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Chinese Americans Take Center Stage: Interwar Film Representation and the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act

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Abstract: The American interwar period saw the emergence of a Chinese American identity. The nature of American film as a reflection of social dynamics provides an opportunity for in-depth analysis of its representation of Chinese Americans. Adhering to the Motion Picture Production Code, many filmmakers and actors were initially limited in expanding beyond stereotypes. This paper examines the films leading up to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and how they mirror the progression of societal acceptance towards Chinese Americans through their increasing degrees of meaningful representation. Through an analysis of key films such as *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936), and *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937), the study reveals how these racialized portrayals allowed public perception of Chinese immigration policy to shift in favor of expansion rather than restriction. From portraying Orientalist stereotypes such as the "Dragon Lady" or "Yellow Peril" to recognizing Chinese Americans as truly American, films from 1929 to 1937 had evolved alongside changing social attitudes and ultimately legislation. By connecting film representation to legal and cultural analysis, this paper attempts to highlight the nuanced relationship between popular media and social changes in perception of Chinese Americans as accepted within American society.

Introduction

In the wake of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese American grassroots organizations played a pivotal role in reshaping community identity. Organizations such as the Chinese Unemployed Council, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, and the Chinese American Restaurant Association of Greater New York divested control of community identity away from the Chinese American elite and to the working and middle class. Further, the Chinese Americans of the 1930s, who felt more American than Chinese, paved the way for increased

visibility of the Chinese American identity (Song, 386-76). However, while the impact of these labor movements is evident in records of their parades, rallies, and their recorded involvement in the 1932 and 1936 presidential campaigns, the era still contains relatively few primary sources from individual Chinese Americans due to perceived unimportance and linguistic barriers (Bankston, 498-499). Thus, film and media representation are some of the only records during this time period that can offer insight into how Chinese Americans were perceived socially and culturally.

Hollywood films of the 1930s provide a lens to examine both the nation and its culture. These films and their content offer a lens into pervasive American concerns. Films "present themselves to the historian for dual service: they are both historical documents and interpretive histories" (Sobchack 294). As such, the interplay of Chinese and Chinese American representations and Hollywood's feature films from the 1930s to the 1940s can help in the understanding of the Chinese American identity during Hollywood's Golden Age, and analyzing The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (1929), Daughter of the Dragon (1931), Charlie Chan at the Opera (1936), and Daughter of Shanghai (1937) can reveal shifts in public perceptions of Chinese Americans. A critical analysis of these films shows how the portrayals of Chinese characters, although influenced by prevailing racial ideologies, reflected the Chinese American community's fight for visibility and acceptance. Therefore, by analyzing classic Hollywood films produced during the interwar period, we can better understand the complexities of racial integration and the role of media in shaping and reflecting societal attitudes towards Chinese Americans during this pivotal era, especially for second generation Chinese American women.

Attitudes Towards Chinese Americans Reflected Through Law

Although Chinese immigration to the United States had been encouraged by demands for railroad laborers, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought with it strong sentiments against working-class Chinese Americans (Pegler-Gordon 51; Marcus and Chen 369; Carson 89). These negative feelings led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first exclusionary immigration legislation to bar entry on the basis of race (Marcus and Chen 369-70). Specifically targeting Chinese laborers, who were deemed undesirable due to racial prejudices and fears of labor competition, the Act prohibited their entry into the United States. Importantly, the Act exempted Chinese merchants, diplomats, and students, reflecting a discriminatory policy that distinguished between the Chinese elite and the working class (Marcus and Chen 369-70).

The legal landscape further complicated the identity formation and societal integration of Chinese Americans, illustrated by the landmark cases of Chae Chan Ping vs. United States (1882) and Wong Kim Ark vs. United States (1898). In both cases, legislation was modified based on race and upheld the controversial plenary

power doctrine—Congress' full control over immigration legislation. In primarily restricting immigration legislation to Congress, changes to immigration law became defined by upholding national security, which oftentimes meant the exclusion of those considered dangerous to the sanctity of American society. These cases exposed the racially motivated and subjective nature of American immigration law, which often viewed Chinese individuals, whether China-born or domestic-born, as perpetual foreigners (Saito 14-15; "CHINESE in…"). In the case of Chae Chan Ping, commonly known as the Chinese Exclusion Case, the Supreme Court upheld the government's plenary power to enforce racially discriminatory laws that barred even legal residents like Chae Chan Ping from re-entering the U.S. after a brief visit abroad. Meanwhile, the case of Wong Kim Ark established an important precedent for birthright citizenship, asserting that children born in the U.S. to foreign parents were indeed U.S. citizens, challenging the notion of perpetual foreignness and racial ineligibility for citizenship for Chinese Americans (Thomas 711).

The Chinese Exclusion Act was further compounded by the Geary Act in 1892, which not only extended the exclusion for another ten years but also required all Chinese residents in the U.S. to carry a certificate of residence or face deportation—a manifestation of institutionalized racism and an early example of racial profiling (Pegler-Gordon, 56). By the 1917 Immigration Act, xenophobia, which deeply affected Chinese communities across the nation, was entrenched in immigration law (Lee, 559). For example, the 1922 Cable Act automatically assigned a woman the citizenship status of her husband upon marriage, thereby depriving women of autonomy, discouraging interracial marriages, and effectively prohibiting marriage between Chinese immigrants and other Americans (Moloney, 272).The extensions and modifications of the exclusion laws perpetuated a sense of alienation among Chinese immigrants, many of whom felt trapped between not being accepted as fully American due to pervasive racism, yet also distanced from their homeland of China. This alienation was complicated by the U.S. legal and social landscape, which in turn muddled the Chinese American ability to form stable, recognized communities and identities within American society (Song, 385-86).

These legislative barriers and court rulings, which embedded discriminatory practices into the fabric of American law, significantly influenced the lives of Chinese Americans. The perpetuation of such exclusionary laws not only entrenched racial discrimination but also deepened the sense of alienation among second generation Chinese Americans.

The Turn of the 1930s and the Emergence of a Chinese American Identity

The first Chinese civil rights organization, The Chinese Equal Rights League, had, among its goals, a desire for Chinese Americans to be treated equally as Americans (Chinese Equal Rights; Appeal; Zhang 137). However, the equity of this

identity remained elusive (Q. Chan 42). Indeed, Chinese Americans were othered and subject to social and institutional racism (Q. Chan 137-8). Chinese American youth in the 1930s often felt the two sides of their identities were "irreconcilable" (Q. Chan 141). The media representations of Chinese Americans during the 1930s exhibited a stark dichotomy of fascinating but unwelcome, oscillating between portrayals of “integral, if exotic” outsiders and vilified depictions as unclean drug fiends (“163 CHINESE…”). This polarized media portrayal mirrored the complex societal attitudes of the time. On one hand, American society could occasionally recognize the contributions of Chinese Americans, albeit often framing them within an exoticized context that emphasized their otherness. On the other hand, sensationalist journalism frequently depicted Chinese Americans as involved in criminal activities, particularly focusing on opium dens, which reinforced racial stereotypes and perpetuated a narrative of moral and social inferiority (“TROUBLE in ORIENT…”). Up until the Great Depression, the Chinese American elites—typically composed of merchants and community leaders closely aligned with the interests of their homeland—possessed “greater abilities and opportunities than the common laborer to cross racial, geographic, and even gender boundaries (Q. Chan 370). However, even elite Chinese Americans felt largely estranged both in the United States and in China; the American dream and upward financial mobility was not as readily available to them as white citizens, and American naturalization caused a significant cultural and social departure from mainland Chinese citizens (S. Chan 115). A second generation of Chinese Americans came of age during the Great Depression and realized the need for collective action (S. Chan 117). Unlike the previous generation, they lived in the United States from birth and desired a supportive community both within their ethnic group and within broader American society. The Great Depression had incentivized Chinese Americans to create labor groups to protect their communal economic stability (Song 386-7).

Organizations such as the Chinese Unemployed Council, the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, and the Chinese American Restaurant Association of Greater New York emerged as powerful platforms for advocacy and change (Song 387; Kwong 55-75). These groups shifted control of community identity away from the traditional Chinese American elite and towards the working and middle-class Chinese American citizens who increasingly saw their futures tied to the broader tapestry of American life.

Changing Representation for the Emerging Chinese Americans

Film as a medium is fundamentally intertwined with cultural expressions and societal norms, effectively mirroring the historical and social dynamics of its time. The study of film can unveil significant aspects of social and political history, positioning American cinema on par with written literature in its capacity to articulate national myths and societal concerns (Sobchack 280-293). Thus, American film is equal to any form of written literature in its

ability to represent American values, animate American mythology, or to express overtly or symbolically the preoccupations of American experience (Sobchack 290).

During the Golden Age of Hollywood, films were particularly reflective of prevailing American values due to strict adherence to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's Production Code, or "the code." This code mandated that films avoid "offensive social, political, and sexual themes," thereby ensuring that cinematic content upheld the moral and cultural standards of the time, which centered around government, church, and family (Black 167-171). These regulations suggest that the portrayal of Chinese Americans in films from this era was indicative of widely accepted societal views.

Though flawed, portrayals of Chinese and Chinese Americans in film can trace increased societal integration of these groups in the 1930s, specifically in The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (1929), Daughter of the Dragon (1931), Charlie Chan at the Opera (1936), and Daughter of Shanghai (1937). As these interwar films made evident, film and propaganda have the potent power of shifting public opinion (Bernays 82). Therefore, these films may not only mirror the legislative changes affecting Chinese Americans but also may have served to shift public perception towards a more inclusive understanding of American identity. The careers of Warner Oland and Anna May Wong, who represented contrasting images of Chinese Americans, give glimpses into the prevailing public opinion toward Chinese Americans. These films progressed from stereotypical depictions to more nuanced portrayals, reflecting the evolving social acceptance of both Chinese and Chinese Americans due to wartime interactions with Asian countries (Shim 391). It is possible to both dissect the portrayal of Chinese Americans in key Hollywood films and analyze the broader racial ideologies and societal attitudes of the time. As reflections of American society and social conventions, the films allow for a glimpse into the complexities of racial integration and immigration policy within the Exclusion Era.

The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (1929) and Early Manifestations of Orientalism

In the 1920s, public support for Chinese immigration to the United States was middling at best. Chinese American men were often relegated to roles traditionally considered "women's work," such as domestic labor and railroad work, which effectively emasculated them (Ma 46-47). During the Sino-Japanese War, the United States at first maintained a neutral stance; although, some commentators expressed a preference for Japan to "clean up" China ("JAPANESE BOYCOTT…"). This period also saw the rise of Orientalism, a concept later defined by Edward Said in 1976 to describe the West's depiction of the East as exotic, dangerous, and inferior—a result of longstanding colonial attitudes. Western media's portrayal of Asia, intensified by globalization and paranoia over a perceived Asian threat to domestic labor post-World War I, grew increasingly distorted (Aoki 35-36). Simultaneously, the

1924 Johnson-Reed Act exacerbated restrictions on Asian immigrants, establishing stricter immigration quotas and forming a Border Patrol to enforce these laws. This act also birthed the term “illegal alien,” a term still used in the modern day to degrade immigrants (Foner et al. 630). In implying immigrant existence itself rather than undocumented migration as “illegal,” the pejorative phrase further socially isolates immigrants in a country they are already not native. This legislation followed 42 years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, during which time several generations of Chinese Americans were born in the U.S., some without ever visiting China (Liang 23).

The portrayal of Chinese characters in Western media during this era was heavily influenced by the British Dr. Fu Manchu series, which began in 1912 and became widely known in the U.S. through the 1929 film adaptation, The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (Sohn 5).The character Dr. Fu Manchu, described as embodying “all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race,” was portrayed as a malevolent figure, the epitome of “Yellow Peril,” the idea that foreign East Asians would “take over” white America (Rohmer 26; Shim 387-388). This representation marked the first significant Chinese supervillain in American pop culture, setting a precedent for the portrayal of Chinese Americans. Warner Oland's portrayal of Fu Manchu, with his exaggerated and sinister characteristics, reinforced stereotypes and underscored America's racialized view of citizenship and belonging. His performance in "yellow-face" demeaned Asian American actors, reducing their roles to that of simple caricatures or side characters. In The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu, the character seeks revenge against the Petrie family, whom he blames for his own family's demise during the Boxer Rebellion. Using a young white girl, Lia Eltham, whom he manipulates following the Boxer Rebellion, Fu Manchu fully embodies the Orientalist stereotypes of exoticism, mysticism, and the dangers tied to this perceived foreignness; ultimately, Fu Manchu even kills General Petrie with poison gas concealed in a tobacco tin, almost magically able to conjure a means of death.

Furthermore, the casting of Warner Oland, a Swedish-American actor, as Fu Manchu underscores the era’s racial and ethnic biases. An immigrant himself, Oland's selection over potential Chinese actors illustrates the phenotypical and racial prerequisites that defined American perceptions of citizenship and belonging at the time (Obituary). His portrayal reinforced a spectacle of the Chinese identity, exacerbating the overt racism and skepticism towards Chinese individuals deemed unsuitable for complex, nuanced roles. Instead, these roles were often diminished to simplistic, auxiliary characters or extras, reflecting the broader societal marginalization experienced by second-generation Chinese Americans during this period (Moon 616).

Female Representation and Dual-Identities in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931)

In the 1930s, Chinese American women began to redefine their roles both

within their families and in society. Liberated from the strict oversight of their mothers-in-law and the traditional male-dominated family structure, these women joined men in operating family businesses, signaling a shift toward more egalitarian dynamics (Wang 189). This transformation in the Chinese American community mirrored broader changes across America, where women were increasingly recognized as essential contributors, particularly during wartime. Like their white counterparts, Chinese American women actively engaged in wartime efforts and were seen as valuable workers, gaining new credibility and respect within the broader society (Zhao 146-149). This evolving social landscape also had its reflection in the entertainment industry, though with complex undertones. Following the success of the Dr. Fu Manchu franchise, Anna May Wong's rising career provided her with unique opportunities, albeit within the constraints of the times. In Daughter of the Dragon, Wong portrayed Ling Moy, Fu Manchu's long lost American-born daughter, a role that both perpetuated and complicated the Dragon Lady stereotype (Moon 168). While Ling Moy was depicted using her allure and cunning in villainous ways, Anna May Wong's starring role broke significant ground. Notably, the film's title and credits did not prioritize Warner Oland as Fu Manchu but instead highlighted Wong, indicating her primary importance despite the problematic nature of her character's portrayal.

The film showcases Ling Moy as a "celebrated oriental dancer," dressed in attire that emphasized exotic mysticism appealing to Western audiences. Daughter of the Dragon explores Ling Moy's dual-identity by juxtaposing a "Chinese" and "American" life through her romantic relationships. As she grapples with the sudden knowledge of her father's vengeance, she must choose between the modest life she has always known as a Chinese American or feed into her father's Orientalist desires of killing the western man. Throughout the film, she is unable to fully commit to killing Ronald Petrie because of her love for him, directly conflicting with her father's dying wishes, even going so far as to attempt suicide from her distress. To avoid suspicion, she also charms detective Ah Kee, somewhat feeding into the Dragon Lady stereotype of using her sexuality as a means to manipulate men. Ah Kee is much "smitten with the alluring Ling Moy," but ultimately chooses the safety of the Petries over pursuing their love (Fu Manchu's Daughter). Her father's right hand Lu Chung emphasizes that "one foot cannot stand in two boats," meaning that she must confine her allegiance to one "side" – either the American Petrie or the Chinese Fu. This portrayal, while catering to stereotypical expectations, also allowed Wong to exhibit a complex character grappling with dual identities. "Daughter of the Dragon" explores these conflicts through Ling Moy's relationships and her struggle between her inherited obligations and her personal affections, particularly her love for Ronald Petrie, which ultimately prevents her from fulfilling her father's vengeful mission.

Race-based legal restrictions were reflected in Hollywood code: "offensive" themes like miscegenation were banned from appearing in film (Perry, Sutton 251).

With the ban on interracial sexual relationships, the codes aligned Hollywood with anti-miscegenation laws and restricted Asian American actors from taking on a larger range of roles, thereby typecasting Wong into racist roles (Lim 69). Despite this, Wong's performance was critically acclaimed, setting her apart from her peers and marking a significant, if incremental, progress in the portrayal of Chinese American women in Hollywood (Babcock). The more meaningful representation of Asian American women in film was a firm advancement for Chinese American women from portrayals in the early 1930s.

Inching Towards Acceptance with *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936)

In the 1930s, the portrayal of Chinese Americans in Hollywood began to subtly shift, moving from explicitly negative stereotypes to more complex characterizations. During this time, the Charlie Chan franchise emerged as a best-selling franchise in the US (Rzepka 1463). Warner Oland's portrayal of Charlie Chan in “Charlie Chan at the Opera” (1936), directed by H. Bruce Humberstone, exemplifies this change. Despite the continuation of problematic elements like yellowface and the use of stereotypical accents, Charlie Chan emerges as an unlikely hero—a departure from earlier, more villainous representations. Charlie Chan, a character described by Charles J. Rzepka as part of a formulaic subgenre of crime fiction that perpetuated racist stereotypes, nevertheless represented a significant evolution in the portrayal of Chinese Americans (Rzepka 1464-71). Positioned as a competent detective, Chan navigates societal prejudices and professional challenges with humility and wisdom, often employing Confucian proverbs (Rzepka 1471-73). This nuanced portrayal contrasts sharply with previous depictions, signaling a gradual shift in how Chinese Americans were viewed in popular media. Significantly, Chan's role as a detective within the Honolulu police force marks a notable departure from the past. His interaction with other characters in the film highlights changing social perceptions. For instance, when a fellow officer derogatorily refers to Chan as “Chop Suey,” his superior reprimands him, suggesting Chan's valued contributions and respected position within the team. This scene is pivotal as it illustrates a move towards acceptance and respect, contrasting sharply with the outright discrimination of earlier films. Chan's characterization still embodies certain Orientalist stereotypes, such as equating politeness and submission with Chinese traits. However, the advocacy by authoritative figures for Chan and his inclusion in a quintessentially American role as a police detective contributed to enhancing the public perception of Chinese Americans, signaling their emerging acceptance as integral members of American society.

This portrayal of Chan came during the Great Depression and the subsequent implementation of the New Deal catalyzed political activism among Chinese Americans. The formation of advocacy groups such as the New York Chinese American Voting League exemplifies this shift. These organizations mobilized to

support New Deal initiatives, thereby asserting a burgeoning political agency and presence within the Chinese American community (Song 389). This period of increased political engagement coincided with a resurgence of nativist sentiment, particularly among government officials. Senator Martin Dies Jr. of Texas exemplified this perspective, arguing that the economic hardships of the era were exacerbated by the presence of immigrants. He contended that without the 16,500,000 foreign-born residents, the United States would not face unemployment issues, and he advocated for the deportation of 6,000,000 immigrants to alleviate economic strain (LaGumina 60-61).

Furthermore, to once again consolidate their place as "true Americans," Chinese Americans turned to political participation. Organizations such as the rising New York Chinese American Voting League rallied in political gatherings in support of the New Deal policies (Song 389). Especially telling was their campaigning for Roosevelt in 1932 and the November 1936 Presidential election, which was one month before Charlie Chan at the Opera was released. Roughly three quarters of the total eligible Chinese voters cast votes in the 1936 election. This mobilization to vote represented a broader desire for Chinese Americans to assert their political presence. Amidst this context, the character of Charlie Chan is more telling of a developing Chinese American identity that was distinctly separate from that of immigrant Chinese. Chan's positive reception among American audiences indicated not only a shift in the portrayal of Chinese characters in media but also the beginning of a broader acceptance of Chinese Americans as integral and established members of American society.

Distinguishing Chinese-American and Chinese in *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937)

In Daughter of Shanghai, Anna May Wong portrays Yan Ling Lin, a character that represents a significant evolution in the depiction of Chinese Americans in Hollywood, in particular due to its finally depicting Chinese American women as strong, intelligent, and integral members of American society. This 1937 film, directed by Robert Florey, diverges from

conventional narratives by positioning two Chinese American characters, Yan Ling Lin and Detective Kim Lee, as protagonists working against an illicit smuggling ring targeting Asian immigrants. Unlike previous portrayals, the film casts the smugglers as the villains rather than the immigrants, a poignant political criticism of the scapegoating of immigrants for economic and social issues rather than addressing the systemic issues enabling such crimes.

Yan Ling Lin is presented as a competent and intelligent figure, a departure from the stereotypical roles assigned to Asian women in earlier American cinema. Courageously placing herself in the backdrop of a burlesque tavern as a dancer to investigate her father's death, she inverts Orientalism by using her sexuality as a means for an altruistic desire to dissolve the smuggling ring. Her confrontation with Olga

Derey, a white burlesque dancer who antagonizes her, highlights the racial tensions of the period but also underscores Yan Ling's resilience and acceptance by other characters in the film. This interaction, and Yan Ling Lin's ultimate uncovering of the smuggling ring's mastermind—her close friend Mrs. Mary Hunt—culminates in an offer for Yan Ling to work in Washington, presumably in a governmental investigative role, signaling recognition of her capabilities and embodying the integration of Chinese Americans into American societal structures. Daughter of Shanghai stands out not only for its progressive portrayal of a Chinese American woman as the hero but also for its female-centric narrative, a rarity at the time. The film's focus on women in dynamic roles challenges the traditional gender norms prevalent in the cinematic portrayals of the era, contributing to a broader narrative of empowerment and change within the Chinese American community.

The film's portrayal of Yan Ling Lin's emergence from a model to a detective following her father's death aligns with cultural narratives of individual independence emerging through personal loss. This theme resonates with Dinkar Burathoki's analysis of post-war media, where familial loss often catalyzes personal growth and independence, particularly in narratives centered around male protagonists (Burathoki 137). However, Daughter of Shanghai subverts this trope by centering a female protagonist, reflecting the shifting dynamics within Chinese American families and broader societal roles for Chinese American women during this period; Chinese women were allowed to take on jobs typically occupied by men, and in doing so, could demonstrate their allegiance to the country they resided in, but were not always were citizens of (Zhao 139). Additionally, Chinese American women emerged as real life leaders in the household. Now living in America, young Chinese women ceased interaction with their mothers-in-law, who were second in command only to the male head of the family, and found themselves in a new independent position of power (Ling 46-49). Nuclear Chinese American families often opened businesses together like laundromats, restaurants, or grocery stores, splitting responsibility somewhat evenly (Ling 47-48).Chinese American children played a particularly important role in the family as translators and interpreters with their ability to learn English quickly, upsetting parent-child power dynamics and in turn acculturating their parents (S. Chan 128). The film's depiction of Chinese American characters and its break from traditional gender and familial roles signify a pivotal moment in the portrayal of Asian Americans in media. It reflects the changing perceptions of Chinese Americans from peripheral figures to central, integrated members of American society, capable of leading narrative and societal change. This progression in media representation mirrored real-life changes where Chinese Americans, particularly women, began to occupy roles that were traditionally denied to them, both in public and private spheres.

Following a romantic English banter in the concluding scene, Kim Lee and Lan Ying switch to Taishanese and solidify their future relationship by affirming their plans

for marriage. This dialogue is left untranslated, likely intended for a Chinese American audience. Unlike narratives of the past, Anna May Wong was finally able to subvert anti-miscegenation codes by romancing an on-screen Chinese man rather than killing or unrequitedly pining after a white love interest. Abandoning Orientalist manipulation or mysticism, their budding relationship represented a broader change towards finding normalcy within Chinese American domesticity. Thus, Daughter of Shanghai represents the broader acceptance of the unconventional Chinese American social structure within American society, a progressive film recognizing Chinese Americans as integral members of the American fabric.

The Good Neighbor Relationship: The Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act

Five years subsequent to the release of Daughter of Shanghai, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act represented a significant legislative transformation, partially precipitated by shifting social perceptions of Chinese Americans, as reflected in the film's portrayal of them as patriotic and relatable figures. This cinematic depiction, emerging just months prior to notable shifts in public sentiment, corresponded with an increase in American empathy towards Chinese Americans during the escalation of the Second Sino-Japanese War. A substantial growth in public sympathy towards Chinese Americans was reported as Japan intensified its military actions. In both 1937 and 1939, those aligned with Japan in the conflict comprised only 2% of the sample size (“Americans neutral…”; “THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR…”). Polls of Americans aligned with China increased from 47% to 74%, meaning that those unaligned had now taken a stance in support of China amidst escalating international conflicts and Japan's militaristic expansion in Asia (Ma 46-47; “15,000,000 AIDED…”). Notions towards Chinese people had shifted from outsiders to those in need of aid. In the same newspaper, the Church Committee for China Relief had spent over $5,000,000 in helping Chinese refugees. The Chinese had “enjoyed the sympathy of the whole world,” which reflected similarly on the public perception of Chinese Americans (“REVIEW…”).

As World War II intensified, concerns grew over the Chinese Exclusion Act's potential to drive China towards an alliance with Japan, threatening Chinese-American diplomatic relations (Leong 5, 8). This period saw a reevaluation of American immigration policies as part of broader efforts to fortify the alliance between the U.S. and China. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 was a crucial step towards fostering national unity and acknowledging China as a key ally against the Axis powers. This legislative change, though primarily symbolic, marked a significant shift in American policies towards a more inclusive approach to its Asian residents, contrasting sharply with the continued escalation of anti-Japanese sentiment post-Pearl Harbor (Pascoe 61). However, despite these advances, significant legal barriers remained for Chinese Americans, who continued to face widespread discrimination in employment, property ownership, and broader civil rights.

This discrimination was legally sanctioned by various restrictive laws that persisted until challenges such as the landmark case Perez v. Sharp in 1947 began to address their constitutionality. This case marked a pivotal moment in civil rights law, paving the way for greater legal recognition of the rights of minority groups in America (Wang 189).

Although the journey towards genuine equality and integration for Chinese Americans was protracted and fraught with ongoing challenges, films such as Daughter of Shanghai noted the shift of public perceptions of Chinese Americans during the 1930s. This eventually culminated in the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act marking a critical, yet initial, step towards dismantling the legal barriers that had long segregated and subjugated Chinese Americans within their own country (Song 402).

Conclusion

The exploration of Chinese American portrayals in Hollywood films from the 1920s and 1930s provides a complicated means of tracing the evolution of racial representation and its broader societal implications. The dynamic interplay between cinema and societal attitudes reveals how deeply entrenched racial perceptions can subtly and overtly shape media content. Early cinematic portrayals, such as those in The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (1929) and Daughter of the Dragon (1931), were heavily influenced by prevailing stereotypes of the “Yellow Peril” mystique. These representations were marked by a distinct otherness, aligning with the societal anxieties and prejudices of the time. However, the work of organizations like the Chinese Equal Rights League and the Chinese Hand Laundry Association reflected a significant shift in the concept of Chinese American identity during this decade. This shift became increasingly apparent in later films like Charlie Chan at the Opera (1936) and Daughter of Shanghai (1937), where sinister representations evolved into more complex and even heroic figures, and main Chinese characters began working for significant American institutions. This evolution signifies a gradual (albeit incomplete, due to inequitable compensations for Chinese American actors within the film industry) societal shift towards more nuanced understandings of Chinese American identity, particularly for second-generation Chinese American women. As the socio-political landscape evolved, particularly with America's altered stance towards China during and after World War II, so too did the portrayal of Chinese American characters in film. The films began to challenge previous stereotypes, introducing characters that were more integrally woven into their storylines with attributes that appealed to American values of heroism and resilience. This indicates that, even within the constraints of the Hollywood Production Code—which reinforced the moral standards of the time—there was a pivot towards Americans' increased acceptance of the Chinese American identity.

Cinema serves as a powerful cultural mirror, reflecting societal values, tensions,

and transformations. The nuanced portrayal of Chinese Americans in Hollywood films serves as cultural proof of increased acceptance of the Chinese American identity, through which one can trace the contours of racial understanding and prejudice, highlighting both progress and the persistent challenges that remain. Although media today still often struggles to provide great representation, this analysis enhances our understanding of racial dynamics in cinema and contributes to our broader historical knowledge, so we can continue to progress both socially and artistically. By examining how these portrayals have evolved, we gain insight into the complex interplay between race, Hollywood, international relations, and domestic policy. The interwar period emerges as a significant marker of Chinese American unity, reflected in improved film representation and the repeal of discriminatory laws, as well as American societal shifts towards Chinese acceptance. The recognition of the Chinese Exclusion Acts as being rooted in racism was a major shift within this time and represents a significant triumph in Chinese American civil rights. As President Roosevelt noted in his 1943 address to Congress on the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, "nations like individuals make mistakes, and we must be big enough to acknowledge our mistakes of the past and to correct them" ("President Urges…").

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