

Sayonara Stereotypes: The Depiction of Chinese/ Japanese Americans in Hollywood Cinema

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Dragon Lady vs. Lotus Flower

Artwork courtesy of Alice Chin

When we think of Hollywood, the following spring to mind: the fame and fortune-the lights, the starry-eyed glamor, the adoring camera, and the adoring fans. However, in the past, like many other minorities, Asians and Asian Americans had no place in Hollywood- neither as actors nor as characters with respectable, well-defined roles. Although stereotypes have been toned down in recent years, the images created by Hollywood studios in the 1930's to 1960's, particularly those of women, continue to influence later feature films and public attitude. This article will primarily address the depiction of Chinese and Japanese Asian Americans. For simplicity, they will be referred to as Asians.

Asians and Asian Americans have had a weary relationship with American cinema,

both as participants and subjects. They have historically been represented in film as an evil, suspicious, and dangerous group of people. In recent decades, Asian American artists have been working to create realistic representations of themselves by reclaiming their media images and retelling their stories on their own terms. This article attempts to examine the role cinema has played in the way we view Asian Americans, how the present has collided with the past, and what efforts have been made by Asian American filmmakers to promote fair and realistic portrayals of Asian Americans in the media.

Early Depictions of Asians in Film and Yellowface

“Until the recent onslaught of films by both Asian and Asian American filmmakers, Asian Pacific women have generally been perceived with a mixture of fascination, fear, and contempt. Most Hollywood movies either trivialize or exoticize us as people of color and as women. Our intelligence is underestimated, our humanity overlooked, and our diverse cultures treated as interchangeable,” wrote author and playwright Jessica Hagedorn in a Ms. Magazine article entitled, “Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck.”¹

In the 1920's and 1930's, a wave of anti-Asian sentiment quickly began to rise,

especially in California. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (which was extended in 1902) prohibited Chinese, as well as Japanese and Koreans, from entering America.

In the period from the 1930's to the 1960's, Hollywood cinema was burgeoning into a popular entertainment medium. Before the advent of television, cinema was an easily accessible source for cultural voyeurism and information. The medium was influential in creating and perpetuating certain images, especially notions America had of other nations and people. During this thirty-year period, the stereotypes of Asian and Asian American women were fueled by their depiction on the big screen.

The Asian woman in Hollywood motion pictures was either dangerous or demure, the dragon lady or the lotus blossom. The term "dragon lady" was coined from the vintage comic strip "Terry and the Pirates," which featured an Asian villainess.² The dragon lady prevailed as a representation of the Asian woman; she was cunning, mysterious, and inherently evil, luring Americans with her exotic looks and her unethical ways. In *Chinatown After Dark*, Madame Ying Su, or Madame "Poppy" (played by a non-Asian, Carmel Myers) murdered, smoked opium, gambled, and kidnapped Caucasian girls to be unwilling participants in white slavery.

The first Asian roles were usually played by Caucasians. Even if the roles did not violate any Motion Picture Association Code taboo, motion picture production companies believed a film would better sell with a Caucasian star. Katherine Hepburn played a politically active Chinese peasant woman in *Dragon Seed* (1944). According to Renee Tajima, in her documentary "Renee Tajima Reads: Asian Images in American Film" (1989), Hepburn's

look was achieved by putting tape across the eyelids.³ Ensuring accuracy in accents or languages was not a consideration. In *Chinatown After Dark*, Carmel Myer spoke with an accent that sounded more Eastern European than Chinese. This practice of yellowface, according to film historian Michael Rogin, is "an example of 'Hollywood orientalism' (which) could bring once-forbidden pleasures to the mass movie audience as long as actual Asians were kept out."⁴

Anna May Wong, the most notable Asian star of early classical Hollywood cinema, frequently played the crafty and untrustworthy vixen in films such as *A Study in Scarlet* (1933) and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1936). Wong was also featured opposite Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932). Although she was the only Asian playing leading lady roles, she was forbidden from kissing her on-screen costars. The 1934 Motion Picture Production Code prohibited the depiction of miscegenation (intermixing of the races) as desirable, barring Wong from having any successful on-screen romance with a Caucasian male.

Occupied with wartime, Hollywood cinema concentrated less on Asian Americans and more on stories from abroad. Plots featuring Asian locales played up the exotic aspect of the place and its people.

China (1943), like many other films of its time, did not focus on Asian characters as its protagonists. Asians as actors and subject material were the background. The only purpose Asians served for the film was to provide local color. Unfortunately, this practice has not changed much over the years. Films like *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and *The*

Art of War (2000) all feature Chinese characters in secondary roles at best.

Prior to the 1940's, little differentiation was made between categories of Asians. After Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, though, the Chinese were portrayed in a more sympathetic, positive light. In *China*, Loretta Young and Alan Ladd led a mission to save Chinese female schoolteachers from the Japanese. "Alan Ladd and twenty girls-trapped by the rapacious Japs!" was the movie's tagline, revealing American sentiment during this period towards the Japanese. These sentiments shaped the treatment from the U.S. government (leading to eventual internment) and the public attitude towards Japanese American citizens-some of who were already second or third generation Americans.

At this time, China, to Americans, was a land of peasants who, as an American from *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944) remarked, were "our kind of people." After 1949, however, the attitude shifted when the Communist Revolution overthrew Chiang Kai Shek's government. China was now the greatest threat to Western democracy. Japan, in the meantime, was in the process of rebuilding itself after World War II through westernization. Now the Japanese were favorably depicted, and the Western world turned their attention from Chinese women to Japanese women.

The Geisha Girl and the Caucasian Guy

It was not until 1948 that laws against interracial marriages were struck down and until 1954, the depiction of interracial relationships was still forbidden on screen.

In the 1950's, a new trend in the Hollywood representation of Asian women

was introduced- the love affair between the Asian woman and white male lead. A slew of post-war films dealt with the issue of interracial love, usually in the backdrop of Japan. For example, *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) introduced the "geisha girl" or "the lotus blossom" to Americans. She was the servile, demure, obedient, and passive Asian woman.

It is important to note that the narratives of postwar American films figured peripherally around stories of Japanese women, not their men. In earlier films, Japanese men were depicted as lecherously preying on Caucasian women, but 1950's films tend to feature short term love affairs between American soldiers who pursue Japanese women, usually leading to tragedy. The "geisha girl" in these stories seldom resists the soldier's advances. Even if she does initially, the films suggest that she inherently finds the Caucasian male (i.e. the soldier) the most desirable male and ultimately concedes. In the film *Sayonara*, (1957) a Japanese dancer exclaims of her admirer Captain Riley, "it is very bad of me... but I cannot help myself. He is so tall!"

While *Sayonara* crossed boundaries by exploring the sensitive issue of interracial marriage, it also propelled a stereotype of Asian women. The film suggests that Japanese women are subservient and soft-the ultimate embodiment of femininity and the ultimate fulfillment of male desire. Captain Kelly (played by Red Buttons) remarks to his friend 'Ace' (Marlon Brando), "This is the life, ain't it Ace?" while his wife Katsumi gives him a sponge bath and massage. In *My Geisha* (1962), an American man compliments Japanese women for not making a fuss when their men leave them because instead of suing for alimony like American women, they "jump into volcanoes."

Jessica Hagedorn explains in “No Joy, No Luck” that “If [Asian women] are ‘good’, we are childlike, submissive, silent, and eager for sex, or else we are tragic victim types...and if we are not silent, suffering doormats, we are demonized dragon ladies-cunning, deceitful, sexual provocateurs. Give me the demonic any day-Anna May Wong as a villain slithering around in a slinky gown is at least gratifying to watch, neither servile nor passive.”¹

In the 1960’s, stereotypes of Asian woman in film were continued by the popular *World of Suzie Wong* (1960). It ushered in a new image of the Asian female-sassy and seductive, sexy but subservient. She is a hooker with a heart of gold and a hint of exoticism. Nancy Kwan played the title role of the Hong Kong prostitute who captures the heart of artist Robert Lomax (William Holden). Suzie approaches Lomax in a bar telling him, “I can be your regular girlfriend.” Lomax responds, “I like, but can’t afford.” Suzie Wong manages to be sexually provocative while remaining submissive, ultimately wanting love and salvation from her life by the White Knight-the Caucasian male who can offer her both security and an escape from her current circumstances. She tells Lomax, “I not important. I’ll be with you until you say-Suzie, go away.”

In *The Flower Drum Song* (1961), Kwan played a similar role to that of Suzie Wong. The setting of *The Flower Drum Song* (the first musical with an all-Asian cast) is the thriving San Francisco Chinatown of the 1960’s, which was upheld as a community of the “model minority.” The Exclusion Laws prohibiting Chinese immigration to America had been repealed in 1943. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, as African Americans were pushing for various civil rights, Hollywood represented

Asians as being quiet, humble, and non-confrontational-they enjoyed the fruits of Americanization, as displayed in the song and dance number “Chop Suey” but also maintained themselves within their Asian communities instead of attempting integration. *The Flower Drum Song*’s subtle political intent to embarrass the African-American movement with a positive representation of the status quo of Asian Americans was also coupled with the financial realization that Asian Americans could be a viable box office market.

The *Flower Drum Song* summarized the two prevailing images Hollywood had of Asian women in the 1950’s and 1960’s. As the character Linda Lo, Kwan was worldly, sensuous, and flirtatious. She “enjoyed being a girl”, flaunting her curves and winking at men with seductive intent. Her counterpart, Mei Li (Miyoshi Umeki, who also played a similarly characterized Katsumi in *Sayonara*) is domestic, loyal, and industrious. These types have become mutually exclusive for Asian women in Hollywood. She cannot be both sensuous and ethical. Even Linda submits to the Asian generalization. At the end, she has been domesticated and tamed. When Linda finally gets her a marriage proposal, she drops to her knees to remove the shoes of her future husband, signifying the same obedience and subservience as Mei Li.

Hollywood films continue to portray Asian women as one-dimensional objects of desire and objects wishing to be desired. “Oriental woman are the proper accessory to the sophisticated individual-exotic creatures that go with the new interest in gourmet food... look what I’ve got. You’ve just got Mary Jane from Iowa and I’ve got Madame Chiang Kai Shek,” remarks one interviewee in Deborah Gee’s documentary “Slaying the Dragon.”⁵

When Holden sees Suzie Wong dressed

up in Western clothing in *World of Suzie Wong*, he violently berates her, telling her she looks like a cheap European streetwalker. It is her very exoticism that William Holden's character appreciates. Often this exoticism itself envelops the cinematic Asian woman, making character development usually an unconsidered aspect to her depiction. The repercussions are experienced in real life as well, influencing the gaze of Caucasian America toward Asian women and Asian American women.

What About Asian American Men?

The stereotypical one-dimensional portrayal of Asian Americans and Asians in Hollywood was not confined strictly to females—the Asian male's role on screen was minimal at best, a supporting character to the Caucasian lead. Those Asian males that did make it on screen took on either nefarious characteristics or feminine qualities, such as the evil world conqueror Fu Manchu, and Nakamura (Richard Montalban), the kabuki actor/actress who plays both male and female roles in the film *Sayonara*.

There are still movies being made about the Asian woman and Caucasian male love story (*Snow Falling on Cedars*, *The Red Corner*, and *James Bond: Tomorrow Never Dies*). Although Asian and Asian American male counterparts are not just villains anymore, they have played heroes who never quite get the girl. Relationships between Chow Yun Fat and Mira Sorvino (in *The Replacement Killers*), Chow Yun Fat and Jody Foster (*Anna and the King*), Jet Li and Aaliyah (*Romeo Must Die*) and Jackie Chan and Lucy Liu (*Shanghai Noon*) are subtle at best. Chow Yun Fat and Sorvino shake hands. Lucy Liu and Jackie Chan hold hands. “There are three insults right there: Asian men are only good

at martial arts, number two—they're not as good as the white guy, and number three: Asian women aren't interested in us,” explains Guy Aoki, president of the California-based advocacy group Media Action Network of Asian Americans (MANAA). According to Aoki, it seems that when it comes to the media, “Asian men need not apply.”

Asian and Asian American representation in Hollywood films still remain for the most part, cardboard cutouts of what Hollywood envisioned or desired Asians to be. There was little attempt in the 1930's to differentiate between subgroups of Asians (between Chinese and Japanese and so forth). Although this distinction was made in the 1940's as a result of the invasion of China and the attack on Pearl Harbor, the demonization of Asians continued while white actors and actresses still played the protagonists. The 1950's marked the beginning of the 'lotus blossom'—the obedient and passive caretaker who still possessed the desirable femininity of her gender. The 1960's fused stereotypes of past and present, perpetuating the submissive image of the Asian woman but introducing and combining the former aspects with the image of the sexy, savvy, but ultimately docile Asian woman.

Asian Americans in Cinema: Present Time

Although the former images of Asian women still continue to exist, attempts have been made by Asian American directors like Wayne Wang to represent Asian and Asian American characters and relationships with depth and complexity. Films like *Dim Sum* and *Eat A Bowl of Tea* place Asians and Asian Americans in realistic situations. With films, though, like *Wild Wild West* (with Bai Ling as the “lady”) or *Charlie's Angels* (where Lucy Liu's ethnicity is exploited in a scene as she

dons the persona of a dragon lady/geisha girl masseuse) it is obvious that times have changed, but not enough.

So what could be done to combat these inaccurate representations? One way is by revisiting mainstream narratives and rewriting them. Asian American artists have been reclaiming their media images and retelling their stories for years.

Asian American cinema created by Asian Americans is largely inaccessible. Unlike Asian cinema, which is supported by the country's studio system, cinema created by Asian Americans is cinema created by a minority group in the United States. These films are expected to lose money.

There are plenty of Asian American media artists out there, however, able to provide fair and realistic representation of Asian Americans in media, showing that they are not kung-fu fighting, sword specialists, nor are they demure and delicate flowers. American cinema might peg Asian Americans as such-but they are certainly trying to fight back.

Many Asians have been able to make the crossover into popular Hollywood film. John Woo, Ang Lee, Chow Yun Fat and Michelle Yeoh (thanks to the enormous success of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*), Jet Li, and Jackie Chan have become household names. Asian Americans have not received quite the same treatment. It remains to be seen whether Lucy Liu will be pigeonholed into playing roles that emphasize or at least, bank on her Asianness, rather than roles that are created around her abilities as an actress, or if a popular Asian American leading male actor will emerge from the big screen. If one is willing to look hard enough, there are many stories being told through the lens and voices of Asian Americans. One of them might resemble yours.

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