
Challenging orientalism, gender and race in Grace Zaring Stone's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*

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Abstract

Grace Zaring Stone's 1930 novel *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* is famous mainly for having inspired a film by Frank Capra starring Barbara Stanwyck. The text follows a young woman from New England, Megan, as she travels to Shanghai to marry an American missionary doctor but is eventually forced to seek of the protection of a Chinese warlord, the titular General Yen. The backdrop of the narrative is the turbulent and diverse world of 1920s China; devoid of the romantic element present in Capra's version of *The Bitter Tea*, Megan's exchanges with the General challenge deeply her ethnocentric Western protestant view of the world. The General, and Zaring Stone's representation of China at large, resist orientalist stereotypes which "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said *Orientalism* 1-2). Hence it is rather Megan who undergoes the influence of China, in a context that eludes her own preconceptions. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* explores interactions between an Asian man and a white American woman avoiding typical clichés of Asian masculinity; Zaring Stone's novel is also the portrayal of the growth of a female character in the context of an alien culture. This novel will be analyzed in terms of the rejection of Orientalism, the interplay of gender and racial elements and the representation of expatriate women.

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