

I know that I'm a member of the Angel race,
My home is somewhere else in outer space.
— Sun Ra (1914–1993)

“Post-truth” was declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, a year in which the Anglophone world saw the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, and the rise of the alt-right with their howls of “Fake news!” “Post-truth” is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Since then there has been an increase of post-truth practitioners in public life, with people like Mike Hughes, a flat-Earther who, in 2018, launched a homemade rocket in the Mojave Desert as a practice run to prove the Earth’s flatness,* and Marjorie Taylor Greene, a QAnon adherent who won a 2020 Congressional Republican primary in Georgia. Seeing the facts or “facts” only when they accord with their beliefs, post-truthers believe themselves to have special insights into a reality hitherto obscured by some amorphous, oppressive power like the “deep state.”

Even before Mike Hughes had crowdsourced the necessary funds on GoFundMe to catapult himself into the sky, his experiment’s result—Earth’s flatness—had already been settled. He shared with other post-truthers a proclivity for confirmation bias: whatever “evidence” he gathered during his stunt would only cause him and his supporters to become more entrenched in their beliefs. Or as the artist Sun Ra said, people “refuse to believe anything except what they know.” Climate-change deniers similarly look to “facts” and “data” to back up their views, citing deliberately misleading studies sponsored by front groups established by Koch Industries and other organizations deeply invested in promoting fossil fuels. Currently—and emblematic of the moment—the most prominent post-truther in the world resides in the White House. President Trump has claimed that the US is “leading the world” in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on a peripheral statistic—the “case fatality rate”—to support his claims. In fact, the US is among the worst affected places, especially when compared to other rich, industrialized nations. Meanwhile, in response to the recent—and still ongoing—nationwide protests against the routine murder of innocent Black citizens by law enforcement, President Trump and White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany both cited cherry-picked, bogus statistics to “prove” that White Americans are more likely to die at the hands of police than Black Americans. Are these attempts at misinformation inherently different from or any less insidious than conspiracy theories that claim that the murder of George Floyd was a “false flag”—a pre-planned event instigated by a covert group—because the police vehicles in the video didn’t bear license plates displaying the word “police?”

Bad Driver is a work of post-truth conceived in this post-truth era. It is a collection of historical writings that constructs a generalized picture of “Asians,” following an outline made up of a constellation of fixed racial stereotypes. In the popular imagination, Asians are studious, hard-working, intelligent, as well as conformist, submissive, and unhygienic. The authors have “done the research”—as conspiracy theorists say—and uncovered factual evidence that support these preconceived notions. Taken as a whole, the essays in *Bad Driver* present a portrait of “Asians” that rely on the reader’s presumptions and internalized prejudices far more than the materials cited within. Like a mirror, the work reflects back to the reader what they already know in their heart of hearts to be true.

Like Hughes’s quixotic undertaking, this project too began with a conclusion that had been determined long before there were any substantiating details. To construct their desired narrative, the authors of *Bad Driver* scoured a seemingly endless number of scholarly works covering four thousand years of Asian history on a broad array of topics, seeking facts that supported their hypothesis. When they encountered particulars that contradicted their premises, they simply ignored them. Given how wide they cast their net, it was nearly impossible not to find information that could corroborate—or could be made to corroborate—contemporary stereotypes. Take chapter nine for example. The text touches on Marco Polo’s observations on Chinese prostitution; the training regimen of 13th-century courtesans; business models of high-class brothels; 1st-century sex handbooks instructing men on how to bring women to orgasm; yin and yang; Daoist techniques on ejaculation control; herbal remedies for virility; consumption of dog flesh to increase stamina; and a 17th-century literary description of a man’s attempt to enlarge his penis by surgically grafting a dog’s member on to his own. Of course, none of these subjects has anything to do with stereotypes of the desexualized Asian man or hypersexualized Asian woman. But, by suppressing or altogether omitting their actual historical significance, while

emphasizing tangentially relevant aspects, the authors were able to mold the facts—and the resultant story—to correspond to their thesis. The reader comes away with the impression that indeed, Asian men, endowed with woefully small penises, are sexually inept and Asian women, skilled in arcane erotic arts, are love-you-long-time geisha girls.

Historians—or for that matter, anyone familiar with the history of Asia—will look askance at *Bad Driver*'s methodology. They would certainly object to the authors' practice of conjoining disparate facts from anytime between the 2nd millennium BC to the present day without regard to their actual historical context or meaning. But *Bad Driver* is not a historical document. Inspired by *ji ju*, or “assembling phrases”—a Chinese literary practice of linking verses and fragments from earlier poems to create new compositions—the authors ripped historical information, sometimes outright, from their original scholarly sources and reconstituted them, resulting in a text that is by turns disjointed and disorienting. Displaced from the source material, and the academic tradition that had produced them, the information in *Bad Driver* is at an even further remove from the socio-cultural conditions of the specific times and places that the original works were attempting to examine. The stories, being completely detached from any historicity, are thus situated in the past, the present, and the future. The facts themselves, unmoored from time, lose all of their factuality. Each sentence is not untrue. However, when considered in the larger context of the work, it is transformed into a “fact.” It is as if they have severed the legs of Abraham Lincoln, the body of Colonel Sanders, the arms of the Statue of Liberty, the head of Ronald McDonald and glued them all together.

The more the authors manipulated a fact to appear true—that is, true in both its original as well as its new context—the more false it became. This happened because the fact's factual quality was dependent on the surrounding details of its original context. Once severed, the fact immediately lost its verisimilitude as a fact. Moreover, when a fact is used in service of an idea that is fundamentally false, that same fact automatically assumes the attributes of falsehood. In the words of Jeran Campanella, a prominent flat-Earther who was quoted in a 2017 *New Yorker* article: “Facts are not true just because they're facts, if that makes any sense.” Or, as the 18th-century novel *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitouji* or *Honglou meng* by Cao Xueqin) put it:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real.

Bad Driver can be approached any number of ways. On the one hand, parts of it read as a commentary on contemporary American politics. In the chapter on “Sumptuary Law, or Crazy Rich Asians,” a 16th-century novel, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, is used to illustrate the subversion of status symbols in late-Ming China. The novel alludes to a quote from Xunzi, a Confucian philosopher, to describe the social unrest of the time:

The ruler is the source of order. The officials maintain the regulations; the ruler nurtures the source. If the water of the source is clear, the lower reaches of the source will be clear. If the water of the source is muddy, the lower reaches of the stream will be muddy.

It feels as if the 3rd-century-BC sage were talking about America in the summer of 2020. Beyond its resonance with the current political and social climate, the work suggests different ways to look at historical facts. By irreverently juxtaposing disparate things together, it reveals serendipitous, even ludicrous connections and patterns. In the same chapter, for instance, the authors also discuss the culture of counterfeiting in contemporary China. Knock-offs are called *shanzhai*—“mountain strongholds” or refuges beyond the reach of government authorities—a phrase that obviously refers to their illegality. But it also signifies popular resistance to establishment elites. The origin of the phrase is found in the *Water Margin*, a beloved 14th-century novel in which heroic outlaws skilled in martial arts evade the law by hiding in the *shanzhai*. Meanwhile, the text they used to describe the decadence and decay of late-Ming China, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, is itself a spin-off of the *Water Margin*. (This zany logic mimics how a conspiracy theorist goes about formulating an argument.) And lastly, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* layers allusions upon allusions, employing a method of pastiche to create a narrative that can be read on many levels. *Bad Driver*, too, is a pastiche of a jumbled assortment of books, essays, and other texts—a historical *shanzhai* of racial trademarks.

Asian American attributes are derived in relation to those that define a real—that is, White—American; they are yellow, hard-working, slanty-eyed, effeminate, docile, etc. relative to White people. In other words, Asian Americans have been and are a foil, a lack, a blankness used to foreground the features of Whiteness. In fleshing out the misshapen effigy, the authors allow it to transcend the tired and boring dialectic of American racial categories. The appeal of post-truth theories lies in their demented energy and outlandishness; how can you look away from the spectacle of someone who has dedicated his life to building a DIY spaceship to disprove what has already been incontrovertibly proven? It's precisely this sense of contrarian mischief that gives post-truth beliefs life. The more sacrosanct the truths, the greater the exhilaration in blaspheming them. This work is animated by the same exuberant spirit. Redefining ethnic identity as a recondite, esoteric assemblage is to turn it into a conspiracy theory—secret, conspiratorial, fun. It's as pleasurable and as madcap as launching oneself in a homemade rocket into space.

Though ostensibly a work about Asia, *Bad Driver* is essentially concerned with Americans. No matter how long you search for references to bananas or buck teeth in scholarly texts on Asia, you will find nothing at all that connects those things to Asian identity. This is of course because those are American (or at least non-Asian) metaphors or metonyms used to denote Asians. If a person in South Korea, or Vietnam, or any other Asian country were to pick up this text, not only would they not recognize themselves in it, but it would appear as gibberish. It need hardly be said that this is because racial identity is not innate. Since it is socially shaped and narrated—in relation to other categories of people—only someone who has internalized the American complex of ethnic and racial relations would read *Bad Driver* and instantly spot an Asian person.

The work is also American in its lumping together of people from vastly diverse origins into one monolithic type. Although much of the text is derived from Chinese sources, it fallaciously purports to apply to all people of East or Southeast Asian descent. The primary reason for the reliance on Chinese history is that, as far as Americans are concerned, people who look a certain way, whether Hmong or Mongolian, are considered physically indistinguishable: they are all “Chinese.” In the current climate, a person with Korean ancestry or even hapa is not immune from accusations of spreading the “China virus” or “kung-flu.” This melding is reflected in language: “Chinese” or “ching-chong” or “chink” in the American lexicon is as “Kleenex” is to tissue paper, and is used indiscriminately to refer to all Asians.

Defying science and logic, conspiracy theorists and other post-truthers sift through the infinite amount of information readily available on the internet to find facts that support conclusions they have reached a priori. The JFK assassination, UFOs, 9/11 truthers, Pizzagate, Sandy Hook, anti-vaxxers, Obama birthers, Moon-landing deniers, Illuminati, George Soros, QAnon, COVID-19/5G—are these contemporary anomalies? Obviously not. If anything, these are merely the latest incarnations of an ancient tradition. What are stereotypes—received ideas about groups of people—but a conspiracy theory by another name? The word “prejudice”—derived from the Latin for *prae-* (before) + *iudicium* (judgment)—means a judgment or opinion formed beforehand without knowledge of the facts. Prejudicial views, whether institutionally or socially constructed, are central to the very mythology of this country. When we describe groups of people as patriotic, God-fearing suburbanites; or fanatical terrorists; or lazy, lawless, violent thugs; or illegal, drug-dealing, rapists; or soulless vectors of deadly diseases, we are dealing with preconceived ideas bolstered by “facts.” What is more venerable and more American than our reflexive faith in racial stereotypes?

*Hughes died in February 2020 when his rocket crashed during an attempted launch. His PR agent claimed that Hughes's outspoken flat-Earth views were nothing more than a “schtick.”