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Sooner or later every Asian-American must deal with the question "Where do you come from?" It is probably the most familiar if least aggressive form of racism. It is a tip-off to the persistent notion that people of Asian ancestry are not real Americans, that "Orientals" never really stop being loyal to a foreign homeland, no matter how long they or their families have been in this country. Confronting the cultural stereotypes that have been attached to Asian-Americans over the last 150 years, Robert G. Lee seizes the label "Oriental" and asks where it came from.

The idea of Asians as mysterious strangers who could not be assimilated into the cultural mainstream was percolating to the surface of American popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century, when Chinese immigrant laborers began to arrive in this country in large numbers. Lee shows how the bewildering array of racialized images first proffered by music hall songsters and social commentators have evolved and become generalized to all Asian-Americans, coalescing in particular stereotypes. Whether represented as Pollutant, Coolie, Deviant, Yellow Peril, Model Minority, or Gook, the Oriental is portrayed as alien and a threat to the American family_the nation writ small.

Refusing to balance positive against negative stereotypes, Lee connects these stereotypes to particular historical moments, each marked by shifting class relations and cultural crises. Seen as products of history and racial politics, the images that have prevailed in songs, fiction, films, and nonfiction polemics are contradictory and complex. Lee probes into clashing images of Asians as (for instance) seductively exotic or devious despoilers of (white) racial purity, admirably industrious or an insidious threat to native laborers. When Lee dissects the ridiculous, villainous, or pathetic characters that amused or alarmed the American public, he finds nothing generated by the real Asian-American experience; whether they come from Gold Rush camps or Hollywood films or the cover of Newsweek, these inhuman images are manufactured to play out America's racial myths.

Oriental comes to grips with the ways that racial stereotypes come into being and serve the

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purposes of the dominant culture.