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<Book Review>

Antje Missbach

Jennifer Ho, ed. *Global Anti-Asian Racism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

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Furthermore, Golkar did win disproportionately at the polls in rural areas, including in the villages that the government electrified. But did Golkar experience losses—or at least narrower wins—in villages where electrification was forgone? It may be that this level of fine-grained data is not available, but if it were, it would further strengthen the argument of the electricity-election link.

A mark of any good scholarship is its ability to change how we see the world, and by that measure *Electrifying Indonesia* succeeds wonderfully. Whereas Anderson encouraged us to view the light bulb as a metaphor for power, Mohsin shows us how political and social power came to be intertwined with electricity.

Finally, it is worth noting that while Mohsin's study is focused primarily on the past, it also hints at the present. In one interview, a former PLN employee recalls the "aura" of rural electrification and how that aura disappeared "after the Orba" (New Order government). But the interviewee quickly adds "Although it seems to start again" and cites an electrification ceremony in Bali in 2012, during the Yudhoyono presidency (p. 62). Techno-patrimonialism, it seems, may still be alive and well.

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## *Global Anti-Asian Racism*

JENNIFER HO, ed.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

Racism is a core problem of our times, yet we have only just started to tackle its different dimensions. While some progress has been made, not least due to some important academic contributions and participation in public debates, the more fundamental underlying dimensions of racism are still dawning on us. Because of the urgency of the problem, which manifests in daily reports about racist violence and discrimination, I was very keen to read *Global Anti-Asian Racism*, edited by Jennifer Ho. I was intrigued by the concept of bringing together a range of voices and perspectives from different parts of the world but also by the format of the intervention: brief essays. Having read the volume closely, I am left with rather mixed feelings. While some essays are well crafted and truly insightful, others read more like an assemblage of interesting but

unordered thoughts and unidirectional complaints.

In her foreword, Christine R. Yano states that “Racism has been taboo in intellectual approaches to Asia because the subject strikes too close to non-Asian home” (p. xi). This very bold claim ignores a whole range of critical research within and outside Asian studies rather than acknowledging the subject in a fruitful manner, as a quick search in any scientific databank would reveal. Given that it is seemingly all too easy to dismiss previous publications on the subject, Yano promises that “this historic volume” (p. xii) will therefore “dispel that taboo” (p. xi). The exaggerated advertising language, however, does not do the book any favors.

In her introduction, Ho, professor of ethnic studies, uses similarly confusing claims to elevate the significance of the volume. Without stating who exactly she has in mind, she writes, “While many believe that anti-Asian racism erupted in March 2020, global anti-Asian racism has been around for centuries” (p. 2). Given that this book is aimed primarily at an academic audience, Ho writes, “I am very proud to share this collection of essays on global anti-Asian racism because this is the volume many people have been looking for” (p. 3). I find it rather risky of her to underestimate the readership and their academic horizons. When it came to selecting the essays presented here, Ho had a tough job having to choose ten from more than four times that number of submissions. Intending to have the contributions cover not only a variety of disciplines and writing styles, including a graphic narrative by Rivi Handler-Spitz, but also centuries and continents (except Antarctica, as explicitly underlined on p. 8), Ho brought together a broad range of “scholars who identify as Asian and who share their personal experiences with anti-Asian racism before and after the global [Covid-19] pandemic” (p. 12). In her ponderings, Ho states at the end of her introduction: “Yes, there is global anti-Asian racism. But there is also global anti-racism resistance and resilience. There is violence, but there is also beauty and hope” (p. 12). If I had not committed to reviewing this book, the banality of this finishing statement might have made me put it aside right here.

But I am glad I continued reading. I was moved by Rahul K. Gairola’s testimony about being hit by a stranger, which was a complete surprise; less of a surprise, perhaps, was that no bystanders came to his help. While he was lucky not to suffer permanent physical damage, he was “damaged in other ways” (p. 18), including in relation to his personal safety but also in his trust in the Australian police. Although the perpetrator was never arrested, the police closed his case. In his analysis, to understand what happened to him, Gairola reminisces about the many remnants of the White Australia policy, which dominated Australia’s exclusionary immigration policies for decades. Specific ideas of mateship, under which racism can easily be reframed as humor and insult as hypersensitivity, further contribute to the downplaying of discriminatory behavior.

In her essay, Sara Djahim deals with migrant organizations’ resistance to racism in Germany. In particular, she ponders the (un)usefulness of the term “Asian Germans” in their struggle against racism, as none of the many existing organizations for Asians in Germany can properly

claim to represent the entire Asian community there (p. 35) and many people with Asian family connections feel rather uncomfortable with it (p. 37). Sadly, Djahim does not only refrain from offering a definite answer, but in her ponderings she makes several references to German institutions and abbreviations (e.g., NSU, documenta), which should have been translated and explained properly.

Despite the editor stating up front that it is “overly simplistic to say that all anti-Asian racism boils down to white supremacy” (p. 3), this shortcut somehow keeps reappearing in several chapters throughout the volume. In their essay, Érika Tiemi W. Fujii *et al.* trace the question of “how Asian people are integrated [in Brazil’s] racial dynamics” (p. 47). Pointing to both the “racial democracy myth” and “whitening politics,” they note that Japanese Brazilians are left to choose from only two options: “an alliance with whiteness or anti-racist solidarity” (p. 47). After explaining in more detail the history of Japanese immigration to Brazil, the writers end the essay with a powerful yet rather puzzling statement: “To destroy colonialism, we must look into ourselves as Asian Brazilians” (p. 52). I wish the writers had elaborated on what that actually implies.

For me one of the most astute contributions is the one by Richard Aidoo on the political economy of anti-Asian discrimination in Africa. Aidoo shows, in particular, how some African politicians instrumentalize discrimination mainly against Chinese populations for their own political and economic interests. Rather than simply pointing out colonial histories in Africa, Aidoo includes also the postcolonial nation-building projects in Ghana, Uganda, and Nigeria, making clear that fueling popular anger against Asians started long before the more recent entry of Chinese capital, labor, and entrepreneurship that contributed to the high indebtedness of African states and unemployment amongst the African populations. Aidoo is very convincing in arguing that the recent “anti-China rhetoric is often grafted onto the discourse of anti-colonialism” (p. 67) but also “that this anti-Asian discourse has real economic implications” (p. 68).

Xuening Kong’s essay on China’s response to the anti-Chinese movement in Mexico (1928–37) is quite an eye-opener, as it shows how racialization was practiced from afar at a time when China was in great political turmoil and depended on ethnic allies abroad willing to dedicate remittances to political struggles in the homeland. This need, as Kong argues, was so strong that it nurtured an ignorance of how overseas Chinese in Mexico were suffering from racism and detracted from the responsibility the Mexican government and society bore for stirring up racist sentiments and violence.

Equally intriguing for me was to learn more from Irmak Yazici about the political discourse and treatment of Uighurs in Turkey. Yazici shows how the pre-pandemic anti-Asian violence and vandalization of seeming Asian-owned businesses were directly related to the developments in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. By discussing the interlinkages between religious identity and foreign policy, and how both shaped negative attitudes toward Asian people in Turkey, Yazici reveals also a number of ambivalences and contradictions. While Turkish President

Erdogan can, on the one hand, criticize the oppression of the Uighurs in a very explicit manner and portray himself as their protector, the Turkish state has, on the other hand, carried out arrests and extraditions of many Uighur activists. China has been one of Turkey's most important money lenders throughout the latter's ongoing economic crisis.

Kong's and Yazici's chapters, in particular, make me wonder to what extent their findings may be applied also to Southeast Asia and the long-standing Sinophobic sentiments prevalent across that region, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, I wonder why Southeast Asia as well as Southeast Asians globally have not received more attention in this collection. Especially when it comes to intense Chinese investments and national indebtedness, there are presumably a number of parallels that may be detected. However, the need for—or should I say lack of—political asylum for Uighurs, and their subsequent deportations, warrant more academic examination.

The remaining three essays are, in my view, less insightful. Kimberly D. McKee sheds light on the microaggressions Asian adoptees have had to endure in white families “that failed to acknowledge racism” (p. 121). Relying on her own experiences and two video documentaries, McKee details discomfort, marginalization, and accusations in a unidirectional way but does not offer any way out of the “false promises of adoption” (p. 130). Eileen Chung reveals very personal experiences that attest to the hypersexualization and fetishization of Asian women, driven first and foremost by “that Western hegemonic discourse [which] has been internalized by other non-Western cultures” (p. 138). By relating her travel experiences in Cuba and Greece that included a lot of unwanted attention by local men, she seeks to underline the truism that “taken in sum, the lethality of racialized and sexualized violence toward Asian women is rooted in the horrific histories of exclusion and imperialism” (p. 139). Chung ends her essay with two lessons learned from her mother to resist the effects of discrimination: first, one ought to be selective about one's educational and emotional labor to avoid burnout; and second, self-care is not selfish. While there is certainly some conventional wisdom in these suggestions, it remains unclear to what extent the advice helped the writer through her previous travels and, perhaps, will help in her travels to come.

Finally, Jennifer Hayashida draws the reader's attention to the importance of translations for resisting racism. The chapter is written in a more experimental and also poetic style, often leaving big gaps between paragraphs and sections that make it difficult to follow the author's line of thought. In fact, I fear that the key message might have been lost on me. Instead of ending so abruptly, ideally the collection should have included an afterword attempting to sum up the key messages and the remaining questions for others to engage in more profoundly.

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