

From Fengshui to Ginseng Tea: The Asianization of America

Eastern Standard Time

Mariner Books

1997

Review by Sara Dorow (Winter 1997 issue)

Roll over, Rudyard Kipling. *Eastern Standard Time* has declared that while East is still East, and West is still West, the twain have indeed met. Published by the trendy A.Magazine, the cover proclaims it “the first book about the Asianization of America—the long-awaited guide to Asian cultural literacy.” Several nights in a row I curled up with this comfortingly weighty paperback, expecting to discover the many ways in which Americans of all walks had been unwittingly Asianized. With the opening piece on bonsai and ikebana, however, I suspected that the second promise on EST’s cover was more to the point: this collection of essays seemed more a popular culture encyclopedia (albeit a very fun one) than an examination of Asianization.

At first I found it disappointing. So much literature, both scholarly and popular, has dealt with the powerful dissemination of the “Coca-Cola culture” to Asia, so the smaller but no less interesting invasion of the United States by soy sauce and fengshui deserves equally thoughtful analysis as a form of resistance and hybridization. But the book told me to lighten up. If we can find ironic delight in Levis on Chinese peasants, or kimchi pizzas in the frozen food sections of Seoul grocery stores, why not turn that back on ourselves? Why not take a campy approach to Asian popular culture, consciously packaging a guide that is at once informative and fun?

Subjects in EST range from brush painting to aphrodisiacs, from Confucius to Jackie Chan. Any subject that has remotely hit American consciousness is fair game, and the reader is assumed to know something but not a lot. Since no one person can know it all anyway, there is something for everyone in EST. Since I thought I knew something, I wanted an index, or at least a table of contents to direct me through this thick book. Again, the book warned me to lighten up. Sans direction, the reader wanders through sections on Art and Design, Film and Television, Food and Drink, Ideas and Philosophy in much the same way that things Asian filter through our everyday existence in America. (EST does employ a system of cross-referencing, for those who want to flip back and forth following a theme.)

My complaints are few, but start with EST being a little Japan-heavy. Sure, Japan has seeped into American consciousness longer and in more ways than probably any other Asian nation. But why reinforce that? I don’t know how, for example, the review of Asian pottery and ceramics could omit Korean celadon or the section on fashion miss Korean designers. Just as EST describes Paper snacks as “Picky’s slighter shorter Korean cousin,” it gives Korea (as well as other countries) the short end of the stick in its coverage of numerous other topics as well. Not that Korea is left out completely: King

Seagoing, hangup, callboy, the term “gook,” Taekwondo expert Jhoon Rhea, and writer Chang Rae Lee among other prominent contemporary Korean personalities, all make appearances.

EST is sure to both delight and offend. I rarely experienced the latter, until a misinformed essay on Asian adoptees appeared in the last section on “Trends and Phenomena,” followed by a piece on Asian pets. Again, it seems anything is fair game. Discomfort is part of the challenge of reflecting on “Asia in America.”

How we read EST as tells us something about how we Americans read Asia: as never explicitly defined, as a disjointed collection of ideas and objects and people that we mix together to try to make sense of the Other. But the Other is here, in our cupboards and theaters, hanging on our walls, living next door. EST challenges the reader to not only acknowledge but enjoy and learn from this meeting of the twain. Thus this book deserves a place on everyone’s nightstand, between the Sanyo alarm clock and cup of ginseng tea.