

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Quah Ee Ling, Associate Professor of Culture and Society at Western Sydney University and author of the new book *Fire Dragon Feminism: Asian Migrant Women's Tales of Migration, Coloniality, and Racial Capitalism*. So that's a lot of big words. For any non-academic listeners, can you explain what all of that means?

QEL: I'm really interested to collect stories, stories of Asian migrant women who have migrated during colonial period, but also collecting stories of women in contemporary period, in contemporary workplace, who are residing, living and accumulating capital in settler colonial systems, in settler colonial societies like Singapore, Australia, and different parts of the world. So I'm located in Australia now, so I'm really interested to know what the stories are in this part of the world, understanding how they navigate colonial systems, how they navigate the neoliberal workplace they find themselves in. And that's what the book is about. Essentially, the book makes use of anti-colonial, anti-racial capitalist perspective to understand their stories. And by that, what I mean is that how do they encounter coloniality? How do they encounter racial capitalism? How do they work out their migration trajectory when they encounter these forces at every turn of their migrant lives? I am less invested in the project of trying to make them a victim. So it's really important that the book doesn't seek to represent these women as victims, and I'm not trying to create a story of victimhood, trying to portray them as victims of racism, and therefore it often evokes this kind of knee-jerk reaction to save them, to demonstrate or display white benevolence, or to think about ways, oh how can we include them? How can we give them voice? And that's not the project, because ultimately when we do that, it really only just reinforces the status quo. It only reinforces white dominance. So neither am I trying to show that they are agents, they are powerful, that they are able to displace agency, they are survivors, they are overcomers, and that's also the typical message that you see at International Women's Day celebrations, just celebrating excellence and success stories. And I think that that kind of binary account is dangerous, because you are forcing women to fit into either/or, either that they continue to be a victim, therefore subordinate, or they continue to have to display a certain kind of excellence, a certain kind of model citizenship, to be a model minority, that again also only suits the white dominance. It only display a set of, it only reinforces a set of criteria that for you to be accepted, for you to be represented, for you to be seen, for you to be included, or to have a seat at the table, you need to be this, you need to a modern citizen, you need to display how you deserve to be a citizen in the settler colonial system. So my book is not about creating that binary account, my project is not invested in that, but my project is really interested to use an anti-colonial approach to understand how did we arrive at where we are now? What kind of colonial legacy did we inherit, where the colonial division of labor continuously conscript and recruit us to take on a very, very distinct work position that makes us subject to racialization, and that makes us also complicit in that white race-making project. And this kind of racialization is not accidental, and I'm really interested to trace the historical context to see how that kind of historical context, that colonial division labor continue till today, and therefore it explains why we are continually subject to racialization, either subject to all kinds of racism or being used as a diversity mascot to signal diversity, inclusion, and equity, but we'll never be treated as equal subjects. So I'm really interested to uncover that kind of power structures in this book.

AT: And I want to go back to that question of nuance that you touched on about, you can't just fit any group into one or two tropes. We tend to, and one of the things that you talk about in the book, is this flattening of many different cultures into "Asian," as one umbrella term, and you also get into things like the complexities of racism between different groups of Asians, like racial minorities in Singapore, where you're from. You get into the other -isms. So sexism, ableism, anti-queer and genderqueer mindsets. You get into the contradictions of being a person of color who is also a settler on stolen Indigenous land. So there's all these different factors that you're looking at. And that just seems like a lot to try and process into one cohesive idea or view of what is happening in our world.

QEL: Exactly. And the book presents a migrant feminist framework that really reviews the contradictions, that

really reviews that kind of trade-offs, complicities, responsibilities, as well as refusal. So it's never going to be a clear-cut binary account, whether you're a victim or whether you are a model citizen. It's never going to be that. Because as a migrant, your positionality shifts all the time from being a privileged majority to a racialized minority and all encompassing both simultaneously. So it is never going to be straightforward. And I think that it's really important when we look at it from a historicized perspective, we will then be able to understand that colonial division of labor that already recruits migrant women, especially Asian migrant women. If you look at it historically, they were already recruited to take on a supplementary, an ornamental role in the division of labor. So if you look at it historically, they were brought in to make up for the labor shortage, to also take up certain positions, to be a domestic helper, to be a nanny at home. So they are already conscripted to do that position. So if you look at it today, they continue to inherit. Yes, you can celebrate excellence. You can see that, oh, you have how many women now being a CEO. But if you look at the kind of racialized division of labor, they are still being imposed with racialized myths and expectations to take up a certain kind of role at the workplace. And therefore, it is then easy to explain why is it that they are still encountering those kinds of contradictions and those kinds of racism or those kinds of marginalization. And because we are set up to do that, and we are set up in the colonial division of labor to embrace competition, it is then understandable that because we have this racialized hierarchy of labor, it is then understandable for the minoritized subjects to be competing for the very, very finite resources that the colonial powers are willing to dispense. So it is also then understandable to make sense of the lateral violence, to make sense of the internalized racism, or to witness competition among minoritized subjects, to fight for whatever scarce resources that they could grab hold of. And therefore, in the book, a part of it looks at how the women that I spoke with related encounters about lateral violence, about facing racism from minoritized subjects as well.

AT: It's interesting because as we're talking about resources that are actually scarce, it makes me think of the false scarcity principle where a lot of times women, racial minorities, whatever marginalized group we're talking about, we're given this idea that there's only enough room for one or two of us, and it pits us against each other. Because if we're seen as "diversity hires" or something along those lines, then it creates this infighting rather than working together to oppose the larger structural forces that are creating that false scarcity principle.

QEL: Yeah, exactly. So there's the colonial logic. So that we fail to see that. We often think that colonialism is a thing of the past, but the colonial logic continues to persist in every part of our society, especially in the economic system that we have inherited. So a colonial division of labor, the colonial logic of divide and conquer, the colonial logic of white supremacy, for example, and has mutated into what we have now a global neoliberal economy. And so therefore what you see is hoarding. You have the rich getting richer and richer, amazing hoarding of resources. We have so many billionaires now and we're talking about having trillionaires soon, but what happened to the poor or what happened to the rest of us? So what we see is really the perverse mutations of colonial logic of hoarding, of how the colonialists continue to hoard the resources and then decide, based on their terms, who gets what. So all the corporate tactics of trying to display benevolence and trying to show that, trying to signal equity. It is really something that we need to have a critical understanding of how we have arrived here and to also be really critical about some of these languages and policies and programs that have been dished out as a smokescreen to pretend that we have progressed, to signal progress, to signal equity or to signal inclusion. But these are all very, very dangerous framework based on the research that I've done and based on other feminist scholars have done, that these are just frameworks that continually reinforce that colonial logic, continue to reinforce racial capitalism and continue to reinforce the unequal division of labor and unequal distribution of resources.

AT: Now in the book, you're looking at contemporary Australian workplaces and everyday life, particularly in university settings. And I find that really interesting because as we're talking about, a lot of people have this idea that we live in a post-racial society and treat racism like it's a thing of the past. I saw something the other

day about when you look at films, the ones that tend to have a lot of funding but are about racism are about historical racism, whereas the ones about contemporary racism have a harder time finding a home. But particularly in a university setting, I find this interesting because I think of these as places where people tend to think they're more enlightened than they actually are and also places that tend to be occupied by people with greater privilege than the average person in any given geographical community. So why focus on universities in particular and what are the differences that you saw compared to perhaps what may be the norm outside of a university campus?

QEL: Yeah, it's interesting why the university appears to think that they can be exempt from scrutiny. I think that of all places, the university should be the one that we should be scrutinizing very closely. If you look at the colonial history, how the university comes about, it is a product of colonialism. It is where the epicenter of colonialism is. It is set up to colonize Indigenous knowledges and then re-aggregate them through think tanks and libraries and museums and laboratories and then position themselves as imperial knowledge, then redistribute and disseminate back to the colonies as to be seen as the superior knowledge. This is still happening that colonial imperial traffic of knowledge is still in existence and in fact even more aggressive than before. So I think that really a historicized perspective is important here, that when we understand the genealogy, the origin of university, how the modern Western university comes about and how the academy comes about, it is not surprising why then the university continues to be the epicenter of generating colonial knowledges and generating Western imperialism because this is what we have inherited and continue to reinforce and celebrate. Therefore, it is also therefore not surprising that the university today is embracing neoliberal logic. The way that the universities are running resembles exactly what it was doing in the past, which is really to reinforce, to reproduce coloniality now today to reinforce and reproduce neoliberalism in different ways. And therefore the university has to be the one, the primary site. It has to be my primary site of investigation because this is where that we are reproducing imperial ideas. And therefore when people think that this of all places, it should be a place that knows better, but it is also a place that has inherited that colonial legacy and continues to display that kind of function in reproducing colonial powers, in reproducing dominant structures and reproducing neoliberal ideas.

One of the questions that I pose to students in class is, why is our curriculum that we're studying today this curriculum, this set of curriculum? How do we arrive at this curriculum? Is it really accidental? Is the curriculum that we are using today in the classroom and being used in every part of the world in many universities, how do we celebrate that curriculum? How do we use this curriculum? So it's really important to understand that the curriculum today that we are having in the university not just in Australia but in different parts of the world, has a colonial legacy to it and that it is essentially a Euro-American curriculum that we are putting on the pedestal. So the question then is that how did we arrive at this singular source of knowledge production? Why is it so dominant? Why are we even using English now? And how did English become such a powerful language that determines, it ranks humanity based on the language that you speak. And if you speak good English, you are seen as superior, you're seen as clever, you are seen as that you have arrived and how did we decide to rank humanity based on that? So these are all very important questions to ask. Why is our curriculum Western-centric or Euro-centric? How is it linked to colonialism? How is it linked to imperial traffic of knowledge? How can we then interrogate that that singular source of knowledge production?

AT: And so the term "fire dragon feminism," my understanding is that is a reference to Chinese mythology which reflects your own ethnic background. But my understanding is also that you don't want to exoticize your own heritage and so I'm curious where this name comes from and any nuance that you'd like to share about fire dragon feminism specifically.

QEL: So I evoke the symbol fire dragon with a lot of caution and trepidations as well because I'm also really anxious about self-exoticizing. I'm worried about how it could be seen as re-Orientalizing and I'm also anxious

about how it will be taken, that “oh this is such a exotic Asian symbol of fire dragon” and how can we use it and think that it is so authentic and exotic that way. So I'm really anxious about that kind of responses but the reason why I chose fire dragon precisely because of the racialized myth that been imposed on Asian migrant women. Asian migrant women are often portrayed especially in the Hollywood as this dragon lady. Either you are really fierce and fiery or that you are this demure sexualized image to be exoticized by the Western gaze. So for this very reason I think that it's important then to confront head-on the racialized myth that been imposed on Asian migrant women. How do they navigate with this myth? How do they break free of this myth? How do they live with this myth? How do they also sometimes reinforce this myth themselves by living up to these racialized expectations and how do they innovate some of these strategies to resist some of this racialized myth. And that's the reason why I decided to stick to using fire dragon but then it is fire dragon feminism. So it is a project really dealing with the racialized myth imposed on Asian migrant women and how do you come up with anti-colonial anti-racial capitalist strategies to speak back against the racialized myth or to come up with strategies to fight against that coloniality that they have to encounter in their migrant lives.

AT: I think it also comes down to intersectional feminism in that we can't just fight for people like ourselves. You're not just fighting against anti-Asian racism, you're also fighting against anti-Indigenous sentiments, like it's not enough to only care about people who are like us we have to fight for everyone.

QEL: Yeah my interest or my activism is not so much fighting for people or fighting for Asian migrant women but fighting against systems and what I'm interested to fight against is colonial systems, racial capitalist systems that impact us all but to varying degrees, to different degrees and in different ways. In this case my subject is the Asian migrant women but I'm also interested to see how they're impacted in a way that is not just about them being racialized and marginalized and being victimized in different ways but also being conscripted into that white race-making project, making them culpable, making them complicit knowingly and unknowingly. And in the process of their own capital accumulation, they dispossess exploited populations, they dispossess Indigenous peoples. They also don't do themselves justice by continually participating in that project that subordinate them to dominant powers. So I'm therefore interested to expose that kind of historical context, that kind of continuing power structures that we are caught up in and that will continually rob us of sustainable futures. So I'm interested in that project of doing that. So not particularly fighting for anybody but fighting against systems that will ultimately drive us to our demise collectively as a whole. So I think that is really my investment here in this book and the Asian migrant women as a case, as a subject on the whole is interesting to me because often they are not seen as racialized, they are like not white, not black. And so they are these quiet migrants who are obedient, who are expected to be good citizens, who are expected to be diligent and do all the housework well in the university, take on students, do all the administrative work well without any complaint. It's easy to co-opt them into any of these capitalist projects because you can trust them to do these things. So there's a lot of these racialized expectations at the workplace. So often you don't expect them to be an activist, to be willing to speak against such oppressions. So I'm interested to really focus on their racialization, not just them as the victim of racism but really as how they have played a significant role in the whole colonial division of labor, how they are being conscripted in the system that keep the overall racial capitalist system intact and how they also continue to reap benefits from it. And so I think it's important then for all of us to really have that introspective reflection on our own positionality, our own culpability and our own role in this ongoing racial capitalist economic system that we are seeing it manifesting in very perverse ways.

AT: So the book is based on in-depth interviews with 40 Asian migrant employees in Australian universities. Are there any particular themes or findings that you'd like to share with us that really stood out?

QEL: Yeah, there are two particular chapters in the book that focus on my interviews with the 40 Asian migrant women employees in Australian universities and these women are from very, very diverse backgrounds. Some

of them are casual staff, some of them are academic staff, some of them are professional staff, some of them are PhD students, some of them are former employees who have left because racism was just too much for them to continue working. And so they are from very different professional backgrounds, also come from different parts of Asia. And when I use Asia particularly, I include all 48 countries under the United Nations definition, but I use Asia, I retain that particular labor specifically to highlight the kind of racialization that Asian migrant women are subjected to because often you hear things like, "oh, would you like Asian food?" And you wonder, "what is Asian food?" because there are 48 countries in Asia and even within a small little country of Singapore where I came from has different kind of cuisine, so what does that even mean by Asian food? So it's the flattening of differences that I want to call out, which is why I decide to keep to focus on Asian migrant women to highlight their racialization, their flattening of differences, that broad categorization of this group of people. So based on my interviews with them, I was really interested to look at how they navigate different aspects of their work life. And in one particular chapter, I look at some of the racialized myth that they have to work with. One is the myth of not white, not black, not racialized. I also look at the myth of how they are expected to be this well-poised achieving migrant woman. And another myth of them being homogeneous and safe, thinking that they're all the same and therefore they're all cohesive, they're united. But in that particular section of myth of homogeneous and safe, I look at the lateral violence that happened within that community as well because of the kind of competition that they're set up to engage in in a global neoliberal economy. And another chapter that I really look at the corporatization of diversity, equity, and inclusion program in the university. And this is an interesting chapter because it really exposes some of the myths within that program, within the DEI program. Some of the myths that the Asian migrant women have to reckon with, for example, how they're being recruited to be the diversity mascot just show up and therefore it signal progress, it signal equity, it signal social justice. And what does that really mean and how it creates a smokescreen to conceal a lot of systemic injustices and systemic inequalities. So that whole chapter really uncovers the different myths within the corporatization of DEI and some of the pitfalls and some of the self-destructive initiatives that the Asian migrant women employees are also engaged with.

AT: And so if someone either in a university setting or outside of university setting came to you and wanted practical advice for how they can be more anti-colonial, anti-racist, and so on in their own activism, whether that's their primary focus or "I just want to do better in my own workplace," what would you suggest?

QEL: One of the myths that I also look at is this kind of individual allyship and individual responsibility. One of the very significant initiatives being rolled out under the corporate DEI banner is individual allyship and individual responsibility. And often it deflects attention from structural forces, it deflects attention from structural responsibilities and as well as the systemic forces that are at play. It individualizes the responsibility where individuals are expected to then be there, to take on that role of being a good ally or to be a good bystander, to educate themselves, to go for all the training, whether it's unconscious bias training or whether it is a good bystander training or whether it is ally training. It pushes that responsibility to individual employees, to the good white allies, to do their job, to go and get all themselves trained, to get themselves educated, so that when there's opportunity where they need to call out racism, there will be this amazing benevolent white savior who will stand up and then fight for their marginalized colleagues, whether they are marginalized along the lines of race, gender, sexuality or ability and therefore we are supposed to do that.

But this is a very slippery slope and I wrote in the book how it is a dangerous tactic where that it really blinds us to the systemic forces at play and it cleverly shifts the responsibility to individuals. So if something happens, it's individual employees who are not educated enough, who are not being a good ally, who are not doing their part, who feel that they need to do more. But this is never about the individual employees. It is really about how the structures set us up to play a certain role or to be complicit or to be conscripted into these kind of projects that will reinforce a certain kind of power structures where it will always subordinate a certain group of people at the bottom. So I think that it is really important to really have a historicized and sociological perspective to

the problem at hand here, to really understand how did we arrive, what kind of historical legacy have we inherited that continue to reinforce the kind of power structures that shape our doings in the university or in the economy. It is really important to understand that and then think about it in terms of coloniality and in terms of racial capitalism that affect us all. And that's where we can then come together collectively to think about strategies, to fight against the system, to demand a revolution, to demand that your own individual goodness is not going to overhaul the kind of global neoliberal structures that we are caught up in now. We need to have a different kind of system and it can't be an individual doing it. It has to be collectively that we come together to think about ways to reimagine how our future can be.

AT: I also have to say, I'm an extremely privileged immigrant. I will be the first to say that. But I've had a situation where I was essentially not allowed to continue in a role because I wasn't a permanent resident yet. It had nothing to do with my permissions. It was just the employer's policy that I could have a temporary role but I could not be allowed to have the permanent version of that role because I wasn't a permanent resident yet. And this was in a community that was, I believe, over 40 percent immigrant by population. And then I had another colleague at a future job tell me that that's perfectly reasonable because immigrants are not invested in their community, they're not really part of their community. And he said this in an office where quite literally half of our department was immigrants, white immigrants, but still. What you're talking about in terms of it's not effective at an individual level if you don't change the systems, I remember filing a complaint because this person was expressing xenophobia and I'm citing their own policies to them and nothing happened. I went through the whole process and nothing happened because the system was not designed to actually protect marginalized employees. It was designed to maintain the status quo.

QEL: Yeah, we also see a situation of rising nationalism, to fight back against globalization. So you also have a situation where there's this unequal distribution of resources and you see the hoarding of resources in a few elite countries and what happened is then it just triggered the protectionist measures, the constructed borders of a nation state. And this is what is happening around the world and even within the elite, even within a very powerful country like the US, that it is also erecting those borders to protect their own people. And in all these cases, it is also not surprising and it's also well documented how migrants will always be scapegoated as a way to deflect attention from structural failures and to blame the migrants for taking away resources. But often then again the problem is not seeing it in an interconnected way, that all these economies around the world and our histories are interconnected. What happened in one part will impact another part of the world and what happened to migrants and why is it that they have to leave in the first place really have a lot of things to do with what's going on historically and today how the economy is moving. So we often forget to see how the movement of people is very much tied to colonialism, is very much tied to racial capitalism, is very much tied to neoliberalism and often we blame migrants for their own movement, for their own mobility. In most cases, for example if you are running away from a war, running away from famine, as if it is their aspiration to go onto the boat and to risk their life for months in the sea - thinking that this is what I would like to do as my ambition. But they are fighting for survival and why is it that they have to do that and why is it that they have to take on that route? We in wealthier countries have a lot to account for, account for that kind of global hierarchy of nations and global inequalities in terms of resource holding and unequal distribution of resources.

AT: And I believe there was a part of the book that you wanted to share with us, if you'd like to go ahead.

QEL: Yeah, so I'll just read this, the last part of the book: Since launching Fire Dragon Feminism, I've been asked what is Fire Dragon Feminism? In this final note, I would like to address this question first by saying what Fire Dragon Feminism is not. Fire Dragon Feminism is not a self-exoticizing project that seeks to stretch out some Asian ancient mythologies and legends and claim authenticity so as to create an Oriental brand that ultimately only excites the white gaze. Fire Dragon Feminism is not an Asianizing area studies project that

insists on essentialist, fixed and contained perspectives in treating Asia as if it needs to be and can be made distinct from the rest of the world, where it shares intimate historical and contemporary connections with. Fire Dragon Feminism is not an ethnocentric project that aims to elevate Chineseness and Chinese ethno-exceptionalism by summoning the auspicious and powerful cultural meanings of dragon and fire dragon. Fire Dragon Feminism is not a feminist project that's reserved only for those who share the Chinese horoscope of fire dragon or relate to Chinese zodiac signs and cultural folklore. Fire Dragon Feminism is also not only relevant to Asian migrant women living and working in white settler colonial societies.

Now, this particular Fire Dragon Feminism project uses the symbol of fire dragon to explain the ornamental, racialized and sexualized myth imposed on Asian migrant women in settler colonial and post-colonial societies. Whether it is Fire Dragon, Dragon Lady or Little Dragon Maiden, Asian women have been associated with a range of socially constructed portrayals and expectations, both uplifting and derogatory but nevertheless constrictive. Therefore, the project uncovers the workings of racialized myth on Asian migrant women at the workplace and more broadly co-constitutive structures of race, gender and sexuality in white settler colonial societies. And we find ourselves implicated in the long history of Asian immigration, labor provision, indentureship, racialization and wealth accumulation in white settler colonial society as well as dispossession and colonialism of Indigenous peoples. Inheriting this colonial racial legacy means we are subject to continuous racialization and conscription as the intermediary between white settler colonialists and Indigenous peoples, therefore complicit in ongoing colonization of local Indigenous peoples. Without doubt, the conditions affect us differently and hence the unequal distribution of life chances, privileges and capital. We therefore need to consider our own implications, complicity and accountability in such extractive, life-terminating systems. Fire Dragon Feminism calls for minoritized migrant subjects to introspectively reflect upon the colonial legacies and accompanying powers, capital and privileges we have come to inherit and our continuing participation and complicity in the growth of racial capitalism and neoliberalism that persists in dispossessing Indigenous peoples, disenfranchising exploited populations and entrapping us in white race-making projects.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.