

## **‘Yellow Peril’: Documenting & Understanding Xenophobia**

K201412 & V18.0380

New York University Spring 2011

Seminar: Wednesdays, 2-4:45 pm

194 Mercer, Room 210

Research lab: Fridays, 10-noon (mandatory!)

145 Fourth Avenue, Room 208

(Check Ning for weekly Friday activities, locations & trips)

Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen

Office hours: Th. 3-6pm or other times by apptd.

(pls make all appointments in advance, best to email ahead)

[Jack.Tchen@nyu.edu](mailto:Jack.Tchen@nyu.edu)

Asian/Pacific/American Institute

41-51 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street (1/5 block east of University)

Office #704 (straight into Gallery, along left wall)

This is a research seminar and everyone will be expected to become the expert on one “artifact” of yellow peril and for us to work together collaboratively helping each other out. That will be your project and mandate. What might your artifact be? What resources and skills and insights do you bring to the seminar as a whole?

But, first, a bit of background...

Fears of "yellow peril" (and brown “Turban tides”), among various other phobias of “others” run deep in the present and past of U.S./Western political and commercial cultures. It's imagery and stories are just beneath the surface of everyday discourse and always latent--readily triggered by an incident, real or fabricated. U.S. Americans, indeed virtually all cultures, are woefully unaware of such shadow traditions, its scapegoating paranoid histories, and consequently vulnerabilities to YP's ideological and affective power.

Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany is attributed to have coined the term "die gelbe Gefahr" in 1895. Saying he dreamed of a menacing Buddha riding a dragon thunderstorm soon to threaten Germania, Britannia, *et. al.*, gave modern racist form to an old European fear. The most effective embodiment of YP phobia is likely the lasting figure of Arthur Sarsfield Ward's “Fu Manchu” caricature (1911). Yet the origins go further back into Anglo-American, Australian, and European histories. Well before Kaiser Wilhelm, European courts, for example, were both fearful of Mongol hordes and Islamic invasions while lured by the fabled riches and exoticism of the east. Such phobia/philia dynamics extend back to the Greek city-state antagonisms towards the nomadic “Scythians” to the north, and further back to pre-historical Eurasia. And YP continues to impact contemporary geo-politics.

The current era of globalization during this much-touted "Pacific Century" is acutely vulnerable to new rounds of anti-Asian paranoia and political manipulation. President Hu Jintao's recent visit to the White House and all the cable/news/blog coverage are about the unfair advantage "the Chinese" have over the U.S.! And what of the response to Yale prof Amy Chua's "Tiger Mom" silliness?! The Bill Clinton campaign fundraising "scandal," SARS and lead in toys fears, computer hackers, charges of Chinese "pirating" U.S. CDs, DVDs, and other cultural properties, the racial profiling of "Arab-looking" peoples, and Asians "taking over" U.S. higher education all illustrate the contemporary forms Asian "peril" in U.S. cultural political practices.

The stakes of understanding "yellow peril" fears are high for the future of our nation. We need to cultivate more rigorous understanding across cultural differences, and discover our shared humanity. Fundamental epistemological questions of knowledge are at stake. How do we know what we know? And how are we, systematically, made unaware? How do yellow peril fears distract us from the real dialogues and real issues that must take place? Will sustainable energy development, for example, be sidetracked by U.S.-China discord?

In our digitizing U.S. republic knowledge is like NYC street noise. It's coming at you from all directions, loud, and hard to pick out clear coherent vibes. Despite the explosive developments in so many cities and nations of Asia, the U.S. people are still fundamentally unaware of Asian countries, where they are, and the languages they speak, the religions they practice and types of governments they have. We are largely Euro-centric in U.S. culture, and certainly even here at NYU. And we are quite unaware of the U.S. history towards Asians and Pacific Islanders, Asia and the Pacific. And we know few of the myriad Asian languages and dialects. We assume everyone will learn English.

In this context of present-past and present-future, seminar students will learn historical research skills and collaboratively document historical and contemporary case studies. We'll explore what can and must be done to counter these fallacies and practices. This is your chance to learn and conduct original research and analysis.

### **Dialogue-driven & chronotopic approach**

I believe a liberating, dialogic pedagogy needs to engage active learners in identifying from where we each come from, imagine ourselves going, and how we consciously and unconsciously position ourselves in society and globally. These basic issues of identification are at once personal and political, social and cross-cultural. Communicating across our differences, honest analysis, rethinking, and the process of re-searching buried archives and fragments are some of the tools we'll be using to deconstruct and reconstruct, decode and recode a more critical knowledge.

Method and form have to be flexible to effectively probe the phenomenon and origins of 'yellow peril.' Our re-search and re-membering will be collaborative, dialogue-driven, personal and political, reflexive and ongoing. I won't provide "answers" for you to regurgitate. We'll all be formulating provisional questions and provisional answers with the goal of improving our approximations of understanding what this phenomenon has

and is about. The honest feedback we provide each other is key to make this active learning process work.

Chrono-topo: Chonos or time and topos or place. Time, contrary to Greenwich Mean Time scientism, is a cultural historical construct that can be infinitely meaningful and manipulated. GMT is a global standard because it stems from British imperialism. The sun rises and sets according to the time of the British empire's past glory. In a land which First Nations/native peoples first named, what names do we use? In what language? All stories and explorations are grounded in the moment of the here and now with an emphasis of some other time and other place "back," "now," or to come. What is the "Present"? "Past"? "Future"? We'll be exploring 'yellow peril' in these three temporal frames but always being mindful of their relations to the originating time of reference—the momentous "now" of the formulator. What is our "now"? What about topos? Home, a place of customary practices and beliefs, what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls our "habitus" is part of the cultural cartography of here/there, insider/outsider, us/them, citizen/alien, etc. A chronotope, therefore, is the culturally bound meanings we tie to a specific case study between the here/now we take for granted and some other time/place. It can be with a past moment, or a projection into "the future" as in much science fiction. The fragments and artifacts of 'yellow peril' past will be examined as chronotopic case studies. For the seminar, you'll be situating them in time/place from our vantage of the here/now to better understand their earlier moments of creation.

The class will be organized in four sections:

- Toolkit & immersion (4 sessions)
- Decoding futurology (2 sessions)
- Decoding ancient genealogies (3 sessions)
- Strategies for recoding (6 sessions)

The last four sessions (which includes finals week) will mainly be reserved for group panel presentations.

### ***The 'Yellow Peril' Reader***

The readings this semester will be testing out a manuscript I am working on with archivist and historian (and a PhD candidate in the History Department at NYU) Dylan Yeats. He and I are editing *The 'Yellow Peril' Reader* (The New Press) coming out next year. The discussions we have, your responses to readings, documents, etc. will be informing what we do and I want to make sure to give credit to each individual in the seminar.

If anyone would NOT want your name credited in the Reader, let me know by the end of the term. I'm also hoping some of what you research and write might contribute to the Reader's accompanying website. Any thing you write or any idea you have will be fully credited/cited to you w/the bio/image you author.

At the same time, I'm a fervent believer in shared intellectual and cultural property, especially in our knowledge-making processes. What you'll experience and discover in this seminar should be shared with others who also want to teach, research, discuss, and explore.

### Three reviews

To ease into become active critics and analysts of the YP phenomenon, I'll want you to write three short, journalistic-type reviews of three yp items of your choosing. They can be from any time of films, drawings, paintings, songs, short stories, advertisements, comics, pulps, or whatever. I can help find items, but much of the fun is going out there and seeing what you can find! These will be integrated into your major artifact project assignment and should help with that research. Also by posting and commenting what you'll find, these reviews and the items become an archive and a shared pool of yp references.

### Your **project**

To learn about primary research, it's best to be required to produce a tangible product as a marker of what you've discovered. Typically this is in the form of a research paper, but depending on your passions and skills this could be any kind of original work—a performance, a series of poems, an activist project, an exhibition... whatever. The key is your becoming an agent in countering the ongoing power of YP. Whatever the agreed upon final form, the paper or project will need to embody careful and thoughtful research, drafts, comments, and a final version by exam session.

Contrary to the mythos of our hyper-individualistic culture, learning and creativity and the formulation of insights is profoundly social and collaborative. Throughout the term I'll have you in working groups to think through together, challenge each other, and to collaborate on your individual work. Additionally, you'll be responding to each other's posts on Ning and working as a panel to present part of your work thematically the last four classes of the semester.

To build up to the project, you'll need to quickly identify some 'yellow peril' artifact (or family of artifacts) that you are fascinated and fixated by. The short reviews are part of that pooling and discovering process. Along with those short reviews, I'll assign a series of weekly decoding exercises. Your working group will squeeze every bit of insight and historical context you can out of that chronotope.

The artifact can be visual, audio, performative, a smell, a sensation, a ... - whatever form it has appeared in. This will be your opportunity to deeply and fully understand a cultural expression of this phenomenon. The goal? For you to become THE expert on this item. The project will be completed in both a written, expository form and a presentational form.

### **Expectations**

I don't believe in grades but am required to give them. I believe in effort, engagement, cultivating insights, collaboration, and sustained work. I also believe in regular self-

evaluation and giving feedback. And getting feedback from “others” is also essential. So, attendance is important. So is working in groups. And honest engagement with each other, yourself, Dylan, and yours truly is imperative. We are all en-culturated within various powerful culturally normative systems and our senses are habituated to find comfort and meaning within them. Yet, meaning cannot just be found in the “head” but must integrate “heart” and “soul,” smell, taste, touching with the Western “higher” senses of sight and sound, right and left, upper and lower, and in how we live our lives and practice our theories. This, to me, is what critical cross-cultural researchers are made of.

There will be weekly assignments to be posted on Blackboard. This will include rounds on your project proposal, drafts of the projects, and the final project.

Your grade will be your self-assessment and if we agree. A realistic self-awareness of your strengths and areas for improvement is key in this process. I’ll be asking you to write self-evaluations for the mid-term grade and for the semester grade.

### **Practical stuff**

**Out of the Classroom.** The A/P/A Institute organizes great events, conferences, film showings all term. You’ll be required to attend and write short reviews of three of them. In the case of a more involved event like a film festival, you can pick one film and any discussion that related to it. All A/P/A Institute events are free unless specified.

**Blackboard/Ning.** If you don’t already know how, learn how to access the Blackboard site for the class right away. I’m just learning how to build a site using Ning, so we might need to use Blackboard for course docs and even the first few postings till I figure it out. For Blackboard, the name of the course will appear on your NYU Homepage. For Ning, I’ll either invite you to join or you’ll send me an email request. Will try to get this going as soon as I have some blocs of time!

### **Readings.**

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed, 1999) (Shakespeare & Co., 716 Broadway, textbooks downstairs. *Support Independent Bookstores and recycled bks!!*)

Dylan Yeats & Tchen, *Yellow Peril: Collecting Xenophobia – A Visual Essay* (A/P/A Institute, 2006) I’ll have copies @ \$10 each for Friday 1.28.

Most reading will be posted as PDFs on Blackboard or Ning. I might be needing you to pay for discounted tix to certain limited events.

**Field Notebook.** Notetaking is the most important work for you to learn, master, and obsessive partake in this semester. Please keep all your notes and fieldnotes in one bound volume. Ideally a bound, hardcover 100 page notebook. If you have notes from somewhere else or a scribble on a piece of paper, just tape it into the notebook. When you read, write your notes into this. This will be the primary, low tech research notebook.

*Important! Keep your Friday 10-noon research slot open. This is mandatory and part of the requirements. This is the time to get us off the ground quickly in the first weeks of the seminar but also lab time to conduct shared research, to confer, to visit an archive or site together. Check online to learn what to do and where you’ll need to be from week to week.*