

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

5-2014

We are not all Bruce Lee, Part 2

Justin Kh TSE

Singapore Management University, justintse@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Citation

TSE, Justin Kh, "We are not all Bruce Lee, Part 2" (2014). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3360.

https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3360

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3360

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

We are not all Bruce Lee, Part 2

By Justin K.H. Tse

Published in James Wellman on American Religion, 2014 May 14

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jameswellman/2014/05/we-are-not-all-bruce-lee-part-2/>

Around the time that Bruce Lee reached the height of his Hong Kong cinematic career, a few Asian American writers put together an anthology called *Aiiiiiiii!* (1973). I grant that readers who know what they're talking about will gently protest that this collection has been contested by feminist and queer API writers for leaving out women's and non-heteronormative Asian American experiences (for details, read David Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*). I'm using the anthology to make one specific point that hasn't yet been made before about Asian American religions, though, so I will ask those readers to forgive me.

The point is this: in 1973, the year that Lee died, there was a marked shift among both Asian Americans and Hong Kong cinema – the two sites where Bruce Lee worked – in the portrayal of Asian manhood and its relationship to religion. It was a much more realistic portrayal of what Asian American and Asia-Pacific men were actually up to in terms of religious practice.

It was also very funny.

Instead of portraying Asian American and Hong Kong men as exotic sages with expert moves and wise counsel that could be produced by stroking masculine shifu chin hairlings, there was a turn toward comedy and the messiness of everyday life, including religion. Hong Kong cinema shifted gears with the work of Michael, Sam, and Ricky Hui, portraying working-class Hong Kong men with silly get-rich schemes, gambling addictions, and sexual vices, all with a hilarious veneer of Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist-Christian pragmatism. Similarly, the *Aiiiiiiii!* editors rediscovered works like John Okada's *No-No Boy* and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, two books that portrayed Japanese and Chinese American communities after World War II with a sort of realistic irony. Both also provided painstakingly literal English translations of Japanese and Cantonese vulgarities with hilarious effects (e.g. "Wow your mother," "you dead person," and "no-no boy"). The protagonist, Ichiro, in *No-No Boy* isn't a karate fighting sage; he's a young man returning in shame and ambivalence to Seattle's Japanese community after going to prison for refusing to fight in the Second World War while his family was interned. The religions that show up here aren't about martial arts and self-cultivation; they're family-based, sometimes instruments of nationalist propaganda for both America and Japan. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* takes the comic fodder further, portraying a young Chinese American man, Ben Loy, who struggles to produce offspring with his new wife in New York's ex-bachelor-dominated Chinatown because he suffers from erectile dysfunction. Again, religion is simply woven into this comedy narrative, not because the spirits are particularly helpful to Ben's virility struggles, but simply because it's part of the mess of Chinese American everyday life.

And yet, you could say that the comedy is the complaint. In 1991, the editors of *Aiiiiiiii!* reissued the volume with a disgruntled observation that the original anthology had never been taken seriously by literary critics. What had passed for authentic accounts of Asian America were instead the "Christian Chinese American autobiographers' lies and obscenities" that made it seem like Asian Americans were strangers to American cultural production, crowding out Asian American voices about what their everyday lives, including religion, were really like. The everyday comedy belies Asian American self-loathing about their marginalization: "If we did not hate yellow men with a vengeance, hate the thought, the subject of yellow manhood, we might have written a love story or two in the last hundred and fifty years" (*Aiiiiiiii!*, "Preface to the Mentor Edition," 1991, p. xxxix-

xl). It's implied that America doesn't want to hear about the banalities of Asian American love stories, community mythologies, everyday spirits, and erectile dysfunction. These themes don't fit with the Bruce Lee kung fu fighting and being like water, which is another way of saying that Asian Americans don't get to talk about their everyday lives and religions unless they're Bruce Lee.

That's why we have to insist that the all-encompassing Bruce Lee obsession that mystifies Asian American religion is getting old. Again, this doesn't mean that Bruce Lee is unimportant; as I said, he's a very important trans-Pacific Asian American figure. But what it does mean is that Asian American religions don't boil down to martial arts. They boil down to the hilarious mess of everyday life in America.

And for us, that's old news. We've just been waiting around for two hundred years for someone to finally hear it.

FOR FURTHER READING: Those who might think that these examinations of Asian American images are unimportant complaints should read John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882*, Robert G. Lee's *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, and Henry Yu's *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. David Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* remains the standard text on Asian American masculinities. Vijay Prashad's *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* is a helpful text for theorizing how Asian Americans must exist in solidarity with other racialized communities. To get a glimpse of Bruce Lee as he lived and thought, John Little's *Bruce Lee Library* is the place to look, starting with *Artist of Life*. Those who want to read more generally in Asian American religions should consult Jane Iwamura and Paul Spickard's *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* and Jane Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*. That last book is very important: Iwamura is one of the key founders of Asian American religious studies, and much of what I have to say is indebted to her work.

FOR FURTHER WATCHING: For those who will complain that my account here seems dated to the 1970s, one still should wonder why Asian American literature and film is seen as "alternative" and "independent" media. There has been an interesting renaissance of Asian American independent film in the 2000s that seems to both address and challenge the Aiiiiiiii! call for love stories beyond self-loathing. For starters, films like *Saving Face*, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *The People I've Slept With*, *Surrogate Valentine*, and *Yes We're Open* may do, as well as the Harold and Kumar stoner comedy series. In new media, Wong Fu Productions has become a standard in producing everyday comedies and dramas featuring Asian American love stories. With such proliferation of Asian American media, it's small wonder that Asian Americans protest with, say, a hastag like #HowIMetYourRacism when *How I Met Your Mother* used yellowface as tributes to kung fu movies. It's because it's not like it's hard to find Asian American media if one really tried.