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ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE RACE PARADIGM:

YELLOW: RACE IN AMERICA BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

BY FRANK H. WU (BOOK REVIEW)

JUDY YENTSUN TSENG*

Where and how do Asian Americans fit into American society, which for the most part remains racially stratified? What forms of discrimination manifest against Asian Americans, and how can we all work toward creating a more racially equal and harmonious future?

Howard University Professor Frank Wu delves into a myriad of contemporary, yet historically rooted, issues pertaining to Asian Americans' pursuit of all the privileges and liberties America purportedly offers. A prolific commentator who is often asked to speak on television and at conferences about Asian American and race matters, Wu expands upon his earlier writings by tackling this and other topics such as identity, hate crimes, and recent injustices against Asian Americans.

Wu begins his book with an autobiographical account of his childhood in 1970's suburban Detroit. Naturally, with the powerful effect television has had on the American psyche, Wu is compelled to describe how television influenced him as a child. He was particularly drawn to a Japanese science fiction show, through which

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he finally found a television character he could identify with, a boy named Johnny Sokko.

I could imagine myself as Johnny. I could not do that with the stars of any other rerun, even though I liked the Brady Bunch well enough. I could hum our theme song. I knew the weapons at our disposal. I choked up when in the melodramatic finale the robot sank beneath the sea as a martyr for humankind. There were other Asian characters on the television networks. None of them was as real as Johnny.¹

Scanty, skewed, and negative portrayals of people of Asian descent seem to be a common experience for Asian American writers to share. In her recent nonfiction book *Asian American Dreams*, journalist Helen Zia has similarly described her family's reactions to Asian Americans on television:

Real Asians didn't include Hop Sing, the Cartwright family's houseboy on *Bonanza*, or David Carradine, Jerry Lewis, or the numerous white actors who donned yellowface to play Asians. We only shouted when we saw regular Asian Americans like us It was a rare event. We would then drop everything and make a frenzied rush to the tube to see who had entered that mysterious TV land where people of Asian descent were virtually nonexistent.²

It is mainly those with the majority privilege of being able to see others like themselves in all sectors of life, including television, who may easily retort, "Why should it matter? I don't see why minorities are always whining."

This is where Wu steps in, to patiently and meticulously explain his views on how racism, particularly racism against Asian Americans, continues to plague us, how Asian Americans have been misled in the affirmative action debates, and why stereotypes of Asian Americans continue to negatively impact our lives—even threatening people's civil liberties and squelching economic parity. Wu prefaces his arguments by stating,

[A]s a teacher, I aspire to provoke people to think for themselves rather than persuade them to agree with me. I am a skeptic who has doubts about my own viewpoints. I profess ignorance and ask questions, but I do not preach and can give no answers I believe that we can engage in dialogue, listening to one another and the voices of our own better selves. I am also confident that we Americans can make our practices live up to the democratic

1. FRANK H. WU, *YELLOW: RACE IN AMERICA BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE* 4 (2002).

2. HELEN ZIA, *ASIAN AMERICAN DREAMS: THE EMERGENCE OF AN AMERICAN PEOPLE* 252 (2000).

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promise in the great experiment of our country.³

Wu touches on so many subjects that it is no wonder that he has “been writing this book since adolescence” He explains, “I have been able to maintain my good humor even as I am frustrated regularly, because I tell myself that everything is material for this book.”⁴ This lofty attempt to discuss the multifaceted issues of race is at times unsatisfying, as Wu gives cursory coverage to some topics that could easily fill up a separate chapter or another book altogether. The book’s clipped and rapid pace is reminiscent of his past speeches, carefully constructed to hit highlights and inspire an audience in short 5 minute clips, like playing Asian American trivial pursuit while catering to audiences’ short attention spans. His passing references to some Asian American experiences, for example, a one-sentence reference to merchants “rely[ing] on private rotating credit arrangements based on ethnicity to bankroll their ventures,” may leave some readers wondering what Wu is referring to. Wu hopes to reach a broad audience with his writing; to that extent, use of footnotes would have helped to explain things for readers who are not as familiar with Asian American issues.

Furthermore, Wu unfortunately perpetuates an inflammatory version of the Latasha Harlins case,⁵ in an incomplete brief summation analogous to the way the McDonald’s coffee case has become a joke in American popular culture.⁶ The Harlins case is condensed down to being “a highly publicized 1992 Los Angeles case [where] a white judge gave probation to a Korean American shopkeeper for shooting to death a 15 year-old African American girl, Latasha Harlins, in a squabble over a bottle of orange juice.”⁷ However, a neglected detail about this case is that Harlins actually punched down the older, female shopkeeper twice before the shopkeeper fired the shot.⁸ While it is arguable whether the shopkeeper felt sufficiently threatened to fire her gun, this additional

3. Wu, *supra* note 1, at 16-17.

4. *Id.* at 16.

5. People v. Superior Court, 5 Cal. App. 4th 822 (1992).

6. Liebeck v. McDonald’s Restaurants, P.T.S., Inc., 1995 WL 360309 (1994). The McDonald’s hot coffee case involved an elderly lady who was severely burned when her cup of coffee spilled on her legs; the burns were so severe that she required skin grafts. However, the facts have been mutated to the point where Americans simply believe the case involved a woman who spilled coffee on herself and won millions.

7. Wu, *supra* note 1, at 31.

8. See Zia, *supra* note 2, at 176. I also viewed the security camera video of the incident as a student in Professor Deborah Lim’s Asian Americans and the Law class at UC Berkeley in 1993.

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information is necessary to give the reader a fuller record of the incident.

Wu himself could be seen as a “model minority.” After all, he is the son of immigrants, a graduate of the University of Michigan, has taught at Stanford, and currently is a professor at Howard University. Yet through *Yellow*, Wu discusses how he became race-conscious and why he, as well as many Asian Americans, views the idea of “model minority” as a myth that impedes Asian Americans’ equality. He explains that where some Asian Americans may have achieved success academically, studies have shown that they earn less income than similarly educated whites. Moreover, studies that report higher incomes for Asian American families fail to note that Asian American families tend to have more working household members, and Asian Americans are more likely to live in areas with high costs of living, such as Hawaii, California, and New York.⁹

In another chapter, Wu tackles the debate over whether it is rude to ask a person, “Where are you from?” when the inquirer really just wants to know what country the person’s ancestors are from. Wu ties in this issue with the plague suffered by many Asian Americans, that of being seen as perpetual foreigners who are not loyal to or beneficial to America.¹⁰ This stereotype then in turn manifests itself in grave injustices and even death to Asian Americans, as Wu describes the mass internment of Japanese Americans during World War II,¹¹ the beating death of Vincent Chin,¹² the selective prosecution of Wen Ho Lee,¹³ and the scrutiny faced by Asian American Democratic party donors.¹⁴

Wu’s chapters on affirmative action and the Wen Ho Lee investigation are perhaps the best written sections of the book. He discusses how remnants of past racial discrimination continue to linger as new incidents of racism, for example, discrimination in the workplace and hate crimes, occur more often than many of us realize. He acknowledges that “affirmative action has costs,” but states that “every public policy . . . has drawbacks.”¹⁵ He starts by stating,

Most of us envision all of us belonging to all our institutions, elite and public, making them legitimate and relevant: a nation where

9. Wu, *supra* note 1, at 42.

10. See, e.g., MIA TUAN, FOREVER FOREIGNERS OR HONORARY WHITES? (1998).

11. Wu, *supra* note 1, at 95-102.

12. *Id.* at 70-71.

13. *Id.* at 176-90.

14. *Id.* at 104.

15. *Id.* at 131.

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African Americans, whites, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans all appear in the halls of Congress, boardrooms of companies, and behind the podiums in university lecture halls, instead of one where some groups are found in prisons and on reservations Affirmative action is the applied component of this commitment to work toward achieving a society that not only happens to be racially diverse, but also strives to be egalitarian and inclusive.¹⁶

But what of the reader who does not care whether institutions are racially and ethnically diverse, and argues that if someone wants to get to the head of the boardroom or at the podium, he or she should get there based on merit? Wu has a ready response to such trumpeters of “merit.” He explains how the concept of “merit” is “an artificial construct that is not neutral. We make it up to suit ourselves in many situations.”¹⁷ If universities should only admit students based on “merit,” which many define in this case as test scores and grade-point average, why do we not similarly complain about athletes being accepted on the basis of their athletic prowess, or children of alumni being admitted at greater rates? Why is there not a rage over students from other countries being denied acceptance from Ph.D. programs, even when they have better test scores and academic credentials?¹⁸ Having described in detail the ways in which America continues to be infected with racial discrimination, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, Wu concludes that affirmative action “means measures that refer to race in order to address problems related to race. The crux of affirmative action is the use of race to respond to racial disparities.”¹⁹

One who believes that racial discrimination no longer exists need only read Wu’s detailed account of the Wen Ho Lee investigation to see that racial profiling continues within our governmental institutions. Wu explains that what occurred to Lee, a U.S. citizen working at the Los Alamos national laboratory, is outrageous in the treatment of Lee by both the media and the FBI, and the disparate scrutiny and punishment meted out to Lee as opposed to white employees who committed similar acts. Accused of being a spy for China, Lee was put in solitary confinement for nine months, badgered and bullied by government agents, and finally released with

16. *Id.* at 19.

17. *Id.* at 31.

18. *Id.* at 36-37.

19. *Id.* at 167.

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an apology from the judge.²⁰ From the Lee case and his own personal experience with racial profiling while crossing the Canadian-U.S. border, Wu moves on to address whether rational discrimination is acceptable, and concludes that it “should be rejected because it is not responsive to rights, causes, contexts, consequences, or any morality beyond the bottom line We should strive not to eliminate generalizations, but to become aware of them.”²¹

CONCLUSION

University of Missouri-Columbia Professor Ilhyung Lee wrote an entire law review article addressing the need for legal “scholars of color” to be civil and rational to each other while discussing matters pertaining to race consciousness.²² Wu’s latest book, *Yellow*, should please Lee, as its arguments are artfully explained in detail and in a thought-provoking manner. Wu’s book can only help people of all colors to better understand some of the problems Asian Americans face, being neither black nor white.

20. *Id.* at 173-90.

21. *Id.* at 190-200.

22. See generally Ilhyung Lee, *Race Consciousness and Minority Scholars*, 33 CONN. L. REV. 535 (2001).