Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2014)

“While the particular ideas about Oriental-Occidental difference changed over time and place, they pivoted consistently on a presumption of Western superiority and evinced a simultaneous fascination with and revulsion of the ‘East.’ Such thinking not only shored up Western, European—and subsequently white—identity, but also helped to rationalize political, economic, and military domination and interventions over ‘weak’ Asian powers.” (pp.5-6)

“As to why and how distorted perceptions persisted in the face of sustained contact from the eighteenth century on, it is important to consider the purpose and uses of knowledge. As long as the impulse to dominate, possess, or ‘know’ the ‘Orient’ framed Europe’s relationship with Asia, then the primary function of knowledge produced and disseminated about it was to rationalize this interest by setting Europe apart from Asia as both *different* and *better.*” (p.9)

“After independence, Americans confronted daunting challenges, among them developing the Revolution’s vision of economic wealth and sustainability. For many, this hinged on establishing trade and visions quickly fixed upon China. Alexander Hamilton was an especially strong proponent of this in his writings.” (p.12)

“By the early nineteenth century, the China trade flourished and transformed New York, the nation, and American commercial culture. The prosperity it generated helped establish New York as the nation’s largest city and one of its most crucial ports and immigrant gateways. Moreover, the trade produced a new merchant elite that included immigrants like Stephen Girard and John Jacob Astor. By the early 1800s, New York had no less than six major China trade houses, which arranged sailings, ordered shipments from agents in Canton, and sold goods at auction. Others profited indirectly from the China trade.” (p.12)

“The establishment of the China trade in the late eighteenth century also marked a new phase in the United States’ relationship with Asia and Americans’ attitudes about Asian people….Possessing Chinese things remained a mark of distinction, but Americans’ attitudes about Chinese people, with whom they now directly interacted, became less admiring. It did not need to be this way, as direct contact can generate understanding and camaraderie, but the interactions here were guided and inherently limited by their context of capitalist trade relations. ‘The closer Americans got to real Chinese, dispelling their imagined ‘Orient,’ the more their respect for and emulation of Chinese civilization diminished,’ says Tchen. When frustrated, for instance, by Chinese traders’ insistence on prices or terms that were unfavorable to their interests, Americans decried Chinese ‘despotism’ and clung to their ‘superior’ claims of ‘free trade.’” (p.13)

“American traders’ descriptions of Chinese practices became increasingly racialized and ethnocentric, ultimately leading them to embrace an identity rooted in their occidentalism that shared affinities with the European traders they encountered in Asian ports. Americans disdainfully noted the ‘cowardly’ and ‘submissive’ nature of Chinese people, whom they also characterized as ‘silly grunts’ and ‘menaces.’ They returned home with tales of the bizarre foodways of Chinese (dogs, cats, rats), their odd music (‘mass of detestable discord’) and their theater (‘disgracefully obscene’). One remarked that Chinese people were ‘grossly superstitious,’ that ‘gambling [was] universal’ among them, that ‘they use pernicious drugs,’ and were as a whole a ‘people refined in cruelty, bloodthirsty, and inhuman.’” (p.13)

“Such dehumanizing views would be reinforced in the coming decades with Asian immigration….By the mid-nineteenth century, consuming Asian things evolved into a pursuit not limited to intellectuals and elites. Perhaps because commercialization drove this ‘popular orientalism,’ the phenomenon was rooted in spectacle and accompanied by an exaggerated flattening and fetishizing of Asia that left its redemptive qualities less discernible….Besides reading popular stories, people could encounter the Orient by gazing at objects collected by whites who had traveled there.” (p.15)

“Moon-Ho Jung has discussed how the figure of the Chinese ‘coolie’ loomed over debates between pro and anti-slavery forces before, during, and after the Civil War, clarifying their positions on and understandings of free and unfree labor. The term coolie referred to imported Asian contract laborers, mostly from China and South Asia, and worldwide demand for them intensified after 1807 when Britain banned the slave trade throughout its empire. As other colonial powers followed suit or faced pressure to do so, slave owners searched for alternative labor sources to maintain their plantations, and many turned to coolies. Between 1838 and 1970 over five hundred thousand Chinese and South Asian men were shipped to labor in places such as Cuba, Peru, Mauritius, Demerara (British Guiana), Brazil, Trinidad, Jamaica, Natal and Reunion. Heralded as ‘free labor,’ coolieism seemed to depart from the worst aspects of slavery, as it purportedly relied on voluntary contracts and legal rights. In practice, however, the freedom of coolies was illusory. Procurers and employers used kidnapping, deception, and corporal punishment, and frequently coerced or tricked coolies into entering eight-year contracts for fixed wages. Conditions on ships were atrocious, and things were rarely better at their destinations.” (p.16)

“By the 1850s, as rising abolitionist sentiment in the United States stirred passionate debates about the future of slavery, just as coolieism was taking off in the Caribbean, the coolie trade increasingly drew the attention of Americans. Some engaged directly in the trade, as American ships were responsible for transporting tens of thousands of coolies between Asia and the Americas, and others benefited indirectly by trading goods produced by coolie labor.” (p.16)

“As a racialized category in between free and slave labor, coolies had no place in a nation headed toward emancipation and where free labor and immigration were touchstones of civic membership. Popular nineteenth-century understandings of coolieism in America tended to conflate the practice with any form of imported Chinese labor, which not only made legislating against it difficult, but also shaped the perception that Chinese immigrant laborers threatened the dignity and wellbeing of the American—usually white, male—working class and hence American values of uplift and independence.” (p.16)