

The Yellow Peril

Chinese Representations in Hollywood Films

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Cultural typecasting has always been a problem for ethnic groups in the United States, and one of the main means of spreading these stereotypes to the general population has been through popular media. Since the early twentieth century the film industry has established itself as one of the core features of Western society, depicting the commonly held societal conceptions, and acting as a means of both reflecting on and creating ethnic labels. Although a few groups have been able to shed some of these stereotypes and take on more diverse roles, such as those played by Black actors and actresses, such is not the case with Asian performers. This paper discusses changing portrayal of Chinese and Asian actors and actresses throughout the film industry, looking at global and national events that were occurring at the time, how they affected American social attitudes, and how these attitudes were then projected onto the big screen. As well, it investigates the difference between the roles of Chinese males and females, and how they have diversified. By studying the historical portrayal of these stereotypes in film, one can gain an understanding of the trends in social view of Chinese and Chinese-American people occurring in the United States throughout the last century.

Hollywood has consistently produced versions of Chinese and Asians to present to the moviegoer. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the emphasis was clearly on what was foreign about them and they were commonly seen as inassimilable. Anti-Asian sentiments can be held largely accountable for this and both the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, established in 1892, and English Only laws illustrates the common American attitude against the Chinese. Indeed, after they had finished building the Central Pacific railroad in 1869 job competition between them and white workers arose leading to

difficult tension between the two groups. As well, there was the common belief that the increasing number of Asians in areas such as California was usurping American culture and racial segregation was commonplace.¹ The early Chinese laborers entered mainstream media as coolies and could easily be recognized not only on the streets but also in magazines and newspapers by their queues, coolie caps, slippers and jackets with braiding or buttons.

Even long after the physical reality of the coolie disappeared, the stereotypes used to depict Chinese workers in the United States and in films reinforced “culturally biased perceptions of the Chinese as uniquely non-Western in dress, language, religion, customs and eating habits determined that [they] were inferior.”²

Coolies were considered economically substandard, untrustworthy males who spoke with a heavy accent and were usually small in stature. They were quickly given the tasks of cooking and cleaning and jobs in laundry or restaurant services were deemed as ‘Chinese’ occupations.³ The coolie laundryman laid the groundwork for the stereotype of Asian domestic servants in the following decades, such as the loyal obedient Chinese servants found in *Son of Kong* (1933), *San Francisco* (1936) and *The Painted Veil* (1934) who can be found constantly bowing and smiling at their Caucasian masters.

Hollywood’s racism can be seen in the fact that, up to World War II, the representation of all Asians was commonly taken from Chinese stereotypes; and anti-Chinese bias translated into anti-Asian bias. Rather than acknowledge the differences between Asians, American films often borrowed haphazardly from all cultures forming one homogenous identity. Such portrayals can be found in the Chinese character in the 1932 film *The Mask of Fu Manchu* where Fu Manchu, played by Boris Karloff commits hari-kari and offers the main actress, Karen Morley, in a blood sacrifice ritual. Another such sweeping

¹ Reba L. Chaisson, *For Entertainment Purposes Only? An Analysis of the Struggle to Control Filmic Representation* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000).

² Eugene Franklin Wong, *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures* (Denver: U of Denver, 1978).

³ Richard A. Oehling, “The Yellow Menace; Asian Images in American Film (1980),” in *The Kaleidoscope Lens*, edited by Randall M. Miller (New York: Jerome S. Ozer Publishing, 1980), 182-206.

stereotype that began in this period and has persisted to the present day is the random association of Buddhism to all Asians. In the end, “the image of both Chinese and Japanese in the media depended more on political factors among the dominant Caucasian population of the United States than upon the characteristic behavior or attitudes of either immigrant group.”⁴

Ironically, although Chinese characters were depicted in many films during the early twentieth century, most of their roles were not played by Chinese actors/actresses, or even Asians. Instead, all major Asian roles were played by white actors/actresses who performed in yellowface – dressing in Asian clothing and makeup so that a white individual could play an Asian role, normally including slanted eyes, slick black hair, and heavy makeup. Even as late as 1961, in the film *Break-fast at Tiffany's*, Mickey Rooney plays a horrible ‘comic’ impersonation of an Asian buck teeth and all. The cultural taboo of actually having Chinese (or any other Asian) actors on screen was not clear-cut however, and certain exceptions can be found. Anna May Wong, for example, appeared in silent films as early as 1918, and even took prominent roles in films. Interestingly, she holds the world record for most onscreen deaths. Richard Oehling notes that suicide is “a practice that Hollywood had long since ascribed to Asians as an almost common trait.”⁵ It is almost as if they could they could not exist alone on their own and suicide, as an end of an Asian character, particularly ones of any importance, has dominated film, as early as *Broken Blossoms* (1919) to films of the 1980s such as *Year of the Dragon*. While films seemed to promote intermarriage as a route to Americanization for European immigrants, they usually viewed intermarriage involving Caucasians and darker-skinned immigrants with disapproval.

The 1930s saw a gradual shift in the perception of Chinese in motion pictures, although racial segregation continued to exist in the United States, the number of Chinese roles began to rise. In many cases they were depicted as cruel and sinister villains, such as “Ming the Merciless” in the Flash Gordon series or the character Fu Manchu in the Fu Manchu series, who plots to conquer the world. Ming is granted supernatural powers in

⁴ Wong, 4.

⁵ Oehling, 195.

order to execute his diabolical plan, and capture the female lead in order to have his way with her. Such mystical abilities are normally assigned to Chinese villains in order to explain their influence – reflecting bewilderment on the part of white men who face an Asian competitor. Obviously non-whites cannot achieve greatness without the aid of exotic powers. Alongside their rising position as evildoers, Chinese characters in movies of this time period also took another role, that of the detective – the most well known of which was Charlie Chan in the Charlie Chan series during the 1930s and 1940s. Over twenty-five movies were made where Chan would travel the globe solving criminal mysteries. His popularity rose so high that 20th century Fox simultaneously produced films with the same concept of an Asian detective, Mr. Moto, and yet another Asian detective, Mr. Wong, was created by Paramount in the 1930s.⁶ This rare prototype of a Chinese hero shows the extent to which sexuality had to be erased from an Asian man as even a heavily Americanized Asian male character is simply portrayed as an intellectual who never shows emotion, especially lust. Only in this form can a Chinese man be a hero, and to a certain degree, these expectations have not yet faded. Films such as *The Replacement Killers* (1998) still depict Asian heroes as emotionless and uninterested in women. “As sexual rivals of whites, Asian males are neutralized, whether or not their potential partners are white or Asian females.”⁷ Although Chinese characters were becoming more prominent, the actors who played them were still played by Caucasians in yellowface. In many ways, however, Chan was able to surpass the initial stereotype of the Chinese being an inassimilable, backwards people and accepts the notion that they can be smart and elegant individuals. If these movies moved beyond certain stereotypes, it maintained others. For example, the detectives had coolie house servants, reinforcing their status and in one case, found in a Mr. Wong movie, after catching an intruder the servant is

⁶ Amy Kashiwabara, “Vanishing Son: The Appearance, Disappearance, and Assimilation of the Asian-American Man in American Mainstream Media,” 1996, U of California Berkeley, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/Amydoc.html>.

⁷ Renee Tajima, “Asian Women’s Images in Film: The Past Sixty Years (1993),” in *Color: Sixty Years of Minority Women in Film: 1921-1981*, by the Exhibition Program at 3rd World Newsreel, U of California Santa Cruz, 27.

told, “Good work. Now make us some tea.”⁸ It seems the Chinese hero fails to respect his servants much like his white counterpart.

During the 1940s when World War II was in full swing, the Japanese came to be seen as an evil threat to world peace. Once the Americans became involved with the war the Hays Code put pressure on Hollywood to keep non-white “ethnics” out of movies, and the US government put great effort into promoting patriotism throughout the war.⁹ Portrayal of Asians (particularly Japanese) in these films attempted to categorize them as the enemy. As the war finished in the middle of the 1940s, a new trend in American sentiments towards the Chinese began to arise, the concept of the yellow peril which Gina Marchetti defines as “a combination of racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible dark occult forces of the East.”¹⁰

Indeed this fear was beginning to form in the minds of the general American public as the hype and expectations for Chiang Kai Shek’s forces to re-take China faded at the hand of Communist victory. It was being replaced by a general sense of uncertainty and uneasiness towards the Chinese and in 1949 when the Communists took China the American people were left confused and worried. The fear and anger held towards the Japanese only four years earlier was shifted toward the Chinese, the new threat in the east. Oehling notes a shift in American sentiments towards Asians, “marked by a remarkable decline of interest in the Chinese and Japanese alien resident in the United States and in increasing concert with Japan and China as foreign powers.”¹¹ Films in this era which were based in Asia always had at least one scene which pans a sea of faces whether it be a sea of peasants or a sea of soldiers. Regardless of occupation the message is clear: there are a lot of them. Often this added to

⁸ Kashiwabara. n.p.

⁹ Cados E. Cortes, “Them and Us: Immigration as Societal Barometer and Social Educator in American Film (1993),” in *Hollywood As Mirror: Changing View of “Outsiders” and “Enemies” in American Movies*, edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westpoint: Greenwood Press, 1993), 51-73.

¹⁰ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril” :Race. Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 64.

¹¹ Oehling, 183.

their threatening nature and the implication is that if you kill one, another would step in his place.¹²

From World War II, through Red China to the Vietnam War, the treacherous Asian soldier played on American screen like a refrain. The awful conduct assigned to Asian men seems to justify killing them with a sense of righteousness, if not glee. In *The Purple Heart* (1944), Dana Andrews is persecuted at the hands of Chinese governor and faces torture and death. We are meant to cheer when he cries out ‘it won’t be finished until your dirty little Empire is wiped off the face of the earth.’¹³ These evil traits can be considered remnants of the old Chinese stereotype of evil villain like Fu Manchu, and by the end of the twentieth century American society had learned to associate brutality and treachery with an Asian face, especially an impassive one. For example, James Bond movies consistently enforce the notion that Asians are not to be trusted, beginning with *Dr. No* (1962) and *You Only Live Twice* (1967), and most recently, *Die Another Day* (2002). Films during this period had a propagandist as well as entertainment mission.¹⁴

Yellow peril was not only restricted to dramatic action movies however, and fear of the Orient was so prominent that it seeped into children’s cartoons. Bugs Bunny episodes include, “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” and “Tokio Jokoi.” The Chinese, too, got their chance to be ridiculed in “Seeing Red, White and Blue,” a Popeye cartoon that contains Chinese spies a third of the size of Popeye who change from baby outfits to Communist robes. Against such anti-American forces, even Popeye’s enemy Bluto has to join in to stop the ruthless scourges.¹⁵ Bluto may be a villain, but he is still an American. Such resurgence in anti-Chinese sentiments could be attributed to the growing McCarthyism (anti-Communist) attitudes developing in the US.

These cruel feelings were not restricted to the Chinese living in China and films set in Chinatowns also played a key role in maintaining the idea that there are masses of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kashitwabara, n.p.

¹⁴ Daniel Bernardi, *The Birth of Whiteness: race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Kashitwabara, n.p.

Chinese. Most of them also put forward the idea that crime was defining characteristic of the Asian community. “Eventually, the outside world saw them [Chinatowns] as tourist attractions at best and as islands of crime and violence at worst.”¹⁶ Chinatowns functioned as an emphasis on how foreign Chinese in America still were in comparison to mainstream culture. They called upon all the stereotypes of in-scrutable Asians, reflected in the continuing popularity of Chinatowns as a setting for crime and the Chinese mafia as villains, seen in *Flower Drum Song* (1961) and *Chinatown* (1974). Although these misconceptions grew in popularity during the decades following the war, their existence in film was not isolated to this timeframe and films such as *Chinatown After Dark* (1931) and *The Phantom of Chinatown* (1941) were already depicting Chinatown as “the modem Sodom and Gomorrah”¹⁷ as early as the 1930s. Indeed, even in current films the popularity of using Chinatowns as locations of debauchery and the Chinese mafia as the villain can be found in *The Corruptor* (1999), *Rumble in the Bronx* (1996), *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998) and *Rush Hour* (1998). Marchetti notes that, “Chinatown fulfills a commercial hunger for a domesticated otherness that can represent both the fulfillment of the American myth of the melting pit and play with the dangers of the exotic.”¹⁸ Chinese teenagers are portrayed sporting machine guns and working for the mob and smoke-filled gambling dens are presented as modem opium dens. We are told by one old Chinese man that the young have learned to kill instead of work for the White people. Chinatown is seen as assimilation at its worst, and the American public has grown accustomed believe this stereotype.

In spite of the negative manner in which the Chinatowns were being depicted between the 1950s and the 1960s, there was a growing movement for positive representation of ethnic minorities in motion pictures, spearheaded by the civil rights movement. Cultural pluralism in the United States began to rise as members of diverse immigrant and religious heritage demonstrated pride in their ethnicity and demanded

¹⁶ Michael Rogin, “Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures,” *Journal of American History* 79, no.3 (1992): 1050.

¹⁷ Kashiwabara, n.p.

¹⁸ Marchetti, 204.

respect from the American government. These actions, coupled with the growing feminist movement developed a more favourable environment for appreciative treatments of ethnicity and gender differences, even though some stereotypes still remained. The rise of Chinese male and female actors in bigger roles can also be attributed to restoration of diplomatic relations between China and the United States (following the 1972 visit to China by President Nixon) as sentiments of fear from the yellow peril and McCarthyism were quickly fading. However, although Chinese actors and actresses were gaining more and more lead roles, they were still subject to stereotypes. Females were showcased as being sexual and subservient, while the Asian male is presented inferior to the White male in the arenas of sexuality and romance. In fact, in most of these films, he fails to be represented at all. In her essay titled “White Knights in Hong Kong,” Marchetti describes William Holden’s role as a “white knight” in both *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Love Is a Many-Splendor Thing* (1966). The ladies in distress are in need to be rescued from a wide of variety of evils ranging from prostitution or abuse to poverty or boredom. By saving them, “the white knight’s gender and racial superiority and concomitant moral imperative to rule are thus simultaneously affirmed.”¹⁹ While the Asian man does not enter the picture, he is clearly affected. Many of our heroes are “white knights,” and Asian men are excluded by definition. This has been a major cause of the scarcity of popular heroic roles for Asian men today. Renee Tajima, too, notes this disparity suggesting that something “noticeably lacking is the portrayal of love relationships between Asian women and Asian men, particularly as lead characters . . . the man often loves from afar but runs a distant second to the tall, handsome American.”²⁰ Indeed the stereotype of the desexualized Asian male dating back to Charlie Chan movies remained prevalent throughout the 1970s, and when he is portrayed in a strong and sexually attractive light, he almost always dies, often because of suicide; a throwback to the depiction of Asians before the war. “Racist belief that Asians (especially Asian males) lack desirable human qualities, which are views as marketable commodities by

¹⁹ Ibid., 164.

²⁰ Tajima, 27.

white executives.”²¹ It was not until the rise of the martial arts film subgenre in the mid 1970s that Asian actors began to get prominent positive roles in films, as opposed to their fe-male counterparts who have been in getting such roles since the 1930s.

In the 1980s and 1990s the representation of the Chinese changed once again in films. Ongoing from the 1970s, female roles as love interests for the lead Caucasian actor continued to develop, and by the late 1980s they was no longer seen as a weak or sexually subservient but just simply as lovers, cast like any other heroine role. There is, however, an expectation for Asian female actresses that wish to gain leading roles as “the marketability of the Asian female artist or worker in media depends on her ability to replace Asian cultural identity with allegiance to western priori-ties.”²² Indeed, current successful Chinese actresses such as Lucy Liu, Sandra Oh, Tia Carrere or Kelly Hu all fit these expectations. For males, the demand for actors who knew martial arts was extremely high, fueled by the lasting popularity of Bruce Lee. Unfortunately, knowledge of martial arts for Asian males was not a suggestion it was a mandatory trait. It is rare, even to this day, to find an Asian male role that does not know and use martial arts in films. The result is a major shift in the roles of Asian males, although they may be getting more prominent roles in films, they are being pigeonholed into a specific type of role; martial arts entertainers such as Jackie Chan, Chow Yun Fat, Sammo Hung or Jet Li. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult for an Asian male actor to break free of these social expectations and explore his artistic potential in the same way his female coun-terpart would be able to.

The portrayal of Chinese characters and use of Chinese actors and actress has significantly changed over the past century. The early 1900s depicted them as an evil, inassimilable group who are threat to the American way of life. As time progressed Chinese characters both male and female, portrayed by Caucasians in yellowface, grew slightly more prominent in the media up until World War II, where they were almost completely banned from film. As the civil rights movement began to expand during the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese roles once again began to increase as females were accepted into the mainstream as

²¹ Wong, 256.

²² Choy, 25.

lovers to the Caucasian hero while Chinese males were expected to be unemotional, martial artists. Indeed, although much has changed over the past century to increase acceptance of the Chinese people into American society, film has been one of the slowest to react to this movement, still working off stereotyping fifty-year-old stereotypes and expectations for Asian actors and actresses. The inclusion of Chinese into film may be seen as positive accomplishments to some, to others it is merely condescending tokenism where the Asian character is only included in the film to achieve political correctness. Hopefully in the next few decades Hollywood will be able to rise above its stereotypes and expectations for Chinese actors and accept them into film as simply actors, ignoring their ethnicity and treating them as equals.

***Robert Parungao** was a student at the University of British Columbia at the time of the original publication. The 2005 edition of the Atlas was a joint venture by UBC and SFU undergraduates; for more detail, please see the Chairman and Editor's Notes.

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