

Migrating Traditions: the Asian Diaspora and the Remaking of Cultural Identities in Early Twentieth-Century United States

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Abstract

In the mid-nineteenth century, changing global socioeconomic and political realities encouraged the migration of peoples, ideas, and objects from Asia to the United States, leading to a growing curiosity for the seemingly exotic region. While Americans had a long history of interchanges with “the Orient” that reached as far back as the colonial era, this time period would be marked by a new level of interest in the exotic. In the process, bourgeois Americans idealized the importance of ancient “Oriental” beliefs for the well-being of their modernizing and industrializing country. This was a departure from the widespread anxiety concerning the deleterious effects that Asian immigrant laborers and their customs might have upon nineteenth-century white American civilization. Because of the dearth of knowledge about Asia, some middle-class immigrants were afforded an opportunity to play an important role in defining and introducing the intellectual, artistic, and cultural institutions of their home countries to curious but uninformed Americans. More specifically, these Asian Americans helped to popularize various Asian religious and cultural practices, which seemed to hold out the promise of individual salvation as well as national revitalization. This paper will explore the ways in which the influx of immigrant communities and traditions worked to remake ideologies of spirituality, class, and race during turn-of-the twentieth century United States. Instead of marginalizing transplanted Asian ideals as incomprehensible Otherness, certain Americans embraced them with the guidance of Asian American intermediaries, thereby reshaping the development of U.S. culture, popular conceptions of immigrants, racial discourses, and international relations.