

1999

# Deslanting the Lens

Lui Amador

*Claremont Graduate University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Amador, Lui. (1999). *Deslanting the Lens*. CGU Theses & Dissertations, 93. [http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu\\_etd/93](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/93). doi:  
Doi\_data: 10.5642/cguetd/93

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Early Asian Immigrant and the Yellow Peril	5
The Asian Male Threat	7
The Emasculated Male	13
The Social Problem Pictures	20
Oriental Barbarians At the Gate: The New Yellow Peril	24
Enter the Dragon: the Hypermasculine Superhero	29
New Paradigms of Representation	35
M. Butterfly	37
Cultural Essentialism	41
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	46
Selected Filmography	47

HON

-----

PN

1995 .9

A78

A63

-----

Amador ,

Lui

Two Asian women slowly walk to the front of the stage. There is somber yet dramatic music playing in the background. The woman on the right is dressed in a white Chinese gown. She is Miss Saigon. The woman on the left is in a Japanese kimono. She is Madame Butterfly. As the two women get closer to the front of the stage, the music is getting louder. Miss Saigon slowly brings a gun to her head. Madame Butterfly simultaneously raises a knife above herself. Both women are about to make the ultimate sacrifice. The music continues to grow even louder and more dramatic. The scene is leading to a climax. Just as they are about to fulfill their destinies, the music stops and both women look at each other in surprise. They both start to look around as if searching for something. At the same time they yell out "Hey, where's the White guy? I'm not going to kill myself without having a White guy?" This is neither Miss Saigon nor Madame Butterfly. It is a performance piece from the Vietnamese theater group, Club O'Noodles. As with the rest of their show, Children from the Laughter of War, this skit is a hilarious yet ironic comment on the tragic Asian woman/White male savior theme that continues to be a popular motif in American film. Moments after their plea for a "White guy," a figure emerges from the back of the stage. It is an Asian man dressed only in black pants and a red bandanna around his head. He is carrying a machine gun and performing an exaggerated imitation of Sylvester Stallone's Rambo character. The two women look at him in disappointment and complain, "You're not a White guy. We need a White guy." The two women exit the stage leaving the Asian man alone and embarrassed.

In their skit, Club O'Noodles makes a powerful statement about Asian men and women, and their portrayal in film and theater. Club O' Noodles brings attention to how specific roles, images and stereotypes have impacted the understanding of Asian American society. Both stories tell the tale of tragic love between the East and West, set against the backdrop of war. While both stories have received success and popularity among audiences, critics of both narratives have been critical of the negative representation of

Asian men and women. The women are portrayed as victims who must be protected and saved from the brutality and hopelessness that comes not only from war, but by the inferred, savage and primitive nature of their Eastern countries. Their facetious statement, "You're not a White guy. We need a White guy," implies salvation can only come from the more superior, more desirable West, represented by the more virile, White, American male. This assigned positioning of the American White man perpetrates America's own maneuvering toward its capitalist, colonial interests in the East. Following this rationale, the Asian male comes to represent Asia, as a weak, primitive figure, who must also receive guidance from the West. Furthermore, Asians are left not only valuing and coveting Western cultural standards, but also as a result, internalize racial oppression and self hate. The Asian man is portrayed either through negative, demeaning stereotypes or made invisible all together. As a consequence, the Asian male in America is marginalized even further in his displacement as an inferior, emasculated male. Throughout the years, the portrayal of Asian men in film has been complicated by a long, historical, political and economic context. Consequently, these portrayals bring to light intersections of identity regarding issues of race, gender, class and sexuality within the Asian male experience. A racialized way of seeing the Asian man is developed, and in so doing, modes of control are constructed that dictate how he should be understood and valued. What results is an intentional means of maintaining the racial hierarchy that elevates the White race to an authoritative level of social supremacy.

Just as Club O'Noodles found similarity and cultural affinity between Japan and Vietnam to articulate their political commentary about Asian representation (the Japanese *Madame Butterfly* and the Vietnamese *Miss Saigon*), some preliminary attention should be given to the notion and classification of the term Asian. Within the last three decades, scholars have examined, debated and written on various aspects of this racial category, including identity politics, shared histories, communal relationships and social movements. Some argue that the term Asian is an artificial construct created and assigned to racially



categorize people who originate from the same, geographic region and who share similar, physical features. A more complicated understanding involves notions of culture that bind people together by a mutual cultural identity. In Framework, Stuart Hall discusses an aspect of cultural identity in the following way:

[Cultural identity] is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture...Far from being externally fixed in some essentialized past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continual play of history, culture and power...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narrative of the past. (p. 70)

As such, the idea of an Asian identity is also recognized as a social formation that has served to unite communities based on shared experiences and mutual political agendas. At various levels, it has and can be some or all of these things. The discussion of racial and ethnic formations is an enormous undertaking too large for the scope of this focused paper. What is important to understand is that regardless of its artificial nature, its impact on group and individual identity development and politics is emphatically real, and it bears great weight on the ways in which these representations and images are influenced, shaped and perpetuated.

Representations of Asians in the media originate in America's long, yet precarious relationship with Asia and its people. From the very beginning, America's interest in the East has been motivated by Asia's potential to serve as political and economic gain. As America pushed forward in its efforts toward globalization and political hegemony, the American people developed a growing interest and fascination toward the exotic and mysterious treasure waiting to be revealed in the Far East. In assessing this transfixed fascination with Asia, Gina Marchetti expands on Edward W. Said's notion of "Orientalism:"

...Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.' They create a mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other. Romance and sexuality provide the metaphoric justification for this domination. (p. 6)

In addition, the growing need for the United States to find an economic source of both unskilled and later skilled labor, prompted an incremental and calculating recruitment of Asian immigrants in areas of construction, agriculture, and later, technology. From the Chinese railroad laborers of the 1800's to the skilled, technical labor that arrived as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, the presence of Asians in the United States has been fueled by American labor needs and the promise of a better life in America.

Through its own economic and political push toward capitalist globalization, America found itself involved in the last three major wars in Asia (World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War). As American servicemen fought on in battle, the need to gain public support demanded the propagandizing of Americans against the enemy. In each war, the Asian enemy became systemically portrayed as the evil foreign threat. As a result, the media implemented aggressive war support campaigns that often relied on the dehumanization and objectification of Asians as a threat to American values and dreams. Pejorative descriptions like Jap and gook became popular ways of identifying and racializing both Asians abroad and Asians in America. During World War II, the racial animosity and fear by White Americans toward the Japanese resulted in the internment of over one hundred twenty thousand Japanese Americans. Even non-Japanese Asians (i.e. Chinese, Koreans and Pilipinos) were often mistaken for Japanese and discriminated against.

## **The Early Asian Immigrant and the Yellow Peril**

As the various Asian communities began arriving and developing as unplanned, yet permanent populations in America, the idea of an invading yellow peril emerged to qualify the xenophobic apprehensions of White Americans. Marchetti explains:

Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe, the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overempowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark occult forces of the East. Given that knowledge about Asia and Asians has been limited in Europe and America, much of this formulation necessarily rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamericans desires and dreads onto the alien other. Thus, as Western nations began to carve up Asia into colonies, their own imperialist expansion was in part rationalized by the notion that a military powerful Asia posed a threat to "Christianized civilization"... Within the context of America's consistently ambivalent attitudes toward Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, and other peoples of color, the yellow peril has contributed to the notion that all nonwhite people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral violent, uncivilized, infantile, and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (pp. 2-3).

Asian immigrants arrived predominantly as sojourners—laborers who would work for a few years in America, but return to their country after successfully amassing their wealth. For many of these laborers, this dream was difficult, if not impossible. The profitable opportunities that had originally lured them to America were in reality, low paying and physically demanding jobs that often placed them in indentured servitude. The option of returning home was inhibited by the shame and embarrassment of failure. A select few were successful in making a profitable living, and they too stayed in hopes of making a better life for themselves in America. However, for many Asian immigrants, the "Gold Mountain" that they had expected was tarnished by the realities of racism and alienation.

Regardless of the circumstances, it soon became clear that Asians were here to stay. The reaction by many White Americans was that of a growing contempt for this new foreign population that served as more competition for jobs and land. White Americans viewed Asians as an inferior race and feared not only that they would steal jobs, but also reduce the quality of life in America. Because of physical differences and a lack of knowledge of Eastern cultures by the West, Asians were perceived as invading foreigners who could not be assimilated into the dominant culture. Like other marginalized groups, Asians were seen as "other", incapable of fully integrating into American society. What this surmounted to were racist attitudes by Whites that feared both the idea of integration as well as the threat of economic competition by a new immigrant labor source.

While White Americans found an economic need for the exploitation of cheap Asian labor, they did not want a permanent population of Asians in America. It was their hope to recruit Asian sojourners who could provide the labor for a limited period, and eventually return to their country of origin. To insure this, racial-specific legislation was passed that limited the immigration of Asians to mostly Asian men. In 1875, Congress passed the Page Law. Purportedly designed to prohibit the importation of Chinese women for immoral purposes (i.e. Chinese prostitutes), the Page Law had considerable effect on the immigration of all Chinese women. Many Chinese women were forced to secure certificates that validated their moral social standing, but even such certificates did not ensure entrance into America. Between 1875 and 1882, one third fewer Chinese women immigrated to the U.S. than in years just prior to the Page Law. (Cao, pp. 29-30) Seven years later, many Chinese men would be secured eternal bachelor-hood with the passing of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In years to come, other Asian men would share a similar fate as the Chinese with racial-based legislation that restricted or outright prohibited the immigration of women from their countries. In 1917, Congress passed an immigration law prohibiting Asian Indian men to bring their wives with them to the U.S. Like the Chinese and Pilipinos, Indian men would have to seek elsewhere for wives or companionship in



America. To further restrict and control these new foreign populations, many states passed anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited interracial marriage between Whites and non-Whites. In 1880, California enacted anti-miscegenation legislation that prohibited the issuance of a license authorizing the marriage of a White person with a "negro, mulatto, or Mongolian" (Takaki, pp. 101-102). By denying access to Asian women, as well as prohibiting interracial marriages, those in power had hoped Asian men would be less inclined to settle down in the U.S. What emerged from this were various Asian, bachelor communities that only served to add more disdain and fear of an Asian presence in America. As a result, the early Asian immigrant experience was occupied by the torment of racial stereotypes and prejudice.

### **The Asian Male Threat**

Films of that era contributed to this growing fear and hatred by depicting the villainous Asian threat. Silent films like the Yellow Menace (1916), The Exploits of Elaine (1916), Patria (1919), and The Perils of Pauline (1919) often positioned Asian men as sexual savages who threatened White heroines. Perhaps the most famous image of the diabolical Asian was portrayed in the numerous films of the infamous Fu Manchu. Inspired and adapted from Sax Rohmer's novels, Fu Manchu is a brilliant, yet mad Chinese character obsessed with taking over the world.

"Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government--which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man."-- Nayland Smith to Dr. Petrie, The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu

Rohmer, himself was so enthralled by his description of Fu Manchu, that he reused it verbatim, to describe Fu Manchu in his next novel. This detailed description as well as the character itself, is a grotesque warning to the West of their worst unanswered fears of the evil Asian. He is unholy and unnatural “with a face like Satan.” Having written this in 1911, Rohmer’s description of Fu Manchu as a being with “all the cruel and cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect” is a prophetic prelude to the model minority, a reemergence of yellow peril paranoia during the late half of this century. Rohmer’s Fu Manchu has become an iconic figure of the evil Asian, and indeed, “the yellow peril incarnate in one man.” Tsai Chin, who appeared in many of the Fu Manchu films, summarized the plot in her autobiography:

Apart from the name changes, the plots were all identical: perhaps that explains why I did not bother to read the script when I came to do the fifth film. Fu wants to conquer the world, forcing a Western scientist to assist him. The white and noble scientist always refuses to co-operate until Fu abducts his beautiful daughter. The scientist pretends to relent before destroying his evil opponent. End of picture—though as the credits role, the menacing voice of Fu Manchu is heard warning his Western cinema audience that the worst is yet to come. (Chin, p. 144)

Between 1920 and 1980, the Fu Manchu character appeared in over a dozen films. First played by Harry Agar Lyons in the 1920's, the sinister Chinese doctor was subsequently portrayed in the movies by Warner Oland, Boris Karloff, Henry Brandon, Manuel Requena, Christopher Lee and Peter Sellers. The portrayal of Fu Manchu spanned a life span of over fifty years, ensuring the preservation of this image for most of the twentieth century.

All of the actors chosen to play Fu Manchu were White men who donned yellow-face for the role. In the early years of cinema, it was not uncommon for White actors to portray other races (i.e. black-face and yellow-face) due to the period’s racist policies

toward non-White actors. Furthermore, by the time Peter Sellers revived the infamous character, Fu Manchu had already been established as a negative image for the Asian American community, which would explain the possibility of resistance or refusal by Asian actors to perform the role. However, I would argue that like other forms of racialized, minstrel performances, the use of White actors for the role of Fu Manchu was perhaps the result of the film industry's delusional concept for image authenticity. In other words, Asians could not perform this particular Asian character, Asian enough—or at the very least, they could not perform Rohmer's Asian, which would imply that Asian performativity was in effect, being done incorrectly by Asians. In addition to the numerous novels and films about Fu Manchu, the image of a sinister Asian-like villain has been recreated and reconstructed in cartoons, comic books and other unrelated films (i.e. Flash Gordon's Ming the Merciless).

Images of the Asian male were also presented to show their threat to a racially pure, White America. In addition to a potentially new population of Asian immigrant families settling permanently in the United States, Asian men also brought on an impending racial tainting and impurity through interracial relationships with White women. For White America, immigration of non-Whites was an interruption of a social Darwinist, American dream. Asians, along with other communities of color, became the unassimilatable "other" who disrupted and complicated the ideal of a culturally homogeneous America. Asians were seen as mysterious, exotic foreigners who could serve the labor needs of "true Americans", but could not be permitted to become a permanent addition to American society. Recruiters of Asian labor recognized the potential for these recent immigrants to outstay their welcome. To address this, heavy restrictions on the immigration of Asian women, as well as the enacting of antimiscegenation laws by various states assured little hope of marriage and family for Asian men in the United States. However, while these laws restricted legal unions, they did not completely prevent the social interactions between Asian men and White women. Asian men were therefore depicted as sexual savages and



potential rapists who, at their first chance would act on their sexual aggression and threaten the sanctity of White women.

Whereas the woman serves as the symbol of her racial community's purity and innocence, White men have feared both the rape and/or seduction of White women by the male "other." The White woman must therefore be guarded and protected by the White male from non-White men. The Asian male, as the sexual savage must be contained, and it is this positioning that allows the White man to remain the savior and protector of White America. Because it is the woman who physically reproduces, she is burdened with the preservation of racial purity. Anything less than mono-racial procreation is a contamination of the race, and for Whites, a threat to their social dominance. Furthermore, it is this dominance that excludes White men from the same social obligatory scrutiny imposed on their female counterpart. The interracial mixing that may and has occurred involving White men does not bare the same level of antipathy. Following the earlier rationale, the male is not obligated with the same, symbolic responsibility toward racial preservation because of his inability to bare children. A woman of color who conceives a child from a White man, while still taboo, does not share the same racial standing with that of a White woman, and it might even be argued that for the child, there is an elevation of social status due to their White half. The combination of these factors makes it an extremely convenient position for the White man. In film, this became a popular theme that positioned White men as the heroic savior of his race, while at the same time reemphasizing earlier notions of not only racial but also gender supremacy.

Between 1850 and 1940, U.S. popular media consistently portrayed Asian men as a military threat to the security and welfare of the United States and as a sexual danger to innocent white women (Wu, 1982). In numerous dime novels, movies, and comic strips, Asians appeared as feral, rat-faced men lusting after virginal white women. Arguing for racial purity, these popular media depicted Asian-white sexual union as 'at best, a form of beastly sodomy, and, at worst, a Satanic marriage' (Hoppentand, 1983, p.



174). In these popular depictions, the white man was the desirable sexual partner and the hero who rescued the white woman from 'a fate worse than death' (Hoppentand, 1983, p. 174-175). (Espiritu, p. 89)

The White male as savior is further elevated by such films' tendency to question the woman's role as victim. The rape fantasy reinforces masochistic notions of a secret, sexual desire by the women toward her defilement, implying the woman's need to be protected not only from her rapist, but from herself as well, further subjugating both the Asian male and White woman and justifying the White man's role as protector. Marchetti explains that the consequence of this "then, involves not only the eradication of the threat of racial otherness by lynching the Asian rapist but also the brutal punishment of the White woman through both the spectacle of her assault and the humiliation of her rescue." (p. 10)

In Frank Capra's The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933), Megan Davis (Barbara Stanwyck) is an American missionary who finds herself a captive of the rich and powerful Chinese warlord, General Yen (Nils Asther) during the middle of a turbulent civil war. The film is filled with binary images and symbols that not only serve to contrast East and West, but of China's own internal conflicts: extreme wealth vs. dire poverty; a heathen China vs. a moral, Christian America; as well as the immoral yet practicality of General Yen vs. the naïve faith and spirituality of Megan. Like the actors who portrayed Fu Manchu, Scandinavian actor, Asther dons yellow-face to alleviate the social tensions, which would condemn the interracial coupling of an Asian actor and White actress. As captor, General Yen is positioned as the rapist who threatens not only Megan, but also her prior commitment to marry a White missionary. For Megan, Yen serves as a catalyst for her awakening sexuality and its implications (Marchetti, p. 53). Like the film itself, Yen appears in polemic contradictions: He is kind and sympathetic yet ruthless and cold-hearted. His Asianness is epitomized by his exaggerated Asian features (slanted eyes and Fu Manchu-style eyebrows and mustache); his opulent and exotic palace, and his lavishly, oriental clothing. However, he is also presented as being very westernized. France's

historical influences in China have given him a distinctive French accent. His only trusted friend is his American financial advisor, and throughout the film he reveals different Western interests like poker and Virginia tobacco for his cigarettes. In addition, Yen seems to shift back and forth between a caring and generous host and a sex-crazed demon who carefully strategizes the seduction of his captive. It is this ambiguity that Megan struggles to understand throughout the film.

Early on in the film, Yen finds himself positioned between the two main female characters, Megan and Mah-li (Toshia Mori). As they prepare to sleep on board Yen's military train, the camera switches back and forth between Yen and the two women, as if he were choosing between the two of them. Megan is shown in a soft white light, accentuating her White innocence, while Mah-li is presented in an extremely seductive position. Her arm is raised above her head as if she is waiting for Yen to sexually satisfy himself with her. Perhaps the most telling images of the film occur in a dream sequence that reveals Megan's growing, yet forbidden attraction to Yen. As she sleeps, Megan dreams of a violent Yen who forces his way into her bedroom. As Yen breaks apart the door, his face slowly appears from the dark shadows only to reveal a grotesque, monster-like figure whose exaggerated Chinese features prevent Megan from acting on her hidden desires. In this form Yen's eyes are even more slanted. His mouth and lips are pronounced outward as to convey stereotypical, Asian buckteeth. The true aberrance however, comes from Yen's pointed ears and spiked fingernails which transform him into a vampire-like demon. As Yen bends over and grabs hold of Megan's prone body, a masked man bursts in from the window. He is dressed in a Western suit and his face is covered with a black mask. The mysterious stranger strikes at the evil Yen which causes him to fall back and vanish from the room. At that moment, the mystery hero throws off his hat and rips off his mask only to reveal a more attractive, less orientalized Yen. As they embrace, the camera focuses on Megan's face spiraling to convey her ecstasy. The scene climaxes in a passionate kiss.

While the film fails to address the more significant racist ideology indicative of its time, The Bitter Tea of General Yen does make progressive, if not controversial attempts at flirting with notions of interracial relationships as well as exploring notions of cross-cultural values. As Megan struggles to understand Yen, ironically, it is her desire for Yen, conflicted with her arrogant belief in needing to save him that eventually leads to his destruction. Megan is torn between her attraction for Yen and her moral, Christian values that also inherently racialize their relationship. Marchetti writes, "If Yen can be Megan's dream lover, in conscious life, ironically, the same values that supposedly make her interested in saving Yen force her to look at him as the enemy and an inferior being, as a threat to her virtue, in other words, the 'purity of her race.'" (p. 55) In the end, Megan fails to save Yen and disprove his claim that she is racist. To do so, would have required her to embrace her feelings for him which were repressed by the racism she denied.

The sexual savage threat is effective in its ability to free White men from guilt of a broader notion of gender oppression. As men of color become interpolated as the sexual threat, White men get repositioned not only as protector and savior, but as the just male. They become excluded or exceptional to issues of a systemic sexism that not only subjugate women, but in this capacity, perpetuates the specific power base of White men in America. In effect, a reinforcement occurs for both racial and gender oppression as men of color and White women become pitted against one another, consequently entrenching power and privilege for White men.

### **The Emasculated Male**

Another prevailing image of the Asian man is that of emasculation. If the sexual savage serves to alleviate the guilt of gender oppression by White men, the emasculated Asian informs the hierarchical structure of patriarchy in America. The portrayal of Asian men as emasculated not only serves to question their virility, but also to denigrate the social value of Asian men as masculine in a heterosexual America. Like the sexual savage, the



emasculated Asian male maintains the established order of White male dominance, a position that is threatened by any appreciation or legitimacy of the male other. Men of color are the yellow peril, black peril and brown peril that endanger and destabilize White male authority. In response to this threat, the idea of men of color as sexual deviants is constructed. This causes the simultaneous positioning of White men as the norm while non-White men occupy the extreme positions of both sexually threatening and sexually neutral. As the emasculated figure, the Asian male is stripped of his heterosexual potency which calls into question both his sexual desirability and his contribution to society as male. Once again, race and gender converge by assigning Asian men as feminine and relying on the prevailing misogyny that infers a masculine gender authority.

In Broken Blossoms (1919), D. W. Griffith attempts to argue for social acceptance of racial difference, yet in his efforts, also succeeds in asserting notions of Asian male perversion. Cheng Huang (Richard Barthelmess) also affectionately referred to as “Chinkie”, is a Chinese immigrant, shopkeeper in London’s Limehouse district. Like General Yen, Cheng serves to confirm Western perceptions of the Asian other. In the beginning of the film, he leaves China to spread the teachings and peaceful philosophy of Buddhism in the West. Cheng eventually settles in the Limehouse, where he has become a merchant. Several years have passed and Cheng’s initial spirit and hope has been broken, presumably by the harsh realities of the West. Cheng has become an opium smoker, and is shown in a “house of sin” (opium den), signifying his fall from grace and contrasting the Buddhist temple in which he is first introduced.

From his shop, Cheng sees the frail and innocent Lucy (Lillian Gish) shopping in the Limehouse. He is enamored by her beauty, but only admires her from a distance. When Lucy runs away from home to escape the abusive treatment of her drunken father, Battling Burrows, she wanders into town and collapses at Cheng’s doorstep. Cheng rescues Lucy by taking her in and caring for her. In his home, Cheng nurses Lucy to health, while at the same time adorning her in lavished, exotic apparel: “A magical robe

treasured from an olden day.” And his “room prepared as for a princess.” For both Cheng and General Yen, the move to “dress-up” their female guests is a conciliatory effort at breaking the cultural barriers that keep their desire of these women at a voyeuristic distance. In both films, the heroines are elevated socially and literally in their sleeping quarters: Megan’s bed is positioned on a platformed part of the room, while Lucy is placed in a high crib-style bed. This elevation situates both women as living altars for General Yen and Cheng, making their admiration implicative of spiritual worship.

As Cheng showers Lucy with gifts and a “gentleness she has never known,” a heavy, sexual undertone drives the narrative:

She seems transformed—into the dark chambers of her incredulous, frightened little heart comes warmth and light. Blue and yellow silk caressing white skin—her beauty so long hidden shines out like a poem.

Cheng’s attraction toward Lucy represents what Marchetti describes as “the desire to possess the child as a fetish object, [meanwhile] the castrating potential of sexual desire belied by his religious elevation of her image.” (p. 40) Marchetti further explains that the attraction to Lucy is a psychological and spiritual contradiction that Cheng battles with throughout the film:

Having gone to Britain on a religious mission and failed, Cheng Huan finds spiritual salvation in the form of a little girl who he worships like a saint and lusts after like a whore. (p. 40)

Cheng’s feelings for Lucy climax when he is so overcome with desire, that he moves to kiss Lucy. The camera switches back and forth between the advancing Cheng and a frightened Lucy. At the last moment, however, he stops himself and reluctantly settles to kissing the hem of her sleeve. As a potential rape, Cheng’s move to kiss Lucy can therefore be seen as the rape and infection of American purity, that is heightened by Lucy’s youth and innocence. This example of the film’s flirtation with sexual desire and sexual

perversity places Cheng in an ambiguous position between pedophilic rapist and castrated, asexual being. In this way, Cheng embodies both sides of the social binary. Espiritu writes:

As Mary Ann Doane (1991) suggested, sexuality is “indissociable from the effects of polarization and differentiation, often linking them to structures of power and domination” (p.217). In the Asian American case, the gendering of ethnicity--the process whereby white ideology assigns selected gender characteristics to various ethnic “others”--cast Asian American men and women as simultaneously masculine and feminine but also as neither masculine nor feminine. On the one hand, as part of the Yellow Peril, Asian American men and women have been depicted as a masculine threat that needs to be contained. On the other hand, both sexes have been skewed toward the female side: an indication of the group’s marginalization in U.S. society and its role as the compliant “model minority” in contemporary U.S. cultural ideology. Although an apparent disjunction, both the feminization and masculinization of Asian men and women exist to define and confirm the white man’s superiority (Kim, 1990). (Espiritu, p. 88)

Marchetti explains that “Cheng Huan embodies the ‘feminine’ qualities linked in the Western imagination with a passive, carnal occult, and duplicitous Asia.” (p. 35) This feminized depiction is exemplified by Cheng’s own exotic dress, his connection with Lucy as kindred spirits, and particularly Barthelmess’ performance of Cheng using huddled postures and exaggerated, facial gestures. Furthermore, Griffith’s use of soft focus and diffuse lighting works to subdue Cheng’s visual presence as feminine.

In Cecil B. DeMille’s The Cheat (1915), the emasculated male and the sexual savage come together in the form Haka Arakau (Sessue Hayakawa). Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward) is a high-class socialite who is frustrated by her husband’s insistence to reduce her spending habits until his stock investments return a profit. Seeing an opportunity to make money for herself, Edith invests \$10,000 of the Red Cross’ money, which she has been

entrusted to hold for safe keeping. When the stock plunders, Edith becomes consumed with grief and panic, realizing that the scandal will ruin her name and reputation. At this point, Haka reveals himself as a conniving and lecherous figure who befriends Edith only to hover over her like a stalker. In one scene, Edith faints out of grief of losing the Red Cross' money. Haka takes this moment to steal a kiss from the unconscious Edith, supporting the idea that the Asian male other can only become a sexual being through force and deceit. It is at this point that the emasculated and sexual savage converge to define the true nature of the Asian male. In Asian American Women and Men, Yen Le Espiritu discusses how two seemingly divergent representations co-exist to serve as images of control.

To exercise power, elite white men and their representatives have propagated 'controlling images' that brand subordinate groups alternatively deviant, inferior, or overachieving—and, in so doing, naturalize and normalize sexism, racism and poverty...Ideological representations of gender and sexuality are central in the exercise of racial domination. In this racist discourse, the sexuality of men and women of color is constructed to be excessive, animalistic, or exotic in contrast to the 'civilized' sexuality of white men and women. (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 75)...Although Asian American men and women are often portrayed as 'hypersexual' and men as 'asexual,' both stereotypes exist to define and confirm the white man's virility and superiority (Kim, 1990). (p. 12-13)

Initially, Haka is shown as a gentleman, passive and even feminine. His friendships and socializing seem to exist primarily with Edith and the other women within the upper class social set. He is also presented as quite assimilated to his Western surroundings, dressing in western-style suits and participating in all of Edith's social activities. As the story progresses however, his true intentions for Edith become more apparent. Haka is therefore a warning of the lurking evil which will result in our friendship and trust of the Asian foreigner. Seizing an opportunity to take advantage of the vulnerable Edith, Haka acts on



his hidden desires for her by offering to replace the \$10,000 if she agrees to his request for a sexual rendezvous. When Edith attempts to repay the money, rather than fulfill her initial agreement, Haka replies, "you cannot buy me off." A struggle ensues between them, in which Haka physically brands Edith's left shoulder to symbolize his ownership of her. In defending herself, Edith shoots Haka, but does not kill him. Frightened by what she has just done, Edith flees from the scene. Edith's husband, Richard (Jack Dean) then arrives at Haka's home looking for Edith. He stumbles onto the wounded Haka and realizes that Edith is responsible for Haka's injury. When the authorities arrive, they find Richard holding the gun that was used in the shooting. Wanting to protect his wife, Richard confesses to the shooting and is arrested. A few days later, Richard is tried for the shooting in a very public, courtroom trial. When Richard is found guilty of shooting Haka, a grief-stricken Edith confesses to the court that she is really the one who shot Haka. As her defense, Edith reveals the branded scar on her shoulder and explains the details of the events leading to the shooting. As Edith tells her story, the camera pans across a courthouse of White men who grow disgusted and enraged by what they're hearing. Edith's scar represents not only the defilement of the White woman, but more poignantly, the stealing of the White woman by the Asian other—in effect, the potential loss of White purity and innocence. Edith's story incites a riot in the courthouse, but fortunately for Haka, the police prevent the mob from capturing him. Richard is dismissed of the charges and he and Edith walk out of the courthouse, cheered and applauded by everyone.

In his jail cell, Richard cries out, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." It is a hard lesson learned through his wife's association with the evil Haka. More importantly, it clarifies Haka's broader representation of Asian people and Eastern cultures. Richard realizes that Asians are just too different for an appreciated co-existence, which more specifically assumes the assimilation of Asians into Western/American society. The juxtaposition of Richard and Haka also serves to emphasize the socio-economic differences in attitude between the East and West. As a result, Edith (the White woman) is



then positioned as a subjective negotiator between Richard's (America's) frugal practicality and Haka's (Asia's) more exciting extravagance.

If both [Tori] and Richard are part of the new consumer order, Richard represents a corrective to [Tori's] excesses. He acts as a mediator between the old economic order based on Victorian notions of restraint and hard work and the new consumerism linked to leisure, indulgence, and consumption. Thus, [Tori] and the Asian objects that surround him act as a metaphor for the suspect nature of these economic changes that seem to call for the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant middle classes to abandon their traditional values of thrift and self-denial and become more like the Victorian's dark image of otherness represented by [Tori] and his sumptuous displays of power, wealth, and eroticism. (Marchetti, p. 30)

As Edith moves between these two orders, she serves to function as what Marchetti describes "the ultimate commodity, the ultimate token of legitimacy and desirability." (p.31) In effect, the conflict and competition between Richard's and Haka's economic, social order is more clearly evident in their struggle to service, and ultimately own Edith. Richard's diligence and hard work as a stock broker serve only to maintain Edith's lavished life-style, while for Haka, the objectification and commodification becomes even more blatant in his act of branding her to signify his illegal ownership. Edith becomes a trophy that symbolizes both male social stature and sexual, masculine potency that is perversely reconfigured as financial success and power. When Edith reveals the brand on her shoulder, the all-male crowd reaction is one of revulsion toward both the violence committed on Edith and the unscrupulous nature of Haka (and all Asians), and his potential infection and denigration of the American work ethic. "When [Tori] is vanquished at The Cheat's conclusion, this shadowy aspect of the new economy vanishes with him, and the nouveau riche Richard is free to allow his wife to consume at will." (Marchetti, p. 30)

## The Social Problem Pictures

After WWII, America was experiencing a multitude of transitions and changes politically, economically and socially. With an Allied victory, the American public seized the moment as a new beginning. During the 1950's the economy was thriving; American family values were the foundation for the nuclear family structure; and people were ready to move forward into a new era of prosperity and growth. Americans had also learned difficult lessons from their experience in the war. Nazi atrocities against Jews had forced Americans to re-examine their own dark side of racial prejudice and hate, while communities of color were slowly setting the stage for the social disobedience which would occur a decade later. U.S. servicemen returned home with war brides that prompted an end to earlier antimiscegenation laws. Politically, the United States recognized its need to rebuild its relationship with Japan, and to begin to heal the wounds of the war both abroad as well as at home. Hollywood responded with a series of social problem films or melodramas that addressed the issues of racial intolerance. With respect to Asians, what emerged were stories of interracial love between American GI's and Asian (often Japanese) women. Just as the social reality they attempted to depict, these stories crossed thematic areas in film that were previously restricted. Films like Sayonara (1957), Teahouse of the August Moon (1956), China Gate (1957), and Madame Butterfly (1915) all depict interracial romance between Asians and Whites, which served as messages of racial tolerance. Interestingly, Hollywood turned to the Asian woman, rather than the Asian man to serve as the symbolic mediator between the East and West. At the time, issues of miscegenation and interracial romance were still considered a social taboo in America, so filmmakers of the social problem films relied on pairing of the Asian woman and White man as the lesser of two potential evils.

As a result, the role of the Asian man in these films was reduced to two forms of representation: the continued practice of yellow face and/or the exclusion and denial of an Asian male presence. Like The Bitter Tea of General Yen and Broken Blossoms, films like

Sayonara and Teahouse of the August Moon continued the practice of “yellow face”--reserving larger Asian male roles for non-Asian actors who were made up to be Asian. In addition to upholding the racist prohibition of Asian men as leading or primary actors, the practice of yellow face also allowed filmmakers to literally construct their own understanding of what and how an Asian should be. These artificial constructions allowed White filmmakers to maintain their control of Asian images, which Jun Xing suggests is “the practice of political, economic, and ‘psychosocial dominance’ of subordinate groups through objectification.” (p. 68) In addition, they are able to preserve notions of a White male dominance in a situation that required the presence of men who exist outside of the Western periphery of maleness.

In Sayonara, the idea of an interracial relationship between a White woman (Eileen) and a Japanese man (Nakamura) is subtly suggested. Ricardo Montalban, a Latino male, is cast in the role of Nakamura, which Marchetti argues, “further removes the threatening racial aspect of the fantasy, while keeping a certain exoticism at its core.” (p. 142) What is also implied in Marchetti’s reasoning is that notions of physical Whiteness is clearly a determining factor. Montalban, in many ways, due to his own ethnicity can be viewed as “other,” but in Sayonara, is at least more acceptable than an actual Asian actor. Nakamura is the only consistent and substantive Asian male character within the film, and he is presented as a powerful figure who clearly embodies a masculine sexuality--a task which at the time, may have been too inconceivable an option for an Asian actor to perform.

Similarly, Marlon Brando is cast as the narrator-character in Teahouse of the August Moon. However, unlike Montalban or even Barthelmess, Brando’s yellow-face performance is reminiscent of the black-face minstrel. In his role as Sakini, Brando depicts the Okinawan male almost as a clown or court jester who is used to move the plot along its comedic course. As a jester, Sakini is able to illustrate how Okinawans can still exist in subversive resistance of American imperialism. However, Sakini’s physical appearance and social behavior is ridiculous and works to heighten the physical appeal of the central

character, Captain Fisby (Glen Ford), which in turn, permits the potential romance between the White Fisby and his Japanese geisha. Another example of the Asian clown is in the film Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961). Mr. Yunioshi (Mickey Rooney) is a Japanese photographer who lives in the same building above Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn). Like Brando, Rooney is a White actor who is also made up to look Japanese. He has exaggerated buckteeth and extremely slanted, almost squinting eyes. In the opening scenes of the film, Mr. Yunioshi is constantly being awakened by the insensitive behavior of Holly. As he is startled by the door buzzer or Holly's loud phonograph, Mr. Yunioshi jumps up in bed, only to hit his head against the Japanese paper lantern hanging above him. As he heads for the front door to confront Holly, his walk seems constrained and awkward. All of his movements are comical. As he looks down to Holly's front door, he shouts, "I must protest!" His voice is just as comical as his physical presence. In nearly all of his dialogue, he is shouting and making intense facial gestures. Rooney's portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi is so absurd that it is nothing short of a living racist caricature. In every scene he is in, Mr. Yunioshi is made to remind us of his extreme foreignness. The movie Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story (1993), shows Bruce Lee (Jason Scott Lee) on a date at the movies, and the film they are watching is Breakfast at Tiffany's. In this scene, the audience is laughing hysterically at Mr. Yunioshi's clown-like behavior. Lee's date Linda (Lauren Holly) who is also laughing sees that the movie is offensive to Lee and asks him if they can leave. It is an enlightening moment for Linda as she sees how something entertaining to a White audience can be insensitive and insulting to Asians. Notably, the film's biographical account of the famous, martial arts superstar depicts some of the racist struggles Lee encountered living in America and working in Hollywood. The film also includes a rare positioning of an Asian man and White woman in a romantic relationship.

Returning to the social problem films, Sayonara and Teahouse of the August Moon, the other method of control of the Asian male image is what Jun Xing describes as "role stratification." Xing writes that, "while Asian actors and actresses are often cast primarily



as background fillers and to create cinematic atmosphere as extras and 'racials,' [Eugene Wong] claims they are not considered competent enough to play leading roles." (p. 76)

Aside from Nakamura, Japanese men are virtually non-existent, despite the film's Japanese setting. The same could also be said for the film, Teahouse of the August Moon, in which the Okinawan villagers are reduced to minimal characters who serve more as pawns and living decorations to help the more central White characters move the narrative along. In essence, role stratification reinforces notions of White hegemony by maintaining the centrality of the White figure in the narrative. Popularized in feminist film theory, the male gaze and notions of spectatorship help to explain the purpose for such representational strategies as yellow face and role stratification. Xing explains:

[Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston] have raised provocative questions about the source and function of the male visual pleasure, making the important shift from women's images to the signifying practices of the film medium itself. However, the theory's usefulness undercut by two serious limitations: its ahistorical and antiempiricist bias and its reductionist logic. First, by focusing on subjectivity, the theory often downplays the social and historical contexts. What is more, the concept of the male 'look' or 'gaze,' so fundamental to feminist film theory, advocates a split in social totality, male and female. Unfortunately, film viewing and reception cannot be understood only in terms of our psychology or subject positioning, and of course women are not solely textual constructs. Since Western feminism emphasizes sexual differences as the only social variable, matters of class, ethnicity, and race have disappeared from the equation. (p. 179)

The male gaze in American film can be argued as not only male, but more specifically White, middle class, heterosexual, Christian. As a result, the idea of a more prominent or central, Asian male character would not appeal to or prevents an empathetic spectatorship by the intended audience. The Asian figure is in direct conflict and competition with the White male dominance, which has existed as the Western standard for what is male. To redefine or, for that matter, add onto the pre-existing social values of being a man is a

highly discomfiting thought--not only for the White man, but for everyone who has conceded to these social norms.

### **Oriental Barbarians At the Gate: The New Yellow Peril**

In the second half of this century, the United States re-opened its doors to immigrants with the 1965 Immigration Act. This act abolished the national-origins quotas and as a result, opened the floodgates for an annual admission of 170,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 from the Western Hemisphere. A quota of 20,000 from each country as well as the entry of family members on a nonquota basis meant a new life in America and/or an opportunity to be reunited with family who had arrived earlier. In 1960, there were only 877,934 Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States, representing less than one half of one percent of America's overall population. Twenty-five years later, they numbered over five million. The 1990 census reports that Asians and Pacific Islanders make up about 3% of the overall U.S. population, and are now the fastest growing immigrant population in America. By the year 2000, it is estimated that Asian and Pacific Americans will reach the ten million mark, and by 2020, it will exceed twenty million. (Takaki, p. 5) Like the Asian immigrants who came before them, these new immigrants arrived in America with hopes of wealth and prosperity, but unlike the first wave, many of the new immigrants were technically skilled, college-educated professionals. Doctors, lawyers, accountants, nurses, engineers and working professionals in the area of business arrived to meet the United States' needs for skilled labor. With this prosperity however, came competition, and once again, a sense of racial tension and apprehension emerged that questioned the place of Asians in American society. The "yellow peril" resurfaced to convey a warning of the impending threat that Asians bring to employment, education and the American economy as a whole.

In more recent, contemporary films, Asians have been used as the target for anti-immigration and anti-foreign sentiments. Popular themes include the evil Asian gang lord,

depicted in films like Showdown In Little Tokyo (1991), Black Rain (1989) and Year of the Dragon (1985). A subgenre derived from earlier World War II narratives, Asian gangster films rely on the mysticism and exoticness of microcosmic settings like the American Chinatowns. Still, one of the most popular themes of the new Asian threat involves the growing economic competition between the United States and countries like Japan and China. Films like Rising Sun (1993), depict a new yellow peril—Japanese corporations invading and controlling American capitalism. Xing describes Rising Sun as “a clear reincarnation of the Fu Manchu who competes with Whites in a fashion not unlike the incarnation of evil.” (p. 58) Even the title, taken from Japan’s own national description: “Land of the Rising Sun,” serves to paint a picture of slow-creeping monolith rising to take over an unsuspecting America. Science fiction films like Blade Runner (1982) prophetically depict the future of Los Angeles in the year 2019. The film foretells a darker Los Angeles where cross-cultural influences reveal a hyper visual and consumer-oriented society dominated by Japanese billboards and electronic messages. In Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe discusses the Asian contributions to multicultural production in Los Angeles:

[In Blade Runner], ‘Asia’ is both constructed as the ‘foreign’ threat to U.S. capital and, in the representation of Los Angeles as a ghetto for ‘hordes’ of Asian immigrants involved in service-sector labor, as the occulted horizon for the visible emergence of the free, white liberal subject. In other words, Blade Runner’s representation of a third world, largely Asian, invasion of Los Angeles rearticulates orientalist typographies in order to construct the white citizen against the background of a multicultural dystopia. (pp. 84-85)

Ridley Scott recreates a similar backdrop in the film Black Rain, where the Tokyo nightlife is a chaotic bombardment of dark, overcrowded streets pasted over with neon lights and consumer labels. In both of Scott’s films, the Asian influence is portrayed as the gross manipulation of western capitalism—a lesson taught to countries like Japan which is now



being used as a punitive means of control of the American economy. In many ways, the new yellow peril is much more dangerous than its predecessor, because it hits at the heart of the American dream and threatens White dominance by beating them at their own game. As Eddie Sakamura (Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa) states in Rising Sun, "Business is war!"

Associated with this new yellow peril and the economic success of Asians in America is the "Asian nerd." The idea of Asians as socially inept has strong social roots with many of the earlier stereotypes. It is an elaboration of the earlier emasculated male that still plays on the fear of an invading, Asian threat. The Asian nerd originates from the popular perception that Asians are more intelligent and more successful in both the professional and academic realm. While there is truth in this perception, the idea of a model minority is also a manipulated and exploitive perception that has been intentionally produced to the advantage of White America. The idea of Asians as a model minority originated as a response by Whites toward African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and then resurfacing in debates regarding affirmative action policies. Conservatives have utilized the example of Asian American success to argue against the need for minority-based assistance for marginalized or underprivileged groups like women, African Americans and Latinos. In an effort to defend against the idea that people of color were being unjustly treated socially, Whites argued that the problems of the African American community were not the result of racial inequality, because Asian Americans were able to successfully acculturate and succeed academically and economically in society. Furthermore, it was argued that African Americans should follow the example of this model minority by, "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps," rather than complaining about social injustice.

The danger of a model minority image is the misleading and blanketed notion that all Asians are smart and successful. While some Asians have achieved a certain level of economic success, the model minority myth clusters all Asians together and negates the struggles of other, less fortunate Asian groups. As a result, such groups are rendered



invisible and overlooked for things like social services. Equally disturbing is that the model minority myth positions Asians as a political wedge between Whites and other marginalized groups. By praising the accomplishments of Asian Americans and utilizing this as an argument against the need to examine the social mistreatment of people of color, it places Asians as a buffer between Whites and other communities of color. Asians therefore, become “different” from the other groups of color. Their perceived advantage and social privilege outcasts them from this united sense of struggle by other marginalized groups. However, because they are not White and live in a society of White privilege, Asians must still struggle through racial inequality. In effect, they become a social anomaly--they are neither White nor marginalized, which means they neither hold power nor benefit from a united struggle with other groups of color against racial oppression.

To maintain their marginalized status, the academic and economic success of Asians gets contextualized as a negative deviation from American or Western notions of accepted prosperity. As a result, the Asian male becomes stigmatized as scientifically and/or mathematically inclined, but consequently suffering from social ineptitude. In effect, Asian success in America is destabilized and used against them. Their fruition becomes of little value because they are incapable of socializing beyond the parameters of their success. For the Asian man, academic aptitude becomes reconfigured as social ineptitude, which in turn, informs popular attitudes of their social worth.

In the film Sixteen Candles (1984), Gedde Watanabe plays Long Duck Dong, a Chinese foreign exchange student who finds himself in the middle of suburban chaos with a family preparing for a wedding. Watanabe's character is the epitome of the Asian foreigner. Reminiscent of earlier characters like Breakfast At Tiffany's Yunioshi and Teahouse of the August Moon's Sakini, Long is depicted as a sex-crazed nerd in search of an “American-style girlfriend.” In his opening scene, the protagonist, Samantha (Molly Ringwald) is lying on the bottom bed of a bunk bed. She is discontented with her life and upset that no one in her family has remembered her birthday. At that moment, the sound of

an oriental gong emanates as Long's upside down face lowers into Samantha's view. She is startled and with good reason. Long emerges with an exaggerated smile and is clearly presented to shock the audience with his comedic appearance. In a thick, mistakenly Japanese accent--not Chinese, Long asks Samantha, "Whats a happenin' hot stuff?" The fact that the movie does not differentiate between Chinese and Japanese is typical of how Asian stereotypes become an ambiguous amalgamation of negative, Asian sentiment. Throughout the rest of the film, any time Long's name is spoken, the same oriental gong sound appears, and he is referred to as "that weird Chinese guy." In one scene, Samantha's younger brother is complaining about having to sleep with Long during his visit. Mike (Justin Henry) argues, "What the hell are you bitchin' about? I have to sleep under some Chinaman named after a duck's dork!" It is clear that even Long's fictitious name is intended to incite humor due to its odd sexual connotations. Later, Long finds himself at a high school party that has gone out of control. It is the perfect setting for Long to show the full extent of his farcical nature. Long is set up as a contrariety to Samantha, who due to her insecurities, has a difficult time expressing her feelings to both her family and the boy she is attracted to at school. Long has no inhibitions and as Samantha indicates, "Donger is here for five hours and he's got somebody. I live here my whole life, and I'm like a disease." Clearly, Samantha is illustrating her pathetic situation by comparing herself to someone who should be a social outcast, but despite his ridiculousness, has successfully found a girlfriend. The woman Long meets, however, is much taller than he is. The couple is an exaggerated illustration of how aesthetically odd it is for a White woman and an Asian man to be paired up. The danger of the Long character is its inferences of a rapist in sheep's clothing. Early on, Long is shown as a shy, humbly, obedient youth, serving, practically as a houseboy to his American hosts, but when the coast is clear, he transforms into an uncontrollable, sex-crazed misfit who borders on being ridiculous. Characters like Long Duck Dong effectively collapse previous stereotypes of

Asian men into one awkward, social deviant who, outside of minstrel-like amusement, seems to have no true place in American society.

### **Enter the Dragon: the Hypermasculine Superhero**

One of the most famous Asian actors to successfully transition from Asian to American cinema also prevails as one of the most legendary and iconic. While Bruce Lee's acting career only spanned four and a half films, American released films (Lee died filming his last film, Game of Death (1978)), the young Chinese actor and martial artist became the catalyst for martial arts films in the United States. More importantly, Bruce Lee brought on a new way of seeing the Asian male. He was a contradiction to the emasculated figure that stereotyped the gendering and sexuality of the Asian male body. Bruce Lee's persona on screen embodied strength, virility, courage and control that seemed to redefine the male body aesthetic. During his fight scenes, Lee was an explosion of mystical, yet graceful movement. Indeed, he not only introduced a more masculine representation of Asian maleness; Lee provided a new performativity of Asian masculinity--one of hypermasculinity. Lee's success in America rested on his ability to not only rise above previous stereotypes of Asian men, but to exceed even the White standard of masculinity. In his films, it was not uncommon for Lee to fight five, even ten men single-handedly. These fantastic and exotic displays of martial arts reassured the viewer that Lee would not only prevail, he would do so in complete control of his situation. Bruce Lee was a modern day superhero in Asian form. For other Asian men, Bruce represented a new sense of hope. He was a departure from earlier representations, and he would depict Asian maleness on his own terms. Not only did he reject previous notions of the emasculated Asian male, he challenged viewers to confront their understanding of Asian men by positioning himself against those very bodies that represented popular Western forms of masculinity.

In Way of the Dragon (1973) (released in the U.S. as Return of the Dragon), Bruce Lee plays Tang Lung, a young martial artist who moves to Rome to help relatives with their Chinese Restaurant. When the family restaurant falls victim to extortion, Lung must use his martial arts skill to defend the family against evil gangsters. In the climactic fight scene at the Roman Coliseum, Lung finds himself in a modern day, gladiator battle against the gangsters' top henchman played by Chuck Norris. This juxtaposition of Lee and Norris becomes a showdown of East vs. West— inverting the often racialized clash between good vs. evil. This binary positioning is also a visual contrast between the two body types of Lee and Norris. Throughout the fight, Lee uses his incredible speed to out-maneuver and outfight the slower yet larger and seemingly more powerful Norris. In this way, Lee refutes earlier notions of a weaker and inferior Asian male. While Lee is physically smaller in size, he is able to use this disparity to his advantage. Toward the end of the fight, Lee's quick and agile movements almost make Norris appear to move in slow motion, which eventually leads to Norris' defeat. During their fight, Lee manages to rip out a handful of Norris' chest hair. As both men pull away from this exchange, Lee examines the hair in his hands. He blows it away from his palm with a look of disgust. It is at this point that we are reminded of the physically, esthetical differences between the two bodies. Lee's upper body is hairless, while Norris has excessive body hair on both his chest and back. The pairing of Lee and Norris is almost a dialectic positioning that serves to dispel notions of the emasculated Asian male. In Game of Death, Lee finds himself pitted against the towering Kareem Abdul Jabar. Again, the Asian body is juxtaposed, this time to that of the African American body. Compared to Jabar, Lee is literally dwarfed in size. Initially in their fight, Lee seems surely destined for defeat against the much stronger and excessively taller basketball player, turned actor. In one part of their fight, Lee receives a kick to the chest that knocks him back to a staggering position. In an almost comical pause, Lee notices the rather large footprint across his chest provided by Jabar—a reminder of the monumental challenge in front of him. Lee defeats Jabar, and in so doing, we are made



aware, of the superhuman nature of Lee's martial arts skill, even against the magnitude of his giant nemesis.

The representation of Lee as hypermasculine is embodied in the very nature of how his image has become understood and preserved. Unlike the Asian actors and characters before him, Lee actually draws on the expression of his sexuality. Lee's body is sleek and muscular. He invokes a sense of strength that was usually reserved for his Western counterparts, while maintaining his essence and identity as a Chinese man. Throughout his films, the young star would rely on his visual presence as his connection to the audience. Like his Western counterparts, Lee knows how to perform masculinity in a way that is raw and exciting, yet he does so in a way that does not compromise his own identity as an Asian man. With every movement he makes, the definition and vascularity of his body serves to reposition the Asian male as masculine in the extreme. As a result of his popularity and then tragic death in 1973, Lee has been preserved as an icon of masculinity throughout the world. His martial arts skill not only set the standard for future martial artist, his on-screen presence defined for American audiences how a martial artist and action star should look. For many of his male fans, both Asian and non-Asian, Lee became a distinct measurement of maleness. To this day, the various fighting stances, movements and even costumes made famous in his films continue to be replicated and imitated by Lee's fans.

In his personal life, Bruce Lee understood firsthand the struggle of American perceptions of Asian men. Lee was proud of his ethnic and racial heritage and seemed to have a growing contempt for the racism of Whites toward Chinese and other Asians. As his career began to rise to stardom, Lee had helped to develop the concept for a new television series in America. Kung Fu centered on a Chinese immigrant in nineteenth century America. The protagonist, Kwai Caine is a mysterious hermit who wanders the country befriending and assisting the helpless with the use of kung fu skills he has learned as a ShaoLin monk. It was Lee's intention to be cast as the lead character, but because American

TV executives doubted that a Chinese man could draw and sustain an audience base, the role of Caine eventually was given to White actor, David Carradine. (Yang, p. 96)

Throughout his career in America, Lee would be haunted by the racist mentality of the American film industry. As with the executives of Kung Fu, Lee often faced the western assumption and insistence that Asian characters would only be accepted, and therefore, could only be portrayed in the racist and stereotypical ways they had been done in the past.

At the time of his death in 1973, Bruce Lee was in the middle of filming Game of Death. The mysterious and clouded circumstances of this tragedy have been the subject of countless rumors and myths. Even more importantly, the nature of how and when Lee died propelled the 32-year-old martial artist into legendary status. As a result of his demise, Game of Death was left unfinished for five years. In 1978, it was completed and released with the use of a Lee look-a-like. Since then, filmmakers and producers have unscrupulously manufactured inferior imitations of Lee. In Game of Death, Kip Fulbeck amusingly addresses the issue of America's fascination and reluctance to let go of Bruce Lee, and the persona he created. In Fulbeck's version of Game of Death, the filmmaker gives the viewer a different perspective of the film by posing some critical questions regarding Lee's success and the impact of his death. Part of the film's innovative commentary is Fulbeck's use of subtitles to narrate and discuss his concerns with the film's production:

question:

how do we sell this movie to the American public without Bruce Lee?

answer:

Bruce Li

edit footage from old films, like this fight scene from "Return of the Dragon" and finish the film with a double. Call him Bruce Li.

The movie comes out in 1978 without mentioning Bruce Li and is a box office success.

I'm 12 years old.

I go and see it on opening day.

Later, other films come out -- classics like 'Bruce Lee: The Man, The Myth' starring Bruce Li.

Bruce Lee is a Chinese legend -- a chinaman who made it in America.  
America loved him.  
And the Chinese loved him.  
Or maybe they loved America loving him.

question:  
why do we want to keep Bruce Lee alive?  
is the question really about keeping this one love alive?

if the Chinese man needs a hero  
is this how we get one?

Since then, Bruce Lee's image has been recreated in a variety of ways including films, parodies, cartoons, comic books, and most recently video games. In Fulbeck's Game of Death, the filmmaker points out how obvious the inserts of Li are just in the first seven minutes of the film. "somebody wake me up. can people really not tell?" Fulbeck asks in his subtitled narration. Fulbeck argues that the producers had high hopes of fooling the audience because of the common perception that all Asians look alike. Bruce Li, whose name is really Tang Lung, is not even Chinese. While Game of Death prospered upon its release, many of Lee's most devoted fans were outraged by the use of a stand-in who many argued, bared little to no resemblance to Lee. Perhaps the filmmakers rationalized or believed that this was inconsequential because it was still a Bruce Lee film and people would come to see it. One of the most notorious amalgamations of Lee and Li involves Li looking into a mirror during a scene. To preserve the illusion that Li is actually Lee, the filmmakers literally paste a photograph of Lee on the mirror, where Li's face should be. The fact is it doesn't really matter if Li succeeded in pretending to be Lee. Game of Death and the countless other Bruce Lee-type films that followed are a strong statement about America's need to hold on to the one accepted image of an Asian, leading, male actor.

The trend of reproduction is not a new or uncommon phenomenon in the American media. If the image still presents a potential profit, its commodification is almost certain. At the height of her television, reporting career, Connie Chung was often used as standard model for other Asian American, female journalists. Chung's success had prompted



television news stations across the country to hire their own “Connie Chung,” often demanding that the reporter cut her hair or wear her makeup in a way that more closely resembled the Chinese American journalist. The idea that successful figures like Lee or Chung can be manufactured and reproduced confirms and validates the tokenized attitude toward, and value for members of marginalized groups. In their reproduction, Lee and Chung cease to exist as their individual selves and have been degraded as commodities. Because both individuals paved the way for other Asians in their respective fields, the act of reproducing them reduced them to their racial characteristics. As a result, this became the basis for new, stereotypical ways of seeing and understanding Asians.

Today, martial arts continues to be a popular genre in film. However, since Bruce Lee’s death, only a few other Asian men have been able to successfully follow the fame and popularity of Lee. In recent years, Jackie Chan has risen to become a superstar in martial arts films. Like Lee, Chan’s success in America was preceded by his enormous following in Asia, and like Lee, Chan is also known for his near-superhuman abilities and for doing all of his own stunts. As Chan began to gain major notoriety in America, he was often referred to as “the second coming,” implying that Chan is the next Bruce Lee. If this is true, then Hollywood has clearly defined what it will take for Asian men to be valued, as well as how the industry is willing to have them represented in film. The only Asian men that are permitted to exist are the ones who can stand above and beyond normal men. Not only are they part of the model minority, but in order to represent maleness, they must also be the superhuman minority. As a result, it leaves the Asian male with one of two binary forms of existence: to play the weak, submissive fool/nerd or to be Bruce Lee. In the film Revenge of the Nerds (1984), Takashi (Brian Tochi) is one of the misfortunate nerds who is tormented relentlessly by the more popular, campus football players. In one scene, Takashi is working as the towel boy in the men’s locker room. As they walk by, football players give Takashi their laundry to wash. Stan Gable (Ted McGinley), the captain of the



football team, asks Takashi, "do you know Karate?" When Takashi indicates that he doesn't, Stan shoves a jock strap on Takashi's head.

### **New Paradigms of Representation**

It would be easy to say that the problem with current representation of Asian men in film is that they are predominately negative or inaccurate. While there is truth to that, it is also too simplistic an answer. First, to approach the issue from a standpoint of good or bad/right or wrong, is to assume that there are only binary understandings or realities of the Asian male. Xing calls this the "positive image" approach:

Much of the work on cinematic representation has stressed the issue of the 'positive imagery' as opposed to stereotypes. But, as African American scholar bell hooks states, 'Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representation created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical.' To move the discussion beyond a single-minded 'image analysis,' several film scholars posed significant questions as to whether positive image, as theoretical framework, was too simplistic and misleading...What is more, this 'imprecise nature of the positive/negative distinction,' as Black film scholar Valerie Smith has noted, 'has the potential to essentialize racial identity and deny its dynamic relation to constructions of class, gender, sexuality, religion and so on.' Even worse, 'positive image' productions often run the risk of reifying rather than ameliorating the same stereotypes that they had initially intended to challenge. (p. 17)

The positive image rationale approaches the issue from the assumption that value-placed images are in fact, empirical and absolute, and that a dialectic response is needed in order to combat them. But the truth of the Asian experience is much more complicated than this.

In speaking with a friend who works in the music, entertainment industry, the topic of Pilipino musicians came up. We talked about why there are so many Pilipino groups and singing artists emerging, yet they have not been able to achieve the same level of

•

success that other groups in their categories have achieved. A summary of his understanding involved having some luck and good timing, but everything to do with marketing. “The fact is, record producers and radio executives don’t know how to market them,” explained my friend. What he was referring to were the pre-existing categories that existed in the music industry, and that executives have a difficult time fitting them into these. Interestingly, the two primary categories that he spoke toward were not even based solely on music style, but about race: White and African American. He further explained that “the industry looks to serve and market to these two main groups and if you don’t fit into either one, it’s going to be tough.”

I realized that the same thing could be said for the film industry. As with music, the film industry still operates largely from a racialized black/White paradigm that leaves little room for other groups like Asians and Latinos. It goes without saying that such a paradigm can be linked to population, history and even social movements regarding the relationship between these two communities, but as a result, groups like Asian Pacific Americans only get reinforced as marginalized or nonexistent within the understanding and consciousness not only of Whites and African Americans, but of everyone—including Asian and Pacific Americans. A few years ago, I attended a conference on issues of race in America. The conference was held in Orlando, Florida and approximately 2000 people had attended. Even though the conference had existed for several years and it provided dozens of varying topics regarding race in America, both the topics and the attendants were predominantly black and White. I asked about the lack of Latino and Asian and Pacific Islander participation and topic related workshops, and to my surprise, it almost seemed as if people were shocked or annoyed by my inquiry. From their reaction, it seemed as if I were inconveniencing the structure of the conference by rocking the paradigm boat. Both of these examples have helped to inform me of the infrastructure that exists in Hollywood and the difficulty involved in trying to change it.

Returning to Xing's notion of the positive image, the call for a more complicated understanding assumes that all images are subjective and should be interrogated not only for their impact but the cause, context and purpose of why they are used. In examining the issue of masculinity, it is clear that resistance must take the form of reexamining and redefining our own values of masculinity and femininity. While it is important to enhance the social awareness of misperception and misrepresentation, a greater struggle comes from the need to shatter pre-existing systems of power that inhibit our ideas of gender. To do this, we must engage a deeper analysis of what is masculine and feminine as well as where power is situated. Our tendency to circumscribe masculinity to solely notions of being a man clearly limits our attitudes and appreciation for men and women who do not conform to these popular definitions of gender roles, while subjugating men and women into artificial constructs that may or may not apply to their gender identity. Furthermore, a more complicated appreciation of gender and gender performativity must occur in order to disable the existing binary structure-- a structure that not only perpetuates sexist, patriarchal systems of power but also heterosexist systems that limit our notions of sexuality. The truly problematic issues of this are in essence, the foundation of sexism and homophobia.

### **M. Butterfly**

In recent years, self-representation by Asian American writers and film makers have opened up new paradigms and avenues for resistance, to expand ways of seeing and understanding the racialized and gendered, Asian American experience. In 1988, David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly opened in the National Theater in Washington D.C. Based on true events, M. Butterfly is the story of French diplomat, René Gallimard and his twenty-year love affair with Beijing opera performer, Song Liling. Subsequently, the affair ends in tragedy when it is revealed that Liling is both a Chinese spy and a man. In 1993 Hwang's story was adapted into a film starring Jeremy Irons (Gallimard) and John Lone (Liling) and directed by David Cronenberg. Hwang first got the idea about writing

M. Butterfly after reading about Bernard Bouriscot (the actual French diplomat for whom Gallimard is based) and his explanation of how for twenty years, he was duped by this man. "I later found a two-page paragraph story in the New York Times. The diplomat, Bernard Bouriscot, attempting to account for the fact that he had never seen his 'girlfriend' naked, was quoted as saying, 'I thought she was very modest. I thought it was a Chinese custom.'" (Hwang, p.94) Hwang believed that this case of gender confusion was greatly influenced by this fetishized image of the exotic, submissive Asian woman. Using Peccini's Madame Butterfly as a starting point, Hwang wanted to tell the story of a Westerner who so badly wanted his own "Butterfly", that he was ultimately fooled.

From my point of view, the 'impossible' story of a Frenchman duped by a Chinese man masquerading as a woman always seemed perfectly explicable; given the degree of misunderstanding between men and women and also between East and West, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place.

The love affair between Gallimard and Liling is a fantasy played out to its ultimate possible deception. The two meet at a performance by Liling of Madame Butterfly, where Gallimard is immediately drawn to the mysterious actor/actress. Gallimard introduces himself and compliments Liling on her performance of such a wonderful story. Liling is amused by Gallimard's reaction, because she recognizes the enticement that the Madame Butterfly story has on Western men. Liling replies:

It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man...Consider it this way: what would you say if a blond homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now I believe you would consider



this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental  
who kills herself for a Westerner--ah!--you find it beautiful.  
(Hwang, M. Butterfly)

Hwang introduces an interesting reverse scenario that forces the viewer to reexamine this popular fetish toward the exotic "lotus blossom" made popular by the Madame Butterfly narrative. Clearly, in the reverse, the positioning of the two characters seems almost unthinkable or "deranged" as Hwang writes. Liling takes advantage of Gallimard's fetishized attraction to carry out her obligations as a spy for China.

Throughout their relationship, Gallimard's constant questioning of Liling, "are you my butterfly?" reassures him, not so much of her love, but that the oriental fantasy they have constructed is still intact. At Gallimard's trial, Liling is asked how it was possible to fool Gallimard for all these years. He responds by saying, "He never saw me completely naked—ever... In all of our years together, Renee never explored my body... He was very responsive to my oriental ways of love—all of which I invented myself, just for him." In this sense, even the authenticity of Asianness, or at least for Gallimard, what is oriental, was an artificial creation that also added to the success of Liling's constructed, oriental illusion. The deception lasted because Gallimard believed what he wanted and needed to believe, and in this sense, he was fooled every bit as much by himself as he was by Liling. When pressed even further by authorities of whether or not Gallimard knew he was a man, Liling simply replies, "You know, your honor, I never asked."

The issue of gender and the performativity of masculine and feminine by Liling attack prior notions of racialized sexuality for Asians. Liling becomes the vehicle for Hwang's discussion of the notion that Asian men and women are seen as both masculine and feminine. In so doing, he effectively creates a character and situation that negotiates through western perceptions of Asianness. In the original play, Liling explains at Gallimard's trial:

the West has a sort of international rape mentality... The West thinks of itself as masculine--big guns, big industry, big money--so the East is feminine--weak, delicate, poor...but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom--the feminine mystique...Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated --because a woman can't think for herself.

Hwang's use of male and female metaphors to juxtapose the East and West is even more complicated by Song's own, ambiguous gender identity. The idea of a feminine Asia isn't so much resisted but further developed and convoluted by Liling's use of gender and sexuality as tools of resistance. In an interview with Hwang about M. Butterfly, he discusses the feminine stigma that exists for both Asian men and women:

Gay friends have told me of a derogatory term used in their community: 'Rice Queen'--a gay Caucasian man primarily attracted to Asians. In these relationships, the Asian virtually always plays the role of the 'woman'; the Rice Queen, culturally and sexually, is the 'man.' This pattern of relationships had become so codified that, until recently, it was considered unnatural for gay Asians to date one another. Such men would be taunted with a phrase which implied they were lesbians. (Hwang, p. 98)

As such stereotypes were created to contain and control Asians in America, ironically, it is this very understanding that eventually serves to enslave and eventually destroy Gallimard. Throughout their relationship, Liling assures Gallimard of her devotion to him by saying she is his "slave" and he, her "lord and master." However, as a woman, Liling is really the one who is very much in control of the relationship, and at the trial, confesses that he/she was the one who convinced Gallimard to carry out his acts of espionage and treason against France. Near the film's end, Gallimard confronts Liling by asking once again, "are you my Butterfly?" Liling responds, "You still adore me don't you? Still want me, even in a suit and tie." Later in their conversation, Gallimard explains to Liling, "How could you, who understood me so well make such a mistake. You show me your true self, but what I

loved was the lie. The perfect lie.” It is in this male form that Liling seems at his most vulnerable and even most feminine. In the end, M. Butterfly follows in the tradition of its predecessor, Madame Butterfly, with the couple’s separation and the tragic death of the Butterfly, who in this case, has become Gallimard.

### **Cultural Essentialism**

In recent years, other, yet less mainstream films have also depicted the Asian male existence with much more integrity and depth. As people examine the issue of representation more critically, Asian American filmmakers are emerging to reveal a different side to the Asian American experience. Films like Wayne Wang’s Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989) and Ang Lee’s The Wedding Banquet (1994) both reveal a more comprehensive portrayal of the pathos and rich culture of the Chinese community. In both films, the Chinese male protagonists struggle with their sense of honor, tradition and duty to one’s family and the pressure that comes from these social binds. While the Wedding Banquet is fueled by its efforts in dealing with the intersections of race, sexuality and marriage, the strength of both films comes from their ability to reveal a deeper sense of the human condition without having to resort to earlier practices of extreme figure positionings. In Eat a Bowl of Tea, Wang presents an interesting look at the Chinese/Asian bachelor societies that were prominent among early Asian immigrants, but rarely acknowledged or depicted in popular film. Wang also explores the relationship dynamics regarding the extended or communal family, valued in Eastern cultures, but is dramatically different from the Western, nuclear, family structure. Both Wang and Lee have faith in the strength of their characters that they refrain from previous gimmicks and angles to convince viewers of the narratives’ value.

Within the medium of documentaries and independent films, contemporary, Asian American filmmakers are now beginning to use their art as a vehicle for education and agency. Films like Some Questions for Twenty-Eight Kisses (1994) and Slaying the



Dragon (1988) explore the social impact of racial representation in the media. In Some Questions for Twenty-Eight Kisses, filmmaker Kip Fulbeck poses a series of thought-provoking questions and statements about the popular pairing of the Asian woman and White man, as well as the obvious absence of Asian men in American popular film. Fulbeck is effective in using video footage, audio sound bites, and written text to bombard the viewer with questions regarding interracial relationships, Asian fetishes, selling out, and self-hate among both Asian men and women. Some of these questions include:

- How many times have you seen an Asian man kiss someone on TV?
- Are Asian men socially inept?
- Are Asian men less sexual?
- Why does people magazine list 50 beautiful people with 3 Asian women and no Asian men?
- Do you ever wish you belong to another race?
- Are Asian men jealous of Asian women in America? Are they intimidated by White men?
- When you see an Asian male calendar, are you embarrassed or proud?

In just under nine minutes, Fulbeck besieges the viewer's senses with an array of suggestions and questions that heighten our awareness of Asian representation in Hollywood. As a bi-racial Asian man, Fulbeck personalizes his visual discourse by exploring the discomfort of Asian male invisibility as well as the interpersonal struggles of interracial dating. In Steve Okazaki's American Sons (1995), four Asian American men tell their personal struggles with racism in the U.S. Based on real interviews, Okazaki's film borders between fictional and documentary cinema, as each of the four characters recount the difficulties of racism in America. As they tell their stories they reveal a different side of the Asian male experience, confessing to the embarrassment, frustration, anger and alienation that they all endured. The strength of American Sons is its ability to effectively tell the story of men without compromising the emotions that are obviously felt, but usually not spoken about. In his article on American Sons, Peter Feng argues that "For Asian



American men, emasculated or ignored by the popular media, anger provides a dramatic means of redefining Asian American masculinity.” In both Fulbeck’s and Okazaki’s films, the standard and process of filmmaking for, and by Asians Americans has proven to be a powerful relationship between spectator and artist. The emphasis on ethnicity-defined essentialism or what Xing describes as “cultural essentialism” (p. 32) is an old strategy that addresses issues like authenticity and representation as resistance. He writes:

It is important to bear in mind that this type of discourse about authenticity results directly from a long period of frustration and anger among Asian Americans over the degradation of their images on the silver screen. Even the most perfunctory review of Hollywood films reveals a constant recycling of grotesque representations of Asians, from the inscrutable Charlie Chan to the diabolical Fu Manchu, down to the exotic Suzie Wong and the Happy-go-lucky Jackie Chan...The relationship between power and representation has become the underlying argument for the essentialist position. To create alternatives to Hollywood portrayals and control the screen images that define so much of their lives, Asian Americans feel they have to take control over what goes on both in front of and behind the camera. (p. 35)

As past representations of Asians in film serve to validate and confirm popular stereotypes in society, the position of cultural essentialism offers not only alternatives to these stereotypes, but a new way of seeing, understanding and relating to ethnic groups who have previously been disempowered. Today’s Asian American filmmakers are taking control and using their own voice to tell stories that redefine or elaborate on who Asian Americans really are.

## **Conclusion**

The absence of more complicated representation of Asian men in popular film is disturbing not so much because of a social, binary value consisting of good and bad, but

because these images serve to reinforce an already alien and limited understanding of Asian men. The effects of not having Asian men in film is much more than an insensitivity of representation. When I first began examining the absence of Asian men in film, I thought about some of the ways this has affected my life and probably the lives of other Asians. Looking back, I realize that none of my childhood heroes from television or the movies ever looked or sounded like me. At the time, I didn't understand what type of message I was receiving. In fact, it wasn't until recently that I realized many of my insecurities have come from the internalized hate I had about being Asian. It was that aspect of racism that was difficult to think about because as a man, it was too embarrassing and painful to acknowledge. While interviewing some students where I work, I asked them who some of their own childhood male heroes were. Not surprisingly, there wasn't one Asian man listed. When I asked what they thought about that fact, many of them were defensive and argued that it didn't really matter, or that it didn't effect them. I then asked if they ever, even once, wished they were White?" They all reluctantly admitted, "yes." At that point, they understood what I was getting at. The message that has been told to us by such heroes was "Our image (White men) is what it means to be a man. This is what you should look like, act like and sound like, and if you don't fit these descriptions, then you are not as valued." The most painful aspect about internalized racism is that within the self-hate, there isn't anything you can do. You cannot change the things that make you uncomfortable, and no matter what you do, you will always be Asian or Black or Latino. It is a no win situation that is not only self-destructive, but perpetuates the elevation in value and power of the dominant culture. One's identity then becomes a struggle with appreciating who you are, even when it feels as if no one else does.

It has been said that one of the most successful and powerful aspects of film as entertainment is empathy. To connect with a character in a story and relate to the experience is not just about being entertained. It also validates one's own life experience. It acknowledges the realness of our existence by telling us we are not alone in the way we

think, feel and act. That is why the misrepresentation and absence of Asian men in American film is so disturbing. It takes the idea of the Asian man out of normalcy and brands him perpetually as "other." It is, in essence, the denial of one aspect of society, and at its core level, is racist. So what then, is the resolution to these concerns? An obvious answer would be to have accurate representation of the Asian male in American film, but what would qualify as being accurate? Is providing more opportunities for Asian men to play leading roles, or perhaps starring as the action hero? Both Bruce Lee and now Jackie Chan have certainly been these things, but as I've discussed, their own images have resulted in certain problematic aspects of representation. This is not to say, however, that Lee's and Chan's contributions to film have been completely negative. Certainly, both actors have helped to redefine notions of masculinity in ways that include Asian men in the discussion. However, Asian male representation, and even notions of maleness should be more complex than this. Indeed, there are Asian men who are masculine and feminine; they have weakness and strength; they can be heroes, antagonists, role models, tragic figures, and villains., but they are not either/or. Asian men are real and their representation in film should reflect the many ways they exist in society. The call for more accurate representation should not be an attempt at being *the* movie that addresses this problem, but many films that provide a better balance of who Asian men really are.

## Bibliography

- Cao, Lan and Novas, Himilce. Everything You Need To Know About Asian American History. Plume: New York, 1996
- Espiritu, Yen Le. Asian American Women and Men. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, 1997.
- Feng, Peter. "Redefining Asian American Masculinity: Steven Okazaki's 'American Sons.'" Cineaste 22:3 (1996)
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." Framework 36 (1989).
- Hwang, Henry David. M. Butterfly. Plume Books: New York, 1986.  
----Afterward to M. Butterfly. Plume Books: New York, 1989.
- Lowe, Lisa. Immigrant Acts. Duke University Press: Durham, 1996.
- Marchetti, Gina. Romance and the "Yellow Peril". University of California Press: Berkeley, 1993.
- Doane, M.A. (1991) *Femme fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Kim E. (1990). "Such opposite creatures": Men and women in Asian American literature. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 29, 68-93
- Takaki, Ronald. Strangers From A Different Shore. Penguin Books: New York, 1989
- Xing, Jun. Asian American Through the Lens. AltaMira Press: Walnut Creek, 1998
- Yang, Jeff; Gan, Dina and Hong, Terry. Eastern Standard Time. Mariner Books: Boston, 1997.



## Selected Filmography

American Sons (1995)  
The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933)  
Black Rain (1989)  
Blade Runner (1982)  
Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961)  
Broken Blossoms (1919)  
The Cheat (1915)  
China Gate (1957)  
Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story (1993)  
Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989)  
Game of Death (1978)  
Kip Fulbeck's Game of Death (1991)  
M. Butterfly (1993)  
Revenge of the Nerds (1984)  
Rising Sun (1993)  
Sayonara (1957)  
Sixteen Candles (1984)  
Some Questions for Twenty-Eight Kisses (1994)  
Teahouse of the August Moon (1956)  
Way of the Dragon (Return of the Dragon) (1973)  
The Wedding Banquet (1994)