

Exotic Erotic & Racist

BY
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The term "exotic" is often used by people in Euro-America as a "compliment" for people of color, often women of Asian heritage and appearance. However, the seemingly positive connotation is riddled with racist, objectifying, and derogatory underpinnings that go unnoticed by those who employ it. It reinforces the perception that Asians and Asian-Americans are foreign, alien, and unsimulated into Euro-American culture, alienating them from mainstream society. In addition to the prejudicial implications, the term "exotic" also evokes stereotypes of submission and sensuality that have defined the Euro-American world's perception of Asian women.

UCLA students Grace Fernandez, a third-year American Literature and Culture culture major who identifies as Filipino-American, and Chloe Pan, a fourth-year double-major in International Development Studies and Asian American Studies who identifies as Asian-American and Chinese-American, spoke with FEM on what the term exotic means to them, and its presence in their personal and student lives.

FEM: What does the term exotic mean to you objectively?

GF: "My mind immediately goes to 'foreign' when I hear the term exotic. I perceive it as synonymous with 'different' and 'other.' Especially in a society built on white 'culture' and dominance—a society in which I was born and grew up—I just know that 'exotic' means anything not Eurocentric or of Western society."

CP: "Objectively, I would see the word exotic as something that's unique and different. Something at which you would gawk at or even gaze at because it's something that is out of the norm."

FEM: What does the term exotic mean to you when you are called exotic?

GF: "When I've been called 'exotic' or that I have 'exotic beauty', I understand that people are trying to compliment me. But... there is an inherently racist meaning behind it, especially when coming from a white person. It's offensive because the people doing the 'complimenting' are insinuating that my ethnicity is something that isn't perceived and accepted as the norm or standard. It happens in my own family, too—with the people who are literally of the same ethnicity as me. Because I'm not a dark-skinned Filipino like most of my family members, they say I'm exotic-looking because I don't look like a 'typical' Filipino. My light skin and the fact that I may look half-White is even fetishized, something that my family glorifies. Within my own ethnicity, I know that it's a problem of colorism, but the point is that the perception of someone as 'exotic' is to label them as different, unfamiliar, unusual."

CP: "In context, I've seen it directed to a lot of East-Asian women in particular and I think a lot of those notions of exoticism are rooted in Orientalism. Edward Said was really the [theorist] who pioneered the understanding of Orientalism, which is the idea that we posit the East in opposition to the West. We see the West as being this fashion of civilization, the East is seen as this very backwards place, and part of that includes women who are seen as coming from the East, and so these women are seen as a spectacle. They're seen as less than human. This interpretation of a human being assumes that one's own identities are the norm and so you have a right to gawk at or that you deserve some level of ownership."

FEM: How has your understanding of the word exotic evolved throughout your life and education?

GF: "When I was in high school, I honestly would have taken being called exotic as such a big compliment. I thought that looking different meant I possessed a unique beauty. But I've learned that the problem with the term is not just that there's a discriminating racial context to it, but it's also fetishizing and sexualizing Asian-American women."

CP: "I think when I was younger, if I heard the word exotic I would have taken it as a compliment. For example, we often use it in the context of zoo animals. I remember visiting the zoo when I was little and people would be like 'Wow. That's so exotic. That's not something you've seen before.' And when I think about it now, it's so strange that an adjective that you would use to describe an animal that we literally look at through often bars at a zoo is the same word that we use to describe women who basically don't appear white in the United States."

FEM: How has the label of exotic contributed to your sense of self, self-worth, and perception of your Asian heritage?

GF: "I don't let the label of exotic change the way I personally perceive my Asian heritage. But at the same time, it's frustrating that some non-Asians can still see Asian physical features and culture as exotic or foreign. It just reinforces the generalization of Asian-Americans as perpetual foreigners... [But] the label doesn't affect my own self-worth. I definitely don't like the idea of people sexualizing Asian women—it makes me feel like a sexual object to those who do claim to have an Asian fetish. But I think that by taking being called 'exotic,' or having 'exotic beauty' as derogatory rather than a compliment, I can critique the way that people perceive the physical beauty of women of color, and redefine Eurocentric beauty standards, which actually reassures my self-worth that I can be beautiful and it's not because of my ethnicity or because someone fetishizes my race."

CP: "The word nymph is often used to describe East-Asian women in terms of being really small, really light, really thin boned. And so in a way, we're often seen as almost small children who are very dainty. I remember that that notion of needing to be some small, cute little Asian girl was something that I definitely struggled with growing up because on the one hand I wanted to be able to claim my physical appearance on my own terms, but then on the other hand when I thought about norms of beauty, I didn't want to have to aspire to Whiteness,

and so it was a struggle to accept the way that I looked, while at the same time having to navigate the stereotypes that other people would have of me because of the notion of East Asians being exotic."

FEM: What are some instances where you've encountered the label exotic on UCLA's campus?

GF: "The term 'yellow fever' is disturbing and offensive. It's fetishism and racism in one phrase, and I hear it too often at UCLA, a space that's so impacted with Asians. It's unsettling and uncomfortable. As an Asian woman, I don't want to be preyed upon by a man who says he has a taste for Asian girls, and who reduces me to a sexual object who can fulfill his Asian girl desires and fantasies... I was walking in front of Powell library when I was abruptly approached by a white male student running in front of me to stop me, and whose first words were, 'Are you Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish?' I was really shocked to hear a question like that coming from a complete stranger; I was thinking, why do you need to know my exact ethnicity? Why is it important or relevant to you? I simply said 'no' and he then said to me, 'I'm trying to guess your ethnicity. It's really hard to tell. You have really exotic features.' Then he went on to say, 'Like an exotic beauty. You're really pretty.' He invited me to hang out with him and asked for my number. But the whole encounter from him invading my personal space, to immediately asking about my ethnicity, and commenting on my 'exotic features' was just offensive and unsettling."

CP: "I haven't seen the word appear necessarily, but differently I think it's something that I've seen happen online because I think that it's easier to not have to own up to the things that you say when you post about it online. I've heard about it in passing, especially when it comes to white men who fetishize Asian-American women in particular because they feel like we're 'exotic.' As if they're thinking that we're a special group that they can date."

FEM: How do you view the stereotype that UCLA is dominated by Asians and Asian-Americans?

GF: "It's definitely true that Asians and Asian-Americans make up a huge proportion of UCLA students. But... a lot of the stereotypes about Asians that are problematic, like that [idea] that, of course we got accepted to the university because we're Asian and we're naturally smart. But the stereotype that we're also passive, submissive, innocent, and apathetic creates a problem that also contributes to Asian fetishization. Perceiving Asian women as having all these qualities sexualizes that submissiveness and innocence, the naiveté and vulnerability behind those things, which again is disturbing and makes us feel extremely uncomfortable."

The Euro-American world has fetishized those who they perceive as exotic. One is expected to satisfy the narrow Euro-American stereotype of exotic, and if one fails to do so, one is further alienated from mainstream culture and society. Women who embody the "exotic" ideals are reduced to trophies, viewed as rare and foreign souvenirs of conquest that have been fetishized by the Euro-American perspective. Exoticism's erotic connotation is one of racism, bigotry, and objectification, yet society at large still views it as a compliment that its receivers should delight in—a reflection of the subliminal prejudices that are fortified by ignorance. White beauty standards have not only infiltrated the Euro-American public, but also East-Asian cultures. It is critical to re-evaluate how we perceive East-Asian women and more importantly the dominating white beauty standards as a whole. We must reject the fetishizing and alienation of those who Euro-American culture has historically deemed "foreign." We must empower all women on a basis beyond their physical appearance, liberating women from the racist stereotypes that have been constructed to oppress them.

