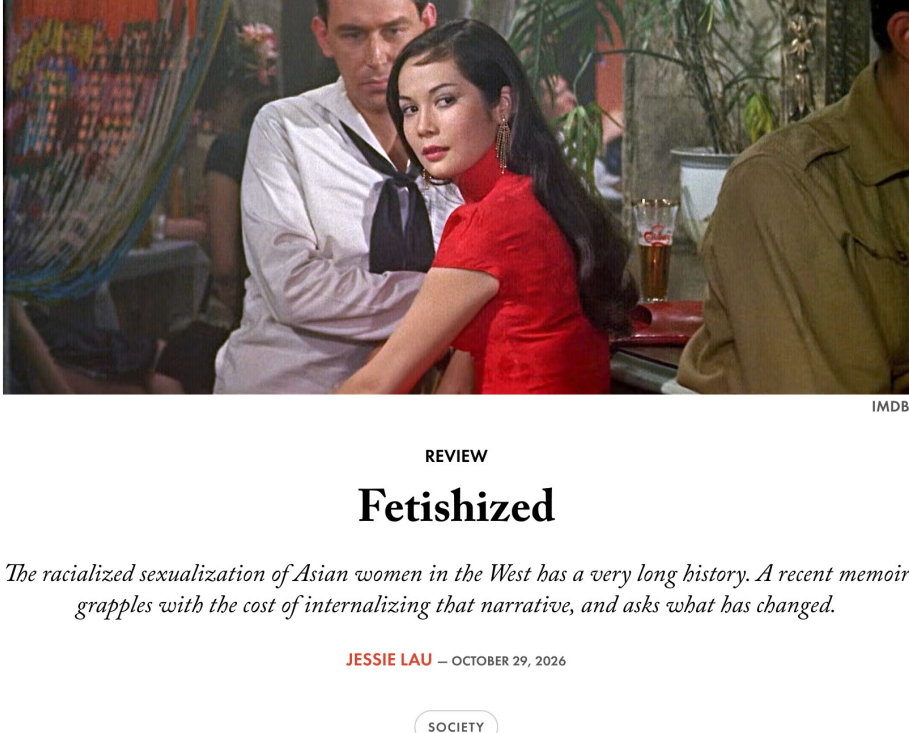




REVIEW

Fetishized

The racialized sexualization of Asian women in the West has a very long history. A recent memoir grapples with the cost of internalizing that narrative, and asks what has changed.

JESSIE LAU — OCTOBER 29, 2026

SOCIETY



Reviewed: *Fetishized: A Reckoning with Yellow Fever, Feminism and Beauty* by Kaila Yu (Crown, August 2025).

Every time I publish a widely circulated story — such as a personal [essay](#) I wrote last summer about my multicultural wedding — I receive sexist and racist direct messages and comments from men trying to belittle me, calling me “white worshipping chink” and other slurs. The men are diverse in race, age and political beliefs, but they all have one thing in common: they see Asian women as objects. To them, we’re nothing more than racialized sex trophies, seen through the lens of fetishization and hypersexualization. When they see women speaking out and challenging this narrative, they feel the urge to put us back in our place — that place being as objects of male fantasy, domination and pleasure.

Earlier in my journalistic career, I would save all the abusive messages I received. Celeste Ng, a writer also of Chinese heritage who has spoken out about being harassed online for marrying a white man, [referred](#) to them as “packets of poison.” I called mine “fan mail,” and collected them into a folder on my phone called “Hinge Cringe.” When I entered my 30s, the messages became so commonplace and repetitive that I barely click them open now before deleting.

It saddens me that Asian fetish and racialized sexual harassment have become such a normalized part of my life. Its most blatant manifestations (verbal and physical abuse) are always unpleasant, but the more subtle forms — such as compliments that reinforce racialized tropes, or cultural appropriation disguised as appreciation — can be even more exhausting, for they require more effort to untangle and explain. This is even more common in the era of K-pop and [Chinamaxxing](#), against the backdrop of a global [anti-gender movement](#), misogynistic memes like the [Oxford study](#) (a fake study cited by trolls seeking to demean Asian women dating white men), and the prevalence of sexually explicit [deepfake](#) content.

There’s clearly an urgent need to examine the roots of this pervasive trend and how it distorts Asian women’s sense of value. Kaila Yu’s incisive and vulnerable memoir *Fetishized: A Reckoning with Yellow Fever, Feminism and Beauty* is an exceptional attempt at doing just that. Born in Taiwan and raised in California, Yu pursued a career in modeling, acting and music — she had a small role in *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) and was the lead singer for the all-Asian American female rock band *Nylon Pink* — before becoming a freelance culture writer. At once highly intimate and thoroughly researched, the book follows Yu’s coming-of-age in the late 1990s and early 2000s, grappling with internalized racism and sexism as she becomes a pinup and import car model, as well as with the dehumanizing process of auditioning as a performing artist for Western media roles that reduced Asian women to hypersexual stereotypes. As Yu explains in her introductory chapter:

“The Asian fetish is more than mere preference and admiration of physical features like hair, skin, and eyes. It’s a myopic, generalized belief that Asian women inherently embody traits of submissiveness and obedience.”

Westerners have a long history of objectifying Asian people, women in particular, with aesthetics such as chinoiserie becoming popular during the 17th and 18th centuries, shortly after Western empires and trade interests expanded into the region. The first record of a Chinese woman stepping foot onto U.S. soil was Afong Moy, a 14-year-old from Guangzhou who was leased from her father by American traders and brought to be [exhibited](#) in New York in 1834. After touring U.S. cities as a Chinese decorative object on display for American consumers, she disappeared from public record and died in obscurity.

Fetishized provides background on this early exoticization of Asian women but largely focuses on the more contemporary roots of Asian fetishization, through a mix of historical analysis and cultural criticism. Yu skillfully examines how movies and TV shows such as *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) perpetuated harmful narratives about Asian women as exotic, disposable and sexually submissive, while *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) reinforced “dragon lady” stereotypes painting Asian women as “sexually voracious, conniving, powerful and reptilian” (the memoir ends with a non-exhaustive list of such fetishized portrayals in mainstream media).

Yu also analyzes the evolution and cultural impact of aesthetic labels such as ABG (Asian Baby Girl or Asian Baby Gangster), a term coined in the late 1980s to describe the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian female teenage refugees who became the first members of California’s Asian gangs. Later co-opted by East Asians as a means to rebel against the model minority myth, ABG became a highly sexualized aesthetic, one that Yu says continues to cater to male Orientalist fantasies.

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The book’s contextualization of Asian fetish within the broader history of Western colonization is particularly noteworthy. In an early chapter, Yu describes how, on the eve of Japan’s surrender in World War II, the wartime government set up [brothels](#) with prostitutes or “recruits” for the American troops they soon expected to be occupying the country, to prevent them from raping local women. “These women had to service fifteen to sixty soldiers a day and described the sex with American GIs as ghastly and animalistic,” writes Yu. American soldiers were also sent to Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Hawaii for “Rest & Recreation” (which some soldiers jokingly referred to as “rape and restitution”), according to scholar Kimberly Kay Hoang’s 2015 book *Dealing in Desire*. During the Vietnam War, the rape and sexual assault of Vietnamese women by American soldiers was both rampant and normalized, so much so that U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright [said](#) in a speech in 1966 that Saigon had “both literally and figuratively” become “an American brothel.”

Yu also explains how the sex tourism industries in Thailand and elsewhere in the region were initially built to serve American soldiers, who invaded Asian countries and prostituted Asian women along the way. “During the Philippine-American War in 1889-1902 [sic],” she writes, “the idea that Filipina women were ‘little brown fucking machines powered by rice’ grew roots.” By the early 1990s, solitary male travelers to Thailand made up an estimated 65% of the country’s seven million tourists and 70% of them came for sex, noted attorney Sunny Woan in a 2008 [article](#) arguing that sexualized, submissive stereotypes of Asian women were created through Western imperialism.

Such narratives of sexual brutality still hold sway today. A paper on pornography that Yu highlights found that “aggression” was present in three-quarters of all videos containing Asian women — a rate higher than for any other group. She also cites a separate study that Asian women are overrepresented on porn sites featuring rape or forced sex. These findings track with contemporary incidents of violence against Asian women, such as the [mass shooting](#) that took place in 2021 when a white gunman killed eight people, including six Asian women, at a string of spas and massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia.

Yu grapples with how her sense of identity and perceptions of beauty were shaped by these stereotypes. Her insights into the impact of these dynamics on her self-worth make up the most evocative parts of the memoir. She describes how, as a child, she had internalized Western beauty standards and envied her white peers, later undergoing breast augmentation and blepharoplasty (commonly known as eyelid surgery, popularized in the 1950s by an American plastic surgeon stationed in Seoul during the Korean War with the goal of making Korean prostitutes more attractive to American soldiers). As a teenager, Yu was sexually assaulted at a “test shoot,” footage of which was published without her consent. She then spiraled into drug use and developed a “disdain” for her vagina that led her to undergo labiaplasty. As Yu writes:

“I’ve always rationalized going under the knife was for me, but it’s not entirely true. None of these decisions involved my own pleasure. Media and pop culture convinced me that fetishization was the key to validation. So, I sacrificed everything to achieve that ideal.”

It’s hard not to feel overwhelmed by Yu’s story. Although her experiences are drastically different from my own, her writing resonated with me, as a feminist who has also been relentlessly subjected to fetishization. Her vulnerability and bravery give me the strength to reflect back on my own formative memories of racialized sexual harassment. When I was a child in Hong Kong, white adult men would lick their lips at me as I walked past them on the street, calling out “ching chong.” Later, when I was a college student in the United States, American guys would confess to me that they had yellow fever. When I started online dating in London in my mid-20s, British men I rejected would call me a “chink” or other slurs.

Since then the landscape for Asian representation in media has shifted dramatically, with multi-dimensional, fully realized Asian characters in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) and the massively [successful](#) *KPop Demon Hunters* (2025). While I feel empowered by such recognition, some of these developments have further commodified Asian culture and arguably exacerbated the objectification of Asian women. K-pop has become a global phenomenon but, as Yu explores, the industry’s infantilization and problematic treatment of idols undeniably perpetuates the objectification of Asian women. Even the recent Chinamaxxing trend functions as yet another way for people to consume, distort or project themselves onto Asian cultures, while remaining disengaged from their own complicity in anti-Asian racism.

Kaila Yu’s story in *Fetishized* may focus on the 1990s and 2000s, but Asian fetish is far from gone in our modern era. Rather, it has evolved to include practices that may be less blatant but are no less insidious. If we are to properly address ongoing racialized sexual violence against Asian women and heal from this trauma, we must confront its roots and use our voices to speak out. Like Yu, we must arm ourselves with the context of how these harmful narratives were forged, and vanquish them by crafting new ones. ■

Feature image: Nancy Kwan plays Suzie Wong, a fictional sex worker in Hong Kong, in “The World of Suzie Wong” (1960).

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