

## **The Daily Life of an Asian Woman: Racialized Sexism in Society and *Interior Chinatown***

**by Anna Quick**

Women all around the world have been objectified on a daily basis. I have seen women get catcalled on the street, get sent disgusting provocative messages on social media, and witnessed the disgusting “locker-room talk” people often engage in. These are all things I have seen in my eighteen years of life, and it seems as if society is not on the road to change. But as a white woman who has lived in a predominately white community all my life, I have not seen the blatant differences in how women of different races get objectified. Reading *Interior Chinatown* written by Charles Yu, opened my eyes to a whole other world. *Interior Chinatown* is about a man named Willis Wu who is trying to navigate his life through the binary “black and white” world that Asian individuals aren’t necessarily welcomed into. Although this novel is centered around racism and stereotyping against the Asian community, it is essential to point out how the gender of a person changes how the Asian community is treated in this novel. *Interior Chinatown* skillfully depicts the differences in discrimination against Asian women and Asian men. Asian women in America are seen as objects and sexualized by the American population, and this may lead to self-esteem issues or lead to the safety of Asian women in America being compromised.

*Interior Chinatown* does not explicitly discuss the discrimination and sexualization of Asian women, but Yu does incorporate a small piece of what Asian women experience in today’s society through his female characters. The discrimination against Asian women did not start recently, it has been a problem for a long time and Orientalism is a large contributor to this problem. Alexandros Sakellariou defines Orientalism as “the beautification of people and places, which contributed to the reproduction among the Europeans of an imaginative and exotic

portrayal of the East” (Sakellariou). Orientalism has led to the term “exotic” being used to describe women of Asian descent due to their Oriental background.

The term “exotic” is not just used to describe something beautiful, it is commonly used to sexualize women as well. In “Asian American Woman Cinematic Image: The Exotic Beauty and/or Perpetual Foreigner,” authors Yan Hai and Haibin Dong analyze four movies, and it is found that an “exotic Asian woman” is a common stereotype used to identify Asian women in media. Hai and Dong analyzed four movies, and the representation of exotic Asian women can be broken into four categories: physical and facial outlooks, dynamic body movements, and interactive positions. The representation of Asian women in Hollywood only shows the idealized version of Asian women such as “petite or small fit, slim, externally flimsy but internally active and athletic with clear Asian facial characteristics” (Hai and Dong 88). Not only are these women physically attractive, but the way the film captures them is erotic in ways. Hai and Dong recall the contents of one movie, and in the movie, the Asian woman character was filmed taking off her coat while the camera “continued tracing the backside of her slim and firm body as if through the voyeuristic perspective of a male spectator during the process of undressing until she retrieved a revolver and shot the three persons in her fancy underwear” (88). The way the actor looked and the way the camera followed her adds to the already sexual “exotic Asian woman” stereotype.

One character that perpetuates the “exotic Asian woman” stereotype is the briefly mentioned hostess of the SRO that frequently gets acting roles as a prostitute. Willis mentions a difference in the way women and men of the SRO treat the hostess. The women in the SRO have shunned the hostess for acting as a prostitute and men “hold doors open for her and say how can she be blamed for her beauty” (Yu 48). In addition to this quote, Willis mentions how these men

cannot help but size this woman up and notice her “skintight cheongsam hugging every curve” (Yu 37). Although readers don’t get an in-depth description of the hostess, the information readers get is strictly about her looks. The mentions of the hostess’ body and her beauty can be compared to the way Hai and Dong recall the Asian woman in the film, in both instances the women are stripped down to their looks. Willis even describes the hostess as “[in her] 20s, pretty, [and] exotic” (Yu 48). The use of the word exotic directly puts the hostess in the “exotic Asian woman” category along with the woman in the film. I believe Charles Yu adds these descriptions so there is no room for interpretation, he wanted to show readers that even Willis — an Asian man who is sick of the stereotypes that his community faces— puts these women into harmful and sexual stereotypes.

Interior Chinatown is written in script, and many of the stereotypes that are commonly used in society appear in the characters’ names. These stereotypical names can be seen at the beginning of the novel when Willis states all of the names used for his mother, Dorothy. The names used for Dorothy are “Pretty Oriental Flower, Asiatic Seductress, Young Dragon Lady, Slightly Less Young Dragon Lady, Restaurant Hostess, Girl with the Almond Eyes, Beautiful Maiden Number One, Dead Beautiful Maiden Number One, [and] Old Asian Woman” (Yu 8). Many of these names used for Dorothy are used in today's society to sexualize and stereotype Asian women. In “Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of “Asian Women” Online Pornography,” authors Yanyan Zhou and Bryant Paul discuss the stereotypical names “lotus blossom” and “dragon lady.” Zhou and Paul state that the stereotype “dragon lady” originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Yanyan Zhou and Bryant Paul, drawing from the work of scholar Raymond Okamura, describe individuals that fit into the “dragon lady” stereotype as “sexy, exotic, attractive, and would actively seduce white men and

therefore, would corrupt the Christian white men's morality" (1088). The "lotus blossom" stereotype is a parallel opposite to the "dragon lady" stereotype. Individuals that fit into the "lotus blossom" stereotype can be defined as "excellent wives, cute, docile, [and] knowing how to please their husband and great homemaker" (Zhou and Paul 1088). Although Zhou and Paul discuss only two of these harmful stereotypes, it is seen that stereotypes like these are harmful to the Asian community as their looks are being used to define their values as a person.

These stereotypical titles can be seen in media from the past and in recent times. In "I Dreamed I Was Wanted: Flower Drum Song and Specters of Modernity," author Juliana Chang discusses the film *Flower Drum Song* and identifies some of the stereotypes seen in the film. Chang describes the scene in which one of the characters, Linda Low (Nancy Kwan) "performs a fan dance-striptease to her signature tune, 'Fan Tan Fanny'" (150). Chang goes on to say that Low does the "Fan Tan Fanny" routine every night, and at the end of her performance she reveals her private parts (150). The scandalous role of Linda Low can be compared to the names used for the women in *Interior Chinatown*, and many of the names used for the women in the novel can easily be applied to Linda Low's character. Chang even uses one of the stereotypes that is used to describe Dorothy when discussing the representations of Asian-American femininity in *Flower Drum Song*. Chang's list includes "the dragon lady and the lotus blossom baby, the vixen and the virgin, the temptress, and the angel" (151-2). Two of Dorothy's names in *Interior Chinatown* are "Young Dragon Lady" and "Slightly Less Young Dragon Lady," and seeing these names used to describe sensual characters like Linda Low may inform readers that Dorothy is sexy, exotic, and attention-seeking.

Growing up in the 21st century, I have seen many of these stereotypes while growing up. I was introduced to manga and anime at a young age. In the *Encyclopedia of Children*,

*Adolescents, and the Media*, author Tamara Swenson defines anime as “Japanese animated films... [that] are distinguished by their adult themes and complex story lines” (Swenson).

Anime and manga usually have exclusively Asian individuals as characters throughout the novel or film. When I was around 13 years old, I began reading the *Death Note* series by Tsugumi Ohba. The *Death Note* series is a manga—which is anime but written in book form instead of made in video form—that tells the story of a young boy named Light Yagami and his journey with a notebook that can kill people. *Death Note* only has only one notable Asian female character, which is Misa Amane. Misa can be described as a mix of the “lotus blossom” and the “dragon lady” stereotypes. The way Misa presents herself throughout the series matches the “dragon lady” stereotype due to her goth clothes and mysterious aura. But when Light gets to know Misa, she reveals herself to be similar to the “lotus blossom” stereotype. Misa turns out to be an annoying, extremely loyal, and submissive woman. Along with her personality, the way Misa is depicted is revealing. Misa is often wearing tops that accentuate her breasts and skirts that are dangerously close to showing her behind. The way Misa’s character is drawn is not a rare occurrence, many Asian women in anime and manga are drawn to have unrealistic body parts and extremely revealing clothes. The way women in anime and manga are depicted only adds to the sexualization of Asian women due to Asian women often being depicted as sultry, submissive, and promiscuous women in this commonly consumed media.

In addition to these stereotypes, Asian women are held to a high standard for looks and personality. If Asian women do not live up to these standards or someone thinks they don’t live up to the standards, then Asian women may be at risk for attacks and harmful interactions. In the newspaper article “The Long History Of Sexual and Physical Violence Asian Women Face In The U.S.,” author and interviewer Lulu Garcia-Navarro interviews Yves Nguyen, an organizer

for the Red Canary Song based in New York City, about a shooting spree in Asian massage businesses (Garcia-Navarro). When answering Garcia-Navarro's question about how to talk about Asian women who work in these massage businesses, Nguyen discusses the stigma surrounding Asian women in massage businesses. Nguyen explains that not all Asian women that work in massage businesses are sex workers but "there are many conversations around the racist and fetishistic perceptions around Asian women, especially migrant Asian women who do low-wage labor, and those perceptions make it so that people think that they're sex workers anyways" (Garcia-Navarro). The stereotypes and stigma surrounding Asian women in the massage business may have been the reason these women were murdered. These murders show a tragic example of how these stereotypes can harm Asian women.

Although *Interior Chinatown* never mentions attacks as severe as fatal shootings, the character Dorothy is put in a harmful situation due to her Asian heritage. In the second part of the novel, Dorothy tells her story about creating a life in America. The story starts in 1969 when readers are told the story of Dorothy's first job as a nurse's assistant. When discussing her pay as a nurse's assistant, Dorothy mentions that she was paid a dollar and 75 cents an hour, but she could occasionally make two dollars if she helped give the older patients sponge baths. Dorothy must endure comments such as "Hey come here, hey you China doll, with the porcelain skin and almond eyes, let me get a look at those slim thighs" to receive the extra 25 cents (Yu 134). The comment calling Dorothy a "China doll" is truly a disgusting and racist comment. In "Not Your Submissive China Doll: Counseling Asian American Female Survivors of Sexual Assault at the Intersection of Racialized Sexism," author Danielle M. Espinosa discusses Asian women's experiences with racialized sexism, the sexism that stems from a woman's race. Espinosa identifies a few stereotypes that are connected with racialized sexism and "China doll" is one of

the stated stereotypes. When speaking about the stereotypes, Espinosa states that “Each stereotype, although contrasting between the docile Asian doll versus the mysterious and deceptive dragon lady, blatantly reduces the Asian American woman into a sexualized archetype made to satisfy men’s sexual desires” (Espinosa 2). Dorothy is objectified by these older men in the hospital and all she can do to counter these awful comments is turn the men down. However, if Dorothy turned the men down she would have to endure nasty and degrading comments from the men (Yu 134). If the situation escalated to more than just nasty and degrading comments, then Dorothy may have been put in the same position as the Asian massage workers in Atlanta.

Dorothy deals with various degrading situations, one of them being the attention she gets from men while she is a hostess at the SRO. Dorothy is “scanned and studied, admired and assessed, pinched, grabbed, slapped, and, worst of all, caressed” while working at the SRO (Yu 152-3). While Dorothy is enduring these disgusting interactions, Willis’ father is watching from afar, pushing down any thought of retaliation he may have. Willis’ father stands around allowing these men to harass Dorothy because Dorothy being a “Pretty Asian Hostess is what pays the bills for them, and [Willis’ father] knows it” (Yu 153). Willis’ father accepts the stereotype of Dorothy being an “exotic Asian woman,” therefore neglecting to do anything to protect Dorothy because the alluring and sexy stereotype she embodies is what brings in the money for them. Although the money helps the couple out, is allowing men to sexualize Dorothy really the way to go? There could be many other solutions to their financial issues, but Willis’ father deals with Dorothy being sexualized because it would most likely happen if they make money or not.

It is clear that Asian women are sexualized and discriminated against due to their Oriental background and the stereotypes that surround Oriental women. Other than the pure annoyance of these situations, Asian women suffer in many different ways due to sexualization and

discrimination. Asian women have been verbally and physically attacked, and even shot and killed due to the perceptions of Asian women stereotypes in society (Garcia-Navarro). But the mental health of Asian women is at risk due to the discrimination and sexualization these women must endure. In *Interior Chinatown*, Willis' father does nothing to help Dorothy when she is being harassed by men. Dorothy sees her significant other blatantly ignoring the situation she is in, and I'm sure she understands that the harassment brings in more money, but it cannot feel good being the sacrificial lamb. Danielle Espinosa discusses the mental effects of racialized sexism, and it is found that Asian women who reported instances of racial discrimination reported having eating disorders, internalized body shaming, symptoms of depression, anger, alienation, and invalidation (2). Asian women's mental health is deteriorating because they are regularly subjected to racialized sexism.

I never see Asian women get justice for their discrimination in today's society, nor do any Asian women's hate crimes get as much traction as white women's hate crimes. As a society we are blatantly ignoring how Asian women are treated, and *Interior Chinatown* does a phenomenal job of showing readers what society is ignoring. Ignoring Asian women's problems and encouraging only white women to speak out about their problems is not a healthy way to fight sexism in America. Society is taking a step back if we are blatantly ignoring the racial and sexist issues Asian women must face. Women like Dorothy, the SRO hostess, and the women murdered in the massage business shootings don't have the platform to speak out about the racialized sexism they face. As a society, we must encourage these women to speak out and fight for their rights just as much as we fight for white women's rights.



## Work Cited

Chang, Juliana. "I Dreamed I Was Wanted: Flower Drum Song and Specters of Modernity."

*Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 29, no. 87,

2014, pp. 149–83. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*,

<https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2801551>.

"Death Note." By Tugumi Ohba, illustrated by Takeshi Obata, *Viz Media*, 2005-2007.

Embry, Ingerlene Voosen. "Orientalism." *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, 1st edition, 2021.

*Credo Reference*,

<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/millikin.edu?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fjhueas%2Forientalism%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1742>.

Espinosa, Danielle M. "Not Your Submissive China Doll: Counseling Asian American Female

Survivors of Sexual Assault at the Intersection of Racialized Sexism." *Asian American*

*Journal of Psychology*, 29 Sept. 2022. *APA PsycArticles*,

<https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000300>.

Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "The Long History Of Sexual And Physical Violence Asian Women Face

In The U.S." *Weekend Edition Sunday (NPR)*, Mar. 2021. *Newspaper Source*,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nfh&AN=6XN2021032109&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8421363>.

Swenson, Tamara. "Anime." *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*, 1st edition,

2007. *Credo Reference*,

<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/millikin.edu?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fsagecam%2Fanime%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1742>

- Yan Hai, and Haibin Dong. "Asian American Woman Cinematic Image: The Exotic Beauty and/or Perpetual Foreigner." *China Media Research*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 85–92. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=ufh&AN=134541042&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8421363>.
- Zhou, Yanyan, and Bryant Paul. "Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of 'Asian Women' Online Pornography." *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 20, no. 4, Dec. 2016, pp. 1083–100. *SocINDEX*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9375-9>.