

The Asian American Hollywood Experience

Throughout history, the Asian race in America has been persecuted time and time again. As early as the 1800s, during the rise in immigration, Chinese individuals were often stereotyped because of their culture. In 1878, the California Senate made a statement regarding Chinese immigrants. The document referred to their way of life and how they did not assimilate to American life (California Senate). The document portrayed Asian women as prostitutes that seduced young men (California Senate). Statements like these are what eventually enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned the immigration of Chinese laborers. As America entered a new age into the 1900s, cinema came to the forefront of American culture. Naturally, some of these movies tended to revolve around Asian characters, themes, and often Asian culture. Asians were often portrayed in these movies as stereotypes. These early movies take some of the deeply believed notions of the 19th century and incorporate them into film itself. As cinema progressed in 20th century, stereotypes still remained in Asian cinema. Even in the 21st century, some stereotypes are present in movies starring Asian Americans. These stereotypes are what prevent some Asian actors and actresses from obtaining roles in Hollywood in the present day. Many of these stereotypes that do exist today affect the Asian American community. Due to the underlying stereotypes in present Hollywood, Asian Americans are often portrayed in negative racist aspects that impact the identity of Asian Americans.

Asian immigration into the United States caused the first stereotypes in Asian cinema in the early 1900s. Because many Asian immigrants would work for cheap labor in America, these immigrants were often accused of taking jobs of other American laborers. The situation, in turn, then led to the disapproval and hate for Asian immigrants. The hate that transpired at this time

transitioned itself into Hollywood during the rise of cinema in America. Many of the earliest uses of Asians in American cinema included the use of yellowface. As described by Jessica Lachenal, yellowface is “the practice of donning makeup and a really racist accent to look and sound Asian” (par. 1). One example of yellowface is the movie *Broken Blossoms*. The movie was released in 1919 and featured a Caucasian man dressed in yellowface. The movie is about a young English girl who was abused by her father. In the movie, she meets a young Chinese man who will take care of her. The father will eventually find her and kill her, and the Chinese man will avenge her death before committing suicide (Henderson and Richards). While this movie portrays the Chinese man in a more positive way, many other movies at this time include Asian characters who are more violent and tend to be villains. Another movie released in 1915 stars Sessue Hayakawa who was an actual Japanese immigrant (Henderson and Richards). The movie, titled *The Cheat*, portrayed a young Asian man who had an affair with a white woman. The two even shared the first interracial on-screen kiss in American cinema. The movie seems quite positive until the end when the young Japanese man brands the woman with a hot iron when she tries to end the affair (Buscher). Sessue Hayakawa also starred in a similar movie the year prior in which the plot was nearly the same as *The Cheat*. In the movie, *The Typhoon*, Sessue Hayakawa stars as a diplomat from Japan in France. In the movie, he will have an affair with a woman and will ultimately kill her by strangling her out of passion (Buscher). Although he often starred in violent roles, he was a sex-symbol and a very attractive Asian man that women were attracted to. Because of this, Sessue Hayakawa became very successful in America despite playing such stereotypical and degrading roles in his early years. He later went on to own his own Hollywood studio and produced movies of his own.

Many other Asian actors were not as successful or fortunate as Sessue Hayakawa. Asian actors had to compete with white actors whom seemed more preferable at the time. Asian actresses achieved some success during this time, but those cast mainly received roles as “dragon ladies” or “China dolls” (Buscher par. 17). Essentially this meant that Asian women were cast as fierce, mysterious, or very sensual characters which were still stereotypes labeled to Asian women beginning in the 19th century. One of the most prominent Asian actresses of the time was Anna May Wong. She became quite popular during the 1930s but still faced the competition from other white actresses in yellowface. She was almost cast for a movie called *The Good Earth* in 1937 but a white actress received the role. The white actress in this movie went on to receive an Oscar for her performance.

As years passed, Hollywood’s portrayal of Asian actors transitioned. While it seems as though the idea of yellowface began to expire, the stereotypes still remained in movies for Asian races. Movies such as *Air Force* in WWII featured American bombings on the Japanese and a fake scenario of Japanese-Americans sabotaging Pearl Harbor in Hawaii before it was attacked (Henderson and Richards). Another movie in 1957, called *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, compared Western and Eastern cultures. The Eastern culture was portrayed as barbaric in contrast to the civilized Western culture (Henderson and Richards). The target Asian race seemed to shift in these eras of films based upon the various wars that were fought. Throughout the 50s and 60s, movies were made about Koreans, Vietnamese, and continued to include Chinese and Japanese races and cultures. As movies progressed into the 70s and 80s, movies featuring Asian actors and actresses relied more heavily on the theme of “Orientalism.” Jessica Lachenal notes that the theory of “Orientalism” was popularized by Edward Said in 1978 (par. 2). It found that “Eastern beliefs, practices, and religions became “mystical, magical,

mysterious,” really emphasizing the differences between the East and the West, pushing them further and further apart rather than trying to encourage connection and understanding (Lachenal par. 2). Throughout the 70s and 80s, many popular movies were featured in American culture that centered around the idea of “Orientalism.” Various Bruce Lee movies such as *Enter the Dragon* feature Asian actors performing martial arts in an inhuman manner. Another famous martial artist actor during this time was Jackie Chan with his various movies such as *Police Story* and *Drunken Master*. A very popular movie released in 1984 was *The Karate Kid*. The movie features a young boy who learns karate from an older Asian man whom is symbolized as a “mystically wise Asian sage” (Henderson and Richards).

While this new predominant idea of “Orientalism” was depicted often in this time period, some movies still continued a trend of vilifying Asian races. A massively popular movie called *Full Metal Jacket*, which was released in 1989, recounts the tribulations that American soldiers faced in the Vietnam War. While a good portion of the movie is centered around their time spent training in America, the scenes filmed in what was supposed to be Vietnam involve Vietcong and what is supposed to be a Vietnamese prostitute (Henderson and Richards).

The common trend of Asians stereotyped as villains or mystical martial artists continued in the early 21st century in modern American cinema. The 2003 movie *Kill Bill Vol. 1* depicts Uma Thurman as a trained assassin whom must fight her old colleague and her colleague’s henchmen in an astonishing display of martial arts fight scenes. Another highly acclaimed film, *Gran Torino*, stars Clint Eastwood as a Korean War vet who helps a Hmong family with a local gang in their area (Henderson and Richards). These examples illustrate the idea that many roles for Asian American actors and actresses are not too far from the ones available to them in the early and mid-20th century.

In recent years, many roles available to Asian actors and actresses are still the same. In Hollywood, Asian Americans are often cast very minor roles with little to no lines. Korean American actor, Edward Hong, has played in many TV shows and movies in recent years such as “‘Math Olympian Dude,’ ‘Chinese Man #2’ and, in a top-rated network sitcom, ‘Male Night Nurse’” (James et al. par. 1). Many Asian American actors are cast into roles such as these in Hollywood. These roles play into the common stereotypes that are held to Asian Americans. Hong exclaimed in an interview, “If you want to be a store owner, the nail salon lady or the IT-tech guy, those are the parts, but rarely do we get a chance to be the main character” (James et al. par. 2). There are some main roles that Asian Americans do get cast in American cinema today. Shows like *Into the Badlands* and *Designated Survivor*, starring Daniel Wu and Maggie Q, feature Asian leading roles respectively (James et al. par. 8). Aside from some of these exceptions, Asian Americans are still occasionally outsourced by white actors and actresses in Hollywood. *Ghost in the Shell* was a movie released in 2017 based upon a popular Japanese anime. However, the leading role was cast to actress Scarlett Johansson. Similarly, in the Marvel movie, *Dr. Strange*, “Tilda Swinton played the Ancient One, a character that is an Asian man in the original comics” (James et al. par. 10). Undoubtedly, Asian American actors are receiving bigger roles in American cinema, but these actors are still held under the stereotypes and prejudice set by 20th century Hollywood.

Stereotypes portrayed by Asian American roles in Hollywood affect the identity of the Asian American population. Allyson Chiu, a writer for the Washington Post, grew up watching Asian Americans in American cinema. She noted that “Being Chinese American, I grew up watching movies and TV shows with characters who looked like me but didn’t act like me” (Chui par. 1). She grew up seeing different roles cast to Asian Americans such as a surgeon, a

piano player, and a martial artist. As she grew older, she found that “I became more acutely aware of how I didn’t fit those molds, as defined by Western pop culture. I was so bad at piano my teacher recommended I quit. I almost fainted in AP biology when I had to dissect a cat, and I have never once attempted to learn a martial art” (Chiu par. 5). Allyson Chiu shared the sentiment that many other Asian Americans did. She saw the way that Asians were portrayed in Hollywood and in media and thought that that was who she was supposed to be. She felt like it was expected of her to be like the other Asian Americans that she saw on the screen. She thought that she had to be highly intelligent or good at martial arts because she grew up watching that subject matter. Luckily, she came to the realization that she did not have to be defined by the stereotypes that were presented to her growing up.

While a majority of Asian portrayal in Hollywood, in the past, has been highly stereotypical and racist, the future for Asian American cinema is looking very optimistic. Very recently, a new movie has been announced starring an entire Asian cast. The movie is free of traditional Asian stereotypes and is based on a novel by Kevin Kwan. The movie, titled *Crazy Rich Asians*, is about a young Chinese American woman who goes with her boyfriend to a wedding in Singapore to meet his family. Allyson Chiu describes it as “an Asian version of *Meet the Parents*” and says that she “completely related” to the lead in the new upcoming movie (par. 11).

Developments in Asian American cinema, like *Crazy Rich Asians*, are providing a new perspective on Asian Americans in American society today. Movies such as this one are trying to shift the traditional Asian stereotypes that have afflicted Asian Americans for many decades.

Works Cited

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