

“So, Do You Know Kung-Fu?”: Asian Portrayal in Hollywood Films

By Jason Khozam

Movies are truly an amazing thing. Through a combination of sound and visual, a movie can transport people across time and space to experience different worldviews and cultures. Unfortunately, the worldviews and cultures expressed in movies are not always accurate and often influence offensive stereotypes. David Hwang of the New York Times makes this argument in his article “Are Movies ready for Real Orientals”. As Hwang watched movies with Asian actors, he increasingly felt that these actors were depicted as foreign and not fitting into the mold of America.[1]By representing Asian Americans this way, filmmakers in Hollywood, intentionally or not, use the power of films to create the impression that Asians are perhaps too foreign to be American. In doing so, movies marginalize the Asian community, as it disregards Asian culture and instead pushes a false image of Asians as truth. By portraying Asians as one-dimensional characters that use martial arts and cannot speak proper English, Hollywood marginalizes the Asian community to nothing more than a stereotype in American culture.

While the anti-Asian sentiment in America goes back at least to the gold rush, the specific hatred of Asian communities intensified in the early 1900’s under the nickname Yellow Peril. Essentially, the Yellow Peril was a “generalized fear of the nations and states of Asia” due to a false perception that Asian countries were uncivilized, pre-modern societies.[2] This fear would lead many western nations to distrust Asians, as they were seen as agents of their primitive countries. As early as 1904, newspapers would warn people of “yellow” threats, citing that this was a “struggle [that] lay between the white and the yellow, the Caucasian and the Mongol, the heathen and the Christian.”[3] Framing the differences between Asians and non-Asians in this manner created an us-versus-them mentality and intensified the image of Asians as non-American and foreign, regardless of their origins. In a reflection of this, the media began to adopt the image of the evil orient. This would lead to the creation of the character Fu Manchu, who was designed to be an evil Asian mastermind who sought the destruction of the western world.[4]

While the portrayal of Asian Americans in films as evil was marginalizing the Asian community, most Asian actors would find that they did not have many options when it came to acting. In an article by Thi Thanh Nga, she mentions

that many of the opportunities that Asian Americans would find in film would force them to reprise the stereotypes that people had about them.[5] With this being the case, even if Asian American actors would find themselves in a position to act, they could only do so if they accepted being marginalized by their role. Filmmakers chose to portray stereotypical Asians because they believed that their audience desired these stereotypes. An article in the Los Angeles Times shows that many Asian actors would actively protest against only being able to play roles that involved stereotypes, especially when white actors were able to play any role they wished.[6] This shows how filmmakers viewed Asians in film: as someone who would make their films more exotic and unique, whereas whites were the ones to play central roles.

In addition to being limited to stereotypical roles, Asian actors also faced being replaced by whites using yellow face. Using yellow face is the process of a non-Asian actor, in this case white, changing his/her appearance and mannerisms to portray an Asian person.[7] A perfect example of a white actor using yellow face can be seen through the movie character Charlie Chan, who was the titular character in the Charlie Chan movie series that spanned across the 1930's to the late 1940's. While Charlie Chan is a character of Asian descent, Hollywood decided that it would be best if this important role was played by Warner Oland, a white man.[8] By electing to have this Asian protagonist be portrayed by a white actor, Charlie Chan ceased to represent an authentic Asian character and instead represented what the white filmmaker believed an authentic Asian was. By following this model of casting white actors as Asian characters, filmmakers subvert any positive influence an Asian character can have on the Asian (American) community, which led to many Asians actively protesting the Charlie Chan movies. One of the main grievances that the Asian community had with Charlie Chan was that he was portrayed by a white actor, so "the character helps to destroy the self-image of young Asian-Americans...it reinforces [white] attitudes toward Asians in a stereotypical way." [9] From an Asian perspective, one of the few role models on TV, an Asian protagonist, was suddenly turned into a tool to further marginalize them.

Another way that films marginalize the Asian community is by portraying them as martial arts experts. The skill of knowing a martial art is not the problem here. However, Hollywood would latch on to martial arts as a defining trait of Asian characters, leading to the image of Asians as only martial art experts. This is best exemplified through the career of Bruce Lee, as he has found both successes and setbacks due to this stereotype.[10] While today Bruce Lee is known for his roles in more popular movies, when he first started in Hollywood he found his acting options very limited. Bruce Lee

mentions in an interview that one of his first roles in Hollywood was playing the role of Kato in the TV show, *The Green Hornet*.^[11] In most scenes, Bruce Lee's character plays the role of a quiet assistant but will use his martial arts skills to turn the tide in a fight.^[12] By displaying Bruce Lee's character in this manner, it gives the impression that all he can do is fight, when martial arts is more than just fighting; it is a blend of fighting, philosophy, and culture.^[13] By misappropriating the meaning of martial arts for entertainment purposes, film makers create the image that Asians use martial arts for violent means.

Finally, Hollywood films have marginalized Asians by treating them as outsiders. Nora Okja Cobb describes this concept of Asians as outsiders in her article "Behind the Inscrutable Half-Shell: Images of Mutant Japanese and Ninja Turtles." Cobb's main argument revolves around the idea that people view Asians in films as foreigners despite their acceptance of Western culture.^[14] While these differences are usually put in a humorous light, the focus on how different Asian culture is only serves to alienate the Asian community. One of the ways that Asians are treated as outsiders is through the use accents in films. This can be viewed in the movie *The Goonies* through the character named Data. In one scene, Data attempts to set traps for a pursuing enemy. However, when Data tries to explain this to his friends, they all try to correct his pronunciation of "booby traps."^[15] By using his accent as a form of comedy, the film promotes the stereotype that Asians are foreigners. A similar example of this is seen in the *Rush Hour* series. In *Rush Hour 2* the Asian detective, Lee, tries to explain to his American partner what the current situation is. After some initial confusion, Lee asks, "Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?" To which his partner replies, "Nobody understands the words that are coming out of your mouth."^[16] Again, by pointing out Lee's accent, it creates the image that Asians are inherently different from Americans.

In conclusion, films have portrayed Asians in many ways. The common idea that ties all those interpretations together is that Asians are vastly different from Americans. By portraying Asians as evil, having skills in martial arts or having accents, films perpetuate the idea that Asians are different from Americans and will never truly assimilate to American culture. By casting whites as Asians and forcing Asians into subjective roles, the intent is to show that the only positive Asian role model is one who assists the white man. As films push these stereotypes on their audiences, the stereotypes are absorbed as truth leading to a cycle of learning and spreading of stereotypes of Asian culture.

Footnotes

[1] David Hwang. "ARE MOVIES READY FOR REAL ORIENTALS?" The New York Times (New York), August 11, 1985. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/11/movies/are-movies-ready-for-realorientals.html?pagewanted=1>. pg.1

[2] Stanford M Lyman "The "Yellow Peril" Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 13, no. 4 (2000): 683-747. <http://o-www.jstor.org.torofind.csudh.edu/stable/20020056>. pg.688

[3] "THE YELLOW PERIL." Los Angeles Times (1886-1922), Sep 04, 1904. <http://o-search.proquest.com.torofind.csudh.edu/docview/164314492?accountid=10347>.

[4] Seshagiri Urmila. "Modernity's (Yellow) Perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English Race Paranoia." Cultural Critique, no. 62 (2006): 162-94. <http://o-www.jstor.org.torofind.csudh.edu/stable/4489239>. pg. 162

[5] Tiana (Thi Thanh Nga). "THE LONG MARCH: From Wong to Woo: Asians in Hollywood." *Cinéaste* 21, no. 4 (1995): 38-40. <http://o-www.jstor.org.torofind.csudh.edu/stable/41687420>. pg.38

[6] "Actors Protest Asian Typecasts." Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File), Oct 30, 1976. <http://osearch.proquest.com.torofind.csudh.edu/docview/158114081?accountid=10347>.

[7] Robert G Lee. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in popular culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. 1-14. http://www.temple.edu/tempress/chapters_1100/1375_ch1.pdf. pg.2

[8] *Chinese Americans in cast of Charlie Chan*. 1933. Shades of L.A: Chinese American Community, Los Angeles Public Library

[9] Grant Lee. "CHAN' FILMING DRAWS LOCAL PICKETS." Los Angeles Times (1923 Current File), Jun 25, 1980. <http://o-search.proquest.com.torofind.csudh.edu/docview/162840924?accountid=10347>.

[10] Fredric Milstein. "MOVIE." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), Jul 05, 1973. <http://o-search.proquest.com.torofind.csudh.edu/docview/157323830?accountid=10347>.

[11] "Bruce Lee The Lost Interview" YouTube video, 26:00. Posted July 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCl5pKLmz7A>

[12] "Bruce Lee – The Green Hornet- Kato fight scene 2" YouTube video, 02:22. Posted January 18, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSao_SvEkSc

[13] Mie Hiramoto. "Wax on, wax off: mediatized Asian masculinity through Hollywood martial arts films." *Text & Talk* 35, no. 1 (January 2015): 1-23. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost pg.5

[14] Nora Okja Cobb. "Behind the Inscrutable Half-Shell: Images of Mutant Japanese and Ninja Turtles." *MELUS*16, no. 4 (1989): 87-98. doi:10.2307/467103. pg.89

[15] *The Goonies*. Directed by Richard Donner. By Steven Spielberg. United States: Warner Bros., 1985.

[16] *Rush hour 2*. Directed by Brett Ratner. By Jeff Nathanson. United States: New LineCinema, 2000.

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