which included illuminati, such as Clellon Holmes, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Watts seems to want to apply the term more broadly to refer to:

...a younger generation's nonparticipation in "the American Way of Life," a revolt which does not seek to change the existing order but simply turns away from it to find the significance of life in subjective experience rather than objective achievement.⁷³

Those who engage in "the hipster life of New York and San Francisco" are a convenient figure for his criticisms. The Beat interested in Zen is in fact a "displaced or unconscious Christian"⁷⁴ who is less concerned with a spiritual practice than justifying his/her own self-centeredness and "underlying Protestant lawlessness."⁷⁵

On the other extreme of the Zen continuum was the "square" practitioner. Watts describes this type of seeker as one who "imagine[s] that the only proper way to find it is to run off to a monastery in Japan or to do special exercises in the lotus posture for five hours a day."⁷⁶ More specifically, he notes:

⁷² Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 6-7.

⁷³ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 7.

⁷⁴ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 10.

⁷⁵ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 8.

⁷⁶ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 11.

[S]quare Zen is the Zen of established tradition in Japan with its clearly defined hierarchy, its rigid discipline, and its specific tests of *satori*...a question for the *right* spiritual experience, for a *satori* which will receive the stamp (*inka*) of approved and established authority. There will even be certificates to hang on the wall.⁷⁷

Here, Watts most likely had in mind his former mother-in-law, the formidable Ruth Fuller Everett Sasaki.⁷⁸ In an interview with *Time Magazine* in the spring of 1958, she notes: "It's not easy to become a Zen Buddhist. I can sit in a monks' hall for seven days, sitting cross-legged, sleeping only one hour a night."⁷⁹ Sasaki was a woman hailing from the American upper classes who went to study for an extended period of time at Kyoto's Nanzenji Temple in the 1930s. She returned to the States and began working at the Manhattan Zen Institute of America alongside Sokei-an (Shigetsu Sasaki); and after the death of her husband in 1944, she married the Zen roshi. Sasaki later returned to Japan and was ordained by Zuigan Goto, head roshi at Daitokuji temple, and installed as the head priest of the sub-temple, which catered to Americans and Europeans who traveled to Japan in pursuit of Zen.⁸⁰

One wonders how much of Watts' criticism of Zen's square proponents is rooted in his personal experience with Ruth Sasaki. Although there is obviously a feeling of indebtedness to his former mother-in-law,⁸¹ he nevertheless writes in his autobiography:

Until her marriage with Sokei-an Sasaki, Ruth was something of a social climber—not too offensively—but for a woman of spiritual and aesthetic resources such as hers, she seemed unduly impressed with the industrial captains and kings of Chicago and their especially feather-headed wives.⁸²

⁷⁷ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 9.

⁷⁸ Suzuki seems exempt from the Watts' criticism. Watts distinguished Suzuki from the institutional Zen of Japan in the following way: "[T]he mood or atmosphere of Suzuki was more Taoist than Zen Buddhist. He didn't have the skin-headed military zip that is characteristic of so many Zen monks, nor their obedient seriousness" (Watts, *In My Own Way* 120).

⁷⁹ "The Zen Priest," *Time* 26 May 1958: 65.

⁸⁰ She was assisted in her duties by another English-speaking priest and "serious" student of Zen, Walter Nowick. It is interesting to note that Nowick had been highlighted as "the real future of Zen in the U.S" in one of the earliest American popular accounts on the subject. See "Zen," *Time* 4 Feb. 1957: 65-66.

⁸¹ Watts comments: "Much of what I learned from Sokei-an and Ruth has so become part of me that I cannot now sort it out" (Watts, *In My Own Way* 146).

⁸² Watts, *In My Own Way* 126.

Watts apparently drew a correlation between Sasaki's early preoccupations and her immersion into the hierarchy of the Japanese Zen establishment. In his eyes, the matriarch's view of formal, uninterrupted training in Japan as a prerequisite of bringing back "true" Rinzai Zen to the West did not escape the dichotomous tendency of Protestant thinking (true/untrue, proper/improper) and fell into the same trap of self-justification as the beat Zen.

There was, of course, a third possibility for the Zen enthusiast in the West besides the beat and square extremes. As the title of Watts' essay implies, there is "Zen" in its truest form, unadulterated by the cultural weaknesses of "sheer caprice" or "rigid discipline." Here, it is helpful to reiterate his definition of a genuine Zen practitioner:

[H]e must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so that he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself.⁸³

In many ways, Watts fulfilled the qualifications of his own definition.⁸⁴ In the 1940s, Watts struggled with the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism. In search of a vocation, he enrolled in the Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Chicago. Watts' education was impressive, and his course of study included early Christianity, Patristics, Russian theology, mystical and ascetic theology, as well as modern interpreters of the tradition.⁸⁵ The accomplished student was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1945 and went on to become the chaplain at Northwestern University.

⁸³ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 7.

⁸⁴ Institutional Zen, in the U.S. is a direct descendant of Watts; these individuals and organizations often view themselves as serious practitioners attempting to articulate viable Zen commitment in a new environment. Although indebted to their Japanese ancestors, they often eschew many of the Japanese conventions, rituals, and practices, as they confidently define Zen on their own terms. They see themselves as the new direction of Zen—beyond both the faddish belief of their Beat counterparts and the sedimentary practices of the Japanese tradition.

⁸⁵ Watts, *In My Own Way* 179-80.

During his ministry, Watts became increasingly disillusioned with Christian practice and never fully resolved his tense relationship with religion's theology and dogma. In 1950, he offered his letter of resignation in which he wrote:

My departure from the Church is not a moral protest; it is simply that, seeing what I see, I cannot do otherwise. I take no credit for it. My viewpoint is not one of moral judgment and condemnation, but of simply inability to conform to a rule of life based on what I see to be illusions.⁸⁶

In his 10-year encounter with Christianity, Watts would attempt to "come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah." And in his mind, his struggle proved that an unconscious attachment to Christianity no longer informed his spiritual belief. Thus, he felt an able representative of Zen in its most genuine form.

To a large extent, Watts' commentary on the Zen clears a path or "middle way" for his own definition of Zen. Employing popular lingo, he isolates and labels the different factions for easy consumption ("beat" and "square"). Already implied in such terminology is that these two alternatives represent two extremes which do not accurately reflect Zen in its truest form. He is careful to qualify his criticisms ("I see no real quarrel with either extreme"⁸⁷), but still bolsters his attack by calling into question the motivations behind his competitor's views (fear, rebellion). For a middle-class American audience who had little interest in either "hitting the road" (i.e., wandering around aimlessly) or "hitting the boat" (i.e., traveling to a monastery in Japan), Watts' conception could not help but come as somewhat of a relief

Aftermath

It is interesting to trace the ways in which the popular press re-presents Watts' delineation after its publication. *Time* magazine featured a brief article—"Zen: Beat & Square" (July 21, 1958)—on its religion page that summarized and condensed Watts' essay. The most noteworthy

⁸⁶ Watts, *In My Own Way* 211.

⁸⁷ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 9.

dimension of the article is its clear condemnation of Beat Zen: "The Beat Generation have Zen wrong."⁸⁸ On the level of the popular, commentators appeared quite wary of Beat Zen (especially as it was portrayed in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*) and harnessed Watts' criticism to bash the authority of its expression.

All in all, the popular press transformed Watts into a figure that could easily be played off the Beats and the unruliness of the subculture. Soon after the *Chicago Review* issue appeared, J. Donald Adams, noted columnist for *The New York Times Book Review*, "harshly criticized *The Dharma Bums* and its spiritual underpinnings (October 26, 1958). Not only did he tag the Beats' religiosity as "brief flights into the Buddhist stratosphere," but also added:

And I remain skeptical as to what can be salvaged from the mystics of the Far East that can be adapted to the emotional and rational needs of a people as different as ourselves.⁸⁹

Obviously, Watts' essay had resonated with the critic. In a later offering (November 16, 1958), Adams would admit to a second-hand knowledge of Zen. But in justification of his initial view, he cites Watts' analysis. A column-long excerpt from "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" appeared alongside the editorial.

An interesting misnomer takes place in Stephen Mahoney's article for *The Nation* entitled, "The Prevalence of Zen" (November 1, 1958). Even though Watts carefully attempts to disassociate himself from either Beat or Square versions of Zen, he becomes associated with the latter. Mahoney writes: "Beat Zen and Square Zen, the factions have been designated by Watts, whom observers take for the captive spokesman of the latter."⁹⁰

The Beat book is the Zen novel *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac, author of *On the Road* and other Beat scripture....The Square book, *Nature, Man, and Woman*, is the prolific Watts's 1958 directory of Zen wisdom. It is a masterful, lucid popularization of Zen that does not distort its difficult subject.⁹¹

⁸⁸ "Zen: Beat & Square," *Time* 21 July 1958: 49.

⁸⁹ J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," *The New York Times Book Review* 26 Oct. 1958: 2.

⁹⁰ Stephen Mahoney, "Prevalence of Zen," *Nation* 1 Nov. 1958: 311.

⁹¹ Mahoney 311.

Throughout the article, Mahoney seems sensitive to Watts' original delineation; he is careful not to label Watts as an outright Square Zenist and keeps intact the exponent's claim of authenticity (i.e., Watts' book "does not distort its difficult subject"). The link between Watts and Square Zen has more to do with those who affiliate themselves with Watts:

Clearly, Beat Zen does not score at the ol' delib'orative level.... But Square Zen no. It does *very* well on the deliberative level. Last April in New York Watts held a weekend-long seminar. It went over much of the ground Watts covers in *Nature, Man, and Woman*. Previously he had given Zen seminars in Illinois, where he used to be an Anglican priest and a chaplain at Northwestern University, and in California, where until recently he was Dean of the American Academy of Asian Studies, near San Francisco. Forty people were allowed to attend this one at \$25 a head. There were architects, engineers, writers, housewives, professors, an Episcopalian priest, a publisher—a group of people one might come upon at a cocktail party in Westport. Nobody removed his clothes.⁹²

The point that Mahoney is attempting to highlight is the way in which Square Zenists have adopted Watts as their representative. This constituency of "clever, bored novelty-seekers"⁹³ may not feel compelled to travel to Japan and study with bonafide monks, but they do seek channels (e.g., Watts' seminars) through which to not only expand, but also legitimate their interest. Watts may have distinguished himself from "[t]he Zen of established tradition in Japan,"⁹⁴ but he did not foresee the ways in which he would play a significant role in the hegemonic creation of American Zen Buddhism. Many years later, he would also depart from his own definitions and admit to the squareness of his 50s façade.

In 1959, Zen continued to make an appearance in the popular press. Watts furthered his excursions into Asian culture: *Vogue* reported "People are talking about...the voice of Alan Watts, on a recording, reading and discussing *Haiku*, the Japanese seventeen-syllable verse."⁹⁵ Suzuki's book, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, was reissued and reviewed in *The New York Times*.⁹⁶

⁹² Mahoney 313.

⁹³ Mahoney 313.

⁹⁴ Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" 8-9. See also "Zen: Beat and Square" 49.

⁹⁵ "People are talking about...Alan Watts." *Vogue* 15 Sept. 1959: 140.

⁹⁶ Nancy Wilson Ross, "Beat—and Buddhist," Rev. of *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. *New York Times Book Review* 5 Oct. 1958: 5.

In the *Christian Century*, Peter Fingesten critically questioned Buddhism's viability for Americans in his article, "Beat and Buddhist."⁹⁷ And Alfred G. Aronowitz presented a sympathetic 10-part series on the Beat Generation for the *New York Post* (including an article dedicated to their Zen spirituality⁹⁸). Post-*Dharma Bums*, Zen was becoming a convenient buzzword. Barnaby Conrad's review of Kerouac's new book, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* was entitled, "Barefoot Boy with Dreams of Zen."⁹⁹ The title was obviously chosen solely for its exotic appeal, since the piece makes no mention of anything remotely related to Zen or of Kerouac's unique interpretation of it.

But by 1960, the Zen "boomlet" had receded from popular attention, and along with it, Suzuki's role as Zen's personality. Although he remained active until his death in 1965, his name vanishes from the news weeklies and magazine articles. His role in the transplantation of Zen into American popular consciousness had become obsolete by this time—his duties and mission passed on to a much more "accessible" exponent. Indeed, by the early 1960's, the American popular press had selected Alan Watts as Suzuki's apparent heir, and focused the attention of their pens and cameras on him.

The selection of Watts as the new representative figure of Zen was not without its own peculiar logic. Despite the integral role his book played in bringing Zen to popular attention, Jack Kerouac could not stave off the harsh reviews of his critics, and by the early 60s, was no longer taken seriously in press accounts. Kerouac's work remained in the public eye during this period. But instead of articulating a clear vision of the "religious movement,"¹⁰⁰ that the Beats had professed to embody, he (along with his protagonists) seemed to continue on their reckless path.

In a review of Kerouac's *Big Sur*, the critic for *Time Magazine* commentated:

What can a beat do when he is too old to go on the road? He can go on the sauce....In the

⁹⁷ Peter Fingesten, "Beat and Buddhist," *Christian Century* 25 Feb. 1959: 226-227.

⁹⁸ Alfred G. Aronowitz, "The Beat Generation," *New York Post* 19 Mar. 1959: 22.

⁹⁹ Barnaby Conrad, "Barefoot Boy with Dreams of Zen," *Saturday Review* 2 May 1959: 23-24.

¹⁰⁰ "Beat Mystics" 56.

end, [the narrator] settles for a howling emotional crisis—which on a grown-up would look very much like the DTs.¹⁰¹

Although the cultural legacy of the Beats eventually made its way into American life and letters, its initial promise had greatly diminished by the turn of the decade. Beat Zen, after much brouhaha, was dismissed as a fad, a youthful preoccupation, something that had been dabbled with but not seriously entertained.¹⁰² Until later rearticulation in the mid-60s (most notably by Gary Snyder), Beat Zen was dismissed. Watts' *Chicago Review* article had achieved its obvious intent.

Watts, during the early 60s, continued to offer seminars on Zen and write prolifically on the subject. He fit the conventionalized model of a religious enthusiast with which Americans felt more comfortable:

Watts is a crewcut, cleancut, and has a shy, boyish, scholar's grin. He is 43, looks 30; he lived in England until he was in his twenties and speaks with an accent that is U. Watts sprawled out awkwardly in an armchair, clutched at his ankle, and the words flowed in an unending, shiningly lucid stream. He never looked at a note.¹⁰³



¹⁰¹ "Lions & Cubs," *Time* 14 Sept. 1962: 106.

¹⁰² Kerouac especially seemed to exhibit this "lack of seriousness." As Ann Charters writes in her biography of the writer: "[Kerouac's] interest in Buddhism, alive and expanding in 1955 with Gary Snyder, had diminished in 1960 to the point where he implied he was sick of the subject" (339).

Many commentators also share Charters' view that "Kerouac was...born a Catholic, raised a Catholic and died a Catholic. His interest in Buddhism was a discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings. He always remained a believing Catholic" (190). Kerouac's Catholicism was most evident in his 1961 book, *Big Sur*.

See also Tonkinson 27; and Fields 248.

¹⁰³ Mahoney 313.

Not only did Watts differ from the Beats in appearance and temperament he also distinguished himself in terms of pedigree. Watts enjoyed a gentrified upbringing attending King's School, Canterbury—one of the oldest boarding schools in England. Although his family could not afford to send him to Oxford, he embarked on his own course of study ("my own university"). As previously mentioned, Watts also had extensive theological training under his belt. (This fact was often noted in articles about Watts.) Hence, unlike his Beat counterparts, Watts seemed to lend legitimacy to Zen via his class background and religious training.

As the 1950s drew to a close and a new decade emerged, Watts appeared to prevail over his Beat competitors. In a 1960 *Life Magazine* pictorial of Watts, he is heralded as the "chief exponent of the burgeoning Zen movement in America." and "its most lucid interpreter."¹⁰⁴ Unlike the Beats, Watts' main goal centered on the development and propagation of Zen in a Western environment. He made a concerted effort to introduce Zen on a popular level through the use of a variety of mediums—"a radio program in five cities, taped TV shows, a nonstop lecture program and a book a year."¹⁰⁵ Compared with Suzuki, who made himself accessible only according to the demand and invitation of his Western audience, Watts actively sought to create such a demand.

The *Life* photographic essay is most interesting to study in relation to understanding Watts' appeal. These glimpses into his world show Watts in a number of different poses and settings: contemplating a dew-covered spider web; sorting mail for a haiku contest; lecturing to students at Brandeis and Big Sur; taking part in experimental movement with a bamboo pole, writing Chinese calligraphy and; at work in his study. The pictorial gives one the impression that Watts achieves the seamless incorporation of ancient Asian traditions into a modernized Western way of life.

¹⁰⁴ "Eager Exponent of Zen" 88A.

¹⁰⁵ "Eager Exponent of Zen" 88A.



Whereas Suzuki generated popular interest because of his enigmatic nature and exotic appeal, Watts seemed to achieve his for exactly the opposite reasons. In the photos, his clothing is Western conservative. In work settings, he is wearing a suit and tie and appears no different than any other middle America, white-collar worker of the time; but even in a casual short-sleeve gear, his shirt is buttoned to the top (also, a marked contrast to the Beats' disheveled look). The only distinguishing marks of an alternative lifestyle is a serious, focused expression which he exhibits throughout the photo spread and the Asian paraphernalia he employs in his pursuits. With his Western dress and Anglo-Saxon looks, he appeared wholly familiar—someone with whom his audience could easily identify.

Watts was also portrayed as a family man. Even though on his third marriage, he is pictured in *Life* with his three children. The caption reads: "In library of his Mill Valley home in California Watts works oblivious to presence of three of his four children."¹⁰⁶ This alone might imply an attitude of distance from his family. But Watts' own words, which appear immediately following the caption, serves to qualify this impression and demonstrate his devotion as a father: "*They ask the usual children's questions like 'Who made the world and who made me?'* I ask them, '*Why use the word made, like a machine—why not use another words: grew?*'"¹⁰⁷ Squarely placed within the constellation of the family, Watts is distinguished from both Suzuki and Kerouac—both of whom could boast no progeny.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ "Eager Exponent of Zen" 88C.

¹⁰⁷ "Eager Exponent of Zen" 88C.

¹⁰⁸This is not to say that Watts remained content with the sexual mores of his day. In 1958, he published *Nature, Man, and Woman: A New Approach to Sexual Experience*, in which he promoted a more open

Throughout the *Life* photographic essay, Watts is portrayed as a highly intelligent as well as intelligible individual. Unlike Kerouac and the Beats—whose brand of Zen was viewed as jazzy and non-deliberative,¹⁰⁹ Watts is taken as an articulate source. The momentariness of Kerouac's prose, as well as the mysteriousness of Suzuki's esoteric speech is abandoned for Watts' clear commentary on Zen. The magazine's editors allow his words to stand alone, as if sufficient in and of themselves—their translation unnecessary and their meaning direct.

In the early 60s, the publication of Watts' book reviews and articles in prominent magazines and journals would attest to the reputation he had developed. His appeal is not surprising. As we have discussed, Watts fit the conventional standards of the time in terms of educational background, class standing, lifestyle, and image. Unlike the Beats, he posed no offense to a popular audience. Studied, non-sensationalistic, yet provocative, Watts seemed to emerge as Suzuki's most perfect pupil, his most appropriate heir.

The discursive interplay between Watts and the Beats as enacted by the mainstream accounts demonstrate the final vestiges of a strategy of containment so prevalent in the 50s. Kerouac and the Beats represented an unruly set whose lifestyles seemed to pose a direct challenge to American society at the time,¹¹⁰ and their attitudes were viewed as infecting the minds of a younger generation. It was hoped that Watts—his clean-cut image and precise words—would serve as inoculate. But the Beats would have a momentous effect and pave the way for the counterculture to come. Although Kerouac suffered slow decline until his death in 1969, others (among them, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder) carried on the movement's spirit and would later be lauded for their literary and spiritual independence.

attitude toward sex. But his views conformed to fairly conventional heterosexist notions on the subject ("nature, *man, and woman*" (my emphasis)) albeit with a Zen twist, and he himself lived within the acceptable bounds of marriage and family.

¹⁰⁹ This characteristic of Beat Zen was positively received in some cases. Both Stephen Mahoney and Seymour Krim laud the lively way in which Kerouac's writing captures a Zen sensibility. But what is admired is the author's ability to *express*, rather than his capacity to *articulate*.

¹¹⁰ Except for love of the nation. Jack Kerouac especially embraced America and its impulse toward freedom.

Ultimately, Watts did come to accept the Beats and their brand of Zen. He would later say that he had been "somewhat severe" in his 1958 essay, and that he now considered Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder among friends.¹¹¹ More than simply acknowledge his earlier asperity, Watts would go on to defend the Beats against enduring misunderstanding.¹¹² And he would eventually forge a special relationship with Gary Snyder about whom he would respectfully say: "[W]hen I am dead I would like to be able to say that he is carrying on everything I hold most dearly..."¹¹³

A little more than decade later, Beat and Square Zen, as first popularly portrayed in the late 50s, would merge into a unified cultural force.



Watts in 1970.
"But after the square culture crashed, I dressed comfortably according to whim (1970)...and roamed the hillsides in a fireman's jacket, with a shakujo staff"

Both Snyder and Watts would share a similar sensibility and direction. Watts' biographer, Monica Furlong, comments: "The vision that Watts, Snyder and Kerouac shared was the renunciation of the values of bourgeois and suburban life."¹¹⁴ This vision was undergirded by a spirituality grounded in a new American configuration of Zen equally indebted to both Beat and Square factions. Although those who carried on Suzuki's legacy saw themselves in direct contradistinction to the rest of American society, they still held a special allegiance to America.

¹¹¹ Watts, *In My Own Way* 309.

¹¹² See "The Beat Way of Life," *Zen and the Beat Way* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1997) 15-25.

¹¹³ Watts, *In My Own Way* 267.

¹¹⁴ Monica Furlong, *Zen Effects: The Life of Alan Watts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 160.

and their efforts would help secure the U.S. (and more specifically, California) as Zen's hegemonic center.¹¹⁵

The Western pupil of Zen would become an important figure. He would come to represent the protagonist of the story that would make Eastern spirituality attractive to a popular audience. Without him the labor of the Eastern sage or Oriental Monk whose express mission it is to transmit his ancient spiritual heritage would bear no fruit. The pupil's function in the narrative would come to depend not so much on his capacity to teach, but rather his ethos. It is the pupil's ability to challenge convention and embody the promise of a new cultural synthesis that transforms him into a hero.

Unlike the popular narrative that would later emerge, the lineage of master and pupil was less discrete in real terms. Even in the early days of American Zen, there were a number of teachers and a multitude of pupils. Some students never studied with a master, but creatively drew their knowledge and inspiration from a wide variety of influences (this was true of Watts, and especially the case with the Beats). However, it is often difficult to capture such complexity and relay it to a popular audience in a way they will lay claim. We have seen that even in journalistic accounts, these real life individuals were often molded into accessible personalities

¹¹⁵ One can interpret this geographical shift in the writings of both Watts and Kerouac. Watts put it this way:

I acquired an interior compass which led me to the East through the West... This interior compass eventually drew me across the Atlantic, first to New York, then to Chicago, and at last to California—at which destination I saw a fog-clouded horizon and knew that this was the end of the West (*In My Own Way* 25, 27).

Kerouac saw himself as travelling a similar path. In the *Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith travels from his home on the East Coast the spiritual center of the West (California). Also, Japhy Ryder, "the number one Dharma Bum of them all," hails from the backwoods of Oregon. In many ways, California represents the perfect geographical compromise as it is situated between Europe (and the European-defined American East coast) and Asia.

Hence, the Orient-Occident binary is complexified as American Zenists situate themselves in between. Although the power relations between Orient and Occident remain intact, the designations *East* and *West* become confused as the center of Orientalism's power shifts from Europe to the U.S.

that a mainstream audience could readily recognize and identify—their interactions dramatized for intriguing effect.

It is not a far stretch to see how these personalities contributed to the Oriental Monk narrative's stock character of the pupil. From the Beats, this figure would inherit bravado, spunk, and independence: he would feel like a misfit as they once had. From Watts, he would receive his seriousness, focus and understated demeanor. And from both, he would garner a passion for the East,¹¹⁶ as well as the brave individuality so attractive in the characters Americans have come to love. In this way, a character and role began to take shape that would reflect and draw cumulatively from the pages of "real life." And we are left with a most heroic pupil for the venerable sage.

¹¹⁶ This passion was inherently fueled by a clear disillusionment with Western culture, evident in the writings of both Kerouac and Watts. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac would make pointed reference to the leveling effects of America's mass consumerism (Japhy Ryder's well-known monologue (97)) and the "millions and millions of the One Eye [America's love of television]" (104). In the February 1960 issue of *Escapade*, he also examines the West's "bloody mad history"—the Crusades, 30 years War, Napoleon, Bismarck, etc.—and wonders if man will learn his lesson.

Watts' too shared these sentiments, and in many ways his criticism is more widespread. He saw in Buddhism a possible solution to Western society's psychological and ecological woes. Both Watts' and Kerouac's disillusionment is also coupled with a kind of nostalgia of the past. In Watts' articulation:

In retrospect, I believe that I entered the ministry under the influence of a tendency which has become rather widespread—a tendency to seek refuge from the confusion of our times by giving in to a kind of nostalgia. In a world where all the traditions in which men have found security are crumbling, the mind seeks peace and sanity in an attempt to return to a former state of faith. It envies the inner calm and certitude of an earlier age, where men could put absolute and childlike trust in the authority of the Church, and in the ordered beauty of an ancient doctrine (*In My Own Way* 207).

Although Watts is discussing his relationship to Christianity in this passage, one wonders if his embrace of Zen Buddhism and Eastern spirituality is not informed by the same nostalgia. For both Watts and Kerouac, this nostalgia speaks of a loss of a spiritual framework that they attempt to fill through alternate means. Ultimately, their longing is displaced onto the newfound object of their affection (Zen) as they attempt to recuperate its originary title. This psychological profile has become an integral part of the Oriental Monk narrative and helps to explain its appeal.

To Watts and Kerouac's credit, they both exhibit a degree of reflection on the matter. As discussed earlier, Watts would insist on the necessity of coming to terms with one's Christian background in "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen." And in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac would have Japhy Ryder exclaim to pal Ray (in a passage that was edited out of the book), "You old son of a bitch, you're going to end up asking for the Catholic rites on your death bed." However, in both cases, the demand for self-reflexivity is made but never fully achieved.

THE DECLINE OF THE EAST: FIGURING JAPAN

As we have seen, the media's "narration" of the transmission of Zen to the West depended on at least two significant characters: the Oriental Monk and his designated pupil. Suzuki—the "wisely foolish, gently disciplined, and simply profound"¹¹⁷ individual whose life had been dedicated to cultivating an understanding of Zen in the West—was well suited for the role of the Monk. And the Beats and especially Alan Watts contributed to the figure of the student who would passionately continue their teacher's work. But the narrative in which these two figures played a prominent part helped plot Zen's movement West within a teleological framework. In the 1950s one begins to see the outline of what would become the *raison d'être* of American Buddhism: the U.S. would be the site of Zen's contemporary culmination. Within the founding narrative, Suzuki's "mission" was imbued with a more transcendental purpose.

The justification for this mission began to emerge as soon as Zen's popularity was firmly established in 1959. Two articles appeared which are especially worth taking note. In its February 23 issue, *Time* magazine reported a current "Zensation" in Japan. A scandal had erupted at the "great temple of Shofukuji (sic)" in Kobe where photographer, Mikio Tsuchiya¹¹⁸ witnessed:

...loinclothed priests playing mah-jongg instead of sitting in immobile meditation, a priest drinking with a bar hostess, two novices staggering along a Kobe street late at night with a barmaid between them. Tsuchiya quoted one priest as saying: "By listening to good music and gazing on *ikibosatu* [the living Buddha]. I feel I can understand the teachings." This wisdom was Tsuchiya's caption for a photograph of the same priest happily gaping at pictures of virtually naked women.¹¹⁹

Other indiscretions are further noted. Mumon Yamada, the temple's head priest "blamed it all on an influx of university-trained novices who lack moral fiber." As a result of Tsuchiya's

¹¹⁷ Watts, *In My Own Way* 119.

¹¹⁸ Tsuchiya had already planned for her photography to be exhibited in the U.S., "where enthusiasm for Zen's ego-smashing techniques ha[d] become a semi-religious phenomenon."

¹¹⁹ "Zensation," *Time* 23 Feb. 1959: 52.

revelations. *Time* reported that the temple council not only expelled the boys, but also compelled the photographer to apologize and destroy all her negatives.

The status of Zen in Japan was further brought into question in the *Newsweek* article, "The Real Spirit of Zen?" (September 21, 1959). The weekly publication was surprised to find that: [a]lthough nearly 5 million Japanese still profess to be Zen followers, few know anything about the discipline..."¹²⁰ For the piece, Suzuki was cited:

"Buddhism...in Japan is passé," adds Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki, Zen's leading missionary to the West. Suzuki, who returned to Japan last year to write the definitive encyclopedia of Zen, says that his colleagues are constantly asking him why Americans are "so interested in what is so old and worn out as Buddhism."¹²¹

This is the last time Suzuki would appear in the popular press until his death in 1966. The article is accompanied by photograph of Suzuki looking even older and more sagely than before. The caption underneath the photograph reiterates and reinforces the philosopher's comment:

"Buddhism in Japan is passé."



Suzuki,
Newsweek

Unruly monks more concerned with women and drink, Japanese who lacked appreciation for their Zen heritage: it is through press portrayals such as these that Americans began to perceive Japan in spiritual retrograde. At the time, there were two prominent explanations for

¹²⁰ "The Real Spirit of Zen?" *Newsweek* 21 Sept. 1959: 122.

¹²¹ "The Real Spirit of Zen?" 122.

this: (1) Japanese Zen Buddhists had lapsed into establishment thinking; and (2) the Japanese had been corrupted by Western influence.¹²²

Suzuki, as well as Alan Watts, had certainly helped to promulgate the first view. For Suzuki, the critique was less direct but still could be intimated in his vital hope of a revitalized Japanese Zen. Watts was much more outspoken. As we have already seen in his essay, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," he considered the Zen practiced in Japanese monasteries as formal and spiritually rigid (i.e., square). In both cases, it was thought that Zen in Japan had gone the way of most established religions and had lost its spiritual direction and inspirational power.

The second explanation, which attributed Japan's spiritual decline to the corruptive forces of Western mass culture and capitalist greed, was more expansive. The occupation of Japan by American forces under General MacArthur was seen as a successful project. In some ways, perhaps too successful—as an ancient culture seemed to be in the process of becoming a modernized industrial nation with all its trappings. Americans may have helped lead Japan into the twentieth century, but it also felt partially responsible for the demise of its native traditional culture.

In 1961, Arthur Koestler published a controversial book that would explore this residual guilt. *The Lotus and the Robot* was previewed in *Esquire* (December 1960) (under the title, "The Decline of the East").¹²³ Koestler put the issue in this way:

¹²² These two explanations were not necessarily exclusive of one another; both were sometimes taken as contributing factors.

¹²³ In *The Lotus and the Robot* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), Koestler also lodges a damning critique against Suzuki (sarcastically referring to him as "the Master"). Indeed, Suzuki serves as the authoritative figure of Zen from whose writings one could most notably detect "the stink of Zen." In response to the criticisms his book received ("Neither Lotus nor Robot," *Encounter* Feb. 1960), Koestler would launch his most inflammatory rebuke:

It is time for the Professor to shut up and for Western intelligentsia to recognize contemporary Zen as one of the "sick" jokes, slightly gangrened, which are always fashionable in ages of anxiety (58).

Suzuki offered his rejoinder in a later edition ("A Reply," *Encounter* Oct. 1961: 55-58). He felt that most of Koestler's objections were due to "misinterpretations" of his views. Although most of Suzuki's essay

Asians have a tendency to lay the blame for this decline on the soul-destroying influence of the West, and Western intellectuals are inclined to accept the blame. "As pupils we were not bad, but hopeless as teachers"—Auden's *mea culpa*, though addressed to Italy, might serve as a motto for the Western guilt complex towards Asia.¹²⁴

Koestler proceeds from the premise that such guilt leads liberal intellectuals to engage in the view that "material poverty of Asia is a sign of its spiritual superiority."¹²⁵ Such a view in his opinion is ill informed. The material "progress" brought to Asian countries may have negative effects on native culture, but such effects are inevitable (they are part of the "package deal"). If rampant consumerism is adopted by a native people, it is their own fault: "[U]neducated Asiatic masses are bound to be attracted by the trashiest influences and wares."¹²⁶ But this does not take away from the benefits introduced by Western political intervention: "literacy, culture hunger and leisure time." The real culprit is the lack of "creative talents" to engage and steer these newly privileged state of affairs.

For Koestler, the search for such "talents" was misdirected. In his own travels to India and Japan in the late 50s, he had hoped to find an "answer to offer to our perplexities and deadlocked problems."¹²⁷ But instead he was led to the following conclusion:

Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds: both India and Japan seem to be spiritually sicker, more estranged from a living faith than the West.¹²⁸

was devoted to a generous rearticulation of his philosophical position, it did include its own retort: "[Koestler] unfortunately seems not to be cognisant of the 'the stink' radiating from his own 'Zen.'" (58).

Koestler's views, as well as those of his critics, are much more complex than I am able to articulate here. For a cogent summary of *The Lotus and the Robot*, see the first half of Larry A. Fader's, "Arthur Koestler's Critique of D.T. Suzuki's Interpretation of Zen," *Eastern Buddhist* 8:2 (1980) 47-72. Bernard Faure also explores the "Suzuki/Koestler Controversy" in *Chan Insights and Oversights* 67-72. Both Fader and Faure take different sides in the debate—a testimony that the controversy still rages on.

¹²⁴ Arthur Koestler, "The Decline of the East," *Esquire* Dec. 1960: 157.

¹²⁵ Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 157.

¹²⁶ Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 157.

¹²⁷ Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 156.

¹²⁸ Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 157.

According to Koestler, the West should not be looking towards Asia for inspiration but rather draw from its own cultural resources. For the remainder of the epilogue, Koestler goes on to make an argument for European culture and its superior evolution. Compared with the Asia, whose philosophical systems remain stunted with concerns of "essential Being" and detachment toward human suffering, Europe has developed a form of rationality and conceptual knowledge that is best able to cope with contemporary problems. In addition, Europe culture has evolved through a process marked by "continuity-through-change and unity-in-diversity."¹²⁹ Asian cultures, in comparison, represented "continuity without change" and unity without diversity—civilizations which have remained relatively stagnant since the dates of their origin.¹³⁰

The argument behind Koestler's defensive account here is not new. His view takes part in a long tradition of European intellectual thought that denigrated Asian religions and cultures in order to boost its own worth.¹³¹ But it did spark an explosive reaction. Koestler's damning critique of Asian religions obviously did not sit well with Zen enthusiasts such as Alan Watts.¹³² Four months later, Watts' response made its way into *Esquire* ("Aftermath: The Decline of the East"). In it, Watts is quick to comment:

Comparisons of this kind between East and West have no constructive results whatsoever. They are merely self-satisfying to those who share Mr. Koestler's cultural provincialism, and to any educated Japanese or Hindu, simply insulting).¹³³

¹²⁹ Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 158.

¹³⁰ I should point out that Arthur Koestler writes as a European. He describes his own background: "born in Hungary, educated in Austria, the formative years spent in France, British by naturalization" (158). In this regard, he remained somewhat critical of the U.S., which he viewed as an example of a culture involved in "change without a deep awareness of continuity with the past" (Koestler, "The Decline of the East" 158).

¹³¹ G.W.F. Hegel is the most notable figure of this tradition. According to the philosopher's teleological framework, Asian religions—Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Lamaism—represented the middle diremptive stage of mankind's philosophical and religious development. According to Hegel, these religious movements emphasized a separation between the consciousness and reality. In Hegel's scheme, Christianity embodied the reconciliation of consciousness with the material realm—the consummation of Spirit. See his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988).

¹³² Koestler's book also drew criticisms from Christmas Humphreys and John Strachey.

¹³³ Alan W. Watts, "Aftermath: The Decline of the East," *Esquire* Apr. 1961: 156.

In response to Koestler's charge that guilt has led intellectuals to entertain the connection between Asia's material poverty and its spiritual superiority, Watts argues that Koestler has committed his own sort of fallacious reasoning. The "backwardness" of Asian countries in terms of technological and material progress does not "by any means imply either that there is a historical tradition of Western culture necessarily superior to the Eastern"¹³⁴ as Koestler would like to have it.

Watts then goes on to demonstrate the ways in which Asian philosophies do have something to contribute to the urgent problems of the modern world. Zen meditation (as well as Yoga), for example, overcomes the dangerous tendencies of Western rational thinking which encourages a distinction between consciousness and its objects: it allows one to see the world as one and work toward the restoration of ecological balance.

Taken together, Koestler's book and Watts' response can be viewed as a debate regarding the value of Asian religions to the West that was taking place at the turn of the decade. Read on a superficial level, Koestler and Watts seem to present opposing viewpoints on the matter. But scrutinized more closely, there appears to be a common thread that unites the two. As we have seen, Koestler portrays Asian religions as stagnant systems of thought based on his own experiences in Japan and India. Although Watts admirably counters the Koestler's major presumption—that Eastern religions have little to offer the West—he does not challenge the view that these religions have become impotent in their context of origin. This is most clear when the Zen advocate pronounces:

Considering [Eastern wisdom's] *sophisticated following in the West*, no old-fashioned denunciation of heathen doctrine will do.¹³⁵ [My emphasis]

¹³⁴ Watts, "Aftermath" 156.

¹³⁵ Watts, "Aftermath" 156.

As an example of this "sophisticated following," Watts cites biologist Joseph Needham who he declares is "as eminent in Western science as in Far-Eastern history."¹³⁶ According to Needham, when European thinking moved ahead of Chinese scientific theories in the seventeenth century:

Europe (or rather, by then, the world) was able to draw upon a mode of thinking very old, very wise, and not characteristically *European* at all.¹³⁷

Here, Watts (via Needham) attempts to establish the indebtedness of Western thought to the Asian theories.

In Watts' account, no mention is made of spiritual developments *in the East*. Asian systems of thought are rather portrayed as "very old, very wise," which unwittingly seems to support Koestler's view of their "continuity without change." It is true that, unlike Koestler, Watts had never traveled to Asia. However, he did have the opportunity to meet with Asian religious luminaries (such as Suzuki), and even these individuals are not ones to which he refers. Instead, Joseph Needham is represented as a contemporary innovator of Eastern thought. It requires historical skills such as Needham's to excavate the ancient source and defend its value. In this way, Watts and Koestler seem in strange agreement: Asian religions appear barren in their context of origin. What they disagree on is whether these religions are worth regeneration. According to Watts, they are. But such regeneration only seems possible in a new environment.

These various portrayals and accounts we have examined are all striking in their common assumptions. In each case, Zen in Japan is characterized by its decline—a decline caused by the spiritual stasis of the Japanese people. Americans could perhaps accept the view that Suzuki helped propagate—namely the extremely intimate relationship that exists between Zen and the Japanese people: "Zen is the expression of the Japanese character."¹³⁸ But this did not mean that they would remain Zen's primary cultivators; indeed, there were signs that its productivity was

¹³⁶ Watts, "Aftermath" 156.

¹³⁷ Watts, "Aftermath" 156.

¹³⁸ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1959) 346.

beginning to wane. Whether one believed that the vine has reached maturity and fails to bear fruit or that its stalk has become irreversibly corrupt by the disease of Western influence, the result were the same—Japan's claim to Zen was falling away. The spiritual species could only be saved if transplanted into new soil and cross-fertilized in just the right way. Such opinions would provide the justification for the transmission of Zen from the Orient to the Occident, from Asia to America, from Oriental Monks such as Suzuki to pupils such as Watts.¹³⁹

"As pupils we were not bad, but hopeless as teachers." Koestler's reference to Auden is more relevant than it would first appear. Indeed the pupil had lost his former (European) teacher—let go because of the student's disillusionment cultivated by a legacy of colonialism and imperialism. But the pupil did not grow up to become the hopeless teacher, as Koestler interpretation implies. Rather that hopelessness led the pupil to search for a new teacher that he unmistakably found in the East.

MIHOKO OKAMURA: FIGURING JAPANESE AMERICANS

If the Japanese were figured as a people neglectful of their spiritual heritage, how were Japanese Americans portrayed? Was there any difference between the two in the minds of a popular audience? If a generalized American consciousness did indeed distinguish between the

¹³⁹ China also entered into American Zen discourse in the most oblique way. Zen (or Ch'an) originated in China, and commentators such as Watts emphasized Zen's interconnectedness with Chinese philosophy. The same was true for Suzuki. Although he felt Zen reached its most paradigmatic expression in Japanese culture, he also recognized the significance of its Chinese roots. As William Sargeant relates:

The important point that Dr. Suzuki makes is that Zen is a peculiarly Chinese contribution to mysticism, and would probably never have existed if the non-speculative and practical Chinese mind had not evolved it. And though the cult has since died out in China, it still retains its Chinese flavor (46).

Hence, Americans' interest in Zen could also be viewed as a "preservative" not only of the rich spiritual heritage of Japan, but China as well. This seemed especially pertinent since China had gone the way of Communism.

During the 50s Cold War, America distinguished itself from Communist nations such as China by emphasizing its democratic impulse towards religious expression. If Zen had not "died out," it would have eventually been eradicated (as in the case of Tibetan Buddhism which was also popularly featured). In a paternalistic gesture, America would remember what China wished to forget.

two, what part would Japanese Americans come to play in the transplantation of Zen and in the Oriental Monk narrative as a whole?

Logically considered, Japanese Americans seemed to embody the prerequisite features of a people that would carry forth Suzuki's legacy. Culturally, the Japanese American had inherited a predisposition to Zen that Suzuki argued (and a Western popular audience believed) was deeply ingrained in the Japanese psyche. However, because of immigration to the U.S., s/he no longer lived under the formal strictures of Japanese society and culture. It appeared that s/he could enjoy a new freedom of cultural expression unavailable to those in Japan. His/her exposure to American culture would stimulate that expression. All in all, it would seem as if the Japanese American represented someone who could integrate the characteristics of Japanese spiritual depth and American initiative that was thought to be needed for Zen's healthy survival.

Indeed, Japanese Americans played an important role in Suzuki's 1950s sojourn to the West. In 1950 Suzuki had been given a temporary appointment at the Claremont Graduate School in Southern California. When the school could not come up with Suzuki's living expenses, it turned to Bishop Takahashi of the Los Angeles Shingon temple. Because of his successful appeal to Japanese American community, the funds were secured for his visit.¹⁴⁰

The Berkeley Buddhist Church in Berkeley—a temple that served local Japanese American Buddhists—was the site of Zen's early ferment. There, an "Advanced Study Class" would meet on Friday nights that would include:

...the Reverend Imamura and his wife Jane, Bob and Beverly Jackson, a high school teacher and his wife who had both studied with Senzaki in L.A. Alex Wayman, a graduate student in Tibetan at Berkeley, and Will Peterson, the printmaker and editor of the group's magazine, the *Berkeley Bussei*, and, as Gary Snyder remembers, "a number of really sharp Japanese-American Nisei and Sansei."¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Fields 196.

¹⁴¹ Fields 215.

At one meeting, Alan Watts was asked to give a talk.¹⁴² It was there that Watts would make Snyder's acquaintance.

But perhaps the Japanese American who would play the largest role in Zen's movement West would be Mihoko Okamura. Here she peeks out on the far-left side of the photo¹⁴³:



I have purposely chosen this photo to introduce Okamura because it is telling of her representational role in the narrative we are discussing. She is a helpful figure by which one can read the predicament of Japanese Americans in the larger scheme of American Buddhism.

From 1953 until Suzuki's death in 1965, Okamura served as the scholar's secretary and constant companion. Personal reflections offered by those who met with the Zen patriarch make note of her presence. She is often referred to as his "lovely assistant," characterized by an unparalleled patience and grace. By all accounts, Okamura is recognized as Suzuki's primary

¹⁴² Watts was also asked to speak at one the "large scale seminars" sponsored by the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) in 1952. The seminars were noteworthy in that represented an ecumenical approach to Buddhism. They included not only speakers from the BCA's Jodo Shin sect, but also Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri who spoke on Indian philosophy and Watts who spoke on Buddhism and psychology. See *Buddhist Churches of America: 75 year History, 1899-1972* (Volume 1) (Chicago: Nobart, Inc., 1974) 96-97, 239-240.

¹⁴³ This is a photo taken by Philip Haar at Diamond Sangha Kokoan, Honolulu, in 1964. I find it particularly revealing not only because of the positioning of Miss Okamura, but also of the other individuals as well. Suzuki is centrally located underneath the icon of the Buddha. On Suzuki's right are Tai Shimano and Robert Aitken. Shimano was a Japanese monk who trained under Shaku Soen, and later helped establish a Zen Buddhist community in New York (along with Hakuun Yasutani). Aitken became the roshi of the Diamond Sangha in Maui as well as a well-known popular writer on matters Zen. Together, they signify the extent of Suzuki's influence during his lifetime (in Japan and the U.S.). They also represent Zen's eventual institutionalization in America—from Hawaii to New York.

caretaker in his later years, looking after his administrative and personal needs and freeing the preoccupied scholar from these everyday concerns.

Okamura makes her most visible appearance in William Sargaent's 1957 *New Yorker* article on Suzuki. In an extensive section dedicated to her and her family, he describes Okamura in the following way:

Miss Okamura—who was born in California, speaks English as glibly as any American college girl, and in a very feminine way, is quite a shrewd thinker herself—dedicates her time to acting as [Suzuki's] secretary, editorial assistant, social hostess, and traveling companion, as well as his most devoted disciple.... Her ministrations might occasionally bring to mind those of a cultivated and lovely geisha attending a grizzled patriarch in the pages of *Lady Murasaki*, but any such resemblance is purely romantic. Miss Okamura, for all her almond eyes and porcelain complexion, is an American girl with ideas of her own, as well as a sound knowledge of typing and shorthand.¹⁴⁴

Sargaent's account is useful in understanding the dimensions of gender and race at play in her representation. It is obvious that Sargaent has a difficult time placing Okamura: she does not conform to the racial script. There certainly is a recognized desire to view her in Orientalist guise as the "cultivated and lovely geisha". This is what her appearance immediately brings to the author's mind. But Okamura's unaccented English throws him off, and Sargaent feels compelled to cite her national allegiance and identity. She is no subservient geisha, but "an American girl with ideas of her own." All in all, his declaration of Okamura as truly American seems somewhat forced and apologetic.¹⁴⁵

Sargaent's reference to Okamura's "sound knowledge of typing and shorthand" is also telling. That these skills are meant to demonstrate her initiative and skill attests to the limited role

¹⁴⁴ Sargaent 38.

¹⁴⁵ The internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War is most likely another factor that contributed to Sargaent's apologetic tone. More than 100,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were forced to evacuate their homes on the West Coast of the United States. The mass evacuation order was revoked in December 1944 and no evidence of espionage or sabotage by Japanese Americans was ever found.

It is unknown whether Okamura's family had been interned during the war. In any case, her family and her were probably not excluded from the extreme racial prejudice towards Japanese Americans during this period. See Chan 121-142; and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989) 379-405.

she is allowed to play as a woman¹⁴⁶ and as a Japanese American. She is allowed to serve to as helpmate, but can never be considered as Suzuki's intellectual partner and peer. These conditions extend to the role of her family as well:

Dr. Suzuki, who often remarks somewhat ruefully that he is so old he has vastly outlived nearly all his close friends, finds in the companionship of the family a warmth that relieves the austerity of his studies. Miss Okamura's father, Frank Okamura is a landscape gardener at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and her mother is a capable housekeeper and cook who is well up to making Dr. Suzuki's favorite Japanese dishes, including specially prepared turnips, *yu-dofu* (a cake made of bean curd), and *azuki* (red rice with beans).¹⁴⁷

Sargaent's inclusion of the Okamura family is meant to provide a humanizing touch to his portrayal of the dedicated scholar. But again, the part they play falls within the domestic realm. Together, the attentive Okamura, and her gardener father and culinary mother compose a background of sustenance in which Suzuki's scholarly role stands in relief. Japanese Americans (including men, such as Okamura's father) are only permitted a feminized role in the Zen scheme.

¹⁴⁶ Women played a significant role in cultivating a better understanding of Zen in the U.S. during the late 50s. I have already mentioned two: Ruth Fuller Sasaki and Nancy Wilson Ross. Sasaki tirelessly worked to translate Buddhist scriptures and maintained the subtemple she established in Daitokuji. Nancy Wilson Ross served as an important commentator on Buddhism and wrote for a variety of publications including *Vogue*. She also published the earliest English anthology on Zen (*The World of Zen: An East-West Anthology* (New York: Random House, 1960)).

Elizabeth Gray Vining, who had tutored Prince Akihito in the postwar years, chronicled her life with the Japanese royal family in the bestseller *Windows for a Crown Prince* (1952). The book became a bestseller in the U.S. In her follow-up, *Return to Japan* (1960), Gray details her encounter with tea ceremony and Zen meditation in the chapter, "The Search for the Ox." Suzuki served as her guide during this time.

Although each of these women helped build a cultural bridge between East and West, their contributions are seldom taken note of (except perhaps for Sasaki who worked more within institutional bounds). Like Japanese Americans, they were viewed as assisting the larger movement and were secondary figures at best.

¹⁴⁷ Sargaent 68.



For Sargaent, the distinction between different sects of Buddhism¹⁴⁸ delineates the Okamuras from Suzuki ("The Okamuras are *not* Zen Buddhists...), and is one way Sargaent precludes the Japanese American family from truly sharing in Suzuki's scholarly and spiritual interests. Rather, the author attributes the Okamura's concern for aged scholar to "the traditional Japanese reverence for age" and "the honor of being hosts to Japan's most noted philosophical thinker."¹⁴⁹ Any religious commitment the Okamura's might have is downgraded to motivations of race and shared national origin. Although they may live in the U.S., their lives still conform to traditional sensibilities and the hierarchical conventions of Japan. Despite their experiences in the U.S., they cannot help but remain a racial "throwback."

This throwback strategy served as one of two ways in which Japanese Americans were precluded from being recognized as making any significant contribution to the emerging discourse of American Zen in particular and American Buddhism in general. The second method portrayed Japanese Americans in the entirely opposite light—as an ethnic people who had become "too Americanized." In an article entitled, "Buddhism in America," *Time* reported on October 26, 1962:

Buddhism owed part of its current health to some shrewd borrowing from U.S. Christianity. To hold their largely Japanese-American membership—which yearly becomes more American and less Japanese—most congregations are turning from Japanese to English to their services, call themselves churches rather than temples to avoid identification with the

¹⁴⁸ The division of a religion into sects is based on a denominational model of religious affiliation developed in Europe and the U.S. This is not to say that Japanese Buddhists make no distinctions between different schools of Buddhism, but the separation does not allow one to consider the permeability and interchange that takes place between these different schools.

¹⁴⁹ Sargaent 86.

occult. Services are held on Sunday, although all days are holy to Buddhists. The Buddhist Church of Seattle sponsors a Boy Scout troop a day nursery, a Sunday school and a drum and bugle corps.¹⁵⁰

Here the reporter recognizes Japanese American Buddhists for their efforts to assimilate into mainstream American religious life. But the reporter also notes in the same article that "the most active members of a [Buddhist] congregation" are a "small group of Occidents [who] continue to find a unique serenity in Buddhism."¹⁵¹ The implication here is clear: Japanese American members seem more concerned with "fitting in," while Euro-Americans are the ones who express a genuine religious commitment.¹⁵²

In the representational scheme, Japanese American Buddhists were either seen as hopelessly tied to their Japanese roots or comically estranged from them.¹⁵³ The most prominent

¹⁵⁰ "Buddhism in America," *Time* 26 Oct. 1962: 60.

¹⁵¹ Sargaent 86.

¹⁵² See Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 85-92. Bhabha's articulation of the "mimic man" is most appropriate in discussing Japanese American attempts at assimilation. According to Bhabha, "[the mimic man] is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (87). In the case of Japanese American Buddhists, to be Americanized is *emphatically* not to be American; this is what is implied in the *Time* report's description. The Japanese American Buddhist becomes "*almost the same but not quite*" (89). S/he, in essence is a failed copy. As Bhabha goes on to point out what this really means in racial and cultural terms is that s/he is "*almost the same but not white*" (and Christian, I might add).

Bhabha's model of mimicry would serve as an excellent way to unearth and evaluate the strategies of Japanese American Buddhists, whose religious presentation appear to be simply a flawed mimesis. As the theorist insightfully uncovers, a more ambivalent reading is certainly called for.

¹⁵³ An interesting example of the throwback strategy can be found in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. In a scene with Japhy, narrator Ray Smith describes:

Across the street was the new Buddhist temple some young Chamber of Commerce Chinatown Chinese were trying to build, by themselves, one night I'd come by there and, drunk, pitched in with them with a wheelbarrow hauling sand from outside in, they were young Sinclair Lewis idealistic forward-looking kids who lived in nice homes but put on jeans to come midwest town some midwest kids with a bright-faced Richard Nixon leader, the prairie all around. Here in the heart of the tremendously sophisticated little city called San Francisco was the church of Buddha. Strangely Japhy wasn't interested in the Buddhism of San Francisco Chinatown because it was traditional Buddhism, not the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he loved—but I was trying to make him see that everything was the same (113).

Although Ray's description emphasizes the youths' assimilated nature and appearance, their faith is seen as "traditional" in Japhy's eyes. However, this paradox is easily overcome. For Japhy, these Chinese-Americans have not escaped their racial past. Although these Asian Americans have re clothed and redefined their religious faith in American terms, their interest and enthusiasm remain essentially Chinese.

role they are allowed to play in the history of Buddhism's development in the U.S. is a fairly minor one. Like Mihoko Okamura, Japanese Americans are allowed to serve as able caretakers providing a comfortable environment for more authentic Buddhist representatives from Asia. Indeed, Okamura helps figure the marginal (often invisible), yet alimentary role that Asian Americans have come to play in shaping the discourse on Asian religions in the U.S. If recognized in popular discourse, they are never seen as major contributors and are often exoticized. In the narrative of the Oriental Monk, the character of the Japanese American will always be relegated to the supporting cast *if* she appears at all.¹⁵⁴

THE RECURSIVE MOLD

Now it happens that in this country (Japan)...[t]o make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken (simultaneously quite essential and quite insignificant), it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text.

Roland Barthes, Empire of Signs

In his dedication to Suzuki entitled, "The 'Mind-less' Scholar," Alan Watts remarks: "Perhaps the real spirit of Suzuki could never be caught from his writings alone, one had to know the man."¹⁵⁵ Watts seems to suggest that experiencing Suzuki in his full personhood communicated as much, if not more than his writings ever could. In many ways, Suzuki's body—his demeanor, gestures, personality, and appearance—would comprise his most definitive text. In the eyes of those who came to know him as well as of those who never did, Suzuki's

¹⁵⁴ Okamura did commit to paper an account of her close relationship with Suzuki ("Wondrous Activity," *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*, ed. Masao Abe (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) 160-172.) More than reminiscence, it reveals dimensions of Suzuki's personality often unknown to more authoritative commentators and frames these slices in Okamura's own Buddhist perspective.

¹⁵⁵ Watts, "The 'Mind-less' Scholar," *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*, ed. Masao Abe (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) 192. Earlier in the essay, Watts professes that he "never knew [Suzuki] really intimately," but that he appreciated "[Suzuki's] intellectual and spiritual mood or atmosphere." This raises the question how exactly did Watts "know" Suzuki? And how did a more personal connection capture his "real spirit" more adequately?

image would serve as a precious icon in Zen Buddhism's Western pantheon. Hagiographically, it would help recall the great sage who in his firm devotion traveled beyond his native land to share openly the wisdom of his faith.

Outside that pantheon—in the American religious and cultural world at large—the icon would be stripped of its individuality, i.e., Suzuki's name would be known less and less in this realm. What would remain are the iconographic remnants—his shaved head, his small eyes and jutting eyebrows, the unassuming repose of his expression, his pre-dated ware, his general orientalness. Suzuki's image would replenish and reconstitute the more generalized icon of the Oriental Monk—the harsh austerity replaced by a new openness and approachability.

As Barthes also reminds us, icons and myths often go hand in hand. The icon is often "at the disposal" of the myth, although the icon itself can take on mythic proportions. In the case of the icon of the Oriental Monk, both are the case. The Oriental Monk participates in the myth of the spiritual East; the figure embodies that spirituality, acts as its most cherished sign. It is mythic in the sense that is "is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter."¹⁵⁶

The "social usage" of the myth of the East on the surface is quite evident. As in the case of Alan Watts and Jack Kerouac, its use lay in its power to entice and inspire. For Arthur Koestler, it served as derisive object. Myth, by its very name, allows such exposure. But to go deeper and examine the conditions of its possibility—the political valence of its elements—reveals its more significant operation.

By examining Suzuki and Zen in the popular context of the late 50s I have tried to do just that. The myth of the East, as I argue throughout, has taken on a particular narratological form in the last half a century. In many ways, the myth has become so condensed that it no longer needs to be told; the icon of the Oriental Monk is sufficient. Examining its semiological form, the

¹⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 109.

narrative the icon encapsulates depends on several figures to consolidate its meaning—the wise Asian sage, his Anglo pupil, and the Asian masses that fail to appreciate the value of their inherited tradition. From the racial and gender specificity of these "characters," one is able to discern the ideological impetus or the underlying "social usage" of the myth.

Put more concretely, the tale of the Oriental Monk—who travels West in search of someone to carry on his spiritual legacy and finds that student in a feisty, yet committed white (male) pupil—helped legitimate a new ideological center for Zen. This center was not only racially, but also geopolitically informed. Racially, it authorized the transfer of Zen spirituality from Asian master to white pupil. Geopolitically, it specified the U.S. as its new spiritual center. The narrative also served to fortify a "modernized American cultural patriarchy" as it aestheticized Japan, then commodified and stylistically appropriated its religious and racial difference in the name of democratic choice and freedom.

It is ironic that Suzuki's image would become the most powerful of signs—pleasurably compelling in its continual recollection. Barthes once likened "Japan," to an "empire of signs," but of signs that were empty.¹⁵⁷ In the Westerner's play with the "irreducible differences" (that Suzuki's foreignness provides), Americans cannot help but fill this empty figure with meaning, to claim ownership over its contents, and ultimately to diffuse its most productive challenge.

¹⁵⁷ Barthes 108.



HYPERREAL SAMADHI | *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*

Those Americans seeking an "alternative spirituality" in the 1990s have a plethora of charismatic leaders from which to choose. Among the most popular to arrive on the scene is "the Indian-born endocrinologist-turned-guru."¹ Deepak Chopra, whose philosophy is based on a "simplified Hinduism that [is] fascinating to a nation of seekers."²

If media coverage is any measure, Chopra has certainly gained popular recognition: three *New York Times* bestsellers, three PBS specials, an appearance on *Oprah*, and over fifty articles in popular magazines, including *Time*, *Psychology Today*, and *Fortune*. One can undoubtedly attribute Chopra's success to the foreign dimensions of his person and approach. Despite an Orientalist advantage, a cloud of suspicion looms over his mystical empire. *Newsweek* (October 20, 1997) disrupted Chopra's glistening aura in its cover story: "Spirituality for Sale." The report critically questioned the underlying motivations of the New Age sensation ("Would you buy a used mantra from this man?"), and likened Chopra to a "snake-oil salesman." If Deepak Chopra can be understood as an Oriental Monk for the 1990s, what can account for the skeptical view?

The answer can perhaps be understood if we travel two decades back and examine the representational phenomenon of Chopra's enigmatic teacher, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Mahesh is probably best known as the personal guru to the Beatles. The world famous pop

¹ John Leland and Carla Power, "Deepak's Instant Karma." *Newsweek* 20 Oct. 1997: 53.

² David Van Biema, "Emperor of the Soul," *Time* 24 June 1996: 64-8.

group, especially member George Harrison, found spiritual inspiration from the unconventional yogi, whose simple meditative technique and hopeful outlook appealed to the busy singers. Transcendental Meditation (or TM as it is popularly referred), a practice derived from the Hindu tradition, which Mahesh refined through 13 years of ascetic practice, refocuses the practitioner's mind on "pure being," and taps into his/her wellspring of "creative intelligence."³ Perhaps most attractive is the fact that TM requires only 40 minutes of one's day and can be practiced in virtually any location.

The pop singers first met the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in London in 1966. By that time, Mahesh had already made seven trips around the globe, established 38 centers, and amassed over 100,000 followers since his announcement to bring peace to the world in 1957.⁴ Despite these impressive achievements, he and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement did not capture widespread American interest until the late 1960s when his name became associated with famous musicians and film personalities. By the end of 1967, *The New York Times Magazine* declared him, "The Chief Guru of the Western World," and in 1968, *Life* magazine announced, "The Year of the Guru." Transcendental Meditation, as an alternative to a drug-induced high, had become a full-fledged phenomenon in the U.S., especially among the nation's youth.

In the late 1960s, the Maharishi's philosophy seemed to appeal to a generation that had become increasingly disillusioned with traditional forms of religious belief and practice. Henry Idema, III self-reflects in *Before Our Time: A Theory of the Sixties*:

³ Although Mahesh's practice and philosophy was greatly informed by Hinduism, he continually stressed that TM did not require its adherents to shift their spiritual beliefs; it was not a religion. Many of his followers found the technique attractive for just this reason. Despite this self-definition, pieces on the guru continued to be published under the "Religion" section of periodicals and newspapers. The American legal system would later consolidate this view; in 1976, both religious fundamentalists and civil libertarians brought about a federal suit challenging the constitutionality of transcendental meditation classes being taught in New Jersey schools. A federal district court judge in Newark subsequently barred the teaching of such classes, designating TM as a religious practice whose instruction violated the doctrine of the separation of church and state.

⁴ Barry Lefferts, "Chief Guru of the Western World," *New York Times Magazine* 17 Dec. 1967: 44-5, 48, 50, 52, 54, 57-8, statistic from 45.

In reaction to dry dogmatism, the Sixties Generation cried out, "The inner world is worth nurturing!" Indeed, many of us became fascinated with the inner world and immersed ourselves in emotionality and spirituality. For some, psychology became the rage, for others, Eastern religions (e.g., Transcendental Meditation or the Hari Krishna and Vendantist movements); for yet others, drugs and sex filled the bill. All those trends became popular in the Sixties because they focused on the inner world, the inner self that was home to spirit and feeling, the world of mystery and fantasy, the world of symbol, myth, and perhaps even magic.⁵

As Americans faced rapidly changing times and increasing turmoil brought on by Civil Rights legislation and the Vietnam War, the Maharishi offered a solution to problems that, to some, seemed insurmountable at the time. With unfettered ease and joyful confidence, he publicly asserted that "world peace would come if he could spread his teachings."⁶ These teachings, the Science of Creative Intelligence, along with its practical component, Transcendental Meditation, focused on the inner world of the individual. Indeed, the "bliss consciousness" and "illuminating expansion of the mind" the Maharishi promised made his spiritual alternative extremely compelling, if not magical.

Mahesh enjoyed spectacular attention by the American media from the autumn of 1967 to the spring of 1968. Whereas the popular audiences only became familiar with D.T. Suzuki through black and white images, their encounters with the Maharishi took place through a colorful lens reflective of the psychedelic style of the time. This vibrancy made for a spectacular presentation and reinforced long-embedded notions of a spiritual, exoticized, and extravagant India.

However, Mahesh's endeavor and image fell prey to an ambivalent press. Perhaps the guru was a genuine spiritual revolutionary, or perhaps, he was simply a clever con man. In the following chapter, I will discuss the two distinct attitudes towards the Maharishi expressed in popular press reports of the late 1960s. Although a few pieces expressed a sincere interest in the Maharishi and his movement and reverently imbued the leader with spiritual import,

⁵ Henry Idema, III, *Before Our Time: A Theory of the Sixties* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1996) 118.

⁶ "Yogi Speaks Here on Peace Teachings," *New York Times* 20 Jan. 1968: 14.

the majority of articles often maintained, through means of irony and satire, a more critical stance.

Despite these varying views, media portrayals had one thing in common. Both types of commentators—critical and reverent—prescribed to Orientalist notions to argue their case. The icon of the Oriental Monk seemed stubbornly fixed within the American imagination, and continued to serve as measure and model. Within its racialized scheme, Mahesh was viewed as either woefully lacking or in utter conformity. In either instance, the yogi's image as conceived by the late-60s American popular press could not escape these stereotypical restraints and would serve as a convenient screen on which to project larger debates over cultural authority.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A small news item appeared in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* on December 12, 1966: "Beatle Tells Preference For Religions of India." The obscure column reported that George Harrison "believed much more in religions of India than in anything he ever learned from Christianity."⁷ Although undeveloped at the time, this interest would lead Harrison and his fellow Beatles to seek out the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Indian founder of the Spiritual Generation Movement and the proponent of Transcendental Meditation, who they would eventually meet in the winter of 1967.

The meeting took place in London, and the singing group would then join Mahesh on a five-day retreat in Bangor Wales (a scheduled stop on the Maharishi's eighth tour around the world). The encounter was auspicious for both parties. The Beatles apparently found a new spiritual guide, who offered consolation during a very difficult period of their lives (the death of their long-time manager, Brian Epstein⁸). As for Mahesh, the pop group represented not

⁷ "Beatle Tells Preference for Religions of India," *New York Times* 12 Dec. 1966: 57.

⁸ Brian Epstein died during the retreat. Mahesh was the one who broke the news to the Beatles.

only new adherents, but also unprecedented public exposure for his movement's mission to spiritually regenerate the world.

As the Beatles made plans to join the Maharishi in Rishikesh, India, the news media covered the spiritual alliance with increasing fervor. *Time* magazine featured the first image of Mahesh to appear in the popular press. In the "Religion" pages of its October 20, 1967 issue, the American public caught a glimpse of the guru who had so enthralled the Beatles. The photo offers a humble portrait of the Maharishi, in both gesture (with one hand rested gently on his forehead, and another clasping a bouquet of flowers) and presentation (the photo's black-and-white medium).



Like the press images of Suzuki, the unassuming representation seemed befitting of a spiritual luminary from the East in all his ascetic and mystical promise. However, any mystique the image itself might evoke is offset by the article's caption: "How to succeed spiritually without really trying." The simple legend, paradoxically phrased, calls into question the Maharishi's authority. The piece further dismisses Mahesh by generically identifying him as, "The Guru."

The Maharishi would be featured in four full-length articles,⁹ visually supplemented with countless photos. Despite the representational abundance, the tone of most of these

⁹ A fifth full-length article appeared in *Ebony*, a periodical targeted to a Black American audience. I chose not to include this article because it speaks to a particular demographic with specific assumptions and issues and feel that relationship between Asian religions and Blacks in the U.S. is deserving of its own study. See Era Bell Thompson, "Meditation Can Solve Race Problem," *Ebony* 1 May 1968: 78-80, 82-4, 86-8.

reports (e.g., *The New York Times Magazine*, *Saturday Evening Post*) would be similarly posed, as they offered skeptical, if not critical assessments of Mahesh and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement. (Only one, *Look's* cover feature, would be exceptionally deferential.)

The suspicion lobbed at Mahesh was undoubtedly a residual from Cold War diplomatic relations between the U.S. and a newly independent India. India's position of non-alignment with not only Communist China, but also the democratic U.S. fostered Americans' ambivalent feelings towards the Asian nation. Harold R. Isaacs' survey of Americans' views of India and China conducted from 1953-1957 reflects this growing hostility. As Isaacs reports, the majority of those surveyed (54 percent) expressed negative views about Indians. He further comments:

The antipathy was directed most particularly...toward Indians in the same professional classes as these Americans [surveyed], and with but few exceptions these were Indians encountered by these Americans during the last ten years, the first decade of Indian independence.¹⁰

According to Isaacs, the Americans surveyed, who primarily encountered Indians abroad in diplomatic and intellectual circles, found their South Asian acquaintances abrasive.¹¹ "Indian high moral sanctimony, Nehru-style, was running not only into American anti-Communist self-righteousness, Truman-Acheson style, but American high moral sanctimony."¹²

Although Mahesh appeared nearly a decade after Isaacs' survey, the India-Pakistan war of 1965 rekindled these views, as American policy makers gave up much hope "of ever creating any durable anti-Communist partnerships with countries as durably hostile to each

¹⁰ Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1958/1990) 381-2.

¹¹ Isaacs does not claim his survey as statistically representative of a general American audience. Rather, the 181 interviewees were "representative examples of American leadership types, products of American education, religion, and politics." Close to 47% of the survey group had traveled to India—obviously not reflective of the Americans as a whole.

¹² Isaacs xxxvii.

other as India and Pakistan."¹³ In addition, the Immigration Act of the same year opened the doors to a new wave of Asian immigration, which included an unprecedented number of South Asians. As Sucheng Chan and others note: "Indian immigrants have been an especially elite group: doctors, scientists, engineers, and increasingly, businessmen."¹⁴ The extent to which Americans' domestic encounters with South Asians replicated their experience with Indians abroad could have also contributed to the overall skeptical view of Mahesh.

Although this generalized view of Indians is significant, the sentiments American held about the Maharishi, an Indian sage, had Orientalist roots that were much deeper and distinct, as I will later discuss. In addition, Americans' attitudes towards the guru were heavily influenced by the medium of television. Mahesh, interviewed on both Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* and the morning program, *Today*, was perhaps the first Indian personality to receive such immediate widespread media attention.

In this section, I will analyze the images that were a primary component of photojournalistic reports about Mahesh in order to offer a general view of his representation. Magazine photos offer particularly good insight into the Maharishi's media appeal for two reasons. First of all, like television (the dominant medium at the time), they furnish a wide range of symbolic cues in condensed form that print descriptions cannot readily capture, e.g., the facial expression of the Maharishi in a meditative pose. Indeed, pictures seem to rely on a "language" all their own.¹⁵ As Joshua Meyrowitz elaborates, visual media function

¹³ Isaacs xxxviii.

¹⁴ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans, An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991) 151. Ronald Takaki also observes:

Of all Asian American groups, Asian Indians have the lowest percentage employed in services (8 percent) and the highest percentage employed as managers and professions (47 percent). They include 25,000 physicians and dentists in practice, 40,000 engineers, 20,000 scientists with Ph.D.'s, 2,000 professionals in areas like law and finance.

See *Strangers from a Different Shore, A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989) 446.

¹⁵ Theorists who engage with visual media, such as Roland Barthes and Joshua Meyrowitz, metaphorically represent television and photographs as possessing a "language" or meaning system distinct from written forms of discourse. For both Barthes and Meyrowitz, the written word functions as a critical apparatus that communicates an intentional, often abstract point of view, while visual images reveal more expressive

according to "the expressive-presentational-analogic form of gesture, feeling, and experience."¹⁶ Unlike written description and argument, the expressive messages that visual representations relay are difficult to feign. As a result, audiences often consider the visual image of a person as a more accurate reflection of that person's character than anything s/he may say or write. In portrayals of Mahesh, magazine readers probably approached photos of the guru as less mediated, i.e., more authentic, representations than the carefully constructed image gleaned from his words or the words of his commentators.¹⁷ Secondly, for an audience more televisually inclined, magazine images presented a convenient, if not compelling view of the subject matter at hand.¹⁸ They were easily digested as the reader flipped through the pages, scanning photo and caption. Even if the article remained unread, the images still left an impression.

content that is contextually dependent and difficult to manipulate. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) esp. 8-9; and Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) esp. 107-9.

¹⁶ Meyrowitz 109.

¹⁷ The rising epistemological status of the visual image with the emergence of new media (photography, film, and television) is noteworthy here. The commonplace saying, "A photograph does not lie," attests to the often-uncontested status of the image. Despite this popular view, theorists often point out how these representations are rhetorically constructed and viewed (as I would also like to emphasize). On the press end, an image is something that can be as carefully crafted as the written word (as the presidency of Ronald Reagan or the videotape of the Rodney King beating attests). And such manipulation often achieves its effect on its intended audience who "read" the image through a socially informed frame of reference (i.e., Barthes' "studium," or Judith Butler's "field of visibility"). Inevitably, the power and status that visual images enjoy intimately depend on the covert nature of such rhetorical operations. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27-8; and Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993) 15-22.

¹⁸ Although it is true that television represented the dominant media in the 1960s (to which I refer here), pictorial magazines had developed a predisposition towards the visual decades earlier.

If a person wanted a graphic and visual depiction of an important happening or event, he went to a magazine to find it. For example, in the forties, the nation saw the first pictures of its war dead when *Life* magazine published a full page black and white photo of American G.I.'s laying crumpled on the beach of some far-off Pacific Island. And if you wanted in-depth and personal reportage, again it was the mass magazine you looked toward.

As a "window on the world before television," picture magazines provided an important source of information. See Don R. Pember, *Mass Media in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1981) quotations from 91, 46. See also the chapter, "Expansion by Compression," in Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1964) 322-61.

Unlike television, magazine's articles provided information that broadcast representations did not.¹⁹ Television allowed a national viewing audience to experience Mahesh "first hand"—his gestures, voice, and overall presentation, but only within the limited environment of the interview setting. In contrast, magazine photos "rounded out" Mahesh's image by capturing his behavior in a wide variety of settings (e.g., in Germany or at his ashram in Rishikesh). In addition, print media offerings were also able to develop and present a specific stance towards Mahesh and his movement that television commentators could not. The television interviewer occupied the same space as Mahesh at the time of broadcast and therefore was not at liberty to offer extensive commentary on his guest. However, magazine reporters enjoyed the opportunity to critically reflect upon their experience and share these impressions with their audience. Although this was largely accomplished within the written account, such impressions were visually transmitted through the selective use and placement of the images that accompanied the piece. These photographs, far from neutral representations, enacted their own visually condensed commentary that was most accessible to a popular audience, as well as reflective of their views.

¹⁹ Here, I set up a dichotomy between the mediums of television and print. However, the two are much more mutually defined. As Meyrowitz elaborates, different mediums often operate in concert. As television emerged as the dominant form of mass communication, print media "emulate[d] the type and form of information that television provide[d]." Meyrowitz asserts that the immediacy of television established a "presumption of intimacy," on which print journalism capitalized. He notes:

Ironically, in *following* electronic media's pursuit of intimacy, print media often appear to *lead*. For the more private (and less regulated) nature of print forums allows books and magazines to reveal deeper back region behaviors.

"Back region behaviors" are spontaneous, informal, and often betray the underlying feelings and emotions of the social actors involved. They represent more "private" moments of an individual's life. Television interviews with Mahesh, in which his everyday life and personal background were not discussed, fueled interest in such details that, at the time, magazines provided. Inversely, magazine and newspaper reports prompted an interest in the more immediate experience of the guru's "onstage" television appearance. See Meyrowitz, quotation from 177.

"Chief Guru of the Western World"

On December 17, 1967, the first feature-length article on the Maharishi would appear. A larger-than-life, color head shot of the Maharishi graced the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, with the accompanying headline, "Chief Guru of the West: The secret of life is the basis of life."

The New York Times Magazine



Although this photo enveloped Mahesh in a mystical aura, the images that accompanied the article cast him in a light that was much more mundane. Three images command the opening pages of the article. The main full-length shot of Mahesh features him speaking on the phone and represents a study in contrasts. This photo alone might seem benign, almost amusing, as the anciently garbed guru interacts with a modern communications technology.²⁰ But the photos, which flank this image, give it another spin. On the left of Mahesh's picture is a shot of Mahesh and followers strolling through an exhibition hall filled with posters bearing his image and words. On the right, a half-page photo features a group of the Maharishi's German followers meditating in Bremen.

²⁰ Recall D.T. Suzuki wearing a green editor's visor, pecking away at the typewriter.



Taken together, the images depict Mahesh, not as a humble religious figure struggling in isolation to articulate an underappreciated Asian spiritual tradition, but as a spiritual powerbroker with which to be reckoned. The exhibition hall shot demonstrates the movement's proactive strategy to attract new members. Although the American reader most likely cannot read the poster board slogans written in German, s/he gets the impression that Mahesh is not merely interested in expounding his spiritual outlook to a Western audience, but in propagating his views. The words—in a Western language, but one that is foreign to American English speakers—also lend a cosmopolitan dimension to the movement. Mahesh seems to rely heavily on publicity (with its focus on slogans and image), rather than on the extended argument of the published text, to disseminate his spiritual knowledge.²¹ By deploying such methods, he appears as a master of marketing, i.e., one who illegitimately circumvents the acceptable ways religious movements gain recognition in the West. In these various ways, the exhibition hall shot offers a profane impression of a supposedly sacred figure and ultimately works to degrade Mahesh's spiritual image.

The exhibition hall shot is discomfiting for another reason. In a straightforward portrait of Mahesh as Oriental Monk figure, the viewer/reader remains anonymous and invisible as s/he gazes at the image. The exhibition hall highlights the act of viewing, as

²¹ Here, I should stress that I am talking about the view of the popular media. Mahesh did write, *The Science of Being and Art of Living* (1963), as well as *On the Bhagavad-Gita. A New Translation and Commentary, Chapters 1-6* (1967), before this time. Popular commentators rarely mention these works.

objects, artifacts, and images are laid out for visual pleasure. This voyeuristic dimension is made present in the photo, and a source of power revealed. Perhaps most disturbing, is the viewer/reader's realization that Mahesh is aware of this source of power, which he effectively exploits. He capitalizes on a hidden privilege and private indulgence. Mahesh, as Oriental Monk, is no longer at the representational beck and call of a Western audience: they are not the ones who visually and spiritually "take in" his image at will, but rather are the ones who have been "taken in."

The photo of the German meditators, which flanks the right side of Mahesh's image, reinforces this sense. Although the contemplative group displays the Maharishi's technique at work, it also attests to the power of the movement's attraction. To the magazine's audience, the four "followers" in the photo's foreground look like any Westerner (Anglos neatly garbed in professional attire). The image creates a mood of both fascination and threat. On the one hand, it evokes curiosity in the viewer/reader who identifies with the meditators through appearance and dress ("If these individuals practice the technique, there must be something to the Maharishi and his movement"). On the other hand, the image constitutes a threat for the viewer/reader, who may already be wary not only of foreign spiritual influence, but the seemingly shrewd way in which it is marketed ("If these individuals are so easily duped, how many others will also be spiritually swindled?").

I would argue that the exhibition hall shot primes the *New York Times'* audience for this latter interpretation. If the photos are "read" from left to right in a conventional manner, the publicity image serves as the lens through which the rest of the article's images are viewed. This includes the primary image of the Maharishi on the phone. Revisiting the photo, one now sees it in a different rhetorical light. As previously mentioned, the image is a study in contrasts, but it can no longer be viewed in such a pleasantly amusing fashion. Mahesh is portrayed as an Eastern religious figure, who is suspiciously adept in the ways of the modern West. The manner in which Mahesh presents himself—ancient, modest, and mysteriously foreign—helps to establish his authenticity as a spiritual figure in the eyes of a

Western audience. However, the slogans, publicity images, and indeed, the exhibition hall itself, symbolically undermine this authenticity. The *New York Times Magazine* effectively corrupts (or at least calls into question) Mahesh's image by visually portraying him as at once, too profane (exhibition hall) and too powerful (white Western followers).

The final image of the article appears several pages later. In it, the Maharishi poses with George Harrison and Paul McCartney in Falsterbo, Sweden. The two Beatles carry large white mums. Several onlookers also crowd the photo.



Amidst celebrity, Mahesh not only appears at ease, but also seems to enjoy the media attention. He is comfortable with his own image (as his stroll through the exhibition hall confirms) and not afraid to deploy its power. Again, the magazine calls into question the guru's motivations and methods through a selective use of images. These images enact their own argument, their own rhetorical commentary, which the viewer/reader can instantaneously process, with far greater economy than words.

Look's Reverential Portrait

In January 1968, less than a month after the *New York Times Magazine* article appeared, the Maharishi packed the Felt Forum in the newly built Madison Square Garden in

New York City.²² During his visit, he also met with United Nations Secretary, General Thant, to discuss ways of aiding "permanent peace."²³ Shortly after, *Look* magazine featured the guru on their cover, with the headline: "AND NOW—MEDITATION HITS THE CAMPUS: How Hindu monk Maharishi turns the students on without drugs."



Cover image of Mahesh superimposed with "Meditators at Yale." (*Look*, February 6, 1968)

The magazine features two articles on the Maharishi phenomenon. The first piece, "A Visit with India's High-Powered New Prophet," by Paul Horn is accompanied by an elaborate photo spread—eleven images of Mahesh and his ashram in Rishikesh, India.²⁴ In the second feature, "The Non-Drug Turn-On Hits Campus," William Hedgepeth reports on student meditators at UC Berkeley and UCLA with seven photos throughout.²⁵

While *The New York Times Magazine* article adopts a critical posture towards Mahesh, *Look* resacralized his image. In "India's High-Powered New Prophet," American jazz musician, Paul Horn, traces the development of Transcendental Meditation and explains the philosophy behind it. The photos and their captions provide a separate text, in which Horn

²² See "Yogi Speaks Here on Peace Teachings," *New York Times* 20 Jan. 1968: 14; "3,6000 Hear Guru Urge Meditation," *New York Times* 22 Jan. 1968: 24; and "Preacher of Peace," *New York Times* 22 Jan. 1968: 24.

²³ See "Yogi Confers With Thant—To Aid 'Permanent Peace,'" *New York Time* 21 Jan. 1968: 60.

²⁴ Paul Horn, "A Visit With India's High-Powered New Prophet," *Look* 6 Feb. 1968: 64-6

²⁵ William Hedgepeth, "The Non-Drug Turn-On Hits Campus: Student Meditators Tune in to Maharishi," *Look* 6 Feb. 1968: 68, 70-2, 73-6, 78.

narrates his visit with Mahesh "on the Ganges." The primary photo of the yogi (below) is minimalist in nature and features a wind-swept, contemplative Maharishi stoically posed.



On the two-page opening spread, this image is supplemented by a host of other photos, mostly of Mahesh among the Indian people. If one looks carefully, a Westerner or two—distinguishable by either hairstyle or dress—can be seen. However, it is the South Asians who provide the main backdrop for the guru's activities.



Such images portray Mahesh as intimately connected with the Indian people.²⁶ Viewing the Maharishi ministering to the native population caters to a paternalistic vision shared by *Look's* western audience: a spiritual leader in tune with the needs of the "most oppressed."

²⁶ This view was not commonly held by Western reporters, who painted Mahesh as more concerned with pleasing his Western audience than in the plight of the native population.

India's third world population.²⁷ Hence, these photos lend a human dimension and spiritual legitimacy to Mahesh's mission.

Such legitimacy is also supplied by another image in the photo spread: a portrait of the Maharishi's own spiritual teacher, Guru Dev. In the article, Guru Dev, is described as "a spiritual leader of the Hindus,"²⁸ who "revived the meditation technique Maharishi is now spreading."²⁹ The image is not simply of the portrait, but of Dr. R.C. Verma painting the likeness of Dev. According to Horn, Verma "supplies portraits of Dev to meditation centers in 50 countries."³⁰



This complex image is significant for two reasons. First of all, it places Mahesh within a spiritual lineage of a recognized religious tradition (Hinduism). Secondly, the fact that the paintings are made for meditation centers relativizes the Maharishi's own image, i.e., takes the focus away from his image. This may seem contrary to the development of Mahesh's own iconic status as an Oriental Monk. But given the "bad press" of previous articles, this referential nod towards Guru Dev, in fact, rehabilitates Mahesh's image.

This favorable view is also evident elsewhere. In yet another image, the Maharishi is shown with camera in hand, taking snapshots. This picture depicts the guru once again engaged with modern technology, but unlike the *New York Times Magazine's* portrayal, this

²⁷ The popular perception of India as a "third world" country will be discussed in the following section.

²⁸ Horn 66.

²⁹ Horn 65.

³⁰ Horn 65.

representation commands a lighter interpretation. Amidst the photos of Mahesh in his "natural surroundings" in India, the camera appears as an anomaly, an amusement. And if there is any doubt to this read, the caption³¹ confirms it:



"Maharishi's message is that men are born to enjoy. He's a superb host, and loved to escort us on tours around India so we could take pictures. Sometimes, he borrowed cameras to take pictures himself."

Mahesh's use of the camera is framed as a moment of unadulterated enjoyment. He seems to approach the device as an amusing novelty. Unlike the image of him on the phone where modern technology is shrewdly employed for the purposes of self-promotion, this photo recreates a disjunction between the Indian sage and Western invention that is more comfortable for a Western audience. Image and text also lend the Maharishi's image a child-like quality: the guru is enthralled with a "new toy," in which he seems to delight.

The opening spread, for the most part, achieves the solemnity befitting of a spiritual leader. The somber nature of its images demands the viewer/reader to take serious the Maharishi and his movement. The photo of the Mahesh with camera is perhaps the exception. But even this somewhat amusing shot is clearly situated within the realm of the yogi's philosophy: *[M]en are born to enjoy*. Likewise, the three photos, which appear on the following page, are meant to capture the essence of this philosophy.

³¹ Horn 64.



In all three, Mahesh's pleasant expression is the focus. Indeed, the spiritual leader becomes the embodiment of his teachings. Surrounded by Indians in his native setting, the Maharishi's smile does not represent an indulgent decadence (as it will come to symbolize in later articles), but rather the non-attachment of a wise man.

In the second article of the same issue, "The Non-Drug Turn-On Hits Campus: Student meditators tune in to Maharishi," Mahesh's joyful face is superimposed on a group of meditators at Yale. His larger-than-life image looks down upon a group of well-scrubbed co-eds with what can be read as almost a look of approval.



Although the piece does feature a photo of Maharishi spokesperson, Jerry Jarvis (who, dressed in coat and tie, looks like a college professor), the majority of images depict student meditators.



Similar to the article's main photo, each student is fairly clean-cut and seemingly happy and at ease. These images reflect the reporter's generally positive stance toward the Student International Meditation Society (SIMS) and speak favorably of Mahesh's influence. The portrayal of the student followers as respectful, drug-free individuals persuasively makes a case for Mahesh, as a general audience contrasts these with the stereotypical image of the disobedient, disheveled, and drugged out youth of their time.³²

Look magazine's coverage of both the Maharishi in Rishikesh and the SIMS in California cast Mahesh in a favorable light. The images selected not only contribute to a positive stance towards the Spiritual Regeneration Movement, but also imbue its chief mystic with authority and grace. I would argue that the persuasive force of the visuals not only is achieved by the way they are arranged within the separate articles, but also the manner in which they are collectively divided. Images of Mahesh are sequestered to Paul Horn's visit to Rishikesh, which locates the spiritual figurehead squarely in India. Images of Western adherents occupy a separate textual and geographic domain. Even the one image that connects the two (the Maharishi and meditators at Yale) relies on two distinct images that are superimposed.

When one compares this visual separation of spheres (East and West) with the images from the *New York Times Magazine* article, in which Mahesh mingles effortlessly in a Western setting, the implication is subtle, yet clear. The Maharishi is awarded spiritual clout

³² One of the requirements to become an initiate of SIMS was that the individual "[must not have taken] hallucinatory drugs for 15 days prior to personal instruction in the technique" (Hedgepeth 71). Other reports also mention this fact. *TM*'s anti-drug dimension was probably the one feature that an older, more conservative adult audience could applaud. Drug usage among the nation's young was a top concern of parents during this time. See the *Time* issue, "Drug and the Young," 26 Sep. 1968: 68-70, 72-4, 78.

when he can be squarely located within certain bounds—geographic and racialized. Under *Look's* surveillant eye, he conforms to this Orientalist contract. And any breach of this contract results in a negative assessment. Transcendental meditation, as Eastern spiritual alternative, is only allowed legitimate consideration when it can be properly managed.

Indeed, a certain degree of foreignness and a strict divide between East and West emerge as significant prerequisites of the recognition of an individual as an Oriental Monk figure.³³ When an Asian spiritual leader crosses that divide, like Mahesh, his behavior becomes suspect, and his image subsequently tainted. Likewise, when Westerners engage in similar traipsing, the spell is similarly broken as the next set of articles reveals.

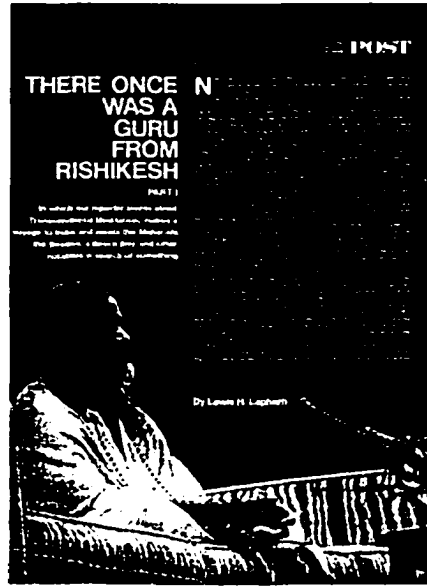
"There Once Was A Guru from Rishikesh"

The Saturday Evening Post featured a two-part report on the Maharishi and his Rishikesh settlement in May of 1968. The series, in which correspondent Lewis H. Lapham offers an account of his visit to Mahesh's compound in India, was whimsically entitled: "There Once Was a Guru From Rishikesh."³⁴ The images chronicle Lapham's trip, and accurately reflect the narrative development of his account. Unlike previous articles, the photos are scattered throughout the piece, but if one scans these images, one is able to get a sense of the story's progression.

Part I of "There Once Was a Guru from Rishikesh" (May 4, 1968) begins with an image of Mahesh meditating calmly on a sofa, microphone poised in front of the contemplative figure. The darkened auditorium in which the picture is set also serves as a textual backdrop against which the article's white print is highlighted, and the viewer/reader is visually drawn in to the story.

³³ The most obvious example here is Mahatma Gandhi, whose political and spiritual mission was primarily aimed at fellow South Asians. For Westerners, he also dressed the part, as he abandoned Western clothing for a more ascetic, look.

³⁴ Lewis H. Lapham, "There Once Was a Guru from Rishikesh, Part I," *Saturday Evening Post* 4 May 1968: 23-29; and "There Once Was a Guru from Rishikesh, Part II," *Saturday Evening Post* 18 May 1968: 28-33.



The Maharishi is obviously photographed at a public event, but his meditative pose—eyes closed and hands folded—sets him apart from the mundane setting. Indeed, it is the microphone that appears as a curious and imposing probe. It beckons the yogi to speak. An instrument of indiscriminating amplification, it accentuates Mahesh's every sound, even his silence.

In the article, the image of the Maharishi's non-interaction with what is, at once, a Western technological device, as well as an instrument of publicity establishes him as a serious spiritual figure—one who appears impervious to the microphone's corrupting presence. The sacred dimension of Mahesh's movement is further captured in the next photo, which depicts a group of student followers in California meditating peacefully in a grassy field. They are well-dressed, well-coiffed, and well-behaved.



Similar to the images in *Look*, these first two photos seem to make a delineation between the Indian leader (and the Eastern mystical realm he embodies) and his students (their world in the West). Although the next photo includes both Mahesh and members of his Western audience, the initial setup allows the viewer/reader to interpret the interaction with requisite seriousness. The audience members, on which the camera is focused, seem intent on the Maharishi's every word.



These opening photos reflect Lapham's initial stance towards Mahesh and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement, developed through interviews with the spiritual leader's most avid followers. Indeed, the images capture the Maharishi's movement through the eyes of its American adherents, who not only view him as a spiritual icon, but themselves as serious seekers. In the article, Lapham does not wholly adopt a convert's perspective, but is heavily intrigued. The commentator's ensuing visit to India serves as the critical event; and he seems to reserve final judgment until then.

Lapham eventually arrives at Rishikesh where the fourth photo is taken. This visual moment is significant because it foreshadows the perspective the reporter will eventually take.



The image depicts a sentry stationed outside the Maharishi's compound, and its caption ironically reads: "A banner said WELCOME, but the way to the ashram was barred by a Hindu guard, a gate and a barbed wire fence."³⁵ For the author, these physical barriers symbolize an exclusionary attitude on Mahesh's part and seem to contradict his universally conceived message. Inevitably, it provokes suspicion in the mind of the both author and viewer/reader.

The final two photos in Part I of "Guru from Rishikesh" visually illustrate those who are allowed to enter Mahesh's compound, and those who remain outside its gates. The first of these photos shows the Beatles and their companions, along with Beach Boy, Mike Love, engaging in conversation with the Maharishi.



³⁵ Lapham, "Part I" 26.

Within the circle, Mahesh sits cross-legged as before, but his celebrity guests seem less earnest, almost nonchalant about the special meeting. Unlike the student meditators in California, the Beatles do not adopt a reverent attitude towards the guru. In fact, they appear rather bored: John Lennon looks idly at his fingernails, while George Harrison snaps a photo of another guest.

The flip attitude of the famous visitors stands in sharp contrast to the final image of the Lapham's first installment. This picture depicts two Westerners (John O'Shea and an anonymous man) meditating solemnly outside the walls of the Maharishi's settlement. According to the caption, these two individuals are among "a group of Americans living near the ashram, searching for a guru of their own."³⁶



Compared with the Beatles, O'Shea and the anonymous meditator represent serious spiritual seekers, unimpressed with Mahesh.³⁷ Together, the three photos taken on and around the premises of Rishikesh (guard, Beatles, O'Shea) help the viewer/reader distinguish the different types of adherents who journey to India in search of spiritual insight. They also reflect Lapham's budding disillusionment with the Maharishi, whose fascination with Western fame and success seem to contradict his sagely status.

³⁶ Lapham, "Part I" 29.

³⁷ Lapham does eventually call into question O'Shea's spiritual journey in Part II of the series (Lapham, "Part II" 30), but the visual image of the wandering seeker in Part I does not betray any such folly.

If there is any doubt to this interpretation, it is confirmed in the set of images that accompany Part II of "Their Once Was a Guru From Rishikesh (May 18, 1968). The article opens with two photos, which emphasize the worldly nature of the guru's spiritual retreat.



The first is of Mahesh, sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat of a helicopter. Once again, he appears overly enthusiastic about the West (its technologies and personalities).

The other photo, on the facing page, shows Beatle Ringo Starr fiddling with a 8mm movie camera. The famous guests appear to approach their spiritual instruction with all the seriousness of a holiday.



In addition to Starr, Lennon and McCartney are also caught filming their visit.³⁸ Mia Farrow, in another image (far right), is seen dining at the compound. According to the report: "[She] called her pilgrimage 'a romp.' but had left the ashram for a few weeks to go

³⁸ The caption does reveal: "John Lennon referred to the Beatles' photographs and records as diaries of their developing consciousness..." (Lapham, "Part II" 30).

tiger hunting."³⁹ As the article progresses, the captions frame the images with increasing irony.

The penultimate image shows two individuals meditating near the Ganges. Despite the irreverent activity that accompanies the celebrity visits, at least two adherents appear to seriously engage the Maharishi's technique.



The caption acknowledges the pair as "Nancy Jackson and Beach Boy Mike Love." Jackson's dress and posture reflect her social status, which Lapham elaborates in the article:

A chic, blond woman in her 40's. Nancy always dressed as if for a late lunch around one of her neighbors' pool in Beverly Hills. She had a brisk way of talking that suggested she was accustomed to managing things and her conversation invariably contained references to the important people she knew."⁴⁰

Mike Love, in comparison to the maven's formal pose, sits cross-legged on the ground. At a glance, the image captures two very different individuals engaged in meditation, which lends the photo a peaceful and alluring tone. However, the caption once again calls into question the sincerity of the followers: "[Jackson] and [Love], two of the Maharishi's disciple's from California, *meditate for the camera*" [my emphasis].⁴¹ The textual commentary highlights the superficiality of the captured moment: the photograph's aura is shattered and the meditators become little more than spiritual "posers."

³⁹ Lapham, "Part II" 31.

⁴⁰ Lapham, "Part II" 31.

⁴¹ Lapham, "Part II" 32.

Given the reporter's surmounting skepticism, the final image of the article comes as little surprise. It captures Mahesh on the phone in his office. Although the room appears modest, the few articles captured within the frame of the photo are telling: a copy of *The Indian Express*, a notebook, and, of course, the phone. The way in which the Maharishi sits—upright in a cloth-covered chair, legs firmly planted on the ground as he leans forward to take the call—signifies the guru in a moment much more mundane. Indeed, a comparison of the first and final images of the two-part report encapsulates and reveals the persuasive flow of the article, as it works to disrupt any "illusion" the viewer/reader may have about Mahesh and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement.



Similar to *The New York Times Magazine* (with its image of Mahesh on the phone), *Look* ultimately presents the India guru as an individual more interested in image than soul. The article does not necessarily place the entire onus for this situation on the Maharishi; its celebrity guests are partly to blame. The allure of the West provides a serious temptation (helicopters, phones, cameras), which the famous guests' presence only seems to heighten. Indeed, celebrity presence, especially the Beatles, overwhelms and disrupts the sanctity of the compound. The Maharishi's ashram turns into "a scene"—one in which an American popular audience is critically distanced, yet phantasmically involved.

Through these first impressions of Mahesh and his followers, one immediately senses not only the two different attitudes —critical and reverent—that prevailed during the period, but also the way in which they were imagistically constructed and communicated. One also begins to see how their meaning depends upon certain preconceived notions, most significantly, the Orientalist divide between East and West. However, many questions remain. What accounts for these two divergent views? What exactly was at stake? And how did they each specifically deploy the icon of the Oriental Monk in their representations of Mahesh? It is these questions that I will next address.

SIGN OF THE TIMES

Before I address these questions, let us first take a look at the fourth article, which I have yet to discuss. The most visually extravagant of the four full-length features, *Life's* "The Year of the Guru" (February 9, 1968), perhaps offered the greatest insight into the Maharishi phenomenon. The relatively brief, four-page article consisted overwhelmingly of color images (the text itself takes up less than half a page), and gave its audience one of the most spectacular photos of the Maharishi.



The reproduction here cannot fully capture the vibrant nature of the magazine copy, which takes up an entire 11"x14" page and shows the Maharishi floating peacefully in some heavenly realm. Despite its metaphysical overtones, this fanciful portrayal and lead-in image

was not meant as an expression of the guru's spirituality, but rather to capture his "aura" as a pop cultural phenomenon. The article's two other photos of Mahesh (below) attest to growing public interest. Both capacity-filled auditorium (at Harvard) and press microphones (at Boston's Logan airport) symbolically capture the Maharishi's newfound recognition in the U.S.



Sans a photo of Mahesh with Mia Farrow, lusciously draped in marigolds, these are the only images of Mahesh to appear in *Life's* visual feast. The spread on the following pages, instead, measures the concurrent shift towards "Indian style" in music and dress to hit the West.



As with the case with Zen in the late 1950s, Americans approached Transcendental Meditation as *stylized religion* that signified a way of life, i.e., an identity, more than something that transformed one's consciousness. One could sample this alternative

perspective and subscribe to its outlook simply by wearing Indian attire⁴² and listening to the inspired sitar of Ravi Shankar. Inversely, by adopting this particular style of clothing and/or music, one demonstrated openness, to such spiritual alternatives.

Whereas Zen as stylized religion was more sparsely developed (with Japanese clothing, architecture, and philosophy separately portrayed and promoted), TM's role in the symbolic nexus was clearly defined as *Life's* photo spread so succinctly portrays. Again, such mundane connections downgraded its spiritual, philosophical, and cultural import to the status of fad, and more specifically, a fad associated with youth. Ultimately, "The Year of the Guru," reduces Mahesh and Transcendental Meditation to a set of crude signs made to represent a generational preoccupation. No image makes this more obvious than the article's final photo.



Here, Marlon Brando appears as the Maharishi's twin figure, levitating effortlessly against a spectacular background. The image is from the comedy film, *Candy*, adapted from Terry

⁴² The intimate connection that Westerners held between outward appearance and inner state is acutely demonstrated by Rishikesh's busy tailor. As Lapham reports:

The tailor lived in a tent opposite the enquiry office, and during the nine days that I was there, he never seemed to sleep. He made saris for the women and kurtas for the men; the demand was steady, and at night he sewed by the light of a kerosene lamp" (28).

Southern's satirical novel about contemporary pop culture. Brando plays Grindl, a caricature of Mahesh, who travels around in his "gurumobile." As parody, *Candy* critically portrays both yogi and follower, treating the popular embrace of Eastern spiritual alternatives as symptom. Again, the larger dis-ease, which this symptom betrays, is widespread, but only among the nation's youth. (As the large caption which ends the article reads: "His *young* followers take the Maharishi at his word: Enjoy! Enjoy!" [My emphasis])

Indeed, the battle between youth and adults—their divergent views on cultural authority—seemed to fuel the popular interest in Mahesh and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement. The way in which popular press reports generally conformed to the Oriental Monk narrative is particularly illuminating in this instance. As laid out in the previous chapter, this conventionalized narrative depends on two primary figures: the Oriental Monk teacher and his dedicated Caucasian pupil. The character of the Monk, mysterious and foreign, operates as the embodiment and transmitter of Eastern spirituality. His Western pupil functions as the figure with which the audience most identifies, or at the very least, serves as an entry point into the Monk's mystical realm.

In representations of the Maharishi in the late 1960s, this narrative is maintained. Mahesh is portrayed as a spiritual sage whose mission it is to spread his teachings beyond his native homeland, specifically with an eye towards the West. As the guru reportedly commented: "[H]e admired the American mind and compared it to the flower of the tree, while the other peoples of the earth were bark and branches."⁴³ Whether Mahesh's comment, metaphorically posed, is taken as genuine compliment or sycophantic gesture, it signals a particular type of recognition of the West (and specifically the U.S.) as a significant site of regeneration and reinforces American's own sense of self-importance.

Within the representative mix, the Beatles paradigmatically serve as the Monk's Western pupils, who, disillusioned with their inherited spiritual heritage, are drawn to

⁴³ Lapham, "Part II" 33.

Mahesh's philosophy and practice. It is important to examine the complex layers of this figuration. First of all, the Beatles primarily function as a synecdoche for Western youth. Examining press reports, the two are almost interchangeable, as the popular rock group is referred to as "the blessed leaders of the world's youth,"⁴⁴ and young people are seen as increasingly defining themselves in relation to their musical heroes. The Beatles seem to reflect both the exuberance and excess of their young audience. Given this metaphorical fluidity, American youth occupy a primary place in the Maharishi/Monk narrative. It is members of this generation who are seen as the ones most attracted to his wisdom.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between Oriental Monk teacher and Western pupil is usually romanticized in order to legitimate the transfer of Eastern spiritual knowledge from one to the other, and more broadly, from the cryptic East to white Western world. The more reverent accounts of the Maharishi phenomenon reinscribe this romantic account, as we have seen in the instance of *Look's* positive portrayal. Not only is Mahesh's image appropriately sacralized, but his American followers are also represented as serious spiritual seekers. In addition, the clear distinction between East and West, maintained in the magazine's coverage, allows the transmission of mystical wisdom to serve as dramatic event. Overall, positive reports adopt a tone that is fairly straightforward and respectful toward Mahesh and his philosophy. The audience is meant to identify (or at least sympathize) with the pupil—portrayed as earnest and reliable in his/her spiritual endeavors, as well as in the high regard s/he holds for Mahesh.

In comparison with these reverent offerings, critical accounts are structured in a more complicated manner. Although the same elements of the conventional narrative are maintained, a strong element of irony pervades the discourse. In media reports on the

⁴⁴ Lapham, "Part II" 28.

Maharishi, examples of verbal irony⁴⁵ are plentiful. Loudon Wainwright, in his commentary, "Invitation to instant bliss," adroitly surmises:

When I excused myself so that the Maharishi could get a brief rest before his lecture, he had still resisted my tacit invitation to tell me my sound. But he had given me his rose, a gift I had never received before and one I accepted with real pleasure. As for the sound [mantra], perhaps he didn't feel he knew me well enough to make such a vital judgment. If I were guessing, I would guess it lay somewhere between a *h-m-m-m-m* and an *o-o-o-o-h*.⁴⁶

Here, it is difficult to get a sense of Wainwright's stance toward the Maharishi. But one gets the impression that, despite the seemingly warm interaction between reporter and guru, Wainwright maintains a critical distance between himself and Mahesh ("somewhere between a *h-m-m-m-m* and an *o-o-o-o-h*"). In comparison with more reverent accounts, he does not approach the phenomenon with requisite seriousness, but rather "entertains" the spiritual option:

On the first occasion I saw him he was describing the joys of family meditation to members of the Stockholm press. "What a happy thing the family becomes through meditation," he said in his high voice, "for just a few moments night and morning." I tried to imagine such sessions in my own house and was in trouble right away.⁴⁷

In Wainwright's account, the Maharishi appears as a comical figure. He is characterized by "a hearty cackle that was an irresistible invitation to join him in a huge joke—even if one was not at all sure what that joke was."⁴⁸ Mahesh's bliss is not necessarily linked to his spiritual insight, but ironically to famous converts and the "boost" they have given his movement around the world. News magazine reports that featured the yogi often

⁴⁵ Instances of verbal irony, according to Seymour Chatman, usually involve an *ironist* and a *target* (or an object of irony). "The ironist intends that somebody (though not necessarily the target) grasp the disparity between the words she utters and the underlying reality that she wishes to convey." In accounts of Mahesh, the reporter (ironist) cleverly and critically comments upon the Maharishi and/or his followers (target) in this indirect manner. The ironist need not be entirely opposed to the phenomenon at hand: s/he can be sympathetic to the selected target. However, the distance that the implied author maintains from his/her target lends ironic accounts their critical edge. See Seymour Chatman, *Reading Narrative Fiction* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 187-8; and *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 156, 229.

⁴⁶ Loudon Wainwright, "Invitation to instant bliss," *Life* 10 Nov. 1967: 26.

⁴⁷ Wainwright 26.

⁴⁸ Wainwright 26.

relied on a similar twist. This is evident in *Time's* photo caption—"How to succeed spiritually without really trying"⁴⁹—as well as the quote with which *Newsweek* selectively ends its piece:

On the question of the cost of his ashram, the otherwise candid guru is circumspect. "I deal in wisdom, he says, "not money."⁵⁰

Mahesh's response is not necessarily coy, but the way in which it is framed ("the otherwise candid guru is circumspect") draws into question the truth of his statement. Although the reporter does not "flatly condemn,"⁵¹ Mahesh, he does not take the guru at his word.

In relation to the popular press, the reporter is usually viewed as a reliable source of information, or the commentator as possessing unusual insight into a phenomenon. Perhaps most significant is the set of shared assumptions between author and audience which truly lend these instances of verbal irony their force.⁵² Media reports critical of the Maharishi invoked deeply embedded notions of Christian asceticism to shape the public's opinion and encourage a skeptical view. For instance, a religious leader should be "in the world, not of it," i.e., not overly taken by celebrity, as Mahesh seems to be. Spiritual worth cannot be assigned a material value, i.e., the guru is not justified in charging the nominal fee for instruction. Spiritual insight requires dedicated commitment and practice, i.e., there is no "Peace Without Penance"⁵³ as TM is portrayed to achieve. Assumptions of religious asceticism were evident in commentaries, such as Harriet Van Horne's for *The New York Post*:

⁴⁹ "Soothsayer for Everyman," *Time* 20 Oct. 1967: 86.

⁵⁰ "The Guru," *Newsweek* 18 Dec. 1967: 67.

⁵¹ William Brandt notes: "When one is ironic about a subject, one refuses to assent to the usual view of it, and at the same time one does not flatly condemn the usual view." Such an ironic posture is useful especially in the genre of news magazines, where reporters are usually compelled to sensationalize information, yet still maintain a semblance of reportorial objectivity. See William J. Brandt, *The Rhetoric of Argumentation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 157.

⁵² As Brandt and other rhetorical theorists maintain: "We are aware of the disparity [between what is said and what the author really thinks] either by reason of what we know of the speaker or by the context." See Brandt 157.

⁵³ "Soothsayer for Everyman," *Time* 20 Oct. 1967: 86.

[The Beatles] seem to have learned that salvation comes hard. This could be the beginning of Wisdom. For we are delivered out of our miseries only to the degree that we labor, repent and accept ourselves. No creed, no inspired conversion ever guaranteed an Instant New You. We have had precious few Pauls traveling the road to Damascus.⁵⁴

In these underlying ways, Christianity provided the frame of reference for understanding the emergent TM movement, as well as for the media commentator's critical rhetoric.

Despite examples too numerous to recount, verbal irony was not the only rhetorical mechanism at work in such critical assessments. Certainly more revealing is the dimension of dramatic irony present in these accounts. Dramatic irony occurs when "there is a tension in a literary work between what a character knows and what the audience knows."⁵⁵ Ironist and audience usually foresee consequences unbeknownst to the characters involved. There are at least three ways dramatic irony is achieved in the various accounts of Mahesh, each predicting the eventual disillusionment of all the characters involved (guru and youth) or one in particular (guru or youth).

Dramatic irony, in the first instance, occurs in accounts that portray Transcendental Meditation as a passing fashion and Mahesh as its celebrity spokesperson. *Life's* "Year of the Guru," can be squarely located in this vein, with its focus on TM as part of a larger cultural trend.

The Maharishi's un-Hindu-like concern with the here and now, his concentration of self-interest and a philosophy of "Enjoy, enjoy" square beautifully with his show business followers, and with the hedonist bent of the swinging young who are making a fad of Indian clothes, Indian music and Indian culture in general.⁵⁶

Indeed, *Life's* reporter squarely locates TM as just another current in line with "previous waves of interest in Eastern mysticism." Although intense at the moment, interest is bound to wane. But this insight is something that both Mahesh and his followers cannot currently comprehend, simply choose to ignore, or perhaps accept. The audience is to approach the

⁵⁴ Harriet Van Horne, *The New York Post* March 1968.

⁵⁵ Brandt 156-8, 283.

⁵⁶ "Year of the Guru," *Life* 9 Feb. 1968: 54.

phenomenon with little seriousness, if not benign amusement. Supposedly, they (along with *Life's* narrator) see the fad for what it is, and what the actors involved most likely cannot.

In the second instance, dramatic irony is cast by highlighting the guilelessness of one of the characters. Arnold M. Auerbach, in his satirical piece, "When West Goes East," presents the diary of fictional character, Maharishi Khoto Ghilbrani. The Maharishi muses on the curious preoccupations and practices of his Western converts, who are primarily celebrity singers and New York theatrical folk. On their stay at his ashram, the daily entry of the fictional guru reads:

November 15: Catastrophe, alas, has struck. What, I ask Vishnu, have I done to be so scourged by the Marutas? I have endured the formation of the ricepaddy Players and their all-goatherd production of "Waiting for Godot." I have survived the ghastly moment when I found my Pagoda of Contemplation piled high with corned beef sandwiches flown up from the Stage Delicatessen by the infamous Komreich.

But now a crueller blow has befallen me: the "Spoons" have scheduled a "remote telecast" with an American guru—one Ed Sullivan. This person—evidently a revered man of learning in his own land—is to broadcast on my very grounds. Worse still he has invited all my seminar pupils to participate. The halls resound with quarrels over "billing" and "residuals."⁵⁷

The "Maharishi" is portrayed as the unwitting victim of his celebrity followers—their excesses and eccentricities. With the yogi as unsuspecting figure, Auerbach's column highlights the lack of seriousness with which these converts approach their adopted Oriental sage—the self-indulgent and superficial nature of their commitment. The overall effect of the piece is comic, yet offers critical commentary on booming interest in this latest wave of Eastern spirituality. Although Auerbach mimics the Maharishi, in particular, and Eastern religions, in general, through the use of Orientalized lingo and overformalized speech ("What, I ask Vishnu, have I done to be so scourged by the Marutas?"), the guru is ultimately represented as the casualty of Western spiritual whim.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Arnold M. Auerbach, "When West Goes East," *New York Times* 17 Dec. 1967: Sec. II, 14.

⁵⁸ This is not to say the Auerbach sympathized with Mahesh and viewed him as a genuine spiritual figure. It is the fictional guru, fashioned somewhat according to the Oriental Monk icon, that the commentator envisages and deploys to make his larger criticism aimed at Mahesh's privileged followers. The use of

In most press reports, however, it is the pupil who is defined as the fateful victim of faddish circumstance. Although such reports are careful to acknowledge the promise the Maharishi's Spiritual Regeneration Movement holds for young people in the U.S., they ironically cast American youth (via the Beatles) as enthusiastic, yet naive individuals who fall prey to their own romanticized hopes, as well as Mahesh's clever tactics. Both *The New York Times Magazine* article ("Chief Guru of the Western World"), and Lapham's two-part feature in the *Saturday Evening Post* ("There Once Was A Guru from Rishikesh") ultimately adopt such a stance. In "Chief Guru of the Western World," Barney Lefferts believes that Mahesh's followers are "decent and articulate people; seemingly not a loon in the lot."⁵⁹ Juxtaposed to their seemingly genuine commitment, the guru's means and motivations are far more suspect:

The only people who cavil at the Maharishi's way of life are other gurus in India who are not privileged to scamper around Europe and America propagating the faith and charging admission. They periodically go on record as saying that the Sage's methods are unscientific and that he is in mediation to make money. The Maharishi, confronted with those accusations, shrugs and smiles, and it would be most difficult to prepare a balance sheet for the last eight years of Transcendental Meditation.⁶⁰

Indeed, Lefferts insinuates that Mahesh may be just another clever salesman interested in his own personal status and gain. As the article's opening caption reads: "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi...is an apostle of the contemplative life but makes waves like any celebrity when he goes on tour."⁶¹ Here, Lefferts suggests underneath Mahesh's spiritual guise lurks less than noble intentions. The most disturbing aspect of the Maharishi's emergent fame (and his movement's rising fortune) is his followers' apparent blindness to an institutional, worldly success that is achieved at their expense. Lefferts ironically states:

When a person is initiated into the movement, he pays a week's salary. Additional fees are charged for courses of instruction. The Maharishi never handles money. "He himself has

Monk as icon—a figurative device of Western representation separate from historical personality—will be discussed in the following section.

⁵⁹ Lefferts 50.

⁶⁰ Lefferts 48.

⁶¹ Lefferts 44.

nothing," says a disciple. "Of course, there are a certain rich believers who fill the gaps." (One of the "gaps" was a private airplane, purchased recently for the Sage's use in India this winter.)⁶²

Mahesh's followers apparently see no contradiction between the monetary and spiritual aspects of the movement, but to the reporter, the conflict of interest is glaring.

Young people—who "respond quicker [to the Maharishi's philosophy], without hesitation"⁶³—are portrayed as particularly susceptible to the Mahesh's wiles. Lefferts represents TM's youthful constituency through the figure of a "rather striking blonde 19-year old" follower named Monika.⁶⁴

"The thing about the Maharishi," says Monika, "is that when you travel with him you don't have time to meditate—which is the whole thing."⁶⁵

By including the young disciple's statement, Lefferts demonstrates how Mahesh's enterprise is given priority over the individual's spiritual development. Monika's gullibility is further highlighted when immediately after her observation, she asks the interviewer: "When are you going to start to meditate?"⁶⁶

As its selection of images acutely express, Lefferts' piece portrays well-meaning, enthusiastic, and energetic followers as victims who have fallen under the yogi's suspicious spell.⁶⁷ Lefferts does not probe the reason why these individuals are drawn to Mahesh, but simply presents them as folks who have been swept away by the Maharishi phenomenon. Other critical pieces are similarly constructed, but highlight the way in which Mahesh's Caucasian followers in the West participate in their own self-deception. Lapham's *Saturday Evening Post* article figures this ironic situation particularly well. Like Lefferts, he points

⁶² Lefferts 48.

⁶³ Lefferts 50.

⁶⁴ Lefferts 50.

⁶⁵ Lefferts 57.

⁶⁶ Lefferts 57.

⁶⁷ The article does not proclaim such deceit outright. But the ambiguous and contradictory way it presents Mahesh and his movement certainly raises such doubts in the reader's mind. Such ambiguity is the hallmark of ironic accounts.

out Mahesh's questionable personality (the way he dotes over the Beatles and Farrow, his preoccupation with image and publicity). However, Lapham also reveals how the Maharishi's guests at Rishikesh, despite these obvious signs, are able to maintain their positive image of the guru:

Simcox and two or three of the other young Americans raised mild objections to the Maharishi's involvement with modern technology. Like O'Shea, they had expected romantic asceticism, of the kind they'd read about in books and they'd been prepared to live on roots and berries. Their dissent was never harsh, reflecting instead a wistful disillusionment.⁶⁸

The night the balloons appeared in the lecture hall, Geoffrey mistook them for decorations in honor of the god Shiva's marriage to the goddess Parvati. The musicians seated on the stage, among them a Sikh wearing slippers that curled at the toes, seemed to support his assumption

"How nice," he said, "Shiva day."

We talked of Shiva's many tricks and disguises, which so pleased Geoffrey that he didn't mind when it turned out he was wrong about the balloons. Like the musicians, they had to do with George Harrison's birthday.⁶⁹

Here, Orientalist notions seem to predetermine both Simcox's and Geoffrey's spiritual commitment to Mahesh. Geoffrey's case, in particular, demonstrates that these notions override the actualities that may challenge his positive view. The article, hence, suggests how romantic visions unwittingly upheld by Mahesh's Caucasian followers distort any clear perception they may have of "the truth."

The different ways in which critical assessments of the Maharishi are drawn demonstrate the complexity of the stance and the various ways they are constructed. Despite the variation, they share one thing in common besides their skeptical attitude. In

⁶⁸ Lapham, "Part II" 32.

⁶⁹ Lapham, "Part II" 33. In his piece, there is also a dimension of self-irony along the same lines, which can be discerned in the article's conclusion:

I still remembered them smiling at me as I turned away toward the ferry and the passage across the Ganges. From the opposite shore, I saw them all again, at a distance and for the last time. By a trick of the weather on that sudden, shifting day, it was raining on my side of the river, but they remained in the clear sunlight. I saw them as small bright figures, sitting in a circle on the stony beach against a background of immense trees. I thought I could see the light reflecting from the Maharishi's white robe and I knew they had gathered to listen to Donovan sing" (88).

these commentaries, author and audience *collude* in their outlook.⁷⁰ Both seem to "know better" than the characters involved, especially Mahesh's young followers in the West. Within these accounts, participants embody a fatal flaw, namely the lack of maturity, and wise judgment and discipline that comes with such maturity. The American mass audience also views the events of the Mahesh's visits abroad and the pilgrimages made by various celebrities to his Himalayan compound as a tragic comedy filled with eccentric characters. Given the targeted readership of popular magazines, such a stance is wholly comprehensible. These periodicals were geared mainly to adults over thirty,⁷¹ whose views were shaped by the religious conservatism of the early 1950s. Many of these readers undoubtedly were the parents of adolescent and college-aged children, whose preoccupations and emerging outlook seemed to differ greatly from their own.

Hence, the ironic stance held by the American press reflected the views of their constituency. As Hayden White writes: "[I]rony is the linguistic strategy underlying and sanctioning skepticism as an explanatory tactic, satire as a mode of emplotment and either agnosticism or cynicism as a moral posture."⁷² Indeed, such a *strategy*, by allowing the covert expression of such attitudes, served to contain the growing popularity of the Maharishi's alternative spiritual movement. In a vast number of reports, the International Meditation Society's increasing membership worldwide, most particularly within its student organization, SIMS, on college campuses in the U.S., was often cited. TM's burgeoning

⁷⁰ Chatman notes that irony relies on a "secret communication" between ironist and audience. See *Story and Discourse* 156.

⁷¹ Magazine publications were driven not by circulation numbers, but rather by their advertising constituency. In response, magazines sought to appeal to potential consumers of their advertiser's goods and viewed adults, aged thirty or older, as their most promising market.

In the late 1960s, commercial sponsors would shift their advertising dollar to specialty magazines that catered to discrete markets (e.g., *Field and Stream*, *Car and Driver*). Even though these general-interest periodicals still maintained their popularity and fairly wide readership, *Look*, *Life*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* would suffer eventual demise. See Pember, 90-1; and David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America, The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1996).

⁷² Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse, Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 73-4.

presence, as well as celebrity interest, was enough to generate not only the attention, but also the proactive, critical view of American media and audience alike.

But the pervasiveness of an ironic strategy and the ambivalence it characteristically entails suggest a deeper issue at play. Popular press accounts, both reverent and critical, participated in a debate that had, in essence, very little to do with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his Spiritual Regeneration Movement. The intense focus on famous converts, especially the Beatles, betrayed a riveting shift in the structure of cultural authority. Indeed, Mahesh's popularity emerged from a new counter-cultural outlook that seemed to resonate with the younger generation. This outlook eschewed traditional forms of American religion and embraced more mystical alternatives focused on individual fulfillment.

However, even more radically, this emerging sensibility brought forth a new authorial framework that featured pop celebrity as legitimating force and was inherently media driven in nature. *Look*, in its report registering the "Campus Mood, Spring, '68," spoke with student editors from twenty-three universities and reported:

The nearest thing to heroes for many students is the Beatles. "The Beatles grew up right along with us," says Notre Dame's [Pat] Collins. "If you take the time to go through their music, it is really neat to see how these people with all their money still manage to keep moving, to keep telling the story while we are thinking of it. They're like the great scribes of our era." Mostly, the Beatles are seen as the knights of rebellion. "We all get a kick out of the fact that they are like us; but they have managed to take on this whole monolithic system," say Art Johnston, "and they have it right by the short hair."⁷³

A similar observation was made in the December 4, 1967 issue of *Newsweek*, whose education column explored the demise of the campus hero. The magazine hints at several reasons why "[c]ollege students no longer idolize political leaders, or try to imitate authors like Salinger or Tolkien:"⁷⁴ these young people are either "too jaded," or "too busy." However, the piece paradoxically realizes:

⁷³ Ernest Dunbar, "Campus Mood, Spring, '68," *Look* 2 Apr. 1968: 26.

⁷⁴ "The Urug and the Grungey," *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 1967: 54.

The most popular non-ideological idols are the Beatles, particularly John Lennon... "They are saying that youth can be more successful than adults, say Jon Ratner, a senior at Berkeley, "and that the values of youth are important. All the new ideas of everything that's going on begin with the Beatles."⁷⁵

The ambivalence towards the Beatles as heroes emerges from the assumption that the pop group is not only "non-ideological" (i.e., not political), but that it derives its cultural authority from illegitimate means. This insight can be intimated not only by the inclusion of mass media philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, in the report "as coming very close to what students would like to say,"⁷⁶ but also the quote with which the article ends:

Ron Scheer, was astounded when his students could not identify Westmoreland, Albee and Rap Brown. But they all readily recognized Napoleon Solo, the hero of "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."⁷⁷

The fact that college students so readily recognize and identify with entertainment figures—real and fictional—reveals a new form of cultural authority.⁷⁸ Such authority appeared not only unwieldy, but also formidable as other powerful influences, such as Mahesh, were spun off of these figures. Cultural sanction seemed based on nothing more than the fluffiness of pop stardom as Lapham's characterization of one adherent suggests:

Characteristic of another type I found prevalent among meditators, [Kip] Cohen was young, engaging, very articulate and very hip. He had long blond hair and a mustache, and he was just past 26, which depressed him. He'd first seen the Maharishi on the Johnny Carson show, and he's heard that Donovan and the Beatles were into meditation.

⁷⁵ "The Urug and the Grungey," *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 1967: 54.

⁷⁶ "The Urug and the Grungey," *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 1967: 54. Arthur Marwick, in his sweeping cultural overview of the Sixties, heralds McLuhan as one of the decade's intellectual "gurus," who was "undoubtedly a central figure in some of the key beliefs of the sixties" and its "post-literature culture." Indeed, McLuhan's 1964 publication, *Understanding Media*, which focused on the impact of new media and its pervasive influence as well as its liberatory potential, had a tremendous impact. Slogans that emerged from his work, such as "the medium is the message" and the concept of the "global village," seemed to resonate with an American popular audience, especially its younger members. See Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) quotation from 309; and Kurt Von Meier, "Love Mysticism, and the Hippies," *Vogue* 15 Nov. 1967: 86.

⁷⁷ "The Urug and the Grungey," *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 1967: 54.

⁷⁸ An American audience certainly feared the truth of John Lennon's controversial statement; the Beatles may *actually* be more popular than Jesus.

"With their endorsement, he said. "I knew the thing couldn't be too far amiss."⁷⁹

Indeed, sensationalized image was often put forth as the foundation of Mahesh's "success" in the West. If anything, it afforded the guru and his movement widespread publicity, whether one felt he deserved it or not. As Hedgepeth observed:

Even if there were some who hadn't seen [Mahesh] on [the Berkeley] campus last year, there wasn't one who didn't realize that he was the same jet-age guru who had guided the Beatles off the psychedelic drug scene by way of a new, nonchemical turn-on.⁸⁰

All in all, the majority of American reviewers seemed most troubled not necessarily by *what* Mahesh had to say (most of which perplexed commentators), but rather *how* he achieved popular recognition, i.e., through the authorial framework of celebrity. Critical accounts, ironically posed in a variety of ways, expressed their disdain, or at least their ambivalence towards this new framework. In contrast, more reverent portrayals seemed readily at home within this framework, or at least, resigned to its presence.⁸¹

Amidst the larger battle for cultural authority and significance, the Maharishi's image served as a convenient screen. Indeed, Mahesh served as a figure or metaphor on which to project these more immediate concerns. Hayden White notes that such "[m]etaphors are

⁷⁹ Lapham "Part I." 25.

⁸⁰ Hedgepeth 68-9.

⁸¹ As one reverent account, which relates the media frenzy surrounding Mahesh's 1968 visit to New York, comments:

If all this sounds like "show biz" and rather commercial, it really shouldn't. That is how things are done in New York. The town is quick on its feet, particularly if you use "established channels." One of Maharishi's means of success has been his use of modern means of communications: airplanes, television interviews, wireless photographs, a readiness to answer the repetitive questions of press agency interviewers.

The piece interestingly maintains that the unique attitude towards the media hype that Mahesh's Felt Forum audience held allowed them to hear the guru in a way others could not. "Immunized by television commercials and the oratory of politicians, the audience was quite prepared not to hold the hyperbole of advance publicity against the diminutive, quietly smiling, white-robed speaker." True or not, the reporter's assertion does suggest a high comfort level with the new styles of communication that the Maharishi's movement utilized and embraced. See John C. Newhouse, "New York Is Ready," *Maharishi, The Guru: An International Symposium*, ed. Martin Ebon (New American Library, 1968) 12-20, quotations from 13, 15.

crucially necessary when a culture or social group encounters phenomena that either elude or run afoul of normal expectations or quotidian experiences."⁸² The ascendancy of television and other new media undoubtedly had transformed popular consciousness in ways that few predicted. The emphasis on more immediate experience (sight and sound), as well as the powerful circuits of pop celebrity⁸³ was just two of its many unintended effects with which Americans struggled. The fact that the Maharishi capitalized on both of these effects seemingly to his advantage made him the perfect figure on which to project the ambivalent feelings toward new media Americans held. Such anxiety, especially over the emerging status of celebrity, was displaced onto Mahesh—a target made more acceptable through racial and colonial difference. The figure of the celebrity guru allowed an American audience to disavow new media's effects by drawing their suspicion onto the figure, while simultaneously indulging their desire for celebrity spectacle.

MAINTAINING THE ORIENTALIST REALM

In the rhetorical ways just discussed, the majority of press accounts dedicated to the Maharishi presented their subject with great ambivalence. They did not romantically embrace Mahesh as Oriental Monk, but this is not to say that the Oriental Monk as icon did not figure into the guru's representation. As symbolic resource and tool through which to measure the spiritual authenticity of the historical figure, it played an integral part in assessments of Mahesh. The degree to which real Asian teachers conformed to the icon, an Orientalist sign already well known in the minds of the American audience, determined the legitimacy of their mission.

⁸² White 184. White speaks of metaphor in this manner as part of his analysis on the "noble savage." He demonstrates how this particular figure was used to express the ambivalent views that bourgeoisie held towards aristocratic nobility in the eighteenth century.

⁸³ For an interesting examination of these circuits, as well as the function of celebrity in contemporary society, see P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power, Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997).

Both critical and reverent accounts implicitly invoked the Oriental Monk icon in order to substantiate their views. Reverent accounts harmonized Mahesh's motivations and behavior with those paradigmatically set forth by the icon. Conversely, critical assessments gained their persuasive power by creating an image of Mahesh that woefully fell short of this measure.

By implicitly referencing the icon, as well as other preconceived notions about East (and more specifically, India), representations of Mahesh, on a whole, not only prescribed to, but also reinforced an Orientalist framework of assumptions and beliefs.

One can easily discern the connection between 1960s American press reports of Mahesh and views upheld by Orientalists during the 19th century. As Edward Said astutely remarks about the latter:

Language and race seemed inextricably tied, and the "good" Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the "bad" Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere. "Aryans" were confined to Europe and the ancient Orient;...the Aryan myth dominated historical and cultural anthropology at the expense of the "lesser" peoples.⁸⁴

Given Said's characterization, representations of Mahesh entail a significant difficulty, because in these, he seems to embody both "a long-gone India," as well as "present-day Asia." But any contradiction dissolves when one takes into consideration the conflicting opinions of the guru held by the popular media. Reverent accounts primarily chose to see Mahesh merely as representative of an ancient Hindu tradition ("long gone India"), whereas critical ones spoke only of the yogi's corrupted concerns ("present-day Asia").

One might be tempted to see only the icon's simple consistency. However, mass media portrayals of Mahesh in the late 1960s provide an opportunity to grasp the integrated, yet complex vision such a frame of reference involves. Although India often is seen as the "'good' Orient" (especially in relation to the Middle East), such distinctions shift according to

⁸⁴ Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 99. Here, Said generalizes upon the view of nineteenth century, "Darwinian anthropologists and phrenologists."

time period, political interests, as well as the representation's "history of effect" influenced by these factors.⁸⁵ For instance, India, after the advent of British colonial rule, was viewed in a much more ambivalent manner within an Orientalist frame of reference. Indians may have once been part of a glorious and rich civilization that was noteworthy for its independent development in ancient times. However, their status as subjugated peoples stood as proof to British colonizers of their contemporary inferiority and moral decay.

The long tradition of British literature dedicated to India testifies to this portrayal. For many writers, it was regarded as "an exotic land of sadhus, snakes and suttee."⁸⁶—a portrait that reflected the fascination, fear, and feeling of moral superiority of its British occupants. As the white colonizer so visibly enters the Orientalist frame, the romantic view of the native falls away. No more is this dynamic seen than in *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling's "immortal story of a white boy in mysterious India."⁸⁷

In Kipling's classic, young Kim O'Hara, the destitute offspring of an Irish color-sargeant in India, embarks on a spiritual journey with his self-appointed lama. As one commentator notes:

The blind quest of the Lama is not only symptomatic of the utter spiritual confusion of the Indians, but is also a bitter comment on the chaos in their worldly affairs. The coalescence of the two themes is, indeed, a badge of Kipling's artistic achievement and the subtlety of his imagination. This confusion in the earthly life of the Indians is brought out by Kipling as he takes along the Lama and Kim through the crowded bazars (sic), *serais*, railway

⁸⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer explains a "history of effect" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) as one that takes into account "the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself." In other words, the perspective by which we approach a historical object or concept involves not only that object or concept, but also its accumulated effects in history that inevitably temper our own understanding. See *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 300-307, quotation from 300.

⁸⁶ *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, ed., M.K. Naik, S.K. Desai, and S.T. Kallapur (London: Macmillan, 1971) preface.

⁸⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (New York: Doubleday, 1900/1956). The description is taken from the book cover.

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, as well as Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, has remained literary staples that are still being read today. (Both novels have been translated for the big screen.) However, Kipling's *Kim* arguably remains the quintessential British novel about India, whose influence is unsurpassed except by the author's work, *The Jungle Book*, written for children.

stations and compartments, *paraos* on the grand Trunk Road, private houses in the villages and so on.⁸⁸

Kipling's portrayal of the Lama may be ultimately critical, but for the most part is quite sympathetic. The fact that Kim's spiritual guide is Tibetan distinguishes him from the native "faqirs, Sadhus, Sunnysis, byragis, nihangs, and mullahs, priests of all faiths and every degree of raggedness,"⁸⁹ who live off the good will of the people. The difference is significant. For the most part, Indian spiritual mendicants were primarily viewed with an air of suspicion and considered "mountebanks, clever hypocrites, 'fraud-men' rather than 'godmen,' who lead easy, lazy lives at the cost of the common, gullible, superstitious folk"⁹⁰ As part of the storehouse of Western cultural memory, Kipling's imperialist view⁹¹ can be intimately linked to the conflicted nature, if not harsh assessments, of Mahesh's popular representation in the late 1960s.

As Said points out, such judgments should not be read as objective fact, but rather as a form of self-justification for the white colonizer's presence in India:

The actual color of [Britisher's] skin set them off dramatically and reassuringly from the sea of natives, but for the Britisher who circulated amongst Indians, Africans, or Arabs there was also the certain knowledge that he belonged to, and could draw upon the empirical and spiritual reserves of, a long tradition of executive responsibility towards the colored races.⁹²

Within the colonial context, assessments of Indian life were informed not only by skin color, but also by a feeling of moral superiority inculcated by imperial rule. All around him, the

⁸⁸ Avtar Singh Bhullar, *India, myth and reality: images of India in the fiction by English writers* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1985) 19.

⁸⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Life's Handicap*.

⁹⁰ Bhullar 92. Patrick Williams, in his essay on *Kim*, also discusses the "widespread negativity in the text towards Indian religion." See Patrick Williams, "Kim and *Orientalism*," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 484-5.

⁹¹ Patrick Williams carefully notes that, "neither Kipling the author nor the range of positions offered by his texts is reducible to the merely imperialist." I agree that such a qualification needs to be made. However, like Williams, I also believe that, although *Kim* remains an exceptional work in Kipling's *oeuvre* for its sympathetic portrayal of Indians, its dominant ideological effect remains imperialist in nature. See Williams 480-97.

⁹² Said, *Orientalism* 226.

Britisher found examples of social confusion and spiritual excess that it was his responsibility to contain (if only by means of literary commentary).

Although the literature is vast and even a modest survey virtually impossible here,⁹³ one is able to discern the roots of American's conflicting views of Mahesh, as well as their penchant to commentate about him, in British imperialism and inherited classics, like *Kim*. Was the Maharishi the spiritual trustee of "a long-gone India"? Or was he simply an expression of its religious and moral decay? The answer becomes superfluous as such assessments are intricately woven into an Orientalist fabric of understanding and representation.

Indeed, Mahesh's historical person and mission could not escape this deeply ingrained frame of reference no matter how he tried. American reviewers could not adequately comprehend his attempts to creatively employ modern means of communication and travel to disseminate his spiritual knowledge. For instance, Mahesh's mobility became an index of his agency and controllability.⁹⁴ A Monk who "stays put" in his Asian country of origin or whose mobility is limited is certainly preferred, over one who seems "on the go." The Maharishi appeared always on the move, traveling from one locale to another.⁹⁵ He not only made eight trips around the world (by 1968), but these trips were part of a conscious

⁹³ See Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969); K.C. Belliappa, *The Image of India in English Fiction: Studies in Kipling, Myers, and Raja Rao* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1991); Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995); David Rubin, *After the Raj: British Novels of India Since 1947* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1986); and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

I should note that British literature about India was not the only wellspring that fed Americans' popular imagination about the Asian country and its inhabitants. Films, newspaper cartoons and articles, and magazine reports also were significant contributors. See Isaacs for examples. For a review of screen images, see Dorothy B. Jones, *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955* (Cambridge: MIT Center for International Studies, 1955).

⁹⁴ Publicity provided a similar measure.

⁹⁵ The mobility of the pupil is also implicated in the scheme. For instance, Watts and Kerouac never leave the West, whereas the Beatles and Mia Farrow travel to the Maharishi's retreat in Rishikesh, India. This pilgrimage East does not, in itself, degrade the spirituality of the adherents. (In fact, it is an essential element of the Monk narrative.) However, the celebrities' ease of travel, as well as the haphazard nature in which they approach the journey (as holiday), calls into question the legitimacy of their spiritual commitment.

plan to establish TM centers and spread his teachings throughout the globe. On the one hand, this conscious plan demonstrated an initiative on Mahesh's part that discomfited critical commentators. On the other, reverent reviewers, often followers of the movement, saw the guru's visits as a response to their call. They also saw themselves as providing Mahesh with the means to travel from one place to another. Hence, Mahesh, as historical figure, maintains the romantic composure of the icon as long as he is seen as suitably passive, i.e., stays within the geographical view of the white host society and/or travels according to their needs.⁹⁶ In either case, his spiritual initiative was not something that could not be adequately conceived by the American press. Initiative constituted a characteristic reserved solely for his pupils in the West.

Mahesh's orientalized image did not exist independently, but was supported by an equally orientalized India. In his "open letter to the Beatles," Arthur J. Dommen, the *Los Angeles Times'* bureau chief in New Delhi, invoked these notions to critically comment on the pop group's impending trip to India. For example:

But you will say, the mystical wisdom of India lies not in the illiterate, ill-nourished peasants, who are like the illiterate, ill-nourished peasants everywhere, but in the holy men, the gurus and the sadhus. Here indeed is an important difference. To observe these holy men in their faded pinkish orange robes trudging the roads of India, their bare feet stirring the dust and their matted hair their only protection from the beating sun or rain, does make one wonder whether they have not attained a higher plane of spirituality, where the afflictions of the body no longer exist.

In so far as they do not collectively concern themselves with problems of bettering society, India's holy men have relinquished the temporal things of life, I agree.

The influence of these holy men is said to be considerable, yet it seems insufficiently enlightening to prevent the suicide of an estimated 17,000 people every year, and it does not give salvation to the estimated 2 million beggars.

I confess that the spirituality of the several thousand baked and near-naked sadhus who tried to storm the Parliament building last November in their frenzy to see a law enacted to ban the slaughter of cows, even if they had to lynch a few MPs in the process, still escapes me today.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ D.T. Suzuki traveled throughout the world—from Japan to the U.S., Hawaii, and Europe, as well as to Mexico. But his sojourns were often extended stays (his two "visits" to America each lasted a decade); if he did travel to another locale for a brief period, it was usually at the invitation of Caucasian hosts.

⁹⁷ Arthur J. Dommen, "India Offers Plenty for Meditation," *Los Angeles Times* 10 Sep. 1967: sec. G, 1.

Here, Dommen references the stereotypical view of India as a third world country, typified by its teeming masses, superstitious tendencies, and chaotic mix of lifestyles. Like British writers such as Kipling, he uses this characterization to posit the spiritual, moral, and political inferiority of the Indian peoples. Ironically, this same view was also upheld in more reverent portrayals. These accounts assumed that Indians' superstitious nature and their penchant to cater to religious folk like Mahesh meant excellent service at the Rishikesh ashram. India's non-technological, agrarian setting provided a romantic backdrop. And the disorderly nature of Indian life translated into "local color" to be enjoyed and experienced by sojourners from the West. Lapham's description of Mia Farrow captures this well:

[Farrow] appeared at lunch, wearing white cotton pajamas and gold-rimmed glasses. In conversation with John Lennon she said she'd been to Goa, and there, with her brother, she'd bought a stove for a few rupees and lived on the beach for a week.

"You've got to do it right, to be with the people and never mind the rotten conditions," she said. "Otherwise you miss the magic of this magical land."⁹⁸

Although Americans at the time saw themselves as distinct from Britisher colonizers of the past, they still adopted many of the same dispositions towards the former colony. Indeed, after India had declared itself an independent state, the Asian country received financial and technical assistance from the U.S.⁹⁹ In Americans' eyes, India could not survive on her own, i.e., she was continued to be a "white man's burden."¹⁰⁰ And this view of India's dependency continued to underwrite lingering Orientalist attitudes of pessimism (Dommen) and privilege (Farrow).

One of the hallmarks of Orientalist knowledge is that it involves a "battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections."¹⁰¹ While Mahesh offered a convenient figure through which to process the ambivalent feelings towards an emerging authorial framework of media celebrity, popular portrayals of him also reveal a desire for an obedient Indian

⁹⁸ Lapham, "Part II" 88.

⁹⁹ Ernest Dunbar, "India," *Look* 19 Mar. 1968: 31-37, quotation from 31.

¹⁰⁰ Kipling's famous phrase.

¹⁰¹ Said, *Orientalism* 8.

subject—acquiescent, passive, and dependent. The portrayals of the Maharishi's Indian followers as appropriately servile also betray this Orientalist hope. Two decades after Indian independence, representations of Mahesh and his Indian disciples reflected respectively, what India had become (autonomous agent) in the eyes of Americans and what they had hoped it would be (compliant ally). In this sense, such images surreptitiously worked to manage various American investments both in matters at home and abroad.

HYPERREAL SAMADHI

Out of all the images of Mahesh and his movement to make their way into American popular view during the late 1960s, perhaps the most representative of the entire phenomenon was the one of the Maharishi and Mia Farrow on their arrival in New Delhi.



The spectacular color photo highlights the startling difference in appearance: the guru's "nut-brown" complexion and dark features stand in stark contrast to Farrow's fair face. Indeed, the actress—her light features, smooth skin, boyish haircut, and intense gaze—seem to portray Western innocence and youth unavailable to the Oriental sage who appears much more "shady." Of the strange pair, it is difficult to tell whose image is most spiritually imbued.

The bright orange marigolds in which the two are entwined are significant. Offerings traditionally offered to a spiritual leader in India, they also are draped around the actress's

neck in deference to the promise of her youthful celebrity. The Maharishi may have emerged from a long line of Hindu sages, but Farrow also boasts her own lineage. As the daughter of actress Maureen O'Sullivan and director John Farrow, she represents the consummate actor, the progeny of the New York stage and Hollywood screen. The image, less a reflection of the characters portrayed, reflects the complicated view of the American popular audience, who brought the frames of both media celebrity and Orientalism to bear.

Mahesh was the first spiritual leader from the East to experience large-scale mass media attention. This event, in itself, reinforced a radically different epistemological framework in which image became more authoritative than anything that could be called historical reality. To the American public, Mahesh's likeness gave witness to its own Orientalist truth, while serving as a convenient screen on which to project debates closer to home. *Hyperreal samadhi*.¹⁰²

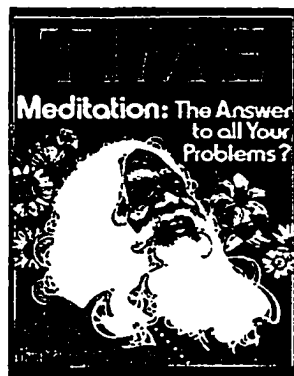
The Orientalism invoked in mass media reports differed greatly from the Orientalism deployed in traditional print culture (with its focus on literature, especially the novel). The proliferation of images—both photographic and televisual—provided a new arsenal for imaginative construction. They also gave an American audience an illusory sense that they were experiencing Mahesh firsthand. The seemingly "objective eye" of the camera and transparent nature of the visuals gave one the impression that one could perspicuously view the phenomenon at hand. But as I have shown, such images are never neutrally presented, but rhetorically select, and often reflect the audience's predetermined frames of reference. The images of the Maharishi invoked a set of assumptions that allowed for two primary interpretations of the phenomenon (critical or reverent). Although deployed in different ways, the Oriental Monk icon and narrative was an essential dimension of both interpretations, which used this frame of reference to enact a larger battle over cultural

¹⁰² *Samadhi* is a Hindu term that denotes a "meditative trance in which the highest truth is experienced." This definition is taken from Raymond B. Williams, ed., *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1992) 303.

authority, as well offer geopolitical comment. Far from challenging preconceived notions of Eastern spirituality, mass media in the television age consolidated an Orientalist view, created an Orientalist realm of vision that became deceptively "real" in its immediacy.

CODA: DEEPAK CHOPRA

Critical reviewers perhaps felt justified in their ironic view as the Beatles and other celebrities lost interest in the Maharishi and his movement. In the summer of 1968, the Maharishi cut short his 15-city American tour for lack of attendance. In the short-term, TM had indeed been a fad that seemed to fade as quickly as it emerged. But history is an unfolding story, and what it reveals can be equally ironic. As the 1960s evolved into the 70s, the nation's youth—who held a more reverent view of the Mahesh—grew up. Although many would abandon their early preoccupations and alternative lifestyles, this generation's experience of the Maharishi through mass media images would not be without its effect.



Time 1975

Transcendental meditation would enjoy resurgence in the mid-1970s, both practically and discursively.¹⁰³ Practically, meditation would be a technique experimentally adopted in the American schools and workplace. Discursively, it would become a buzzword for an alternative way to handle anxiety and stress. The Maharishi's image also enjoyed its own

¹⁰³ See Gerald Clarke and Anne Hopkins, "The TM Craze: Forty Minutes to Bliss," *Time* 13 Oct. 1975: 70-4.

discursive regeneration during this time, and the guru would become a frequent guest on popular talk shows during this period. All in all, it is questionable whether Mahesh achieved his goal of worldwide peace. However, he and his movement did manage to initiate a set of controversies in American life and Western science that are still being argued today.¹⁰⁴

Despite the immeasurable influence he had on American culture, Mahesh would be most remembered for his association with the Beatles long after this relationship had soured. His image would be nostalgically invoked as part of the larger phenomenon of their enormous success, as well as the cultural revolution that took place during the 1960s. Although they viewed the legendary pop group as TM's most promising pupils at the time, both Mahesh and the American public could not foresee the way the movement's legacy would unfold. Indeed, the individual through whom Mahesh's ideas would reach their contemporary fruition would be none other than a South Asian American named, Deepak Chopra.

Recruited as a young doctor during the "Vietnam-era doctor shortage," Chopra would arrive in the U.S. in 1970. He would become increasingly disillusioned with many aspects of Western medicine, and in 1980, picked up a book on Transcendental Meditation. By 1989, he had become the chairman and sole stockholder of Mahesh's product line of Ayur-Veda herbal cures.¹⁰⁵ His efforts were so successful that the Maharishi would bestow upon Chopra the title, "Lord of Immortality." Although he eventually split with his former teacher,

¹⁰⁴ The most obvious controversy sparked by Mahesh centers around the legality and effectiveness of alternative medicine that is still being debated today. The emerging popularity of alternative health gurus such as Dr. Andrew Weil, Dr. Bernie Siegel, as well as Chopra, attests to Americans' declining opinion of Western medicine and is perhaps the most enduring legacy of Mahesh's movement. See Claudia Wallis, "Faith and Healing," and David Van Biema, "Emperor of the Soul"—both in *Time* 24 June 1996: 58-62.

¹⁰⁵ Chopra, along with two co-authors, published an article that touted a "glowing assessment" of Ayur-veda in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1991. However, the editors of *JAMA* soon discovered the authors' link to the commercial venture, and in a piece commissioned for the publication, charged Chopra's findings as "misrepresentative." Chopra countered with a \$194 million libel suit against the journal that was later dropped. Because of the bad publicity generated from incident, Mahesh encouraged Chopra to "stop writing books and doing workshops," and the two parted ways. See Van Biema, 67; and Chip Brown, "Deepak Chopra Has a Cold," *Esquire* Oct. 1995: 123; Robert Barnett and Cathy Sears, "JAMA gets into an Indian herbal jam," *Science* 254:29 (11 Oct. 1991): 188-9; and Andrew A. Skolnick, "Maharishi Ayur-Veda: guru's marketing scheme promises the world eternal 'perfect health'," *JAMA* 266:13 (2 Oct. 1991): 1741-6.

Chopra would maintain much of the philosophical outlook developed under Mahesh's influence, as well as the guru's technocratic savvy.

Chopra's own rise to spiritual celebrity is as colorful as Mahesh's, and mass media representations of him, no less conflicted. Perhaps the most significant difference between teacher and pupil is the latter's Westernized image. Indeed, Chopra—clean-cut and immaculately dressed in Western clothing—seems diametrically opposed to Mahesh in appearance and style. Often hearkened as "an immigrant success story,"¹⁰⁶ Chopra's popular image bespeaks of a view where Oriental Monk icon and the American "model minority" myth merge. Despite this representational inflection, the New Age guru and his former teacher do share the same dark features, betraying their Indian origins and adding a powerful mystique to their spiritual missions. Many of the same representational dynamics that informed the American popular audience's view of Mahesh in the 1960s can be read in portrayals of Chopra today.

Perhaps the most disconcerting feature of Chopra is not the self-help leader's financial success or his special attention to celebrity followers. As was the case with Mahesh, the most confounding aspect of Chopra's fame seems to be the dissimulation between reality and image that the popular press senses, yet is not able to dispel or contain. As *Time* anxiously quotes:

"It's my destiny to play an infinite number of roles, but I'm not the role I'm playing," says Chopra with characteristic inscrutability.¹⁰⁷

No matter how much they are remade in its image, Mahesh and Chopra, as historical figures, demonstrate not only an initiative, but also a Westernized flair for promotion that exceeds

¹⁰⁶ Leland and Power 54.

¹⁰⁷ "Help Yourself," *Time* 14 June 1999: 206. This edition of *Time* was the fifth in a series of special issues, entitled, "Heroes and Icons." Although Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was selected for the honor as one of the hundred "most influential people of the century," Chopra was featured in the subgroup of four gurus of the self-help movement, "who taught us to rely on ourselves—to heal both body and mind." (The other three were Betty Ford, Norman Vincent Peale, and Andrew Weil.)

the representational bounds of the Oriental Monk icon. And Americans would turn to a figure more of their making...



THE MONK GOES HOLLYWOOD | *Kung Fu*

In one of the most popular films of the 1990s, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), mob hit-man Jules Winnfield, played by Samuel L Jackson, has a near-death experience which leads him to spiritually re-evaluate his life. In the film's final scene, Jules renounces his violent life of for-hire killing for one dedicated to a higher, more humane mission. He tells his partner, Vincent (John Travolta), that he will "walk the earth...like Caine in *Kung Fu*. Just walk from town to town, meet people, get in adventures...until God puts me where he wants me to be."

The movie's audience gets a clear sense of Jules' new-found spiritual conviction, not only through his references to the Almighty Father and the Biblical scripture he so rousingly cites, but his idiosyncratic nod to Caine, the wandering monk of the 1970s television series, *Kung Fu*. Both the humor and efficacy of this reference derive from the allusion to Caine as pop cultural icon, a wholly fictional figure whose spiritual authority has been made wholly real through the medium of television.

While "real" Oriental Monks, like the Maharishi Mahesh, would disappoint, ones spun directly from imagination could not, as the television and film characters such as Kwai Chang Caine would prove. The 1970s and 80s saw the emergence of a number of fictional Monk figures in popular media. As Hollywood creations, these characters would take part in a new stage in the development of the Oriental Monk icon and firmly establish virtual Orientalism's hold. Kwai Chang Caine in the 1970s television series, *Kung Fu*, would be the first to assert a prominent visual image of the Monk, as well as consolidate the discrete Orientalist narrative

that the image would meaningfully carry. As I will discuss, implicit attitudes, expectations, and hopes in circulation since the 1950s, and further cultivated in the 60s, were made explicit through the popular mediums of film and television.

The fact that Oriental Monks in the 1970s and later decades emerged within fictional accounts is of great significance. Virtual Orientalism constitutes a new symbolic realm characterized by its obdurate self-sufficiency. In its self-sufficiency, it does not simply declare an independence from the real, but co-opts or colonizes the real. This particular operation is especially insidious and can be clearly seen in the cases we will examine. As modern-day media intertwines the fictional characters and the actors who play them, the lines between fabrication and reality become hopelessly blurred. Although superficially labeled as pure entertainment, these "Hollywood Monks" are taken as a new kind of ethical guide, often supplementing, if not supplanting more historical models.

"AN EASTERN WESTERN"

The 1960s were a watershed period in American history—a time of unusual social, political, cultural, and religious transformation. The period saw the popular recognition of "alternative" lifestyles and spiritual experimentation, as well as 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 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.¹

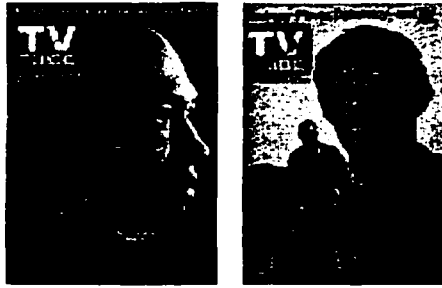
The cultures of Asia offered the unparalleled promise of finding such ground. Although the seeds of such promise were already sown as we have seen in the cases D.T. Suzuki and the

¹ See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, they would not fully come to bear until the early 1970s when the search for spiritual renewal in the East found popular expression in *Kung Fu* (1972-75). *Kung Fu*, which had its humble beginnings as an ABC "Movie of the Week" in February 1972, follows the wanderings of a "half-Chinese, half-American" Shaolin priest named Kwai Chang Caine, through the late nineteenth-century Western frontier. Having justifiably killed the emperor's nephew, Caine is forced to flee China to the U.S. But his deed follows him, as the young monk becomes a wanted fugitive on both continents, and he attempts to atone for his "sin" by helping those in need. In America, Caine also discovers that he has a half-brother, Danny Caine, whom he also goes in search.

Kung Fu began as a discarded script written by comic writers, Ed Spielman and Howard Friedlander. Their decision to pen an "eastern Western," initially inspired by Spielman's avid interest in Asian cultures (Japanese film, martial arts, Chinese language and philosophy), led to the movie script the pair would sell to Warner Bros. in 1970. Although the studio bought the script with their overseas market in mind, the project was subsequently shelved because of the high production cost it would entail (\$18 million), as well as the movie's "violent and esoteric" nature.

During an earnings slump, Warner Bros. decided to take a gamble on the project and handed it over to producer/director, Jerry Thorpe, who transformed the screenplay into a made-for-TV movie. The original 90-minute movie pilot, *Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon*, first aired on February 22, 1972. It was met by such a popular response that ABC not only offered a second showing of the movie during its summer season, but also commissioned four new one-hour episodes for the following fall. By 1973 *Kung Fu* officially became part of ABC's regular line-up.



During its inception, *Kung Fu* was viewed as a revolutionary series in many ways. The success of the program is undoubtedly due to the novel ways it played upon and transformed the once popular yet fading genre of the television Western to reflect the outlook of a new generation. Although the rugged frontier characterized by its vigilante justice provided much of the backdrop as in traditional Westerns, the story's protagonist, Kwai Chang Caine, was without precedent. As a fugitive who demonstrated none of the bravado of conventional Western heroes and, in fact, espoused a pacifist philosophy that directly challenged such behavior, the character of Caine seemed quite radical indeed.

One of *Kung Fu's* most characteristic features was its use of flashback, which was intimately linked to its pacifist philosophy.² In most episodes, Caine's contemporary situation in America is interspersed with scenes from his Shaolin training in China, offering the philosophical background for his unorthodox actions and views. The audience is also able to trace the development Caine's spiritual development through his relationships with the show's most regular characters, his Oriental Monk teachers—Master Po and Master Kan. Under their tutelage, the viewer along with the young Caine learn the show's most important lessons:

Perceive the way of nature and no force of man can harm you. Do not meet a wave head on: avoid it. You do not have to stop force: It is easier to redirect it. Learn more ways to

² This pacifist philosophy, as well as the spiritual nature of the martial arts practice of kung fu, was also communicated by the way in which the program's more violent moments are portrayed. These slow motion scenes were presumably meant to emphasize the wages of brute force, and highlight Caine's artful and disciplined method.

preserve rather than destroy. Avoid rather than check. Check rather than hurt. Hurt rather than maim. Maim rather than kill. For all life is precious nor can any be replaced.

The show's success did not rest on its Eastern-influenced pacifist philosophy alone. It intimately linked these views with martial arts prowess—a specific brand of physical strength and agility that few Americans had but a vague notion. And this blend of spirituality and physicality would prove a potent attraction.

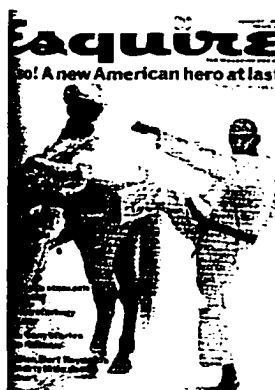
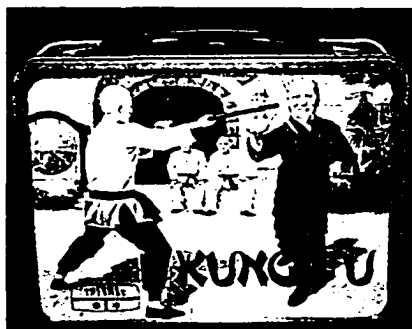


*Caine with
Master Po.*

For many, *Kung Fu* was considered a breakthrough series—not only because of the novel way it inserted pacifist philosophy into the popular genre of Western, but also because of its unlikely hero, a "half-Chinese Buddhist monk." No other television show before *Kung Fu* had featured a lead character of Asian descent, let alone valorized his cultural and spiritual heritage. Reflective of a new consciousness about race and gender, the series also featured other unsung heroes of the West in a more humane and dignified fashion—Chinese laborers, Native Americans, Black and Armenian sojourners, and women.

These elements—the show's philosophical pacifism, its martial arts spirituality, and its embrace of minorities and women—televisually idiosyncratic at the time, would distinguish the show from anything that had come before. No one could have predicted the series' amazing success. As one critic acknowledged: "Its audience appeal is a network vice

president's dream. Kids love it. So do teens, young marrieds, and women of all ages."³ *Kung Fu* would enjoy a three-year run, garnering not only impressive Nielsen ratings, but also several Emmy nominations. The show's popularity would spawn a book series and record, as well as later inspire a popular dance craze.⁴ Perhaps overwhelming cultural acceptance of the series by the American public could best be seen by the show's appearance in the inner-city public schools of Philadelphia, where the program was used as an aid in teaching children to read.⁵ By 1973, "The Kung Fu Craze" was sweeping the nation,⁶ and Kwai Chang Caine declared, a "new American hero."⁷



Children's lunchbox marketed to the show's younger audience (l). The August 1973 cover of Esquire magazine (r).

A DOUBLE-EDGED CHOP: READING CONTRADICTIONS

It is no doubt that *Kung Fu* represented an innovative program in the early 1970s with its unprecedented inclusion of women and racial minorities, as well as its unorthodox view of violence aimed at a mass audience in the U.S. However, if one were to view *Kung Fu* within the historical representation of other Oriental Monks by the American mass media, the series loses its revolutionary cast. Through this frame, *Kung Fu* can be read as a hegemonic

³ Gary Deeb, "You Can't Teach the Golden Rule with a Punch in the Nose," *Chicago Tribune* 1 Oct. 1973: sec. 3, 13.

⁴ "Kicking with Kung Fu," *Time*, 27 Jan. 1975: 70.

⁵ "'Kung Fu' and 'Sanford' Praised As Aids in Teaching of Reading," *New York Times* 24 June 1973: 46.

⁶ "The Kung Fu Craze," *Newsweek* 7 May 1973: 76.

⁷ "Ah, So! A New American Hero at Last! (Kung Fu and All That)," *Esquire* August 1973: cover.

moment, in which the American popular imagination once again recreated its Asian spiritual "other." The fictional nature of the series allowed an unmitigated Orientalist portrayal of Eastern philosophy, as well of the behavior of its Asian characters.

To view *Kung Fu* as an instance of cultural hegemony takes into account the multifaceted ways in which the series operated to manage social meaning. Antonio Gramsci speaks of *hegemony* as thus:

The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the *organic relations between State or political society and "civil society"*.⁸ [My emphasis]

Political society and civil society constitute "two major superstructural 'levels'—the former corresponding to the State, and latter to "the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private'" (12). Political society exercises its power and accomplishes direct domination through juridical channels, whereas civil society works through a rhetoric of influence. Although television and film did not exist during Gramsci's time, they can well be categorized as cultural institutions that take part in the formation of civil society.

To understand *Kung Fu* as a hegemonic moment in the cultural history of the U.S., is a complex affair, and the best way to discern its operation as such is to start with the *contradictions* that the series entailed. Contradictions emerge when there is a severe clash between the dominant narrative at hand, and the social reality it is attempting to contain. Richard Dyer, in his *Essay on Representation*, further describes the relationship between hegemony and contradiction as thus:

[Hegemony is] the expression of the interests and world-views of a particular social group or class so expressed as to pass for the interest and world-view of the whole of society. Hegemony is something that a class, gender and/or race constantly has to work for — it is never permanently, statically established in a culture. It seems to me likely that the degree to

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 52.

which the suppression of contradictions in an art-work actually shows is a register of the hold of a particular hegemony at the moment of the film's production. Where there is a sense of strain at holding down contradiction, I would posit either the ruling groups' own lack of faith in their world-view (contradictions *within* dominant ideology) or the presence in other groups of a hard and disturbing challenge to the ruling groups' hegemony (contradictions *to* dominant ideology).⁹

Kung Fu gave rise to both types of contradictions of which Dyer speaks (*within* and *to* dominant ideology). These can best be read from the popular print commentary that accompanied the show (e.g., reviews, letters to the editor). By understanding these two primary contradictions, we can begin to discern the narrative shape and visual mechanics of the show's hegemonic project.

*Caine: Pacifist Hero or Violent Assailant?
A Contradiction Within Dominant Ideology*

In the early 1970s, as Americans emerged from a decade characterized by social unrest and unprecedented generational conflict, it is not surprising that their view of themselves and the society they had become was undergoing a major change. Contradictions *within* the dominant ideology were plentiful and reflected the shifts and compromises being made. In relation to *Kung Fu*, this type of contradiction emerged in the critical reviews of the show that centered on the issue of violence. These reviews noted a glaring contradiction between the series' pacifist philosophy and its equally dependable fight scenes. As a critic for the industry periodical, *Variety*, sarcastically wrote:

Bragged on by the network for its non-violent nature, each segment seems to wind up with a clutter of corpses probably unmatched by any other series on TV. But Carradine is never really responsible—it seems the dead ones were always bent on destroying him when they met death.¹⁰

Chicago Tribune columnist, Gary Deeb, in his commentary, "You can't teach the Golden Rule with a punch in the nose," further condemned the show's morality as disingenuous.

⁹ Richard Dyer, *Essay on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 93-94.

¹⁰ Rev. of *Kung Fu*, *Variety* 18 Sept. 1974.

And please don't twist my arm about Caine's live-and-let-live credo. Kung Fu is a violent TV show that insidiously exploits the mass audience's craving for blood and guts, and yet astonishingly wraps it all up in a pretty package topped by a stylish ribbon that proclaims the Golden Rule.¹¹

Many critics such as these questioned the depth and sincerity of the series' philosophical aims. Far from challenging the conventional use of violence, they felt that *Kung Fu* simply made aggression more palatable by coating it with a thin spiritual veneer drawn from "night-school notions about Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tse."¹² Although the character of Caine would espouse a rhetoric of non-violence, he would inevitably put his martial arts skills to good use in each episode, with justifiable defense providing the convenient escape clause. According to the critics, the show's producers and writers had stumbled on a formula that allowed the audience to have their fortune cookie and eat it, too.

Perhaps most damning were the possible effects the show had on its young audience.

Stephen Farber for *Esquire* magazine noted:

Although Caine preaches nonviolence, every episode includes at least one juicy fight, and many high-school kids have indicated more interest in Caine's exotic techniques of assault and battery than in his pacifist philosophy. A boy from Arlington, Virginia, put it very simply in his letter: "I would like to learn karate and judo because kids are always trying to beat me up at school."¹³

The fact that the critics were concerned with *Kung Fu's* influence on the country's youngest viewers tells us much about the particular ideological contradiction involved. Since children represent the future of the nation, any public discussion regarding their moral development necessarily encapsulates the values that the nation holds most dear. As the 60s generation began to take their place in the adult world and have children of their own, they had to decide which values from their parents' tradition to keep and which ones to transform. And as a

¹¹ Deeb 13.

¹² Cyclops, "Kung Foolishness," *Newsweek* 12 Feb. 1973: 51.

¹³ Stephen Farber, "Kids! Now You Can Chop Up Your Old Comic-book Heroes with Your Bare Hands!" *Esquire* August 1973: 74+.

product of its time. *Kung Fu* reflected a negotiation of such values *within* the dominant ideology.

*Kung Fu: Racially Progressive or Racially Regressive?
A Contradiction To The Dominant Ideology*

As mainstream critics argued over *Kung Fu's* pacifist vision, one of the most critical reviews of the show was lodged from a very different angle. This criticism, unlike the others, would demonstrate a significant contradiction *to* the dominant ideology inherent in *Kung Fu*, as a "minority" opinion would offer a bold challenge to the seeming progressive portrayal of racial-ethnic peoples in the show. In his editorial review for the *New York Times*, Asian American author, Frank Chin, focused on the series' representation of Asians and especially of Asian men. In his controversial opening, he claims:

The progress that Asians of all yellows have made in the movies and on television is pitiful compared to the great strides in determination made by apes, dinosaurs, zombies, the Creature from the Black Lagoon and other rubber creations of Hollywood's imagination.

In 40 years, apes went from a naked, hairy King Kong, gigantic with nitwit sex fantasies about little human women, to a talking chimpanzee leading his fellow apes in a battle to take over the planet. We've progressed from Fu Manchu, the male Dragon Lady of silent movies, to Charlie Chan and then to "Kung Fu" on TV.¹⁴

Chin goes on to link the show's portrayal of Asian masculinity to the "'small, soft man' vision of the Chinese in America."¹⁵ Ultimately for Chin, *Kung Fu* insidiously reinforces pre-existing stereotypes and plays into a white fantasy of Chinese as "passive, docile, timid, mystical aliens." The series, far from being progressive, simply continues a legacy of racist misrepresentation.

¹⁴ Frank Chin, "Kung Fu Is Unfair to Chinese," *New York Times* 24 Mar. 1974: II, 19. The "talking chimpanzee" to which Chin is referring is Cornelius, one of the central characters in the series of movies popular at the time. *Planet of the Apes*.

¹⁵ Chin 19.

Chin also reports that "a debate is raging" in Asian America—one between those who accept the series and those who vocally express their disdain for the series. Of the two sides, he writes:

The yellows who are against "Kung Fu" are advised to sit down and be grateful that Charlie Chan reruns and the "Kung Fu" series are making us sympathetic in the white man's mind. And the majority never having had a serious thought about our people mining for gold and building the transcontinental railroad, are so grateful to "Kung Fu" for making us likable that they look on its insults and inaccuracies as merely the price of acceptance in America.

At the heart of this debate is a commentary over the insidiousness of the "good" stereotype and its power to dishonestly suggest a racial politics that is not only sympathetic, but also progressive. While "the majority" of Asian Americans are willing to settle for this representational compromise, Chin, a product of the ethnic consciousness movements of the 1960s, is not. *Kung Fu*, for him and other vocal dissidents, is racially regressive in its cunningly deceptive portrayal of the Chinese. As a minority opinion, even within his own racial-ethnic community, Chin calls attention to and firmly establishes a contradiction to the show's dominant ideology.

Three weeks after the article appeared, *Kung Fu* producer/writer/director, Ed Spielman responded to Chin's attack. In "I'm Proud to Have Created 'Kung Fu,'" Spielman pegs the Asian American author as simply a "malcontent in residence," and defends the series as one that portrays Chinese as "intelligent, brave, disciplined and humane."¹⁶ He goes on to claim:

No one ever formed a negative opinion of a Chinese from having watched "Kung Fu." It is the mainstream of public opinion which indicates that "Kung Fu" changed the negative Oriental stereotype to an image of sensitivity and dignity.¹⁷

For the most part, Spielman does not seem cognizant of one of Chin's primary criticisms, i.e., how seemingly "good" stereotypes can be as harmful as "bad" ones. This lack of

¹⁶ Ed Spielman, "I'm Proud to Have Created 'Kung Fu,'" *New York Times* 14 Apr. 1974: 19.

¹⁷ Spielman 19.

awareness is written into his related defense of Charlie Chan. Of the Chinese detective popularized in American film during the 1930s and 40s, Spielman writes: "I would willingly trade such a stereotype for any one of the passive Jews, servile blacks, or drunken Irish that I have seen depicted."¹⁸ In an especially telling comment, the *Kung Fu* creator labels Chin's opinion as "radical" and "very much in the minority," citing "the countless letters of thanks which I have received from Oriental-Americans for my creation."¹⁹ As Chin predicted, Spielman, as the voice of "the majority" once again commands him "to sit down and be grateful."

In addition to Chin's scathing critique, letters from Asian Americans appeared in newspapers that registered a notable discontent with the racial politics of the series on another level. In her letter to the *TV Guide*, Miss S.Y. Pon from Fort Collins, Colorado, commented: "I resent having a white actor play the role of a Chinese man, even if the character is supposed to be half-Chinese, half-white."²⁰ In a more extended submission, Katie San of New York City wrote to the *New York Times*:

It is incredible that the role of the main character, Caine who is half-Asian, is played by Carradine, who does not—not, not, not—look remotely Asian. And when he appears with Asians, it is completely absurd. Maybe on a theater stage, from the 15th row, with a lot of adhesive tape on his eyes, Carradine might look half Asian to a white audience. But not to Asians—or half Asians.

Is anybody following this? Does anybody care? Can anyone see the extreme irony of the situation? Here is a TV series with a story line that can, at last, begin to show an Asian as a human being, and not as a stereotype of one. And that role is being played by a white actor.²¹

It seemed that, especially for a number of Asian Americans and other dissatisfied viewers, any measure towards racial progress that *Kung Fu* made was seriously undercut by the politics of casting. Although objections such as these over racial representation would not become a more prominent issue until the 1980s, they, like Chin's pointed criticisms, marked a

¹⁸ Spielman 19.

¹⁹ Spielman 19.

²⁰ S.Y. Pon, Letter, *TV Guide* 30 June 1973: A-2.

²¹ Katie San, Letter, *New York Times* 17 June 1973: II, 19.

contradiction *to* the dominant ideology towards race that the show could not so readily suppress.

MASKING CONTRADICTIONS

To begin to understand these contradictions and what they reveal about *Kung Fu's* ideological matrix, one must recognize that hegemony is not simply the domination of a unitary ruling class over an equally well-defined proletariat or "subaltern" group. Rather, this social process often depends on a number of groups—ruling class and subaltern in nature. According to Gramsci, one avenue by which to study such interactions involves the examination of "the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them."²² The interaction between these different groups gives character to hegemonic moments that are historically unique in nature.²³

Kung Fu sets the stage for a negotiation of different socio-political interests emergent during the period. The turmoil of the 1960s produced a younger generation with new ideals. This generation—whose ethos was defined by anti-war movements, free-love culture, counter-cultural skepticism, and Civil Rights struggles—created their own subaltern existences that radically challenged the dominant social, religious, and cultural hierarchies of their parents' world. However, as American youth entered adulthood in the 1970s, the evolution of American values was evident and marked the entrance of a new dominant group. Television, as mass medium, reflected this cultural ingression, with new programming that was a great deal more ethnically diverse (e.g., *Sanford and Son*), and attempted to honestly capture the social reality of its time (e.g., *All in the Family*, *Room 222*).

²² Gramsci 52.

²³ See Gramsci, especially the section entitled: "History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria" (52-55).

This is not to say that the cultural values and perspectives of the 60s generation simply replaced that of their parents'. But rather the early 1970s saw the complex negotiation between these dominant groups, especially in the realm of mass media. *Kung Fu* paradigmatically captures this moment, as the series enacted a protracted generational compromise. The television Western was a format familiar to an older audience, who had made it the most popular fictional genre of the 1950s. *Kung Fu* maintained many of the elements of the traditional Western: the distinct dichotomy between good and evil (good guys vs. bad guys), the lonely and misunderstood hero, and the unforgiving landscape that reflected the harsh social and physical conditions of the frontier.

The series also incorporated the sensibilities of the younger generation as well. Critics, who immediately saw the show as a "flower children's western"²⁴ and attributed its more innovative dimensions to this cultural influence, discussed such affinities. The bulk of the commentary centered on the character of Caine, who was tagged in one review as "the runaway Buddhist priest with all the Love-Peace-and-Happiness ideals."²⁵ Kwai Chang Caine, as an alternative Western hero, embodied the values of non-violence, anti-authoritarianism, and ethno-cultural diversity that also spoke to a younger viewing audience, as well as served as an expression of the changing times.

As an integrated discourse, *Kung Fu* did not simply conjoin resonant themes of the old dominant group with the ones of the new, but also emphasized values that they had in common. Most notable of these were Caine's self-reliance and his spiritual individualism. As a bi-racial outcast in both China and the U.S., Caine is left to fend for himself. In the flashbacks that recount his initiation into the Shaolin Temple, the young Caine perseveres both physically and morally over other boys who wish to enter. In the scenes that take place in America, this dimension of self-reliance is even more apparent as Caine must depend on his own ingenuity and strength to survive as a fugitive. However, even as he seeks and finds

²⁴ Benjamin J. Stein, "Kung Fu," *National Review* 1 Mar. 1974: 265.

²⁵ Deeb 13.

human friendship in temporary ways along the frontier, his spiritual training sets him apart from those he meets—Chinese and American. In addition, he does not stray from his religious commitments even in the intemperate social environment of the West. As one who is able to maintain his spiritual integrity in the hostile frontier, Caine stands out as a staunch individualist and reinscribes the myth of the American West in conventional form.

While the features of self-reliance and individualism strike a chord in both old and new dominant groups, perhaps the element which most contributed to *Kung Fu's* mass appeal was the show's focus on human reconciliation and spiritual justice. Robert S. Ellwood has called the years leading up to the 1970s, "the bitter years"²⁶—ones in which American witnessed the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Chicago riots, the Kent State shootings, and the prolonged continuation of the Vietnam War. This environment of seemingly senseless violence and aggression, as Ellwood states, "seemed to exhaust the Sixties spirit and gave way to the more inward, disillusioned mood of the Watergate decade."²⁷

In addition, the dominant culture also felt under siege by the growing political presence of a variety of subaltern groups. The late 1960s saw the emergence of the Black Power Movement, as well as similar movements by Chicanos, Asian Americans, and American Indians. These new movements brought their own challenges and distinguished themselves from the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s in several ways. For one, they did not simply tackle the arena of political and social participation (i.e., voting rights, school integration), but demanded full acknowledgement of racial minorities in all areas of life (most notably, education and culture, and for Native Americans, full-scale social autonomy). Moving beyond the issue of assimilation and integration, ethnic consciousness movements also posed a direct affront to the State. "Liberation" entailed liberation from American imperialist efforts—on both international and domestic fronts and gave rise to emergence of

²⁶ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1974) 247-325.

²⁷ Ellwood 249.

various cultural nationalisms.²⁸ Finally, these movements did not necessarily adopt the pacifist means of protest espoused by Martin Luther King, but entertained approaches that were more direct and confrontational. Indeed, both parties of the dominant group sought relief from the social unrest and confusion of the 1960s, especially the direct and proactive challenge from various subaltern movements regarding the State.

Emerging within this socially fraught environment, *Kung Fu* offered itself as an expression of these larger conflicts and provided a singular vision of how these conflicts could be overcome. As both acknowledgement and panacea, it constituted a type of regular and regulated *release* for its audience from these conflicts as its formulaic narrative was played out each week on the small screen. To understand the series' effectiveness, it is helpful to look at the details of this narrative and the dynamic identifications it forged between the show's characters and its faithful audience.

Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon

Kung Fu effectively brought unexpected solace to the dominant culture suffering from the social upheavals just discussed. Caine's weekly encounters with Chinese laborers and other misfits enacted a pointed commentary concerning these groups that, at once, acknowledged their presence and the nobility of their struggle, yet clearly denounced their methods. One of the most evident examples of this can be found in the series' pilot, *Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon* (1972).²⁹ The made-for-TV movie centered on the plight of a group of Chinese railroad workers, who are forced to dig through a rock formation filled with natural gas. As thirteen men are subsequently killed, Fong, a pragmatic and bitter worker

²⁸ Ellwood 290. The "internal colonialism" paradigm acted as the philosophical model for action among many of these groups. The paradigm linked imperialist efforts abroad (in Asian, Africa, and Latin America) to the continued subjugation of Asian Americans, Blacks, and Chicanos in the U.S. and united these groups under the banner of the "Third-World"—the continuing source of exploited labor in a capitalist-dominated world economy. Liberation therefore necessarily involved "self-determination" or autonomy from the State and its sanctioned institutions. See William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1993) 41-42.

²⁹ This television movie is still widely available in video rental stores and video sellers.

incites the rest of the camp to rebel. He is immediately shot to death by Raif, the surly white foreman. In the tense scene, Caine implores the laborers:

To fight for yourself is right. To die vainly without hope of winning is the action of stupid men. Let one death be enough.

The workers, suitably pacified, return to their work. The story takes a number of twists and turns, but eventually, Caine, himself, takes up militant means to disrupt continued mining efforts (e.g., by blowing up a new shipment of dynamite and eventually employing his Shaolin training to overcome his captors). As Dillon, the head boss, becomes the sole white person remaining and a prisoner in his own camp, the workers celebrate their victory. Throughout the events, Caine maintains a calm detachment. And in his final act before leaving the settlement, he sets ablaze the symbol of the worker's oppression—the wooden railway—with a spirit of both sadness and defiance.



Caine works alongside Chinese American laborers in a scene from Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon.

The television movie that would launch the series is remarkable in both content and style. Per content, the storyline of the film was indeed revolutionary in that it not only brought to the small screen a most unconventional hero (a Shaolin Buddhist monk), but also focused attention on and sympathetically portrayed the plight of Chinese railroad workers, whose struggles were conspicuously absent in fictional accounts of the Western frontier.³⁰ In

³⁰ Perhaps the most well known Chinese character to appear in a television Western is Hop Sing, the loyal domestic of the Cartwright family on the series, *Bonanza*. Darrell Hamamoto offers a survey of these characters in his chapter, "Asians in the American West," *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1994) 32-63.

addition, the workers were not written as an undifferentiated mass; they reflected a range of character types that, at first glance, seemed to go beyond the conventional representations of Chinese.

On a stylistic level, the movie effectively incorporated several devices that not only gave *Kung Fu* its unique "look and feel," but also were visually innovative for television:

It was Jerry [Thorpe] who started the visuals with candles...the slow motion, forced perspective, and long-lens rack focus techniques. The rest of us, certainly awe-inspired, tried our best to add to and increase the visual impact.³¹

All these elements combined to visually capture the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Caine's story. The use of slow motion made the martial arts scenes more "ballet-like" and highlighted the skillfulness and artistry behind the protagonist's Shaolin training. The slowed-down pace of the combat sequences was meant to reflect the deep thought behind the action and present a philosophical alternative to the viewing audience. One of the later producers of *Kung Fu*, John Furia, Jr., would note:

The whole show displayed a lack of the frantic, frenetic motion for its own sake that I think is part of the American culture and a lot of the American media. Our characters moved and spoke slowly and tersely. They used fewer words rather than more. They didn't repress their emotions, they controlled them, as well as their actions.³²

This new philosophical view was enhanced further by other techniques as well. The use of flashback—a hallmark of both movie and series—allowed the viewer to reconstruct Caine's training at the Chinese temple, as well as trace the attachments and events that were formative in his emotional and spiritual development. The personal background that the flashbacks provide helped create a strong identification between Caine and the spectator. In *Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger. The Sign of the Dragon*, form and content merged seamlessly, setting precedence for a series that would introduce a new type of American hero.

³¹ Herbie J. Pilato, *The Kung Fu Book of Caine* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1993) 9.

³² Pilato 8.

However, both form and content would help carry out a greater ideological mission beyond these obvious achievements. Although it humanely portrayed the Chinese laborers' struggle against their white employers, the storyline did enact a pointed commentary regarding how such struggles are most effectively resolved. Fong, who initially calls the men to arms, is immediately killed off. As angry upstart, his actions are portrayed as foolishly impulsive in relation to Kwai Chang Caine's calm and tactical approach. Even when Caine resorts to more destructive measures, his actions are always portrayed as somehow provoked and therefore always justified. For instance, one of the extended martial arts scenes is prompted by the stabbing death of the old man, Han Fei, who reminds Caine of his favorite teacher, Master Po. Not only does he find the men's age their murders abhorrent, but also his (and the audience's) attachment to these spiritual men makes Caine's retribution seem necessary and fair. The movie, therefore, portrays the use of violence as a defensive measure and last resort.

In this way, the movie's plot conveys its preference for one style of leadership over another: defensive over aggressive, thought over emotion, Caine over Fong. On a superficial level, this view seems benign and more reflective of a philosophical choice that has little to do with whether those being led are Chinese or not. However, because race plays a significant part in both story and visuals, the movie's contemporary message cannot be thus separated. One is able to discern this commentary through a close examination of the characters involved. Although a variety of Chinese railroad workers are portrayed, as a whole, they are represented as an oppressed group that is unable to organize itself effectively against their oppressors. Han Fei, the old man, possesses the spiritual insight but not the initiative. Fong, the young upstart, possesses the initiative, but not the insight. And the rest of the Chinese characters who have speaking roles either resign themselves to their fate (Chuen) or exploit the situation to their own benefit (Hsiang). It is not until Caine arrives on the scene and takes control of the situation that the unjust system is properly handled, and much of this, he accomplishes mainly on his own.



*Caine and
Han Fei.*

Hence, old stereotypes of Chinese get written into the movie in a new, yet insidious way. For instance, the character of Han Fei, in his calm passivity and general good will, shares an affinity with the emasculated colored servant, who knows better than his oppressors but accepts his fate all the same. On the other end of the spectrum, the character of Hsiang alerts Dillon and Raif of the impending uprising, and thus trades in his loyalty for a meal. As such, he is easily recognized as the immoral and essentially cunning Asian.³³

Other stock characters, such as the racist bar patron and the brutish foreman (Raif), also take part in the story. However, the white men in the movie are, for the most part, written with greater depth. McKay, the mine surveyor, embodies a social conscience that eventually gets him killed. And out of all the characters (besides that of Caine), it is Dillon, the camp boss who is portrayed in the most sophisticated manner. Although he sanctions continued blasting through the gas-laden hillside and is therefore directly responsible for the deaths of many Chinese laborers, he is not cast as an evil villain but rather as someone who is doing his best under the circumstances. His character is allowed to register doubt over his decisions, as well as a resigned remorse after the successful takeover of the camp by Caine and the other Chinese railroad workers.

Returning to my original analysis that frames *Kung Fu* as an ideological compromise between old and new dominant groups, one is able to understand Dillon's portrayal and the

³³ For a discussion of stereotypes that haunt American portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans, see Elaine H. Kim, "Images of Asians in Anglo-American Literature," *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982) 3-22; and Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1999).

concurrent stereotyping of other characters—both Chinese and white. The concept for the film was obviously indebted to the genre of classic Westerns that fit squarely within the sensibility of the old dominant group. Within this genre the protagonist was usually a man who possessed unusual character that distinguished him from the more brutish types that he encountered in the Old West. He was also often portrayed as an individual who faced a difficult moral dilemma and who would eventually succumb to the fate he was unfairly dealt. Caine fits this mold, but more interestingly, so does Dillon.

Indeed, Caine and Dillon reflect the sensibilities and characteristics of new and old dominant parties, respectively, *in the new party's eyes*. Dillon is portrayed as the ultimate "company man," a model citizen and byproduct of capitalist expansion. With a firm belief in technological progress (railroad), he perseveres in his attempts to settle uncharted territory. On a more mundane level, he is a person caught up in a system that depends on such a belief. In *Kung Fu: The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon*, Dillon embodies the old Western hero, now transformed into tragic victim. Indeed Dillon's eventual insight is meant to parallel that of the audience members, who witnessed the promise of a new industrial age in the postwar period lead only to increased disillusionment and alienation in the 1960s.

While Dillon serves as the point of identification for older audience members, Caine serves as one for the movie's younger audience. For a generation eager to abandon, or at least call into question their parents' way of life, Caine's anomalous character reflected their commentary on the conventional order. The system could not be challenged from within, i.e., given well-known ethical structures. It could only be transformed with the introduction of new models for behavior and action. The young generation that came of age during the 1960s found such models in the spiritual cultures of the East. Hence, the character of Kwai Chang Caine embodies this new sensibility that emerged in direct response to the old. As itinerant monk in a foreign setting, the character seemed to capture the alienation of a generation who saw themselves as seeking a new identity apart from their past.

The sympathetic portrayals of both Chinese (Han Fei) and whites (Dillon) at *Kung Fu's* inauguration seemed to suggest a new representative egalitarianism. However, within the larger ideological frame, these sympathetic identifications functioned differently according to race and social position. On the one hand, through the figure of Dillon, the movie's nod toward a dominant (white) ethos of the previous generation acknowledged this generation's lingering authority, yet demonstrated the tragic impotence of its claims. On the other, the film included a self-congratulatory recognition of a subaltern group (Chinese Americans) that was, as we have also seen, both limited and limiting in its vision. The character of Kwai Chang Caine stood at the center of this hegemonic stage. And, as a unique expression of an emerging party of the dominant group (1960s moderate liberals), his figure would relativize and force silent commentary on the concerns and interests of both traditional dominant and subaltern groups through his narrative journey. As the pilot gave way to the television series, *Kung Fu* would come to stand as a generation's representational claim to a new social order.

Kung Fu: The Series

The way in which racial minorities are scripted into each episode reveals a potent commentary on contemporary race relations during the early 1970s. Unlike the movie pilot, which dealt with an exploited group (Chinese American laborers), the weekly episodes would individualize the politics of race. In addition, it would ideally configure a pacifist approach to social oppression. This ideological solution, although often complicated by plot and character development, would become *Kung Fu's* patterned and paternalizing diagnosis to racial strife and misunderstanding.

Caine's struggle to live a peaceful existence in the not-so-peaceful environment of the Wild West is a focal point of each episode. It is apparent that the storywriters were aware of the contradictions the show held regarding pacifism and violence, as well as attitudes towards the social self-determination of minority groups. And the way these tensions were eased became formulaically scripted. Each episode that deals with the oppression of an ethnic

individual by whites first recognizes and highlights the injustice of the situation. It also, at some point, gives expression to the anger inherently involved, especially how the minority characters experience this anger. When either side resorts to psychological or physical violence, Caine inevitably steps in and diffuses the scene as heroic and wise mediator. And as such, he becomes the only one who is justified in his use of physical force.

This formula can best be seen by examining several episodes that invoke its prowess and appeal. In "The Spirit Helper" (1 Nov. 1973), Caine befriends an Indian adolescent named Nashebo (played by a young Don Johnson), during the boy's spiritual rite of passage to becoming a man. Alone in the wilderness and suffering from extreme exhaustion from his quest, Nashebo opens his eyes to find Caine standing before him and immediately takes the wandering monk as an otherworldly presence, his "spirit helper." At the youth's encouragement, Caine follows him back to his family's camp only to find Nashebo's father slain and his mother, Crucita, kidnapped by band of outlaws. As Caine and Nashebo attempt to rescue Crucita, they, too, are captured. The story climaxes when the outlaw leader, an aggressive Irishman named Pike, challenges Caine to a fight. Mano a mano, Caine defeats the prideful Pike and wins the release of himself, the boy, and his mother. But when the ropes that bind Nashebo are cut, the young Indian immediately lunges for Pike with a machete to avenge his father's death. Both Crucita and Caine intervene, and as he holds Nashebo back, Caine utters: "Is it not better to embrace the living than avenge the dead?" Nashebo relents, and at the story's end, Caine declares: "Now, you have become a man."



Nashebo (Don Johnson) in "The Spirit Helper."

"The Spirit Helper" serves as a pointed commentary on the use of violence as a means to enact racial justice. The storyline does much to develop viewers' identification with

Nashebo, as he is portrayed with a youthful earnestness and passion. While the audience is also allowed to feel the young man's rage and helplessness when he discovers the violent demise of his family, they are steered away from embracing an equally violent response through Caine's intervention. Caine, as such, does not function as a conventional protagonist, but rather as a moral measure for the actions of those he meets. Most notably, his character is meant to reveal how the edict of "an eye for an eye" is ethically bankrupt and only continues the cycle of vengeance and hate; the cycle can only be overcome through love and the embrace of all human life. On the surface, the solution to personal and racial strife that Caine provides seems not only dignified and morally sound, but also simple as well.

Despite its elegance, the episode lacks both emotional and moral depth and does not adequately address the problems it raises. Nashebo's pain and suffering, as well as his mother's, remain at a superficial level—with the machete scene acting as defining moment. In addition, any legacy of greater conflict between Indians and frontiersmen is completely absent from the narrative. The only mention of Nashebo's larger community is made in the episode's final moments when he and his mother leave Caine to rejoin their people. The audience is left with the hope that Nashebo will take his pacifist lesson to heart and share its message with others of his kind—no doubt a commentary to racial and ethnic minorities in the present day.

A significant reason for this easy solution rests in the medium itself. Bound to a narrative format that requires the elements of intriguing conflict and satisfactory resolution within the space of an hour, the show's producers and writers are inevitably confined to this moral recipe. However, one must also acknowledge the ways in which television format colludes with a larger ideological view that finds such a solution palatable. In the eyes of the dominant culture, the answer to racial oppression is indeed quite simple or at least that is what it wishes it to be. And as it trades its panacean vision for Nielsen ratings, *Kung Fu* promotes an ideological contract that precludes other types of resolution. In these complex

ways, the show reinforces a hegemonic view that not only ignores the deep wounds of racial injustice by offering easy solutions, but also makes only one solution the morally correct one.³⁴

This solution is given variegated expression in other episodes of *Kung Fu* that feature racial minorities. "The Well" (27 Sept. 1973), which kicked off the show's second season, centers on an ex-slave named Caleb and his family. In the small town of Crossroads, riddled by drought, Caleb secrets away a well on his property because of his inherent distrust of his white neighbors. He is also distrustful of Caine. But when Caine defends Caleb from a corrupt local deputy who discovers the well, he not only gains the black settler's trust, but also the admiration of his young son. While the show's storyline revolves around the struggle of a precious resource, it ultimately comments on racial distrust and the meaning of freedom. In one of the episode's crucial moments, the interaction between Caine and Caleb encapsulates the show's definitive take on the matter:

Caine: "You look to others for your own freedom?"
Caleb: "Where else am I gonna find it?"

Caine's rhetorical question leads Caleb to look at the situation from a different angle. As John Furia, one of the producers of the show, would later remark about the episode's message, freedom comes by "freeing yourself of anger, and by freeing yourself of your own prejudices and by, in a sense, acting free."³⁵ This response to racial oppression, while superficially appealing, places the responsibility for reconciliation squarely on the shoulders of the minority individual in episodes, such as "The Well". While the white settlers are greatly to blame for the situation, it is Caleb who must make the first move. Larger social ills not only

³⁴ In "The Spirit Helper," it is interesting how this solution is legitimated through a masculinist discourse. Only after Nashebo decides to follow Caine's advice and allow Pike to live is he declared "a man."

³⁵ Pilato 94.

become personalized through Caine's intervention, but their remedy is one-sidedly cast. As a result, sustained oppression becomes the moral burden of minorities and outcasts.

Perhaps the most characteristic and insidious aspect of *Kung Fu's* formulaic storylines involving minorities rests in its constant turn toward the psycho-spiritual realm for answers. In the two aforementioned episodes, Caine points both Nashebo and Caleb toward internal resolutions that erase the larger social context and material realities from which their hatred and anger spring. This process of internalization is especially highlighted in the episode, "In Uncertain Bondage." The episode focuses on the kidnapping of a white southern belle, Dora, by her driver, Tait, and the complicity of her two black servants, Jenny and Seth. Although Jenny and Seth eventually rebel against the scheme, the episode centers most on Dora, whose heart is changed through her interaction with Caine; she thanks the fugitive monk for "teaching her that there is no less dignity in serving others than in being served." In this one variation of the usual formula, it is implied that Dora's attitude towards her servants has been radically altered and that she will treat them with greater respect. However, it, again leaves intact her institutionalized relationship with Jenny and Seth (master-slave) and masks the inherent oppressions of the social economy, including her own gendered status within that economy; as privileged, yet defenseless "southern belle," she exists as a commodity to be ransomed. The moral insight she adopts, the show's proffered solution, reconfigures the initial problem of social exploitation as one exclusively of the individual soul.

This turn toward an internalized solution is most pointedly expressed in the first-year episode, "Blood Brother" (19 Jan. 1973), where Caine happens across the name of a man, Lin Wu, with whom he grew up in the Shaolin Temple. He searches the town for his long-time friend, but instead encounters Soong, an elderly Chinese man, who is being viciously harassed by a group of drunken young men. Caine intervenes, but is then thrown in jail "for his own protection," suggesting the town's racially fraught environment. As the story evolves, it is revealed that the same young men are also responsible for killing Lin Wu and abandoning his body in the marshlands. The episode's plot revolves around their eventual

indictment, which Caine helps bring about. Through legal resolutions such as this, the show promotes the enactment of social justice via institutional channels of recourse (i.e., the law and the courts) and reaffirms the eventual effectiveness of these institutions. All alternative means of resistance to legal restitution are invariably written out of the scene, except for one: pacifism.

It is the ideal of unmitigated pacifism as proper response to racial injustice that, in fact, becomes the show's significant message. Although Caine's efforts to have the racist gang tried in court move the storyline along, it is the characteristic flashback scenes that are its true impetus. In these scenes, Caine recounts his early relationship with his friend, Lin Wu, at the temple. The Shaolin monk teachers arrange for a contest between the two young novitiates as a test of skill. Caine wins the match, however, he feels that "his gentle friend let him win on purpose." Attempting to trace the events that led up to Lin Wu's senseless death in the arid terrain, i.e., his failure to use his combative skills to defend himself in a socially hostile environment, Caine recalls Master Kan's lesson:

Each living thing strives to survive. It is an instinct as deep as life. Yet, Lin Wu, given the ultimate choice of a death, a symbolic death in his contest with you, chose his own. At some time in the future, confronted with the honest choice, he will choose his own. It is, perhaps, the flaw of saintly men, condemning him to an early death.³⁶

These words reflect the show's resolution to an acute moral dilemma that racism breeds—namely that if given the choice to kill or be killed by one's oppressors, those who choose the latter are more spiritually noble. Through his severe treatment and seemingly non-sensical response, the physically absent Lin Wu becomes a pacifist model and spiritual ideal to which even Caine falls short.

The writer's choice to invoke such an ideal once again demonstrates how *Kung Fu* deftly deals with the contradictions that emerge in the series. Through Lin Wu and Caine's relationship to him, the show maintains its pacifist stance: it smoothes over the protagonist's

regular use of physical force by positing the ideal as something difficult to achieve (i.e., of the realm of "saintly men"). As such, it becomes all the more glorified, as Caine's admiration attests. But perhaps the most significant dimension of the show rests in the way it squarely situates this response within a racialized context. As Herbie J. Pilato, in *The Kung Fu Book of Caine*, commentates:

This episode directly addresses the racism of the West, particularly the racism against Chinese-Americans. Rather than ignore the complicated rage that results from racism, Caine addresses it head on. Referring to Lin Wu's apparent death, Caine says to Soong: "You are a man. What has happened must make you angry. To hide a feeling is to increase its force a thousand times."³⁷

Often by subject matter alone, *Kung Fu* appears as a racially progressive show. And in views such as Pilato's that seek to acknowledge the psychological dimensions of racial discrimination, the series does an effective job. However, given the show's apparent response to how racism should be handled—through legal institutions, or in the extreme case, through unmitigated pacifism—one must question its ideological intent. The recognition of anger stemming from racist injustice is certainly important, but the ways in which the show suggests such anger should be channeled is most telling.

Indeed, the organic relationship of the characters in "Blood Brothers," further shapes the show's ideological agenda. The character of Lew, Soong's son, angrily asks Caine: "Why did he let it happen? He was a practitioner of *kung fu* like you! Why did he let it happen?" The Chinese American's outrage provides a human touch to the scene. But it also simultaneously highlights the equanimity with which Caine and Lin Wu deal with racial injustice and helps to establish their response as a model. The fact that the two are both Shaolin priests also emphasizes that response as essentially a spiritual one. Through this

³⁶ Pilato 70.

³⁷ Pilato 70-71.

juxtaposition of character response, the show invalidates any other possible modes of social action and leads its audience to a foregone spiritualized solution.³⁸

INDIVIDUALIZATION AND IDENTIFICATION

The series' ideology towards racial conflict is shaped in two specific ways: first, through a process of *individualization* of social problems; and secondly, through the types of character *identifications* it establishes and relies upon. As we have seen, the weekly episodes *individualize* this oppression and often make it a problem for minority characters to solve. The social context and institutional racism that give rise to the characters' conflicts are practically erased, as Caine's spiritual direction leads these characters to an internalized resolution on an individual level.

Indeed, this focus on the protagonist's one-to-one encounters with marginalized peoples (Indians, blacks, Asians) is legibly apparent in the "Writer's Guide" for the show:

II. CONTENT

...

c. Ideally, stories and scenes should spring from character, rather than incident. Ambiguities should be apparent in character and in drama as they are in people and in life.

d. We prefer to avoid stories about Indians. It is virtually impossible to reproduce the culture of the American Indian with any sense of reality. Among other things, it was very rare to find an American Indian who spoke English, while still living in his own environment. Then, too, the limitations with Indian actors and extras, as well as authentic accoutrements tend to make everything seem like musical comedy. However, we have done and will continue to do stories about a single Indian character seen apart from his own civilization.³⁹

Emphasis on character development (II.c.) and the explicit avoidance of "the culture of the American Indian" (II.d.) express a directed individualization that underwrites the series' take on social representation. Problems that minorities and women face in the show become the problem of the individual—ones that are produced and should be addressed on a deeply

³⁸ I am aware that spiritual healing need not be divorced from social justice. But in the case of *Kung Fu*, the relationship between spiritual healing and social justice takes place *only* on the individual level, i.e., posits individual healing as the source of social justice, instead of vice versa.

³⁹ Pilato 63.

personal level. It is interesting to note the rationalization that underlies this process of individualization, especially in guideline (II.d). Because the series is unable to duplicate without any *authenticity* the historical reality of the culture and conditions in which Native Americans lived during the period, the possibility of representing their social reality is dismissed in a cursory manner.

The guideline also bases its rationale to allow only a "single Indian character" per show on the "limitations with Indian actors and extras." What exactly are those "limitations" is not exactly clear and one is left to ponder: Are there not enough Indian actors to play these parts? Or are the Indian actors available not up to speed, i.e., not considered good enough actors or not easy to direct? Or both? In any case, the obstacle of racial casting also provides a convenient excuse. Again, authenticity becomes an issue, as the series does not see itself able to recreate a marginalized social group on the most physical, i.e., visual level.

Kung Fu's concern for authenticity is obviously an effect of a new social consciousness regarding the racial representation emergent at the time. This consciousness reframed previous portrayals of ethnic individuals in film and television by white actors either as obscene, undignified, or ridiculous ("like musical comedy"). Whether these portrayals were actually seen as such, the fact of the matter is that they were clearly unacceptable given the cultural milieu. Hence, *Kung Fu's* producers felt compelled to justify not only their casting decisions, but also their reasons for avoiding the larger social reality of their characters.

Despite its attempt at "political correctness" on screen and off, the show's move towards individualization was inevitably also the product of more suspect motives. In a *New York Times* article that reviewed the current state of the film industry in 1973 entitled, "How Do You Pick a Winner in Hollywood? You Don't," Aljean Harmetz reports that "the two biggest hits in America right now are 'The Mack,' about a black pimp, and some Chinese film

Warner Brother picked up—'Five Fingers of Death.'⁴⁰ Obviously, the success of films featuring minorities in subcultural contexts came as an unexpected surprise. However, Harnetz also reveals the executive philosophy at play in Hollywood's choices:

Daniel Melnick, the articulate MGM vice president in charge of production, newly come West from—he mocks himself—"the Eastern lib-rad Establishment," expounds MGM's philosophy. "To make pictures that are movie movies, not polemics or minority entertainment, not for special groups, not downbeat or about losers..."⁴¹

Although Melnick works within the medium of film, his comment is significant because it reflects a general dis-ease with racial representation held by the general viewing audience. Pictures that are racially colored are acceptable as long as they are "not polemics or minority entertainment, not for special groups." Films that advocate such interests are not considered "movie movies," i.e., ones that will appeal to a large number of the movie-goers. Melnick's view of the general public, as well as the rhetoric he employs, hints at a more large-scale backlash towards marginalized groups—their representation and political concerns.

Kung Fu's process of individualization similarly takes part in this backlash as the representation of the social ills experienced by racial minorities is routinely disciplined and rechanneled in order to make the show palatable for mass consumption. Under this rubric, it is assumed that *changing the hearts of individuals will automatically lead to changing society*. To a post-60s liberal audience who obviously felt sympathy towards the plight of racial minorities, but who nevertheless were wary of certain measures taken by these groups towards self-determination and weary from extended conflict, this simple adage proved seductive. Indeed, for a great many Americans, post-civil rights race relations had transformed the U.S. into an unruly site with different groups vying for cultural, economic, and political resources. In this way, *Kung Fu's* "wild west" setting—the uneven hand of justice, social "free for all," as well as the general inhospitableness of the natural landscape—

⁴⁰ Aljean Harnetz, "How Do You Pick a Winner in Hollywood? You Don't," *New York Times* 29 Apr. 1973: 11.

seemed to reflect the audience's view of their contemporary social environment. It also mirrored the overall impotence that Americans felt toward ameliorating the situation. Given such a scenario, individualizing racial oppression and other social inequities may have seemed like a final alternative.

While this process of individualization is key in deciphering the show's political stance, the types of *identifications Kung Fu* forged between character and audience more substantively reveals its ideological commitments. Although *Kung Fu's* psycho-spiritualized vision was available to all of its audience members, one could argue that it was primarily framed as a commentary towards racial minorities and women who sought social change through means other than or in addition to inner transformation. It achieved this through a formulaic pattern of identifications. To discern this pattern, one must first understand the constraints placed on character development specific to a television series. Rita Parks, in her examination of western heroes in film and television remarks:

Added to the exigencies of structure are the necessities developing about the recurring characters in any [television] series. These types must remain stable enough for audience identification and development of residual personality, yet they are also responsible for satisfying the constant demand for variety. Irwin Blacker indicates the problem of developing character as one of the difficulties of creating a classic Western in the television format. If the story is to have any significance, says Blacker, the people in it must change; yet in a Western series the hero cannot risk change. The writer, therefore, must constantly use "guest" characters who are able to develop, change, or die within the context of the weekly episode while the hero functions as a catalyst in that action. This constraint, though preventing the series from developing into a significant drama, achieves a twofold purpose necessary to the continuing story: the variety of secondary plots and characters retains audience interest; the stability of the continually developing (but basically unchanging) residual personality of the hero sustains audience loyalty.⁴²

Kung Fu fit this mold for the television Western well, with Caine as the hero, and figures such as Nashebo, Caleb, Dora, and Soong serving as rotating or "guest" characters. Hence, the latter provided color and variation, while the former offered a stable point of identification and entry into each week's plot.

⁴¹ Harmetz 11.

As I had mentioned, the audience was indeed meant to identify with the guest characters, e.g., feel his or her anger and confusion. However, given their temporary status as well as the fact that these characters were often minorities, the connection the audience made with these figures was at best an *ancillary* identification—a link forged in sympathy and dependent upon racial and gendered difference. As the series' protagonist and hero, Caine provided the *primary* identification for the viewer, who aspired to the show's vision of fair-mindedness and spiritual acumen.⁴³ Although Caine is obviously a minority as well, the fact that he is both Chinese *and* white allows a type of representational access for the dominant culture viewer that other mono-racial characters do not share. Indeed, his bi-racial status becomes the pivotal point on which everything turns. As in the case of Alan Watts and the Beats during the Zen phenomenon of the 1950s, and the Beatles and other celebrities who flocked to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s, the character of Kwai Chang Caine served as a *bridge figure* by which an American audience could enter a seemingly foreign worldview with ease.

As a bi-racial character, Caine represents the perfect blending of East and West. Although he is raised in China and his spiritual outlook informed by Chinese cultural traditions, Caine seems to retain behaviorial traits that are marked for the audience as decidedly "Western." For instance, his instinctual defense of Master Po at the August Moon festival in which he kills the emperor's nephew—the event which serves as the impetus for

⁴² Rita Parks, *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982) 152.

⁴³ Identification is a complex term that has its own history of definition in cinema studies. Psychoanalytic film theorist, Christian Metz is perhaps best known for articulating this psychical phenomenon, linking it to the mirror stage and the Oedipal narrative. According to Metz's framework, "primary cinematic identification" is squarely located between the spectator and the apparatus (i.e., camera and/or projector); and "secondary cinematic identification" is constituted by identifications with characters. (See *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* trans. Celia Britton et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana, 1982.)

My use of primary and ancillary identifications here obviously differs from Metz. What he takes for secondary cinematic identification is the representational field in which the set of identifications of which I speak occur. Although his delineation is significant in understanding the epistemology of spectatorship, my use of these terms is meant to reveal the way in which a particular narrative with a particular set of

Caine's exile—is one that the audience is able to identify, although morally denounce. Compared with the Chinese characters that appear in the series, Caine demonstrates an unusual degree of loyalty based on bonds of feeling, rather than bonds of honor. The difference between these motivations—feeling vs. honor—are racially coded. Western vs. Eastern, and within the narrative, highlight the character's link to the West even before he sets foot in America. The demonstration of active commitment also comes to distinguish Caine from his full-blooded Chinese compatriots. In "Blood Brother," Caine's ambivalent, yet heroic, fortitude is most evident. Whereas Lin Wu and his stance of extreme pacifism come to mark "Chinese-ness," Kwai Chang's decision to defend himself and other innocents, i.e., his unique sense of justice and his willingness to act on that sense, comes to be viewed as decidedly "American" in flavor.

Caine's bi-raciality also allows for a key transaction to take place both within the story and without: the transfer of Eastern spiritual knowledge to the West. Diegetically, Caine, unlike many of his fully Chinese counterparts, endures the rigorous training at the temple to be initiated into the order of Shaolin priests. The television series implicitly links his endurance and noble stoicism to the conditions that brought him to the temple in the first place: his marginal status in Chinese society as a "half-breed." As a marginal individual in a homogenous society, the young Caine seems intuitively aware that the temple is perhaps the only place left to possibly call home, and therefore seems determined to excel. He also seems to unduly appreciate and respect the teachings of his elder monks and carries their lessons to heart in an unparalleled manner. In this way, Caine's bi-raciality allows him to embody Eastern spiritual teachings in a way no pupil fully Chinese could. And similarly, his hereditary connection to America that prompts him to travel to the U.S. both in exile and in search of his Anglo-American family also authorizes him to transmit those teachings from China to the West. Both these elements of the larger narrative offer extra-textual license

characters diegetically operates and how that operation is informed both intratextually (within the story

for the spectator to take part in a foreign spiritual heritage and begin to potentially adopt it as his own.

Perhaps the significance of Caine's bi-raciality is most apparent when one considers the visuals of casting. The producers' decision to cast David Carradine, a white actor, over other Asian American or Anglo-Asian actors is in itself telling. One of the actors considered was martial arts legend, Bruce Lee, born in San Francisco and bi-racial in heritage. According to certain accounts, Lee not only helped in the development stages of *Kung Fu*, but also competed with David Carradine for the role of Kwai Chang Caine. David Carradine would later comment:

There are two stories about why Bruce Lee didn't get the part. One: that he was turned down because he was too short and too Chinese; which is a way of saying he was, ironically, a victim of the same prejudice we would be dealing with as our theme in the film. Two: that, for some reason I can't fathom, he was advised by his people not to take the part.

I was told by someone in the production company that they weren't sure he could act well enough to handle the complexities of the character. I don't know. Whatever the reason, it caused him to quit Hollywood, go home to Hong Kong and embrace his destiny.⁴⁴

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who claims Lee as a good friend, notes that Lee "would have been perfect [for the part], a master working his art before the national audience, but whoever it was that decided such things made it clear to [him] that they didn't think a Chinese man could be a hero in America. They passed over Bruce and gave the part, and the stardom, to David Carradine."⁴⁵

itself) and intertextually (through the dynamics of casting).

⁴⁴ David Carradine, *The Spirit of Shaolin* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1991) 18-9.

⁴⁵ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler, *Giant Steps* (New York: Bantam, 1983) 188-9. See also Hamamoto 59-63.



The truth of the matter is difficult to discern. However, both Carradine's and Abdul-Jabbar's remarks point to a possible consideration when it came to casting the enigmatic figure of Caine. The producers perhaps felt that if the actor who played Kwai Chang looked "too Chinese" that the necessary identification between the series' main protagonist and the American audience could not be achieved, let alone sustained. To properly draw a sympathetic connection, the audience had to be able to visually see themselves in him, i.e., see at least a hint of recognizable whiteness somehow reflected back to them in the most visceral manner. At the same time, the actor who played Caine had to be able to "pass" as half-Chinese and convey somehow a character undoubtedly new and foreign in nature.



During the early 1970s, David Carradine appeared to fit this bill. Seeing Carradine's "stunning and balletlike performance"⁴⁶ as Atahualpa Capac, the emperor of the Incas, in the Broadway play, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Jerry Thorpe recalls: "He had the same kind

⁴⁶ Here described by Gerald Leider, television chief of Warner Bros., who recommended Carradine to Jerry Thorpe. See Bill Davidson, "'Does Not the Pebble, Entering the Water, Begin Fresh Journeys?'" *TV Guide* 26 Jan. 1974: 22.

of dignity and lyricism that we wanted."⁴⁷ The way in which the young actor may have met the visual requirements of the role is never referred to by Thorpe. However, Carradine acknowledges the trend for producers to typecast him in ethnic roles:

For a few years I had tried to escape my fascination with the Third World by turning down those parts. I'm not sure we even had that term in those days: "Third World"—probably not. Then fatefully, one day, out in the woods in Arkansas, I decided that if there were some progressive function in society which I could perform by accepting these roles, and there seemed to be no one else to do it, and everybody else seemed to want me to say yes: well then, who was I to say no?

When the script, *Kung Fu, The Sign of the Dragon*, arrived at my door, I knew it was the one. Not because of the martial arts—none of us even knew anything about that. That was just the hook the movie hung on. It could have been basketball or downhill skiing. It was "the one" because it was a great story. It was about important things and it could make a significant movie, and it had that "Third-World thing" that I was looking for right then. The character of Caine was obviously perfect for me.⁴⁸

Kung Fu constituted a propitious meeting of interests as Carradine fulfilled the minimal visual requirements to play the part of Kwai Chang Caine, and the role, itself, met with the actor's own mission to promote the "Third-World thing." But the primary identification that was forged between Carradine's portrayal and the audience went beyond the superficial appearance and movement of the character. The young actor seemed to be able to capture the spiritual ethos of Kwai Chang as well.

Carradine's comment, that the appeal of *Kung Fu* was "[n]ot because of the martial arts—none of us even knew anything about that," is prescient in this context. In a more extended interview, Jerry Thorpe, the show's producer, relayed:

I'll never forget the day David first came in to see us. He arrived, seething with rebellion and accompanied by his dog, Buffalo, who is part Great Dane, part Labrador, plus a lot of other breeds, and who has one brown eye and one blue eye. David didn't say two words in that first interview. There were six of us one side of the room and David and Buffalo on the other side of the room, and no communication between us whatsoever.

Finally David left and I got the idea that he was putting us on—sort of a slap at the Establishment. So I called his agent and asked if David and Buffalo would come back and see me alone. They did, and this time man and dog were totally co-operative. We made the deal for him to do the movie, little realizing then that it would become the pilot for a series.

⁴⁷ Farber 74.

⁴⁸ Carradine 13.

When I asked David why he had been so resistive the first time, he said, "Your brown office and your brown Mercedes outside the window turned me off."⁴⁹

More than any connection that was distinctly Asian or spiritual that Carradine had with the role, his anti-establishment attitude seemed to define the producer's sense of the character as well as their decision to cast the disaffected actor for the part. Indeed, the character of Caine was, in essence, a reflection of the American counterculture—with its affront to Western institutions and attitudes, its pursuit of new ways of being and knowing, and its challenge to American aggression—than it was of Chinese life and spiritual traditions.

In unacknowledged yet significant ways, the character of Kwai Chang Caine, "the runaway Buddhist priest with all the Love-Peace-and Happiness ideals,"⁵⁰ was more akin to an American 60s hippie than an ancient Chinese monk. Both the casting of David Carradine for the role and his subsequent portrayal affirmed this in a variety of ways. To the audience who read about the actor in the *New York Times*, *TV Guide*, and other periodicals, Carradine seemed to embody the hippie almost to the point of caricature.

Carradine's rebellion act has been well-chronicled: How he lives in a decrepit shack with actress Barbara Hershey, who changed her name to Barbara Seagull after she inadvertently killed a sea gull in a picture and felt his spirit enter hers. How their little boy, named Free, was born out of wedlock. How David drives a succession of 20-year-old cars, abandoning them where they stand when they no longer can transport him. How he shows up at formal industry affairs barefoot and in ragged jeans. How he deliberately gives the impression that he is frequently stoned on marijuana.

*Is it an act?*⁵¹

Carradine would carry much of this ethos into his portrayal of Caine. The actor's vision for the role included "a whole style of playing him that would be very quietly stylized, satirical, a sort of formal way of moving, the deadpan reading of those far-out lines of his."⁵² In addition, he would add small, but significant changes to the character: Caine's trademark flute

⁴⁹ Davidson 22, 24.

⁵⁰ Deeb 13.

⁵¹ Davidson 24.

⁵² Tom Burke, "David Carradine, King of 'Kung Fu,'" *New York Times* 29 Apr. 1973: II, 17.

(which the actor hand-carved) and his shoeless appearance (mirroring the actor's own preference for bare feet).

*Carradine as featured
in a TV Guide article
(l); and in character
(with flute) (r).*



But Carradine readily admitted that very little of this vision was based on any concrete knowledge of martial arts or Shaolin spirituality.⁵³ As one interviewer discovered:

[Carradine] is not interested in Zen (sic), and he has never studied Eastern religions. "I couldn't get interested in Eastern mysticism or any of those things. I'm basically a pagan—but I'm very religious about it."⁵⁴

Still, the actor saw it as his necessary mission as "keeping the character pure."⁵⁵ For Carradine, this meant shielding Caine from a particular kind of representational compromise:

You'd be amazed how many times they put in something just for convention's sake. When we were doing one of the first segments the director was trying to show me where to stand and he was standing there demonstrating it the way some macho actor would do it—with his hand cocked over one hip. I thought that was silly. I usually bend my knees and stoop a little...The only reason I don't want [the show] to go down is that I keep seeing it actually approach an ideal. Left to its own devices, the studio would just turn the show into *The Rifleman*.⁵⁶

⁵³ The exception to this is the flute, which Carradine explained grew out of the appreciation of *kung fu* as traditionally defined in Chinese culture as "the art of..." As he explains: "A true martial artist must be well-rounded. Traditionally, the warrior should also be an artist. He should draw or paint, or make things with his hands, or play a musical instrument. This was my thinking when I introduced the bamboo flute into the series." But even this added accoutrement bore the actor's inflection: a silver concert flute was used as the model (Carradine 32-34).

⁵⁴ Farber 75.

⁵⁵ Farber 76.

The ideal of which Carradine speaks seemed to rely on conveying an authenticity based on his own beliefs and values. Kwai Chang Caine and his Shaolin background became a convenient vehicle through which this ideal could be achieved. And Warner Bros., in tune with the changing demographics of its audience, exploited this convergence of actor and character to their advantage.

If the analogical relationship between the roaming Shaolin monk and the modern-day hippie was not apparent in the intertextual dynamics (casting, star interviews) surrounding the show, it was certainly made manifest in the series' intratextual dynamics (narrative, character development). As Benjamin J. Stein for the *National Review* elaborates in his critique of the show:

Caine has sprung up from that worship of the occult, the different, the alien that showed itself in the earlier teenybopper adoration of Spock (the half-other-world-half-human creature of *Star Trek*), and in the current fascination with things Chinese. The hippie's dream, he is, by birth and education, not part of this degenerate and violent society, yet he can defend himself in it. He lives by his own standards, without allowing other people to impose their standards on him. Yet Caine always succeeds in imposing *his* standards (nonviolently, despite his lethal skills) on those around him....

Caine never seeks out female attention. It always just seems to come to him (goading the Caucasian men in the show to fury), and he never reciprocates, always keeping himself in a position to make peace between the two men fighting for the woman. This too is part of the hippie's dream—a world in which sex is so readily available that it is a free good, one which can be turned down without any fear that there will not be more tomorrow, a world in which women are complaisant and eager, in which they have the (dubious and archaic) equality necessary to be sexual aggressors, but not sufficient equality to be able to harm Caine, or those who identify with him.....[an] electronic incarnation of doped-up fantasies of an ideal way of life...⁵⁷

This stinging commentary peels back *Kung Fu's* veneer to reveal the hippie ideal at the show's core. Although propelled by the reviewer's own particular motives, it does suggest the ways in which the series constitutes a patriarchal expression that relies upon racial and gendered difference.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Farber 76.

⁵⁷ Stein 265, 273.

⁵⁸ Lodged from within the conservative milieu of the *National Review*, Stein's review has an investment in unmasking the ideological interests at hand. However, whether it be through critiques such as Stein's (a

To more readily understand how this ideal functions in relation to the identifications that the show depends, and further, how these operations undergird the show's hegemonic impulse and efficacy, it is helpful to reframe these in psychoanalytic terms. In her seminal article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explicates the "function of the woman in forming the unconscious," and the way this unconscious has structured film form.⁵⁹ She harnesses Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage to speak of the primary identification that is reenacted in conventional Hollywood films. Similar to the child who recognizes himself in the mirror for the first time and posits this image as "more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body," the spectator takes cinematic images as reflective of his "ego ideal." Mulvey further elaborates on "this long love affair/despair between image and self-image" as it is played out on the screen⁶⁰:

An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination. In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror-recognition in

representation of a competing dominant group) or ones similar to Chin's (mentioned earlier as a subaltern example), the show's hegemonic vision is further exposed and challenged.

⁵⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (1975).

⁶⁰ I should note that Mulvey deals with the medium of film and not on that of television. John Ellis argues that sound is a more significant aspect of reception than image, due to the difference in format expectation and viewing environment. Although these differences certainly exist, Mulvey's work is still significant here, because through an extended interaction with a series, the viewer does garner visual impressions of character and scenery and links these to the show's overall narrative intent. See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of this imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape.⁶¹

In the case of *Kung Fu*, Kwai Chang Caine (as played by David Carradine) emerges as the "figure in the landscape." He serves as the "main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" and, as the spectator's "screen surrogate," Caine becomes more than just a heroic character, but functions as an ego ideal. With his Shaolin insight and martial arts skills, he certainly "can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator." Indeed, the seamless melding of spiritual wisdom and physical prowess that Caine embodies offer the viewer an irresistible integration of mind and body. And these acute powers make him especially equipped to negotiate his way through an uncharted frontier or landscape that is both physically and socially hostile.

As ego ideal, Caine also becomes the fair arbiter of the social conflicts he encounters. In the fashion of the philosopher-king, Caine is able to wisely intervene in situations that seem hopelessly deadlocked (e.g., racial misunderstanding) and through seemingly non-coercive means enlightens the parties involved. As is obvious from the series' inception, when dialogue fails, Caine is the only one justified in his use of physical force to ameliorate the situation. (For example, in the movie pilot, the Chinese workers' uprising is squarely condemned, whereas Caine's tactics are seen as heroic.) This authority to judge both the oppressor and the oppressed and to morally engage in justifiable violence become the hallmark of the character as an ego ideal. Through an Orientalist frame, Caine not only mirrors the audience's desire for such authority, but also confers and reestablishes their claim to such.

Such an ideological vision is further confirmed when one considers the character description of Caine on which the show's producers and writers relied:

The Marks of Caine.

⁶¹ Mulvey 838.

Caine is a duality. In a way, the familiar western hero, recognizable, satisfying. But in perhaps a larger way, he is unique. He is a man who seeks peaceful justice in a time of violent solution. He becomes almost the inadvertent symbol, the unsought-for (on his part) champion of the underdog, with whom he can empathize only too well—the Red man, the Brown Man, the Yellow Man, and the Black. Though he doesn't seek out this kind of action, he yet attracts it, and, being what he is, a man who cannot endure injustice, he must act on it.

As a traditional western hero, we can see him in traditional stories, but with a new dimension. See him for instance, as Shane, drawn to the side of a small family fighting to keep their home against the incursions of the cattle barons, forming a relationship with both the man and the woman. The woman, like other women, will be drawn to him by his air of mystery, his aura of gentleness combined with strength. And because he is human, and because it is not forbidden to him, he may be attracted to her.⁶²

Mulvey's theoretical insights regarding the male protagonist in conventional Hollywood film are especially apt here. An "active/passive heterosexual division of labour" is indeed written into *Kung Fu's* overarching narrative, as Kwai Chang Caine becomes the unlikely protector of the "small family" against capitalist forces that seek to destroy it ("incursions of the cattle barons"). Perhaps more reflective of his role as screen surrogate, Caine seems to attract female attention as women are drawn to "his air of mystery, his aura of gentleness combined with strength." Reflective of women's changing roles in a post-1960s America, the female characters are granted a certain degree of agency within *Kung Fu's* narrative field. However, this agency is undermined as the above description surreptitiously suggests. Sexual attraction becomes something that Caine naturally evinces and controls ("*his air...his aura*"). converting an apparently passive role into an active one and vice versa. Within this field of vision, the show paradoxically offers (in the words of Stein's unwittingly apt review), "a world in which women are complaisant and eager, in which they have the (dubious and archaic) equality necessary to be sexual aggressors, but not sufficient equality to be able to harm Caine." Women are once again transformed into objects that Caine, as well as the male audience member, is able to control and take pleasure.

⁶² Pilato 28.



Mayli Ho (Nancy Kwan) captures Caine's interest in "The Cenotaph."

The fact that Caine becomes involved in amorous conquests is doubly telling. Moral license is given to the character according to the show's description, because " he is human, and because it is not forbidden to him." But his couplings with women appear to be a privilege and a need that his Oriental monk teachers do not seem to share. Here, we are able to fully examine the visual and narrative plane on which race and the heterosexual division of labor intersect. Full-blooded minorities who Caine journeys upon are either reinscribed back into a family (e.g., Nashebo, Caleb), or in the case of certain women of color, are resexualized for Caine's/male viewer's pleasure. Any minority character that falls outside this configuration is taken as a threat (e.g., the Emperor's avengers) and is quickly disciplined by our Shaolin hero.

Master Po and Master Kan, at first, appear to be an exception to this rule. As monks, they seem to fall outside of the domain of the family. In addition, they are never viewed as a threat, but are in fact, featured as caring figures to which Caine is emotionally attached. But if one conceives the Shaolin order as offering a type of family structure in which Master Po and Master Kan serve as father figures for the young Caine, the domestic scene is once again restored. Also, the fact that the older monks do not seem to leave the temple except on rare occasion precludes them from sexual liaisons with women. As such, they fit squarely within the stereotype of the desexualized (i.e., impotent) Asian male that poses no threat to Caine's

masculine authority.⁶³ In these ways, race and gender form an inseparable matrix out from which the ego ideal gains its potency and the male spectator in turn, his sense of control.



Master Kan



Master Po

If "good" Asian males are sexually neutralized within *Kung Fu's* televisual realm, then one may wonder why the main protagonist is himself half-Asian. As mentioned earlier, Caine's bi-raciality allows for a brand of spiritual crossing to occur that reflects the audience's own interests and desires. At the very least, viewers could entertain an alternative identity—"try on" a different way of being with all its attendant pleasures. But perhaps more than that, the ambivalence that the protagonist literally embodies (white/Oriental, American/Chinese) bespeaks of the inner turmoil experienced by a generation coming into its hegemonic own. The figure of Caine offered an identification through which a post-1960s audience could readily reflect upon their disappointment and guilt over promises lost and promises gained.

Of promises lost, the emergent dominant group, whose views and ideals *Kung Fu* readily expressed, undoubtedly suffered the disappointment of broken alliances with other

⁶³ The desexualization of Master Po and Master Kan should also be viewed as a resexualization. In his article examining the contemporary play and movie, *M Butterfly*, David L. Eng speaks of "racial castration" and "reverse fetishism" as a means by which Asian males are feminized (i.e., castrated) in order to maintain racist and heterosexist structures on which a colonial order depends. In Freudian terms, fetishism is reversed and involves a "blatant refusal to see on the body of an Asian male the penis that *is* clearly there for him to see" (346). See "Heterosexuality in the Face of Whiteness: Divided Belief in *M Butterfly*," *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple, 1998) 333-365.

subaltern groups, such as those embodied by women's liberation and ethnic consciousness movements. Anti-establishment whites, and especially white males, perhaps could not understand how they could be shunned by these subaltern groups. In their efforts towards self-determination, such groups exhibited an agency that directly threatened the existing patriarchal structure and those who enjoyed privilege under that structure. However, such agency was easily wrested away through the medium of television—a medium that was still controlled by white American men. Within this context, Kwai Chang Caine would represent a protagonist that mirrored the affinity or "love" that anti-Establishment white males had once felt toward their subaltern compatriots, as well as their grief over the loss of that love. The character of Caine achieves this psychic negotiation of an unrequited love through its incorporation of the idealized traits of the Other—a certain level of passivity, unusual calm, and spiritual wisdom. Yet the character also maintains the patriarchal privilege to speak, act, and fight on behalf of the Other. Put in other words, the series' continual emphasis of Caine's bi-raciality reveals a need to maintain the ego's claim to agency (American male initiative), while holding onto its vision of the submissive Other (Chinese feminized passivity) that had been so seriously challenged. Hence, a racial and gendered equilibrium—on which American white male privilege relies—is achieved via the unlikely hero of the exiled and itinerant, half-American, half-Chinese Shaolin priest. Viewing itself as both itself and the Other through the figure of Caine, the new dominant group staves off its disappointment. Returning to a psychoanalytic frame, this unusual representation that seems to serve as both ego ideal and fetish is also reflective of a transitional moment in American hegemony, in which the new dominant group ambivalently eschews its subaltern affiliations. The character of Caine, at once, serves as a declarative statement of the group's emerging dominant status, as well as a symbolic substitute for alliances hoped for, but never achieved.

Of promises gained, the generation of viewers that embraced *Kung Fu* and its unconventional hero saw themselves as helping to establish a new social and spiritual order. But this did not come without its psychic repercussions. As the new dominant group sought

to challenge the old, it inevitably suffered a degree of ambivalence and guilt over its emerging authority. In many ways, this guilt is reflected in *Kung Fu's* larger narrative and the diegetic event which set that narrative in motion: the death of Master Po and Caine's inadvertent, yet subsequent slaying of the Emperor's nephew. This formative incident seems to eerily reenact the Oedipal drama itself, i.e., Oedipus's unwitting murder of his father and his attendant guilt. Similar to the Greek character, Caine is intimately connected with the demise of a father figure. Also, the two characters appear blameless as far as intention. Acting out of instinct, Caine does not seem directly responsible for the death of the Emperor's nephew, and even less so for that of Master Po. At the same time, Kwai Chang accepts responsibility—if only based on the mere feeling that through his actions, he has devalued all that he has learned from his beloved teacher.

Through Caine's moral dilemma, the emerging dominant group reenacts the psychic trauma that attends not only the foreclosure of possible futures (subaltern groups), but also an ambivalent break from the past (older dominant group).⁶⁴ Guilt's lingering presence throughout *Kung Fu's* narrative again reveals a love for an Other (this time, for the new dominant group's predecessors). In her explication of guilt as a psychic process, Judith Butler, elaborates:

If the object goes, so goes a source of love. In one sense, guilt works to thwart the aggressive expression of love that might do in the loved object, an object understood to be a source of love; in a counter sense, however, guilt works to preserve the object as an object of love (its idealization) and hence (via idealization) to preserve the possibility of loving and being loved.⁶⁵

In *Kung Fu*, guilt becomes a way for anti-Establishment white males to forge and maintain what they see as their link to their father's ideals. While the love for the subaltern is

⁶⁴ This pivotal event can also be read along the lines of original sin. Caine (like Adam and also, Cain), through his moral transgression, is exiled from an idyllic setting and is condemned to live out his existence in an arid and inhospitable land. His primary goal becomes reconciliation with the Father, which is represented through Caine's search for his patriarchal lineage in America as well as his mission to maintain his spiritual beliefs passed down through his adopted Shaolin heritage (Master Po).

expressed by incorporating (i.e., consuming) the Other's idealized traits, the love for the dominant expresses itself through an alternative path—one that ceaselessly recalls the initial trauma of separation and loss. Read within this frame, Master Po's death gains its full significance. The new dominant group, through Caine's representational guilt, both acknowledges its aggression towards the older dominant group and preserves it as an object of love. On this tenuous psychic foundation so readily expressed in *Kung Fu*, anti-Establishment white males who emerged out of the 1960s began to negotiate and establish their own cultural authority.

As we have seen, the audience's primary identification with the ego ideal (Caine) is characterized by a desire for not only agency, but also for an alleviation of guilt and disappointment. But no single identification is seamless or universal. No doubt there were those who saw the guest characters (e.g., outcasts, misfits, children, pioneer women) as more a reflection of themselves. In this ingenious way, *Kung Fu* also employed ancillary identifications most efficiently to cover an audience with diverse claims and interests. However, even these characters gained their significance in relation to the main protagonist, who serves as their teacher, defender, protector, and friend. When these ancillary identifications failed to interpellate the viewer both visually and psychically, one witnesses the breakdown of the hegemonic frame and the expression of contradiction, as the critical commentaries attest.

We began with two sets of contradictions to which *Kung Fu* gave rise—ones that focused on the show's violence (contradiction *within* the dominant ideology) and others that criticized the series' racial politics (contradiction *to* the dominant ideology). By exploring the narrative, character development, visuals, and casting decisions of the show in depth, one is able to discern the inextricability of these two contradictions. *Kung Fu*, as a hegemonic statement of a post-1960s liberal audience, can be viewed as the patriarchal assertion of a

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 26. Here, Butler's explanation

new group of the dominant ideology, in which older forms of authority are delicately cast aside, and minorities and women shrewdly disciplined. And Kwai Chang Caine, as enigmatic hero, stands as the mediatic remnant of this historical move.

NOT SO LONG AGO IN CHINA

Kung Fu would not only reflect back on domestic relations in the U.S., but on America's involvement in the global arena as well. As *Kung Fu* entered the American popular imagination in 1972, a watershed event in foreign relations between the U.S. and China simultaneously occurred—Richard Nixon's visit to Communist China. The historical meeting between the President and Chairman Mao Tse Tung seemed to coincide perfectly with the series' inception. As David Carradine would later recall:

It seemed that a lot of people hadn't watched the show the first time it was aired because they had no idea what it was. Now, they all wanted to see it. The network scheduled a second showing and, then, just when the whole country was tuned in to see this Chinese western they'd all heard about, the show was preempted by Richard Nixon shaking hands with Chairman Mao, to commemorate the acceptance of Red China into the United Nations. This seemed, to me, remarkably synchronistic.⁶⁶

Indeed, the American audience's openness to *Kung Fu* seemed to mirror that of its government's. Whereas China had literally dropped from Americans' representational view during the time of the Communist takeover,⁶⁷ it was granted a positive reappearance on the small screen.

This is not to say that a certain level of ambivalence and distrust did not accompany both political and representational rapprochement. Impressions of China, which had developed since the Cold War, were not simply abandoned, but continued to feed into American's contemporary views of the Communist superpower. During the Mao's official

reiterates the theoretical framework of Melanie Klein.

⁶⁶ Carradine 25. The timing was perhaps less "synchronistic" than suggested. Although Nixon's landmark visit took place in 1972, the two nations had begun to edge toward renewed relations almost a year before.

takeover in the 1950s, these images included the resurrection of the Chinese as the "evil and untrustworthy Oriental."⁶⁸ In Harold R. Isaacs' survey of American's attitudes toward the Chinese in the late 1950s, he notes:

In the images of the Chinese that they see in the Communist mirrors, these Americans see no more deferential politeness, no more gratitude, and distressingly little humor: no more philosophic calm, no more sage wisdom, no more respect for antiquity or tradition, or passive and smiling reliance on timeless verities—almost none, in short, of all the features that made the Chinese so attractive and often so dear.⁶⁹

Although "twenty-two years of hostile nonrelations had clearly reached a sterile end"⁷⁰ and the U.S. had begun to positively entertain the idea of China once again, these images still lingered in the American imagination, even as its attractiveness was on the verge of being restored.

From *Kung Fu's* inception, such mixed impressions were woven into the story's larger narrative. The Asian characters who were featured as regulars—Kwai Chang Caine, Master Kan, and Master Po—all exhibited the traits of a desirable China: deferentially polite, humble, philosophically calm and wise, suitably passive, and respectful of their spiritual tradition. In addition, the figure of Master Po, with his easy smile and good humor, gained a special place in the viewing audience's hearts. In both the series' pilot and subsequent episodes, the majority of the scenes in which these characters take part occur within the confines of the temple. Although squarely located in China, the temple takes on an other-worldly character that is non-diegetically produced: the chimes which transition Caine and the audience into the flashback mode, the darkened halls of the temple eerily lit by candles that produce an unconventional sense of time, the neatly manicured gardens in which Master Po imparts his wisdom to the novice Caine. The culmination of these effects transforms the

⁶⁷ Harold R. Isaacs comments on this lack of interest in China as a "nearly total severance" (212). See *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980).

⁶⁸ Isaacs 218.

⁶⁹ Isaacs 219.

⁷⁰ Isaacs xx.

site into a space that is untouched by outside the world, in which the physical environment reflects the eternal truths that are sequestered within the temple walls. As such, Caine's education takes place not in China per se, but an idealized storehouse of her spiritual and cultural traditions. Invoking the cherished Orientalist myth of an undisturbed "heaven on earth," the Shaolin temple becomes for the Western audience a Shangri-La, evoking "an eternal classical age...outside time and history."⁷¹



As soon as the monks leave the temple, they encounter a very different environment—one, that is characteristically brutal. This is symbolically captured in the show's opening credits that display Caine's full initiation into the Shaolin brotherhood. As he successfully maneuvers through a set of physical tests and brands himself with marks of the dragon and phoenix within the darkened corridors of the temple, he stumbles out into the harsh snow and glaring light. Barefoot and clad only in a monk's humble robe, he must now journey out into an unsympathetic world. This synecdochic scene figures the China that Caine enters as an unusually cruel place. The scene in which the audience, along with Caine, witnesses the disrespectful treatment and eventual death of Master Po, sets in marked contrast the humble values of the Shaolin order vs. the arrogance of the Emperor's court. Sacred and profane systems of order are pitted against one another, to highlight their

⁷¹ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998) 7. Shangri-La is often associated with Tibetan Buddhism and the contested kingdom of Lhasa.

antithetical nature. The fact that the Emperor's young nephew is the one who kills Master Po further suggests an archaic system of rulership that has become not only egotistical, but childish in its old age. Although there is an obvious distinction between China's rule under the Emperor and under that of Mao, a parallel can be drawn between the two that probably was not lost on *Kung Fu's* audience. In the American's viewer's eye, both regimes seemed to hold little regard for the nation's rich spiritual resources and had lost a sense of individual human dignity linked with its cultural and religious traditions. The legacy of a great civilization was threatened by the ineptitude of its leadership. Only within the temple walls forged in the American imagination was this legacy fully protected.

Hence, positive images of Chinese in *Kung Fu* as Oriental Monks, i.e., spiritual men, served as a pointed commentary on Red China, who under Mao, had labeled religious practices and beliefs as superstitious and misleading. For the first two seasons, the show's representational bearing on China would be confined to this implicit critique. However, by in the final year:

[T]he production staff was beginning to realize that the American West was invariably the West—that is, predictable. Thus, at the end of ... the second season, there was a turn to Asia. More of the episodes were to be set in China and, in the third season, the show became, decidedly more mystical.⁷²

As the storylines began to take China as its setting, the guest characters (and that of Caine as well) seemed to lack human depth, and instead, often served as the archetypal figures of good and evil. For instance, in "The Devil's Champion" (12-20-74), Caine confronts the devil himself. The narrative begins with Yi Lien, an individual unknown to the temple, challenging Master Kan to a ritualistic combat to the death. As Master Kan finally is made to concede (since Yi Lien has started killing innocent peasants for every day his request is not met), he first requires the bloodthirsty warrior to fight the novice Huo. Through a dream, Caine

but as a notion that speaks of an imagined and imaginary repository of an ancient spirituality in the East, it aptly describes *Kung Fu's* depiction of the Shaolin temple.

realizes that Yi Lien has been possessed by the devil Hsiang and subsequently travels to Hsiang's lair to confront and eventually defeat this evil spirit. By doing so, he releases Yi Lien from the devil's possession and saves Huo in the process.



Caine battling with the evil Hsiang (John Fujioka) in "The Devil's Champion."

Through episodes such as this, *Kung Fu* took a decidedly mystical, other-worldly turn supported by trick visuals (e.g., Hsiang's image doubles and quadruples as him and Caine battle). "The Devil's Champion" is perhaps one of the show's most over-the-top episodes. However, other Chinese characters did not escape such crude portrayal. In many cases, they are spiritually dehumanized—shells for evil spirits that Caine must vanquish. Or they are greedy individuals (e.g., feudal lords and princes) who threaten the temple. Interactions with these figures are often marked as trials in Caine's spiritual development, which he eventually confronts and triumphantly overcomes.

Women's roles in Chinese society are also commented upon in the series. In "Besieged" (Parts I and II), Barbara Seagull/Hershey (Carradine's real-life wife) plays Nan Chi, an independent woman determined to enter the Shaolin order. Attempting to disguise herself as a man, Nan Chi's gender is revealed, and she challenges Master Kan to accept her into the priesthood as an opportunity to change the temple's institutional practices:

Master Kan: "I do not regard it as an opportunity, and I certainly do not regard you as a remedy. I regard you, on the contrary, as a remarkably impudent child whose unacceptability is only exceeded by her capacity for showing disrespect.:"

⁷² Pilato 123.

Nan Chi: "Surely not because I am a woman..."

Master Kan is forced to acknowledge Nan Chi's point. For the scene, the scriptwriter's note elaborates on the Master's mindset:

Master Kan is most cruelly caught out...not because of dishonesty or duplicity...but simply because of a centuries-laden way of thinking of females. Hell yes, it's because she's a woman...and the truth of it hangs in the echoes...and Master Kan is too honest an old man to deny the truth.⁷³

Here, it is not only Master Kan who is "caught out," but China as well. According to the American view so readily expressed here, the Asian nation, despite its move towards Communism, cannot escape its patriarchal, non-egalitarian tendencies because of its "centuries-laden way of thinking of females."



Nan Chi (Barbara Seagull/Hershey) gets to know Caine in "Besieged."

Although *Kung Fu* attempts to make a progressive statement towards gender in shows such as this, its portrayal of Chinese women especially reenacts the timeworn narrative of female sacrifice. In "Besieged" and the "Cenotaph"—both two-part episodes that take place in China—the female protagonists, out of love, gives up her life in some way to save Caine. Nan Chi ("Besieged") throws herself in front of Kwai Chang and is killed in his defense; and Mayli Ho ("The Cenotaph"), in her belief that she will inevitably "destroy" the young monk, unselfishly rejects him. These stories of ardent sacrifice seem to take as their impetus the

⁷³ Pilato 140.

Western tale of *Madam Butterfly*. Although originally invoking the fantasy of "the submissive Oriental women and the cruel white man,"⁷⁴ *Kung Fu* twists the narrative and makes the women (Mayli Ho, Nan Chi) less submissive and the man (Caine) less cruel. Despite this seemingly progressive variation, both episodes leave intact the eventual sacrifice of the Chinese woman on which (white) male subjectivity depends. The ego ideal is shored up and made worthy through her abandonment.

It is also interesting to note that the two instances in which Caine enjoys sexual relations, it is with Chinese women (Mayli Ho in "The Cenotaph, Su Yen in "The Tide"). Through this specificity, the bi-racial protagonist at once crosses boundaries and maintains them. *Kung Fu's* storylines maintain ethnic-racial boundaries by keeping sexual relations within a certain culture (Chinese doing Chinese). But at the same time, it transgresses them by allowing an "experience" with the fetishized Asian woman. The fact that both Mayli Ho and Su Yen are played by actresses of Chinese descent (Tina Chen and Nancy Kwan, respectively) seems to visually authorize their role as objectified fetish. (Nan Chi—who loves Caine but does not have sexual relations with him—is played by white actress, Barbara Seagull/Hershey.)

Through narratives of self-sacrifice and of sexual love, *Kung Fu* symbolically appropriates the figure of the Chinese woman to once again reconfirm and secure patriarchal and racial privilege. Again, these female characters are granted a degree of agency, but it is eventually turned against them towards the masculine reconfiguration of Caine. As in the case of subalterns who would be disciplined by the series' representations, China would suffer a similar fate. Both American desire for a pacified state (Mayli Ho, Su Yen, and Nan Chi) and disappointment over political and cultural distinctions (Emperor's nephew) would be mirrored in the show. Far from treating China as its symbolic equal, *Kung Fu* would assert an

⁷⁴ Ironically stated in David Henry Hwang's play, *M Butterfly* (New York: Plume, 1988) 17.

Orientalist portrayal that representationally maintained a self-portrait of American dominance.

CARRADINE/CAINE

On June 28, 1975, the final episode of *Kung Fu* aired on ABC. Apparently, the series' end was not due to lack of ratings (it still enjoyed a high Nielsen share), but rather was based on David Carradine's decision to leave the show in order to pursue other projects. He recalls:

You know the mystique of the character sort of began to take me over. I think actually that's why I left the series. The series was never cancelled...I just left.⁷⁵

Although Carradine always eschewed similarity to Caine in public interviews at the time, he could not seem to escape this slippage between himself and the character. As Alex Beaton, one of the show's producers and directors, would remark:

David had always been interested in mystery and in the mystical elements of life. And *Kung Fu* was a great opportunity to explore that interest....David was a peaceful guy. He really just wanted to bring joy to himself and the world. I believe he wanted his life to be as Caine's. In other words, his intentions and Caine's were one and the same. And he had Caine's principles.⁷⁶

Zealous fans would carry out the confusion even further, and when happening upon the actor, would often challenge Carradine to a fight.⁷⁷ As for those who looked to Carradine for spiritual wisdom and advice, he would comment: "I'm not about to present myself as a potential guru."⁷⁸

Carradine would go on to enjoy modest acclaim and success as an actor in movies such as *Bound for Glory* (1976), in which he played folk singer Woody Guthrie, and *Death Race*

⁷⁵ "Interview with David Carradine." <http://www.tnt-tv.com/action/kungfu/media/index.html>.

⁷⁶ Pilato 33-34.

⁷⁷ In response, Carradine would confess: "Every once in a while, I would have to demonstrate a technique, but that's it." If the interaction began to border on actual physical combat, he would "see it coming and just walk away" (Pilato 35).

⁷⁸ Pilato 35.

2000 (1976), a science fiction film and "deliberate move to kill the image of Caine."

However, he could never escape his most famous role.⁷⁹ By 1976, only a year after the end of the series, he began to embrace martial arts and train with *Kung Fu* martial arts consultant and sifu, Kam Yuen. During that time, he would pursue the production of *The Circle of Iron (The Silent Flute)* (1979), an allegorical tale initially conceived by Bruce Lee that attempted to present the "true essence of kung fu."⁸⁰

In the early 1980s, with *Kung Fu* in syndication around the world, Carradine, along with original co-star, Radames Pera (young Grasshopper), would come up with the idea for *Kung Fu: The Movie*, that would have Kwai Chang Caine pass the spiritual sword to his son. Warner Bros. embraced the idea, and production soon began.



Scene from
*Kung Fu: The
Movie.*

Carradine would reprise his role, and Brandon Lee (Bruce Lee's son) was cast as Caine's son. The movie obviously was successful enough for the studio to pursue a sixty-minute television movie pilot entitled, *Kung Fu: The Next Generation* (1987). This time, Carradine nixed playing the role of Caine because the potential series featured "kung-fu car crashes" over the original series' spiritual integrity.

However, by the 1990s, David Carradine seemed fully ensconced in his role as Caine. In 1991, he would pen *The Spirit of Shaolin*. The book includes autobiographical stories, as

⁷⁹ Carradine 49.

⁸⁰ Carradine 51.

well as the philosophical background and explication of *kung fu*. Per the impetus for writing the work, Carradine recounts:

A few years ago, I received a message on my answering machine from Sifu Kam Yuen, my nominal Master for the last eighteen years. I called him back and he said, "David, I want you to write a book about the true essence of kung fu. People associate it with violence and aggressiveness. They have lost track of the spiritual and philosophical aspects. I know, however, that you will never get around to it, so I'm going to write it and put your name on it. There is a great need for this book."

Every once in a while, the Master gives me a task, and I must perform it or suffer because of it. Yet, from time to time, I have taught the Master. We have grown up side by side.

So, I said to him, "Sifu, I have always agreed with everything you have ever said or written, but if I must do this task, I must DO it. Will you help me?"

After some thought, Sifu Kam Yuen agreed. "All right, David, but don't take too long. The world needs this book."⁸¹

In addition to the publication of *The Spirit of Shaolin*, Warner Bros. would resurrect Kwai Chang Caine (this time as the grandson of original protagonist and in a contemporary urban setting) in *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* (1993-1997). Gone are the philosophy and flashbacks to China, gone is the alternative sense of Caine's responses, and in their place one finds "other-worldly" plots and martial arts scenes filled with implausible stunts. Most notable is the absence of a bridge figure: Caine's son, ironically named David, is a middle class, thirty-something, white-identified, law enforcement official who totes a pistol and shares little in common with his father. As he says in the opening credits: "I don't do that kung fu stuff...I'm a cop, a cop." Although cancelled in the late 1990s, *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* still receives heavy airplay in syndication,⁸² and the numerous websites attest to a loyal fan base. One wonders whether the newer series stands as the entrenchment of what was once an emergent dominant group now firmly established, or rather the hegemonic claim of a new generation with ambivalent ties to their hippie parents.

David Carradine continues to write and produce instructional videos on the Chinese spiritually based systems of Tai Chi and Chi Kung.

⁸¹ Carradine 3.

⁸² *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* airs every week day on The Turner Network (TNT).



As mass media has made Carradine and Caine ever more inseparable in the minds of both actor and viewing public, *Kung Fu* not only marks the ideological legacy of a generation, but also the full-fledged induction of that generation into the realm of the hyperreal. Visual media, and most notably television, has transformed the fictional characters of Caine and his Oriental Monk teachers into messengers of spiritual substance, and the actors who play them into fictional characters. Indeed, the protagonist's "search for truth," parallels that of the American viewer who, through the show, searches for his/her own Orientalist truth and finds it virtually real.



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SPIRITUAL ROMANCE TODAY

As the millennium approaches, 'God is in' and everyone is searching for meaning beyond the material—even in materialistic Hollywood. It's now chic in Tinseltown to have a spiritual path that goes beyond mainstream religion. *Hollywood Spirituality* is a one-hour long look at celebrities' search for meaning in the esoteric spiritual disciplines of yoga, kabbalah, witchcraft, Buddhism and alternative forms of healing.

E! cable network promo

Can you not flick the shit out of your fingernail these days and not have it hit one of those damn White Buddhists right in the lotus?

Just a few years ago, it seemed like they were all Hindu, buying up all the sitar music at Street Light, and taking cooking lessons at the Bombay Culinary Institute in Sunnyvale. The lucky ones who dared venture to Chinatown to the cheap cheap travel agents managed to find a good ticket, dashing off to India for a good deal of Indian stuff, swimming in the holy Ganges and coming home with parasites swimming in their blood, which I'm sure many mistook for some kind of divine blessing of enlightenment. Until the harsh reality of blood in the stools took over.

But now, nothing beats the calm, centered, self-actualization of the Buddhist Thing.

...Welcome to Lamapalozza

Justin Chin, "Attack of the White Buddhists"¹

Americans' fascination with Asian religions remains surprisingly intact over the past half a century. However, as the tagline for the E! cable network special, *Hollywood Spirituality* (Spring 1999), seems to suggest, this fascination is marked by an unusual type of amnesia—an amnesia that allows for its subjects to experience their fascination each time anew. For a younger generation, D.T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Kwai Chang

¹ *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, and Pranks* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999) 113, 115.

Caine are names that mean very little. All held the attraction of a particular generation: all "chic" in their given time.

Since "Caine walked the earth" in the early 1970s, reincarnations of the Oriental Monk would make their steady appearance in Hollywood fictional accounts—most notably, Yoda in the Star Wars epics, Mr. Miyagi in the Karate Kid series, and Splinter of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. There have been more anonymous sightings of the iconic figure in a multitude of films—from *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995) to *Holy Smoke* (1999)—and across different mediums (in television shows, such as *Walker Texas Ranger* and Airwalk print ads). In each of these scenarios, the characters may change, but they play the same roles, serve the same function, and tell the same story—time and time again.

Virtual Orientalism relies on this repetitive promise, on the reliability of iconic performance, and on a Western audience's spiritual needs and desires, as it masks the ideological interests and geopolitical concerns that invisibly drive its cultural imperialist enterprise. It relies heavily on new technologies and visual mediums that allow for a constant stream of images and data. The seemingly uninterrupted flow of representations and their easy access make stereotypes of Asians and Asian religions all the more obdurate. In a consumer-oriented society, we have seen how virtual Orientalism accommodates the demand for novelty by introducing new versions of the icon. As Justin Chin's diatribe hyperbolically (yet truthfully) states: it may be a guru one year, and a lama the next. These manifestations of the icon are marked by their sheer substitutability in the pop cultural realm. This substitutability is possible because spiritual consumers are less concerned with distinctiveness of the figure or the religious tradition he represents, but rather with the desires the figure meets and the operations he performs as an iconic representation. The preceding chapters have been an attempt to trace the emergence of this new development in Orientalism's history, as well as unveil Orientalism's hegemonic work.

Today, the situation seems more complex than ever. In the past decade, we have seen a burst in communications technology, in the form of fax machines, wireless telephones,

MP3 recordings and most notably, the internet, and have experienced the effects of these technologies in our everyday lives and consciousness. This explosive "multiplication of the media" (to borrow Umberto Eco's prescient phrase), far from challenging stereotypical views of Asians and Asian cultures, in many ways has further strengthened Orientalism's virtual hold. An ongoing case study of this fact can be seen in the unprecedented popularity of the Dalai Lama in the U.S.

With much acclaim, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., his selection for the honor continued a new line of world peacemakers whose vision was simultaneously shaped and influenced by a mixture of a profound spirituality along with political awareness. The Nobel Peace Prize hurled the Dalai Lama and the small Asian country of Tibet into the public eye and therefore marks the most contemporary stage in the development of the icon of the Oriental Monk.

What happened next solidified the Dalai Lama's inception as an American pop cultural figure. Hollywood actor and celebrity, 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: "the Power Buddhist/Free Tibet contingent" included Harrison Ford, Willem Dafoe, Sharon Stone, Steven Seagal, and Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys.² These celebrity endorsements offered a Buddhist way of life unprecedented Western exposure and shepherded in a new variation of the icon. The power of these celebrity networks proved vital in keeping the Dalai Lama's name in the headlines and his image in the news.³

²See Edward Silver, "Finding a New Path," *Los Angeles Times* 11 Apr. 1995: E8. This contingent has formally expanded into the "Committee of 100 for Tibet." See the Committee's home page, <http://www.tibet.org/Tibet100/>.

³ An informal analysis of news coverage is revealing. If one does a title word search on the *New York Times* database, one uncovers an interesting pattern. In the 1980s, the Dalai Lama receives the most coverage in 1989—the year he is granted the Nobel Peace Prize. Headlines drop in the early 1990s, until Richard Gere makes his much publicized statement of support at the 1993 Oscars. Since this time, the Dalai Lama has enjoyed regular coverage; his appeal remains constant throughout the decade and into the new millennium.

This attention has had enormous payoffs, as "Lama fever" spread to famous Hollywood directors. The 1990s saw the production of several big studio films that centered around the life of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism: Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993); Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997), and Jean Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997). To add to this mediatic mix, the Dalai Lama himself published several best-selling books, made public appearances across the U.S., and even chatted online in an e-public forum. This acclaim has afforded the spiritual leader private meetings with leading political figures and heads of state, including Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. One can find further evidence of Americans' love affair with Dalai Lama on the World Wide Web and the innumerable sites dedicated to him, as well as to Tibetan Buddhism and culture. His influence similarly shows up in the commercial realm: one can buy audio CDs of Tibetan mantras and chants, spirit bead bracelets, meditation pillows, Buddha wall and garden statues, and mandala posters. One can purchase, in stores and online, the live box set of CD recordings from the Tibetan Freedom Concerts. Stylized religion has come home and caters not only to aging yuppies, but also to their children—a new generation of spiritual seekers.

Despite opportunities to experience the Dalai Lama both sensually (through material objects) and aurally (through sound recordings), it is again the image of the Tibetan patriarch that proves most compelling. The Oriental Monk is now modeled after the Dalai Lama (note, the saffron-robed, shaved head versions in IBM's OS/2 commercials who miraculously are able to communicate with each other telepathically). Psychically, this monk descendant 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. (Martin Wassell, documentary filmmaker)

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. (Steven Batchelor, English Buddhist monk and scholar)⁴

The Dalai Lama obviously fulfills certain cultural and spiritual needs. But this version of the icon also constitutes a shift in political focus and mission. In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans seemed to demonstrate a preference for the Japanese or Chinese model, and this selectivity was not coincidental. Japan and China had been viewed as cultures possessing great spiritual richness. But this recognition only emerged when relations between these countries and the U.S. were good, and their challenge in the arena of international politics and the world market was perceived as fairly contained. Ideally, at the time, they were also seen as less modernized than the West, or in the case of Japan, seemed to possess some inexplicable nature that could account for their economic success. Only when these conditions were met were Japanese and Chinese Oriental Monks suitable representatives of the East in the American popular imagination.

But in the 1990's and into the new millennium, Japan and China appear too formidable, with contemporary patriarchies of their own in place that greatly resemble those of the West.⁵ Hence, the Japanese and Chinese variations of the Oriental Monk have for the most part been traded in for a less compromised Tibetan model. The Tibetan version of the icon through his dress and religious practices paradigmatically signifies a mythic spiritual past.

⁴Edward Silver, "Finding a New Path," *Los Angeles Times* 11 Apr. 1995: E8.

⁵The American conception of Japan's position in the world economic market is readily expressed in survey polls and popular press headlines, e.g., "The Pacific century: as the year 2000 approaches, Japan and the other trading powers of Asia are moving into position to dominate the world economy" (Bill Powell, *Newsweek* 4 Apr. 1988: 62+). From the mid-1980's into the early 1990's, American political rhetoric increasingly figured economic relations with Japan as a nasty "battle," a "challenge" in which the small island nation engaged in unfair play (e.g., imbalanced trade practice, investment binges, appropriating U.S. invention, political corruption, ecological exploitation). Japan's style of "judo-economics" no longer appeared the model to emulate. Instead, "to our own selves be true"—America felt the need to "fight back" in its own way against "the seemingly unstoppable giant."

Whereas Japan became transfigured as America's economic adversary, China emerged as its political one. In 1989—a year that included the fall of the Berlin wall, as well as the Tianamen massacre—a "giant, powerful, merciless China" was inaugurated. Richard Bernstein, in his analysis into "Hollywood's Romance with Tibet," remarks: "The answer [to why Tibet has become the cause du jour for celebrities and non-celebrities alike] has several factors. There is the ferocity of China's actions in Tibet, and China's status in the post-cold-war world as the most important large country still holding another land in subjugation." See *New York Times* 19 Mar. 1997: B1+.

The nation to which he is attached is actually no nation at all—except in its past and its promise. Under Chinese rule, Tibetans have been scattered throughout the globe, and the Dalai Lama, as their leader, remains in exile. Out of this political situation, Americans have developed a unique affinity to spiritual patriarch and his people.

The Dalai Lama as Oriental Monk also provides his American charges with a concrete political mission: Free Tibet. The Tibetan monk's politico-spiritual mission and the forces that he opposes are well defined. They are succinctly summarized in the inaugural issue of *Tricycle*:

- 1.2 million Tibetans have died (one sixth of the population)
- 70% of Tibet's virgin forest has been cleared cut
- More than 6,000 monasteries, temples and historic sites have been looted and razed
- All religious practices have been outlawed.⁶

This scenario portrays a third world people who are fighting against a global power (China) for their very physical, cultural, and spiritual survival—a noble cause with which to align oneself. But unrecognized desires underlie American interest in this mission. It is interesting to note how Tibet's predicament mirrors and emerges from America's own guilt within its own borders and without—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. Hence, the Tibetan model 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 political and cultural patriarchal influence over the exiled nation.

I surmise that we have yet to see the full potential of the Dalai Lama in his role as an Oriental Monk figure. His representation or image constitutes an unfolding phenomenon. However, we perhaps are now able to better understand what fuels Americans' attraction. We

⁶"The International Year of Tibet" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* Fall 1991: 32.

can isolate and recognize the conventionalized narrative that draws his audience in close relation with him. We are better able to discern how his image and personality meet certain Orientalist protocols and why an American pop culture audience is more consumed with what he represents, than what he necessarily has to say (Suzuki). We have a better clue about what makes his representation especially attractive to young people (Maharishi) and is especially apt for a youth-oriented market. And we now perhaps realize how the radical pacifism he seems to embody can actually work against other liberatory efforts (Kung Fu).

For Americans, the Oriental Monk has certainly arrived—he can be found on a television set in Des Moines, a movie screen in Tampa, a computer monitor in Minneapolis, or a billboard ad in Oakland. You can carry him around in your book bag or hang him on your bedroom wall. At our immediate disposal and making no demands of his own, he has indeed become virtually ours. *Welcome to Lamapalooza...*

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