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Go East, Young Man

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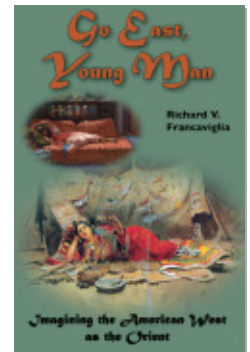
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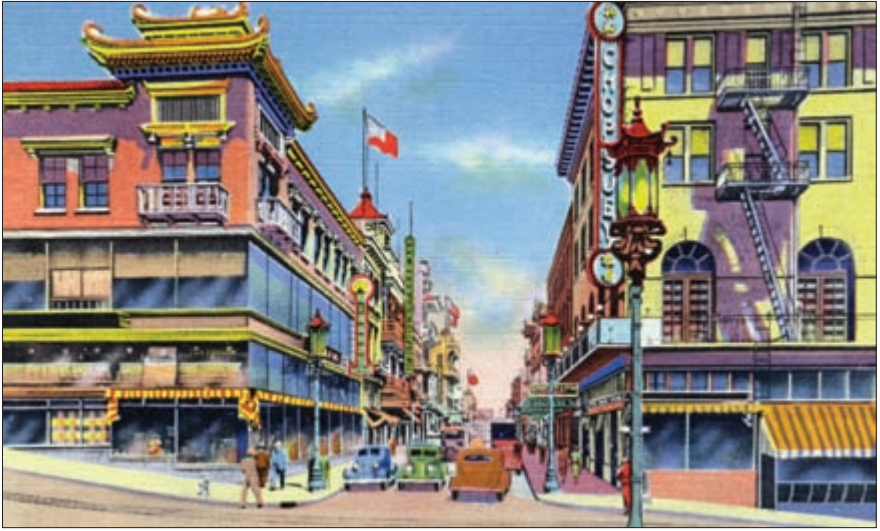
Another Place, Another Time

The Modern West as the Far East

“Welcome to the home of our Pan-Asian American communities. It’s the only neighborhood in America where Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese and Southeast Asians live and work together, side by side.”

Discover Seattle’s Chinatown/International District website

IN THE FAR WEST FROM CALIFORNIA INTO THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST, the Far East has remained a major theme throughout the twentieth century. China and Japan, in particular, are the major areas of Asia represented, but other Asians are increasingly becoming part of the region’s identity. California was a leader in perpetuating an Asian character for the West, and it developed in two major centers there. As Asian American art historian Gordon Chang recently noted, “San Francisco may be unique for the degree to which it has embraced an Asian cultural identity.”¹ In that city, Asian art and culture flourished despite considerable racial animosity. Building on the momentum of the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915, San Francisco’s Chinatown became one of the city’s most recognizable and heavily visited neighborhoods. In the era that saw private automobile ownership soar, Chinatown was now filled with traffic and presented a bustling appearance to tourists. It was among the most popular of subjects for San Francisco postcards in the 1930s, keeping its place along with another icon, the new Golden Gate Bridge whose stunning orange-colored superstructure formed a portal through which ships passed on the way to exotic ports. Within the sight of the bridge, equally exotic Chinatown experienced a facelift aimed at making it more accessible and visible. Using new printing techniques, postcards of Chinatown further emphasized the bright colors of the buildings and signs (fig. 9-1). Color is the operative word here, for Chinatown represented the colorful side of ethnicity.



Author's collection

Fig. 9-1. A brightly colored postcard, ca. 1940, depicts San Francisco's Chinatown as an enduring tourist attraction.

Pretty much missing were threatening images such as highbinders, which were now replaced by polychrome dragons and other symbols of Chinese culture. Chinatown had now become a largely commercial district, with fewer Chinese living in this part of the city.

If San Francisco helped establish a Chinese identity in the entire West, however, Los Angeles helped further that connection in twentieth-century popular culture. This began well before Grauman's Chinese Theatre (fig. 9-2) opened its doors in 1927, but that spectacular theater symbolizes the city's modern fascination with Asian culture. The brainchild of showman Sid Grauman, it was built near Grauman's earlier Egyptian Theatre. Constructed to look like a real Chinese pagoda, Grauman's Chinese Theatre features several iconic touches, including a huge dragon writhing across the facade, two stone lions that perpetually stand guard at the front entrance, and a copper roof decorated with the silhouettes of dragons. When completed, Grauman's Chinese Theatre epitomized Hollywood's insatiable interest in the exotic as represented by stylized icons. Such faux architecture is both a tribute to authentic Chinese buildings and a whimsical addition to an eclectic streetscape along Hollywood Boulevard. As a mecca to film aficionados in Southern California, Grauman's Chinese Theatre has become an icon in its own right, appearing in movies that make inside references to Hollywood filmmaking. And yet beneath the veneer of cinematic tributes is the theater's ultimate bow to fantasies about the Far



Fig. 9-2. As seen in this 1940s-era postcard, Grauman's Chinese Theatre became a Hollywood icon after its grand opening in 1927.

East itself, which has been the subject and locale of hundreds of Hollywood movies. These included the popular Charlie Chan series of detective films, which, of course, employed highly made-up Anglo-Americans in the lead Asian roles—a racializing of characters now disparagingly called “yellowface.”

Grauman's vision of building an Asian-style wonder in Hollywood may have been inspired, at least in part, by two wealthy businessmen, brothers Charles and Adolph Bernheimer. As New Yorkers who had made their fortunes in the cotton and dry goods trade, the Bernheimers were attracted by California's climate and well aware of its proximity to the Far East. Avid Orientalists who traveled frequently to the Far East—Adolph is said to have made seventeen trips there—the brothers knew the Orient well. In 1914, the brothers amazed Hollywood by constructing an impressive Japanese style home and gardens on a hilltop overlooking the city. The Bernheimer mansion was both unique and magisterial. It was, in fact, a replica of a palace at Yamashiro, near the Japanese city of Kyoto. To ensure accuracy, the brothers imported Japanese craftsman and laborers. The impressive, Japanese style home not only made an Asian statement in the California landscape; it also housed the brothers' fabulous collection of Asian art and artifacts. Inside and out, the home possessed the feel of an imperial palace. One might say that it not only conveyed or revealed the brothers' appreciation of the Orient; it also positioned them as Oriental-style nabobs in a community that

appreciated the exotic and admired fame and fortune. That the Bernheimers were able to pull off their Oriental dream so effectively was due, in part, to the similarity between the original setting in Japan and the setting of their replica in California—rugged hills overlooking cities on coastal plains bordering the Pacific Ocean. More to the point, the Bernheimer's palatial Japanese style home was visited by many of the budding film industry's elite. Following Charles's death in 1922, Adolph built the even more impressive Asian style Oriental Japanese Gardens on a bluff overlooking the ocean in Pacific Palisades. Given the public's interest in things Asian, it is no surprise that both of the Bernheimer sites were heavily visited and admired in the 1920s and 1930s. Regrettably, the Pacific Palisades site was vandalized during the Second World War, in part a result of anti-Japanese sentiment. However, the Bernheimer's fabulous Hollywood home still enchants as an artifact of the Orient, for it is now the upscale Yamashiro Restaurant.²

The Second World War marked a turning point for Asians in California. During that conflict, Japanese Americans paid a high price, as those living in cities on the West Coast were deported for security reasons. These temporary relocation camps were located far inland, as officials worried that Japanese Americans sympathetic to the emperor would sabotage shipbuilding plants or harbors. Unpleasant popular stereotypes of Asians, regardless of country of origin, persisted into the 1950s, as evident in a black-and-white photographic postcard titled "Chinese Laundry in Ghost Town" (fig. 9-3). It features a lone male figure, but the text here is both explicit and degrading. That familiar phrase mocking Chinese-American speech—"No Tickee No Shirtee"—was a staple "in-joke" (which, like all such stereotypical sentiments, had some basis in reality because laundries were very often owned and operated by Chinese). Here, however, it not only takes on a comical or mocking quality but also has an element of the theatrical because the entire scene itself is fabricated in Knott's Berry Farm (erroneously called "Knotts Berry Place" on the postcard). Archconservative Walter Knott created the theme park in 1951, four years before Disneyland opened, and it featured vignettes from the "real" past of the American West. The building's interior itself looks credible enough, and Walter Knott likely pulled it out of a real mining camp such as Calico in the Mojave Desert. Hoping to keep the western past alive, Knott not only partly reconstructed Calico in Buena Park, but also obtained buildings and artifacts from many other western locales. The Chinese laundry was such a common business in western towns that we see it here as a cliché, for both a man and his occupation are reduced to a marketable stereotype. In this image, the Chinese man appears to be a caricature of a "Chinaman," his features accentuated



Fig. 9-3. Building on venerable stereotypes, a photographic postcard of the Chinese laundry in Ghost Town, Knott's Berry Farm (ca. 1953) portrays a stereotyped Chinese man.

either by makeup or photographic retouching. People viewing this card might wonder, is he real, or a wax figure?

Despite these attempts to perpetuate anti-Asian sentiment, or at least mock Asians, the media and Hollywood began to defend them. With the bitterness of the Second World War subsiding by the late 1950s, for example, Japan began to be portrayed favorably, its geographical similarities to California and the richness of its traditions noted in television and film. In a 1959 episode of the popular television show *Perry Mason* titled “The Case of the Blushing Pearls,” a Japanese artist named Mitsu Kamuri (played by actress Nobu Atsumi McCarthy) rents a home overlooking the rugged Pacific coastline near Los Angeles so that she can paint pictures of the beautiful scene, which, she tells her attorney Mason, reminds her of her home in Japan. As in many films now portraying Asians sympathetically during this period, Mitsu’s talents and dignity are respected rather than ridiculed.

This positive portrayal of Asians in California is also evident in popular cartoons in the 1950s. Again, San Francisco took the lead in celebrating rather than denigrating Chinese people. Cartoonist Albert Tolf included several vignettes of them in his popular cartoon-filled book, *This Was San Francisco*. Tolf’s book, produced from his cartoons that ran from 1956 through 1958, depicts “A Walk Through Old Chinatown” as a positive experience wherein a boy’s fortune is told (“You grow up to be a great man”) and Chinese people

converse with each other, sometimes about their beliefs and superstitions (“Fifth day of month lucky for me”). The Chinese people depicted are industrious (“A few steps away might be a shoe repairman”) and their architecture elaborate and exotic. In his cartoon titled “A Corner of San Francisco in 1900,” Tolf depicts “the Chinese Shrimp Camp”—which, he noted, was “a thriving village and a marketplace for seafood which was built and inhabited by Orientals and located in the southeast part of the city.” Shrimp Camp became a magnet and “kids would hike [to] it from afar to bring home cornucopias of fresh shrimp”³ (fig. 9-4). It is worth noting that Tolf went out of his way to include only the positive attitudes of Chinese culture. Gone are the aspersions cast at such “Orientals.” Now, the Chinese are instead woven into a sanguine, multiculturally inclusive urban world.

Chinatown became the most enduring stereotype of Asian-American life on the West Coast. Of the many Chinatowns here, however, none has earned more cinematic acclaim than Chinatown in Los Angeles. In a sense, Los Angeles was the perfect place for such an exotic ghetto, as it were, existing as an island in a sea of Anglo-American fantasies about the region’s cultural identity. One factor that helps explain Los Angeles’s propensity to experiment with identity is its relative recency compared to, say, New York. The city’s Anglo-American population began to grow rapidly during the real estate boom of the 1880s, transforming the former Mexican pueblo. As Mike Davis put it, Los Angeles “had no compelling image in American letters,” and that anonymity made it a tabula rasa. Then, too, Hollywood had already given the city a cinematic quality in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, “L.A. was all (stage) set, which is to say, it was utopia: literally, no-place (or thus any place).” The movie set had become the “architectural zeitgeist” of Southern California. An eclectic built environment blossomed with the likes of “Spanish Colonial” houses, “Egyptian revival” apartments, and Masonic temples.⁴ In the twentieth century, film studios repeatedly used Los Angeles’s Chinatown to convey a myriad of plots and themes, many of them sinister. Of all those films, none has portrayed the mystery of Chinatown better than Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974). Although filmed several decades after the film noir period of the 1940s and early 1950s, *Chinatown* is often considered to be of that genre, or better yet neo-noir, because it reveals anew the seamier underside of life in otherwise prosperous and happy mid-twentieth-century California.

The action in *Chinatown* initially focuses on the rural landscape at Los Angeles’s periphery, where land grabbing and water dealing are exposed. Significantly, it is a Chinese gardener who helps private detective J. J. “Jake” Gittes (Jack Nicholson) ultimately solve the case. The film’s name, however,

A CORNER OF SAN FRANCISCO IN 1900

THE CHINESE SHRIMP CAMP

WAS A THRIVING FISHING VILLAGE AND A MARKETPLACE FOR SEAFOOD WHICH WAS BUILT AND INHABITED BY ORIENTALS AND LOCATED IN THE SOUTHEAST PART OF THE CITY AT THE FOOT OF EVANS AVE. KIDS WOULD HIKE IT FROM AFAR TO BRING HOME CORNUCOPIAS OF FRESH SHRIMP.



Author's collection

Fig. 9-4. In Albert Tolf's book *This Was San Francisco* (1958), the Chinese section called "Shrimp Camp" is portrayed nostalgically.

concerns the more sinister parts of the plot. The most poignant scene—the climactic shooting death of the mysterious woman (Evelyn Cross Mulwray, played by Faye Dunaway) with whom Jake falls in love—takes place in Chinatown. When trying to console Jake about Evelyn's senseless death in that seemingly foreign part of Los Angeles, an associate tells him to "forget it" because he will never have an answer. As his friend concludes with simple resignation, "It's Chinatown." That parting line reminds us that the Orient is associated with mystery and inscrutability. Moreover, Chinatown as both disquieting film and indifferent place personifies the arbitrariness of fate. The premise that something greater than the individual is in control and predetermines events is one of Orientalism bedrock themes.

Noir, particularly Los Angeles noir, has been associated with a grim predestination since the 1948 release of *Criss Cross*, a film whose plot Mike Davis brilliantly summarizes as “industrial strength sexual obsession unraveling through complex duplicities to the final betrayal of the otherwise-decent protagonist by the *femme fatale*.” Some critics and moral guardians objected to the film’s theme of predestination—as when protagonist Steve (Burt Lancaster) tells femme fatale Anna (Yvonne De Carlo), “It’s all in the cards.” That, however, is precisely the point of noir. It challenges the largely Protestant model of a controllable fate, replacing it with a darker, largely Orientalist theme that fate is predetermined. More to the point, Los Angeles’s gritty, decadent, multiethnic Bunker Hill neighborhood steals the show as the place where nightmares come true.⁵ Ethnic neighborhoods—Chinatown was the supreme example but others like Tokyotown and Koreatown can also serve as stand-ins—bring the Anglo-American face-to-face with the “other”; in this case, the “other” is not only other peoples, but their timeless philosophies.

The film *Chinatown* is worth additional comment, for it is an excellent example of just how compelling film is at moving a story to an inevitable, place-bound conclusion. As cultural geographers Gary Hausladen and Paul Starrs recently observed, film has a unique ability to depict peoples and places in a viselike grip. Like the Orient itself, film presents a scenario that seems predetermined, inevitable. Hausladen and Starrs put it succinctly: “Settings transform character, and rarely is choice involved; film is a deterministic medium, which gives a movie maker rare and exotic power.”⁶ Even more to the point is their observation that if we “start with landscape and lead character—noir, especially on screen, works toward the strengths of film, the conveyance of an evolving society that foists unwanted change on the world around, alterations transforming the land and tormenting the victim.”⁷ In *Chinatown*, Los Angeles and Southern California are in flux, driven by nefarious forces that finally express themselves in a timeless setting—the mysterious and unchanging Oriental core of the ironically named City of Angels. *Chinatown*, then, is beautifully situated in the dark and complicated world of Los Angeles noir.

Los Angeles was a natural for the setting. Fueled in part by booster literature and word of mouth, the city’s experienced phenomenal population growth in the early 1880s slowed only occasionally, with strong rebounds continuing to bring in those searching for sunnier climes and the good life. As Norman M. Klein described in *The History of Forgetting*, Los Angeles boosters had an evangelical spirit: “They were selling,” as Klein put it, “the City on the Hill . . . the new Jerusalem, first come, first served, at the semi-arid, most westerly—and newly civilized—corner of the great frontier.” Like a manuscript taking shape,

the cityscape of Los Angeles contained some elements which remained from the outset, while others were obliterated through the eraser or delete key. Klein uses the term “social imaginary” to describe an ethos about the “built environment, particularly sites that were destroyed or severely altered”—to “make the fictions of erasure easier to describe.”⁸

The creation of the new Los Angeles through additions and erasures was achieved largely by the development of several myths. One of these is the “myth of Chinatown, 1887–1973,” which involved “a nest of catacombs where inscrutable sins were committed,” and “‘hatchetmen high binders’ dressed in purple silks . . . killed to win ‘slave’ women, like the famous Helen of Chinatown.” These fantasies were resurrected in the film *Chinatown*, which was based on a screenplay by Robert Towne. Using information obtained by a vice cop—“that police were better off in Chinatown doing nothing, because you could never tell what went on there” anyway—Towne’s *Chinatown* helped “the legend of the underground downtown” resurface. Klein confesses, or rather laments: “As much as I love noir, and find it compelling, it is nevertheless often utterly false in its visions of the poor, of the non-white in particular.” The problem, as Klein sees it, is that *Chinatown* itself is a fabrication, that is, part of Anglo-American mythmaking and erasure. As Klein concluded: “Chinatown may be the Ur-text for L.A. political history, but it obscures as much as it clarifies.”⁹ Similar questions about the validity of a work of art often arise when one considers their political implications in light of modern sensitivities. The point to be remembered here, however, is that noir is valuable precisely *because* it so essentializes, even stereotypes, culture—in this case, Asian culture.

Before leaving Los Angeles’s fabled Chinatown, it should be noted that some films about it draw from both the Near East and the Far East for inspiration. In the classic 1982 science-fiction film *Blade Runner*, for example, the entire Orient lingers in postapocalyptic Los Angeles. The year is 2019, and the functioning center of a perpetually dark and rainy Los Angeles is Tyrell Corporation’s headquarters, which resembles a truncated pyramid. Harrison Ford is the Blade Runner, a man who searches out and destroys Replicants—robots who have rebelled and attempted to take over what is left of the world. In seeking them out, Ford enters Chinatown, where he hopes to learn the identity of a piece of evidence he has found. It seems to be a fish scale, but the Chinese informants tell him it is a snake scale. This clue leads him to an Arab merchant, Amin Assad, who in turn leads Ford to a woman who carries a snake, which wraps itself around her sequined, nude body like a mink stole. This woman is mysterious and erotic—and dangerous. In an instant, she

subdues Ford and escapes. The Oriental part of Los Angeles, in Ridley Scott's vision of the future, is still a place of mystery, intrigue, and danger. But it is also a place where answers to enigmas can be found.

In addition to popular depictions of places like Chinatown, the West's Orientalization occurred in one highly unlikely form, namely, the classic American Western. From its origins as the dime novel of the 1870s and 1880s, the Western evolved into a quintessentially American genre. By the 1950s, during the early Cold War, the Western was not only one of the most popular forms of entertainment but also a metaphor for America's engagement in a broader, polarized world of good and evil. Although seemingly indigenous in that it took place on American soil, the Western frequently calls upon ancient stories from the Orient as it explores subjects like good vs. bad, individual will vs. fate, and the like.

Building on a long tradition, American writer Louis L'Amour (1908–1988) crafted stories about the American West by essentially retelling Asian stories in a new setting. L'Amour became a household name after he was discovered as a Western writer in 1958, but he never forgot his literary debt to the Orient. He was, in a sense, a child of the bleak Great Plains, where the imagination could be stimulated to see more than what the eye beheld. Growing up in North Dakota, L'Amour became fascinated by the unusual sights that Marco Polo had encountered on his epic journey to China. Like Polo's tales, L'Amour's stories are steeped in the romance of travel to exotic and dangerous places. After all, this is the same L'Amour who, in his autobiography *Education of a Wandering Man*, revealed his fascination with Rudyard Kipling and recounted his own travels to Singapore and Arabia. These readings and travels helped fill his nearly insatiable appetite for the far-off continent of Asia. As a young man, L'Amour was especially influenced by an Arab boy he had met in Indonesia—a boy who related stories of Asia to the spellbound writer who would publish some of the most popular fiction about the American West.

We must also credit L'Amour's much earlier fascination with Orientalist literature. As L'Amour put it, "It would be impossible for me to explain my early fascination with Asia, although it could well have sprung from reading a child's version of *The Arabian Nights*." That legendary story apparently got him started, but L'Amour confessed that "years later, when I acquired the full set in the Sir Richard Burton translation [of the *Arabian Nights*], I was content that I had the best." Particularly impressive to L'Amour was "Burton's knowledge of the Arabic language, of the customs and mores of Near Eastern and African peoples." What fascinated L'Amour about the *Arabian Nights*, though, was his perceptive realization that "the stories largely originated in India or farther

east.”¹⁰ They were, in his opinion, Pan-Asian. Although L’Amour devoured all kinds of literature, he was especially captivated by Asian stories, including *Shah-nama*, Iran’s *Book of Kings*, which, as he romantically put it, “are still told along the caravan trails with some minor variations here and there, as are stories of that other hero of Central Asia and Tibet, Kesar of Ling.”

L’Amour especially admired “one of the greatest works any man ever attempted” to write—*Science and Civilization in China*, a monumental twenty-seven-volume work orchestrated by Joseph Needham, a British China scholar and biochemist. L’Amour also noted his appreciation of two Chinese classics—*The Scholars* (a novel about the Qing Dynasty written by Wu Junzu in 1750), and *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* (an 800,000-word epic historical novel written by Luo Guanzhong in the fourteenth century). At a time of seeming American supremacy in the world, L’Amour humbly concluded, “We must take heed of India and China, Pakistan and Southeast Asia.” This, from the same man who simultaneously admired Joseph McCoy’s *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, and J. Frank Dobie’s *The Longhorns*. Like William Roberts, who wrote the screenplay of *The Magnificent Seven* using *The Seven Samurai* as inspiration, L’Amour noted, “Long before the appearance of Samurai films in this country I knew their stories.” That rich Asian source material, including exposure to “the history of Japanese martial arts, and the Legends of the Samurai and the *bushido* code,”¹¹ give L’Amour’s stories both an ageless quality and an Asian feel. Leaving little doubt about his debt to Asian literature as an influence, L’Amour candidly noted: “As I was researching the American West, I was also delving into the histories of India, China, and Southeast Asia.” According to L’Amour, “That Arab boy, long ago in Indonesia had no idea what he started, but I owe him a debt.” L’Amour concluded: “He opened a door for me that has never closed.”¹²

That may help explain the Oriental quality of L’Amour’s descriptions that blur distinctions between Asian and Native American spirits and people. For example, in the Western novel *The Lonesome Gods* (1983), an Anglo-American named Peg-Leg describes Tahquitz, who “is supposed to be an evil spirit.” Hinting at origins far from the American West, L’Amour noted that “some say he’s a monster of some kind, even a dragon. Once in a while, the mountains rumble and they say Tahquitz is trying to escape.”¹³ In *The Lonesome Gods*, L’Amour makes a revealing comment about the antiquity of the American West: “The ‘Old World’” one character says, “is no older than this, if as old.” Even though in the Old World, men “knew of the Egyptians and Babylon,” this American desert had mysteries of equal importance. L’Amour’s character asks the question that brings both identity and time into focus: “Who knows

when men first came here? Who knows how many people were here before you whom we call Indians? So much decays. So much disappears in the passage of years.”¹⁴

In keeping with L'Amour's fascination with the Orient, *The Lonesome Gods* makes frequent reference to Japan, China, and Korea—no doubt an autobiographical comment based on L'Amour's own extensive travels in Asia. L'Amour constantly compared the trappings of this West to the Orient: “An attractive Indian woman opened the door for me, and I was shown into the shadowed quiet of a rectangular room carpeted with Oriental rugs.”¹⁵ L'Amour also describes a mysterious Asian man who is “not a Chinese, although he comes from what is part of China. From Khotan,” which we learn is “in Turkestan, against the Kunlun Mountains.” A character in *The Lonesome Gods* put it, as only L'Amour could: “I believe Marco Polo was there on the old Silk Road that led from China to the Mediterranean.” Here in L'Amour's West, this man “has found a place he loves, and he lives there.”¹⁶ Like this Asian dweller in the West, L'Amour himself recognized that the Western was the vehicle by which East and West could be united, or rather reunited.

It should be underscored that L'Amour the Orientalist was decidedly *not* an exploiter of the East. Rather, he used the literature and oral traditions of the East respectfully. In a sentiment that Edward Said himself might have appreciated, L'Amour noted that “unfortunately, in most of our [American] schools the history of Europe and North America is taught as if it were the history of the world.” L'Amour added, “We do not at the present educate people to think but, rather, to have opinions, and that is something altogether different.”¹⁷ Valuing both the oral and literary tradition, L'Amour confessed: “That book or that person who can give me an idea or a new slant on an old idea is my friend.”¹⁸ The sentiment here is that Orientalism can inform and enrich—and reveal debts to the East that few Western critics acknowledge. We Orientalize the West in part because we inherently value the Orient and its peoples.

Hollywood played a major role in putting these Easternized Westerns on the screen in the 1960s and 1970s. In the enigmatic 1964 film *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*, a mysterious Asian man named Dr. Lao (played by an Asianized Tony Randall) arrives in the West to lead a circuslike entourage. Although based on the 1935 fantasy novel *The Circus of Dr. Lao* by Charles Finney, the film version provides an almost surreal critique of 1950s-era American conformity and morality. In the film, Dr. Lao beguiles the circus goers into questioning their beliefs and values. In this regard he is both Asian and Bohemian. As the movie poster declared, “Bolt the Doors! Lock the Windows! Dr. Lao's coming to town!”¹⁹ Metaphorically speaking, those doors and windows would

not hold, and Dr. Lao's circus would soon appear in, appropriately enough, San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, as an age-old Oriental combination of drugs, sex, and spirituality (namely, Zen-inspired pacifism) swept the nation from the West Coast to the East Coast.

The tumultuous sixties witnessed the toppling of the Western as the most popular form of nightly television show, in part because the Vietnam War now cast doubt on both simplistic good vs. evil plots and the veracity of authority in general. As an outcome of that disenchantment, the television Western became darker and more sophisticated despite its waning popularity. The Western television series *Kung Fu*, featuring a stoic David Carradine as a man of part-Chinese heritage who roams the American West barefoot dispensing wisdom and justice, revealed how flexibly western identities could be cast. There was a certain revisionist irony to *Kung Fu*, for as we have seen, real Asians in the Old American West had so often been marginalized, and sometimes brutally harassed. This again underscores the flexibility of a western America that serves as a stage upon which dramas of all kinds can be acted, and then reenacted.

The *Kung Fu* series lasted only three seasons (1973–75) but deserves additional scrutiny here because it made such a deep impression on popular culture. As a website dedicated to the show observes, *Kung Fu* is an “Eastern Western.”²⁰ As such, it builds on the rich traditions of giving the American West an Eastern character—literally and metaphorically. *Kung Fu*'s main character is Kwai Chang Caine, the orphaned son of a Chinese woman and an American man. From the outset, Caine's biracial status raises interesting questions and creates interesting dilemmas regarding his identity. Caine was raised in a Shaolin monastery in the province of Honon, and he became a Shaolin master there. However, because Caine killed the emperor's nefarious nephew, he left China to avoid being imprisoned or executed. Caine's name suggests the biblical Cain, who slew his brother and was forced to flee. At any rate, like many nineteenth-century wanderers, “Caine ended up in the American Old West.” While wandering there, Caine discovers that he has a half brother named Danny.

As an Orientalized icon, Caine was the right man in the right place at the right time. He epitomized the romanticized Asian: given his instilled sense of social responsibility and his training as a priest, he is highly ethical and spiritual. A seeming loner with a burning passion for social justice, he soon puts everything to the test in the West. Given Caine's martial arts skill and his concern about civil rights, he becomes the quintessential 1970s hero/antihero. The American West of the 1870s was the perfect place and time for Caine, whose

“desire for anonymity and a sense of social responsibility is conveyed through the frequent use of flashbacks.” To add to the drama and create even more cross-cultural identity tension, Caine is pursued by both American bounty hunters and Chinese assassins. One of the most notable and haunting things about Caine is his uncanny ability to seem detached and highly engaged simultaneously. He is catlike—one might say tigerlike—in his demeanor and movements. His combination of lethality and compassion are characteristically Oriental in that they create one character with two opposite identities. By this, I mean much more than Asian and American, but also pacifist and violent—the perfect yin and yang character for a time of tremendous social change. Tellingly, perhaps, *Kung Fu* aired during the Vietnam War and concluded a year after the United States pulled out of that quagmire. The Old West also proved the perfect locale for Caine’s persona to operate—a land of permeable borders, moral ambiguity, and stunning, almost otherworldly scenery.

Caine was played by David Carradine, whose unusual facial features, willowy body, and graceful moves were perfect for the role despite the fact that Asian actor Bruce Lee had tried for the part. Ironically, Lee’s audition had proved him to be too intense and frenetic to play Caine’s serene, Asian persona. The series featured many actors who have become Hollywood legends in their own right, including Harrison Ford, Jodie Foster, and William Shatner, but Carradine became the icon for the series. The show also spawned martial arts epic films such as *The Circle of Iron* (1978) and a later television series—*Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*—which also starred David Carradine. As a testimony to the endurance of the West-as-East theme, the latter ran for five years (1993–1997).²¹ *Kung Fu* also spawned two books that interpret the series.²²

Few characters ever ventured forth into the American West more purposefully, but impassively, than *Kung Fu*’s Caine. Film studies scholar Yvonne Tasker observed that *Kung Fu* possesses “that peculiar mix of violence and stoicism so characteristic of the Western in its various fictional incarnations.” And yet the show emphasized philosophy over violence, making *Kung Fu* “in some ways contradictory . . . a ‘pacifist’ action series.” This helps *Kung Fu*, to use Tasker’s deliberate play on words, “re-Orient” the television Western. Caine serves two roles or purposes in the series—as a “witness to human frailty and diversity . . . and dispenser of justice.” A promotional illustration for the series reveals the contrast between the bald-headed, cloth-costumed Caine and the hard-edged, leather-clad westerner. However, it is the stoic-looking Caine alone who appears on the packaging for the three-part DVD series, which includes every episode of the show’s three-season run (fig. 9-5). Despite the show’s—and Carradine’s—insistence that nonviolence was the message, *Kung*



Fig. 9-5. The cover image used on Warner Bros. Entertainment's complete three-season DVD set of *Kung Fu* features a bald-headed David Carradine as the Shaolin priest Kwai Chang Caine.

Fu is credited with starting the martial arts craze that continues to the present in the United States. Tasker perceptively observes that the flashbacks to Caine's Chinese past, as well as his simplicity and his simple questions (in one episode, he asks "What is a railroad?"), render him as a "child-man." Tasker also notes that Caine's reluctance to be violent and his gentle demeanor essentially feminize him.²³

Throughout the series, Caine's identity confounds many who encounter him as he wanders the western frontier. Although most people simply call him a "Chinaman," others mistake him for a Native American. For example, in the episode titled "Chains," which aired on March 15, 1973, a fellow prison escapee tells Caine, "You sure act like an Indian," because Caine knows where to find and how to use medicinal herbs. In the episode "Alethea," which aired

two weeks later, a stage stop owner tells Caine, "You got a sorta Injun look." Hearing this, Caine does not answer. Instead, a far-off look comes over his face, adding to the enigma of his identity while also perpetuating the long-held popular belief that Indians and Asians are somehow related. Other people that Caine encounters recognize him as mystical or almost superhuman. For example, in the episode titled "The Brujo," which aired on October 10, 1973, a Mexican priest informs Caine: "You are not like any other man in this part of the world; you are strange." In "The Spirit Helper," which aired two weeks later, a young Indian man on a vision quest prays for a spirit to advise him just as Caine serendipitously appears to fulfill that request. Although Caine is both Asian mystic and transcendent wise man, he does indeed take on more of an American Indian countenance as the series develops: he begins the series with his head shaven, but by the second season his straight, dark brown hair has grown to shoulder length and he wears a headband much like an Apache Indian (or, as some critics observed, a hippie). Then, too, Caine plays a flute as he travels, its haunting tone as reminiscent of Native American flute playing as it is Chinese. In *Kung Fu*, the landscape itself helps conflate the American West and Asia. Flashbacks to Caine's youth in China feature the same rugged, scrub-covered landscape, as both were shot in Southern California. A reed-choked streambed or mountainous scene in one episode might be a setting in China, while in another it is the frontier American West. In one particularly humorous but revealing episode in the second season titled "The Cenotaph II," a trapper asks Caine what he seeks and Caine answers the "Tao." Unaware that *Tao* refers to an ancient Chinese philosophy, the trapper informs Caine that he means "Taos" (New Mexico), which, he states authoritatively, lies a few miles to the north. This, of course, is a play on words, for that *Tao* literally means "the way" or "the path."

As Herbie J. Pilato observes in *The Kung Fu Book of Caine: The Complete Guide to TV's First Mystical Eastern Western*, the show "was a story about love overcoming hate, good triumphing over evil," and in each episode, Caine "struggled with the oldest of human questions"—namely, how should a good man behave in a violent world? In answering this question weekly, Caine "becomes almost the inadvertent symbol, the unsought-for . . . champion of the underdog, with whom we can empathize only too well." He doesn't seek out action; rather, it comes to him. Pilato notes that because Caine is "a man who cannot endure injustice, he must act on it."²⁴ Although *Kung Fu* is widely regarded as socially progressive, scholars and the Asian-American community are ambivalent about it. As Jane Naomi Iwamura observes in *Virtual Orientalism*, the show represents "a hegemonic statement of a post

1960s liberal audience” that was not as socially and politically progressive as is often claimed.²⁵

This series helped Carradine become one of America’s most popular actors. However, ironically—or perhaps prophetically—Carradine’s death in 2009 had an aura of Oriental intrigue. After the actor’s naked body was found hanging in a closet in his hotel room in Bangkok, Thailand, authorities listed his cause of death as accidental autoerotic asphyxiation. In life, Carradine savored roles that were enigmatic, philosophical, and mysterious; now, in death, he became associated with forbidden, exotic, and dangerous behavior. Ironically, all of these are common themes in portraying the Orient.

In a sense, *Kung Fu* was parodied in the popular film *Shanghai Noon* (2000), whose plot involves a Chinese martial arts-savvy imperial guard (Jackie Chan) searching for a kidnapped Chinese princess (Lucy Liu) in nineteenth-century Nevada. More comedy and action film than drama, *Shanghai Noon* is a tongue-in-cheek homage to Westerns—for example, the film’s title mocks *High Noon*, and Jackie Chan’s character is named Cho Wang (pronounced “John Wayne”).²⁶ And yet this film team presents Chinese and American characters as more or less equals rather than hero and sidekick. For that matter, it actually cast real Chinese and Chinese American actors in lead roles. *Shanghai Noon* above all symbolized the growing acceptance of China as a player in both the heroic Western and Hollywood itself.

Hollywood’s fascination with the Orient continues to play out closer to home as it imagines the built environment into exotic locales.²⁷ California had, from the 1890s onward, reproduced portions of the Far East—for example, the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park in 1894, which was the first Japanese garden in America—a trend that culminated in the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay in 1939. Faux Oriental locales not only were popular places to visit but could become film shooting locales in their own right. Those closest to Hollywood had an advantage, as film crews could shoot there conveniently. Small wonder that the 2005 movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* was filmed in part at the famed Japanese Garden at the Huntington Gardens in San Marino. Offering enough stereotypically Asian settings, including a Japanese house, Zen court, moon bridge, rock garden, and the like, it proved the perfect locale to simulate the Orient.

In capturing the visual character of Japan, or at least the popular view of Japan, the Huntington built on its long history of interest in the culture of Asia. In 2006, it began a new venture aimed at reproducing “one of the world’s largest classical Chinese gardens outside of Asia.” When completed in several phases over perhaps a decade or more, the new Chinese Garden will feature



Author's collection

Fig. 9-6. Conceptual drawing of the Huntington Chinese Garden, slated for development in San Marino, California, from 2009 to 2019, shows the proposed arrangement of pavilions, waterways, and forested areas.

a lake, bridges, pavilions, and “poetic views”—all set among native Chinese plants (fig. 9-6). In design, the fourteen-acre Huntington Chinese Garden is configured something like a mandala, for the seasons will be represented by the four compass directions (summer in the south, spring in the east, autumn in the west, and winter in the north). Ultimately, more than thirty major structures, all Chinese-style, will grace the site. One of the Huntington Chinese Garden’s main objectives is to “feature plants rich in literary and symbolic associations.”²⁸ After an elaborate process, the Huntington Chinese Garden was given a name, Liu Fang Yuan, which means “Garden of Flowering Fragrance.” The selection of this name was considered to be crucial because “according to Confucius . . . ‘If a name is not correct, speech will not flow smoothly [and] it will even imperil the harmony of all under heaven.’” This is in stark contrast to the Western tradition immortalized by Shakespeare, who opined: “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Liu Fang Yuan, then, involves not only the importation of physical elements from China, such as rocks and plants, but also the philosophical spirit of the Chinese garden.

Given the Huntington’s interest in art, it is not surprising that the garden’s connection to painting is stressed. Interestingly, Liu Fang was also the name of a famous Chinese painter during the Ming Dynasty. The Huntington notes that “gardens were always seen as three-dimensional paintings.” Moreover, “painters designed many celebrated gardens of the 16th and 17th centuries, the golden age of gardens in China.”²⁹ In part educational and in part therapeutic, the Huntington Chinese Garden promises to be much more than a contemplative setting: it will also be a tribute to New Age sensitivities that embrace the rich Oriental (in this case Chinese) heritage of California.

In any event, the fact that the Chinese Garden will be developed well into the second decade of the twenty-first century confirms that California’s fascination with the Far East endures. Nearby, throughout the San Gabriel Valley, a thriving Asian American community has shaped Southern California’s suburban landscape into a remarkable amalgam of Buddhist temples, apartments, shops, and other businesses. These comprise the authentic modern American “Chinatown” of the twenty-first century—functional, oriented to the automobile and public transportation, unselfconscious—continuously altering and reshaping Anglo-American suburbs into vibrant ethnic communities. Then, too, an Asian consciousness can infiltrate even modern Los Angeles, as is evident in the recent book *The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.*, where the serene Theravada Buddhist Temple sits just a few blocks from the perpetually congested Santa Monica freeway.³⁰

California is the undisputed hearth of popular culture embracing the Far East, but farther up the Pacific Coast, the Pacific Northwest is also enmeshed in its aura. Although this region is in a sense a step or two behind, and in the shadow of, California when it comes to creating an Oriental identity, it too has flowered. Given the Pacific Northwest's long-held dream of connecting with Asia, it should come as no surprise that it enthusiastically embraced a modernized connection with Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century.

This time, though, it was the airline industry rather than the railroads that led the way. Aptly named Northwest Orient Airlines was a major player in this process. Beginning in the Midwest as Northwest Airlines in 1926, this airline expanded after the Second World War, making the first flight from the United States to Japan in 1947. In 1949, it was rebranded as Northwest Oriental Airlines, but ultimately dropped the *al* and became simply Northwest Orient. Interestingly, however, the legal name of the company remained a more American-sounding Northwest Airlines.

At its zenith, Northwest Orient Airlines produced a wealth of Oriental images aimed at getting American travelers to Japan, and vice versa. The airline's colorful postcards from the early 1960s feature scenes of "majestic" Mount Fuji, and Japan as "the land of picturesque gardens." A common theme is a traditionally clad Japanese woman, parasol in hand, standing on stumplike stones in a serene pond. More often than not the woman's dress is pink (reminiscent, perhaps, of cherry blossoms) and the vegetation is an intense green. This, in fact, is imagery that Portland Oregon would soon adopt as the popularity of Asian gardens increased. One card reminds prospective travelers that "Japan [is] the land of Oriental classicism and Western modernism" where "you'll see trees and temples . . . ponds and pagodas . . . shrubs and shrines . . . in delightful picturesque harmony." This wording builds on many of the sophisticated themes in Victorian-era travel literature that were so well represented by Raphael Pumpelly nearly a century earlier. However, it now had a more candid and more modern connection to a globalizing America that had made Japan part of its own hinterland.

More to the point, though, by the time that postcards touted the airline's "Orient Express"—which operated on "Northwest's Great Circle shortcut across the Pacific to the Orient"—the Pacific Northwest was poised to more fully embrace Asia as a partner in image building. This happened for a good reason: Japan was now, as a postcard put it, "just a day away."³¹ That country was also one of the United States' most important trading partners and becoming an economic giant in its own right. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Northwest Orient advertised on radio and television, its name sung as a jingle:



Author photograph, 2010

Fig. 9-7 The Poetry Stone in the Japanese Garden (Portland, Oregon) features a *haiku* (traditional Japanese poem) reading “Here, miles from Japan, I stand as if warmed by the spring sunshine of home.”

“Northwest Orient . . . [followed by the single clash of a gong] . . . Airlines.” That gong reminded one of the huge metal disks struck at strategic places in orchestrated Asian symphonies and in popular movies set in Asia. It not only signalled that something important was about to happen, such as the arrival of an emperor. It also conveyed a sense of the difference between Western music and its more mysterious counterpart from the Orient.

In the late 1950s, when Portland became a sister city to Sapporo, Japan, leaders in the community sought a way to offer a glimpse of the Orient closer to home. The result was Portland’s stunning Japanese Garden. Designed by Professor Takuma Tono in 1963, it consists of five separate gardens that were opened to the public in 1967. As the Japanese Garden’s website reminds visitors, because they were “influenced by Shinto, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophers, there is always ‘something more’ in these compositions of stone, water and plants than meets the eye”³² (fig. 9-7). As another website observes, the gardens take full advantage of Portland’s setting at the base of the towering Cascades, which yields an “unsurpassed view of Mt. Hood,”³³ a subliminal reference, perhaps, to its similarity to Mount Fuji. In their elaborate design, the gardens juxtapose small and large objects as a way of fostering contemplation and appreciation.

In addition to Japan, the sprawling country of China also offers important models of landscape appreciation and contemplation in the Pacific Northwest. In Portland, the Classical Chinese Garden recognizes the city of Suzhou in China, in that it uses an “authentic” Suzhou-style garden as its prototype. Opened in 1990 and occupying a full city block at the north edge of downtown, the garden was designed by Chinese architects and artisans. Situated behind a wall, the Classical Chinese Garden features “serpentine walkways, a bridged lake, and open colonnades” that “set off a meticulously arranged landscape of plants, water, stone, poetry, and buildings.” According to a promotional brochure, the Classical Chinese Garden’s design “embodies the duality of nature, yin and yang.” Like all such gardens, this one involves miniaturization and abstraction of the real world—and is carefully designed to appeal to the senses during all seasons, “each one as lovely as the last.” That miniaturization of topography here is achieved by Taihu rocks that are meant to symbolize high mountain peaks framed by a waterfall. Not far from Portland, the surrounding landscape also features high peaks and waterfalls aplenty. And yet the fact that this garden is within the city—and is a miniaturization of a larger, similar landscape—makes it all the more intriguing. The brochure concludes that “the yin and yang of the Garden take you to another place and time.” In addition to the basic environmental designs, the architecture here features a pavilion and teahouse, which offers “Chinese teas to calm and refresh you.”³⁴

The Classical Chinese Garden’s promise to “take you to another place and time” touches on the essence of American Orientalism. The place is ostensibly the Orient, specifically China, at some time during the classical period before modernization and industrialization sullied so much of the real world. In other promotional information, the Classical Chinese Garden quotes Wen Zhengming (1470–1559): “Most cherished in this mundane world is a place without traffic; truly in the midst of the city, there can be mountains and forest.”

With its two Asian gardens, Portland now had an embarrassment of riches. Upon its tenth anniversary in January of 2010, Portland’s Classical Chinese Garden changed its name to the Lan Su Chinese Garden—in part to avoid confusion with the Japanese Garden. As the *Oregonian* reported, the new name builds on the Chinese name for Portland (*Lan*), and the name of Portland’s Chinese sister city, Suzhou (*Su*).³⁵ Still, the city’s pride in both gardens is evident. Graciously, the brochure for the Chinese Garden also takes a bow to the city’s other Asian sister garden, as it were, noting it has been “proclaimed one of the most authentic Japanese gardens outside [of] Japan.” As “a haven of tranquil beauty,” as the brochure puts it, the Japanese Gardens’ five components “combine to capture the mood of ancient Japan.”³⁶ Although

Asian gardens can be found in other cities nationwide, the fact that Portland has two—and two Asian sister cities—serves as a reminder that the Pacific Northwest is oriented to the Orient. Seattle has an equally strong Asian identity, but it is not confined to just the Northwestern United States. Across the Canadian border, Vancouver, British Columbia, emphasizes that heritage, too. The late actor-photographer Dennis Hopper recently named Vancouver “one of the most exquisite, aesthetically pleasing cities in the world” because, as he put it, “you can really see the Chinese influence in the new skyscrapers towering above the sea.”³⁷

It is in the arts, letters, and film, however, that the Pacific Northwest has made original contributions to Orientalizing the American West. Seattle was a major center in this process. As Asian American art historian Kazko Nakane recently observed, “In this quiet city, Asian American artists have long asserted a prominence equal to that of other local artists developing their own artistic identity, rooted in their Asian heritage but adapted to the new life in America.”³⁸ They and their work also influenced European American artists living in the city. Paintings hanging in Pacific Northwest art galleries and museums confirm the connection between this region and Asia. Since the 1950s, several famous regional artists have used Asian themes to link life and landscape across the Pacific. Of the three great Northwestern artists who came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century, for example, one looked to the eastern United States, but two “look[ed] west across the Pacific to the orient as a source of inspiration.”³⁹ These two artists—Mark Tobey and Morris Graves—used different styles, but their work clearly owes a debt to Japan and China.

Tobey was born in Centerville, Wisconsin, in 1890 and died in his adopted homeland of the Pacific Northwest in 1976. Between these two dates and places, he did a lot of traveling. After converting to the Baha’i world faith in 1918, Tobey moved to Seattle, where he became one of the Northwest’s most recognized modern artists. Tobey’s Oriental influences include extensive travel to China and the Middle East, where he became interested in Arabic and Persian scripts. However, Chinese calligraphy, which he learned from the masters, was his forte.⁴⁰ By the 1950s, Tobey’s work helped the Pacific Northwest segue into an Asian-influenced cultural hearth that not only honored the logging and fishing of the Northwest but also introduced an element of Oriental mysticism.

It was Morris Graves (1910–2001), however, whose work more clearly reflected Asian influences. As biographer Delores Tarzan Ament observed, Graves found inspiration in Japan, where he learned to see the world and

the Pacific Northwest anew. Ament noted that Graves's "time in Japan was brief, but for the rest of his life, his art reflected a spare Japanese aesthetic." Ament also noted that "it is unlikely that any artist will ever again capture the popular imagination and the public heart of Northwesterners in quite the same way Graves did."⁴¹ Several of Graves's paintings of various subjects, for example a still life and a forest, epitomize Asian art in its American northwestern context. His interpretation of a pine forest in particular (fig. 9-8) is simultaneously Asian and northwestern. In this young forest, the new green stems resemble fragile asparagus shoots, and the scene is seemingly enveloped in mist. On Graves's canvas, we experience the Northwest not only through an Asian lens but in the electric incandescence of modern American painting.

In 1975, a remarkable documentary film called *Northwest Visionaries* explored the factors that inspired northwestern artists to create such energetic yet strangely serene works of art. After describing Seattle in the early 1930s, the filmmakers let those people who were actually involved with the arts there tell the story from their own perspective. These included art dealers and the artists themselves. One interviewee recalled that there were two main groups of artists—the serious artists who were influenced by Paris (and New York), and the commercial artists who "painted pretty pictures that sold well." In this regard, Seattle was much like other places. However, a third and much smaller group emerged in the 1930s that would have the most lasting influence. Called "the Northwest School," it consisted of three artists: Kenneth Callahan, Mark Tobey, and Morris Graves. As noted above, two of these artists—Tobey and Graves—exerted a tremendous influence, but others, including Margaret Thompkins, George Tsutakawa, Paul Horiuchi, Helmi Juvenen, and Guy Anderson were also significant players.

Throughout *Northwest Visionaries*, several themes emerge. The first is the significance of the natural environment, which is often "wet, dark, gloomy and gray," but richly textured. Its primary themes are forests, mountains, and water. The coastal margin of the region, as well as the Cascades, which form the veritable backbone of the Northwest, is topographically varied, spectacularly verdant, and awash in streams and waterfalls. As hinted by J. Russell Smith, a second and equally important factor is the region's proximity to Asia. As one informant candidly put it, the Pacific Northwest is "close to the water—the Japan current—that brings Zen influences." This current, which Japanese fishermen call *Kuroshio*, brings relatively warm water from the eastern Pacific far northward, circulating it to the Pacific Northwest. Here, although considerably cooler at this point, the Kuroshio Current helps explain the mild, damp quality of winter, and sometimes summer, in the Pacific Northwest. Driven by



Courtesy The Phillips Collection, with permission from the Morris Graves Foundation, Lolo, California

Fig. 9-8. Morris Graves's painting *Young Pine Forest in Bloom* (1947) uses Asian techniques to depict a Pacific Northwest landscape.

the prevailing westerly winds at this latitude, the cool, moist air moves across the coastal ranges, where it rises and further cools, depositing as much as 120 inches (300 centimeters) of rain a year in some locations. These coastal ranges are the wettest places in North America, veritable rain forests shrouded in clouds for a substantial portion of the year.

The supposed connection between Asia and the Pacific Northwest by ocean currents may sound whimsical, but some of the topography here was

literally part of Asia in the ancient geological past. Geologists believe that a Jurassic crocodile fossil recently found in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon originated in “an area from Japan to East Timor, somewhere in the western Pacific in a tropical estuarine environment.” What used to be called continental drift and is now plate tectonics was evidently operative here: the terrane (huge block of strata) in which the fossil was found moved here by “floating” on the more pliable surface below. As veteran Oregon geologist William Orr put it: “Fossils similar to the Oregon crocodile appear today in [rocks in] many areas around South China.” These moving blocks are called exotic terranes, “exotic” referring to their origin elsewhere. Some of these terranes are larger than mountain ranges, yet they moved pretty much intact for hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of miles. Earth history is replete with many such examples. These exotic terranes remind us that what we think of as “American” or “Asian” topography may have been connected in the distant geological past—in the case of the Jurassic crocodile, about 150 to 180 million years ago.⁴²

The more recent, but still prehistoric, past also links the Pacific Northwest and Asia in the popular mind. If, as one artist claimed, even Native American art in the Pacific Northwest is based on “early Chinese” culture from which the natives were descended,⁴³ then this made the region a natural to be Orientalized. According to some in the artistic community here, the Native Americans themselves have had a role in the complicated process through which this part of North America has become Oriental in nature. The Indians, of course, may have been unwitting actors in this complex dramatic process of Orientalization, but they are extremely important nonetheless. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, it became increasingly clear that Asian and native were being compared, and sometimes conflated. Interestingly, in his soul-searching book *Haunted by Waters*, Japanese American writer Robert Hayashi observed that growing up in the interior Pacific Northwest involved, as Gary Okihiro observed earlier, being “neither ‘black nor white’ but red.” Both the Japanese Americans and Native Americans not only faced discrimination but were mythically united by language. Upon arriving at Idaho’s Minidoka internment camp during the Second World War, for example, the Japanese Americans did not know what that name meant in Indian, but it sounded much like the Japanese expression *mina do ka*, or “how is everyone?” That name resonated as an ironic joke, given that those interned here had been displaced from their homes in the green, forested western portion of the region.⁴⁴ For the most part, it is that moist, lush part of the Pacific Northwest that resonates as Asia’s surrogate.

In literature, too, the misty and wet western margin of the Pacific Northwest has embraced the Far East. In the 1950s and 1960s, Oregon celebrated a rising star in a regional literary field that was becoming crowded with moody poets and brilliant novelists. That star, Gary Snyder, was claimed to be a native son, and quickly became a regional poet laureate to both mainstream and underground. Snyder's poems seemed delightfully exotic and yet familiar. At this time, Snyder was breaking new ground by creating his own Northwest based on Asian prototypes. This was, after all, the poet who could describe the winter landscape of the Cascade Range as a "Chinese scene of winter hills and trees."⁴⁵

This eloquent poet who could so easily conflate West and East was actually born in California in 1930, but became a northwesterner at an early age. When he was two years old, Snyder's family moved to the state of Washington. At twelve, he was living in Portland, Oregon. In his midteens, Snyder attended a camp at Spirit Lake, in the shadow of Washington's spectacular Mount Saint Helens, and in his late teens he worked a series of jobs in radio and journalism, including copy boy for the *Oregonian* in Portland. Despite claims as a northwestern native, Snyder had, as do many northwesterners, a close if ambivalent connection to California. After attending Reed College in Portland, Snyder enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley, where he majored in Oriental languages. In the mid-1950s, Snyder began associating with San Francisco beats, including Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. By 1956, the pull of the Orient proved irresistible, and Snyder left for Japan. A decade later, he was famous as the author of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* and *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. The 1960s witnessed Snyder's coronation as the king of northwestern poets.

With one foot in the Pacific Northwest and the other in Asia, Snyder straddled two continents. Traveling back and forth across the Pacific Ocean, Snyder personified the intense relationship between two very distant but somehow connected locales. In a sense, Snyder represented Orientalism's role in creating the cultural "Pacific Rim," only his role was more literary than economic. Snyder's writing reveals his Zen Buddhist philosophy and the influences of Japanese haiku poetry, Chinese poetry, and Oriental (Asian) art. In other words, Snyder's American genius and talent plumbed an eclectic set of elements before it blossomed into a characteristically regional form of expression. One of these elements was his fascination with the evocative Pacific Northwest landscape for both the physical attributes (forests, mountains, coasts, rivers) and cultural traditions (a deeply rooted Japanese presence). Blending these with the Orient, Snyder created something radically new. And yet the haunting subliminal presence of the real Orient—which is to say the

Orientalist impulse that has run so deeply through American history and has played out so richly in the American West—is part of the equation in Snyder's brilliant work.

Snyder's work combines East and West in remarkable ways. It builds on the delicacy of the "Northwest Coast Indian myths and folktales" and Japanese Zen. However, it fuses this Oriental softness with what Snyder's biographer Bob Steuding calls the virility of "the rough-and-tumble world of the Far West."⁴⁶ In a very real sense, Snyder's strong advocacy of ecology represented an Asian sensitivity to the landscape coupled with an active sense of American individualism. One can, in fact, identify two sources of Snyder's inspiration—the early New England Orientalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) (and Walt Whitman), and the mid to late twentieth century revival of Oriental sensitivities in West Coast artists and writers—to understand the Orientalist foundations of the American environmental movement itself. Consider these connections: early (nineteenth century) and later (twentieth century) conservation narratives reveal the subtle influences of Native American mythology on the European American mind. The fact that these Indians were both indigenous and exotic (that is, often Orientalized) helped suggest the timeless "wisdom" of their beliefs about the sacredness of the land.

Snyder was able to draw from varied cultural and artistic traditions in a way that epitomized the mind-set of the Pacific Northwest, or at least the elite in that region. As Steuding astutely notes, "The elements of a typical Snyder poem are: (1) a wilderness, or Oriental setting; (2) an avoidance of abstraction and an emphasis on the concrete; (3) a simple, organic form, with generally imagistic lines; (4) the use of colloquial language, with the exploitation of oral aspects; (5) esoteric allusion; (6) occasional erotic overtones." In demonstrating that in Snyder's work, "images are concrete; they are held to objects that are visual and generally sensuous," Steuding observes that several factors, including Oriental poetry, influenced Snyder.⁴⁷ To these, we should add the very landscape and cultural traditions of a Pacific Northwest (and Northern California) that had been Orientalized for nearly a century before Snyder began publishing. In phrases like: "Creating empty caves and tools in shops / And holy domes, and nothing you can name; / The long old chorus blowing under foot / Makes high wild notes of mountains in the sea," Snyder's poems reveal "his explorations in the mythology of other cultures—in this case, essentially that of India." Moreover, Snyder's work was influenced by Ezra Pound, who "was thoroughly familiar with the technical aspects of the Imagistic Chinese and Japanese poems." Snyder himself also "acknowledged his debt" to the original Chinese and Japanese poets.⁴⁸

There is an ethereal, almost surreal, quality to Snyder's poems, for example "Riprap," which is essentially Asian in construction. Steuding observed that this poem is more Asian than American in its "evocation of solitary objectivity and a melancholy that is both sad and somehow strangely pleasant." Snyder himself admitted that "Riprap" was in part "influenced by the five and seven character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows to the mind." These are sharp blows, indeed, for they hammer home an American's exposure to an Oriental way of expressing the relationship between individual and environment.

As Nicholas O'Connell observes in *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature* (2003), "After immersing himself in Chinese and Japanese poetry, he [Snyder] began to produce some of his best work." More specifically, "as a result of his intensive training in Buddhist meditation, Snyder is able to see things from the inside out, and embody them with great concreteness in his poetry." The result of this, O'Connell concludes, is that Snyder's "practice of Zen Buddhism and familiarity with Asian poetry in the original laid the groundwork for an art that achieves the interpenetration of people and place." Snyder reanimates the landscape of North America, particularly the Northwest, using ecological, anthropological, and Oriental writing strategies, all of which "are designed to convey a sense of the landscape as a living entity, entitled to respect and reverence."⁴⁹ The American literati became cognizant of the Northwest's connection to Asia through an article that northwestern poet Carolyn Kizer wrote in 1956: "In this same rainy, misty area, on which the sun never (or almost never) rises, with a climate tempered by the Japanese current and protecting mountains . . ." Kizer declared, "a new Pacific School of poets is emerging."⁵⁰

Oregon poet Clemens Starck frequently uses Asian imagery. His poem "Practising Archery," for example, juxtaposes Oregon's beautiful landscape, with its "Mist in the firs, Moss on the oaks . . . Snow on the mountains—no, those are clouds!" with "Two little Chinamen kneeling, / one is in brick-colored pajamas, the other / in charcoal colored pajamas, each / drawing a bow." Starck asks if one of the Chinese figures might be "the young Buddha practising archery?" and he uses the illustration of them on the cover of his book of poems. A central theme in this poem is that in many things, including vegetation, climate, and the search for deeper meaning, "Oregon is not so far from China."⁵¹

When did the Pacific Northwest's literature begin to take on an Asian quality? In his essay "Inventing the Pacific Northwest: Novelists and the Region's History," historian Richard Etulain notes that this region's literature

evolved through several stages. Between the 1920s and early 1930s, “a new wave of regionalism flooded over the section, baptizing numerous writers and editors alike.” Slowly, “a new way of viewing the region, one that continued to gain strength in the next generation,” took hold.⁵² Etulain suggests that the region’s literary identity was linked to other areas in the United States, including Montana, but that a distinctively northwestern style began to develop in the 1960s. To Etulain’s influences should be added a strong Asian undercurrent that was part of that new regional style.

Consider lastly how popular film incorporates Asia Pacific Northwestern identity. A major theme is Asian identity in what remains a largely European-American region. The 1999 movie *Snow Falling on Cedars*,⁵³ which is set in the fictional Puget Sound community of San Piedro, plumbs a sore subject—the harsh treatment of Japanese Americans. Although this story is set in 1951, it features the enduring theme of European American pioneer identity confronting people of Japanese descent. The struggle is ultimately between white, nativist, blue-collar workers and the enigmatic and proud Japanese, and the outcome is predictably tragic. Although nominally historical, *Snow Falling on Cedars* is a reminder that Asian-northwestern identity is still taking shape, as novelists address one of the growing literary and academic themes of the early twenty-first century, namely, the mistreatment of minorities regarded with suspicion in times of national crises. When the Japanese American population living along the Pacific Coast was sent to internment camps in the interior American West during the Second World War for “security reasons,” the foreignness of even long-term residents was underscored.

Another side of the same coin—the European-American fascination with, and appreciation of, the Pacific Northwest’s Oriental identity—is evident in the film *Little Buddha* (1994). The perspective here is more sanguine. This transcultural film begins as two Buddhist monks travel from Bhutan to Seattle in search of their master, who has been reincarnated as a boy there. Upon arriving in Seattle, they visit a family living in a house that one of the monks has “seen in a dream.” They announce to the stunned family that their son Jesse is the reincarnated lama. In this surreal film by Bernardo Bertolucci, images of Bhutan are interspersed with scenes in Seattle, thereby giving that American locale a connection with the Orient. The boy’s Anglo-American mother is surprisingly receptive to the monks, as she herself is not only open-minded but also in search of alternative explanations to the ultimate meaning of existence. Bertolucci has an ulterior motive—to introduce the audience to Buddhist philosophy. Given Seattle’s proximity as the place in the continental United States closest to Asia, and its receptivity to alternative spirituality, it is

a perfect place for revelation. Possessing vaguely ethnic features, Keanu Reeves is cast as Siddhartha—the man who will become Buddha. After traveling to Kathmandu, Nepal, the American boy experiences the story of Siddhartha's transcendence as he too is validated as a lama. The revelation comes full circle as the boy returns to Seattle with the ashes of the monk who first found him. In the film's finale, the monk's ashes are placed in a bowl and set afloat in the Seattle harbor; in this symbolic act, the Orient and America are (re)united in the most natural locale—the Pacific Northwest.

In the 2008 romantic comedy *Management*, a young man named Mike (Steve Zahn) pursues Sue (Jennifer Aniston) from Arizona to Maryland and then to Washington State. Here in the Pacific Northwest, Mike meets an Asian American man named Al (James Hiroyuki Liao) who offers him a job at his folks' Asian restaurant. In one scene, Al shares his insights about Asia with Mike: "China is not only going to kick America's economic butt, but it's going to invade your whole country. I'm talking about you guys getting like a whole new flag and whatnot." In a play on words, Al adds, "You need to re-orient the way you think about the Asians, Mike, because we will blow your minds with our uniqueness and [our] inner beauty." Mike evidently heeds Al's advice and attempts to become a Buddhist monk. His spiritual mentor, an older monk from Vietnam, teaches Mike something about accepting life when he reveals that even though American troops killed his parents during the Vietnam War, he moved to the United States to fulfill his destiny. Filmed in portions of Oregon, including Portland's Japanese Gardens, this film reinforces the proximity of Asia not only to the Pacific Northwest but also to the nation as a whole.