

Franck Billé and Sören Urbansky, eds., *Yellow Perils: China Narratives in the Contemporary World*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. 284 pages. Hardcover, \$54.40; paperback, \$22.40. ISBN 9780824875794 (hardcover), 9780824883119 (paperback).

Reading this book while under lockdown due to COVID-19 in March 2020 could not be timelier. As President Trump insists on calling the pandemic the “Chinese virus,” there are pervasive reports on social media of anti-Chinese/anti-Asian verbal and physical violence. The pathologization of “Chinese” or “Asian” is not new. Having just witnessed one incident myself at a Myers department store in Sydney’s CBD, I would not look into my mirror to search for the danger that people who look like me posed.

Instead, I might obtain more insight from Franck Billé and Sören Urbansky’s interesting collection of essays, which tackles the multiple historical and specific contemporary contexts from which the peril of yellowness emerges. The editors ground the volume not just on the multiplicity of who is “yellow,” which could refer to Japanese, Chinese, Korean, or Asian (which is itself a problematic ascription), but they also take up the protean nature of “peril,” vacillating between the disgust of “degeneration” and “decay” and the “emergence” of a powerful threat.

The collection unpacks some of the more complex threads that make up the trope of yellow peril in different spaces and at various periods in history. I found three points particularly interesting. First, they point out that the deployment of Sinophobic and anti-Asian narratives are not a monopoly of the West even as it continues to dominate prevailing discourses in media at home and around the world. Christos Lynteris’s essay mentions how the ruling elite of the late Qing era and the subsequent Nationalist faction also used the yellow peril trope as a biopolitical strategy in support of the 1911 Revolution in China. This essay is particularly timely, as it focuses on the longstanding connection made between China and disease, going back at least to the late nineteenth century when during the plague epidemic this discursive association legitimated the incineration of Honolulu’s Chinatown and the quarantining of all local Chinese migrants who were believed to be carriers and spreaders of the plague in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Tellingly, the description of China as “the sick man of Asia” was current then and re-emerged today at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his essay, Urbansky shows how contemporary notions of yellow peril evolved into the “China Threat” trope, which departs from the “degenerate” texture of early twentieth-century yellow peril discourses and aligns with the PRC’s current propaganda of the West’s Sinophobic bias and a triumphant recognition of its geopolitical power.

Second, the yellow peril discourse is not limited to the shaping of binary East-West relations. Kevin Carrico discusses how mainland Chinese were referred to as “locusts” by Hong Kong Chinese in the 2012 intra-ethnic tension, as Hong Kong people sought to distinguish themselves from mainland Chinese not only culturally but politically in the face of the PRC’s increasing encroachment into the territory’s civic and economic life. Billé’s essay explains how the anti-Chinese stance in Mongolia is grounded on its identification with the West in the form of Russia and how its positioning of itself as not-Chinese is rooted in “thousands of years of hostility.”

Lastly, Billé and Urbansky help us understand that although the yellow peril discourse may have emerged in and been dominated by Western prejudices and anxieties,

particularly in North America, it is reconfigured in multifarious ways around the world by the local sociopolitical climate of its deployment. Yellow peril discourses do not construct China or Chineseness as a monolithic threat but through a prism of multiple, conflicted interests. David Walker's essay focuses on Australia's historical anxiety with its Asian and Chinese neighbors and also touches on current concerns over how Chinese money drives up property values and buys up agricultural lands. However, the economic impact of Australia-China relations is promoted in other growth industries, such as tourism, education, and services, because of Chinese spending power. In their essay, Romain Dittgen and Ross Anthony describe the growing relationship between South Africa and China in the former's "looking East" rhetoric and "China model" enchantment, as represented by the bilateral "political tours and seminar tours" backed by the influx of foreign funding and illustrated by the open support of the South African government for China. Yet it is not surprising that out of postcolonial South Africa there emerges its own form of anti-Chinese sentiment. This sentiment is framed as the "exploitative path of 'industrial colonialism'" (121) and is attributed to the "vast and multilayered Chinese presence" (122) in various aspects of South African politics, economics, and societal life.

Yu Qiu's essay unpacks the notion of yellow peril in Chinese-Nigerian relations in a most layered and nuanced way. By describing tension in the relationship as a composite of intertwining history, national psyche, and the culture of both China and Nigeria, it provides valuable insight into why the yellow peril discourse endures and is still evoked in the current discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic today.

In recent times, yellow peril imaginaries associated with China's rise are invoked in several essays as they describe the contemporary impact of China's global economic power that varies across different social, economic, and political settings. Although that impact might have been addressed around the world through official channels such as official trade and diplomatic agreements, institutional partnerships, and investment projects, the yellow peril trope is convenient and easily redeployed in the face of the "China threat" because of the enduring power of reducing broader socioeconomic issues onto one monolithic "enemy." The power of the idea of yellow peril lies not in the actual dangers posed by the soaring might of the People's Republic of China—dangers that are felt as very real everywhere from Hong Kong to Nigeria to Australia (where the COVID-19 outbreak has exposed the dangers of an overreliance on Chinese supply chains and materials)—as much as the capacity of "China" to serve as the symbolic condensation of multiple discourses across time and space.

The yellow peril narrative might have begun as a racialized anxiety over Chinese cheap labor during the North American post-gold rush era. It continues to accumulate and accommodate other anxieties, because racialization has put a face onto anxieties that are usually more abstract or masked. Included in the trope as a container for anxiety lies the assumption that the "Chinese" or "Asian" face belongs to its putative home (China). These essays show the mutability of the yellow peril discourse in both who it refers to and why a group might pose a danger. This is because it cuts across two levels, as is evidenced by the current discourse on COVID-19. The pandemic demonstrates how the yellow peril trope endures at a macro level when we observe in the media how the pandemic is being blamed on China as being the source of the virus (by creating it and by enabling its emergence with deplorable eating or hygiene habits), for the failure to contain it, and for the lack of accurate data on its spread. On

a micro level, yellow peril anxieties manifest in the random attacks on Asian-looking people across the globe during this pandemic because they are seen as carriers and spreaders of the virus. The emerging discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how racial and economic anxieties are intertwined, as Billé and Urbansky correctly describe, and how they can go global as a unified discourse in an interconnected world through the abstraction of yellow peril. Thus, this book is timely in that it helps us understand the potency of yellow peril during the COVID-19 outbreak. It illustrates that the awe over the rise of China cannot be separated from the anxiety-driven Sinophobia of the last century, raising questions on the limits of economic greed and reminding us of the enduring power of racial anxiety even in so-called post-racial and “successful” multicultural societies.

My main critique is that there should be more essays like Yu Qiu’s in such a collection of pluralized yellow peril discourses beyond space and time, whether written by the “West” or the “East,” which tap into the more subtle and “disjointed, fractured, and fragmented” (124) nature of discourses such as those of yellow peril, so they can contribute to fostering more cooperation and geniality beyond informing us why there is such persistent anxiety and hostility. Overall, *Yellow Perils* is an important book to read today, particularly when “yellow” implies “peril.”

Karen T. Sy de Jesus  
*Western Sydney University*