

Book review of HübINETTE, Tobias. 2024. *Svenska Asiater: Asiatisk rasism och framväxten av en ny minoritet* [Asian Swedes: Asian racism and the emergence of a new minority]. Stockholm: Verbal. 287 pp.



BOOK REVIEW

SAYAKA OSANAMI TÖRNGREN 

Svenska Asiater: Asiatisk rasism och framväxten av en ny minoritet is the first book written in Swedish focusing on Asian Swedes in Sweden. The book comprehensively maps the history of literary, textual, and discursive representations of Asians, as well as self-expressions by persons who are of Asian descent in Sweden. It offers a rich historical narrative, not only of how persons of Asian origin (not always explicitly self-identifying as ‘Asian Swede’) have expressed and articulated their experiences of being Asian in Sweden in both fictional and non-fictional forms but also how Asians in Sweden are portrayed by the majority society’s media and printed materials. HübINETTE includes a vast amount of both academic output and activist advocacy that he has produced, making the book partly an autobiography of and personal reflection by HübINETTE, who self-identifies as an Asian Swedish male academic, activist, and transnational Korean adoptee.

I identify as a cis-female, first-generation Asian immigrant living in Sweden, and the book is of both academic and personal interest to me. I read the first chapter, which outlines the state of knowledge and provides a historical account, including demographic changes in the Asian population in Sweden, with ease. Some of the historical and demographic facts are familiar to me, while the historical accounts dating earlier than the 1900s are eye-opening and refreshing. The historical overview highlights HübINETTE’s immense ability and effort in mapping the history of Asians in Sweden.

As I read through the second chapter and beyond, covering anti-Asian racism in Sweden, Swedish “yellow” racist humor, and gendered perceptions about Asians, my heart started to sink. Despite having read most of the works HübINETTE cites, reading through testimonies of racism and discrimination weighed heavily on me. I know how it feels to be asked whether we eat dogs, to receive judgmental comments about marriages between an Asian (specifically a Japanese woman) and a Swede, and to worry about and anticipate challenges for my children in school and in the future. I have personally tried to ‘enlighten’ others about racism and encouraged my fellow Asian friends to recognize that it is not OK to be silent. I feel my internalized racism and coping strategy of positioning myself as ‘not really Asian’ and the relief I feel every time

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I hear others tell me, 'you are not like others.' I admit and accept that I experience difficulties in forming a common identification with other first-generation Asians but feel much more at ease with second-generation Asian Swedes and transnational adoptees who are aware of their position in society. These feelings were difficult to digest as I read through the chapters extensively presenting different narratives of Asian experiences in various forms of fictional and non-fictional novels, interviews, news reports, and other journalistic work.

As this is the first book comprehensively mapping the history and textual expressions of Asian experiences, it holds immense value. I remember the joy and heightened awareness of my Asian identity as I read books such as *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Chan 1991), *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Takaki 1989; 1998), and *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader* (Zhou & Gatewood 2000) during my undergraduate studies. Hübinette's book will be one of those read by many Asian Swedes in the future. However, as a researcher dedicated to multidisciplinary and sociological empirical study, I find it problematic to address textual material of completely different natures together (e.g., scientific reports, news reports, non-fiction and fiction novels, and opinion pieces). Even though they form the same patterns of discourse, the purposes of their writing are vastly different, and these differences should be recognized and presented carefully. The content of the book is often very descriptive and serves the purpose of forging a historical narrative. However, when a deeper critical analysis of identity formation, the model minority myth, or racial triangulation is attempted, some statements are made without sufficient and nuanced analysis of the empirical material.

Another point of critique is the usage of Omi and Winant's (1986; 1994) Racial Formation Theory. In my understanding, what is central to the racial formation theory is that all racial categories and groups are historically formed, socially constructed, and upheld through their relations with other groups and the dynamic between macro- and micro-levels. The macro-level refers to social structures and dominant ideologies, while the micro-level includes an individual's everyday interactions with and relations to their own and other groups. Racial formation theory is about how racial meaning prevails in a given society and how racial meaning extends from individual racial identities to the collective political action of the state. The book, as I wrote earlier, undoubtedly shows the historical overview of Asian presence in Sweden and the transforming experiences of racism and discrimination Asians face in contemporary Swedish society. However, I question whether we can talk about 'racial formation' without understanding individual racial identities and the collective understanding of racial identity as Asian Swedes. We do not know whether the authors, protagonists, or main figures represented in the stories in the book self-identify as 'Asian Swedes' rather than transnational adoptees or Chinese, Vietnamese, or mixed Swedes. Moreover, to understand racial formation in Sweden, we need systematic empirical research on how Asians are seen and positioned in relation to other racial minority groups in contemporary Swedish society.

The biggest question is: Is there an emerging identification as Asian Swedes? Are our communities and experiences maturing enough? Hübinette raises an important point in the concluding chapter about the lack of historical experiences and contexts that unite Asians in Sweden. In the United States, Asian Americans faced systemic racism through state actions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and Japanese American Incarceration (1942–1946), which conditioned their lives as Asian Americans. The term 'Asian American' emerged from the pan-Asian movement and activists such as

Yuri Kochiyama, Karen Ishizuka, Nobuko Miyamoto, Grace Lee Boggs, and Frank Chin, to name but a few. It was the second- and third-generation Asian Americans claiming and grappling with their history and place in the United States, in solidarity with the wider Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, that strengthened and deployed individual and group identification as Asian American through political actions. Today, who identifies as 'Asian American' is still evolving, and the term embraces a wider range of ethnic groups than it did in the 1960s. However, they always have their historical narratives of macro-level oppression that Asian Americans have experienced, and their micro-level stories of how Asian American racial identity emerged.

In Sweden, there is no collective memory or history of Asian Swedes yet, and I wonder whether the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic was significant enough for Asian Swedes to form a collective pan-Asian experience. We still lack united voices celebrating our Asian identity in Sweden, equivalent to *East Side Voices* in the United Kingdom (Lee 2022) or *Hitta hem* (Lindström & Trotzig 2003) for Korean transnational adoptees in Sweden.

The book *Svenska Asiater* highlights the urgent need for systematic understanding and knowledge about Asian Swedish identification and the formation of Asian Swedes as a racial minority group equivalent to Muslim Swedes and Afro-Swedes through robust empirical research. I recommend that the book be read by all who are interested in Swedish history, researchers within the field of international migration and ethnic relations, and persons of Asian descent or those with close family members of Asian descent.

The book indeed builds our racial consciousness through forging a collective body of knowledge and raises what Omi and Winant (1986; 1994) define as 'racial common sense', which is necessary for racial formation. This book is a call for all of us who are of Asian descent to express and unite our voices as Asians. As a scholar who has known HübINETTE for over two decades, I know that this is part of his lifework and his call for us who identify as Asians to reckon with our Asian identities in multiracial and multiethnic Sweden. Collective reflections on Asian experiences in Sweden through reading this book may be the first step toward the racial formation of Asian Swedes.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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