

YELLOWFACE, THE YELLOW PERIL, AND THE RISE OF THE KUNG FU MASTER

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture has contributed to forming a distinct set of archetypes for Asian Americans, though many questions surrounding Asian identity in media have gone largely unanswered. Vijay Prashad has researched the facets of Bruce Lee's life and career, while scholars like Janine Young Kim have discussed the role of Asian Americans in the civil rights movement, though there is a narrow range of scholarship about Asian Americans in film as a whole. I examine the portrayal and inclusion of Asian actors in Western cinema, with a focus on the United States, from the 1920s to the 1970s. Asian characters were added to films to provide an exotic or dangerous element, and the inclusion of Asian women like actress Anna May Wong, who rose to prominence in the 1920s, filled the archetype of the sexualized woman who hindered the white protagonist. This typecasting persisted and was heightened to a level of explicit prejudice in the years surrounding World War II, which led to demeaning images of Asians and in some cases the complete removal of Asian actors in favor of white actors. Following the war, Asian women in Hollywood began to see larger and more substantial roles, culminating in Miyoshi Umeki becoming the first and only Asian American woman to win an Academy Award in 1957 for her role in *Sayonara*, late in her career. Instances of Asian roles being played by white actors dwindled but continued to remain, and following the rise in *kung fu* popularity that reached the West in the 1970s, a new trend began to emerge for Asian men that lost their predatory depictions in favor of muscular and physically skilled men. The masculine Asian man still persists into the present day and brings its own questions about the position of Asians in Hollywood to the forefront, and also raises concerns about whether representation has improved or merely shifted to another form of stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

A distinct shift in the perceptions of Asian Americans is noticeable within the United States, both socially and in popular culture, across the years before and after World War II. Prior to the 1940s, Asian characters were portrayed as cunning, villainous figures that were not to be trusted and stood in opposition to the white hero. These caricatures exemplified the view that Asians were the enemy, leading to the stereotype of "dragon lady" Asian women who were promiscuous and deceitful, along with the feminized, yet predatory Asian male. These popular depictions changed radically following the conclusion of World War II and the rise of the Cold War, when the United States eagerly accepted the popular *kung fu* style of films that were coming from Hong Kong and celebrated the cultural and stylistic aspects. By examining the status of Asian American actors over the years, their positioning from a cultural standpoint has ranged from exaggerated caricatures to major roles.

While Asian actors were rare but not entirely absent from motion pictures in the 1930s, they largely served to fulfill particular archetypes. One of the earliest and most prominent examples is Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, who achieved fame for her portrayal of typical "dragon lady" characters who served as cunning women who opposed the white male hero or were competition to the white heroine. Wong is also notable for a handful of "butterfly" type parts, a term derived from the Japanese titular character in the opera *Madame Butterfly*, where a woman is quiet, submissive, and second to men. Following a hiatus from the film industry and a journey to China, Wong acquired and wore several elaborate dresses that served as a means to project a genuine "Chinese image" in American films,¹ though her reception by filmmakers and the general public was as a distinctly Chinese actress, regardless of the role she played.² As a result of Hollywood's anti-miscegenation rules, Wong was unable to break

free of her typecast roles and achieve leading roles in films, even if she had been presented with the chance to audition for the part of an Asian character. To avoid the issue of portraying an interracial romance on screen, the parts of Asian leads were given to white actors who wore makeup and prosthetics to give them a more “Asian” appearance in black and white films as the practice that became known as “yellowface,” which was not unlike the use of “blackface” as a means to degrade African Americans and perpetuate racial stereotypes. This created a cycle where an Asian female lead could not be cast without an Asian male lead, with the reverse also being true, leaving most Hollywood studios to opt for white actors in both parts.

AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

The films of the 1920s and 1930s, overall, represented an era of uncertainty for the position of Asian Americans in society, represented by their on-screen portrayals. Many of these films utilized elements that were a distinct component of the popular “oriental” trend yet also served as a means to categorize Asian Americans according to these preconceived characteristics. The opportunities for Asian Americans in Hollywood and their presence on screen stagnated, with films continuing to use the persisting stereotypes for men and women without room for advancement. Female roles became increasingly sexualized and, like Asian men, their roles in films were used as a means of opposition to the white heroes. Hollywood also began to incorporate aspects that it viewed as “Oriental” into many of its films, such as Chinese qipao dresses and characters that spoke exclusively Mandarin, who were often servants or household help and served to further emphasize the divide between white and Asian.

This attitude toward Asian Americans in film persisted into the years of World War II, and was strengthened by international hostilities, propaganda, and the rise of Japanese internment camps. Numerous war films created during this time shared many of the same themes, and the Office of War Information was instrumental in shaping the details of these portrayals. In the case of *Little Tokio, USA*, footage of actual military evacuations in California was used in the final film to inspire tensions against the “Oriental bund” or general view of Japanese-Americans, with “Hollywood serving as a point of contact between the government and film industry.”³ The Asian characters in the Hollywood war films of the 1940s continued to follow the prior archetypes that had been set by the era, and were always placed against a white, male, American hero and may have posed a threat to the white heroine. Hollywood selected these overt portrayals for their capacity to draw in audiences and generate profit, as well as their involvement with the OWI, who “were showing their imprint in films of all categories by 1942.”⁴ However, these caricatures were prime visual examples of the contradiction between the idea of the “melting pot” and the perception of the “United States as a white, homogeneous identity” that existed at the time.⁵

Politics and wartime played a key role in how many of these films were produced and intended to be seen by the public. These demeaning portrayals were a form of “new racism,” using a popular medium like film, to “demonize an entire people and culture.”⁵ The depiction of Asians during this era manifested itself in three distinct forms, including the “verbal racism” which included slurs and language, the “physical racism” and its exaggerated features and caricatures, and the “psychological racism” which included the villainous roles.⁶ These extremely prevalent images were a method of propaganda during the Second World War, existing as a means to inspire certain attitudes against the enemy while inflating the perception of the United States and its allies.

After the conclusion of World War II, Asian actors were seeing a gradual improvement in their on-screen representations, and the depiction of Asian war enemies dissolved. One particularly notable example of this change in presentation is the 1959 film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, which was produced jointly between French and Japanese studios following renewed French interest in the study of the atomic bomb and received recognition at the Academy Awards that year.⁷ The film displayed an interracial relationship between a French woman and a Japanese man, subverting the dynamic of an Asian woman and white man that was previously popular. The plot was set in the midst of the recent war, shortly after the atomic bombing of Japan, and grappled with some of the questions that race posed within society. Namely, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, was able to display two sides of a conflict and the struggle that became apparent when one chooses to “fraternize with the enemy” and cross racial boundaries.⁸

The increased presence of Asian Americans would continue into the 1960s with the civil rights movement in the United States, when Asian Americans joined African Americans in defending their right to equal opportunities and fought for fair treatment under the law.⁹ While the Asian American community did not have its own March on Washington, the case of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* made the enforcement of prejudice-based business ownership laws unconstitutional and served as a major turning point for Asian immigrants. It was during the 1960s that the United States began to see an increasing number of films made by Asian Americans, including social and political commentaries. Asian American actors appeared in these films, which were made through a method known as “triangular cinema” that emphasized community, social action, and life for Asian Americans in the United States.¹⁰ These films were successful in some regards, but the established stereotypes of Asians in film continued to persist, and Hollywood continued to portray Chinese and Japanese “culture” in an inaccurate, dramatized manner as the West saw the rise of Bruce Lee as the Asian leading man.

In the 1970s, the popularity of the *kung fu* films produced in Hong Kong reached the United States, bringing changing views on gender roles in regards to race and further adoption of Asian elements in mainstream Hollywood. Chinese-American actor and martial artist Bruce Lee found large amounts of success overseas in the beginning of the decade and expressed interest in the lead role of the television series *Kung Fu*, but was rejected for “being too Chinese” despite the fact that he was American-born and spoke fluent English.¹¹ The role was instead given to white actor David Carradine, who used facial prosthetics for yellowface to give himself a more Chinese appearance for the part, while surrounded by a cast of Asian actors in comparatively minor roles.

Bruce Lee would star in the 1972 film *Way of the Dragon*, a Hong Kong film released at the height of American opposition to the Vietnam War. The film also starred American and Korean actors, and the climax of the film featured an intricate fight scene between Lee and American martial artist Chuck Norris, which served as a visual metaphor for the ongoing conflicts between the Eastern and Western world.¹² The most noteworthy detail is Lee’s victory over Norris, showing an Asian man outfight a Western man on an international scale.

This theme continued with the 1973 film *Enter the Dragon*, which was the first Hong Kong martial arts film to be produced by a Hollywood studio. Bruce Lee portrayed a leading man who was assertive, physically skilled, and clever, along with a cast that was predominately Asian and filmed on location in Hong Kong, marking a significant milestone for a Western-produced film. It is also important to recognize the brief but strong inclusion of a female martial artist, played by Taiwanese actress Angela Mao, in the beginning of the film, who is able to defend herself against a group of male attackers and claims her own life to avoid being subjected to their aggression. The film was incredibly successful in the United States, both commercially and critically, and contained notions of clashes between social classes and oppression which resonated with Cold War audiences.¹³ *Enter the Dragon* is also notable for its inclusion of African American martial artist and actor Jim Kelly, who played the role of a black martial arts instructor who experiences harassment by white police officers, uniting the issues that both Asian and African Americans faced in their everyday lives.

The struggle of Asian Americans in Hollywood is not unlike the social difficulties faced by other groups in the United States, but the noticeable shift in the portrayal of Asian characters has had a lasting impact that is evident in the present. The inclusion of African American actors in martial arts films throughout the 1970s inspired a sense of shared struggles that coincided with the civil rights movement within the United States, as well as defying existing stereotypes about those who were not white. However, while Asian men have benefited from the *kung fu* craze of the 1970s to become action stars, icons of masculinity, and able to secure leading roles without the inclusion of a white actor, it should be noted that the presence of Asian women in film has largely remained the same. It is uncommon to see an Asian woman in a leading role, or as a threat within the cast of a film, while she is instead relegated to a minor role with limited screen time and dialogue, or as an attractive figure.

Presently, Asian actors play Asian characters, and more consideration is applied to the manner in which cultural and historical elements are shown. Modern examples of films like *Rush Hour* and *Hero* show that there is indeed a place for Asian men in Hollywood, but also make it clear that leading roles remained confined to action and scripts that set the lead apart as distinctly Asian. While Asian women

are often confined to stereotypical roles, there have been a few prominent examples in more recent years, particularly in the case of actress Lucy Liu, who has been able to take on parts as an action heroine.

The depiction of Asian men as martial arts figures also raises the question of whether these roles have simply changed the stereotype, from that of the small and weak to the threatening "Asian superman." In light of the United States' current allied status with many Asian nations, Asian characters may no longer be the default choice for a war villain, but can only be heroic when they fulfill certain conditions. While more modern films do show considerable improvement both in regards to diversity and cultural accuracy, it is difficult to determine if the current expectations from audiences of Asian leading men have been entirely beneficial. Changes within the industry are evident, and Asian American actors have had access to a more varied set of roles in Western media. Moving forward, the future is rich with opportunity for presenting more Asian leading men and women along with a stronger representation of Asian American actors.ⁱ

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ⁱ Metzger, Sean. "Patterns of Resistance?: Anna May Wong and the Fabrication of China in American Cinema of the Late 30s." *Quarterly Review Of Film & Video* 23, no. 1 (January 2006): 1-11.

² Yiman, Wang. "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era." *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 60 (September 2005): 159-191.

³ Koppes, Clayton and Gregory Black. "What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942-1945." *The Journal of American History* Vol. 64, No. 1 (Jun., 1977), pp. 87-105.

⁴ Koppes, 90.

⁵ Xiaofei, Wang. "Movies Without Mercy: Race, War, and Images of Japanese People in American Films, 1942-1945." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2011): 11-36.

⁶ Xiaofei, 22.

⁷ Cardullo, Bert. "The Symbolism of Hiroshima, Mon Amour." *Film Criticism* 8.2 (1984): 39-44.

⁸ Cardullo, 40.

⁹ Kim, Janine Young. "Are Asians Black?: The Asian-American Civil Rights Agenda And The Contemporary Significance.." *Yale Law Journal* 108.8 (1999): 2385.

¹⁰ Shah, Hemant. "Asian culture" and Asian American identities in the television and film industries of the United States." *Simile* 3, no. 3 (August 2003): N.PAG.

¹¹ Prashad, Vijay. "Bruce Lee and the Anti-imperialism of Kung Fu: A Polycultural Adventure." *Positions* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 51.

¹² Prashad, 54.

¹³ Prashad, 56.